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ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA, PROPAGANDA,
AND POPULAR SUPPORT: EVIDENCE FROM CHINA

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PHD

LINGNAN UNIVERSITY

2022

ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA, PROPAGANDA,
AND POPULAR SUPPORT: EVIDENCE FROM CHINA

by
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A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Degree of
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Lingnan University

2022

ABSTRACT

Entertainment Media, Propaganda,
and Popular Support: Evidence from China

by

XIA Shouzhi

Doctor of Philosophy

Is it possible to form “soft authoritarianism” that manages citizens by taking away their sense of resistance? Taking China as a case, this dissertation suggests that the rise of entertainment media in authoritarian states enables the rulers to maintain their resilience through a soft approach, thereby avoiding costly heavy-handed measures. Such a soft approach can work because entertainment media, like “fictitious pleasure drugs,” undoes audiences’ sophistication so that people are susceptible to official propaganda.

We provide two pieces of evidence that the Chinese authorities may use entertainment media as a subtle means to manage society. First, analyzing the Weibo posting corpus of the Chinese Communist Youth League, the youth wing of the ruling party, we find that it keeps a close relationship with pop idols on social media platforms, thereby attracting these idols’ fans who are liable to be influenced by nationalistic propaganda. Second, based on a provincial-level panel data set, statistical results indicate that a one percentage point increase in the ratio of variety shows in television broadcasting time is associated with the decrease in the expenditure of public security by roughly 110 million Yuan. In other words, entertainment is used to some extent as an alternative to heavy-handed means.

The causal relationship between entertainment consumption and popular support for the current regime in the Chinese context is also empirically supported. By analyzing a national data set, via instrumented regressions, we show that a one standard deviation increase in people’s interest in entertainment media is associated with an increase of almost 20% in both their satisfaction with the current regime and their anti-Western hostility. Furthermore, the findings indicate a positive relationship between people’s entertainment consumption and their acceptance of indoctrination by state media.

This research contributes to the existing authoritarian resilience literature by proposing the soft authoritarian model and illustrating the model based on the Chinese context. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that such a soft pattern will not totally take over the hard one, especially when the authorities perceive an increase in latent threats or instability.

DECLARATION

I declare that this is an original work based primarily on my own research, and I warrant that all citations of previous research, published or unpublished, have been dully acknowledged.

SIGNED

(XIA Shouzhi)

Date of submission of bound thesis

July, 29 2022

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL OF THESIS

ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA, PROPAGANDA,
AND POPULAR SUPPORT: EVIDENCE FROM CHINA

by
XIA Shouzhi

Doctor of Philosophy

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Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION

Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley's vision.....people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.

— Postman (1985, page 1-2)

During Hong Kong's Anti-Extradition Movement in 2019, one may heed a noteworthy phenomenon that a considerable number of young Chinese who are labeled “fangirls” (*fanquan nühai* 饭圈女孩) for their extreme fervor for pop-culture icons defended the Chinese authorities from Hong Kong demonstrators and foreign forces on the internet voluntarily and fervently. They forced people who support the protest to apologize, and boycotted brands involved with the opposition. This spontaneous action was vividly described as “Fangirls’ Expedition” (*fanquan chuzheng* 饭圈出征).¹ Prior scholarship suggests that indulged in entertainment will decline ordinary citizens’ political knowledge as well as their willingness to participate in public and political affairs (e.g., Hooghe, 2002; Olken, 2009; Prior, 2003). If that is the case, “fangirls” who are enthralled by entertainment media content, such as variety shows, soap operas, and short videos, to follow their idols would not be that enthusiastic to defend the current regime. As such, the intense nationalistic inclination exhibited by them seemingly reminds us to re-evaluate the latent political implications brought by entertainment media consumption, especially in authoritarian settings.

Logically, if patriotic nationalism or regime support is widespread among individuals who routinely consume entertainment media content, like what “fangirls” have been, then China’s current sociopolitical system will be resilient despite several tricky problems it confronts. The

¹ See, for example, *Bloomberg* (December 10, 2019). ‘Fangirls’ Defend China from Hong Kong Protesters and the World <https://bloom.bg/30ZpYcT> (last accessed on April 10, 2022).

core of this dissertation hence falls in the investigation of the probable role of entertainment media in helping contemporary authoritarian regimes maintain resilience, as well as the latent mechanism by which entertainment media is able to model ordinary citizens' political attitudes. The focus of this investigation is on China.

This research examines the political implications of entertainment media built upon a profound theoretical perspective, that is, modern authoritarian resilience. How can contemporary authoritarian states keep stability? This question has attached great scholarly attention, and many pundits attempt to raise explanations from diverse perspectives (e.g., Andersen et al., 2014; Di Lonardo, Sun, and Tyson, 2020; Dimitrov, 2013; Gerschewski, 2013; Gerschewski, 2018; Murtazashvili, 2012; Von Soest and Grauvogel, 2017). For instance, Di Lonardo, Sun, and Tyson (2020) argue that the autocrats face both internal and external threats, to avoid pressure from both sides at the same time, the autocrats have incentives to instigate hostility to broader interests among politically influential domestic actors. Dukalskis and Gerschewski (2017) suggest that the autocrat also pay attention to build its legitimacy, even though some scholars question “legitimate autocracy” is nothing more than an oxymoron and/or legitimacy does not matter for authoritarian stability, because such regimes are not relied on popular support (e.g., Przeworski, 1991). They note that authoritarian legitimation is guaranteeing active consent, compliance with the rules, passive obedience, or mere toleration within the population by four main mechanisms, i.e., indoctrination, passivity, performance, and democratic-procedural.

A large body of literature suggests that heavy-handed means such as repression and strict censorship are major tools picked up by authoritarian states to keep resilience. Andersen et al. (2014) argue that state capacity — monopoly on violence, and administrative effectiveness — is one of the crucial factors that influence stability in both democracies and non-democracies, moreover, monopoly on violence primarily matters to authoritarian stability while

administrative effectiveness is the key for democracies. Likewise, when analyzing the confusing stability of Uzbekistan, Murtazashvili (2012) notes that state capacity to repress revolutionary aspirations is one of the prominent reasons that the current regime in Uzbekistan could resist an array of latent challenges. In theory, political repression can be categorized into two classes, namely, vertical repression (against the public) and horizontal repression (against economic and political elites). Bove, Platteau, and Sekeris (2017) point out that more natural resources enable the autocratic leader to take other tactics such as co-optation to refrain from the backlash from the elites, therefore, the leader will reduce horizontal repression and concentrate on increasing vertical repression.

In addition, censorship also plays a critical role in authoritarian stability, especially when the network technologies have realized significant improvement. In China, the authorities have spent huge sums of money to establish a formidable internet censorship system, i.e., the Great Firewall, strategically cutting the connection between China's domestic internet and World Wide Web (it is worth noting that the government filters some outside websites and information but does not entirely block external information). Roberts (2018) theorizes this tactic as friction that increasing citizens cost to get uncensored information by fabricating barriers to information access. In addition to friction, the authorities also use "flooding" as a subtle way of censorship. Precisely, when there is a crisis, the authorities manage the online army (i.e., so-called "fifty-cent army" (*wumao dang* 五毛党) to fabricate unrelated information such as cheerleading posts to distract public attention (King, Pan, and Roberts, 2017; Roberts, 2018). This strategy also adopted by other authoritarian states, for example, in Putin's Russia, the authorities are found using bots to fabricate more than 50% tweets on the majority of days between February 2014 and December 2015 (Stukal et al., 2017). Recent scholarship suggests that this flooding strategy is not only used in domestic information control but employed by authoritarian states as a subtle means to influence other hostile states' public opinion (for

review, see Cirone and Hobbs 2022). In this light, some scholars suggest that although conventional wisdom cautiously optimistic about the impact of the internet on liberalization in authoritarian countries, the reality is relatively discouraging, namely, the network technologies have been largely domesticated as a stability maintenance tool (Rød and Weidmann, 2015; Tucker et al., 2017).

Taken together, what should be recognized is that contemporary authoritarian resilience is a multiplex factors-driven phenomenon that cannot be explained by a single factor. Yet, the existing literature mainly focused on the function of crude means, lacking necessary discussions over the role of “soft” means. Theoretically speaking, there are two authoritarian models, one is “hard authoritarianism” that the authorities control the society by heavy-handed toolkit such as seizing individuals’ rights, coercing dissents, and censoring information, as what George Orwell depicts in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; the other is “soft authoritarianism” that, like Aldous Huxley’s prophecy in *Brave New World*, the ruling oligarchy attempts to, undoing people’s capacities to think, make people medicate themselves into bliss so that voluntarily following the current regime. An understudied but crucial question is that whether soft authoritarianism is feasible in reality? If it is possible, what is the mechanism behind soft authoritarianism? In this research, we are going to show that the rise of entertainment media in authoritarian countries enables authoritarian leaders to implement soft authoritarianism, that is, manipulating average people’s minds via a soft approach. Precisely, taking advantage of the side effect of entertainment media, the authorities can undo a large subset of people’s resistance toward official narratives, thereby bolstering the grassroots’ loyalty towards the regime.

In non-democratic settings, less cognitively sophisticated citizens are often a group of solid followers of the regime since they vis-à-vis sophisticated people are more likely convinced by autocratic rhetoric (Geddes and Zaller, 1989). As a result, they are more likely to immerse themselves in an illusion woven by authoritarian oligarchies. Under this

circumstance, whether the authorities can effectively weaken ordinary people's cognitive complexity especially political sophistication determines the final efficacy of soft authoritarianism. While a person's sophistication is modeled by diverse factors, the role of mass media is integral. Mass media largely organize the "reality" surrounding ordinary citizens' everyday life, not only telling people "what to think about" but also telling them "how to think" (e.g., Bandura, 2001; Cohen, 1963; Lippmann, 1922; Tuchman, 1978; Zaller, 1992). As Lippmann (1922, p. 59) notes that,

each of us lives and works on a small part of the earth's surface, moves in a small circle, and of these acquaintances knows only a few intimately. Of any public event that has wide effects we see at best only a phase and an aspect...Inevitably our opinions cover a bigger space, a longer reach of time, a greater number of things, than we can directly observe. They are, therefore, to be pieced together out of what others have reported and what we can imagine.

In modern society, most reports or pieces of information ordinary people adopt to form their consciousness toward the outside world come from media, either mass media or social media. More importantly, whereas almost every media outlet claims its objectiveness, in reality, media coverage is biased more or less because of internal and/or external reasons. Those pieces of selective information or so-called media frames will alter the balance of considerations that citizens weight when contemplating an issue, that is, framing effects (e.g., Chong and Druckman, 2007; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson, 1997).

There are various genres of mass media content, which can be roughly categorized into two types, one is serious media content represented by news reporting, the other is entertainment media content such as variety shows and soap operas. In recent decades, with the development of the market economy, media technologies, and the rise of the middle class, a salient phenomenon within the global mass media industry is the dramatic expansion of

entertainment media (e.g., Artz, 2015; Bai, 2005; Gray, 2009; Zillmann, 2000). And many authoritarian regimes are no exception. For example, in Russia, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, media commercialization has gradually taken place in Russian media, and a salient feature is that entertainment media have been popular. A survey conducted in 2007 showed that NTV and the new entertainment channels STS and TNT regularly reached almost half of the population in towns and cities (Pietiläinen, 2008). In Turkey, the entertainment media industry has also experienced fast development. Its drama serials are not only popular with domestic audiences but exported to Middle East countries and overseas regions, which, along with other entertainment products, creates over 100 million dollars per year for Turkey (Çevik, 2020). Apart from the market and social demands, the authoritarian oligarchies that have exclusive control over media policy are a crucial force to promote the fast development of entertainment media.

Given that keeping stability is one of the most prominent goals of authoritarian states, allowing the fast growth of entertainment media indicates that this type of media does not conflict with the purpose of resilience maintenance. Furthermore, evidence suggests that in some authoritarian states, the authorities actively promote the development of entertainment media, revealing that this media genre may have been exploited by the authorities as a subtle means in society management, in view of the side effect of long-lasting entertainment media exposure. Some pundits hold that entertainment media can bring about some positive implications, for instance, some entertainment-oriented programs such as political talk shows enhance audiences' attentiveness to specific political issues, in the meantime, increase their factual political knowledge which is the foundation for people to make valid political decisions such as voting (e.g., Baum, 2003; Fox, Koloen, and Sahin, 2007). Nonetheless, Postman (1985) insightfully points out that the medium is the metaphor, the growing entertainment attribute of mass media just like a "fictitious pleasure drug" that undoes people's critical-thinking

capacities, making them degenerate to be one-dimensional. He worries that people who indulge in entertainment will not be rational enough to make valid decisions and take part in constructive public debate, which is regarded as one of the most important pillars of American democracy. Similarly, in authoritarian settings, people might be less sophisticated enough to distinguish propaganda from factual messages because of the side effect of entertainment consumption.

Over the past few decades, a large number of studies have indicated that Postman's worry is not unreasonable. To be specific, entertainment programs consumption brings about several detriments, from causing people to have no incentive to take part in civic and political affairs, to making people reluctant or irrational in voting (e.g., Besley, 2006; Boukes and Boomgaarden, 2016; Durante, Pinotti, and Tesei, 2019; Prior, 2005). Furthermore, psychological literature has demonstrated the negative impact of entertainment media exposure on the cognitive complexity of average people especially children and adolescence (e.g., Ennemoser and Schneider, 2007; Hernæs, Markussen, and Røed, 2019; Shin, 2004; Singer, 1980; Zimmerman and Christakis, 2007). For instance, based on Norwegian data sets, Hernæs, Markussen, and Røed (2019) find that the youth's commercial television consumption lowers both their IQ scores and their high school completion. Durante, Pinotti, and Tesei (2019) show that Italian who had lasting exposure to Mediaset, an entertainment-based TV founded by Berlusconi, were vulnerable to populist rhetoric and voted for Berlusconi's party in the 1994 election.

In view of the negative effect of entertainment media exposure on audiences' sophistication, I posit that, in authoritarian settings, people who are addicted to this media genre will be more likely to support the current regime, since they are not sophisticated enough to resist the influence of authoritarian propaganda.

Historically, propaganda was a solid pillar for some twentieth century's totalitarian states

such as the Soviet Union and Hitler's Germany (e.g., Doob, 1950; Kenez, 1985; Odegard, 1939; Schurmann, 1968). Autocrats at that time aimed to transmit social and political values in the hope of affecting people's thinking, emotions, and thereby behavior (Kenez, 1985), in other words, the ultimate goal of totalitarian propaganda lies in comprehensively refashioning social value systems thereby promoting the transformation of sociopolitical structures and keep societal stability. For example, the Bolshevik regime, under Lenin, planned to create new humanity suitable for living in a new society, and Lenin himself chose culture and education as major topics of his writings after 1917 in order to promote ordinary people's understanding of socialism (Kenez, 1985).

Nevertheless, pundits point out propaganda in modern authoritarian regimes — different from the last century's totalitarian one — is only an effort to convince the public to support the current regime, not an attempt to refashion citizens' comprehensive values and ideologies (e.g., Guriev and Treisman, 2019). Despite the decline of expectations, this information manipulation tool remains an indispensable means for authoritarian countries to keep resilience (e.g., E. Cater and B. Cater, 2021; Gunitsky, 2015; Guriev and Treisman, 2019; Guriev and Treisman, 2020). Through effective propaganda to fabricate or exaggerate positive information, as well as frame negative news such as shirking responsibility (e.g., Rozenas and Stukal, 2019), authoritarian leaders can mold people's thinking, emotions, and behaviors so that they do not need to employ other costly tactics such as repression to maintain societal order. Thus, in contrast to traditional propaganda in the last century, contemporary authoritarian propaganda is more likely to realize its goal.

Besides, as Dimitrov (2013) notes, authoritarian leaders are inclined to make use of nationalism to distract people's attention on internal problems and maximize popular support. In order to improve the persuasiveness of propaganda, many authoritarian countries have intensified nationalistic rhetoric (Gerber, 2014; Kuzio, 2016; Luqiu, 2018; Yilmaz and

Bashirov, 2018), which aggravates the “brainwashing effect” of propaganda. Aside from the forms and content of propaganda, the feature of audiences matters the persuasive effect of propaganda too. In contrast to sophisticated citizens, less cognitively sophisticated people are more readily to be convinced by propaganda, as they are difficult to distinguish propagandist rhetoric from factual information, thereby resisting the influence of propaganda.

To test the argument above, this dissertation takes China as an example. Since the 1990s, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, many observers claimed that China would follow in the footsteps of the Soviet Union, heading for collapse. For example, Goldstone (1995, p. 35) writes that “*China today faces a series of pressures stemming from population growth and the declining ability of agriculture and state-owned industries to expand employment. These pressures will soon bring economic and political conflicts to a boil.*” Many other scholars suggest that China would undergo the process of democratization because of the bottom-up pressures and the wide diffusion of modern network technologies that were previously regarded as a liberalization catalyst (e.g., Pei, 1995; Yang, 2009; Zheng and Wu, 2005). However, China has been neither collapse nor undergone so-called Western-style democratization.

Witnessing the extraordinary resilience of the current Chinese regime, a group of China experts tries to raise their explanations from different perspectives. Numerous probable factors ranging from co-opting elites to special central-local power structure have been debated (e.g., Cai, 2008; Dickson, 2000; Li, 2013). This research aims to take part in this ongoing discussion by explaining China’s resilience through the above soft authoritarianism viewpoint. There is a profound background for us to exploit the soft authoritarianism perspective to analyze China’s resilience, namely, China has undergone the boom of entertainment, meanwhile, the authorities try to intensify the persuasiveness of official propaganda and use propaganda as one of the most important ways to maintain stability. Considering the monopoly that the Chinese

authorities have over media policy, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the authorities take advantage of entertainment media as a subtle means to weaken people's resistance to official rhetoric, thereby increasing the persuasiveness of propaganda. (Chapters 3 and 4 will discuss the development path of entertainment media and the possible role played by the authorities in detail.)

First, over the past three decades, the flourishing of China's entertainment industry is remarkable. Although there lacked entertainment content in China's mass media before the 1980s, with the reform and opening-up, entertainment media has flourished in China, which can be roughly categorized into three stages. The first stage was from the late 1980s to 2005, and a prominent feature of this period was the diversification of TV dramas and variety shows, as well as the emergence of marketized newspapers (e.g., Bai, 2005; Stockmann, 2013); From 2006 to 2012, the rise of early-generation online video platforms, e.g., Youku, Tudou, 56, and Ku6, marked the second stage of the expansion of the Chinese entertainment industry (E. Zhao, 2016); in recent years, i.e., the third stage, an online video-centric entertainment storm has emerged, significantly transforming ordinary people's daily lives. Data reveals that, as of the end of June 2020, the number of users of live-streaming APPs that mainly supply short funny clips was more than 800 million, over twice the population of the United States (China Internet Network Information Center, 2020).

Second, China has a long-term tradition in propaganda since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, or ever since the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1921 (Brady, 2009a). Propaganda has been treated as the life blood of the state, which contribute to the legitimacy of the CCP's rule for a long time (Brady, 2009b). In the Maoist era, propaganda or ideological indoctrination was widely exploited as a formidable weapon to propel the communist revolution, to refashion ordinary citizens' comprehensive values and ideologies, or to against the existing CCP central leadership, for example, Mao

Zedong controlled mass media to against his political opponents like Liu Shaoqi (Brady, 2009a). Since the reform and opening-up, economic development has been the central work for the ruling party, while propaganda has still been emphasized by successive paramount leaders, from Deng Xiaoping to Jiang Zeming to Hu Jintao. In particular, after Xi Jinping took the office, the role of propaganda has been continually emphasized by the paramount leader. In a high-level meeting about propaganda and thought work in 2013, Xi stressed that while economic construction is the central work, ideological work is an extremely important work of the Party.²

Facing the challenge to official rhetoric brought by the internet, Xi asks mainstream media to innovate propagandist patterns, particularly, ideas and measures. In January 2019, when visiting *People's Daily*, the mouthpiece of the CCP central committee, he remarked that *efforts should be made to develop websites, microblogs, WeChat, electronic newspaper bulletins, mobile newspapers, internet protocol television and other forms of new media to enable the voice of the Party to directly reach all kinds of user terminals and gain new public opinion fields.*³ Following the highest leader's requirement, several mainstream media reform projects have been implemented over the past few years, the core of which lies in embracing the internet, in general, and social media, in particular (e.g., Creemers, 2017; Repnikova and Fang, 2018). Besides, to further reinforce propaganda effectiveness, the authorities have an incentive to make use of entertainment media to undo a subset of people's sophistication.

Based on the discussion above, this dissertation intends to resolve the following three research questions:

² Xinhua News (August 20, 2013). "Xi Jinping: ideological work is an extremely important work of the party (习近平：意识形态工作是党的一项极端重要的工作)" <https://bit.ly/3eSYopY> (last accessed on April 11, 2022).

³ Xinhua New (January 25, 2019). "Xi stresses integrated media development" <https://bit.ly/3lyt8h7> (last accessed on April 11, 2022).

- Does entertainment media somewhat be exploited as a subtle measure to keep resilience in the Chinese context?
- Are people who habitually consume entertainment media more loyal to the Chinese authorities?
- Is there evidence to support the latent mechanism that people addicted to entertainment would be more readily convinced by official propaganda?

To answer the first question, we will show that behind the triumph of entertainment media, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) with the monopoly over media policy is an important force, which recognizes the commodity attribute of mass media and permits the development of the entertainment media industry (Bai, 2005). China's media outlets, treated as the mouthpieces, had merely political attributes for a very long time (Brady, 2009b). After the Fourteenth Party Congress in 1992, the commodity nature of mass media was recognized by the authorities (Stockmann, 2013), which laid the basis for the flourishing of entertainment media. Likewise, many policies and regulations issued by the propaganda authorities and other departments contribute to the development of the entertainment industry. This research analyzes official documents to verify the ruling party's role behind the flourishing of entertainment media. Taking the Chinese Communist Youth League (the youth wing of the ruling party) as an example, we vividly present the role played by the authorities. Furthermore, we document how entertainment media (i.e., variety shows) are treated as an alternative to heavy-handed stability maintenance means (i.e., repression). To be specific, on the basis of China's provincial-level panel data, statistical results indicate that a one percent increase in the ratio of variety shows on television broadcasting time is associated with the decrease in the expenditure of public security by about 110 million RMB.

To give responses to the second research question, this study suggests that Chinese people indulged in entertainment media will not only be more allegiant to the current regime but more

hostile to Western forces. On the basis of a national survey ($N = 2,347$) in China conducted by Renmin University in 2017, this dissertation explores the causal relationship between people's entertainment interest and their attitudes towards the authorities and Western forces. To address the problem of endogeneity of people's entertainment interest, this research takes the Baidu Index of the four most popular entertainment programs from 2011 to 2017 as an instrumental variable.⁴ Equivalent to the Google Trend, the Baidu Index reflects the diversity of people's online searching behaviors and content preferences in different regions, therefore, we suggest that the provincial level the Baidu Index of popular variety shows is associated with different provincial residents' interest in entertainment media exposure; statistical results indeed support the positive correlation between these two variables. The results of instrumented regressions support my argument, showing that a one standard deviation increase in people's interest in variety shows is associated with both an increase of about 19 percentage points in their satisfaction with the current sociopolitical conditions in China and an increase of about 16 percentage points in their anti-Western sentiment.

Moreover, to answer the third question, we make use of the national survey once again to conduct the mechanism analysis. Statistical results indicate that there is a positive relationship between citizens' entertainment interest and their trust toward news reporting made by state-run media, the mouthpiece of the Chinese authorities. Some cultural scholars optimistically argued that the development of entertainment media rebuilds China's public sphere, contributing to the development of civil society (e.g., Wu, 2014). The findings of this research, however, reveal that the prosperity of entertainment media is conducive to stabilizing the current regime indirectly, rather than elevating the masses' civic mind.

While soft authoritarianism, to a certain degree, can contribute to authoritarian stability

⁴ Baidu is a leading search engine in China, holding a more than 70% market share in China's search engine market.

at a relatively low cost, there are some preconditions that the authorities are able to or have incentives to implement this fresh ruling model. First, the development of entertainment media is a crucial premise for the authoritarian regimes to make use of entertainment as a subtle ruling means. Although the authorities with monopoly over media polices can issue a series of favorable policies to promote the flourishing of entertainment media, the market economy plays an indispensable role. Put differently, without relatively mature market economy, authoritarian states cannot realize a fast development of entertainment media, thereby using it as an alternative means to maintain regime stability. Second, the authoritarian states implement the soft authoritarian means only when the ruling elites deem society is overall controllable so that they can use low-cost means to improve the resilience. But, if the elites perceive an increase in potential threats from both internal and external, they will not mainly rely on such a soft means that take a long time to have an effect; rather, the ruling elites tend to resort to heavy-handed means that are costly but have an effect in a short time. We will discuss this in detail in the last chapter.

The remainder of this dissertation is organized as follows. Chapter 2 proposes the theoretical framework of soft authoritarianism. In order to avoid potential backlash brought by repression and other heavy-handed domination measures, non-democratic leaders have incentives to take softer and more subtle means to maintain resilience. One crucial presupposition for the effectiveness of these soft means is that a large subset of people is less politically sophisticated. Entertainment media has negative impacts on people's sophistication, contributing to authoritarian stability. Therefore, we posit that authoritarian leaders intentionally support the growth of entertainment and make use of this media genre to induce people to be susceptible to propaganda, thereby being faithful to the current regime.

Chapter 3 tries to give a relatively comprehensive picture of both the development of entertainment media and the historical evolution of propaganda work in the Chinese context.

We introduce the three stages of the rise of the Chinese entertainment media and analyze the role played by the ruling party, initially showing that the development of entertainment media benefits from the promotion of the authorities to a certain degree. Besides, by introducing the development and features of the CCP's propaganda, we attempt to indicate its importance to stability maintenance and further show that the authorities have a strong incentive to, making use of entertainment, intensify the persuasiveness of propaganda.

Chapter 4 presents two pieces of evidence that the Chinese authorities strategically use entertainment media as a subtle means to manage society. First, leveraging the text-as-data tool, we analyze over 15,000 pieces of Weibo postings released by the Chinese Communist Youth League and show that the League keeps a close relationship with pop idols to extend its influence among the younger generation so as to instill nationalistic sentiments in the latter. Second, collecting and analyzing provincial-level data on entertainment media (i.e., variety shows and soap operas) and public security expenditures, we find that there is a negative relationship between entertainment media broadcasting and public security expenditures; precisely, a one percent increase in the ratio of variety shows on television broadcasting time is associated with the decrease in the expenditure of public security by about 110 million RMB.

Chapter 5 mainly exhibits the results of instrumented regression that shows the positive implications of ordinary people's entertainment media interest on their political attitudes toward the current regime and the negative effect of entertainment consumption on people's hostility to those so-called foreign forces, especially the Western countries. Meanwhile, further statistical results are also shown, which supports the latent causal mechanism, i.e., people's entertainment favor is positively associated with their consumption of and trust in mainstream media.

Chapter 6 draws the conclusion that through the soft authoritarianism approach, the

authorities can successfully obtain support from a large subset of people without using costly heavy-handed means. With support from the grassroots, the current regime in China can keep a long-term resilience in spite of numerous tricky sociopolitical problems and even challenges. Meanwhile, we suggest that some limits of the soft ruling model prevent the authorities from implementing it at some times.

Chapter 2. “SOFT AUTHORITARIANISM:” ENTERTAINMENT PROMOTES AUTHORITARIAN RESILIENCE

For a long time, a number of scholars and pundits, based on three theoretical arguments, tend to believe that contemporary authoritarian states would be unstable. The first argument comes from the core hypothesis of Martin Lipset’s modernization theory, which suggests that the progress of modernization, e.g., economic development of high incomes, enhances the probability for democracy to be sustained (Lipset, 1960). With the advancement of modernization, authoritarian leaders cannot sustain their leadership under the pressure of the rising middle class. The second argument is raised by Bremmer (2006) in his widely read book *The J Curve: A New Way to Understand Why Nations Rise and Fall*. In which, the author argues that democracies can be stable under the condition of free trade, free travel, and the free flow of information; on the contrary, authoritarian states will face challenges brought by the free environment. If the authoritarian incumbents want to keep stability (or maintain domination), they can only close their states’ “borders” or open political systems. The third argument comes from the “imitation argument.” In order to legitimate self-domination and reduce international pressure, autocrats have tried to imitate democratic institutions and elections, even though in a limited, manipulative way. *At some point, these institutions will “fire.” The presence of democratic institutions even if perverted ones will eventually bite authoritarian regimes where it hurts* (Krastev, 2011, p. 10).

Nevertheless, the reality does not seem to be the case. The unexpected stability exhibited by a group of non-Western democratic states such as China, Russia, Iran, Turkey, and even North Korea questions traditional scholarship. Despite some countries tightly closing their “borders” and adhering authoritarian ruling strategies, a number of authoritarian states either embrace the market economy and the globalization or “imitate” western representative election

systems. However, we have not seen these changes push authoritarian regimes toward democratization, rather the degree of authoritarianism in many countries have been on the rise (Cooley, 2015). Under this circumstance, how contemporary authoritarian countries maintain stability has drawn great scholarly attention over the last decade, and many pundits strive to raise explanations from different perspectives. In which, as presented in the first Chapter, the impact of crude means, such as state capacity in the use of violence and repression (e.g., Andersen et al., 2014; Bove, Platteau, and Sekeris, 2017; Davenport, 2007; Escribà-Folch, 2013; Shen-Bayh, 2018; Young, 2019) and formidable censorship systems (e.g., Keremoglu and Weidmann, 2020; Roberts, 2018; Shadmehr and Bernhardt, 2015), has been frequently discussed.

Both repression and censorship, however, are a double-edged sword, which may contribute to relieving a short-run crisis and pressure yet is counterproductive from a long-run perspective because those heavy-handed tactics will create new grievances (e.g., Aytaç, Schiumerini, and Stokes, 2018; Curtice and Behlendorf, 2021; O'Brien and Deng, 2015; Pan and Siegel, 2020; Roberts, 2018). For example, Aytaç, Schiumerini, and Stokes (2018) conducted an experiment after the 2013 Gezi uprising in Turkey and found that people will remain to take part in demonstrations after the repression because the government's violent actions cause a moral and emotional reaction from those bystanders. Similarly, through experimental studies in Uganda, Curtice and Behlendorf (2021) find that when police forces repress the demonstration by excessive violence, ordinary people's support for the dissents increases. Censorship is also likely to trigger a backlash. Analyzing more than 300 million tweets as well as Google search data through the big data approach, Pan and Siegel (2020) find that although repression has deterred imprisoned Saudis from publicly dissenting, it has a limited or even counterproductive effect on those Twitter followers of the imprisoned Saudis who continue to dissent online, including criticizing the ruling family and calling for regime

change.

Compared to the above heavy-handed means, tactics that lower people's resistance can largely decrease the likelihood of backlash. In other words, if autocrats can effectively take away people's sense of reflection, questioning, and resistance, they may securely occupy the center of power without worrying about being overthrown by the people; whereby, they do not need to frequently use costly heavy-handed tactics to keep stability. In this research, we name those tactics aiming to weaken people's resistance as "soft" means of stability maintenance and theorize authoritarian states build upon such soft means as soft authoritarianism. Authoritarianism does not always "stand in the place," it constantly updates its survival strategies. Soft authoritarianism hence is not merely theoretical, rather some authoritarian countries have striven to cultivate soft tactics. As Dobson (2012, p. 4) writes, *faced with growing pressures, the smartest among them neither hardened their regimes into police states nor closed themselves off from the world; instead, they learned and adapted.*

The effectiveness of soft authoritarianism hinges largely on the feature of ordinary citizens. Theoretically, it is relatively easy for autocrats to effectively manipulate a group of unsophisticated citizens just through a piece of inflammatory speech, without using those costly crude means; whereas soft means such as propaganda may hardly be effective if audiences are highly political sophisticated and immune to radical discourse. Taking China as an example, in the Maoist era, because the entire societal and political system, under a strongman, was closed, ordinary people, especially the young generation, were born to be instilled communist ideology and had no way to gain alternative information, thereby they believed and participated in, without any hesitation, a series of political and social movements stirred up by propaganda (Brady, 2009a). However, in the post-Mao period, to advance economic and social development, China has to loosen its control in many aspects; and the ultimate goal of official propaganda has also changed from ideological revolution to keeping

societal stability (Brady, 2009a; Guriev and Treisman, 2019). Under this circumstance, while the authorities still strive to reinforce propaganda work in the reform period (Brady and Wang, 2009), a considerable number of average citizens, in particular, public intellectuals, are not as easily persuaded as people in Maoist era (H. Huang, 2015; Veg, 2019). Opening society and building the market economy have strengthened China's overall national strength, while also posing a challenge to the effectiveness of the available stability maintenance toolkit. To keep stability, apart from immense and sophisticated propaganda system, the government has to exploit heavy-handed means like repression, even though those in power may understand the huge cost and potential hazard of these means.

To avoid the enormous cost of heavy-handed means, the contemporary authoritarian states have incentives to develop and cultivate a series of effective "soft" means of stability maintenance. That is the reason why in a letter to George Orwell, Aldous Huxley wrote that world rulers will discover infant conditioning and narco-hypnosis are more efficient in ruling the people than clubs and prisons.⁵ As aforementioned, in reality, the possibility of soft authoritarianism largely depends on whether the ruler can find efficient and effective narco-hypnosis to weaken people's political sophistication. There may be a lot of tools that the leaders can employ to undo ordinary citizens' sophistication or their sense of resistance. Among which, this study suggests that the development of entertainment media provides autocrats with inexpensive but effective "narcotic" to control the society, specifically, entertainment media experience could weaken ordinary citizens' cognitive complexity so that they are vulnerable to authoritarian rhetoric.⁶ The remainder of this chapter will discuss in

⁵ "Letters of Note: 1984 Versus Brave New World" <https://bit.ly/2NGq2ve> (last accessed on April 11, 2022).

⁶ It is worth noting that although this research focuses on how and to what extent entertainment media can be a tool to set up "soft autocracy," it does not signify that entertainment is the most powerful or the one way to make soft autocracy work. There might be other more powerful tactics that some autocrats are going to or have already employed. In this light, more scholarly attention should be paid to this field of inquiry.

detail that why entertainment media can be a valid narcotic and what is the latent mechanism.

2.1 Entertainment Media and Its Latent Implications

The boom of communication technologies, such as the internet, digital television, smartphone, and the latest 5G technique brings us into the information age. Scholars and observers have discussed profoundly how tremendous changes will be brought by technological advances to average people's daily lives, while what has seemingly been overlooked is that with the great enrichment of media environments, an unimaginable wealth of entertainment choices has emerged in mass media around the world (Zillmann, 2000). Taking the television as an example, in both Western developed and other developing countries, entertainment programming not only composes the largest category of television content but is the most popular media genre on the screen. In the United State, statistics reveal that roughly 1.4 million audiences watch Fox morning news programs, whereas American Idol, a reality show, can attract twenty to thirty times as many viewers (Gray, 2009). Similarly, in developing countries like India and Dominica, television entertainment is also the major approach exploited by the masses to kill leisure time (Cooper-Chen, 2006).

The rise of online entertainment media is more remarkable in recent years. Novel social media platforms that change and even reshape the way ordinary people communicate with others and amuse themselves have profoundly influenced entertainment and media landscapes worldwide; online streaming services have also realized great development, providing convenient and plentiful entertainment products. For example, In China, as of the end of March 2020, more than 850 million people have ever viewed video online, over twice the population of the United States, the number of users of live-streaming platforms, e.g., Tiktok, Kuaishou, Miaopai, etc., that mainly supply short funny clips was also close to 0.6 billion (China Internet Network Information Center, 2020). Online soaps and online reality shows attract a large number of audiences. In the summer of 2018, a Qing Dynasty drama named *Story of Yanxi*

Palace (*yanxi gonglue* 延禧攻略) got 25 million views the night it premiered and it was finally streamed more than 15 billion times.⁷ With the diffusion of the internet worldwide and the development of giant media enterprises, similar conditions can be witnessed in many other countries.

Although entertainment media has deeply embedded into ordinary citizens' daily lives, there lacks a rigorous academic definition on this term. Previously, many communication and cultural scholars gave some relatively crude definitions of entertainment. For instance, Browne (1983, p. 188) states: *entertainment mass medium is that which appears to have as its primary purpose the amusement, distraction and/or relaxation of its audience*. Zillmann and Bryant (1994, p. 448) suggest that entertainment refers to *any activity designed to delight and, to a smaller degree, enlighten through the display of special skills by others and/or self*. Thus, in the two authors' view, entertainment media is a specific type of medium that delights audiences. Likewise, Gray (2009, p. 3) defines television entertainment, a major genre of entertainment media, as *programs, segments, or channels that enjoy, amuse, delight, and perhaps even enlighten*. To be more specific, it refers to *programming designed with entertainment as the primary goal*. Artz (2015, p. 1), even though not proposes a precise definition, gives a wide range of entertainment media, including *children's stories in cartoons, telenovelas (soap operas), game shows, action-adventures, situation comedies, mysteries, anime, factual entertainment, sports, music, movies, and news*. Whereas this proposed range of entertainment media might be too extensive to be accurate, it, at least, incarnates the prosperity of this media category around the world.

On the basis of previous wisdom, this research defines entertainment media as specific media outlets and media content, aiming primarily to delight, amuse, and relax audiences. In

⁷ *China Daily* (January 25, 2019). "The rise of online drama in China" <https://bit.ly/2OSAoIW> (last accessed on April 11, 2022).

this sense, we can say that when it comes to media outlets, serious and intellectual newspapers, news channels of radios and televisions have no significant entertainment traits, whereas tabloid newspapers, commercial televisions, and online video websites are prototypical entertainment media; while media content such as news reports, documentary, education programs does not belong to the scope of entertainment media, variety shows (or entertainment programs) and soaps are prevalent entertainment content produced by media outlets (for convenience, entertainment media is used in the following).

Nonetheless, in practice, the boundary between serious media contents and entertainment ones has been more and more blurred (Zillmann, 2000). For example, to win attention, media producers, combining news programs with entertainment elements, make talk show-like news programs that cover news in a storytelling approach with an easy and hilarious way with words. These hybrid news programs are not rare in many countries. For instance, in China, began to transmit in 2008 on Liaoning Satellite Television, *Talking the World* (*shuo tianxia* 说天下) has been a popular talk show-like news program, which covers news in a storytelling way and mostly focuses on societal anecdotes. The funny mode and contents make this program stand out in news programs.⁸ Similarly, there is an apparent trend that drawing people's attention by funny, droll, or even campy trifles, a number of societal news programs have emerged. Strictly speaking, these media content should be regarded as entertainment in a broad sense, since their primary target lies in delighting audiences rather than transmitting factual information.

However, this study does not aim to involve in the discussion on the various type of entertainment media and the boundary of different types. Rather, we focus on how the authorities support the development of "pure" entertainment and the potential implications of this media genre. With this in mind, the scope of this study is limited to pure entertainment or

⁸ *CCTV News* (July 3, 2012). "No. 1 in Ratings Liaoning Satellite Television's *Talking the World* Aired on CCTV" <http://media.sohu.com/20120703/n347135823.shtml> (last accessed on March 1, 2021).

entertainment media in a narrow sense. To be specific, although numerous fresh types and modes of entertainment media content have constantly emerged and popular among ordinary people, variety shows and soap operas remain prominent entertainment products consumed by average citizens.⁹ Therefore, we focus on these two types of entertainment media on both televisions and online video platforms.

In modern society, people living in a “pseudo environment” fabricated by mass media, so our mind, attitudes toward the external, and even thinking patterns are profoundly structured by mass media. Under this background, when expounding why scholars should pay enough attention to media, Silverstone (1999, p. 2) states that,

because the media are central of our everyday lives that we must study them. Study them as social and cultural as well as political and economic dimensions of the modern world...study them as contributors to our variable capacity to make sense of the world, to make and share the meanings.

Likewise, given the great popularity of entertainment around the world, we should explore the economic and sociopolitical implications brought by this media genre too.

Over past decades, the societal and political implications that entertainment media can have captured growing scholarly attention. Although there is an absence of evidence in terms of entertainment media or soft news’ contribution to factual political knowledge of audiences, say some scholars, it does not mean that people cannot learn anything from entertainment (Baum, 2003). For example, Baum and Jamison (2006) suggest that serious news on political and public affairs is often unattractive to politically inattentive individuals, whereas entertainment-oriented soft news is appealing to them and, therefore, can inform them which

⁹ Variety show, also known as variety arts, variety entertainment, or entertainment programs, is entertainment made up of a variety of acts including musical performances, sketch comedy, magic, acrobatics, juggling, ventriloquism, and so forth; soap opera is a genre of TV serials that focus on pure entertainment themes with uncomplicated plots.

candidate best fits their own preferences. However, many scholars do not agree with this idea, they find out that entertainment programs can only leave audiences the impression in the aspect of “entertaining” instead of valid political knowledge and, at the same time, drive down support for political institutions and leaders among those who already tend to not participate (Baumgartner and Morris, 2006; Prior, 2003). Scholarship further demonstrates that lasting entertainment media exposure may increase political knowledge gap among the public, namely, in contrast to people used to expose to news programs, those who are indulged in entertainment ones lack essential knowledge to make a valid judgment regarding public affairs (Hollander, 2005; Kim and Vishak, 2008; Prior, 2003; Prior, 2005).

Besides the influence on political knowledge, some empirical studies reveal that entertainment exposure will make people reluctant or irrational in voting. Prior (2005) points out that in a high-choice media entertainment, people who spend a lot of time watching commercial TVs are going to be reluctant to vote than those who are accustomed to viewing news programs. The similar result has been found by other empirical studies too (Gentzkow, 2006; Potoski and Urbatsch, 2017). In addition, whereas the implications of media bias on voting behavior have been extensively debated, the effects brought by entertainment consumption are rarely savvied until recently. By experimenting with a Dutch sample, Boukes and Boomgaarden (2016) find out that politicians who attend entertainment programs, like talk shows, can significantly increase audiences’ trust, thereby obtaining more voters. In this process, political knowledge has a moderating effect, namely politicians can harvest support from audiences with poor political knowledge, yet the influence is opposite if audiences are familiar with politics. Another research shows, Italian who were enduring exposure to Mediaset, a commercial TV founded by Berlusconi, were more vulnerable to populist rhetoric and voted for Berlusconi’s *Forza Italia* in 1994 (Durante, Pinotti, and Tesei, 2019).

Furthermore, a growing body of literature suggests that lasting entertainment

consumption may make citizens be less civic-minded, that is, citizens are less ardor about civic engagement. As Hooghe (2002) argues, modern people spend too much time in viewing commercial TV programs to squeeze out time for civic purposes. Excessive exposure to entertainment media may cultivate the less civic-minded public who can hardly realize the importance of public participation. In his seminal work, Putnam (1995) insightfully points out that commercial televisions in the United States lower people's civic engagement, which had ever been a solid pillar of social capital in America previously. Putnam (1995, p. 75) writes, *there is reason to believe that deep-seated technological trends are radically "privatizing" or "individualizing" our use of leisure time and thus disrupting many opportunities for social-capital formation. The most obvious and probably the most powerful instrument of this revolution is television.* By utilizing exogenous differences in electromagnetic signal in Indonesian villages, Olken (2009) supports the negative causal impact of commercial TV exposure on people's willingness of involving in local government activities.

More deeply, psychological literature has documented that the fundamental origin lies in that people's sophistication will be influenced by enduring entertainment media exposure. Sophistication is a relatively broad concept in the context of social sciences. In the field of psychology, sophistication is defined as the people's cognitive capacity, including but not limited to sensory capacities, attention and orientation reflex, short- and long-term memory systems, information processing capacities, mental rehearsal and stream of consciousness (e.g., Singer, 1980; Zimmerman and Christakis, 2007). A person with a higher level of sophistication means he or she is more likely to conduct rational thinking and make the valid judgment (Toplak, 2021). The term sophistication (more precisely, political sophistication) has been frequently adopted by scholars in the field of political behavior/psychology to refer to people's cognitive capacity in terms of political issues. For instance, Luskin (1987) points out that a person's political sophistication is commonly known as his or her political belief system (PBS).

At any given moment very little if any of a PBS is conscious --- in working memory. Cognitions spend most of their time in longer-term storage, out of the way but subject to recall. Political sophistication in this sense is similar to concepts like “constraint” and “ideology” discussed by political behavior scholars (e.g., Campbell et al., 1960; Converse 1964).

Different people have different levels of political sophistication. Theoretically speaking, it is very difficult to accurately measure people’s political cognitions because we cannot compute their dispersion among topics; we cannot calculate their mean connectedness (Luskin 1987). To some extent, we can only infer the levels of political sophistication. In general, a person can be regarded as politically sophisticated, says Luskin (1990), if his or her political cognitions are numerous, cut a wide substantive swath, and are highly organized, or “constrained.” People’s political sophistication is influenced by several factors, such as intelligence, education backgrounds, occupations, interest in politics, and political information consumption (Luskin 1990).

Lasting entertainment media consumption is going to affect the levels of sophistication (or political sophistication) of people, either children or adults. For instance, based on a 4-year longitudinal experiment, Ennemoser and Schneider (2007) find there is a negative relationship between exposure to entertainment media and children’s reading speed and comprehension capacity. Hernæs, Markussen, and Røed (2019) show that in Norway, young men’s one year of living in a municipality with full coverage of commercial television during childhood and adolescence decreases their IQ points by 0.18, as well as high school completion rate by 0.4%. Gentzkow and Shapiro (2008) demonstrate that different dominated contents on the U.S. screen have different impacts on audiences’ sophistication. The consumption of television in the U.S. during the 1950s contributed to children’s standardized test scores, though this effect was moderate; however, after the 1950s, viewing televisions brings negative results to children. It is because, in the initial stage of television, the screen had not been dominated by pure

entertainment entirely, which means children have a chance to benefit from age-appropriate programs. Nevertheless, with the expansion of commercialization, the screen has been full of entertainment programs gradually, leading to a series of negative effects. Entertainment has a similar effect on adults. In order to attract the audience, the common feature of entertainment programs is amusing-oriented, with uncomplicated plots, and avoids from involving vital sociopolitical issues and constructive discourse, resulting in audiences to be one-dimensional without the capacity to think critically (Postman, 1985; Singer, 1980).

Despite the potential negative implications of entertainment media, over the past decades, this type of media has flourished in many authoritarian states. For instance, with the appearance of commercial broadcasting in the 1990s, entertainment content has dominated Russian television schedules (Artz, 2015); the Turkish drama serials are not only popular with domestic audiences but exported to overseas regions (Çevik, 2020); Chinese entertainment industries have experienced fast growth since the reform and opening-up (e.g., Bai, 2005; Su, 2019). Regarding the boom of the entertainment media industry in authoritarian countries, in addition to the development of the market economy, the authorities' permission and pushing should not be overlooked. Because in authoritarian regimes, the authorities monopolize the media policy, if any media genre does not meet the interest of autocrats, then this media genre cannot realize fast development. An important reason that the rulers promote entertainment media lies in that they attempt to take advantage of the side effect of entertainment media to make citizens easily to be indoctrinated.

2.2 Mechanism: Entertainment Exposure Makes Citizens Vulnerable to Propaganda

The previous discussion expounds on the definition and features of entertainment media as well as its negative implications on audiences' sophistication. In this section, we will discuss

how the authorities can strategically make use of entertainment as a subtle tool of resilience maintenance; put differently, autocrats may make themselves benefit from the side effect of entertainment media. We theorize that the authorities take advantage of entertainment media mainly through an indirect approach, namely using pure entertainment to weaken the political sophistication of a subset of people, and at the same time, reinforcing nationalistic propaganda to model them as a group of solid followers to the current regime.

First of all, the definition and indicators of authoritarian resilience in this research should be clarified. Modern non-democratic states can hardly survive by bloody repression or coercion (Guriev and Treisman, 2020), popular support determines the stability of authoritarian domination to a large extent. Authoritarian resilience hence can be evaluated by public support for the regime, namely, if a specific authoritarian regime enjoys a high layer of support from ordinary people, it will be stable; by contrast, if any authoritarian regime is unsatisfied by most people, then it is likely to face challenges such as social protests. As Coppedge (1999) notes that regime support is a “thick concept” that is multifaceted and cannot be reduced to a single determinant, different literature has taken different approaches to operate popular support for the regime in both democratic and authoritarian contexts (e.g., Chen and Dickson, 2008; Dickson, Shen, and Yan, 2017; Harmel and Robertson, 1986; Lu and Dickson, 2020). For instance, Harmel and Robertson (1986) suggest that, in democratic settings, regime support can be measured by people’s support for democracy, specifically, a survey item of the Eurobarometer that “on the whole, are you satisfied with the democracy works in (country)?” is a good example. Differently, following the concept of diffuse support proposed by Easton (1965), scholarship evaluating popular support in authoritarian settings mainly focuses on people’s attitudes towards political institutions. For example, Dickson, Shen, and Yan (2017) use a series of questions that ask the degree to which respondents support and trust the CCP, the government, and the people’s congress as indicators to assess regime support among

ordinary Chinese. This research largely follows the previous approach that using both abstract and concrete objects of the party-state to evaluate popular support for the Chinese regime, to be specific, assessing respondents' support for the current sociopolitical system as well as the CCP Central Committee and the central government (see Chapter 5 for details).

Next, we are going to talk about the latent mechanism of entertainment political implications raised above in detail. Vladimiro Montesinos, the security chief of former President of Peru Alberto Fujimori, once said that *we live on information; the addiction to information is like an addiction to drugs* (McMillan and Zoido, 2004, p. 74). This saying vividly shows what critical role information manipulation is for contemporary authoritarian states to maintain resilience. There are several approaches for autocrats to manage the flow of information, for instance, censorship, i.e., deleting content reflected badly for the incumbent and blocking foreign websites, is widely employed among authoritarian countries (e.g., Keremoglu and Weidmann, 2020; King, Pan, and Roberts, 2013; Roberts, 2018). But, as mentioned above, a growing scholarship documents that censorship may backfire especially during the crisis (e.g., Hobbs and Roberts, 2018; Pan and Siegel, 2020; Roberts, 2018). In contrast to censoring content with a heavy-hand, propaganda that strives to steer public opinion seems "softer," which focuses on the management collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols thereby moving large masses of people to uniformity of opinion and of action (e.g., Bartlett, 1972; Lasswell, 1927).

While propaganda is a key concept for understanding information manipulation in the authoritarian context (or even includes the democratic context), there is no agreed-upon definition of this term. For instance, propaganda, Ellul (1965) suggests, is the means that aims to intensify existing trends and to lead men to action, or to prevent them from interfering. Kenez (1985) holds that propaganda is nothing more than the attempt to transmit social and political values in the hope of affecting people's thinking, emotions, and thereby behaviors. In

Propaganda & Persuasion, Jowett and O'donnell (2018) give a broader definition of propaganda, namely it is a form of communication that attempts to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist. This research does not aim to evaluate different versions of the definition of propaganda, rather we only attempt to appropriately clarify the concept and scope of propaganda used in this research on the basis of previous wisdom. Although different scholars put forward different definitions of propaganda, there are some overlaps: first, propaganda has a clear purpose. No matter in what contexts, propagandists disseminate information with specific purposes. Second, the form of propaganda is varying. In order to realize favorable effectiveness, propagandists may employ various forms and approaches to spread particular information. Given this research focuses on propaganda in an authoritarian context, we hence define propaganda in the following way: propaganda refers to that with specific purposes, authoritarian leaders adopt diverse approaches to spread biased or manipulated information.

Although some totalitarian states in the last century also stressed the importance of building formidable propaganda machines to conduct ideological indoctrination, bloody repression was the basis for a number of dictatorships at then (e.g., Rozenas and Zhukov, 2019). Meanwhile, the dominant model of propaganda in the twentieth century was indoctrination which aims to transmit the entire social and political values, for example, after the success of the October Revolution, Lenin transformed his major writing theme to culture and education, trying to cultivate people's consciousness towards Marxism-Leninism and socialism, which, in his mind, was the foundation for socialist construction (e.g., Kenez, 1985). Likewise, in order to establish a new society, in Maoist China, Nazi Germany, and other totalitarian states in the last century, through ideological indoctrination, paramount leaders aimed to refashion citizens' prior values and ideologies so as to nurture new humanity for new societies (e.g., Cassinelli, 1960; Doob, 1950; Schurmann, 1968). However, in the recent two decades, the

authoritarian model has changed, specifically, bloody repression is rarely seen in authoritarianism, and the role of propaganda has been more and more crucial (Guriev and Treisman, 2019).

More importantly, different from ideological indoctrination — the dominant model of propaganda in the last century — modern authoritarian propaganda has some novel characteristics, the most prominent one among which is it merely aims to convince the public to support the current regime rather than attempting to refashion citizens' values and ideologies (Guriev and Treisman, 2019). To be more specific, propaganda to lead ordinary people to trust that the incumbent is competent and selflessly dedicated is a crucial tactic for contemporary authoritarianism to keep resilience. To realize the target of “brainwashing” the masses, in contrast to rational persuasion, propaganda has no duty to be objective or truthful but to provide the masses with highly selective and processed messages and prevent them from finding out the truth, thereby instructing people's political cognition and attitudes (e.g., Kenez, 1985; Odegard, 1939). Simply put, in modern authoritarian settings, any communication intended to ameliorate ordinary people's evaluation of the incumbents' competence is propaganda.

Given the crucial role of propaganda, the extent to which it works in reality influences or conditions the stability of authoritarian regimes. Over the past few years, a great body of literature has tried to explore the effects of authoritarian propaganda, whereas the results are heterogeneous. Some empirical studies have documented that propaganda could draw popular support in elections (Adena et al., 2015; Peisakhin and Rozenas, 2018), manipulate people's ethnic identity and violent behavior (Blouin and Mukand, 2019; Yanagizawa-Drott, 2014), reduce citizens' willingness to protest (e.g., E. Cater and B. Cater, 2021; H. Huang, 2015), and so forth. Adena et al. (2015), for example, demonstrate that the growth of Nazi popularity sped up in regions that had access to the radio when pro-Nazi radio broadcast became mainstream

following Hitler's appointment as chancellor. Based on Rwandan datasets, Yanagizawa-Drott (2014) shows that media reporting through state-controlled media not only directly increased both militia groups and ordinary citizens' participation in killings, but also indirectly influenced people's violent behavior by raising participation in neighboring villages. Furthermore, a number of theoretical research has also suggested a series of mechanisms that authoritarian propaganda can affect ordinary citizens (e.g., Chen and Xu, 2017; Guriev and Treisman, 2020; Little, 2017).

Nevertheless, in the meantime, a growing body of literature has shown that authoritarian propaganda has only limited effects and may even backfire (e.g., Bush et al., 2016; H. Huang, 2018; Knight and Tribin, 2019; Selb and Munzert, 2018). For instance, while iconography is an important medium for some autocrats to conduct implicit propaganda, Bush et al. (2016), through a laboratory experiment, find that authoritarian iconography does not significantly increase political compliance or support for the regime in United Arab Emirates. Moreover, the diffusion of television enables autocrats to conduct propaganda more widely via state-owned TV stations and channels, audiences seem to have no way to keep away from encountering those contents. Yet, Knight and Tribin (2019) suggest that sophisticated audiences have variety ways to response to official propaganda. Based on Venezuelan data sets, they demonstrate that after Hugo Chavez introduced *cadenas*, a video product of government propaganda, (1) the drop-off in viewership when transitioning from news programming to *cadenas* was more significant for the opposition channel than for the government channel; (2) cable viewership rises during *cadenas* and the drop-off in viewership is more significant for those with access to cable. In other words, a considerable number of consumers will try to avoid exposing themselves to government propaganda so that the latter cannot achieve expected effects.

The distinction of propaganda effects, posits H. Huang (2018), is caused by the varying

forms of propaganda, specifically, “hard propaganda,” i.e., those crude, heavy-handed, and obsolete propagandistic content is difficult to convince the audiences, whereas “soft propaganda” such as propaganda embedded into movies, music, and other artworks may implicitly affect people’s opinions and behaviors. Nonetheless, like what Knight and Tribin (2019) have revealed that sophisticated customers have the consciousness to keep away from official propaganda, under this circumstance, propaganda cannot convince audiences even though it belongs to so-called “soft propaganda.” As Geddes and Zaller (1989) point out, people who are not sophisticated are important sources of support for authoritarian regimes. In view of that, I suggest that, apart from propaganda forms and genres, whether the audiences are capable to distinguish publicity from factual information has great impacts on propaganda effects too. If people are less cognitively sophisticated, they will be more susceptible to official propagandistic rhetoric thereby firming the support for the current regime, and vice versa.

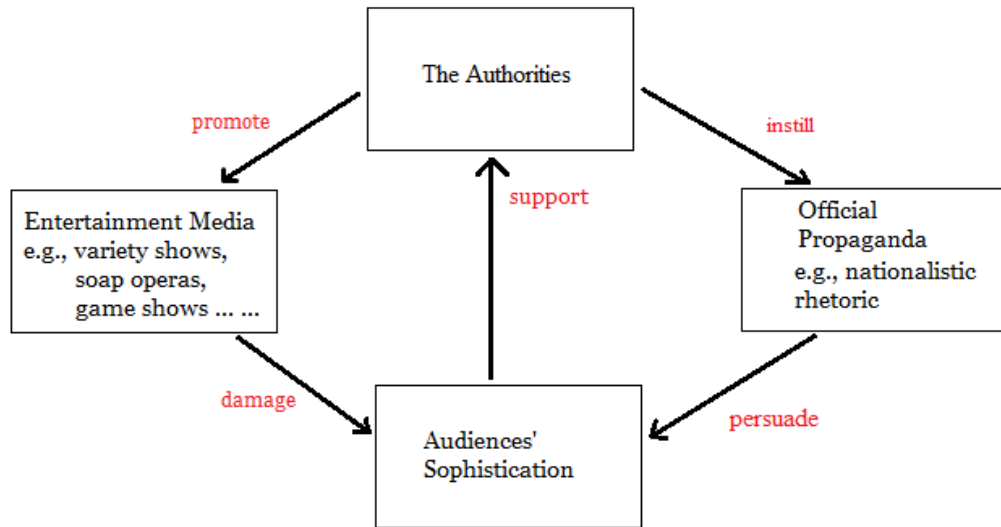
Entertainment media is a valid means exploited by authoritarian leaders to fashion numerous unsophisticated people. In the previous section, the negative effects of entertainment media exposure on audiences’ cognitive complexity have been illustrated in detail. In view of that, compared to those people without a strong interest in entertainment media, people who do so are more likely to be less cognitively sophisticated, and when encountering official propaganda in their everyday life, they are readily persuaded by those carefully fabricated discourses because they lack the capacities to distinguish those discourses from factual information.

Furthermore, to improve the “brainwashing effect” of propaganda, in recent years, many authoritarian states have striven to upgrade propaganda tactics, a prominent one among which is reinforcing nationalistic rhetoric because nationalism has been demonstrated as a critical approach to advance popular support for authoritarian regimes (e.g., Dimitrov, 2013; Weiss, 2014), as Nye (1993, p. 3) insightfully notes, *nationalism proved to be stronger than socialism*

when it came to bonding working classes together, and stronger than capitalism that bound bankers together. For example, in Putin's Russia, nationalism has played a prominent role in state-controlled media's propaganda campaign on evoking ordinary people's national pride and anti-Western hostility; Putin himself also frequently invokes nationalistic images, tropes, and topics to clarify his political targets, legitimize his policies, and boost public support (Gerber, 2014; Kuzio, 2016; Schenk, 2012). A similar situation occurs in Turkey where, under Erdogan, the ruling party has tried to promote Islamic-nationalist ideology through various channels such as mass media and education (Yilmaz and Bashirov, 2018). Alrababa'h and Blaydes (2021) find that the Syrian authorities propagandize the threat from Israel and Western forces to evoke public's nationalistic sentiment, thereby compensating for its poor political performance. These nationalistic rhetoric and discourses are highly persuasive for unsophisticated people who are addicted to entertainment media so as to move them to be more loyal to the current regime and more hostile to the West.

To sum up, the author's argument falls in that entertainment media enables authoritarian countries to keep resilience via a soft approach (see Figure 2.1). Over the past decades, with the development of the market economy and permission of the authorities, entertainment media has experienced a fast development in many authoritarian states such as China, Russia, and Turkey. Although for ordinary citizens, this media category might be merely treated as a commodity to kill leisure time, it, like a "fictitious pleasure drug," actually weakens or even undoes audiences' cognitive complexity whereby being a formidable weapon for authoritarian leaders to shape unsophisticated people. And those less cognitively sophisticated people are vulnerable to official discourses indoctrinated by state-controlled media. In particular, authoritarian rhetoric has been more nationalistic in order to realize better persuasiveness. Consequently, those people are pleased with the current regime and willing to defend it voluntarily.

Figure 2.1 Theoretical Framework



Notes: This graph presents the theoretical framework of this research. Where authoritarian states promote the development of entertainment media and instill official propaganda, trying to persuade ordinary people to support the current regime.

It is worth noting, while this research suggests that autocrats may employ soft means to keep resilience, it neither says that soft means can totally replace a series of heavy-handed stability maintenance means nor says that soft means are more powerful than heavy-handed means in any case. Types of tactics that will be used by the authorities to keep stability hinges on the condition that a regime is facing. This research only aims to theorize that, in some cases, authoritarian regimes are inclined to boost regime resilience by building up soft authoritarianism, such as making use of entertainment media, to weaken ordinary citizens' resistance.

Chapter 3. ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA AND PROPAGANDA IN CHINA

This Chapter first reviews the development of entertainment media in China, dividing the growth path of this media genre into three stages and drawing the most prominent features of each stage. Furthermore, we suggest that aside from the market economy and popular demands, for a long time in the past three decades, the ruling party has also played an important role in the triumph of the entertainment media industry. By the direct and indirect approaches, the authorities aim to take advantage of this media genre as a means to contribute to societal stability (In the next Chapter, this point will be elaborated and discussed more deeply). In addition, we briefly introduce the propaganda work in China since the Maoist era and focus on the evolution of the CCP propaganda in recent years, expounding its nationalistic tendency.

3.1 Entertainment Media in China: Three Stages

As soon as the set-up of the People's Republic of China, the communist regime started to build a new media system based on that of the old regime. While commercial media outlets were allowed to continually operate in the early 1950s, since the mid-1950s, all media outlets in Mainland China were state-owned and were constructed to be a strong Party-dominated media system (Y. Zhao, 1998). As mentioned in the previous Chapter, entertainment media refers to such media category that provides content mainly for delighting, amusement, and relaxation. In the Maoist era, under the guidance of “class struggle as the key link” (*yi jieji douzheng weigang* 以阶级斗争为纲), mass media had only political attributes and was used for ideological indoctrination and political education (Perry, 2017; Y. Zhao, 1998); thus, entertainment media undoubtedly did not exist at that time.¹⁰

¹⁰ Strictly speaking, in the Maoist era, there were already TV drama and other types of entertainment-like programs in Chinese televisions. China's first TV drama, for example, was produced and broadcast

Because of the market economy was strictly banned by the Chinese authorities, entertainment media content was rarely produced and broadcast in Chinese media outlets before the 1980s. Nevertheless, from the early 1990s on, the trend of pan-entertainment in Chinese mass media has been continually speeding up, especially in the recent decade. Reviewing the development path of entertainment media, one might easily notice that it has closely followed the step of the market economy, which not only brings investments and advertisements to the entertainment industry but also promotes the emergence of the middle class who is the major audience of entertainment media products. Generally speaking, the journey of entertainment boom in China can be roughly classified into three stages. The first stage is from the early 1990s to 2005; the second stage is from 2006 to 2012; the third stage is from 2013 to the present. The existing literature divides the development of entertainment media in China mainly based on the salient features of each stage. In the first stage, the most prominent features are the emergence of entertainment-oriented programs on the Chinese screen, i.e., soap operas and variety shows, and the rise of urban newspapers driven by the market demand. The salient feature of the second stage is the emergence of early-stage internet-based entertainment products. And the characteristic of the third stage is the boom of the online entertainment media, represented by short videos and live streaming. In what follows, we will make an introduction to each stage.

3.1.1 The First Stage (the early 1980s - 2005)

The 1980s witnessed a dramatic growth of television in China, including television owners and television stations. Statistics show that television stations increased from 38 in 1980 to 202 in 1985, and weekly TV program broadcasting time also climbed from 2,018 hours

in 1958. Entertainment at that time was decidedly different from it today, however. The term entertainment was also not much in use, whereas literally “literature and art” (*wenyi* 文艺) was used to refer to all those programs just mentioned (Bai, 2005).

in 1980 to 7,698 hours in 1985 (Lee 1994). Unlike before the 1980s, the TV programs in the 1980s were more entertaining and commercial. For instance, the Spring Festival Gala (*chunwan* 春晚) was first produced by CCTV in 1983, featuring music, dance, comedy, drama performances, and other entertainment-oriented elements. While in the early days the Spring Festival Gala focused merely on entertainment and arts, this show has become more and more political-oriented since the late 1980s and early 1990s (Wang, 2010). Besides, the TV drama or serial had also experienced a limited entertainment transformation in the 1980s. Data reveals that in the year 1978 a total of 32 television stations produced eight TV dramas, whereas in 1987 there were 366 stations producing over 1,500 dramas that consist of several entertainment-oriented dramas (Keane 2005). *Yearnings* (*kewang* 渴望), widely considered the first true-sense Chinese soap opera transmitted in 1990, is viewed as a watershed of the Chinese television. Before this TV serial aired, television, like other genres of mass media, was employed as a means of ideological indoctrination by the propaganda authorities; yet this electronic media genre, with a growing commodity value, has gradually been the foremost way for ordinary people to kill leisure time since the early 1990s, even though it is still an important means or channel for official propaganda (Y. Zhao and Guo, 2005). At the early stage of TV entertainment, China Central Television (CCTV) walked in the forefront. In addition to *Yearnings*, the first true-sense entertainment program (or variety show) *Zongyi Panorama* (*zongyi daguan* 综艺大观) on the Chinese screen was also produced and aired by CCTV at the same year (Bai, 2005). A series of entertainment programs and TV dramas with diverse characteristics, hereafter, started to land on CCTV one after another, in which *The Same Song* (*tongyi shouge* 同一首歌), *Lucky 52* (*xingyun 52* 幸运 52), *Happy Dictionary* (*kaixin cidian* 开心辞典) are standout representatives. The drama channel and the entertainment (*zongyi* 综艺) channel of CCTV were also launched in 1996 and 2000, respectively.

Furthermore, local televisions, either the provincial- or metro-level, following the step of CCTV, were urgent to air their own entertainment programs in the late 1990s. Under this trend, Hunan Satellite TV station (HSTV), with the heart of entertainment on, has risen (Bai, 2005). Happy Camp (*kuai le dabenyong* 快乐大本营) and Date with Rose (*meigui zhiyue* 玫瑰之约) were produced by HSTV in 1997 and 1998, respectively, which got great success and the former one remains popular nowadays (Ju, 2002). In 2005, HSTV launched an *American Idol*-like reality talent show *Super Girl* (*chaoji nüsheng* 超级女声),¹¹ which not only set a record of viewing figures but was considered a symbol of “democratic entertainment” by *Time* magazine because more than 8 million audiences had voted for their favorite contestants in the finale (Jakes, 2005; Jian and Liu, 2009). At the same time, at least 33 provincial televisions and many lower-tiers TV stations put their own variety shows on air (Ju, 2002). A source shows that by the end of 2002, close to 90 per cent of provincial TV stations and more than 70 per cent of city-level TV stations set drama and movie channels (Bai, 2005).

The rise of urban newspapers is another salient symbol of the development of the entertainment industry at the first stage, bringing a fresh type of merriment for the Chinese urban middle-class. Conventionally, under Leninist political system, the newspaper, treated as the mouthpiece for the communist regime, had only political attributes without commercial value in Maoist era (Brady, 2009a). After the Fourteenth Party Congress, the Propaganda Department acknowledged for the first time the commodity nature of the press, eventually pushing newspapers to the market (Stockmann, 2013; Y. Zhao, 1998). The number of officially licensed newspapers increased from 1,442 in 1990 to 2,163 in 1996, many of which were market-oriented evening or urban newspapers. These newspapers, dissimilar with party papers (*dangbao* 党报), abide by the logic of the market, for example, *Chengdu Economic Daily*

¹¹ the first season of *Super Girl* was produced in 2004, yet it was widespread over the country in the second season.

(*chengdu shangbao* 成都商报) was the first newspaper in China entering the stock market; *Beijing Youth Daily* (*beijing qingnianbao* 北京青年报) became the first Chinese newspaper achieving IPO (initial public offering) in Hong Kong in 2004 (R. Huang, 2016; Stockmann, 2013). Commercialization, privatization,¹² and conglomeration, hereafter, have been the mainstream of the press, resulting in the transformation of contents and patterns of news reporting, i.e., soft news and entertainment information takes up more and more newspaper layouts because advertisers — the main source of the newspaper’s income — care more about what the audience likes to read than the Party’s preferences (Stockmann, 2013).

3.1.2 The Second Stage (2006 - 2012)

In 2006, Youku, a YouTube-like online video platform, was operated, marking the new stage of the growth of Chinese entertainment. A period of time prior to or after Youku’s establishment, an array of analogous platforms, such as Ku6, 56, PPS, etc., had also emerged continually. A source predicts that the highest number of online video platforms had attained more than 1,000 (Jia, 2014). At an initial stage, the online screen mainly leaned on the UGC (user-generated content), referring to videos produced and shared online by unprofessional amateurs (E. Zhao, 2016). Even though the term users might come with inherent diversity, says Lange (2017), most of platforms still tend to attract those who are without sophisticated skills to produce videos. Youku, for example, strives to appeal to its users to actively produce selfmade videos with a series of slogans, like “*paike* (amateur videographer) is everywhere” and “anyone can be a *paike*.” Dissimilar with conventional entertainment programs transmitted on televisions, the UGC gives the audience another genre of merriment. For instance, *The Bloody Case That Started from a Seamed Bun* (*yige mantou yinfa de xue’an* 一个馒头引发的血案), one of the earliest comedy spoof videos in China, mocked eminent Chinese director

¹² In China, the proportion of private shares is allowed to up to 49 per cent, with the remainder belonging to the CCP to ensure the party’s control over the field of publicity.

Chen Kaige's film *The Promise* (*wuji* 无极) by re-editing this film along with a piece of news reporting from CCTV. This video was unexpectedly popular with netizens as soon as it was uploaded on the internet (E. Zhao, 2016). By the end of 2007, there were more than 160 million people ever viewing video online, accounting for 76.9 per cent of total netizens in China at then (Jia, 2014). In contrast to entertainment products in the 1990s, internet-based videos reject thoughtful or critical narratives to a greater extent, exhibiting a more significant pure-entertainment trait.

At the same time, people also witnessed the prosperity of blogs and SNS (Social Networking Services) in China, eliciting the early-generation internet celebrities (*chudai wanghong* 初代网红) who furnished gaiety to people, though many might be regarded with "negative" value orientation. Sister Feng (*fengjie* 凤姐) is an example. From a Chongqing village and with an associate degree, Luo was known by a piece of post on Tianya Club (*tianya shequ* 天涯社区) seeking a marriageable boyfriend with some primary conditions like "hold a master degree in economics from Tsinghua University or Peking University," "must also be 176 to 183 centimeters tall and good looking." On a talk show, she claimed herself the brightest human being both in the past and for the next 300 years, which let her suffer great criticisms online, but at the same time, made her exposure increase significantly (Yan, 2010). Likewise, Sister Lotus (*furong jiejie* 芙蓉姐姐) was another initial-stage internet celebrity known by her photos with a signature pose "S-figure," and her narcissistic self-descriptions on a post (Edwards and Jeffreys, 2010). These internet celebrities mark the trend of "aesthetic of the ugly" in the cyberspace, which is promoted by the market economy, or based on Baudrillard's insight, the rise of consumer society. Regardless of the pros and cons of this trend, what should be acknowledged is that people at then enjoyed a much more enriched entertainment than that of in the 1990s.

Besides, TV entertainment at that stage had also realized new gains. Different from HSTV

significantly outshining other local television stations in the 1990s, a group of provincial TV stations have made a good performance in entertainment after 2005. Zhejiang Satellite TV (ZSTV), for example, in 2005, launched a plan named “Seven Swords out of Jiangnan” (*qijian chu jiangnan* 七剑出江南), which aims to in collaboration with seven corporations solicit outstanding entertainment program ideas over the country.¹³ From then on, a series of popular entertainment programs were produced by ZSTV, and, in 2012, *The Voice of China* (*zhongguo haoshengying* 中国好声音) was broadcast for the first time, which not only writes a new viewing record but makes ZSTV into the first echelon of provincial TV stations. Jiangsu Satellite TV (JSTV) and Dragon Television (*dongfang weishi* 东方卫视) have also risen at this period driven by their flagship programs *If You Are The One* (*feicheng wurao* 非诚勿扰) and *China’s Got Talent* (*zhongguo darenxiu* 中国达人秀), respectively.

3.1.3 The Third Stage (2013 - Present)

In late 2007, the Administrative Provisions on Internet Audio-Visual Program Service was issued by the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television and the Ministry of Information Industry, which allows online video platforms to broadcast self-produced videos or the professionally generated contents accordingly (E. Zhao, 2016). After several rounds of such capital operations as acquisition, merger, and IPO, the online screen started to massively invest self-produced contents, like online dramas, online variety shows, and online films in around 2013. Taking the online drama as an example, although there has no a consensus about its beginning, this form of entertainment has been sought-after.

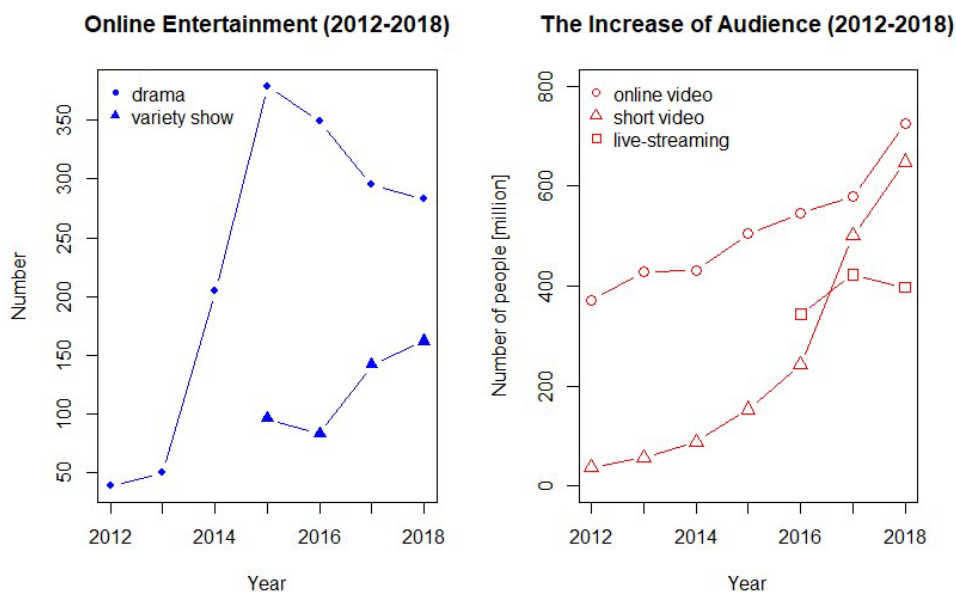
Figure 3.1 shows the rise of online entertainment consisting of the online drama and the online variety show, and its audience from 2012 to 2018, through which one can intuitively aware of the boom of online entertainment in China. To be precise, the number of online

¹³ *Evening News*, October 1, 2005. “Zhejiang Satellite Television: Seven Swords out of Jingnan.” <http://m.zjstv.com/730466.html> (last accessed on April 11, 2022).

dramas had been rapidly increased from less than 50 in 2012 to up to 379 in 2015, though the figure has dropped down a little bit after then. In contrast, the number of online entertainment programs has continually grown in recent years. Under this context, the size of online video audiences has also dramatically expanded. According to official statistics, by the end of 2018, there were close to 800 million people ever viewing videos online, accounting for 60 per cent of the Chinese population. Furthermore, the growth of short-video consumers is also remarkable, which reflects the rise of short-video and live-streaming platforms, such as Kuaishou, TikTok, Miaopai, etc. To a large extent, a pan-entertainment storm has been emerging in China, which not only refers to the rise of various online entertainment platforms but indicates the transformation of the Chinese audience's preferences, of which "pure entertainment" dominates, and the online screen providing online drama and online entertainment program lies in the center of this storm.

Following the transformation of the audience taste, both traditional media and new media tend to produce entertainment content to cater to people's preferences. For instance, official statistics reveal that, in 2016, TV dramas, news programs, and entertainment programs lied in the first echelon of the view ratings, which share of 29.6 per cent, 13.8 per cent, and 13.7 per cent of the total duration of people watching TV, respectively; moreover, the proportion of TV dramas and news programs decreased, while entertainment programs turned into much more popular and its proportion increased by 0.7 per cent than in 2015 (National Radio and Television Administration, 2018). Additionally, the rise of live streaming has made many people addicted to it in recent years, forming a new genre of entertainment industry worth up

Figure 3.1 The Rise of Online Entertainment and Its Audience in China (2012-2018)



Notes: The left panel shows the growth of online drama and variety shows between 2012 and 2018; the right panel shows the constant growing of the audiences of three types of online entertainment, namely, online videos, short videos, and live streaming.

to 5 billion dollars. The trend of live streaming breathed new components into the Chinese entertainment circle, for example, unique categories of music like *Han Mai* (喊麦), a form of rapping, and *Gu Feng* (古风), Chinese ancient music styles; mainstream media also embraced live streaming for attracting the public recently (Lin and Lu, 2017). Meanwhile, a new generation of internet celebrities arises relying on the novel platform. Papi Jiang, a salient model, has released homemade funny videos online mocking everything from personal relationships to relational accent in “high pitched, rapid fire Mandarin” started from 2015. In less than a year, she had already accumulated 44 million followers.¹⁴ Absurdity now seems the most essential capability for the celebrity to capture audiences’ eyes, reflecting the trend

¹⁴ See, for example, *The Culture Trip* (July 5, 2017). “Why Is the Chinese Internet Going Crazy over Papi Jiang” <https://theculturetrip.com/asia/china/articles/why-is-the-chinese-internet-going-crazy-over-papi-jiang/> (last accessed on April 11, 2022).

of pure entertainment in Chinese media outlets.

3.2 The “Invisible Hand” Behind the Entertainment Media

It is evident that the development of the market economy is the fundamental force driving the boom of entertainment media. But, in the Chinese context, due to the tight control of the authorities over mass media, the discussion on the role of the CCP behind the triumph of entertainment should not be dismissed. I suggest that the CCP make use of entertainment media through two approaches. One is the direct approach that the propaganda authorities try to exploit entertainment media to conduct “soft propaganda,” the other is the indirect approach that the authorities take advantage of pure entertainment to undo audiences’ critical-thinking capacities and fashion their political attitudes by stirring rhetoric such as nationalistic propaganda.

Propaganda through artworks or “soft propaganda” has a long-term tradition in authoritarianism because in the lack of solid established democratic institutions, authoritarian leaders may find historical and cultural assertions to be of indispensable value in staking their claim to a “right of rule” (Perry, 2017). Various artworks, e.g., literature, films, documentaries, music, dances, etc., were utilized by authoritarian authorities as effective vehicles of propaganda, which could be observed from Nazi Germany to the Soviet Union to Maoist China (e.g., Groys, 2011; Hoffmann, 2003; Hoffmann, 1996; Perry, 2017). As Groys (2008, p, 4) points out insightfully that *totalitarian movements and states...The art that is put in the service of such a dynamic, revolutionary balance of power takes necessarily the form of political propaganda. Such art does not reduce itself to the representation of power — it participates in the struggle for power that it interprets as the only way in which the true balance of power could reveal itself.* In Chinese revolutionary period, under Mao Zedong, the CCP not only

enabled the transplantation of Marxist-Leninist ideas and institutions onto Chinese soil but also enabled to utilize an array of resources — from Mandarin gowns and literary aphorisms to popular religion and secret-society conventions — to conduct cultural positioning; After the establishment of PRC, the authorities both the central and local officials conducted cultural patronage to promote the socialist construction (Perry, 2017).

Like the treatment over other cultural and historical resources, in recent years, the Chinese propaganda authorities also tried to exploit entertainment media to conduct implicit propaganda. For instance, the Propaganda Department encourages and invests numerous “main melody” (*zhuxuanlü* 主旋律) films and serials to show the ruling party’s contributions to modern and current China so as to affirm its right to rule (e.g., Cai, 2016b). China Central Television’s Spring Festival Gala (*chunwan* 春晚), a large annual TV show broadcast on Lunar New Year Evening, is also an important approach for the authorities to do education of traditional culture and evoke ordinary people’s national pride (Cai, 2016a; Wang, 2010).

Whereas making use of cultural resources to conduct implicit propaganda has a longstanding tradition in China and seemingly realizes great success in different historical periods, entertainment media might be difficult to be successfully retrofitted as propaganda vehicles. Traditional authoritarian cultural products are structural-sophisticated, pursuing aesthetic sensibilities, yet modern entertainment content should be grassroots-oriented Fast Moving consumer goods, rejecting seriousness and grand narrative. If entertainment is injected too much propagandist elements, it tends to be not interesting enough to draw audiences’ attention. Take the frequently mentioned two cases, i.e., “main melody” films and drama and Spring Festival Gala as examples, the primary purpose for both two entertainment-like media products lie in framing certain official ideologies instead of pure amusement, so, strictly speaking, these are not pure entertainment content and not attractive for people who are interested in pure entertainment. In today’s China, more and more enriched media choice

enables audiences to opt for their preferred content so that semi-entertainment or propaganda-oriented entertainment content is unpopular, a prominent case is that the ratings of Spring Festival Gala have continually dropped down for years.¹⁵ In this light, propaganda embedded into entertainment might not be as powerful as some pundits posited.

Compared to the direct approach, I posit that the implications of entertainment media through the indirect approach is more salient. Specifically, lasting pure entertainment media exposure largely damage ordinary citizens' cognitive complexity thereby making them susceptible to stirring rhetoric. China's pure entertainment industry's boom seems merely driven by the market economy, while, in the Chinese context, the role of the authorities' permission should not be overlooked. Without the recognition and endorsement of the commodity attribute of mass media in the Fourteenth Party Congress in 1992, marketized media like metro newspaper will not be emerged (Stockmann, 2013). In 2007, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television and the Ministry of Information Industry promulgated a provision on online video productions, largely promoting the flourishing of online entertainment programs in recent years. Zhou and Huang (2021) further suggest that the government to some extent plays a role in the process of legitimization of entertainment media in the Chinese context. Put differently, after making sure that entertainment content in line with the signals that the authorities attempt to spread to the public, the authorities to some degree endorse entertainment production. Moreover, if pan-entertainment storm especially online entertainment is in conflict with the party's propaganda strategies and the guiding line, we would not witness the fast flourishing of internet entertainment industry in China over the past few years. For instance, investigative journalism is also demanded by the market in China, yet it is not in line with the authorities' propaganda guiding principles, so the recent decade

¹⁵ See, for example, *China Times* (February 22, 2015). "The Ratings of CCTV Spring Festival Gala Can't Go Back (央视春晚收视率回不去了)." <https://www.chinatimes.com/newspapers/20150222000136-260108?chdtv> (last accessed on April 11, 2022).

witnessed a fast decline in this type of media content (Svensson, 2017).

Two main reasons make the authorities glad to see or promote the development of entertainment media. First, the Chinese authorities have viewed “cultural economy” represented by media marketization as a critical part of the national economy since the mid-1990s; the boom of entertainment media industry, without doubts, can contribute to the economic growth. Second and more importantly, pure entertainment media indeed supply the authorities with valid “pleasure drug” that helps to take away people’s sophistication so that makes them much more readily to be ruled. As introduced in the previous sections, entertainment media such as soaps, variety shows, and market-oriented tabloids make audiences immerse in the sea of joyousness; in particular, when the internet rises, pure entertainment such as the trend of “aesthetic of the ugly” deconstructs the tradition of serious narratives, making everything to be “entertainmentalization.” This propensity, of course, pollutes public sphere and undermines rational social atmosphere (Postman, 1985), yet it indeed makes a subset people to be unsophisticated and lacking the capacities to resist the influence of authoritarian propaganda.

Given the formidable side effect of entertainment media, the authorities exploit this media genre as a subtle means to substitute those crude stability maintenance means such as repression. For example, during the early stage of the COVID-19 epidemic, the Central Propaganda Department and the National Radio and Television Administration urgently supplied Hubei province with many TV serials copyrights.¹⁶ Many of those serials are pure

¹⁶ Those TV serials include *Diplomatic Situation* (外交风云), *Surgeons* (外科风云), *Emergency Department Doctors* (急诊科医生), *On The Road* (在远方), *The city of the family* (那座城市那家人), *Like a Flowing River* (大江大河), *Perfect Youth* (最美的青春), *The Best Partner* (精英律师), *The Thunder* (破冰行动), *The Eyas* (飞行少年). See, Xinhua News Agency (January 24, 2020). “The Central Propaganda Department and the National Radio and Television Administration Urgently Coordinate the donation of TV Drama Copyrights to Hubei and Wuhan TV Stations (中宣部、广电总局紧急协调向湖北、武汉电视台捐赠电视剧版权)” <https://bit.ly/3shNT2j> (last accessed on April 11, 2022).

entertainment rather than with explicit propaganda features. Thus, it is obvious that what the government wanted through supplying the copyrights of these TV serials did not lie in influencing audiences' attitudes by serials directly but lie in letting people immerse themselves in the pseudo environment depicted by soap operas and then weakening their perception of the reality. As such, people would be more vulnerable to anti-pandemic propaganda made by state-controlled media.

As aforementioned, we use some policies issued by the relevant departments in China and scholars' research findings as suggestive evidence to illustrate the probable role played by the authorities behind the triumph of Chinese entertainment media. In the next chapter, some quantitative evidence will also be presented to support the hypothesis that the government may employ entertainment media as a subtle means to manage society. What should be acknowledged is that we still lack very direct evidence, such as official documents or statements that explicitly signal the authorities' aims of making use of entertainment, to prove the government strategically promoting the development of entertainment media. Nevertheless, what should also be recognized is that, in the Chinese context, we can hardly find such direct or explicit evidence to prove the authorities' ruling tactics, especially their intention. The suggestive evidence presented above and empirical evidence in the next chapter should be sufficient to demonstrate the authorities' latent purposes for using entertainment media. Meanwhile, one may be concerned that the Chinese government cracking down on the entertainment industry and famous idols in the recent two years seem to challenge the soft model proposed by this research. We suggest that the "soft authoritarianism" model has its premises and limits and cannot entirely take over those hard ruling means. When the ruling elites perceive an increase in potential threats from the entertainment industry, they will repress it without hesitation. Regarding this point, we will make an illustration in detail in the final chapter.

3.3 Propaganda in China: from Ideological Indoctrination to Nationalistic Stimulation

The main idea of this research is that entertainment media consumption makes people vulnerable to propaganda. Looking back to the evolution of official propaganda, several changes have been made in terms of both contents and formats that aim to pursue a higher level of persuasion. Since the birth of the CCP, propaganda has been treated as a crucial weapon for the Party to organize, mobilize, influence, and even shape the mass public. Propaganda hence is usually regarded as the “lifeblood” of the party work for a long time (Brady and Wang, 2009). Mao Zedong attached great importance to the role of propaganda, and personally participated in it both during the Revolutionary War and after the founding of the People’s Republic of China. Mao stressed that “(we) should seize the newspaper in our own hands, taking it as a weapon for organizing all work.”¹⁷ He also stated that “the role and power of the newspapers consist in their ability to bring the Party programme, the Party line, and the Party’s general and specific policies, its task and methods of work before the masses in the quickest and most extensive way” (Jan, 1967). As aforementioned, Mao attempted to employ the tool of propaganda to realize the spiritual transformation of the public, more precisely, cultivating the mass to be qualified communist citizens instead of merely convincing them to be supportive of the nascent regime (Brady, 2009a).

To maximize the effect of ideological indoctrination, under Mao Zedong, the authorities built a four-layer, sophisticated Party propaganda system in the early 1950s and had invested great resources to construct radio stations. Radio was regarded as the most effective propagandistic vehicle before the emergence and popularity of television. Data shows, as of the end of 1955, there were 104 wired radio stations in villages, 719 in cities and towns, 8,200 in factories, plants, and enterprises, and 2,500 in schools and military units (Jan, 1967). The

¹⁷ Bin Li (July 24, 2013). “The principles and methods of the Party’s ideological propaganda work advocated by Mao Zedong” <https://www.dswxyjy.org.cn/BIG5/n1/2019/0228/c425367-30913665.html> (last accessed on April 11, 2022).

powerful propaganda machine, without doubt, played a crucial role in mass mobilization during several ambitious construction projects such as the Great Leap Forward. At the same time, the sophisticated propaganda system also minimizes the possibility of social unrest after the failure of impractical construction projects because a sizeable subset of people living in illusions weaved by propaganda (Paltemaa, 2019).

In the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), propaganda was also used by Mao and his subordinates to spread his personal ideology, although the ultimate aim was to consolidate power rather than merely to cultivate qualified communist citizens. A notable condition is that the existing propaganda system was almost shutdown, and Mao was inclined to appoint fresh propagandists to replace incumbent bureaucrats (Brady, 2009a). As such, a group of young propagandists and students was discovered, activated, and assigned to writing teams, such as Liang Xiao (梁校),¹⁸ thereby contributing to the spread of Mao Zedong Thought (or Maoism) and the value of the Cultural Revolution (Tsai and Kao, 2013). Propaganda during the Cultural Revolution was successful, reflecting not only in the emergence of hundreds of thousands of Red Guards that voluntarily defended Chairman Mao (Yang, 2000; Zuo, 1991) but also in that the legacy of the Cultural Revolution has a lasting effect on Chinese people till now (e.g., Mittler, 2013; Y. Wang, 2021).

After the Cultural Revolution, while the new leadership of the CCP abandoned the principle of “politics in command” and gradually moved to the market economy, it awarded the great power of political propaganda. In the 1980s, the economic and limited political reform was the most crucial task of the leadership, the field of propaganda was subject to rather loose supervision. A salient example is that Zhu Houze, Head of Central Propaganda Department of the CCP (1985-1987) had proposed the policy of “Generous, Tolerant, Relaxed”

¹⁸ Liang Xiao is the pseudonym of “the Great Critic Group of Peking University and Tsinghua University” that consists of students and faculties in these two schools and members from other institutes.

(宽厚、宽容、宽松) (Brady, 2009a). However, the outbreak of a large-scale student movement in 1989 shocked the leadership, especially the conservative camp, those top leaders faulted the laxity of ideological propaganda. The importance of propaganda became a consensus of the new leadership after the Tiananmen Square Movement. But the collapse of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought drove the propaganda work into a predicament (S. Zhao, 1998). It was difficult for the authorities to steer public opinion and reshape the glorious image of the communist regime because spiritual resources that were previously proved to be effective did not work at then. Alternatively, the authorities found that nationalism “*remained the one bedrock of political belief shared by most Chinese people in spite of the rapid decay of Communist official ideology*” (S. Zhao, 1998, p. 289).

Therefore, from the 1990s on, there has been a transformation of China’s official propaganda, that is, from ideological indoctrination to nationalistic stimulation. In other words, in the Maoist era, the guiding principle of propaganda work was to refashion citizens’ ideologies, thereby making them be so-called qualified Communist citizens, but starting from the 1990s, the authorities did not take propaganda as an ideological cultivation machine, rather the regime merely utilizes nationalistic and other similar ideological materials to convince the public to accept such narrative, i.e., the Communist Party is competent to governance China and guide the country to realize fast socio-economic boost. Nationalism has been the crucial ideological means used by the Communist authorities to shape public opinion. Nationalism, a term born with the modern nation-state, has shown its powerful implications on war, revolution, and collective action over the past centuries (e.g., Breen, 1997; Davis and Brown, 2002; Hutchinson, 2017).

Regardless of how complex it is, each ideology has its roots in specific conditions, and nationalism is no exception. The emergence of nationalism was accompanied by the struggles of diverse nationalities for nation-state’s establishment or national independence. Smith (2001,

p. 9) therefore defines nationalism as “*an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity for a population which some of its members deem to constitute an actual or potential nation.*” There are three influential theories on what drives nationalism. Gellner (1983) raises a functionalist theory of nationalism that economic development and modernization promote the need for a unified language, writing system, and culture, which lays the basis for the emergence of the nation. The theory of cultural origins holds a different view, namely nationalism is driven by pre-modern origins such as kinship, religion, belief systems, and common historic memories (Smith, 1995; Smith, 1998). The constructivist view argues that nationalism is a product fabricated by the elites to manipulate the mass public (e.g., Anderson, 1983; Deutsch, 1953). Despite the debate on the origin of nationalism, the influence of this ideology on stimulating people’s sensitive nerves has been well demonstrated.

In the Jiang Zemin era, the Chinese authorities had begun to build a sophisticated patriotic education system (S. Zhao, 1998), aiming to bolster ordinary people’s patriotic or nationalistic sentiment from their childhood. The core content of this patriotic education lies in modern Chinese history, i.e., so-called century humiliation (*bainian guochi* 百年国耻) and the CCP-led successful struggle against imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat-capitalism (Brady, 2009a; Z. Wang, 2008; S. Zhao, 1998). Hu Jintao inherited the policies of his predecessor, including hostility-centered nationalistic propaganda. Moreover, while market-oriented media and the internet enjoyed relatively loose management in Jiang’s period, media censorship or control in Hu’s period has been more and more restricted (Wu, 2009). Media censorship was used to ensure the effectiveness of patriotic education.

Compared to his predecessors, Xi Jinping pays more attention to propaganda and thought work. As aforementioned, as soon as he came to power, Xi stressed that while economic construction is the central work, ideological work is an extremely important work of the

Party.¹⁹ To overcome several challenges faced the Party in the ideological field, under Xi, the propaganda authorities has conducted a series of reforms. After 2012, while nationalism remains a crucial theme of official propaganda, its contents and formats have experienced great changes. To begin with, if nationalistic education and propaganda in the Jiang-Hu era could be regarded as hostility-centered propaganda that strives to instill nationalistic sentiment and support for the regime in the masses through inducing popular hostility toward foreign forces, the content of nationalistic propaganda in recent years has dominated by national pride. Precisely, official rhetoric and state media vigorously prime an array of achievements, such as fast economic growth and scientific and technological breakthroughs, realized by China, portraying the vibrant image of China that has a bright future (H. Huang, 2021). For example, in 2018, a documentary film entitled *Amazing China (lihaile wodeguo 厉害了我的国)* that depicts or even overstates the achievements made by China since the 18th National Congress of the CCP became the most popular one of all time in China.²⁰ It is evident that pride-oriented nationalistic propaganda has replaced previous hostility-centered ones to be used to cultivate ordinary people's nationalism and, in turn, to boost their support for the government.

In addition, to maximize the effectiveness, the propaganda authorities have invested a lot of resources to update propaganda vehicles, namely embracing the internet, in general, and social media, in particular (Creemers, 2017). For instance, in 2014, Shanghai United Media Group launched an APP-based news platform *The Paper (pengpai xinwen 澎湃新闻)*, which realizes great success and is regarded as a representative of “novel mainstream media” (*xinxing zhuliu meiti 新型主流媒体*) (Repnikova and Fang, 2019); in the meantime, state media have actively set an array of official accounts on social media platforms, including Weibo, Wechat,

¹⁹ Xinhua News (August 20, 2013). “Xi Jinping: ideological work is an extremely important work of the party (习近平: 意识形态工作是党的一项极端重要的工作)” <https://bit.ly/3eSYopY> (last accessed on April 11, 2022).

²⁰ *South China Morning Post* (May 14, 2018). “Xi Jinping takes leading role in hit propaganda film extolling ‘amazing’ China” <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/2137168/xi-jinping-takes-leading-role-hit-propaganda-film-extolling> (last accessed on April 11, 2022).

and TikTok, etc., narrowing the gap with the audience and shaping discourse in the cyber public sphere. For example, *Xinwen Lianbo* (新闻联播), the flagship news programme produced by CCTV, set up its official account on Douyin (TikTok in China) on August 24, 2019, attracting over 10 million followers in just one day.²¹ Through a sophisticated cyber medium network, the authorities attempt to realize the highest level of convincing of nationalistic narrative, especially among the younger generation.

The rise of nationalist propaganda along with both increasingly conservative internal policies and tough diplomacy that is now called “wolf warrior diplomacy” is regarded as “Maoist revival” in China (S. Zhao, 2016). This propensity has raised unease among domestic liberal intellectuals and has caused deterioration in relation with the US-led Western community (e.g., Walker, 2018; Weiss, 2014), yet to some people who are vulnerable to nationalistic propaganda, these practices and rhetoric could provoke their nerves, boost their satisfaction with the current regime, increase their xenophobia, and make them be willing to defend the regime voluntarily, like “Fangirls’ Expedition.”

²¹ China News Service (August 25, 2019). “CCTV’s ‘Xinwen Lianbo’ settled on Douyin, gaining more than 10 million followers a day” <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/2019/08-25/8937254.shtml> (last accessed on April 11, 2022).

Chapter 4. ENTERTAINMENT AS A SUBTLE MEANS TO MANAGE SOCIETY

In the previous chapter, we have introduced the development path of entertainment media, the role played by the authorities behind the triumph of entertainment media, as well as the nationalistic transformation of official propaganda. Through the relatively detailed background and relevant policies' introduction, it is evident that by two main approaches, the propaganda authorities attempt to steer public opinion relying on entertainment media, and in contrast to embedding propagandistic elements into entertainment products (i.e., the direct approach), promoting pure entertainment to undo audiences' resistance to propaganda (i.e., the indirect approach) is more likely to realize favorable effects. In this chapter, we are going to present more sophisticated empirical evidence regarding how the Chinese authorities use entertainment media as a subtle means to steer public opinion, thereby safeguarding regime stability.

In what follows, two pieces of empirical evidence will be exhibited respectively. First, taking the Communist Youth League of China, the youth wing of the ruling party, as an example, we display how entertainment (i.e., pop idols) can be used as an effective way to attract a large subset of politically unsophisticated people, thereby increasing the effect of nationalistic propaganda. Second, using provincial-level panel data over the past two decades, we show more direct evidence of how entertainment media has been somewhat exploited as an alternative means of heavy-handed repression to maintain resilience.

4.1 Evidence from the Communist Youth League

4.1.1 The Chinese Communist Youth League and Its Role in China's Political Context

The Chinese Communist Youth League (the CYL or the League) is a youth movement or

party, run by the CCP. As of the end of 2017, the CYL had more 80 million members aged from 14 to 28.²² The history of the CYL could be traced back to the Shanghai Socialist Youth Corps that was founded in 1920 by Chen Duxiu, a co-founder of the CCP (Pringsheim, 1962). The mission of this youth organization, since it was inception, has been to spread pro-Communist (or pro-CCP) information, claims, and ideologies among young workers, peasants, and students, thereby moving them to unite closely under the flag of the Communist Party. From the 1930s to the 1940s, the CYL fruitfully mobilized and organized the youth to fight against Japanese imperialism and the Kuomintang (KMT). For instance, during the Sino-Japanese War, over 90 percent of the CCP-led armies were made up of young people; during the Chinese Civil War, the majority of young students, stimulated by the CYL, stood in opposition to the KMT (Pringsheim, 1962). Furthermore, after the setup of the People's Republic of China, the CYL was continuously assigned the task of guiding the younger generation to follow the Communist Party and be faithful to Communist values (Funnell, 1970).

However, this youth organization gradually turned into a sluggish bureaucracy without once strong publicity and mobilization capacities (Chao, 1954; Pringsheim, 1962). Especially during the Cultural Revolution, under repression, the CYL was almost inoperative (Leader, 1974). With the reform and opening-up policy, the Chinese authorities turned its core work from the “class struggle” to the economic development, many institutions that had been hit during the Cultural Revolution were back to normal, including the CYL. After the large-scale student movement happened in 1989, the authorities were aware of the importance of ideological education or control, in particular, among the student and young people. As such, the League was entrusted with crucial responsibilities in the state-led patriotic propaganda campaign (Li, 2018; S. Zhao, 1998). While shouldering an important mission, the League, for a long time, propagated official doctrines through monotonous approaches, realizing limited

²² Data Source: <https://bit.ly/3ctYx08> (last accessed on April 11, 2022).

effects or even backfiring sometimes (Tsimonis, 2018).

Although the CYL had behaved unsatisfactorily in terms of conducting ideological indoctrination among the youth, this organization was still a crucial “reserve force” for the CCP (Doyon, 2020). In the 1980s, the ruling party set up fresh criteria for cadre cultivation and appointment — “four transformations” which attempts to sieve a group of “younger, better educated, more professional, and revolutionized” cadres to update governance capacities and perpetuate the regime (Kou and Tsai, 2014; Manion, 1985). It is found that from 1982 to 2012, more than 15% of the CCP Politburo members were once members of the CYL Central Committee (Doyon, 2020). This favorable status of the CYL, however, has been gone away since Xi Jinping came to power after the 18th National Congress of the CCP. Source shows, in a 2015 internal speech, Xi Jinping criticized the League for devolving into an “empty shell” (*xingtong xushe* 形同虚设) and could merely shout “empty slogans” (*konghan kouhao* 空喊口号) (Doyon, 2020). In 2016, this biggest youth organization was accused of growing bureaucratic and aristocratic tendencies by the top discipline authorities of the CCP.²³

In the face of criticism from the leadership, the CYL must reconstruct its work patterns and target accurately the work priority. Striving to be popular among young Chinese has become the top priority of the CYL’s work over the past few years. That is because, on the one hand, close connection with the youth helps the CYL to respond to the accusation of out of touch with the youth; on the other hand, if there are a considerable number of steadfast youth followers, the CYL will gain bargaining chips with the leadership. To realize the goal of increasing influence among young people, the League gives prominence to nationalistic propaganda work, trying to stir up the youth’s nationalistic feelings by fresh and innovative

²³ *Global Times* (February 4, 2016). “The Investigation Team: There Are Aristocratic and Entertainment-Oriented Problems in the CYL Central Committee” <https://bit.ly/31Fmyw4> (last accessed on March 1, 2022).

approaches instead of previous clumsy indoctrination.

4.1.2 The Innovation of the CYL's Propaganda Practice

While the authorities stress the importance of propaganda in terms of steering public opinion, traditional heavy-handed propaganda has been proved ineffective or even backlash sometimes (e.g., H. Huang, 2018; Qian, Xu, and Chen, 2017). As aforementioned, a lasting exposure to entertainment media can weaken people's sophistication and, thereby, increase their acceptance of the content indoctrinated by propaganda outlets. Although we could not confirm to what extent the CYL leadership understands the latent mechanisms of entertainment media's political implications, this youth organization, in recent years, has indeed intentionally exploited entertainment as a "sieve" to select those young people who are interested in entertainment media and pop culture; at the same time, the CYL pays attention to refashion its propaganda content, that is, increasing nationalistic propaganda to influence those targeted young audiences' attitudes toward the Chinese authorities as well as so-called foreign forces.

To be specific, the League uses social media to innovate its propaganda practice. Social media is used as a major platform to build close ties with pop idols; on the other hand, social media is also used as a nationalistic content spreading medium to influence ordinary people, especially the youth who follow those idols. Because for pop idols or celebrities, building a connection with the CYL confers official accreditation to some extent, they have incentives to maintain this relationship. For example, in 2014, the League launched an online activity, i.e., calling for people to take photos with the national flag to celebrate National Day. There was a limited number of netizens who responded to the CYL online at first, however, when Han Geng, a then-popular singer, posted a photo of him with the Great Hall of the People with one sentence "I love you, China" on Weibo, tens of thousands of netizens followed Han's step to

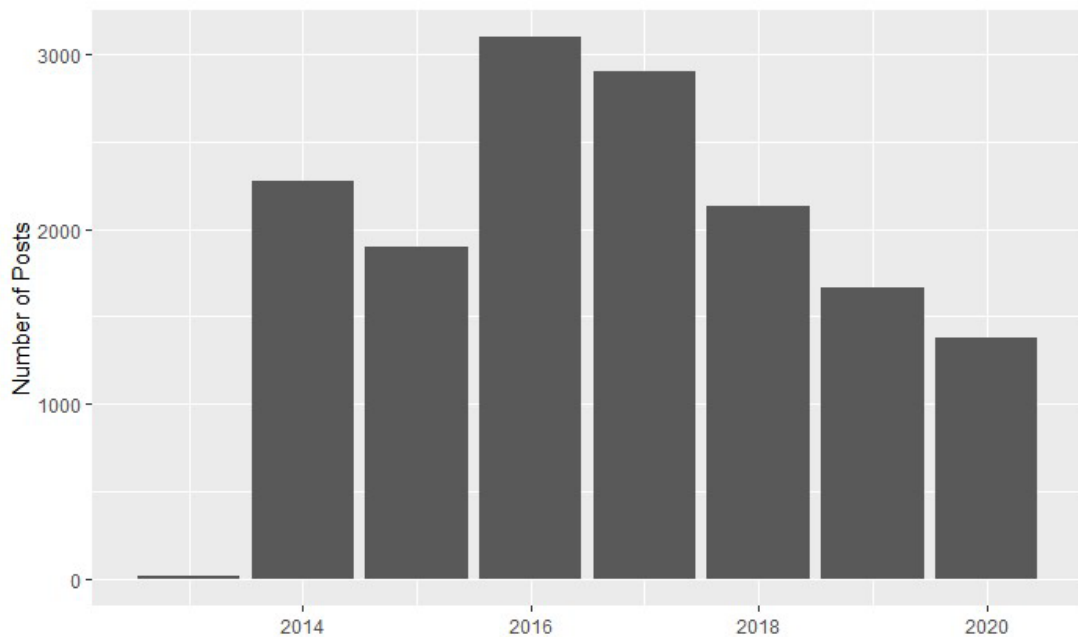
share photos with the symbols of China to celebrate National Day.²⁴ Since then, Han Geng became one of the most salient pop idols who have built a close interaction with the youth wing of the ruling party in cyberspace. With the cooperation of pop idols, the CYL boosts its influence among the younger generation, setting up the basis to spread nationalistic ideologies.

4.1.3 Data Collection, Methods, and Results

To show how the CYL makes use of the influence of pop idols to attract the younger generation on the internet, we analyze the propaganda strategies of the CYL on Weibo, a prominent social media platform in China. As a Twitter-like social media, Weibo was set up in 2009 and became popular soon. While early research was cautiously optimistic about the influence of the popularity of Weibo on freedom of speech and, more general, liberalization in China (e.g., Rauchfleisch and Schäfer, 2015), the Chinese government learned how to control social media platforms very soon and cultivated these platforms, including Weibo, to be fresh mouthpieces for the ruling party (Creemers, 2017; Qin, Strömberg, and Wu, 2017). As the youth wing of the CCP, the League also uses Weibo as the major social media channel to connect with popular pop idols, whereby increasing influence among the youth.

²⁴ “How the Communist Youth League reversed China’s online public opinion” <https://chinaqna.com/a/11916> (last accessed on March 1, 2022).

Figure 4.1 The Distribution of the CYL Weibo Posts



Notes: The graph presents the distribution of the CYL Weibo posts from 2013 to 2020.

To be precise, leveraging web-scraping technology, we collected all of the original posts produced by the CYL official Weibo account between 2013 and 2020. The number of posts we finally got is 15,373 (see Figure 4.1). The main aim of the empirical analysis falls in figuring out whether or not the CYL pays special attention to keeping a close connection with those popular pop idols on Weibo. To this end, we use machine learning algorithms to examine the interactive network of the CYL based on its Weibo posts. The specific approach is that, given in the Weibo context, when a specific account wants to interact with other accounts, it will mention (“@”) these accounts in the body of its posts; therefore, we use “@” as the key character to identify all accounts mentioned by the CYL in its posting corpus. If pop idols have been indeed used by the League as a means to attract unsophisticated followers, we may see some evidence in the CYL’s interactive network on Weibo.

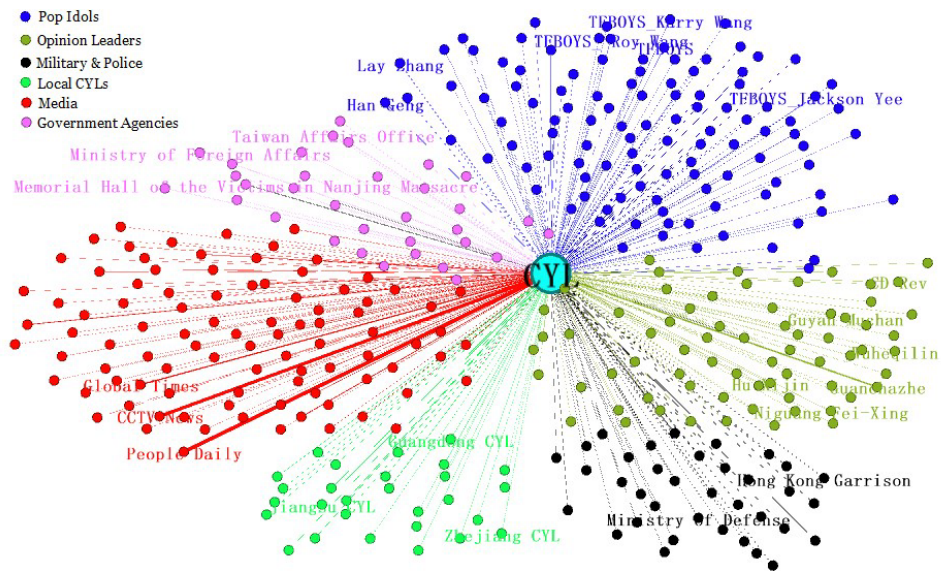
Figure 4.2 presents the interactive network of the CYL based on its posting corpus. It can be found that the accounts mentioned by the CYL can be categorized into six groups or classes,

namely pop idols, left-wing opinion leaders, military and police forces, local CYL accounts, mass media, and government agencies' official accounts. Given that the size of the edge indicates times that the CYL mentioned a given account, it is clear that the *People's Daily* and CCTV News are two accounts that have been mentioned by the CYL most frequently. Many other mass media accounts, as Figure 4.2 shows, have also been frequently mentioned by the CYL in its daily postings. However, the biggest group that interacts with the CYL on Weibo platform is a number of pop idols who have numerous young fans. Table 4.1 lists the number of accounts in each group that has been mentioned by the CYL and also presents the one with the maximum number of mentioning times in each group. As an official account for the youth wing of the ruling party, the CYL Weibo account should have interacted with other accounts with official backgrounds such as accounts operated by state-run media and government agencies. However, what the CYL has done is to keep a close relationship with pop idols instead of following traditional operation pattern, i.e., closely connected with official accounts. Through this somewhat special interactive network, the argument put forward by this research, namely the CYL attempts to make use of the influence of pop idols to intensify its reputation and influence among the younger generation, has been supported.

Further analysis shows that the CYL interacts with pop idols strategically. There are two major criteria that the CYL hold to sieve appropriate celebrities on Weibo. One is that those celebrities or pop idols should be willing to spread pro-regime "positive energy" (*zheng nengliang* 正能量), the other is that those pop idols should be as popular as possible among the younger generation. As aforementioned, Han Geng, a pop singer, was frequently mentioned by the CYL on its Weibo postings after Han gave a response to the CYL's appeal of sharing a photo with the national flag. Nevertheless, when Han was no longer as popular as before, the CYL fast hunted for other pop idols who are also willing to spread patriotic information online. As such, TFboys and Lay Zhang have been new young "exemplars"

praised by the CYL. This strategic interactive pattern brings a favorable outcome, namely the CYL's young followers have increased fast. Data shows, merely in the third quarter of 2016, the CYL Weibo account harvested more than 300,000 new followers, in which more than 56% were between 18 to 24 years old (Zhu, Pan, and Chen, 2017). In this circumstance, the CYL can instill patriotic or nationalistic sentiment on the internet effectively.

Figure 4.2 Visualization the Interactive Network



Notes: The graph plots the interactive network of the CYL Weibo accounts. Nodes refers to accounts that have been mentioned (“@”) by the CYL in its Weibo posts, and the size of edges indicate the number of times an account has been mentioned. Those accounts can be categorized into six groups, namely, pop idols, opinion leaders, military or police, local CYLs, mass media, and government agencies.

Table 4.1 The CYL Interactive Network Statistics

Group	Number of Accounts	Most Mentioned Account (times)
Pop Idols	112	TFBOYS-Roy Wang (30)
Media	93	<i>People's Daily</i> (781)
Left-Wing Opinion Leaders	70	Niguang Fei-Xing (25)
Military & Police Forces	36	Military Newspaper Reporter (114)
Government Agencies	31	the Memorial Hall (71)
Local CYLs	28	the CYL Fujian Committee (60)

Notes: The table lists the number of accounts in each group that have been mentioned (“@”) by the CYL in its Weibo posts. the Memorial Hall refers to “the Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders.”.

4.2 Evidence from the Public Security Expenditure

4.2.1 Public Security Expenditure, Entertainment, and China’s Regime Stability

Since the reform and opening-up, China has realized a fast and continuous economic boost, bringing China to be the second-largest economy around the world. While the socio-economic progress has been remarkable, a series of problems such as inequality, corruption, and political repression have induced grievance and resistance from the mass public, threatening the stability of the party-state. Since the 1990s, collective actions or popular protests have become a prominent social phenomenon in China, attracting attention from both overseas media and academia (Cai, 2010; Chen, 2000; Chen, 2012; Lu and Tao, 2017). The subjects of collective actions include almost all social classes, from the peasant to the labor to the urban middle class. Given the peasants’ interests are likely to be damaged after the industrialization, peasant protests are too many to be overlooked in the Chinese context. For example, in Hunan Province, more than 9,200 collective actions broke out in countryside in 2001 (Chen, 2012). And O’Brien and Li (2006) further put forward a noteworthy feature of the

peasant resistance in China — rightful resistance: a subset of peasants organize to resist the government in the name of existing laws and regulations. The protest organized and participated by the labor is also notable. Data shows that from 2010 to 2020, over 10 years, over 13,100 labor protests had happened across 31 provinces in China.²⁵

In view of the threat of collective actions, the Chinese authorities have strong incentives to monitor, control, and repress potential collective actions, thereby keeping regime stability. To maximize the capacity of regime stability maintenance, the authorities have built a multilayer, sophisticated public security maintenance system over the past decades (Yang, 2017). To support the huge security maintenance system, the government has to spend a lot of money on domestic public security. Official statistics reveal that the annual public security expenditure had jumped from 348 billion RMB in 2007 to 1,240 billion RMB in 2017, and the average annual growth rate reaches 25%.²⁶ Nonetheless, increasing public security expenditure does not always work in terms of undoing latent social movements and keeping regime resilience. While heavy-handed maintenance or repression is useful to control society in some conditions, we see a lot of cases that exhibit the backlash effect of the repression in China (for review, see O'Brien and Deng, 2015; Zhu, 2017). On the other hand, the slowing down of China's economic development in recent years prevents the authorities from continuously investing numerous resources in regime stability maintenance.

Facing the potential problem brought by heavy-handed repressions, the authorities may find other alternative means to maintain regime stability, and entertainment, as introduced in previous chapters, can be exploited as a subtle tool to weaken people's resistance toward official narratives, thereby decreasing the probability of collective actions. If that is the case, what we can see is that the region that produces and broadcasts more entertainment

²⁵ Data source: <https://clb.org.hk/zh-hans> (last accessed on April 11, 2022).

²⁶ Data source: <https://bit.ly/3J4Rcmj> (last accessed on April 11, 2022).

productions (e.g., variety shows and TV serials) is more likely to reduce its expenditure on public security. In the following section, we make use of China's provincial data to examine the relationship between entertainment and the public security expenditure, whereby exhibit how entertainment media in China has been used as a subtle alternative means of heavy-handed repression in terms of regime stability maintenance.

4.2.2 Data and Methods

We collect second-hand provincial-level data regarding entertainment productions and public security expenditure to examine the above hypothesis. The dependent variable is the expenditure of public security across 31 provinces. This set of data is from China Statistical Yearbooks. Given that data about provincial entertainment media is available only after 2008, we collect the annual public security expenditure across 31 provinces from 2008 to 2019. In view of that this paper categorizes entertainment media into two major types, namely variety shows and soap operas, the independent variable therefore consists of two dimensions: one is the annual number of TV serials aired by different provinces and the other is the percentage of entertainment program playing time in total TV program time. The two sets of data are from China Statistical Yearbooks and China Radio and TV Yearbooks, respectively. To rule out the influence caused by other factors, we also include a series of control variables, such as the population in each province and provincial economic features. Therefore, the estimation method this research uses to examine the relationship between entertainment media and public security expenditure is as follows:

$$Y_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_{it} + \beta_2 Y_{i,t-1} + \beta_3 POP_{it} + \beta_4 GDP_{it} + \gamma_i + \lambda_t + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (4.1)$$

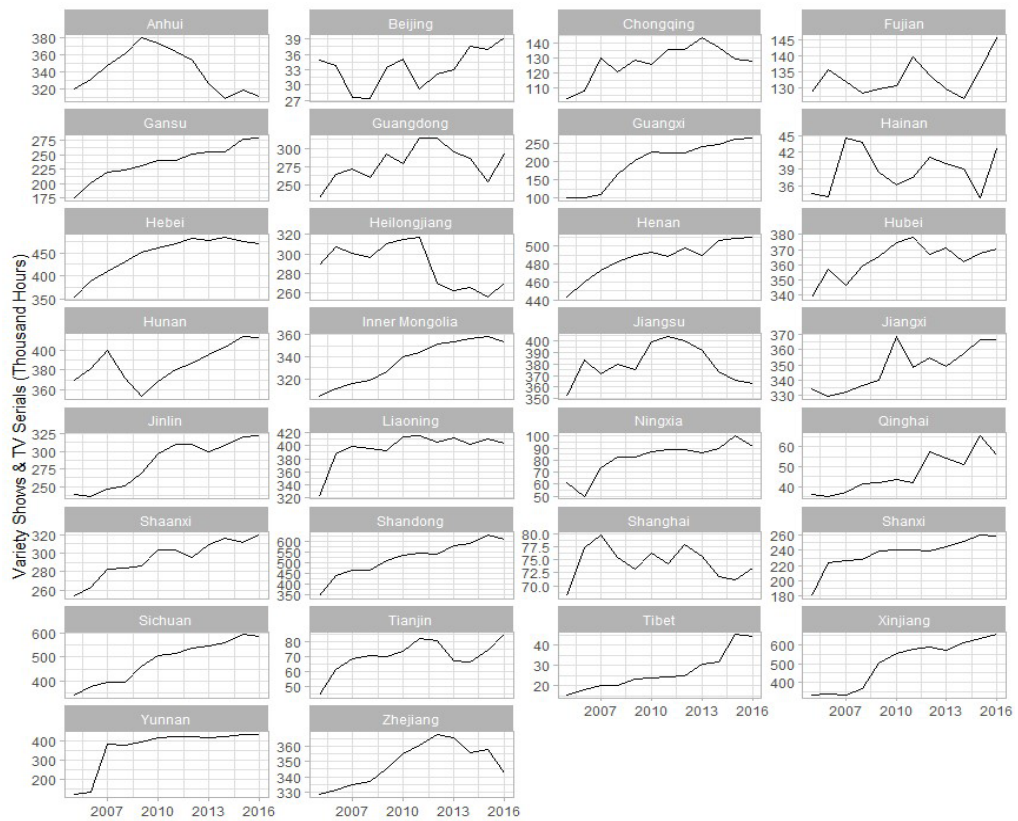
Where Y_{it} stands for the outcome variable this research interests, namely, the annual public expenditure across distinct provinces; x_{it} is the major explanatory variable, i.e., the number of TV serials and the ratio of entertainment programs, β_1 hence is the coefficient that

this research is interested in. It is worth noting that, to reduce latent errors, we add the lagged value of the outcome variable into the regression model. If the core coefficient is negative and significant, we can confidently say that the increase in entertainment transmitting is negatively associated with the decrease in the expenditure of public security.

4.2.3 Findings: The Negative Relationship between Entertainment Media and Public Security Expenditure

Figure 4.3 vividly presents the dynamics of entertainment transmitting across different provinces from 2005 to 2016. It can be noticed that in most provinces, entertainment products' playing time was constantly increasing, only except for provinces like Anhui, Heilongjiang, Shanghai, and Zhejiang. The difference is merely in the speed of growth and the level of the baseline. Moreover, Figure 4.4 further shows that the average number of TV serials aired by different provinces is varying. For example, in Xinjiang and Sichuan, the average number of TV serials between 2008 and 2019 was over 15,000, whereas, in provinces such as Tibet and Qinghai, the number of TV serials was very small. Figure 4.5 exhibits the difference in public security expenditure across 31 provinces. From which we can obtain two pieces of important information, one is that the diversity of provincial public security expenditure is remarkable; the other is that in contrast to South China, North China spends more money in regime stability maintenance, indicating the status quo of socio-economic distinction between South and North China.

Figure 4.3 Variety Shows and TV Serials Broadcasting Time (2005-2016)

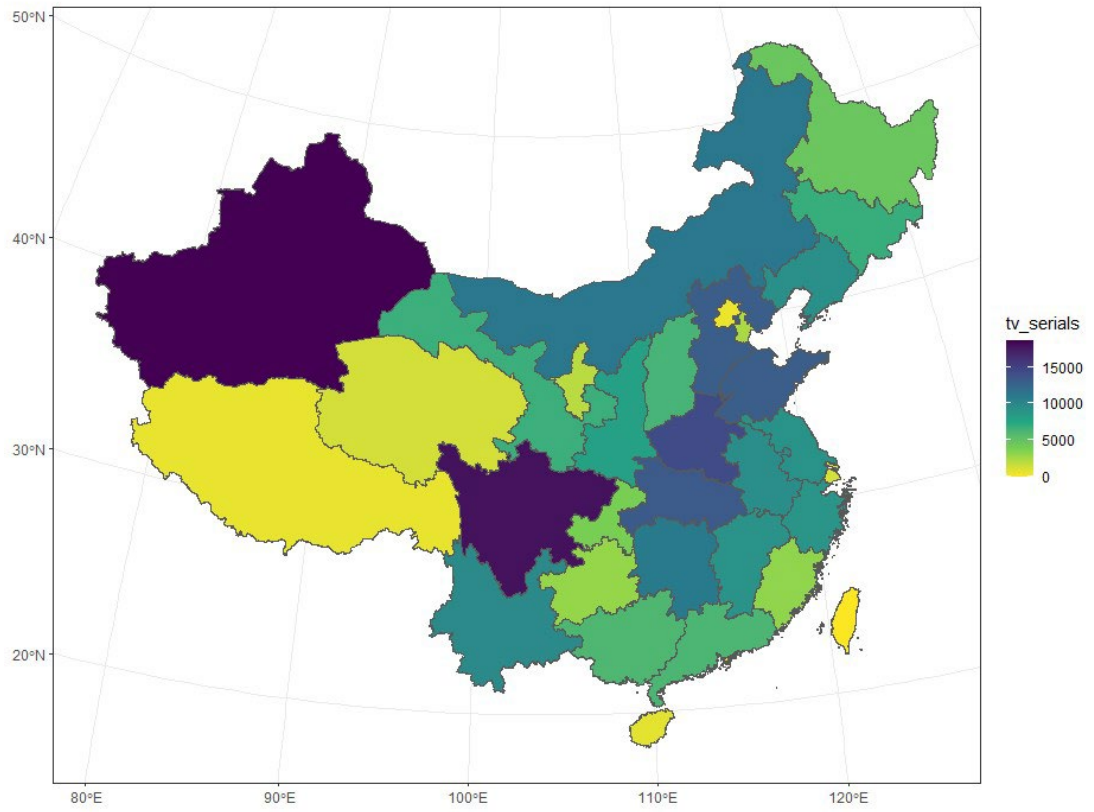


Notes: This graph plots the dynamics of the broadcasting time of entertainment content (i.e., variety shows and TV serials) across China’s provinces between 2005 and 2016. The trend in most is up in most provinces.

Next, we are going to analyze the relationship between entertainment broadcasting and the expenditure of public security across provinces. Figure 4.6 plots the negative relationship between the percentage of entertainment programs playing time in total TV program time and the expenditure of public security. In other words, controlling other conditions, when a province increases the ratio of variety shows, it spends less money on public security. Table 4.3 presents regression results in detail. While the influence of the number of TV serials is not statistically significant, the coefficient of the major explanatory variable remains negative when we add a series of covariates. When it comes to the percentage of entertainment programs, it can be found that when we control all covariates, there is a negative and significant

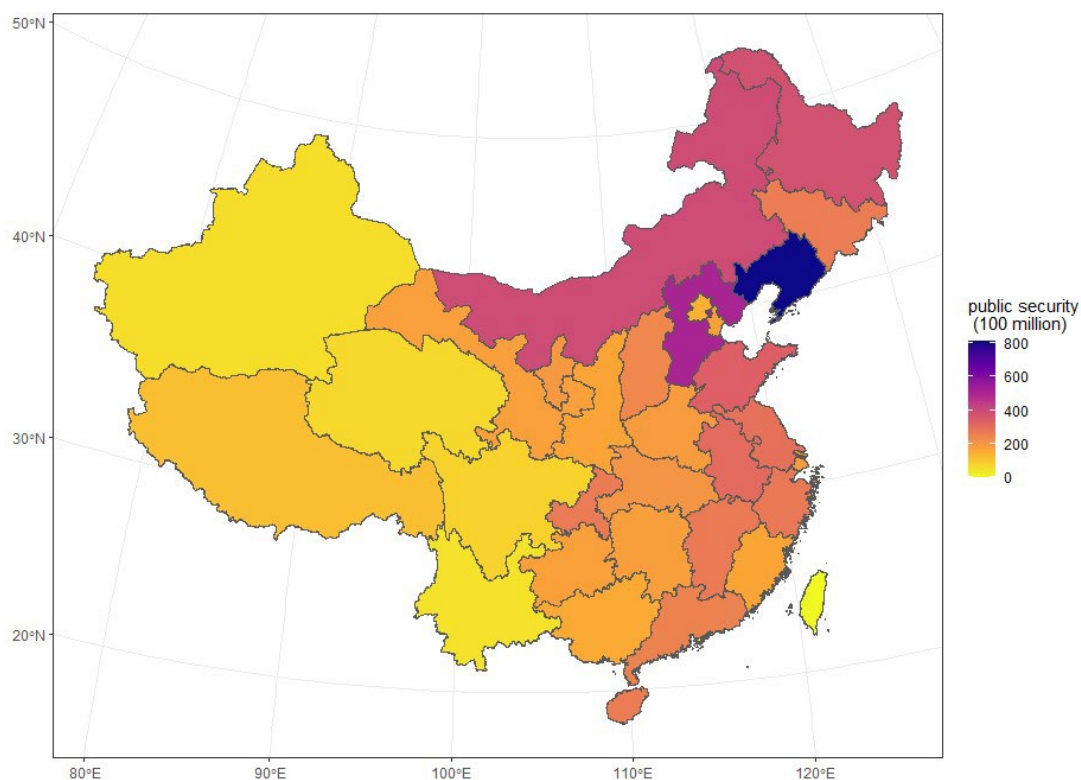
relationship between the independent variable and the outcome variable. Specifically, a one percent increase in the ratio of variety shows on television broadcasting time is associated with the decrease in the expenditure of public security by about 110 million RMB. To conduct a robustness test, we delete observations from Xinjiang where large-scale repressions have been conducted with the target of Uyghur separatist forces and the relevant spending might have not been accurately recorded in its annual statistics. Table 4.4 presents the regression results, from which we can note that the relationship between the ratio of entertainment programs and the expenditure of public security remain significant, even though we delete observations from Xinjiang. Put differently, the authorities can reduce the spending on public security by airing more entertainment programs. In this sense, entertainment media has been exploited by the authorities as a subtle means to maintain stability.

Figure 4.4 Average Number of TV Serials by Province (2008-2019)



Notes: The graph shows the spatial distribution of the average number of TV serials across China between 2008 and 2019.

Figure 4.5 Average Public Security Expenditure by Province (2008-2019)



Notes: The graph shows the spatial distribution of the average public security expenditure across China between 2008 and 2019.

Table 4.2 Summary Statistics

Variables	Observations	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
TV Serial (log)	372	8.558	1.006	5.953	10.193
Show Percentage	270	0.510	0.076	0.257	0.646
Security (log)	372	5.213	0.739	2.956	7.263
GDP (log)	372	9.539	1.031	5.979	11.587
Population (log)	372	8.121	0.862	5.677	11.622
Crime Rate	372	0.057	0.027	0.010	0.100

Notes: The table shows the summary statistics results of key variables.

Table 4.3 Relationship between Entertainment and Public Security Expenditure

	Public Security Expenditure(log) (1)	Public Security Expenditure (2)
TV Serial (log)	-0.013 (0.027)	
Show Percentage		-110.254* (61.090)
Security(log) _{t-1}	0.596*** (0.088)	
Security _{t-1}		1.267*** (0.083)
GDP (log)	0.146*** (0.043)	10.653 (16.046)
Population (log)	0.034** (0.012)	18.228 (26.432)
Crime Rate	0.112 (0.148)	2.025 (24.576)
Province FE	Y	Y
Year FE	Y	Y
observations	341	240
R2	0.977	0.972

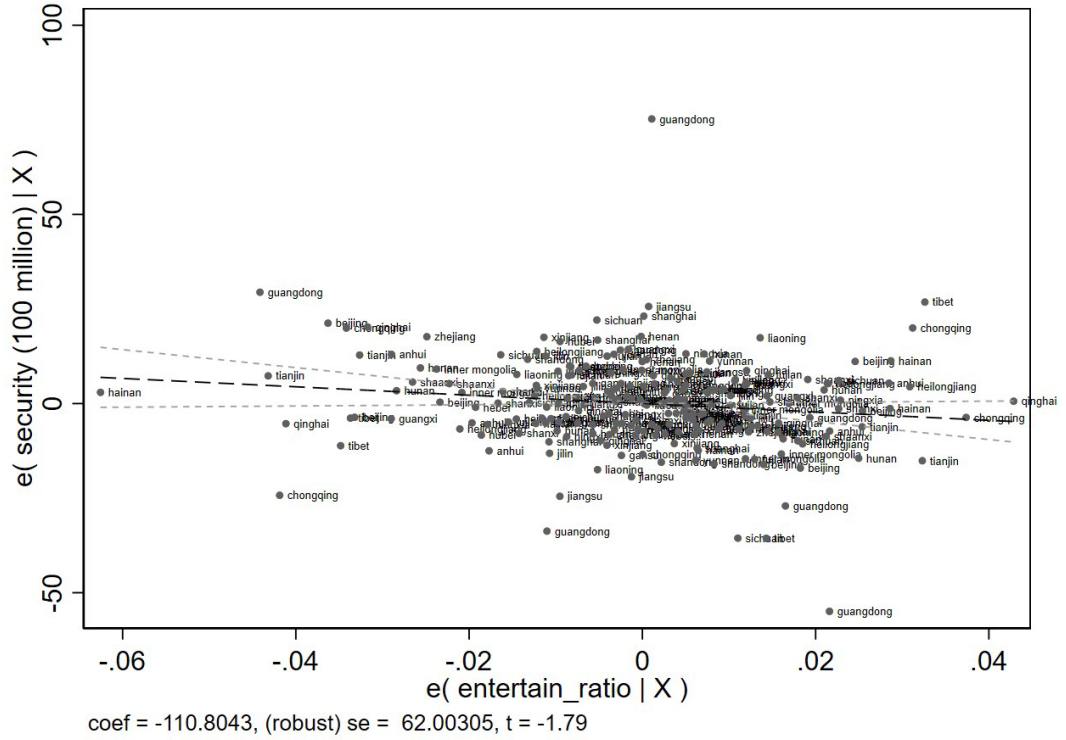
Notes: Standard errors are clustered at provincial level. * p < 0.1 ** p < 0.05 *** p < 0.01

Table 4.4 Relationship between Entertainment and Public Security Expenditure (without Xinjiang)

	Public Security Expenditure (log) (1)	Public Security Expenditure (2)
TV Serial (log)	-0.006 (0.028)	
Show Percentage		-105.224* (60.384)
Security(log) _{t-1}	0.454*** (0.061)	
Security _{t-1}		1.273*** (0.081)
GDP (log)	0.192*** (0.035)	10.408 (16.133)
Population (log)	0.033*** (0.008)	23.975 (27.539)
Crime Rate	0.044 (0.130)	5.708 (25.034)
Province FE	Y	Y
Year FE	Y	Y
observations	330	232
R2	0.967	0.969

Notes: Standard errors are clustered at provincial level. * p <0.1 ** p <0.05 *** p <0.01

Figure 4.6 Visualization of the Regression Result of the Ratio of Entertainment Programs on Expenditure for Public Security (2008 to 2016)



Notes: The graph shows the regression result of the proportion of variety shows to the total TV broadcasting time on the public security expenditure at the provincial level.

Chapter 5. ENTERTAINMENT INTEREST AND POPULAR POLITICAL ATTITUDES: AN INSTRUMENTED REGRESSION APPROACH

The previous chapter has presented two pieces of evidence regarding how entertainment media is used as a subtle means by the Chinese authorities to manage society. In this chapter, we are going to display empirical evidence about the influence of entertainment media consumption on the mass public's political attitudes, namely their satisfaction with the current regime and hostility toward so-called foreign forces. We use a national survey that was conducted in 2017 covering questions about both respondents' interests in entertainment media and their political attitudes as the data source of the empirical study. To ease the concern over the endogeneity of people's entertainment interests, we make use of the Baidu Index, China's version of Google Trends, as the instrumented variable. The results show that a one standard deviation increase in people's entertainment interests is associated with around a 20% increase in their satisfaction with the Chinese authorities as well as their hostility toward foreign competitors.

5.1 Data and Methods

The data set used is from a Chinese national survey named "Survey on Social Awareness of Netizens,"²⁷ covering Chinese netizens' media preferences, social identity, nationalist sentiment, political trust, and so on. Although some scholars and researchers are concerned about the accuracy and scientificity of the online survey, due to its flexibility and other advantages, this method has been frequently employed by academia in recent two decades (e.g., Evans and Mathur, 2005). Furthermore, via identifying the IP addresses of those respondents, we find that this survey incorporates all 31 provincial-level administrative

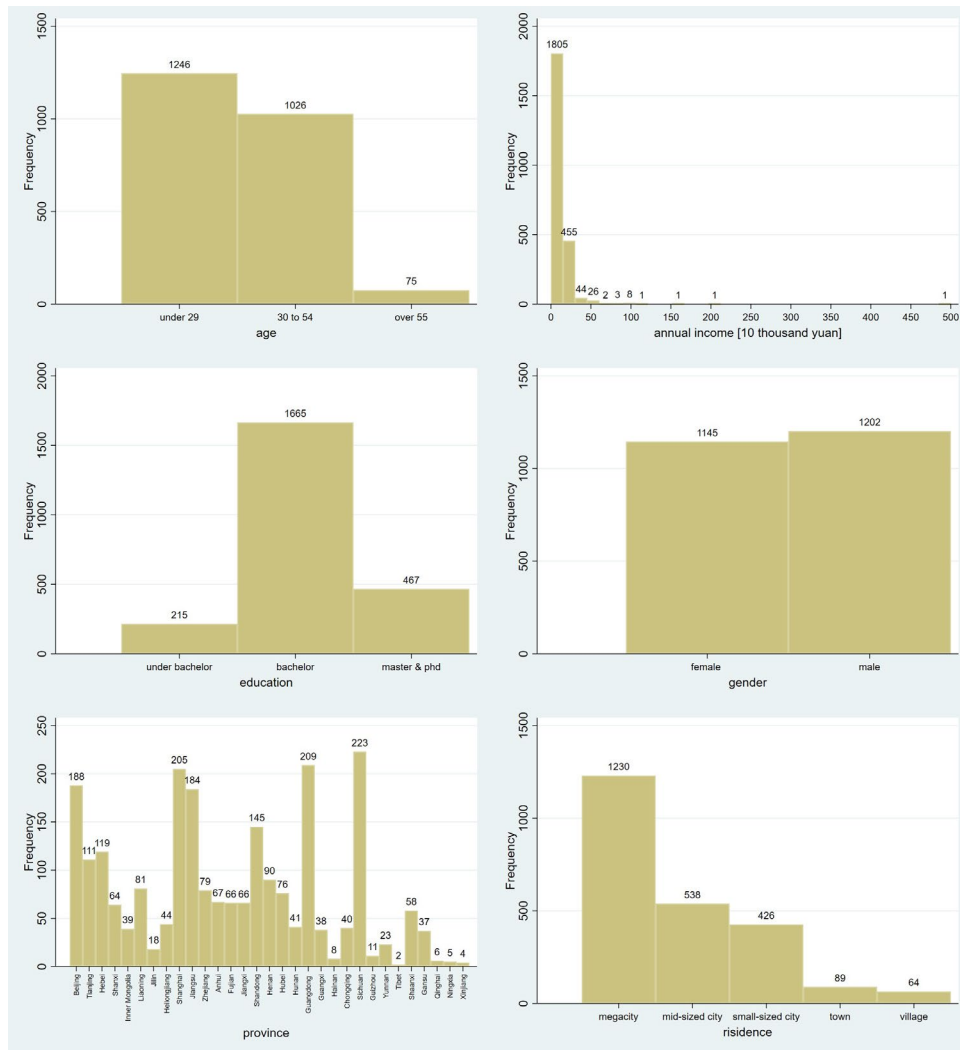
²⁷ This survey was conducted during April and May 2017 through Wenjuan.com, a large online-based survey company in China, and hosted by Renmin University of China. It opened to access in late 2019.

regions in Mainland China (excluding Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan). The total volume of this survey is 2,347.²⁸ Figure 5.1 plots several demographic features of respondents, and it is clear that participants' age and gender structures, annual incomes, and provincial distributions are very close to the actual status of Chinese netizens. In other words, this survey can fairly represent the situation of Chinese internet users, which now accounts for more than 70% of the population (China Internet Network Information Center, 2020).

In this section, I introduce three main variables of this empirical study — entertainment media interest, political loyalty, and anti-Western sentiment. To qualify the major explanatory variable, I use a questionnaire item “do you like viewing entertainment programs?” To measure people's allegiance to the Chinese regime, an item that “are you satisfied with the current sociopolitical status of China?” is used. Different research adopts very distinct operationalizations to measure regime support (e.g., Chen and Dickson, 2008; Harmel and Robertson, 1986), the core is in evaluating respondents' satisfaction with the regime. In contrast to political leaders and institutions, regime is somewhat an abstract rule of the game (Easton, 1965), we therefore have to employ an indirect measuring approach. We posit that if a person supports a certain regime, he or she will be satisfied with the sociopolitical system that is structured by the existing regime. Moreover, to measure people's anti-Western hostility, we utilize an item that “do you agree that the dispute between China and Western countries, like trade disputes, is *always* provoked by others?” One of the salient characteristics of Chinese nationalism is that when there is a controversy between the two sides, it blindly opposes the West. It is hence suitable to take this item as a measurement of people's anti-Western sentiments. For all questions, respondents are asked to make a choice from a 5-point scale.

²⁸ We exclude those respondents whose IP addresses are out of Mainland China.

Figure 5.1 Distribution of Various Features of Respondents



Notes: The graph shows the distribution of various variables related to the feature of respondents.

As introduced, the Baidu Index is used as the source of the instrumental variable. The Baidu Index embodies netizens' online searching behaviors and media content preferences, for instance, the searching index of a specific variety show is higher in province A than in province B, indicating this program is overall more popular in province A than in province B. Thus, we argue that the Baidu Index of those popular variety shows is positively associated with respondents' interest in entertainment media. Because once a specific variety show is more popular in a given province, residents in this province are more likely to expose to this show

with the influence of surrounding peers or through other channels. We collect a set of data consisting of 31 provincial layer searching indexes of the four most popular variety shows from 2011 to 2017 in China (see Table 5.1 for details). Besides, given that the Baidu Index is available only after January 1, 2011, and the survey was conducted during April and May 2017, the scope of the above four entertainment programs' searching indexes hence is from their premiere day (not exceed Jan 1, 2011) to April 30, 2017, and the mean value of each program's searching index is collected.

Table 5.1 Entertainment Programs Used as the Instrument

Number	Name in English	Name in Chinese
1	If You Are The One	非诚勿扰
2	Happy Camp	快乐大本营
3	The Voice of China	中国好声音
4	Running Man	奔跑吧兄弟

Furthermore, we include a set of control variables, like individuals' annual income, education, gender, and GDP per capita at provincial levels. Descriptive statistics (see Table 5.2) indicate some noteworthy results, for instance, the mean value of people's interests in variety shows is up to 3.3 (S.D. = 1.095), reflecting the popularity of this type of media content in China. And as prior literature has well documented that the Chinese government enjoys great trust and satisfaction from the public (e.g., Tang, 2016; Z.X. Wang, 2005), this data set shows that the mean value of people's satisfaction with the current regime is more than 3.5 (S.D. = 0.901).²⁹

²⁹ Distinct from in the democratic context, some scholars point out that respondents in authoritarian regimes, like in China, might misreport their political attitudes in public opinion surveys because of wariness (e.g., Tsai, 2007). Yet by experiments, an array of latest research draws an opposite finding that people in China incline to indicate their true political trust and satisfaction in surveys (e.g., Lei and Lu, 2017; Stockmann, Esarey, and Zhang, 2018). In this light, I argue that two main reasons make the data set used in this research relatively credible. On the one hand, different from telephone surveys and face-to-face interviews, this survey was conducted online, which could lower respondents' wariness to a certain extent; on the other hand, this online survey measures people's political attitudes by general

We suggest a two-stage equation to model the causal effect of entertainment consumption on citizens' political attitudes. The first stage equation measures the correlation between the log number of entertainment programs' Baidu Index Z_{index} in province j and the entertainment interest $x_{entertainment}$ of a respondent i whose IP address is in j ; covariates, such as the provincial-level GDP per capita, annual income, education, gender, CCP membership, etc., are controlled. Thereby, I estimate the relationship via the following model:

$$x_{entertainment,i} = \alpha_1 + D_1 Z_{index,j} + D_2 \mathbf{C}_i + \varepsilon_l \quad (5.1)$$

There are two main outcome variables of this research, hence, the second stage equations are as follows:

$$Y_{loyalty,i} = \alpha_2 + \beta_1 x_{entertainment,j} + \gamma_1 \mathbf{C}_i + \varepsilon_l \quad (5.2)$$

$$Y_{hostility,i} = \alpha_3 + \beta_2 x_{entertainment,j} + \gamma_2 \mathbf{C}_i + \varepsilon_l \quad (5.3)$$

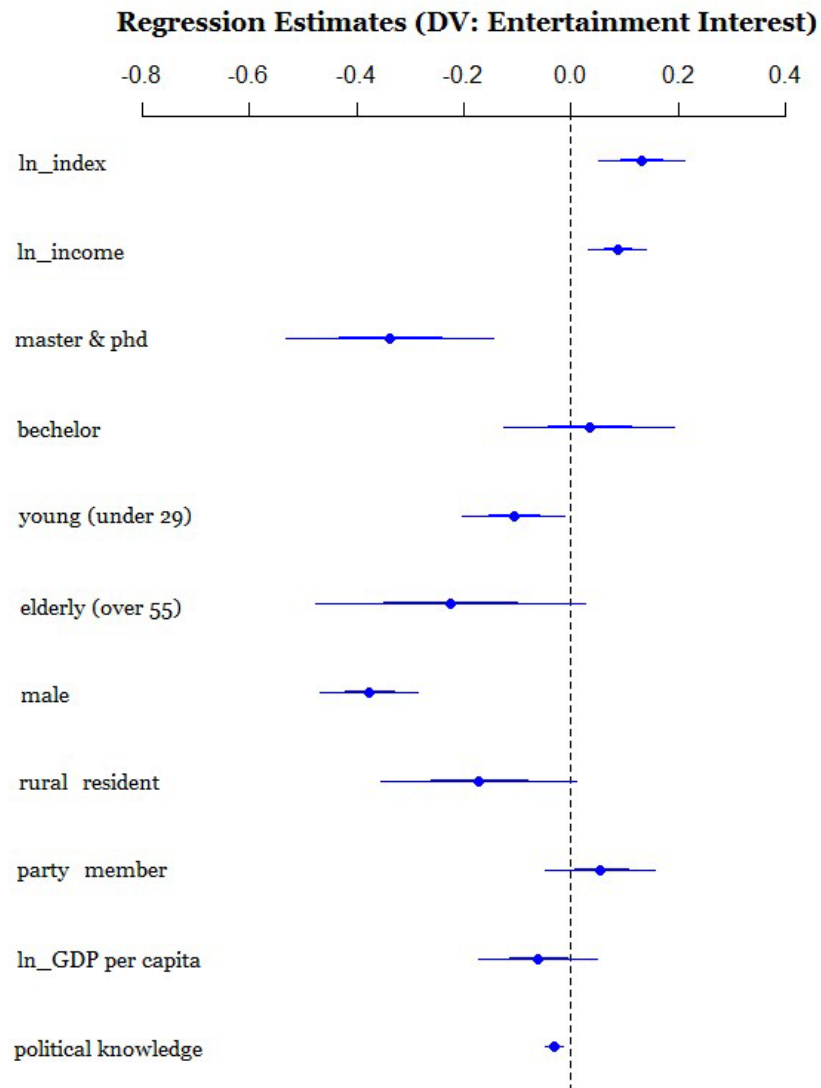
Where $Y_{loyalty,i}$ and $Y_{hostility,i}$ are two dependent variables; β_1 , as well as β_2 , are major coefficients that this study focuses; \mathbf{C}_i stands for a set of control variables.

As Figure 5.2 presents, there is a significant positive relationship between the Baidu Index of popular entertainment programs and respondents' interest in viewing entertainment contents. This relationship remains significant when we control a set of covariates, such as annual income, education, age, gender, and CCP membership. (See Table 5.3 for details). Put differently, those people who live in a province with a higher level of searching volume of popular entertainment programs are more likely to consume entertainment than their counterparts who live in other provinces. Therefore, the Baidu Index is appropriate to be used as the instrumental variable. In the following section, we will examine the causal effect of

items, which have been used by other public opinion surveys, so respondents have no strong motivation to misrepresent their true feelings.

entertainment media on ordinary people's political attitudes.

Figure 5.2 Visualization of the Regression of Baidu Index on People's Interest in Entertainment



Notes: The graph shows the positive relationship between the Baidu Index of popular entertainment programs and people's entertainment interests.

Table 5.2 Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Observations	Mean	S.D.	Min	Max
variety shows	2,347	3.254	1.095	1	5
soap operas	2,347	2.938	1.192	1	5
satisfaction with the Regime	2,347	3.504	0.901	1	5
anti-Western sentiment	2,223	3.357	0.972	1	5
trust in the regime	2,234	3.199	0.754	1	4
anti-Japan	2,312	2.957	1.18	1	5
trust in state media	2,347	3.948	0.996	1	5
annual income	2,347	12.551	15.807	0	500
education	2,347	2.107	0.528	1	3
residence	2,347	1.815	1.033	1	5
gender	2,347	0.512	0.499	0	1
age	2,347	1.501	0.560	1	3
CCP membership	2,347	0.302	0.459	0	1
GDP per capita	2,347	70300.2	30084.58	27643	118198
political knowledge	2,347	4.275	3.037	0	10
Baidu Index (variety shows)	2,347	4627.362	2437.46	170.75	9485.5
Baidu Index (soap opera)	2,347	2612.664	1064.465	129	4215

Notes: The unit of annual income is 10 thousand RMB yuan; education is classified into four layers, i.e., “below bachelor,” “bachelor,” “master and PhD”; residence refers to residents living in the village or four-distinct-scale urban areas; there are three age groups, from “under 29” to “30 to 54” to “over 55”; political knowledge is estimated by 10 items related to internal and external political affairs; the unit of GDP per capita is RMB yuan.

5.2 Main Results

We conduct the Two-Stage Least Squares (2SLS) regressions to test the causal relationship between entertainment media consumption and people’s attitudes toward both the Chinese regime and foreign forces. The statistical results support the above hypotheses, namely average citizens’ entertainment media interests indeed boost their loyalty to the regime and, at the same time, excites their anti-Western nerves. Put simply, lasting exposure to

entertainment media makes a subset of people to be a group of steadfast followers to the Chinese authorities to some degree.

The first column of Table 5.4 exhibits the relationship between the explanatory variable and the outcome variable without controlling covariates. The result indicates that a one standard deviation increase in people's entertainment programs interests pulls up their contentment to the current socio-political status by about 65 percentage points, which is equivalent to around 19% increase relative to the mean value of the outcome variable. In columns (2) and (3), a set of control variables, such as annual income, education, age, sex, residence, CCP membership, GDP per capita, and political knowledge, are added in order and the coefficients of the major independent variable remain statistically significant at the 5% level. To make a comparison, in columns (4) to (6), the results of the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions are displayed. It is clear that the instrumented coefficients are larger than non-instrumented ones by approximately three to four times, which is within an acceptable range based on the existing literature. To be precise, this degree of inflation is smaller than some high-profile political science papers using instrumented regressions, in which the instrumented coefficients are larger than the non-instrumented ones by about 10 times (for example, see Croke et al., 2016).

In addition, Table 5.5 presents the results of the causal relationship between people's interest in entertainment programs consumption and their hostility toward Western countries. In the first column, only the main independent variable is put into the model, and its coefficient is statistically significant (at the 5% level). Specifically, a one standard deviation increase in people's interest in exposure to entertainment programs can raise their anti-Western sentiment by roughly 16%. And when all control variables are included, the coefficient of the explanatory variable remains significant at 10% level. Besides, compared to the results of OLS regressions (see columns (4) to (6)), the degree of inflation of the instrumented coefficient is within three

times, which is acceptable.

Table 5.3 Relationship between Baidu Index and People's Entertainment Interest (First Stage)

	OLS		Ordered Probit	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Index (log)	0.145*** (0.038)	0.131*** (0.039)	0.136*** (0.036)	0.128*** (0.039)
income (log)		0.086*** (0.026)		0.086*** (0.026)
master& phd		-0.338*** (0.096)		-0.334*** (0.096)
bachelor		0.034 (0.079)		0.033 (0.079)
young (under 29)		-0.107** (0.047)		-0.107** (0.047)
elderly (over 55)		-0.225* (0.126)		-0.236* (0.125)
male		-0.376*** (0.045)		-0.379*** (0.046)
rural resident		-0.173* (0.091)		-0.173* (0.090)
CCP membership		0.054 (0.051)		0.054 (0.051)
GDP per capita (log)		-0.062 (0.055)		-0.064 (0.055)
political knowledge		-0.031*** (0.007)		-0.030*** (0.007)
constant	2.050*** (0.318)	3.098*** (0.585)		
Observations	2,347	2,337	2,347	2,337
Adj R2	0.006	0.074		
Pseudo R2			0.002	0.028

Notes: *p <0.1 ** p <0.05 *** p <0.01.

Table 5.4 Relationship between Variety Shows Interest and Satisfaction with the Regime,
Instrumented by Baidu Index

	Dependent Variable: Satisfaction with the Regime					
	2SLS			OLS		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
variety	0.601**	0.652**	0.712**	0.220***	0.211***	0.207***
shows	(0.232)	(0.277)	(0.291)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.016)
income (log)		-0.024	-0.032		0.011	0.011
		(0.032)	(0.035)		(0.021)	(0.021)
master & phd		0.12	0.031		-0.058	-0.152*
		(0.139)	(0.140)		(0.074)	(0.078)
bachelor		0.105	0.079		0.117*	0.09
		(0.073)	(0.076)		(0.064)	(0.064)
the young (under 29)		0.066	0.116**		0.047	0.061
		(0.045)	(0.055)		(0.038)	(0.038)
the elderly (over 55)		0.049	0.031		-0.093	-0.089
		(0.148)	(0.139)		(0.103)	(0.103)
male			0.184			-0.006
			(0.118)			(0.037)
rural resident			0.185*			0.096
			(0.101)			(0.074)
CCP membership			0.229***			0.258***
			(0.051)			(0.041)
GDP per capita (log)			0.007			0.008
			(0.049)			(0.042)
political knowledge			0.004			-0.011
			(0.011)			(0.006)
constant	1.546**	1.302	0.858	2.787***	2.703***	2.620***
	(0.757)	(0.884)	(1.155)	(0.056)	(0.09)	(0.472)
Observations	2,347	2,337	2,337	2,347	2,337	2,337
F-test	14.368	10.943	10.866			

Notes: *p <0.1 ** p <0.05 *** p <0.01.

Table 5.5 Relationship between Variety Shows Interest and Anti-Western Sentiment,
Instrumented by Baidu Index

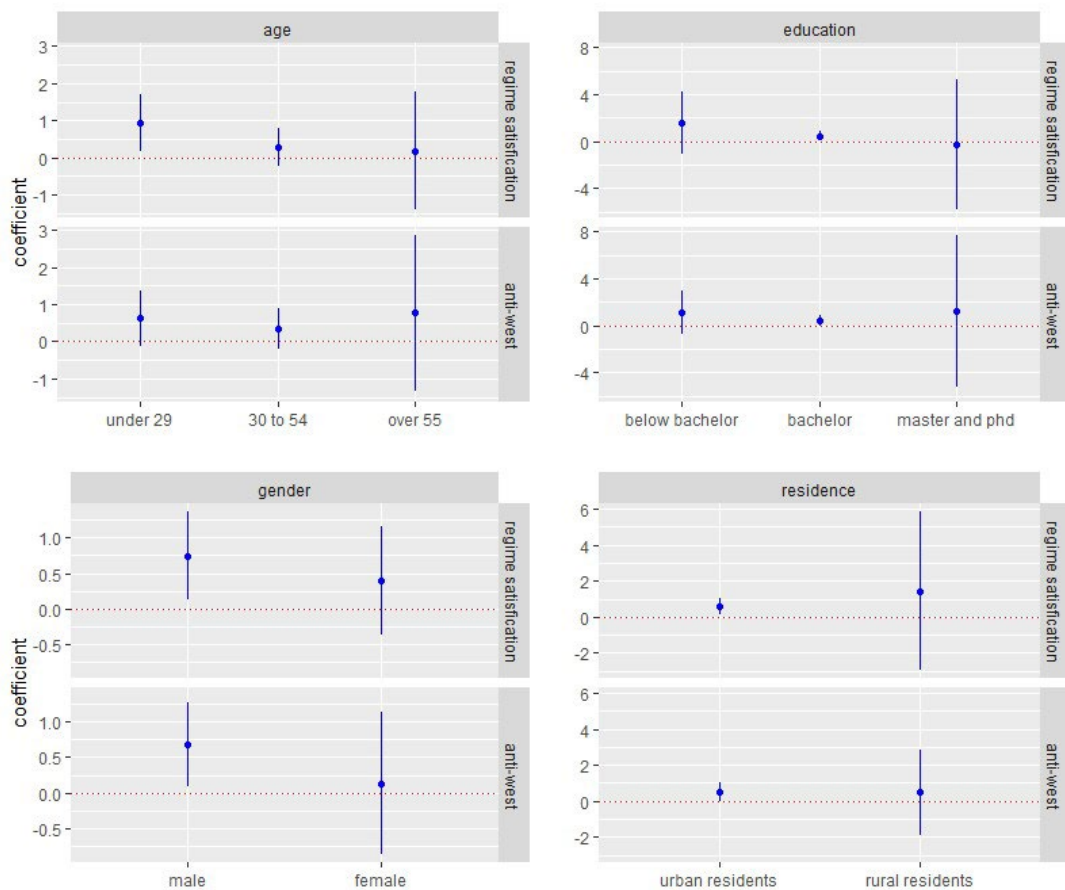
	Dependent Variable: Anti-Western Sentiment					
	2SLS			OLS		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	0.505**	0.401	0.524*	0.210***	0.187***	0.182***
variety shows	(0.245)	(0.270)	(0.289)	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.018)
income (log)		0.000	-0.006		0.017	0.023
		(0.032)	(0.036)		(0.023)	(0.024)
master & phd		-0.433***	-0.424***		-0.512***	-0.536***
		(0.130)	(0.134)		(0.082)	(0.088)
bachelor		-0.152**	-0.165**		-0.141*	-0.151**
		(0.075)	(0.079)		(0.071)	(0.073)
the young (under 29)		-0.190***	-0.161***		-0.201***	-0.201***
		(0.045)	(0.056)		(0.042)	(0.042)
the elderly (over 55)		0.039	0.068		-0.032	-0.017
		(0.145)	(0.139)		(0.110)	(0.111)
male			0.106			-0.02
			(0.116)			(0.041)
rural resident			0.073			-0.006
			(0.111)			(0.083)
CCP membership			0.089*			0.104**
			(0.050)			(0.045)
GDP per capita (log)			-0.045			-0.044
			(0.050)			(0.046)
political knowledge			0.001			-0.009
			(0.012)			(0.007)
constant	1.704**	2.319***	2.338**	2.668***	2.996***	3.524***
	(0.802)	(0.860)	(1.148)	(0.063)	(0.100)	(0.521)
Observations	2,223	2,213	2,213	2,223	2,213	2,213
F-test	13.888	10.735	10.593			

Notes: *p <0.1 ** p <0.05 *** p <0.01.

We further explore the heterogeneity among various demographic groups. Figure 5.3 plots the relationship between respondents' entertainment interest and their regime satisfaction

as well as anti-Western sentiment based on four major demographic variables, namely age, education, gender, and residence. What can be found is that compared to those middle-aged and old people, the younger generation (age under 29) is more likely to be affected by entertainment consumption; the political implication of variety shows is more significant among less-educated respondents compared with those who are well educated. Furthermore, compared to the female, male respondents are easier to be impacted by the entertainment media; urban respondents vis-à-vis rural ones are more likely influenced by entertainment experience (see Table 5.6 for statistical details).

Figure 5.3 Comparison of Political Attitudes of Different Groups



Notes: The graph shows the results of instrumented regression brown down by demographic variables, i.e., age, education, gender, and residence.

We are now going to check whether the instrument used in this chapter is weak. According to previous scholarship, we use first-stage F-test as the major parameter to do the examination. Generally speaking, if the F-test is over 10, then we can reject the hypothesis that the instrumental variable is weak (see Staiger and Stock, 1997). As Tables 5.4 and 5.5 present, all F-tests pass the normal threshold of 10, even though some are close to 10. To further ease weak instrument concerns, we have also conducted Limited Information Maximum Likelihood (LIML) regressions, an alternative form of instrumental variable estimation developed for weak instruments, and the results are the same as that of 2SLS regressions (see Table 5.7). Furthermore, as aforementioned, in contrast to the results of OLS regressions, in instrumented regressions, the coefficients of the independent variable, i.e., the interest in variety shows, are not overly larger. Therefore, we are confident to say that the instrumental variable used in this paper is valid. The rest concern falls in whether the Baidu Index of variety shows affects people's political attitudes only through their entertainment media experience. We suggest that the Baidu Index merely reflects the diversity of people's entertainment interests in different places, so it lacks other channels, in theory, to shape citizens' allegiance with the Chinese regime without the mechanism proposed by this research. To sum, the statistical results above are credible.

Table 5.6 Relationship between Variety Shows Interest and People's Satisfaction with the Regime and Their Anti-Western Sentiment, Broken Down by Demographics

DV: Satisfaction with the Regime; Model: 2SLS										
	Age			Education			Gender		Residence	
	Under 29	30 to 54	Over 55	Below Bachelor	Bachelor	Master & PhD	Male	Female	Urban Residents	Rural Residents
variety shows	0.921** (0.388)	0.271 (0.262)	0.172 (0.808)	1.581 (1.352)	0.469** (0.207)	-0.27 (2.834)	0.743** (0.315)	0.395 (0.385)	0.577** (0.237)	1.432 (2.242)
constant	0.45 (1.285)	2.648*** (0.842)	2.825 (2.438)	-1.76 (4.431)	1.998*** (0.693)	4.1 (8.271)	1.182 (0.964)	2.183 (1.332)	1.614** (0.778)	-0.845 (6.861)
observations	1,246	1,026	75	215	1,665	467	1,202	1,145	2,194	153
DV: Anti-Western Sentiment; Model: 2SLS										
variety shows	0.623 (0.388)	0.652 (0.277)	0.767 (1.066)	1.092 (0.929)	0.390* (0.227)	1.225 (3.288)	0.679** (0.299)	0.133 (0.511)	0.518** (0.258)	0.476 (1.221)
constant	1.399 (1.266)	2.066** (0.892)	1.113 (3.216)	0.032 (3.034)	2.121*** (0.764)	-0.627 (9.672)	1.241 (0.923)	2.919 (1.774)	1.656* (0.850)	1.883 (3.674)
observations	1,188	960	75	195	1,584	444	1,154	1,069	2,081	142

Notes: The table shows the results of instrumented regression broken down by demographic variables, i.e., age, education, gender, and residence. *p < 0.1 ** p < 0.05 *** p < 0.01.

Table 5.7 Relationship between Variety Shows Interest and People's Satisfaction with the Regime and Their Anti-Western Sentiment (LIML)

	DV: Satisfaction				DV: Anti-West	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
variety	0.601**	0.652**	0.712**	0.505**	0.401	0.524*
shows	(0.232)	(0.277)	(0.291)	(0.245)	(0.270)	(0.289)
income (log)		-0.024	-0.032		0.000	-0.006
		(0.032)	(0.035)		(0.032)	(0.036)
master & phd		0.12	0.031		-0.433***	-0.424***
		(0.140)	(0.140)		(0.130)	(0.134)
bachelor		0.105	0.079		-0.152**	-0.165**
		(0.073)	(0.076)		(0.075)	(0.079)
the young (under 29)		0.066	0.116**		-0.190***	-0.161***
		(0.045)	(0.055)		(0.045)	(0.056)
the elderly (over 55)		0.049	0.031		0.039	0.068
		(0.148)	(0.139)		(0.145)	(0.139)
male			0.184			0.106
			(0.118)			(0.116)
rural resident			0.185*			0.073
			(0.101)			(0.111)
CCP membership			0.229***			0.089*
			(0.051)			(0.05)
GDP per capita (log)			0.007			-0.045
			(0.049)			(0.05)
political knowledge			0.004			0.001
			(0.011)			(0.012)
constant	1.546**	1.302	0.858	1.704**	2.319***	2.338**
	(0.757)	(0.884)	(1.155)	(0.802)	(0.860)	(1.148)
Observations	2,347	2,337	2,337	2,223	2,213	2,213
F-test	14.368	10.943	10.866	13.888	10.735	10.593

Notes: *p <0.1 ** p <0.05 *** p <0.01.

5.3 Robustness Tests

To check the robustness of the above findings, we conduct several additional regressions. First, alternative approaches are utilized to measure those major variables. In addition to variety shows, the soap opera is regarded as another pillar of the Chinese “entertainment

mansion” (Bai, 2005). Therefore, people’s soap operas interest is used as an alternative measurement of entertainment media consumption. Specifically, the item that “do you like viewing the soap opera?” is employed. And a 5-point scale ranging from “very dislike” to “very like” is employed to represent the degree of respondents’ soap operas interest. Likewise, the Baidu Index is used as the source of the instrumental variable once again, precisely, we collect 31 provincial-layer searching indexes of *Empresses in the Palace* (*zhenhuanzhuàn* 甄嬛传), a highly popular palace drama on the Chinese screen, from Jan 1, 2012 to April 30, 2017, and exploited the log number of the indexes’ mean value as the instrumental variable. The statistical results (see Tables 5.8 and 5.9) reveal that a one standard deviation increase in people’s interest in viewing soap operas raises their satisfaction with the current regime and anti-Western sentiment by about 21% and 18%, respectively.

We also use alternative operationalizations to measure the two major dependent variables. In view of that political trust is a crucial indicator of regime support, we select a questionnaire item that “do you trust in the central committee of the CCP and the central government?” as an alternative measurement of the public’s regime support. Furthermore, because of some “history reasons” and ongoing territorial disputes, anti-Japanese sentiment has continually existed in Chinese society and recently this trend has solidified (e.g., Wallace and Weiss, 2015; Weiss, 2014). As such, we pick up the item “do you agree that if one is patriotic, he or she must boycott Japanese goods?” as an alternative proxy of citizens’ hostility toward foreign forces. Table 5.10 presents the statistical results based on the above new measurements. It can be found that the coefficients of the explanatory variable are all statistically significant, and the results of weak instruments F-test (except for the one in column (2)) surpass the threshold.

Second, to avoid the influence of some potential extreme observations, we delete those observations with IP addresses in Beijing and Shanghai where because of the relatively mature market economy, a large-scale urban middle-class, and advanced mass media, people are generally keen on entertainment media; meanwhile, citizens in Beijing and Shanghai vis-à-vis

people in other provinces and cities are more benefit from the current regime, like privileged education, high-quality medical service, as well as other social welfare. As Table 5.11 reveals that the coefficient of people's entertainment media interest remains statistically significant after removing observations from China's top two metropolises.

Third, we alter the statistical model to further check the robustness. In the above analysis, the Likert 5-point scale is treated as an interval scale; however, strictly speaking, its nature is ordinal (e.g., Coombs, 1964). To alleviate concerns on probable errors caused by that, we conduct instrumented ordered probit regressions to re-estimate the causal impact of popular entertainment interest on their political attitudes. As Table 5.12 presents, the coefficients of the explanatory variables are still significant (only except for Column (5)), showing that people's interest in entertainment media indeed drives their political loyalty toward the current regime as well as their hostility toward the foreign forces. To sum up, based on a series of statistical analysis, the causal relationship between people's entertainment media consumption and their political attitudes is supported.

Table 5.8 Relationship between Soap Interest and Satisfaction with the Regime,
Instrumented by Baidu Index of *zhenhuanzhuan*

	Dependent Variable: Satisfaction with the Regime					
	2SLS			OLS		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
soap operas	0.627*** (0.214)	0.638*** (0.216)	0.967*** (0.351)	0.165*** (0.015)	0.155*** (0.015)	0.161*** (0.016)
income (log)		-0.035 (0.033)	-0.076 (0.049)		0.012 (0.021)	0.011 (0.022)
master & phd		0.055 (0.114)	-0.009 (0.138)		-0.095 (0.074)	-0.191** (0.079)
bachelor		0.047 (0.080)	-0.024 (0.102)		0.105 (0.065)	0.075 (0.065)
the young (under 29)		-0.056 (0.056)	0.03 (0.055)		0.014 (0.038)	0.037 (0.039)
the elderly (over 55)		0.061 (0.145)	0.063 (0.165)		-0.107 (0.104)	-0.104 (0.104)
male			0.699** (0.291)			0.045 (0.040)
rural resident			0.121 (0.109)			0.070 (0.075)
CCP membership			0.241*** (0.060)			0.264*** (0.042)
GDP per capita (log)			-0.112 (0.075)			-0.011 (0.043)
political knowledge			0.025 (0.018)			-0.01 (0.006)
constant	1.660*** (0.630)	1.684*** (0.577)	1.525 (0.943)	3.017*** (0.048)	2.962*** (0.084)	3.042*** (0.475)
Observations	2,347	2,337	2,337	2,347	2,337	2,337
F-test	16.58	17.008	10.386			

Notes: *p <0.1 ** p <0.05 *** p <0.01.

Table 5.9 Relationship between Soap Interest and Anti-Western Sentiment, Instrumented by
Baidu Index of *zhenhuanzhuan*

	Dependent Variable: Anti-Western Sentiment					
	2SLS			OLS		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
soap operas	0.511** (0.218)	0.438** (0.209)	0.788** (0.337)	0.126*** (0.017)	0.114*** (0.017)	0.111*** (0.018)
income (log)		-0.011 (0.033)	-0.052 (0.049)		0.021 (0.023)	0.026 (0.024)
master & phd		-0.450*** (0.109)	-0.417*** (0.136)		-0.547*** (0.083)	-0.571*** (0.089)
bachelor		0.181** (0.082)	-0.228** (0.100)		-0.144** (0.072)	-0.155** (0.073)
the young (under 29)		-0.267*** (0.053)	-0.217*** (0.054)		-0.226*** (0.042)	-0.221*** (0.043)
the elderly (over 55)		0.065 (0.143)	0.12 (0.163)		-0.053 (0.112)	-0.037 (0.112)
male			0.540** (0.274)			0.001 (0.044)
rural resident			0.005 (0.109)			-0.041 (0.084)
CCP membership			0.086 (0.059)			0.109** (0.046)
GDP per capita (log)			-0.144* (0.074)			-0.057 (0.047)
political knowledge			0.02 (0.018)			-0.01 (0.007)
constant	1.850*** (0.644)	2.424*** (0.565)	2.689*** (0.915)	2.985*** (0.054)	3.286*** (0.095)	3.951*** (0.525)
Observations	2,223	2,213	2,213	2,223	2,213	2,213
F-test	16.876	16.948	10.55			

Notes: *p < 0.1 ** p < 0.05 *** p < 0.01.

Table 5.10 The Effect of People’s Entertainment Interest on Their Trust in Regime & Anti-Japanese Sentiment

	DV: Trust in the Regime			
	2SLS		OLS	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
variety shows	0.551** (0.235)		0.147*** (0.014)	
soap operas		0.853** (0.333)		0.074*** (0.014)
control variables	Y	Y	Y	Y
observations	2,225	2,225	2,225	2,225
F-test	11.528	9.614		
	DV: Anti-Japanese Sentiment			
	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
variety shows	0.552* (0.328)		0.220*** (0.021)	
soap operas		0.902** (0.383)		0.167*** (0.021)
control variables	Y	Y	Y	Y
observations	2,302	2,302	2,302	2,302
F-test	10.849	10.502		

Notes: *p <0.1 ** p <0.05 *** p <0.01.

5.4 Mechanism Analysis: Entertainment Media Exposure Induces People Vulnerable to Propaganda

How to interpret the impact of people’s entertainment media interest on their political attitudes? As presented in detail in Chapter 2, we posit that the potential mechanism lies in that lasting entertainment consumption is likely to undo ordinary people’s sophistication or critical-thinking capacities, thereby they are difficult to distinguish factual information from propagandistic rhetoric. As a result, these people are very likely to be persuaded by official narratives, especially over the past few years, the effort from twofold — reinforcing nationalistic discourses and embracing novel communication technologies — has been made

by the Chinese authorities to improve the persuasiveness of propaganda (e.g., Creemers, 2017; Luqiu, 2018; Repnikova and Fang, 2018). In China, state-run media, such as CCTV, People's Daily, and Xinhua News Agency, are the prominent channel used by the authorities to practice propaganda, thereby steering public opinion (e.g., Brady, 2009b). As such, if the argument we suggested is correct, people who are accustomed to viewing entertainment content tend to be more trust in news reporting or propaganda yielded by these state-run mainstream media.

To estimate the extent to which people trust in mainstream media, I adopt an item in the data set that “faced with an emergency, e.g., mass incidents, do you trust in the news reporting made by mainstream media (e.g., CCTV, People's Daily, and Xinhua News Agency)?” In China, the mass incident is classified into politically sensitive events, which may lead to large-scale riots and societal unrest (Tong and Lei, 2010). In order to maintain stability, the authorities strive to manage public opinion through state media's “positive propaganda” (*zhengmian xuanchuan* 正面宣传). If respondents present a high level of trust in mainstream media's news reporting on the mass incident, revealing that those media outlets enjoy a high reputation among them and could influence or even shape their minds. Table 5.13 shows the results of both OLS and ordered probit regressions from which one can notice that when demographic variables are controlled, the positive relationship between people's entertainment media interest and their trust in mainstream media remains statistically significant. In other words, in contrast to people without great entertainment media interest, those citizens with so are more probably to trust in the news reporting produced by state-controlled media, thereby, in the long term, changing their political attitudes towards the current authorities, as well as the West. In this light, whereas some previous high-profile papers doubt the true persuasion of CCP's propaganda especially “hard propaganda,” i.e., those crude, heavy-handed, and preposterous propaganda messages (e.g., H. Huang, 2015; H. Huang, 2018), we would better to re-evaluate it when taking the side effect of entertainment media into account.

In his seminal work *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman (1985) notes that compared

to the prophecy proposed by George Orwell in Nineteen Eighty-Four that citizens will be harshly enslaved by the dictatorship, Aldous Huxley's one in Brave New World is more likely to come true, that is, human being mediates themselves into joyousness, losing the capability of critical thinking, thereby falling into slaves of the autocrat. The present paper shows that Postman's apprehension has seemingly occurred in China. Statistical results reveal that people's favor for entertainment media is significantly associated with their faithfulness to the current authorities and their hostility to Western countries because lasting entertainment exposure induces them unsophisticated to resist ubiquitous "propaganda storm." Entertainment media have largely enriched ordinary citizens' everyday life worldwide, whereas, in authoritarian settings, this superficially unpolitical media product becomes a formidable "pleasure drug" contributing to authoritarian resilience. Adapting Postman's well-known saying, the prosperity of entertainment media in authoritarian countries leads to the result of "amusing ourselves to loyalty."

Table 5.11 Relationship between Entertainment Interest and Political Attitudes (without Beijing & Shanghai)

	DV: Satisfaction		DV: Anti-West	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
variety shows	0.667*** (0.238)		0.542** (0.244)	
soap operas		0.956*** (0.303)		0.774*** (0.289)
income (log)	-0.016 (0.035)	-0.06 (0.048)	-0.008 (0.037)	-0.051 (0.050)
master & phd	0.083 (0.140)	0.057 (0.146)	-0.387*** (0.139)	-0.388*** (0.144)
bachelor	0.075 (0.078)	-0.036 (0.104)	-0.193** (0.083)	-0.256** (0.102)
the young (under 29)	0.136** (0.054)	0.032 (0.061)	-0.189*** (0.057)	-0.266*** (0.060)
the elderly (over 55)	0.119 (0.164)	0.195 (0.203)	0.117 (0.168)	0.190 (0.199)
male	0.161 (0.101)	0.714*** (0.242)	0.105 (0.102)	0.547** (0.246)
rural resident	0.214** (0.098)	0.104 (0.109)	0.077 (0.108)	-0.03 (0.110)
CCP membership	0.214*** (0.055)	0.220*** (0.067)	0.049 (0.056)	0.044 (0.066)
GDP per capita (log)	0.056 (0.061)	-0.029 (0.081)	-0.049 (0.063)	-0.116 (0.081)
political knowledge	0.008 (0.010)	0.028* (0.016)	-0.001 (0.011)	0.016 (0.015)
constant	0.425 (1.045)	0.613 (1.061)	2.371** (1.058)	2.490** (1.034)
Observations	1,946	1,946	1,842	1,842
F-test	15.091	13.847	14.701	14.281

Notes: *p <0.1 ** p <0.05 *** p <0.01.

Table 5.12 Alternative Models on the Causal Relationship between Entertainment Interest and Political Attitudes

	DV: Satisfaction with the Regime			
	Instrumented Ordered Probit		Ordered Probit	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
variety shows	0.564*** (0.178)		0.259*** (0.021)	
soap operas		0.888*** (0.133)		0.198*** (0.020)
control variables	Y	Y	Y	Y
observations	2,337	2,337	2,337	2,337
	DV: Anti-Western Sentiment			
	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
variety shows	0.477 (0.292)		0.210*** (0.021)	
soap operas		0.520** (0.227)		0.127*** (0.02)
control variables	Y	Y	Y	Y
observations	2,213	2,213	2,213	2,213
	DV: Trust in the Regime			
	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
variety shows	0.370** (0.152)		0.226*** (0.022)	
soap operas		0.559*** (0.121)		0.110*** (0.021)
control variables	Y	Y	Y	Y
observations	2,225	2,225	2,225	2,225
	DV: Anti-Japanese Sentiment			
	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)
variety shows	0.635* (0.334)		0.213*** (0.021)	
soap operas		0.982*** (0.241)		0.160*** (0.020)
control variables	Y	Y	Y	Y
observations	2,302	2,302	2,302	2,302

Notes: *p < 0.1 ** p < 0.05 *** p < 0.01.

Table 5.13 Relationship between People's Entertainment Interest and Their Trust in Mainstream Media

	DV: Trust in Mainstream Media							
	OLS				Ordered Probit			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
variety shows	0.192*** (0.018)	0.180*** (0.019)			0.216*** (0.021)	0.207*** (0.021)		
soap operas			0.116*** (0.017)	0.098*** (0.018)			0.131*** (0.019)	0.115*** (0.021)
income (log)		-0.002 (0.024)		0.001 (0.025)		-0.006 (0.028)		-0.001 (0.027)
master& phd		-0.420*** (0.089)		-0.458*** (0.090)		-0.492*** (0.101)		-0.524*** (0.101)
bachelor		-0.173** (0.072)		-0.182** (0.073)		-0.187** (0.083)		-0.192** (0.082)
young (under 29)		0.126*** (0.043)		0.109** (0.044)		0.125** (0.049)		0.105** (0.049)
elderly (over 55)		-0.175 (0.115)		-0.196* (0.117)		-0.151 (0.130)		-0.168 (0.130)
male		-0.187*** (0.042)		-0.176*** (0.045)		-0.210*** (0.048)		-0.191*** (0.050)
rural resident		0.061 (0.083)		0.041 (0.085)		0.053 (0.095)		0.032 (0.094)
CCP membership		0.131*** (0.047)		0.137*** (0.047)		0.164*** (0.053)		0.168*** (0.053)
GDP per capita (log)		0.694 (0.455)		0.74 (0.461)		0.642 (0.057)		0.674 (0.505)
political knowledge		0.035*** (0.007)		0.034*** (0.007)		0.044*** (0.008)		0.042*** (0.008)
constant	3.168*** (0.090)	-4.825 (5.301)	3.414*** (0.087)	-5.073 (5.373)				
province FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
observations	2,347	2,337	2,347	2,337	2,347	2,337	2,347	2,337
Adj R2	0.051	0.073	0.026	0.048				
Pseudo R2					0.025	0.035	0.015	0.026

Notes: *p <0.1 ** p <0.05 *** p <0.01.

Chapter 6. CONCLUSION

Authoritarian survival or resilience has attracted great attention from comparative political scientists, and previous scholarship chiefly focused on the role of crude means such as repression, violence, coercion, and strict censorship in keeping authoritarian stability (e.g., Andersen et al., 2014; Davenport, 2007; Young, 2019). Nevertheless, a burgeoning literature indicates that the heavy-handed means is a double-edged sword, which may cause backlash from the public (Byman, 2016; Pan and Siegel, 2020). This research posits that to avoid potential backfire caused by those crude means, contemporary authoritarian regimes have incentives to use more subtle and soft tools to manage society, namely, building “soft authoritarianism.” Theoretically speaking, the authoritarian states have many ways to practice such a soft ruling model, and different approaches may bring about very distinctive results. In this research, we focus on how entertainment media can be used as a subtle means to weaken people’s resistance to official propaganda, thereby increasing ordinary people’s loyalty toward the regime. The argument is building upon the findings of a great body of political science, economic and psychological literature that lasting entertainment media consumption is likely to affect people’s civic mind, rational thinking, and sophistication. Taking China as an example, we have expounded and empirically supported the soft authoritarian model.

Our research shows that over the past three decades, entertainment media has realized great development in China, which can be further categorized into three different stages. The first stage is from the early 1980s to 2005, and the most prominent of this stage lies in the emergence of TV variety shows and marketized newspapers as well as periodicals. The second stage is from 2006 to 2012, and the salient feature in this stage is fast growth of TV entertainment and the emergence of online video platforms. The third stage is from 2013 to the present, and the most notable characteristic is the rise of online entertainment represented by online variety shows, short videos, live streaming, as well as other diverse entertainment genres. With the fast development of entertainment media, a large subset of Chinese people

has cultivated the custom of consuming those entertainment products. Given the side effect of entertainment consumption, many people who are addicted to entertainment media are likely to exhibit support for the government and hostility to the Western countries, due to their susceptibility to official narratives.

In this research, we suggest that in addition to the market demand, the authorities have played an important role in the prosperity of the entertainment industry in the Chinese context. Put differently, the authorities may take entertainment media as a subtle means to manage society. Without the recognition and endorsement of the commodity attribute of mass media in the Fourteenth Party Congress in 1992, marketized media like metro newspaper will not be emerged (Stockmann, 2013) and the fast rise of TV variety shows would also be less likely to come true. In 2007, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television and the Ministry of Information Industry promulgated a provision on online video productions, largely promoting the flourishing of online entertainment programs in recent years. Furthermore, Zhou and Huang (2021) point out that the government to some extent plays a role in the process of legitimization of entertainment media in the Chinese context. Put differently, after making sure that entertainment content in line with the signals that the authorities attempt to spread to the public, the authorities to some degree endorse entertainment production. Moreover, if pan-entertainment storm especially online entertainment is against the party's propaganda strategies and the guiding line, we would not witness the fast flourishing of internet entertainment industry in China over the past few years. For instance, investigative journalism is also demanded by the market in China, yet it is not in line with the authorities' propaganda guiding principles, so the recent decade witnessed a fast decline in this type of media content (Svensson, 2017). Another more direct evidence is that during the early stage of the COVID-19 epidemic, the Central Propaganda Department and the National Radio and Television Administration urgently supplied Hubei province with many TV serials copyrights. Many of those serials are pure entertainment rather than having explicit propaganda features. Thus, it is obvious that what the government wanted through supplying the copyrights of these TV

serials did not lie in influencing audiences' attitudes by serials directly but lie in letting people immerse themselves in the pseudo environment depicted by soap operas and then weakening their perception of the reality. As such, people would be more vulnerable to anti-pandemic propaganda made by state-controlled media.

We have also presented some empirical evidence that entertainment media has been employed as an alternative measure of heavy-handed regime stability maintenance toolkit. To be precise, the Chinese Communist Youth League, the youth wing of the ruling party, keeps a close relationship with pop idols on social media platforms, thereby attracting these idols' fans who are likely to be influenced by nationalistic propaganda because they are politically unsophisticated. And through analyzing a provincial-level data set, we also find the negative relationship between entertainment broadcasting and the public security expenditure. Precisely, a 1% increase in the ratio of variety shows on televisions is associated with the decrease in the expenditure of public security by about 0.11 billion RMB. The above evidence indicates that entertainment media may have been used by the Chinese authorities as a subtle means to replace other heavy-handed means of managing society.

Moreover, using a national survey data, this research exhibits that people's entertainment media consumption indeed raises their loyalty toward the Chinese regime and their hostility toward so-called foreign forces. Specifically, a one standard deviation increase in people's interest in entertainment media is associated with an increase of almost 20% in both their satisfaction with the current regime and their anti-Western hostility. Meanwhile, our empirical studies show the latent mechanism of the implication of entertainment consumption. Precisely, people who are accustomed to consume entertainment media are more likely to accept indoctrination made by state-run media. In other words, people's lasting entertainment media consumption makes them more easily to be persuaded by official narrative, thereby increasing their support to the current regime.

This research suggests the political implications of entertainment media in China, which have been largely overlooked by academia previously. Given that entertainment media has

been one of the prominent commodities that are employed by ordinary people to kill leisure time, we should not underestimate the potential contribution brought by entertainment media in terms of popular regime support. In this sense, the prosperity of entertainment media somewhat unexpectedly drives popular support for the authorities. As such, while the predictions of the collapse of the Chinese regime have never ceased, this research provides us with a perspective to examine the myth of China's stability: with a diverse toolkit (especially fresh softer means), the Chinese authorities can constantly improve popular support, which is the origin of the Chinese Communist Party to consolidate its rule.

Like other ruling tactics, the soft authoritarian model has its own premises and some limitations, however. First, while the authorities can promote the growth of the entertainment industry, the market economy plays a crucial role in this process. Without a relatively large market demand, entertainment media cannot realize fast development. As such, in those authoritarian states lacking a relatively mature market economy, the ruling oligarchies may be difficult to make use of entertainment media as a subtle means to build the soft authoritarian model. Second, the core of building soft authoritarianism is making people less sophisticated, thereby being easily manipulated by official rhetoric. It is worth noting that while unsophisticated people are readily to be influenced by official nationalistic discourses, they may be also driven by other inflammatory rhetoric, including those against the current regime. Put differently, if not being controlled well, the soft authoritarian model may induce backfire to some extent. Third and most importantly, in contrast to those crude means such as repression and coercion, the soft authoritarian model is more subtle, and has no result immediately. Thus, the authorities are going to implement this model when they perceive that society is overall stable and the problem, they face, is controllable, because the soft model can gradually change a large subset people's mind without using costly measures. On the contrary, when the ruling elites perceive an increase in potential threats from inside and outside, even within the entertainment industry itself (or the capital represented by entertainment), they are going to temporarily shelve the soft model and resort to the hard one to ensure stability. It should be

one of the most prominent reasons why recently we saw that the Chinese authorities' attitudes and policies toward the entertainment industry differ from the framework this research proposed. Given that rational rulers will maximize their benefits and minimize their costs, we suggest that with the change in the internal and external environment, the authorities may resort to the soft model once again in the future.

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