

The Moon Is Rounder on the Other Side: Foreign Vloggers and Chinese Nationalism

by

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explain the phenomena of popular foreign vloggers in domestic Chinese media by using existing theories in propaganda, nationalism, and social identity theory. Selecting six videos from domestic Chinese social media Bilibili, I generate original data of 1,125 comments from these six videos. I find that holding everything else equal, videos with foreign vloggers who speak fluent Chinese will elicit more positive comments from the audience than foreign vloggers who do not. Moreover, the word “China”, “U.S.” and “foreign” appeared more frequently in videos by Chinese-speaking vloggers, and comments praising foreign vloggers’ Chinese skills constitute half of all the positive comments in one video. This study contributes to people’s understanding of nationalism and propaganda. It is also the first time, to the author’s knowledge, that social identity theory has been applied to the Chinese context in the discipline of political science. This study has implications for future studies and studies outside of China as well.

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1. Introduction

“Chinese people have always had only two terms of address for foreigners: either ‘beasts’ or ‘majesties’. They have never been called friends, nor said to be the same as us.”

Lu Xun 1919

Chris is a Caucasian American male, who has lived in Shanghai for 11 years. In 2020, he opened an account on Bilibili, the most popular social media platform in China and often referred as the “Chinese Youtube”, and posted a video titled: “What changes will happen to an American living in China for 10 years? Listen to my truest feelings!¹” With a perfect Mandarin accent, he praised China’s rapid development in terms of its infrastructure, economy, and people’s livelihood. After he posted the video, it exploded. Not only did it receive more than 200,000 views, but it also paved way for Chris to become a social media celebrity.

Chris is not alone. In recent years, more and more videos appeared on Chinese social media featuring foreigners filming their daily life in China. They are called “Up 主” in Bilibili or “vlogger” in English. Some vloggers’ video cover the “complex” reaction of the foreign vlogger when they first tasted traditional Chinese food such as sticky tofu and douzhi, others cover their travel stories in China. Some of the foreign

¹ Translated from “一个美国人在中国生活 10 年会发什么变化？听听我最真切的感受！”

vloggers don't speak Chinese, others do and some even quite fluently. These videos vary in popularity, however. Videos that cover social and political issues are far more popular. Vloggers in those videos praise China for its ability to build infrastructure, protect people from Covid-19, and create a genuine "democratic" political system.

Authoritarian regimes are fundamentally shaped by two conflicts, one of which is the problem of authoritarian control. In order to resolve this conflict and maintain their power, autocrats often use repression, which is defined by Davenport (2007) as "a wide variety of coercive efforts employed by political authorities to influence those within their territorial jurisdiction". However, as society develops and the emergence of new technologies, such as the internet, repression has evolved beyond "sticks, stones, and severing limbs" (6). The use of complementary mechanisms of control in the face of political conflict has occurred.

One such mechanism from the autocrat's toolkit appears to be effective: propaganda. There has been extensive study on propaganda and its effect in authoritarian regimes. Some scholars focus on the effect of propaganda. Geddes and Zaller (1989), Kenez (1985), and Jowett and O'Donnell (2018) found that propaganda has the indoctrination effect which transmits social and political values to affect people's thinking. Others like Huang (2015) argued that propaganda does not change people's beliefs but rather has a signaling effect: signal to the public that the regime has the power to monopolize its narrative. Literature also approaches propaganda from its form. Huang

(2015; 2018) categorized propaganda into “soft” and “hard” propaganda based on its form and argued that “soft” propaganda is more persuasive than “hard” propaganda. Propaganda, however, will be more effective if it was combined with nationalism. When propaganda is filled with nationalistic messages, it can be extremely persuasive because it stirs up audiences’ emotions. Studies in the realm of political psychology argue that emotionally-charged messages can be particularly effective in terms of shaping public opinions, and political advertisements that are heavily loaded with emotions are more persuasive (Marcus, 2000; Brader 2005). Scholars also demonstrate that emotionally charged messages spread faster through online social networks in the United States (Brady et al., 2017). Papers also shows how politicians in Europe exploit emotionally charged messages to incite fear over increased immigration and its alleged threat to national security (Grzymala-Busse 2019).

But how does nationalism incite strong emotions? Scholars of social identity theory have offered some explanations. They argued that nationalism overlaps with ethnocentrism which is a “predisposition that divides the human world into in-groups and out-groups” (Kinder and Kam 2010, 8). Such division is not innocuous, however. Members of in-groups are considered to be virtuous: friendly, cooperative, trustworthy, and safe; whereas the members of out-groups are assumed to be the opposite: unfriendly, uncooperative, unworthy of trust, and dangerous until they are proven otherwise (9). Nationalism enhances the negative feeling of the outgroups by including more explicit

comparisons between highly valued in-group traits and the devaluation of out-groups (Johnston 2016).

This project combines the existing discussions on propaganda, nationalism, and social identity theory together and uses them to test a phenomenon in the real world: what makes pro-China videos made by foreign vloggers overwhelmingly popular on domestic Chinese social media? The article proceeds as follows. In Section 2, I review the literature on propaganda, nationalism, and social identity theory. I situate this study in the context of China. In Section 3, I provide a theory of in-group and out-group credibility in Chinese nationalism, proposing that: *all else equal, foreign vloggers who speak proficient Chinese will elicit more number of positive comments toward the Chinese government compared to foreign vloggers who don't*. In Section 4, I generate an original dataset from Bilibili of video comments from six videos which were all made by foreign vloggers, each praising the Chinese in the video on different social issues, to test my arguments. The data incorporate a total of 1,125 comments from the six videos which were filmed in 2020 and 2021. In Section 5, I discuss the empirical results that support my hypothesis, as well as and some other findings. Interestingly, comments that directly compliment the foreign vloggers' Chinese skills occupy a large portion of all the positive comments in the videos in which the foreigner vloggers speak proficient Chinese. Moreover, even with controls for other influence, the video from a good-Chinese-speaking foreign vlogger, who has relatively few subscribers, receives more views than the video from a not-so-good-Chinese speaking foreign vlogger, who is a Chinese social media celebrity with

tens of thousands of followers. In Section 6, I conclude by addressing the limits of this study and implications of its findings.

This project seeks to make several contributions. It provides insight into new forms of state propaganda during this digital age, when social media plays an important role in people's daily life. These new forms of propaganda are more insidious: there are no obvious linkages between them and the state propaganda apparatus, and individual creators of these media content do not disclose their ties and sponsorships. Nonetheless, they have a huge number of responses online. This study also contributes to the understanding of Chinese nationalism by highlighting the role language plays in nationalism and incorporating social identity theory, which has been studied extensively in the field of American politics, into the study of China. To the author's knowledge, this is the first time that social identity theory has been applied to the Chinese context in the discipline of political science. Finally, this study has implications outside of China. Scholars have famously argued the importance of language and boundaries in understanding the creation and the spread of nationalism (Anderson 1991; Calhorn 1993). The current overwhelming popularity of some foreigners (e.g., Chinese-American athlete Eileen Gu) in China presents an interesting phenomenon. Technically, they are "foreigners": people outside of the "boundary" of this imagined Chinese community, who should be treated "as a distinctive set of people deserving limited rights and closed surveillance" (Calhorn 1993, 217). However, not only they are accepted into the

community, but also they are treated as heroes and symbols that elevate community pride more than do those originally from the community.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Propaganda

Propaganda is the “deliberate dissemination of inaccurate, exaggerated, or fabricated information that favors a political cause or player” (Huang 2018, 1035). It operates both on the collective and the individual level. On the collective level, propaganda may affect the public’s perceptions of other people’s support for the regime or their beliefs about the regime’s power, since it is possible that other people have been influenced by propaganda. Such uncertainty about other people’s beliefs and feelings of uncertainty will make collective action, such as protests, much more difficult (Huang and Cruz 2021).

On the individual level, scholarship suggests that there are two goals of propaganda. The first goal is indoctrination: it seeks to manipulate the preferences of individuals directly, by persuading them about the merits of the regime, its leaders, or its policies in order to increase their support of the regime (Geddes and Zaller 1989; Kenez 1985; Jowett and O’Donnell 2018; Huang and Cruz 2021). The second goal is to signal government’s strength in political control. Some propaganda is not persuasive, and its purpose is not to persuade the audience. It is stodgy, didactic, and wooden. They make exaggerated claims about the process of leaders and present blatantly distorted information (Mattingly and Yao 2021, 1). It sends signals to the public that show the state’s far-reaching coercive power: being able to monopolize public discourse. Such

signaling can deter individuals from challenging it (Wedeen1999; Huang 2015, 2018; Little 2017; Carter and Carter 2021b; Mattingly and Yao 2021). Multiple studies have demonstrated that propaganda directly builds support for autocratic governments or at least reduces the likelihood of anti-regime protests (Adena et al. 2015; Huang 2015; Chen and Xu 2017; Huang 2018; Peisakhin and Rozenas 2018; Chen and MacDonald 2020). The typical didactic and dull propaganda is referred to as hard propaganda (Huang 2015). With the rapid development of ICT and social media platforms, large portions of authoritarian regimes' propaganda budgets started to be dedicated to producing "soft" propaganda, including movies, documentaries, soap operas, artistic performances, and viral social media content (Huang 2018). Soft propaganda is typically disseminated in slickly produced and entertaining media and makes relatively credible claims and is more persuasive on the individual level (Mattingly and Yao 2021, 2-3).

2.2 Nationalism

Nationalism is of relatively recent historical provenance and different scholars have different definitions of the concept. One theme that underlies all these definitions, however, is clear. It is that nationalism is about boundaries. In his influential book *Nations and Nationalism*, Ernest Gellner (1983,1) defined nationalism as "a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent" and further stated that "nationalist sentiment is the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the principle or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfillment." In a similar manner, Fukuyama (2018) defines nationalism as a doctrine maintaining that political borders

ought to correspond to cultural communities, with culture defined largely by language. Language is an important component of nationalism as it is not only a central gauge of a culture's desire for and ability to articulate a common cultural and political identity, but also language serves as a boundary in identifying who belongs and who does not (Stergios 2006). In his classic work *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson (1984) argues that language was a crucial factor in the rise of nationalism in 14th-century Europe because language formed a crucial link that sparked national consciousness and forged key bonds of commonality between previously disunited political communities within European countries. Johnston (2016, 14) defines nationalism as a relational concept. Despite it also constituted by love of (or pride in) the nation similar to patriotism, it includes more explicit comparisons between highly valued in-group traits and the devaluation of out-groups as well. Thus, nationalism includes a more emotional and normative commitment to the political, economic, and social status quo, and, in more extreme forms, blind support for the nation-state, as well as the denigration of the traits of out-groups. Similarly, Fukuyama (2018) touches upon this discussion between in-group and out-group in his book *Identity*. He argues that at the root of nationalism is identity and defines it as something that grows out of a distinction between one's true inner self and an outer world of social rules and norms that do not adequately recognize the inner self's worth and dignity. Nationalism is the amplified version of an individual's search

for dignity or respect, and it is centered on the dignity of a particular group that has been marginalized or disrespected (Fukuyama 2018, 59).

2.3 Nationalistic Propaganda

When propaganda is filled with nationalist messages, it can be extremely persuasive because it stirs up audiences' emotions. Studies in political psychology argue that emotionally charged messages can be particularly effective in shaping public opinion, and political ads that are heavily loaded with emotions are more persuasive (Marcus 2000; Brader 2005). In authoritarian regimes, scholars such as Greene and Robertson (2020) reveal that increased emotional engagement centered around pride and positivity generated a surge of support in Russia for its President Vladimir Putin. Nationalism, in addition to stirring up emotions, also gives a clear object, which is the foreign entity that does not belong to the "community" (Fukuyama 2018).

Nationalist propaganda, like other forms of propaganda, can also affect the public's perception of state performances. The literature provides conflicting findings on this. On the one hand, scholars suggest that elites employ nationalist propaganda to indirectly bolster support for the government by distracting attention from domestic economic and political woes (Mansfield and Snyder 1995; Pickering and Kisangani 2010; Solt 2011). On the other hand, studies have shown no effect or have even suggested that propaganda can reduce national pride (Cantoni et al. 2017; Huang 2018). Scholars like

Treisman (2011) show that in Russia, public approval for the president is largely a function of economic performance, with patriotic acts providing a smaller boost.

2.4 Social Identity Theory

We cannot fully understand nationalism without understanding social identity theory, since the latter “attempts to identify the environmental conditions that give rise to ethnocentrism and nationalism” (Kinder and Kam 2010, 23). Studies on social identity theory are numerous. It was first introduced by Tajfel and Turner (1986), who posited a distinction between personal and social identity. They argue for a difference between interpersonal situations and group situations (determined largely by category-based processes) (Brown 2000, 746). Social identity theory is concerned with the latter and starts from the assumption that identity is derived primarily from group memberships. It further proposes that “people strive to achieve or maintain a positive social identity, which boosts their self-esteem, and that this positive identity derives largely from favorable comparisons that can be made between the ingroup and relevant outgroups” (Brown 2000, 746). A major contribution of social identity theory is explaining in-group biases. Group members are prone to think that their own group (and its products) are superior to other groups (and theirs) and to be rather ready behaviorally to discriminate between them as well (Mullen et al. 1992). Another major contribution of social identity theory is explaining how language serves as an important mechanism in distinguishing between in-groups and out-groups. Language can be a critical determinant of whether someone views another as an “authentic ingroup member or an outgroup imposter”

(Kurylo 2012, 144). Indeed, even “one sound can cause detection as with the notion of linguistic shibboleths, which are words or terms that when communicated can identify someone as being a member of a distinctive group” (Kurylo 2012, 144).

2.5 Propaganda Under the Chinese Communist Party

Among authoritarian regimes in the world, the one that has mastered the technique of using both propaganda and nationalism to maintain its legitimacy is China.² The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has built one of the most extensive propaganda apparatuses in the contemporary world. The CCP’s propaganda bureaucracy directly controls a combination of state-run newspapers, publishers, radio stations, social media accounts, and TV channels (Roberts 2018). Both “hard” and “soft” propaganda has a long history in CCP’s development. It is not until recently that digital technologies enable the propaganda to attain unprecedented scale and to assume novel forms and styles. The resurgence and digital reincarnation of soft propaganda in China is an outcome of the party-state’s consolidation of its ideological influence and its responsiveness to changing public opinion, emotions, and tastes in the digital age (Zou 2021). Regardless of the “softness” or the “hardness” characteristics, these messages often have heavy components of emotional and cultural appeals, reflecting a long tradition in Chinese propaganda. For example, Elizabeth Perry shows how the Communist Party under Mao

²The focus of this study is on authoritarian regimes, but it is also apparent that nationalistic propaganda is pervasive in liberal democracies as well. Scholars such as Fukuyama (2018) consider it a direct threat to democracy.

used “emotion work” in order to mobilize people for political campaigns like land reform efforts (Perry 2002). Mattingly and Yao (2021) argued that emotionally charged soft propaganda effectively manipulates anger and anti-foreign sentiment of the Chinese public and such sentiment even persists for a week.

In recent years, the Chinese propaganda apparatus has shifted its focus more to the international arena. The Propaganda Department began to expand its broadcasting channels across the world to promulgate official Chinese rhetoric to international audiences. The goal, according to CCP chief Xi Jinping, is to “tell China’s stories well” (Xi 2013). It comes from the perception that China has been misunderstood by the West, so as China becomes more powerful it is important to tell the “true” stories of China (Xi 2013). China Global Television Network (CGTN), the international arm of the propaganda apparatus, was established in 2016. Since 2020, the network has posted stories such as China’s success in containing Covid-19 to push further the narrative that the pandemic has proven the superiority of its authoritarian model on international media (Buckley 2020). Another prime example is the so-called: “Wolf Warrior diplomacy”: an aggressive style of diplomacy that loudly denounces any criticism of the Chinese government, this contrasts sharply with the open and cooperative style of diplomacy during the Deng Xiaoping era. Other reports and policy analyses have investigated China’s increasing propaganda campaign on the international stage, particularly China’s diplomats’ activities on Twitter, and how Beijing influences foreign media influencers to reshape its global image. All the reports frame these propaganda strategies as external

propaganda: the fact that they are reposted on Facebook and YouTube and by Chinese foreign embassies showcases that the targeted audiences for the videos are international audiences.

2.6 Chinese Nationalism

Chinese nationalism was born with the national crisis of China's defeat by the British in the 1840-42 Opium War and by the Japanese in the 1894-95 First Sino-Japanese War. It was the first time in Chinese history that imperial China, which used to consider itself the "heavenly kingdom", the strongest country in the world, was defeated by a foreign power. After China's humiliating defeat, it started to seek ways to enhance its national power. Many believed that China lost the war and suffered the humiliation of the West not only because of its technological backwardness and military weakness but also fundamentally because of education and government administration. There were debates and conflicts about what kind of political system China should adopt in order to regain its national glory (Zhao 2004). Despite there being different schools of thought among Chinese elites, there was consensus on two things. First, is the recognition that there is something that once-superior China, now disastrously defeated, needs to "learn" from the Western "barbarians." Since then, an inferiority complex, namely the enchantment with the West and the perception that the West's "dynamism" is worthy of emulation, has been planted in Chinese nationalism as well (Zhao 2004; Huang 2021). Second, and more importantly, the dignity of the Chinese nation has been violated and

the struggle for China's recognition and respect has been planted deeply. The historical defeats and the subsequent humiliations at the hand of the imperialist powers were the impetus for not only the rise of Chinese nationalism but also the central message of both the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (Zhang 2004, 15-17; Wang 2014).

There are both qualitative and quantitative studies on Chinese nationalism. Vanessa Fong discovers that Chinese youth maintained a strong sense of "filial nationalism," which they saw as analogous to their unconditional loyalty to their parents, and such nationalism can coexist with their dissatisfaction towards China (Fong 2004). Gries (2001) uses condolence letters to gauge youth nationalism after the U.S. bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999. Johnson (2016) uses a time-series survey from Beijing to test whether Chinese nationalism is on the rise and argues that, contradicting what the media has portrayed, Chinese nationalism is not rising. Leibold (2010) incorporates Han chauvinism among the Chinese youth into the discourse on Chinese nationalism.

An important pillar of Chinese nationalism that many of the aforementioned studies have touched upon is the construction of Chinese national identity. Scholars have argued that the Patriotic Education Campaign is a crucial component in such a process. The Patriotic Education Campaign was initiated in 1991, and its aim is to boost CCP's legitimacy after the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre. The campaign portrays China as the victim of foreign imperialist bullying and perpetuates the idea of a Century of

Humiliation: a period from 1839 to 1949 when China was subjugated and intervened by imperial powers such as Japan and the United States (Wang 2014). Fitzgerald (1999) argued that the desire many Chinese express for dignity has its origins in feelings of humiliation stemming from China's early modern encounter with Western and Japanese imperialisms. William Callahan argues that "humiliation has been an integral part of the construction of Chinese nationalism (Callahan 2004, 210). Geremie Barmé argues that the "aggrieved nationalism" of China today has its origins in "state-supervised mythologies" of "dynastic greatness" and victimization at the hands of Western colonialism (Barmé 2009, 68). Gries et al. (2011) use three surveys conducted in China and the U.S. and show that the Patriotic Education Campaign generated nationalistic historical beliefs that predicted Chinese respondents' perceptions of US threats and their US policy preferences. In the realm of international relations, scholars such as Andrew Nathan similarly argue for the importance of dignity and humiliation as drivers of Chinese foreign policies (Nathan 2003).

3. Theory and Hypothesis

A brief review of the existing literature on propaganda, nationalism, social identity theory, and the first two concepts in the Chinese context revealed that: (1) the Patriotic Education Campaign and the emphasis on China's past humiliations by Western power play a vital role in Chinese nationalism and (2) language is both a crucial component of nationalism and an important device in creating and identifying "us" and "them". Based on these frameworks, I propose the hypothesis:

H1: Videos with foreign vloggers who speak proficient Chinese when they are parsing China will elicit more positive feedback toward the Chinese government from the viewers than foreign vloggers who do not speak proficient Chinese, ceteris paribus.

I distinguish between nationalism and patriotism. Many scholarly works use these two related concepts interchangeably; however, these two are empirically distinct concepts (Kosterman and Feshbach 1989; Gries et al. 2011). According to Kosterman and Feshbach, patriotism taps the affective component of feelings about a country. It assesses the degree of love for and pride in one's nation in essence, and the degree of attachment to the nation (Kosterman and Feshbach 1989, 271). Nationalism, in comparison, reflects a perception of national superiority and an orientation toward national dominance (271). I am aware of this distinction. The positive feedback towards the Chinese government that I posit here is the result of nationalism, not patriotism. This is because when foreign vloggers praise China, it reflects China's superiority relative to countries where these

foreigners are from. It matches nationalism's "perceptions of superiority," as defined above.

The rationale behind this hypothesis is straightforward. In recent years, the CCP has enhanced its negative portrayal of Western power attempting to "contain" China's development and "interfere" with China's domestic affairs in Taiwan and Xinjiang. It has engaged directly, and in a hawkish manner with the United States., publishing White Papers such as *The Status of American Democracy in 2021*, and *U.S. Hegemony and Its Peril in 2022*, which vehemently criticize the flaws of the U.S. political system and its "bullying" actions on the international stage. Such engagement also has consequences. In a survey on Chinese perception of the United States in 2019, only 21 percent of the public respond with a positive view of the United States (Wang 2019). When asked how to describe the United States and the Americans, the adjective "aggressive" and "condescending" are two words that get the most frequent selection (Wang 2019). In this context, when the out-group foreigners say something good about China in terms of its social and political issues, which the West has been constantly criticizing China, in perfect Chinese, the domestic Chinese audience feels a stronger boost in confidence and support of the Chinese government. This is because not only does domestic Chinese audience consider these foreign vlogger members of the in-group based on the fluent Chinese they speak, but also these foreign vloggers act against the Chinese audience's perceived biases: i.e., perception of foreigners as condescending and arrogant. This is also known as the "source credibility effect" in the political persuasion literature. In his

study on rumors and health care reform in the United States., Berinsky (2015) argue that citizen willingness to reject rumors increases when the rumor is refuted with statements from an unlikely source: a person who makes proclamations that run contrary to their personal and political interests. Similarly, Calvert (1985,546) argues that if “biased” advisors – those with strong priors toward a particular policy – reject a policy that the decision maker presumes he would support, this unexpected advice could be “enough to reverse prior preferences.”

4. Data and Method

4.1 Case Selection Strategies

Since my study has a small number of cases (six videos), case selection becomes extremely important. I explain the case selection process in this section. I went on Bilibili to search for videos made by foreign vloggers. There are many of them with videos covering a wide range of topics, from food, fashion, travel, teaching a foreign language, crazy experiments, to social and political issues. I first limited the content of the videos to only those that cover social and political issues. I then went through all these videos and divided them into two categories: videos in which foreign vloggers speak “proficient Chinese” and videos in which vloggers speak no Chinese (but instead use Chinese subtitles). I admit that assessing Chinese proficiency myself, a Chinese native, is very subjective, so I tried to be more objective and systematic. That is the reason why I combined my judgments with judgments from the viewers by looking at the comments below the videos before putting the videos into categories. If comments say things such as “his Chinese is good!” that confirmed my judgment and I put the video in the “proficient Chinese” category.

Foreign vloggers have different levels of cumulative popularity. I define cumulative popularity as a (1) the total number of subscribers, and (2) the date the foreign vlogger uploaded the first video on her channel. The total number of subscribers is the most straightforward reflection of a vlogger’s popularity, as it is the same on international social media such as YouTube. The more total number of subscribers each vlogger has,

the more “public” their video will be. By “public”, I mean that videos are more accessible: they can appear in the first few search results or even on the main page of the website, according to Bilibili’s algorithm. That is why controlling for cumulative popularity is important. In this study, I care about the effect of a specific video from different foreign vloggers, not the effect lingering from his or her previous videos. That is, I tried to disentangle the cumulative impact on audiences from a specific video’s impact on audiences. For this reason, I create two more categories: big vloggers and small vloggers. I define big vloggers as those who have 200,000 subscribers, and small vloggers who have below 200,000 subscribers. The date the vlogger uploaded his or her first video also matters. Consider Person A, who joined the platform a year ago, but already had attracted 1000 subscribers within a year. Person A has more cumulative impact than some Person B, who joined the platform four years ago but has only attracted 100 subscribers.

These methods do not meet the standard of an experiment. I cannot find two videos with the exact same content and narrative on social media platforms because Bilibili’s policies strictly penalize duplicating videos. Nor can I find two vloggers with the exact same cumulative popularity (i.e., same total number of subscribers and same date of first video upload). During entire case selection process, however, I try to control different elements and make them as similar and comparable to each other as possible.

Based on my definition of cumulative popularity, I control the cumulative popularity of foreign vloggers. I select foreign vloggers who joined the platform at similar times and have similar total numbers of subscribers. I first set the threshold of

difference in total number of subscribers at 50,000 but could not find pairs of videos with similar narratives with one foreign vlogger speaking proficient Chinese and the other speaking English. I was forced to accept the threshold of 100,000 as differences in subscriber numbers and a threshold of same year of first video upload.

After controlling the cumulative popularity, I select cases with similar content/narrative. All six videos I select are about China’s remarkable infrastructure. Specifically, the small vlogger pairs both talk about China’s new high-tech public restrooms. One of the big vlogger pairs talks about her and her husband’s reactions when they visited the newly-constructed Daxing International Airport; and the other talks about his reaction when he saw some major infrastructure sites in Guizhou province and the construction site of the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge. In the most likely case, both vloggers talk about China’s advanced technology infrastructure. In addition, I also control the race. All the vloggers in the six videos are Caucasians. In terms of gender, only the English-speaking vlogger in the big vlogger pair (路卡和瑞丽) is female. I control the length of each video by making sure they are similar in length.

Figure 1 shows the four cases I selected based on my case selection strategy:

	Proficient Chinese	No Chinese(English Speaking)
Big Vlogger (subscribers above 200k)	请叫我克里斯 ¹ 256k	路卡和瑞丽 ² 319k

¹ These are the names of the vloggers’ channel. English translated as “Please call me Chris”.

² The translations of their foreign names into Chinese name “Luka and Ruili”.

Small Vlogger (subscribers below 200k)	马克 cn ³ 87k	加油马特 ⁴ 177k
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Figure 1. Case Selection Framework

During the process, I also discovered a most likely case, in which a video from a big vlogger, who speaks fluent Mandarin, receives more views and positive feedback from the audience than a video from an English-speaking super vlogger, who has almost twice the number of subscribers.

	Proficient Chinese	No Chinese(English Speaking)
Super Vlogger (subscribers above 400k)		Barret 看中国 ⁵ 477k
Big Vlogger (subscribers below 200k)	请叫我克里斯 256k	

Figure 2. Most Likely Case

4.2 Coding and Measures

After selecting the cases, I gathered all the 1125 comments below the six video and sorted them from the most recent to the earliest before starting to code them. I hand coded several key variables in the comments to assess the positive attitude (*Comm_pos*) that was prompted from the video and the audience's perception on the foreign vlogger's Chinese language skills (*Comm_lang*, *Comm_lang_pos*). *Comm_pos* is a hand-coded

³ English translated as "Mark CN".

⁴ English translated as "Go Matt!".

⁵ English translated as "Barret observes China".

binary variable that indicates whether or not the comments spoke in clearly positive terms about China. For instance, I coded the following comments as positive feedback:

“基建狂魔近年来在国际上名头越来越响亮，港珠澳大桥就是最新一项震惊世界的成就，我为我的祖国自豪！(The infrastructure maniac has become more and more famous internationally in recent years. The Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge is the latest achievement that shocked the world. I am proud of my motherland!)”

“这就是中国速度！(This is China’s way developing infrastructure!)”

“为国家喝彩，为祖国自豪，为这些伟大的工程师与相关人员致敬！(Cheer for the country, be proud of the motherland, and pay tribute to these great engineers and related personnel!)”

There are also comments where they did not directly praise China, but they talked about other countries’ approaches to building infrastructure and mocked its shortcomings. It implies a comparison between China’s superior capability of building infrastructure and other countries’ inferior capabilities. I also coded these as positive feedback. For instance:

“这算啥，美国火车都能不用轨道就跑了(This is nothing, American trains can run without tracks!)” This comment is referring to the 2023 Ohio Train Derailment incident. It implies the crumbling U.S. infrastructure in contrast to China’s vibrant infrastructure.

“老美某普花了几百亿美金就修了一堵墙。(Donald Trump spent several billion dollars just to build a wall).”

Since all six videos are about infrastructure, it is inevitable that viewers of the videos will mention keywords such as “development” or “changes,” so I also coded comments that described the rapid development of China’s infrastructure as positive feedback. For instance:

“现在的公厕改进真的大 (The current public toilets have really improved.)”

“有的很干净，有的真的脏，但是干净的越来越多了，不像以前，在外面根本不愿意上厕所 (Some are very clean, some are really dirty, but more and more clean ones, unlike before, I didn't want to go to the toilet outside at all.)”

In addition, there are many comments that do not praise China, but rather praise the vlogger himself or express affirmation on the vlogger's video. I coded these comments as positive feedback as well because what the vloggers have done in their videos is praise China's ability to build infrastructure. If audiences express their positive feelings or love toward the vlogger, I infer that the audiences endorse what the vloggers have done and his or her messages. Because the vlogger praised China, logically the audiences positive feedback about the vlogger can be translated to positive feedbacks towards China. Here are some examples:

“我很喜歡你的視頻，一直很中肯，有理，分析到位而且有趣，加油哦！我會一直關注你！ (I like your videos very much. They are always pertinent, reasonable, well analyzed and interesting. Come on! I will always follow you!)”

“up主的video是非常公平、公正的!(Vlogger's video is very fair and just!)”

“这老外讲得确实非常客观，不吹不黑。(This foreigner speaks very objectively, no bragging or talking bad on China)”.

“看过最靠谱的老外!(The most reliable foreigner I have ever seen!)”

Comm_lang and *Comm_lang_pos* are two hand-coded binary variables that indicate whether the comments mention any language component, and whether they praise these foreign vloggers' language skills. An example of comments on language is:

“一股子川普口音(Your Chinese has a Donald Trump accent)”. The comment mentions the language component but did not praise the vlogger's Chinese skills because the viewer thinks the vlogger has a strange accent when speaking Chinese.

“其实我是进来学英语的(I'm actually here to learn English).” This comment has language component because it mentions “English”. It also fits the *Comm_lang_pos* because it implies vlogger’s English skill is better.

Here are a few examples of positive comments on vlogger’s Chinese skills:

“感觉up不是美国人了 (I feel like the vlogger is not American anymore.)”

“是混血儿吗？完全感觉不出来是外国人!(Were you born a mixed race? I don't feel like you are a foreigner at all!)”

“这普通话和大山有的一拼! (Your Mandarin is as good as Dashan (大山))”.

Dashan is the stage name for Mark Rowswell, a Canadian who was one of the most famous Western personalities in China's media industry from the late 1980s through the early 2000s credit to his flawless Chinese.

After hand-coding all comments, I described my coding strategy to a Duke University graduate student in political economy and asked him to hand-code the comments again to increase intercoder reliability. The coding results are substantively the same.

I use for my measures the percentage of positive comments instead of the absolute value of the number of positive comments because the total numbers of comments below each video are different.

5. Findings

5.1 Small Vlogger Pairs

Although the vlogger who speaks Chinese in this group has a strong foreign accent, which is pointed out in the video's comments, the result still shows that 46.4 percent of the total comments are positive in comparison to the only 26.3 percent of the positive comments from the vlogger who speaks English. Besides, for the Chinese-speaking vlogger, 23.2 percent of all the comments mentioned him speaking Chinese and 3.6 percent of all the comments praised his Chinese skills. In comparison, no comments discussed the language component in the English-speaking vlogger's video.

5.2 Big Vlogger Pairs

The result is similar for the big vlogger pairs: 27.8 percent of the total comments from the Chinese-speaking vlogger's video are positive in comparison to the only 16.4 percent from the video where the vlogger speaks English. In the Chinese-speaking vlogger's video, 22 percent of all comments have language components and 20.7 percent of all the comments are praise the vlogger's Chinese skills.

5.3 Most-Likely-Case Pairs

The results still hold for the most-likely-case: 20.8 percent of the total comments are positive from the Chinese-speaking vlogger's video, with only 18.5 percent from the video where vlogger speaks English. In the Chinese-speaking vlogger's video, 25.2 percent of all comments have language components and 24.7 percent of all the comments are praising vlogger's Chinese skills. In comparison, only 2.4 percent of the total

comments covered the language component and no comments that praises for language skills.

These findings support my hypothesis. In addition, I discovered three interesting findings. First, in the big vlogger pairs, among all the positive comments on the Chinese-speaking vlogger, 73.2 percent of them are not discussing the material of the video, but rather praising the vlogger speaking Chinese. This overlap between positive comments and positive comments towards vloggers' Chinese language skills, although not observed in the two other pairs, is worth studying. It further substantiates the source credibility effect and the idea that language plays an important role in identifying “us” and “them.” In this case, the foreign vlogger not only acts against the perceived biases, but his identity also changed from out-group to in-group because he speaks the language of the in-group—and that gives him even more credibility. His video received comments such as “这是个假老外吧？ (You must be a fake foreigner!)” ; “我感觉你是中国人吧？ 只是容貌像外国人而已 (I think you are Chinese, right? Just look like a foreigner)”, which is additional documents that his identity has changed from out-group to in-group.

Second interesting finding is from the three pairs of word clouds. Figures 3 and 4 show the general difference between comments from Chinese-speaking foreign vloggers and English-speaking foreign vloggers in terms of word frequencies in small vlogger pairs. In response to the Chinese-speaking vlogger's video (Figure 3), China, bathroom, and foreign are the top three mentioned words, followed by video, village, rural area, Chengdu, and years ago. When it comes to the English-speaking vlogger's video (Figure

4), while the top-mentioned word is also bathroom, other frequently mentioned words include clean, China, urban, a lot, really, right now. Comparing these two word clouds, we can find some slight distinctions: there is more frequent usage of the word “China” and “foreign” in the Chinese-speaking vlogger’s video (Figure 3). Interestingly, similar patterns (frequent mentions of “China”, “U.S.”, and “foreign countries”) also occur in the other two Chinese-speaking vloggers' videos (Figure 4 and Figure 6). This may suggest that Chinese-speaking foreign vloggers evoke more discussions and comparison between in-groups and out-groups.

Third, not all comments are positive, and non-positive comments are more prevalent in response to the videos where the vlogger speaks English. For instance, there are comments that criticize the vloggers, saying their content is over-exaggerated and deceitful:

“这父子俩真的成了‘中国吹’了 (This father and son have really become "China’s flatters")

“这位国际友人，请问你哪个国家的……请说实话没人怪你 (This international friend, which country are you from, please tell the truth, no one blames you)”

There are comments that questioned the sincerity of the videos, suspecting these videos are simply click-bait:

“拍视频挣钱的老外一律不欢迎。没贡献。(Those foreigners who make money by making videos are not welcome. No contribution).”

“密码错误 (wrong password).” “Password” here means the trick that some foreign vloggers use that they boost their video’s views and attract more subscribers by making over-exaggerated videos parsing China.

Interestingly, there are also comments that directly call on Chinese people to be confident that they do not need foreigners to praise them:

“国人要有自信，我们好不好用不着外国人来评价。因为他们也不是评委。(Chinese people must have self-confidence, we don't need foreigners to judge whether we are good or not. Because they are not judges.)”

Although such negative comments are rare from the videos of Chinese-speaking foreign vloggers, there are still negative comments below the video that go along a similar line, but their tones are milder. For instance:

“也希望能够对中国的缺点给予善意的批评和解决问题的建议(I also hope to be able to give well-intentioned criticism and suggestions for solving problems in China's shortcomings.)”

“中国好的地方都看到了。请你说说美国好的地方。(I have seen all the good places/things in China. Please tell me about the good places/things in America.)”

These negative comments have huge implications for future studies. This study shows that foreign vloggers who speak fluent Chinese will elicit more positive feedback from audiences. It works now, but as we have seen from the negative comments, it is legitimate to question whether such a strategy can still function in the future, as more and more of these videos appear on Chinese social media. In other words, whether such “soft propaganda” can still work as intended.

6. Conclusion

The moon on the other side, based on the result of this study, is in fact rounder. This study aims to fill the void of existing literature by applying social identity theory in the study of Chinese politics within the field of political science. It also helps us to better understand Chinese nationalism. I propose that videos with foreign vloggers who speak proficient Chinese will elicit more positive feedback toward the Chinese government than videos with foreign vloggers who do not, after relatively controlling the content, vloggers' identity, and their accumulated popularity. The empirical result supports my hypothesis and reveals that such soft propaganda can indeed work effectively by prompting more positive feedback from domestic Chinese audiences.

However, I fully acknowledge that my findings here are only suggestive. This project does not meet the rigorous criteria of an experiment. Future research can continue with the exploration of causal inference about the relationship between foreigners' language skills and the positive feedback it can elicit from the domestic audience. A true randomized experiment could be designed to test the causal relations more rigorously or perhaps expand the study by comparing the differences in results between a foreign vlogger who speaks perfect Chinese and a domestic Chinese vlogger. Also, this study can be implemented beyond China. Finally, most coding and matching for this study were completed by hand. For further exploration, advanced techniques such as machine coding can be used and adapted to expand this study to a larger scale.

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