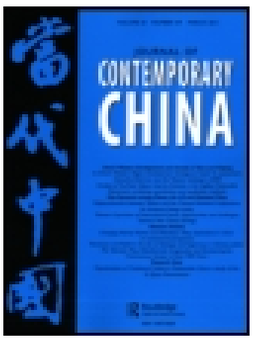

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Support for Propaganda: Chinese perceptions of public service advertising

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Chinese perspectives of, and support for propaganda, relying on television public service advertisements as a means of tapping into citizens' beliefs. Through the analysis of data from focus groups conducted in Beijing and public opinion survey data from 30 cities, this study argues that Chinese people are generally supportive of state efforts to guide public attitudes through television advertisements, although levels of support vary by age, education and gender. The study suggests that considerable popular support for state propaganda contributes to the regime's capacity to guide public opinion and helps to explain the persistence of popular support for authoritarian rule.

Introduction

Since the beginning of China's period of 'reform and opening' in 1978, the commercialization of China's mass media has provided financial incentives for media to appeal to popular tastes with messages that are subtle, catchy and capable of reinforcing support for the political regime.[1] The ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has emphasized the importance of producing propaganda in a variety of styles and formats for cell phones, the Internet, print media and television. While the PRC's use of marketing strategies in propaganda has received considerable scholarly attention, little systematic research has been done to determine how the Chinese perceive new forms of propaganda or to determine whether the public is supportive of heavy Party-state involvement in 'propaganda work' (*xuanchuan gongzuo* 宣传工作).[2] This area of research has particular salience for scholars of Chinese communication and political scientists researching China's 'adaptive governance' and 'authoritarian resilience'.[3] Public approval (or disapproval) of new forms of propaganda and state involvement in communication also advances our understanding of citizens' expectations of the Chinese state regarding its management of media

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[1]Geremie Barmé, *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008); Anne-Marie Brady, *China's Thought Management* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Ashley Esarey, 'Cornering the market: state strategies for controlling China's commercial media', *Asian Perspective* 29(4), (2005), pp. 37–83; Daniela Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[2]Chin-Chuan Lee, Zhou He and Yu Huang, 'Party–market corporatism, clientelism, and media in Shanghai', *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 12(3), (2007), pp. 21–42; Daniela Stockmann, 'Who believes propaganda? Media effects during the anti-Japanese protests in Beijing', *The China Quarterly* 202, (2010), pp. 269–289; Ian Weber, 'Reconfiguring Chinese propaganda and control modalities: a case study of Shanghai's television system', *Journal of Contemporary China* 11(30), (2002), pp. 53–75; Yuezhi Zhao, *Communication in China: Political Economy, Power, and Conflict* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008).

[3]Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry, *Mao's Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Andrew J. Nathan, 'Changing of the guard: authoritarian resilience', *Journal of Democracy* 14, (2003), pp. 6–17.

and the extent to which citizens are satisfied with the substantial changes in Chinese media during the reform era.

Utilizing data from focus groups conducted with long-term Beijing residents in 2009–2010, this article examines citizens' evaluations of state-initiated efforts to guide public attitudes through political advertisements broadcast on television known as 'public service advertisements' (*gongyi guanggao* 公益广告). Public opinion survey data are used to test the representativeness of key focus group findings nationwide and to assist in making further inferences. Contrary to the notion that most citizens under Chinese authoritarian rule hunger for media freedom or that the 'Chinese government's propaganda machine is facing a crisis', our study finds considerable public support for a strong governmental role in propaganda production and dissemination.[4] In the eyes of Beijingers and residents of 30 provinces, airing public service advertisements (PSAs) on television was preferable to commercial advertising, and people voiced greater support for state involvement in the production of public service advertisements (PSAs) than for involvement by corporations, which frequently sponsor PSAs. Chinese support for state initiation of PSAs reflects the belief that communication orchestrated by central-level leaders and political institutions, rather than the market actors, plays a key role in governance and the betterment of Chinese society.

Unlike prior research on Chinese politics that examines how entrepreneurs, the middle class, workers and farmers view the authoritarian state and democratic governance, this study considers the relationship between education, age and gender, and perceptions of television propaganda.[5] Our approach is informed by studies which argue that the rapid transformation of Chinese society has led to strikingly different attitudes between age groups and that education levels affect people's trust and satisfaction in the Chinese political system.[6] Although gender is infrequently studied in Chinese public opinion research, it was treated as a key variable after detecting strong attitudinal differences between women and men in focus groups.

In authoritarian political systems with Leninist political traditions, notably in China, Cuba, Laos, North Korea, Russia and Vietnam, propaganda is central to promoting the goals of the dominant party.[7] Unfortunately, the negative connotation associated with the term propaganda in North America and Europe has reduced its attractiveness as a subject of research.[8] Some scholars have attempted to revitalize the study of propaganda by treating propaganda in value-neutral terms.[9] In this article, propaganda is seen as Party-state (henceforth state) communication designed to inform or educate citizens with the objective of guiding their thoughts and actions and increasing public support of the regime's leadership, policies and ideology.[10] Moreover, rather than superimposing this definition of propaganda

[4]Xuecun Murong, 'Beijing's propaganda crisis', *The New York Times*, (17 March 2014), p. 5.

[5]Jie Chen and Bruce J. Dickson, 'Allies of the state: democratic support and regime support among China's private entrepreneurs', *The China Quarterly* 196, (2008), pp. 780–804; Cheng Li, *China's Emerging Middle Class: Beyond Economic Transformation* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2010); Teresa Wright, *Accepting Authoritarianism: State–Society Relations in China's Reform Era* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

[6]Wenfang Tang, *Public Opinion and Political Change in China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005); John J. Kennedy, 'Maintaining popular support for the Chinese Communist Party: the influence of education and the state-controlled media', *Political Studies* 57, (2009), pp. 517–536; Qing Yang and Wenfang Tang, 'Exploring the sources of institutional trust in China: culture, mobilization, or performance?', *Asian Politics & Policy* 2, (2010), pp. 415–436.

[7]Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship*; Patrick McEachern, *Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Post-Totalitarian Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Sarah Oates, *Television, Democracy and Elections in Russia* (London: Routledge, 2006); Rafael Rojas, 'Ideology, culture, and memory: symbolic dilemmas of the Cuban transition', in Marifeli Perez-Stable, ed., *Looking Forward: Comparative Perspectives on Cuba's Transition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), pp. 271–272.

[8]Noam Chomsky, *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002); Robert M. Entman, *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and US Foreign Policy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Anthony R. Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson, *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion* (New York: Freeman, 2001).

[9]Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization 1917–1929* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985); David Welch, *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Garth S. Jowett and Victoria J. O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2011).

[10]See also Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China*; Ashley Esarey, 'Winning hearts and minds? Cadres as microbloggers in China', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 44(2), (2015), pp. 69–103.

on the views of Chinese citizens, this definition is offered as a reference point in hopes of illuminating a broader range of perspectives on propaganda or *xuanchuan* (宣传), as it is called in Mandarin, within China. The sections that follow relate to the political motivation for PSA production, our research methods, preliminary findings concerning public evaluations of PSAs, evidence of Chinese approval of PSAs as state-guided propaganda, and our broader inferences on the utility of this form of propaganda for shoring up popular support for the regime.

Public service advertisements

While sometimes resembling military recruitment advertisements in the United States or ads discouraging cell phone use by motorists in Canada, PSAs emerged in the 1980s as a subtle form of communication designed to cultivate CCP-approved modern values and norms and to halt the subversion of socialist ideology.[11] PSAs are part of a broader trend towards the use of entertainment and other 'soft' methods in 'propaganda and ideological work' (*sixiang xuanchuan gongzuo* 思想宣传工作). They pertain to a wide variety of issues, such as promoting nationalism and a positive image of state leaders, the commemoration of significant political events, combating corruption, improving treatment of migrant workers, protecting the environment, and increasing knowledge of laws and regulations.[12] PSAs thus touch upon a broader range of topics than public service announcements in North America and, like other Chinese propaganda since the 1990s, tend to emphasize government successes in promoting economic growth and political stability.[13] Sponsors of Chinese PSAs include a number of state-affiliated institutions, such as Party- and state units, semi-governmental organizations or TV stations. Increasingly, Chinese corporations sponsor PSAs, although their messages are subject to state approval prior to dissemination.

Beijing's influential propaganda tsars, Li Changchun and Liu Yunshan, have seen PSAs as a form of propaganda that is effective and perceived positively by the Chinese public. Since 1997, the Central Propaganda Department of the CCP and other central government bodies have mandated the broadcast of PSAs on television throughout the country.[14] PSAs are a pervasive component in the CCP's arsenal of media strategies designed to guide public opinion, bolster popular conceptions of performance legitimacy and create public support for CCP rule.

Contemporary Chinese propaganda comes in many forms. Public service advertising is designed to supplement government messaging appearing in mass media, in public spaces on posters and billboards, and increasingly online. Airing on national and local television, PSAs reach an estimated 75% of the rural and 80% of China's urban population.[15] A CTR market research study conducted in 2009 found that 67% of government-initiated PSAs aired on municipal television stations, 24% on provincial stations, and 5% on China Central Television. As television remains the most popular channel through which Chinese access political information, PSAs broadcast on television reach the largest audience of all types of public service advertising.[16]

[11]Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship*; Daniela Stockmann, 'Greasing the reels: advertising as a means of campaigning on Chinese television', *The China Quarterly* 208, (2011), pp. 851–869.
[12]For examples of awarding-winning PSAs, see Stockmann, 'Greasing the reels', p. 868.
[13]Xiaoping Cong, 'Road to revival: a new move in the making of legitimacy for the ruling party in China', *Journal of Contemporary China* 22(83), (2013), pp. 917–918.
[14]Zhongyang xuanchuanbu (Central Propaganda Department), Guojiagongshangxingzheng guanliju (State Administration for Industry and Commerce), Guangbodianying dianshibu (Ministry of Radio, Film and Television) and Xinwenchubanshu (State Administration for Press and Publications), 'Guanyu zuohao gongyi guanggao xuanchuan de tongzhi' ['Notice on the Optimal Production of Public Service Advertising Propaganda'], (11 August 1997) in Zhongguo chuanmei daxue, quanguo gongyi guanggao chuangxin yanjiu jidi, ed., *Zhongguo gongyi guanggao nianjian* [*China Public Service Advertising Yearbook*] (Beijing: Zhongguo gongshang chubanshe, 2011), pp. 350–351.
[15]Stockmann, 'Greasing the reels', p. 857.
[16]Jie Lu, 'Acquiring political information in contemporary China: various media channels and their respective correlates', *Journal of Contemporary China* 22(83), (2013), p. 834.

Data and research methods

To evaluate perceptions of PSAs this study utilized focus groups and a national public opinion survey. Focus groups are capable of eliciting data that are difficult to obtain through surveys that center on rigidly prescribed topics. They are a valuable instrument of discovery and help to generate hypotheses for quantitative testing.[17] These two qualities were particularly useful for our research due to the paucity of prior work on PSAs and on public perceptions of this form of state-guided communication.

Focus groups were comprised of citizens recruited by the Research Center of Contemporary China at Peking University. Due to the large number of migrants in China, people without a Beijing residency permit (*hukou* 户口) were included in each focus group. The researchers sought to learn the views of a broad sample of ordinary citizens who had lived in Beijing for at least a year, as numerous semi-structured interviews with Chinese policy-makers and PSA producers had made it clear that PSAs are *not* designed with a particular target audience in mind. Rather PSAs are 'propaganda instruments' (*xuanchuang gongju* 宣传工具) that are produced for a wide audience of 'ordinary people'.[18]

To test the representativeness of key findings from focus groups conducted in Beijing, the project drew on the Survey on Citizen's Life conducted by Horizon Market Research in collaboration with the Unirule Institute for Economics. Questions concerning attitudes toward PSAs, commercial advertising and perceived sponsorship of PSAs were created and added. Utilizing multi-staged random sampling, the survey was conducted by employees of Horizon Market Research in 30 cities during June 2010, starting only three weeks after the third and fourth focus group. Over 500 interviewers, with fluency in local dialects, completed interviews face-to-face with respondents in four municipalities (Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai and Chongqing), 22 provincial capitals and four major cities in autonomous regions (Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia and Guangxi).[19] Criteria for a participant's inclusion in the survey were: (1) aged between 16 and 60 years of age; (2) resident in the city for at least one year; (3) no participation in market research activities for six months prior to the interview; and (4) the interviewee (or members of her family) did not work in market research, advertising, mass media or any related industry. Migrants were included if they had lived in their city for more than one year. [20] The sample size within each city depended on the city's size, varying between 150 and 300 people per city, with the largest samples obtained from cities with populations over 10 million. Responses were then weighted in accordance with data from the 2009 *China Urban Statistical Yearbook* (*zhongguo chengshi tongji nianjian* 中国城市统计年鉴). After the exclusion of invalid or incomplete responses, the total sample was 6,577.

Participants, design, and procedure of focus groups

In order to learn about people's perceptions and interpretations of public service advertisements, four focus groups were conducted among different demographic groups in Beijing in the winter of 2009 and the summer of 2010 in collaboration with the Research Center for Contemporary China at Peking University. The size of our focus groups ranged between 11 and 12 people. Snowball sampling was used to identify participants whose demographic characteristics varied based on the group's composition of age, gender and education—demographic characteristics believed to influence perceptions and interpretation of PSAs. Group composition was kept similar with respect to one variable at levels approximating the Beijing population. This rationale of 'controlling' for one variable, while varying another, helped to distinguish between potential effects of socio-demographic characteristics among participants. Yet it should be noted that, as the focus group participant selection was non-random, it is impossible to rule out omitted variable concerns.

[17]Peter Lunt and Sonia Livingstone, 'Rethinking the focus group in media and communications research', *Journal of Communication* 46, (1996), p. 80.
[18]Stockmann, 'Greasing the reels', p. 861.
[19]Among the four cities in autonomous regions, only the one in Xinjiang (Karamay) is not the seat of the regional government.
[20]The average response rate per city was 32% (s.d.=19%). Due to the increase in market research and other polling institutes in China, response rates have been declining since the 1990s.

For the first focus group (henceforth *Average Education*), males and females were selected to participate in roughly equal proportions. Participants' ages varied from 19 to 71, reflecting our expectation that perceptions of PSAs might differ by age, as the result of longer exposure to propaganda as a mainstream form of political communication. All participants had a high-school level education, the average education level of long-term Beijing residents, with one exception: an individual was included whose education was cut short at the middle-school level due to the onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, a typical experience for people of that generation.

In the second group (*Average Age*), age was held constant between 38 and 41, the average age of short-term Beijing residents, while education levels varied from primary schooling to the post-graduate level. After reviewing videos of the first two focus groups, researchers noticed that women appeared more reluctant to share their views, while in *Average Age* women with high education levels participated at levels similar to well-educated men. Thus, a third focus group (*Lower Educated Women*) was comprised entirely of women between 35 and 42 years of age, with lower than average education levels, including participants who had elementary, middle-school and high-school educations. The fourth focus group (*Advanced Education*) consisted of both men and women aged 35–42 with a university or advanced graduate degree.[21] This demographic was selected and sharpen the understanding of the relationship between higher education and perceptions of PSAs.

All focus group sessions were led by the same female moderator, whose efforts were guided by a protocol consisting of instructions and a list of questions to be asked. The moderator was instructed to make participants comfortable to voice disagreement and to prevent especially vocal people from dominating the discussion; in addition, participants were informed beforehand that they would be asked about their television viewing habits in order to eliminate the emergence of a 'Hawthorne effect' in which participants voiced views that they believed were socially desirable for the researchers.[22] After introductory remarks and an ice-breaker the moderator asked participants about their general television viewing habits and later asked more specific questions about PSAs, with the goals of obtaining information on individual participants and easing into discussions that could be politically sensitive.

Midway through each discussion, the moderator showed clips of PSAs, each with a label indicating the sponsoring organization. Participants watched three PSAs related to nationalism, environmental protection and combatting corruption among officials. For *Average Age*, *Lower Educated Women* and *Advanced Education*, a fourth PSA was added concerning the promotion of proper moral conduct. This PSA departed in style from the first three, as it relied less on story-telling similar to a commercial ad, and promoted an ideological message in a series of moving images, as explained below.

In order to ensure that the ads were roughly equal in quality, provincial-level PSAs were used that had been submitted to the biannual national PSA competition organized by the state to improve the production of PSAs. All four PSAs were similar with respect to quality, three had a similar format, but all differed in terms of the content of their messages. The order of the ads and the label indicating sponsorship (or not) were chosen randomly; once decided upon, the order remained the same for all focus groups. None of the participants indicated that they had watched the PSAs previously.

PSA content

The first PSA (henceforth *Nationalism*) depicted a boy practicing the movements of raising the national flag on a tablecloth hanging from a laundry line. He later raises the flag at school with dramatic music playing in the background. The attribution following the ad indicates sponsorship by a national television station.

[21]The age ranges for *Lower Educated Women* and *Advanced Education* were increased to make it easier to recruit participants. In *Advanced Education* both age and education were held constant. As age had no clear effect on perspectives of PSAs in *Average Education*, a fine-grained understanding of the effect of higher education became of interest among people of average age.

[22]After the focus group session, participants received a Chinese-language handout elaborating on the nature of the research and funding sources.

The second PSA (*Conservation*) portrays a group of children arm wrestling after school. One small bespectacled boy defeats all opponents and is later shown turning off dripping faucets. These small acts of altruism, a viewer assumes, contribute to the boy's hidden strength. The sentence, 'I want to conserve water' then appears prior to the sponsor's name, a major manufacturer of household electronics.

The third PSA (*Corruption*) shows the hands of a bureaucrat on a black desk. The bureaucrat is presented with a document, which is rejected, until a gift appears, whereupon the document receives a red stamp reading 'approved' (*tongyi* 同意). Then, documents accompanied by a wrist watch, a credit card and car keys all receive a stamp indicating approval. The final items are a pair of handcuffs and an arrest notice that is stamped 'approved'. The bureaucrat's hands are shown cuffed while a melodious voice says 'oppose corruption and promote clean government, know honor and eliminate disgrace'. The four sponsoring organizations listed the main central-level political institutions responsible for overseeing PSAs.

A fourth PSA (*Moral Conduct*) concerned 'the Eight Desirables and Eight Undesirables' (*barong bachi* 八荣八耻), a major slogan of the Hu Jintao presidency. This PSA depicted a montage of heroic efforts, including those of the People's Liberation Army, set to dramatic music. The narrator's voice announces a political slogan advanced by the administration of President Hu Jintao, 'the Eight Desirables and Eight Undesirables', which concerns the dos and don'ts of 'correct' moral conduct.[23] For *Moral Conduct*, no sponsorship was indicated.

Knowledge and understanding of PSAs

Focus group results

In each focus group session the moderator asked participants what sorts of TV advertisements people had seen recently or found particularly enjoyable. Prior to any mention of public service advertisements by the moderator, three participants recalled PSAs they had seen in the past as commercials. One participant surnamed Wu in *Average Age*, a 38-year-old worker in a cosmetic company with a junior-high education, volunteered that she had seen an advertisement with the jingle 'one small step for love is one great step for moral growth'. Wu also recalled a second PSA that depicted a child on the beach playing with building blocks; the ad was accompanied by the slogan 'use labor to build a beautiful future'. One participant in *Advanced Education* who held a university degree, a 42-year-old teacher surnamed Zhu, said he liked a PSA he had seen three years before related to planting trees. These comments served as an initial indication that, at least for some participants, PSAs had left an impression, which was surprising in light of research suggesting the effects of campaign advertisements in the United States last only a week or two.[24] By comparison, most participants were critical of commercial advertisements, seeing them as disruptive, overly frequent, untrustworthy and oriented toward profits rather than public interest.

The moderator broached the topic of PSAs directly with the question: 'What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the words "public service advertisement"?'. Participants quickly recalled PSAs related to such topics as respect for the elderly, AIDS awareness, opposing corruption, promotion of the Beijing Olympics, improvement of moral standards, avoidance of littering and smoking, proper disposal of garbage, and water and energy conservation. Two participants even mentioned a PSA featuring the actor Pu Cunxi concerning the merits of PSAs as a 'bright lantern' (*yizhan deng* 一盏灯) to shed light on matters of concern for society.

[23]The eight moral points, assumed to be understood by viewers of the PSA, are: (1) love the motherland, don't harm it; (2) serve, don't disserve the people; (3) uphold science, don't be ignorant and unenlightened; (4) work hard, don't be lazy; (5) be united and help each other, don't benefit at the expense of others; (6) be honest, not profit-mongering; (7) be disciplined and law-abiding, not chaotic and lawless; and (8) know plain living and hard struggle, do not wallow in luxury. The translation by Bill Sharp (2006) is available at: http://csimpson80.com/new_page_711.htm (accessed 9 July 2015).

[24]Alan S. Gerber, James G. Gimpel, Donald P. Green and Daron R. Shaw, 'How large and long-lasting are the persuasive effects of televised campaign ads? Results from a randomized field experiment', *American Political Science Review* 105(1), (2011), pp. 135–150.

Many participants asserted that PSAs were infrequent, 'too few' or too brief, seldom repetitive, 'believable' or '100% believable', and largely 'healthy'. One participant in *Average Education*, a 39-year-old accountant named Wang, said he tried to watch PSAs completely when they aired, as 'PSAs are primarily directed toward talking about and solving social problems'.

Statistical results

As was true for the focus group participants, the overwhelming majority of Chinese urban residents had been exposed to the concept of a PSA. To consider exposure to PSAs, a question was asked to determine whether the respondent had heard about PSAs. Since the previous survey question asked about television advertising, respondents were primed to think about television PSAs. In the sample, 88.5% had heard about PSAs, 11.5% had not. Since multivariate probit maximum likelihood regression analysis was employed, it is helpful to compare the respective impact of these variables when holding all other control variables constant at the mean or mode. Likelihoods were calculated for respondents with a local *hukou*, not being a CCP member, not working at a state unit, being average in terms of family income, and living in a city (*fushengjishi* 副省级市) with an average size and GDP-level. For an 'average' Chinese urban resident, exposure and education increases a person's likelihood to have heard about PSAs before, while age decreases it. With respect to these three independent variables, curvilinear relationships were detected, whereby the relationship is reduced at higher levels of exposure to commercials, education and age, which became more and less pronounced depending on gender. Detailed statistical results are presented in Table 1.

When distinguishing between men and women, this study identified significantly different relationships among these variables, depending on the gender of the respondent. The figures below display the relationship between exposure, education and age within two standard deviations from the sample mean (displayed in the middle of the x-axis). As shown in Figure 1, women tend to be less affected by PSAs at lower levels of exposure than men, but men tend to be slightly more resistant to PSAs at high levels of exposure compared to women.

In terms of education, women tend to be less likely than men to have heard of PSAs at low levels of education, but at high levels of education gender differences become insignificant (see Figure 2 and Table 1).

With respect to age, young women tend to be significantly less likely to have heard about PSAs compared to young men, but this gender gap is reduced with age, resulting even in a greater likelihood among women to have been exposed to the concept in their late fifties (see Figure 3 and Table 1).

The broadcasting of television PSAs greatly contributes to urban residents' exposure to the concept of PSAs, but the impact of exposure differs depending on a person's education, age and gender.

As noted above, interviews with PSA producers and officials suggested that PSAs are directed toward a general audience; survey data confirm that most urban Chinese are acquainted with the concept of PSAs. Yet how do people of different backgrounds perceive or interpret PSAs relative to commercial advertising? Are Chinese supportive of this type of government-backed communication, and what do people think of propaganda? To help answer these questions, it is helpful to consider findings emerging from the focus groups.

Support for PSAs vs. commercial advertisements

Focus group results

Following a discussion about public service advertising, the moderator was instructed to show each group the PSAs mentioned above concerning nationalism, water conservation, opposition to corruption and the improvement of moral conduct. Each PSA was then discussed at length in conversations that revealed strong dislike for commercial advertisements, especially relative to the favorable view many held of PSAs. Commercial ads were seen as disruptive, overly frequent, untrustworthy and oriented

Table 1. Multivariate probit regression analysis on having heard about PSAs.

	Dependent variable: **Having heard about PSAs** (dummy variable)		
	Coefficient (s.d.)		
Independent variables:	*Among all respondents*	*Women*	*Men*
Exposure to commercials	1.432***	1.232***	1.625***
	(0.25)	(0.364)	(0.347)
Exposure to commercials squared	−1.060***	−0.747*	−1.369***
	(0.271)	(0.392)	(0.38)
Educational degree	1.108***	1.176***	1.047***
	(0.162)	(0.228)	(0.231)
Age	−0.203**	−0.075	−0.330**
	(0.093)	(0.131)	(0.132)
Female	−0.089**	–	–
	(0.044)		
Non-local *hukou*	−0.223***	−0.189**	−0.249***
	(0.062)	(0.087)	(0.087)
CCP member	0.059	0.109	0.045
	(0.095)	(0.154)	(0.121)
Work at state unit	0.204	0.473	0.03
	(0.214)	(0.349)	(0.279)
Family income	−0.02	−0.074	0.076
	(0.168)	(0.23)	(0.247)
Size of city	0.055	−0.024	0.164
	(0.177)	(0.243)	(0.261)
Municipality	−0.009	−0.034	0.022
	(0.129)	(0.177)	(0.19)
Prefecture-level city	0.096*	0.031	0.166**
	(0.055)	(0.076)	(0.08)
Autonomous region	0.125	0.123	0.127
	(0.083)	(0.111)	(0.125)
GDP of province, autonomous regions or municipality	0.142	0.115	0.149
	(0.122)	(0.163)	(0.188)
Constant	0.569***	0.497***	0.527***
	(0.136)	(0.188)	(0.193)
N	6,103	3,156	2,947
Pseudo R^2	0.04	0.04	0.05

z-value.
***$z<0.01$.
**$z<0.05$.
*$z<0.1$.

toward profits, rather than public interest. PSAs, by comparison, were seen as positive, except by a small number of participants, many of them highly educated, who believed they could be unacceptable, one-sided or were directed toward increasing popular support for the political regime.

One participant in *Average Education*, Wang, a 38-year-old accountant from Jiangxi Province with a vocational high-school degree, said he tried to watch PSAs in their entirety when they aired. 'PSAs are primarily directed toward talking about and solving social problems', he noted. When asked to compare PSAs and commercial ads, Wang said the former do not contain as much 'crazy commercial stuff'. Four participants in *Average Education* noted that PSAs 'are always well done' or that 'they are really good'.

Approval of the anti-corruption PSA, which respondents were led to believe was sponsored by four central-level institutions, was high among members of all four groups. Wang, the 38-year-old accountant in *Average Education* said, 'This is a good thing'. In *Average Age*, 40-year-old Liu, who has a university education, concurred: 'This is pretty good. If broadcast on television I think it would have a pretty good effect'. He even exclaimed that the anti-corruption would have been better if the bureaucrat had been executed! Thirty-nine-year-old Zhang, a woman from Liaoning Province with an M.A. degree in government, who in an earlier comment had suggested that everyone rejects traditionally dogmatic forms of party propaganda, remarked 'I think this is acceptable'. The 40-year-old Yang in *Average Age*,

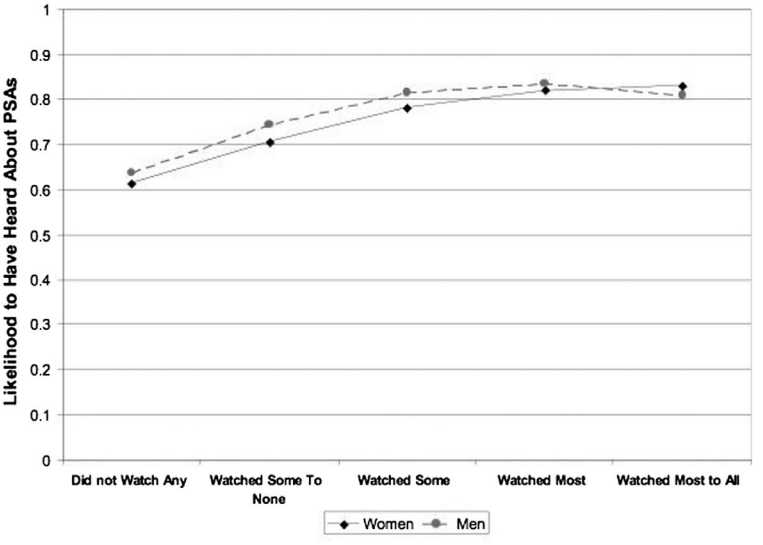

Figure 1. Marginal effect of exposure among women and men.

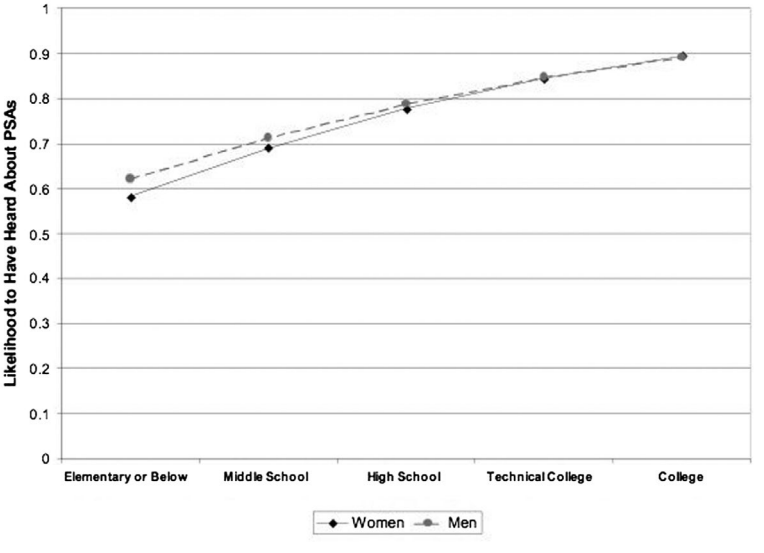

Figure 2. Marginal effect of education among women and men.

a man with a junior-high education, made his group burst out laughing with the comment: 'corrupt officials attract the people's hatred'. In *Lower Educated Women*, 38-year-old Li noted with dismay, 'in our society there are now many leaders who are like this'.

The fourth ad pertaining to Hu Jintao's slogan 'the Eight Desirables and Eight Undesirables' was by far the least popular PSA. In contrast to the three other PSAs this format relied less on common marketing techniques, but used 'traditional' forms of propaganda in which images and slogans are displayed rather than developing a plot. It appeared that the negative responses resulted, in part, from the ad's portrayal of a complex and ideological message through a rapid sequence of images intended to evoke a sense of heroism. In *Average Age*, Zhang, a male professor of political science at Peking University, and Liu, the

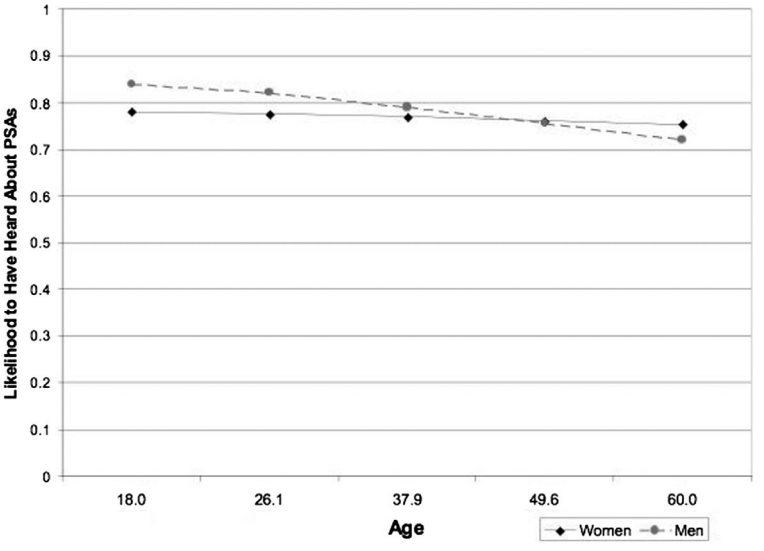

Figure 3. Marginal effect of age among women and men.

college-educated teacher, said they 'certainly wouldn't be able to remember [the PSA]'. Hu, an engineer from Jiangxi Province educated at a technical college (*dazhuan* 大专), said the 'train of thought was too disorganized'. Ms Zhang, a 39-year-old from Liaoning Province with an M.A. in political psychology said, 'the logic was just too confused'.[25]

Favorable views of 'the Eight Desirables and Eight Undesirables' PSA were expressed in *Lower Educated Women*. Yang, a high-school-educated, 36-year-old from Beijing, said 'the ad concerns a good aspiration … no matter who brings up the "Eight Desirables and Eight Undesirables" she has a better aspiration that she hopes everyone can achieve'. Gu, a junior-high-educated 43-year-old hotel employee from Shaanxi Province, said the PSA: 'Tells you … what is correct and what is incorrect, what is good and what should not be done'. Zhou, a 37-year-old from Hebei Province with a junior-high-school education, remarked 'This is pretty good. It educates people and makes them have this consciousness'. Members of *Advanced Education* cautioned, however, that living up to the high standards of the Eight Desirables and Eight Undesirables would be difficult or even impossible. Overall, focus group participants evaluated PSAs more positively than commercial ads, though support for certain PSAs depended in part on their style and the gender and education level of viewers. PSAs featuring a plot (as opposed to dramatic images) were uniformly popular among different socio-demographic groups.

Statistical results

Survey results also indicated a high level of public support for PSAs. To aid in the assessment of support for public service advertising, PSAs were compared with commercial advertising, as was the case in the focus groups. Respondents were asked whether they fully agreed, somewhat agreed, agreed, somewhat disagreed or completely disagreed with the following statements: first, 'I wish television stations would broadcast fewer commercial advertisements'; and second, 'I wish television stations would broadcast fewer public service advertisements'. Survey respondents agreed, on average, that television stations should broadcast fewer commercial ads, but the same was not true for PSAs: on

[25]Readers may recall that 'the Eight Desirables and Eight Undesirables' PSA did not clearly indicate that it had been sponsored by party-state bodies, although responses suggested that viewers assumed this was the case because of the overtly political nature of the PSA's content.

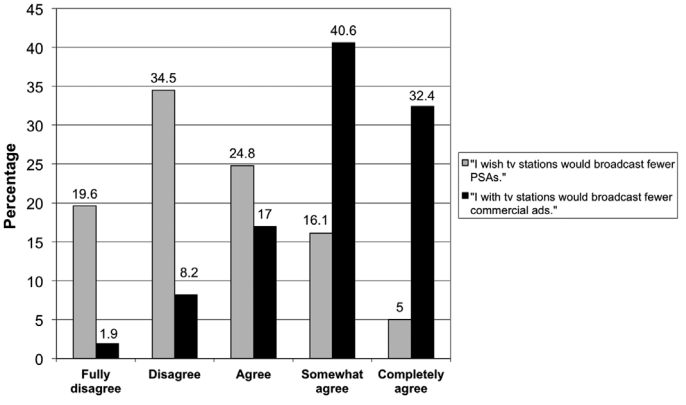

Figure 4. Support for PSAs in comparison to commercial advertisements.

average people somewhat disagreed that fewer PSAs should be broadcast on TV.[26] As shown in Figure 4, responses regarding broadcasting of commercials formed almost the mirror image of responses regarding broadcasting PSAs.

Support for state sponsorship of PSAs

Focus group results

As explained earlier, public service advertisements are funded by a number of state and corporate actors. To tap into people's attitudes towards state-sponsorship of propaganda, the moderator initiated a discussion about sponsorship of the PSAs. Some people were troubled that a major corporation was shown as the sponsor of *Conservation*. In *Average Education*, Wang, a 38-year-old accountant with a high-school education said, 'This gives you the feeling that it is a commercial advertisement. Why does the [company] name have to appear here?'. Du, a retired carpenter with a high-school education replied, 'This is excusable. The name appears because [the company] donated financial support for the [ad]'. Wang continued to protest, arguing that the appearance of the company name 'erased' the effectiveness of the ad. Chen, a 29-year-old computer programmer from Hubei Province with a junior-high education agreed, 'You have a good feeling during the first half of the ad but in the second half all of the good feeling disappears'. Liu, the 39-year-old college-educated teacher retorted, 'That is a commercial ad!'. Other participants in *Average Education,* however, asserted that *Conservation* was a PSA that had been sponsored by a company. On the whole, reactions to corporate sponsorship of *Conservation* suggested that many people believe strongly that it is the role of the government, but not corporations, to produce PSAs.

Statistical results

People were especially supportive of PSAs if they thought that state or party units had been the primary sponsors. To assess the variable *PSA support*, the responses that favored commercials were subtracted from those that favored PSAs, coded such that higher numbers represent greater support for PSA broadcasting in comparison to commercial advertisements and lower numbers less support for PSAs in comparison to commercial advertisements. The scale ran from –4 to +4. Since this variable is a continuous variable, we employ multivariate OLS regression analysis to analyze the relationship between

[26]Support for commercial ads was, on average, equal to 2.06 (s.d.=0.99); support for PSAs was, on average, equal to 3.47 (s.d.=1.12); each variable included five categories (1–5), whereby higher numbers represented greater support.

Table 2. Multivariate OLS regression analysis on PSA support.[a]

	Dependent variable: **PSA support**
	Coefficient (s.d.)
Independent variables:	*Among all respondents*
Accurate source perception	0.529***
	(0.075)
Perception of Party and state units as source	0.722***
	(0.078)
Perception of TV as source	0.147**
	(0.06)
Perception of NGOs as source	0.515***
	(0.06)
Perception of corporations as source	−0.119
	(0.09)1
Constant	1.393***
	(0.125)
N	5,976
R^2	0.05

[a]Controlling for exposure to commercials, education, age, gender, non-local *hukou*, CCP member, work at state unit, family income, size of city, municipality, prefecture level city, municipality, autonomus region, Gross Regional Product. To facilitate interpretation of the intercept, independent and control variables were coded to run from zero to one.

p-value.

***$p<0.01$.

**$p<0.05$.

*$p<0.1$.

support for PSAs and the belief that PSAs are initiated by party and state units, NGOs, TV stations or corporations.

In the survey *perceptions of the source* of PSAs were evaluated by asking respondents 'in your opinion, which organization (*jigou* 机构) initiates the production of television PSAs?'. Respondents were given the choices of television stations, commercial enterprises, party and state units, and social organizations (*shehui gongyi zuzhi* 社会公益组织); interviewers were instructed to record answers by respondents which did not clearly fit into any of these categories. Besides perceptions of state-involvement, the study tracked responses indicating that initiation of PSA production was not limited to just one type of institution, as this reflects the usual circumstances in which multiple institutions work together to produce PSAs (*Accurate source perception*). In China, all work units have the right to initiate PSAs: party and state units, television stations, social organizations and even corporations have initiated the production of PSAs.[27] Dummy variables were created for each of these response categories. The baseline for comparison or value zero among the above dummy variables is the perception that all four types of work units collaborate in the production of PSAs.

As shown in Table 2, if people consider PSAs to be more closely related to the party-state, they become more supportive of PSAs. Respondents were the most supportive when believing that PSAs are initiated by party or state units, followed by social organizations and TV stations. Those who have accurate knowledge of PSA sources are roughly as supportive as those who believe social organizations constitute the main source behind PSAs.

Most people do care which organizations make PSAs, even if they don't always understand the relationship between corporate, state and media actors involved in PSA production. According to our survey data, only a minority of 23.7% reported that it did not matter to them which organization initiated PSAs. As shown in Figure 5, about 21% of those who saw corporations as the initiator of PSAs were not supportive. By comparison, only 4.7% of those who believed that party or state units initiated PSAs did not to support this.

[27]Stockmann, 'Greasing the reels', pp. 863–864.

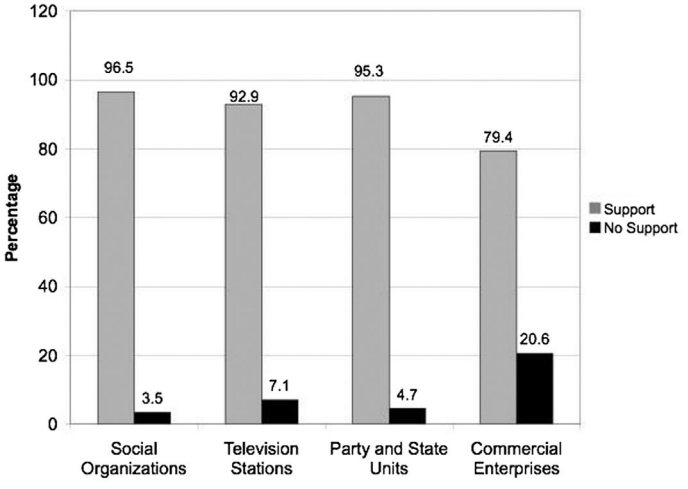

Figure 5. Evaluation of perceived source of PSAs (among those who care about PSA sources).

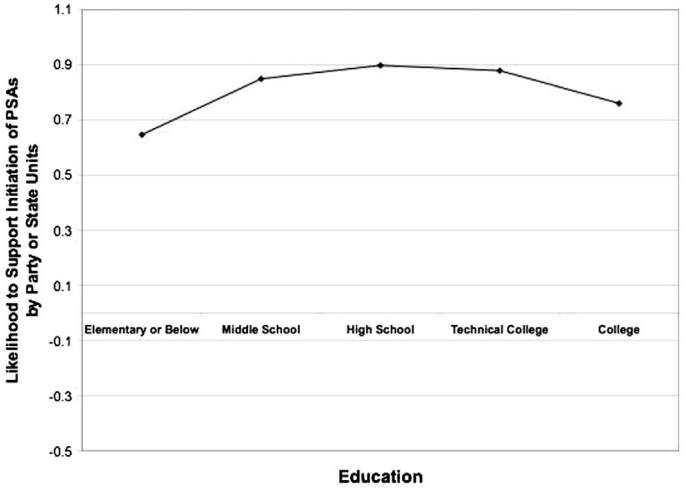

Figure 6. Marginal effect of education on support for initiation by Party or state unit (among those who care about PSA sources).

Who is particularly supportive of state initiation of PSAs? Here differences in terms of age and education were detected among respondents. Multivariate probit maximum likelihood regression was utilized on three dummy variables, indicating support for party and state units, corporations or TV stations as initiators of PSAs. Control variables were consistent with the previous statistical analysis. For ease of interpretation, the calculation of the likelihoods for 'average' urban residents in the sample are depicted in Figures 6 and 7. Each of these figures shows the marginal effect of the independent variable and support for initiation by a specific source, whereby the x-axis displays changes in the independent variable within a distance of two standard deviations from the sample mean (in the middle of the x-axis). Detailed statistical results are displayed in Table 3.

Results show that those average urban residents with junior-high, high-school and technical college education were somewhat more likely than those with only elementary or college education to support the Party-state as a source of PSAs. People who only attended elementary school were about 25% less

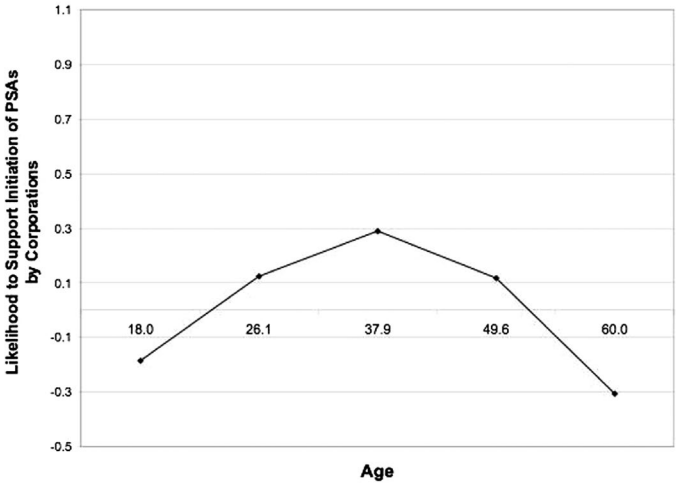

Figure 7. Marginal effect of age on support for initiation by corporations (among those who care about PSA sources).

Table 3. Multivariate Probit Regression Analysis on Support for Initiation of PSAs by the Party-State, Corporations, and TV Stations (among those who care about PSA sources).[a]

	Dependent variable: **Support of initiation by Party or state units** (dummy variable)	Dependent variable: **Support of initiation by corporations** (dummy variable)	Dependent variable: **Support of initiation by TV stations** (dummy variable)
	Coefficient (s.d.)	Coefficient (s.d.)	Coefficient (s.d.)
Educational degree	**3.774***	−4.202	−1.126
	(2.157)	(2.881)	(1.319)
Educational degree squared	**−4.619***	3.805	0.404
	(2.419)	(3.303)	(1.521)
Age	2.434	**2.720***	**1.411***
	(1.551)	(1.445)	(0.783)
Age squared	−2.271	**−2.903****	**−1.848****
	(1.561)	(1.391)	(0.731)
Constant	1.190*	1.146	1.436***
	(0.718)	(0.772)	(0.423)
N	481	269	1,275
Pseudo R^2	0.11	0.16	0.07

[a]Controlling for exposure to commercials, education, age, gender, non-local *hukou*, CCP member, work at state unit, family income, size of city, municipality, prefecture level city, municipality, autonomus region, Gross Regional Product. To facilitate interpretation of the intercept, all independent and control variables were coded to run from zero to one, such that higher values indicate higher levels of exposure, education, age and being female.

z-value.

***$z<0.01$.

**$z<0.05$.

*$z<0.1$.

likely than those who attended high school to be supportive; college graduates were about 14% less likely to express support. Here survey results provide evidence for a curvilinear relationship between education and support for state initiation of PSAs, which was not captured in focus groups, due to their comparatively small number of observations.[28]

[28]In regression analysis the *R*-square is dependent on the total variation in the sample. See, for example, Christopher H. Achen, *Interpreting and Using Regression* (Newbury, CA: Sage Publications, 1982), pp. 58–61. *R*-squares in regression analysis of Chinese public opinion survey data are usually low, because the underlying variation of public opinion in China is large.

In contrast to support for state initiation, where education plays a key role, support for involvement of private enterprises in the production of PSAs differs strongly by age. People in their thirties, who were born in the 1970s and socialized during the 1980s, are more supportive of the involvement of corporations in PSA production than earlier or later generations. An 18-year-old is 60% less likely to be supportive and a 60-year-old 48% less likely, when compared to a 38-year-old. The causes of variation in support for the involvement of commercial enterprises in PSA production may be related to which demographics have benefited more from China's embrace of market economics. People who grew to adulthood during the early years of reform have on average benefited more financially from China's embrace of capitalism; therefore, they tend to be more supportive of market forces and corporate backing for PSAs. Older Chinese, by comparison, are less likely to be 'big winners', financially speaking, and may remember with nostalgia the egalitarian, anti-capitalist Maoist culture of their youth. Chinese younger than their mid-thirties are less likely to have achieved middle-class wealth and lifestyles. They grew up during a period when the social and environmental problems accompanying the reforms became more readily apparent and thus are wary of PSAs initiated by commercial enterprises.

PSAs as propaganda

People were generally supportive of PSAs even when prompted to think about PSAs as a form of propaganda. After discussing each ad, the moderator asked participants what they saw as the relationship between PSAs and propaganda. During the discussion this question seemed natural because, without prompting, participants mentioned propaganda, related PSAs to propaganda, and sometimes suggested that PSAs were a form of propaganda. On the main, people with below-average or average education, especially participants in *Lower Educated Women*, struggled when asked to consider propaganda as a concept and to compare it to PSAs. The responses of people with university or post-graduate educations were more helpful for understanding the similarities and differences between propaganda and PSAs.

University-educated Zhen, a 41-year-old information technology specialist in *Advanced Education*, said 'the ultimate aim (of PSAs) is the same as propaganda but the method is different'. Zhen saw propaganda as a governmental means of using laws and social pressure to control the actions of citizens. For him, propaganda is a broader concept whereas PSAs 'educate people to learn to love and learn to care about their environment and the personal relationships in their own lives. The point of departure of (propaganda and PSAs) is different'. The Ph.D. candidate, Meng, responded to Zhen's comment with the sardonic remark, 'Of course it seems as if their purpose is the same'. Several *Advanced Education* participants chimed in that they shared the latter view, including 41-year-old He, a university-educated engineer who said, 'PSAs are indistinguishable from propaganda'. Ms Zhang, with the M.A. in government, offered a slightly different view noting that propaganda differed from PSAs in the sense that *xuanchuan* (宣传) connoted a forceful style of communication that was unidirectional, designed to change behavior, and intended to tap into an individual's desires.

Most participants who addressed the relationship between propaganda and PSAs found the two to be similar in terms of the underlying objectives. PSAs were seen as performing an advisory role, but a role that was useful for raising moral standards and addressing important social and political problems. Many expected the state to engage in propaganda work as part of good governance. PSAs thus represent a useful innovation by the government to guide public opinion in a polity where ideological conformity is no longer mandatory, but where heightened public awareness of issues—such as the need to love the country, conserve resources or fight corruption—is seen by the regime as beneficial to the body politic.

Discussion

A major challenge in studying propaganda in China and in other authoritarian regimes is the possibility that citizens may not reveal their true political attitudes for fear of repercussions from the Party-state.

This study employed a relatively uncontroversial topic that Chinese regularly encounter while watching television in order to learn about their understandings of propaganda. The production of PSAs, which is associated with the state, corporate, media and other societal actors, provided a unique opportunity to tap into people's perceptions of state-initiated propaganda as well as public attitudes that contribute to state power.

While details concerning the process of PSA production are unclear to most TV viewers, with only a small minority possessing an accurate understanding of the forces behind the initiation, sponsorship and broadcast of PSAs on television, most urban Chinese are familiar with PSAs and supportive of them. Decades of CCP rule appear to have normalized citizen expectations that the state is responsible for educating and guiding the public via propaganda. PSAs pertaining to problems that the public sees as important, such as combating corruption or promoting water conservation, are viewed as worthwhile attempts to heighten awareness of major problems facing society.

Focus groups indicated that some people disliked the style of propaganda associated with the Mao era; however, most enjoyed the funny, creative and 'modern' style that is typical for PSAs, and favored state involvement in production. These results are consistent with research on persuasion in China, which has demonstrated that urban audiences are particularly receptive to state messages delivered with a commercial spin.[29] In contrast to existing studies, which focused on messages that influenced public opinion, we were able to learn about people's views of state involvement in propaganda and interpretations of propaganda.

Exposure to PSAs and perceptions of PSAs varied by age, gender and education. For both men and women, advancing age was associated with greater exposure to PSAs, with women in their late fifties more likely to know about this form of communication than men. Women who were aware of PSAs were also more likely to watch them than men. Although women with lower education levels had less knowledge of PSAs, this gender gap disappeared at higher education levels.

Like television viewers in the United States and elsewhere, most Chinese do not enjoy watching commercial advertisements. Yet the extent to which people had a positive view of PSAs was surprising, although education levels did influence how people appraised and interpreted PSAs. Participants in *Advanced Education* were the most critical of the *Moral Conduct* ad associated with Hu Jintao's slogan 'Eight Desirables and Eight Undesirables'. *Lower Educated Women* voiced the most supportive views, suggesting that participants believed they could improve themselves from the moral guidance associated with the slogan.

Chinese not only approve of PSA messaging, they support state sponsorship and disapprove of corporate involvement. The most supportive demographics included people with average, or just below average, education levels, with the lowest level of support from the college educated. For most people, PSAs are propaganda or they are believed to exercise a similar function: to remind citizens (and officials) to ameliorate social or political problems and to strengthen national unity. Participants in *Advanced Education* were capable of thinking critically and analytically about propaganda and its purposes, but it was clear that higher education was not equivalent to disapproval of state propaganda.

Taken together, these findings suggest that a broad subset of Chinese society readily cedes an outsized role to the government in propaganda work. The view that the Party-state, rather than citizens, civil society organizations or corporations should guide public opinion indicates considerable trust in government and provides a foundation for continued state dominance of communication that is designed to shore up attitudes conducive to political stability. An outsized role for the state in guiding public opinion is not intrinsically incompatible with demands for media freedom. In many longstanding democracies, for example, influential state messaging coexists with persuasive communication

[29]Kennedy, 'Maintaining popular support for the Chinese Communist Party'; Stockmann, 'Who believes propaganda?'; Daniela Stockmann and Mary E. Gallagher, 'Remote control: how the media sustains authoritarian rule in China', *Comparative Political Studies* 44(4), (2011), pp. 436–467; Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China*.

by individuals and social groups. Yet in China dissenting voices are routinely suppressed. The official line of the state is broadcast more widely than opposing perspectives, with the effect of reducing the agenda-setting function of dissent and diminishing the opportunities for the public to consider the merits of political reform or regime change.[30]

Popular support for state involvement in propaganda does not equate to unqualified support for the government. That many Chinese support *xuanchuan* seems to reflect the belief that central-level state leaders and the institutions they oversee, rather than market forces, remain best equipped to handle the country's many economic, social and political problems. Yet the public's expectations for the government to address its concerns, a view reinforced by PSAs, could prove to be a weakness should the state fail to deliver the public goods that Chinese desire.[31] Guiding public opinion, while meeting the needs of an increasingly pluralistic society, remain among the foremost challenges for CCP governance in contemporary China.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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[30] James W. Tong, 'Publish to perish: regime choices and propaganda impact in the anti-Falungong publications campaign, July 1999–April 2000', *Journal of Contemporary China* 14(44), (2005), p. 523; Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China*.

[31] Thanks to Maria Repnikova for this insightful comment.