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Cross-ideological acceptance of the illiberal narrative of the 2019 Hong Kong protests in Japan: aversion to protests as a key facilitator

Tetsuro Kobayashi[a], Fujio Toriumi[b], Mitsuo Yoshida[c] and Takeshi Sakaki[d]

[a]School of Political Science and Economics, Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan; [b]School of Engineering, University of Tokyo, Tokyo, Japan; [c]Institute of Business Sciences, University of Tsukuba, Tokyo, Japan; [d]Institute for Future Initiatives, University of Tokyo, Tokyo, Japan

ABSTARCT

In its pursuit of greater global discursive power, China aims to counter criticisms by Western democracies by promoting illiberal narratives favourable to its regime on international social media platforms. Although research has explored the nature of these narratives and their propagators, little is known about which segments of the population in democratic countries are most receptive to them. This study examined China's international propaganda by demonstrating that the narrative, that the 2019 Hong Kong protests were riots instigated by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), was accepted and disseminated by both the left and right wings within Japan's Twitter space. In addition, a survey experiment revealed that aversion to political protests in Japan led typically China-critical rightists to accept this narrative. Contrary to arguments that participatory propaganda aims to sow discord in democracies, this research suggests that such influence operations can garner support across ideological divides.

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Introduction

Amidst global democratic backsliding and a rise of authoritarianism, sharp power projected from authoritarian states to democratic nations has garnered scholarly attention. Sharp power is defined as the covert and overt exertion of influence aimed at widening divisions within democratic societies and cultivating favourable public opinion towards authoritarian regimes, primarily through various forms of propaganda and public diplomacy strategies (Walker, 2018). Specifically, under Xi Jinping's leadership, China launched the 'Going Global' campaign in 2017, utilizing sharp power to pursue discourse control and shape international opinion in favour of its interests.

CONTACT Tetsuro Kobayashi tkobayas@waseda.jp
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Central to China's international propaganda efforts on social media has been the dissemination of narratives supportive of the Communist regime. Particularly since 2019, as economic and military tensions between China and Western democracies have become more apparent, China has countered narratives disadvantageous to it that dominate in Western democracies, and promoted narratives favourable to the Chinese Communist Party on global social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (DiResta et al., 2020). Examples include narratives concerning human rights abuses against Muslim minorities in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (Doublethink Lab, 2023a), erosion of political freedoms in Hong Kong due to the 2020 National Security Law implementation (Doublethink Lab, 2023b), and narratives surrounding the coronavirus and pandemic (Lemus-Delgado, 2022). What is common across these efforts is both an aggressive rebuttal of dominant Western discourses (Sullivan & Wang, 2023) and dissemination of alternative illiberal narratives, aiming to construct an international opinion environment more favourable to China.

There is a growing body of knowledge about the contents of illiberal narratives propagated by China, as well as the disseminators of them. These include state-sponsored media, spokespersons for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and diplomats such as ambassadors and consuls general stationed in foreign embassies. However, the agents of propaganda on social media are not limited to conventional propagandists such as state-sponsored media or diplomats. Propagandists include the targeted countries' ordinary citizens, who disseminate it further to their 'friends' and followers, making participatory propaganda increasingly relevant.

Social media serves as a tool for broadcasting propaganda and enables its audience to engage through 'likes' and comments and further share content. In this context, the boundary between propagandists and their audience blurs, with ordinary citizens and astroturfing agents within the target countries becoming jointly involved in interpreting and disseminating narratives. Yet little is known about the participatory nature of international propaganda aimed at spreading narratives. Therefore, the research aim was to elucidate how narratives propagated by China are received and disseminated on social media in an East Asian democracy: Japan. Specifically, the study investigated how the narrative that the 2019 anti-government protests in Hong Kong were riots instigated by the United States (US) Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and National Endowment for Democracy (NED)—a narrative promoted both domestically and internationally by the Chinese and Hong Kong governments—spread among various segments of the Japanese public.

Narrative-based Chinese propaganda

China leverages both domestic propaganda and international public diplomacy to maintain regime stability and shape global perceptions (Schliebs et al., 2021). As tensions with Western countries, especially the US, have increased, China has intensified its global social media campaigns to gain support for its policies. China's strategy includes 'wolf warrior diplomacy', through which diplomats aggressively critique Western governments and use non-Chinese languages on platforms such as Twitter to 'tell China's stories well' (Huang & Wang, 2019).

In China's international public diplomacy, global social media platforms have become essential for spreading narratives. Since 2019, Chinese diplomats and state-sponsored media have increasingly established Twitter accounts, initiating the spread of narratives on global platforms (DiResta et al., 2020; Schliebs et al., 2021). Narrative dissemination on social media intensified after the 2020 pandemic, as China faced criticism for initially concealing the coronavirus outbreak. To counteract this, China spread narratives highlighting its aid to developing countries and the superiority of its authoritarian regime through stringent lockdowns and widespread viral testing, while simultaneously deflecting blame by insinuating that the virus might have originated in the US (Lemus-Delgado, 2022).

Even if China's narrative strategies do not massively persuade the citizens of democratic nations, they are sufficiently effective if they challenge the dominant narratives and sow seeds of doubt among those citizens. While there are limits to China's strategic narratives within what remains the predominantly US-dominated international discourse (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2021), establishing a supportive segment among some citizens of democratic nations can still create divisions in public opinion regarding international issues and political regimes.

Participatory nature of Chinese narrative propagation

The studies reviewed above primarily analysed top-down public diplomacy deployed by actors directly associated with the Chinese government, such as state-sponsored media and diplomats, with few interactions with others (Huang & Wang, 2021). However, recent propaganda efforts by authoritarian states, both domestic and international, are increasingly characterized as *participatory propaganda*, in which state-supervised propagandists and the propaganda audience collaborate to spread narratives (Asmolov, 2019; Repnikova & Fang, 2018; Starbird et al., 2019; Wanless & Berk, 2021).

Participatory propaganda is defined as 'the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour of a target audience while seeking to co-opt its members to actively engage in the spread of persuasive communications, to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist' (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2015, p. 7). Before the advent of social media, it was difficult for audiences to broadcast the propaganda they received through traditional media such as television and print. With social media platforms, it is now possible to broadcast, receive, respond to, and share propaganda all within the same platform. This has enabled the transformation of propaganda audiences into voluntary active disseminators. Moreover, when the general audience shares propaganda narratives, the information flowing from known people or 'friends' is considered more credible, potentially making it more persuasive than messages received directly from state-affiliated accounts. This can further the strategic objective of deepening divisions within the targeted country. Thus, participatory propaganda, in which parts of the target audience become active contributors in propaganda, co-creating frames and narratives with propagandists, is a crucial form of narrative-based public diplomacy in the age of social media.

However, empirical studies on participatory propaganda remain scarce. As noted above, research on social media propaganda has primarily focused on analysing

narratives disseminated by state-affiliated actors from countries such as China and Russia, with limited attention to the participation of target audiences in democratic countries. To address this literature gap, this study examined how China's illiberal narratives are being disseminated by Twitter users in Japan, using the large-scale anti-government protests in Hong Kong in 2019 as a case study. On one hand, Japan has not been a primary target of digital influence efforts by authoritarian states due to linguistic barriers and low online political engagement, making it a challenging case for observing participatory propaganda. On the other hand, Japan's cultural proximity to China may increase its citizens' receptiveness to Chinese propaganda (Min & Luqiu, 2021). Evidence of participatory propaganda in Japan would suggest its likely presence in other countries with similar characteristics.

Competing narratives surrounding the 2019 Hong Kong protests

The two divergent narratives that have emerged from the discourse surrounding the interpretation of the 2019 Hong Kong protests are inherently irreconcilable. One aligns with the predominant perspective prevalent in Western liberal democracies, depicting the anti-government protests in Hong Kong as a spontaneous uprising of its citizens amidst increasing influence from the Chinese government and characterized by their demands for freedom and democracy. The other narrative, advanced by the Chinese government and the Hong Kong administration, portrays the protests as riots incited through clandestine intervention and instigation by entities such as the US CIA and NED, under the guise of promoting democracy (Yang, 2023). The latter illiberal narrative is of particular significance herein.

The Chinese government has long been cautious of regime changes driven by Western democracies, particularly the US. China views events like the 2011 Arab Spring and the 2013 Maidan Revolution as examples of US support for anti-establishment groups to install pro-US governments (Colley & Moore, 2023). This perspective has been applied to the 2019 Hong Kong protests, with claims of financial and material support from entities like the CIA and NED (e.g. Lamb, 2019).[1] These concerns led to enacting the Hong Kong National Security Law in 2020 and implementing Article 23 of the Basic Law in 2024. Doublethink Lab (2023b) conducted an analysis of 5,704 Chinese-language tweets related to the Hong Kong protests posted by Chinese state-owned media accounts on Twitter from 2021 to 2022, revealing a consistent narrative aligned with the overarching theme 'From chaos, to stability, to prosperity'. In particular, the 'chaos narrative' portrays the Hong Kong protests as riots incited by outlaws and traitors acting as puppets of foreign powers conspiring to uphold Western hegemony.

Herein, we analysed the dissemination of the illiberal narrative, which asserts that the Hong Kong protests were riots supported by the CIA and NED, among individuals in the Japanese Twitter space. The study thus aimed to provide one of the earliest descriptions of proponents of international participatory propaganda. In Study 1, we investigated three key inquiries regarding pro-China narrative tweets in Japan:

RQ1: Who is disseminating (i.e. posting and sharing) pro-China narrative tweets?
RQ2: What is the content of pro-China narrative tweets?

RQ3: What segments of users are reached by pro-China narrative tweets?

Study 1

By analysing Japanese tweets, Study 1 aimed to elucidate the participatory nature of the dissemination and reach of the pro-China narrative asserting that the CIA and NED instigated the Hong Kong protests.

Data collection and network clustering

Data collection

We collected tweets containing the Japanese word for Hong Kong, '香港', and either 'CIA' or 'NED' using the Twitter Public API from 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2021 ($N = 52{,}401$). Because the Japanese and Chinese characters for Hong Kong are the same, this query may have included tweets in Chinese. Therefore, tweets with the language set to Chinese were excluded ($N = 6{,}221$). In addition, upon manual inspection of the collected tweets, a considerable number were found to relate to the former CIA employee Edward Snowden, who exposed US government surveillance activities and sought asylum in Russia after a stay in Hong Kong. Consequently, tweets containing 'Snowden' were excluded ($N = 789$). The final number of tweets analysed was 45,391. Because all of these tweets highlight an illiberal narrative linking the Hong Kong protests to the CIA or NED, the act of disseminating these messages by non-state actors qualifies as participatory propaganda. Furthermore, we collected the profile text and follower information of the accounts that posted or retweeted these 45,391 tweets. To conduct the reach analysis for RQ3, we also gathered all their followers' profile text and tweets.

Construction of tweet network

We constructed a tweet network following the methodology detailed by Uchida et al. (2019). Specifically, we first divided the collected tweets into monthly segments and identified the top 1,000 tweets that were retweeted at least 10 times per month. Next, the weight of the links was calculated based on the similarity between two tweets using the Simpson coefficient, defined as follows:

$$\mathrm{Simpson}(A,B) = |A \cap B| / \min\{|A|, |B|\},$$

where A and B refer to the sets of accounts that retweeted each tweet. In other words, the greater the overlap of accounts retweeting two tweets, the higher the weight of the link in the network. A tweet network was then constructed by connecting pairs of tweets with Simpson coefficients above 0.2.

Detection of clusters

To discover clusters of tweets within the network, we used the Louvain method—a community detection algorithm grounded in modularity that evaluates the connectivity

levels between clusters. By maximizing modularity, the Louvain method identifies clusters with strong internal connections. Specifically, it organizes the network by performing local optimizations and merging nodes that belong to the same community. After applying the Louvain method for clustering, we assembled monthly lists of Twitter accounts that retweeted tweets for each cluster. We then traced the clusters over successive months by treating clusters with high overlap in account lists between adjacent months as homogeneous and stable. Specifically, we defined the similarity between cluster $C_{M,p}$ in month M and cluster $C_{M+1,q}$ in month $M+1$ as:

$$\mathrm{sim}\left(C_{M,p}, C_{M+1,q}\right) = N(C_{M,p} \cap C_{M+1,q}) / N\left(C_{M+1,q}\right),$$

where $N(C)$ represents the number of accounts that retweeted tweets in cluster C at least once. Among all possible cluster pairings between consecutive months, if this similarity is the highest and exceeds 0.5, we consider the two clusters to be the same. This process was repeated until no further clusters could be merged, resulting in a total of 30 tweet clusters, each containing more than two tweets. However, most tweets (over 80%) were concentrated within the two largest clusters, which accounted for 60.8% of the total retweet count. Consequently, our analysis focused on these two primary clusters.

Measures

In the following analyses, we employ three metrics to examine disseminators (RQ1), content (RQ2), and reach (RQ3), respectively:

Term frequency-inverse document frequency of disseminators' profile texts

Term frequency-inverse document frequency (TF-IDF) indicates how 'distinctive' a particular word is within a document. In other words, words that appear frequently in one document but are less common in others are given a higher weight. We treated the profile texts of accounts that post or retweet tweets belonging to each cluster as text data and calculated their TF-IDF scores. Specifically, words that frequently appear in the profile texts of accounts disseminating tweets from a given cluster, but are less common in the profiles of accounts disseminating tweets from other clusters, were assigned higher values.

Term frequency-inverse document frequency of tweet content by cluster

The TF-IDF of tweet content by cluster assigns higher values to words that are frequently used within tweets in a specific cluster but are less common in tweets from other clusters.

Reach of tweets

To analyze the reach of pro-China narrative tweets, we categorized the accounts that (re)tweeted these narratives, along with all their followers, into four distinct categories: (1) Core accounts: highly active accounts that originally post tweets within a specific cluster or retweet them more than 10 times, (2) Neutral non-core accounts: accounts

that post or retweet pro-China narrative tweets but do not qualify as core accounts, (3) Non-core accounts uninterested in Hong Kong: accounts reached by posts or retweets from core accounts but that do not post or retweet pro-China narrative tweets themselves, and (4) Peripheral accounts: accounts reached by posts or retweets from neutral non-core accounts but that do not post or retweet pro-China narrative tweets themselves. From the perspective of the effectiveness of participatory propaganda, the extent to which it can reach peripheral accounts—those more open to persuasion—rather than core accounts that already hold strong opinions, is critical.

RQ1: who is disseminating (i.e. posting and sharing) pro-China narrative tweets?. A defining feature of participatory propaganda is the presence of numerous participants who share propaganda without necessarily posting original tweets. Therefore, identifying those who retweet pro-China narratives is crucial for dissecting participatory propaganda. To illustrate the characteristics of the disseminators, we identified feature words in profile texts with high TF-IDF scores (Table 1). Specifically, we excluded words that appeared less than 10 times across the entire corpus and those that appeared in 80% or more of the documents.

The words in the left column of Table 1 prominently feature elements associated with Japan's ideological left, while those in the right column feature elements associated with Japan's ideological right. Japanese ideology primarily centres around issues of national security and constitutional revision (Yamada, 2020). The left, traditionally adopting anti-war, anti-imperialist, and pro-Constitution positions, tends to hold a critical stance towards the global presence of the US military. Domestically, there is strong support among leftist activists and politicians for reducing or removing US military bases in Okinawa, reflecting broader anti-base sentiments. Some left segments also criticize globalization and oppose economic partnerships that promote it, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Further, with a strong emphasis on anti-nuclear and environmental protection, leftists have reinforced their anti-nuclear stance since

Table 1. Profile features characterizing accounts that retweet leftist and rightist clusters.

Rank	Leftist cluster	TF–IDF	Rightist cluster	TF–IDF
1	opposition	0.004	Prime Minister Abe	0.007
2	nuclear power plant	0.003	support	0.004
3	likes	0.002	likes	0.004
4	information	0.002	President Trump	0.003
5	nuclear power plant phase-out	0.002	follow	0.003
6	retweet	0.002	Love Live!	0.003
7	TPP	0.002	forgive	0.002
8	peace	0.002	silent	0.002
9	music	0.002	I love	0.002
10	consumption tax	0.001	follow us	0.002
11	Taro Yamamoto	0.001	conservative	0.002
12	now	0.001	PM Abe	0.002
13	war	0.001	abduction victims	0.002
14	Reiwa Shinsengumi	0.001	information	0.002
15	abolition	0.001	Indo-Pacific	0.002
16	society	0.001	animation	0.002
17	anti-nuclear	0.001	games	0.002
18	film	0.001	anti-Japanese	0.002
19	world	0.001	erotic games	0.002
20	people	0.001	solid	0.002

the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster. In addition, influenced by historical guilt over Japan's past aggression towards China and an affinity for socialism and communism in the latter half of the twentieth century, Japan's left tends to adopt a relatively anti-US and pro-China stance.[2]

By contrast, Japan's right wing emphasizes tradition and conservative values, ideologically supporting the strengthening of Japan's Self-Defense Forces and revision of Article 9 of the Constitution to enable greater military capabilities. Rightists generally maintain a strong alliance with the US, while often adopting a tough stance towards China and South Korea, particularly on issues of national security and territorial disputes. The conservative ruling party, the Liberal Democratic Party, strengthened its conservative orientation after its brief time as opposition during the early 2010s. This shift was marked by former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's openly critical stance towards liberal parties and media, which encouraged anti-liberal sentiment among conservative constituents. Because of Abe's popularity and his close relationship with former US President Donald Trump, conservatives in Japan hold a strong affinity for American conservatives while being critical of the American liberals who advocate for minority rights through social movements. Consequently, they do not exhibit a distinct preference for or against the US as a nation but rather demonstrate a cross-national critical stance towards liberalism.

In light of these ideological characteristics in Japan, the ideological affiliations of the two clusters in Table 1 become evident. The characteristic terms in the left column include many that represent left-wing positions, such as 'anti-nuclear power', 'nuclear power phase-out', the left-wing politician 'Taro Yamamoto,' 'TPP' (a contentious issue for the left), 'peace', and 'anti-war' sentiments. By contrast, the characteristic terms in the right column include keywords such as 'support' for the conservative politician 'Prime Minister Abe', 'conservative', as well as terms typical of right-wing accounts such as 'anti-Japanese', 'abduction [by North Korea] victims', and 'President Trump', which reflect the characteristics of Japan's ideological right. This result addresses RQ1, suggesting that pro-China illiberal narratives are being propagated through participatory propaganda by both the Japanese left and right.[3]

The numbers of original tweets, total retweets, and unique accounts that tweeted or retweeted within each cluster are presented in Table 2. The table highlights that the leftist cluster is more prevalent than the rightist cluster across all three indicators.

RQ2: content of pro-China narrative tweets. Given that pro-China narrative tweets are disseminated by both the leftists and the rightists in Japan, what characteristics does their content exhibit? Table 3 displays the TF-IDF of tweet content for the two detected clusters. Because TF-IDF highlights the characteristic terms present in tweets within each cluster, it reflects the distinctive features of the content in pro-China narrative tweets in each cluster.

Table 2. Summary of the two major clusters.

	Number of original tweets	Total number of retweets	Number of accounts that retweeted
Leftist cluster	312	7,047	2,129
Rightist cluster	93	3,117	1,105

Table 3. Characteristic terms in the tweet contents in the two primary clusters.

Rank	Leftist cluster	TF–IDF	Rightist cluster	TF–IDF
1	rioters	0.020	China	0.022
2	China	0.017	Hong Kong	0.020
3	Agnes Chow	0.014	protests	0.020
4	movement	0.012	control	0.015
5	the US	0.011	Xi Jinping	0.015
6	Wong	0.011	SEALDs	0.015
7	citizen	0.010	finance	0.013
8	America	0.010	jiayou	0.012
9	police	0.010	force	0.012
10	riot	0.009	support	0.011
11	Lai	0.009	funds	0.011
12	the US	0.008	Umbrella Movement	0.010
13	funds	0.008	what	0.010
14	command	0.008	Jiang Zemin	0.009
15	training	0.008	relationship	0.009
16	this	0.007	the US	0.009
17	Joshua	0.007	group	0.009
18	media	0.007	Democratic Party	0.008
19	it	0.007	the US	0.008
20	youth	0.007	international	0.008

Note: The US appears multiple times in a column because it is expressed in different ways.

The left column in Table 3 lists the feature words found in the tweets categorized under the leftist cluster. Notably, these tweets are characterized by referring to protesters as 'rioters' and highlighting names such as Joshua Wong, Agnes Chow, and Jimmy Lai to emphasize their alleged collaboration with the CIA or NED. This suggests that leftists are accepting narratives supportive of the Chinese or Hong Kong government, which portray the Hong Kong protests and prominent pro-democracy activists as being manipulated by US agencies such as the CIA or NED. By contrast, the feature words in tweets from the rightist cluster include references to the US Democratic Party, seen as a liberal stronghold, as well as SEALDs (the Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy). SEALDs was a student-led social movement active in opposing the Specially Designated Secrets Protection Law in Japan between 2015 and 2016. In addition, these tweets are marked by conspiracy theories, including references to the 'involvement of Jiang Zemin's faction' and various 'forces' competing for financial capital privileges.

To investigate these pro-China narratives disseminated by leftists and rightists, we manually inspected the tweets classified into the two clusters (see SI2 in the Supplementary Materials for sample tweets from each cluster). A careful review of these tweets revealed that the leftist cluster included narratives referencing past involvement by the CIA and NED in pro-democracy movements worldwide. For instance, one tweet stated, 'Western funds are involved in the Hong Kong movement. The US NED is inciting division between mainland China and Hong Kong. The NED has directed colour revolutions worldwide, aiming to overthrow regimes in non-aligned countries. […]' Additional narratives suggested that, due to its vested interests in Hong Kong, the US supports the protests through the CIA and NED to prevent China from expanding its influence in Hong Kong. For example, one tweet claimed, 'The Fugitive Offenders Ordinance included provisions related to finance, which would extend Xi Jinping's rule of law over Hong Kong if passed. Factions that do not want

to lose their interests in Hong Kong (e.g. Shanghai clique, international finance, US Democratic Party) conspired to support the protests through the NED'. Thus, the leftist cluster associates the history of the US's overt and covert interventions in toppling or destabilizing anti-US regimes worldwide with the Hong Kong protests, resonating with the narrative propagated by the Chinese and Hong Kong governments. This narrative suggests that the US is inciting the Hong Kong protests through the CIA and NED to secure its own interests.

By contrast, the rightist cluster exhibits a distinctive perspective linking the Hong Kong protests to liberal social movements in Japan. Notably, recurring narratives connect the Hong Kong protests with SEALDs (i.e. the Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy), which was active in opposing the Specially Designated Secrets Protection Law between 2015 and 2016. Connections between Hong Kong's pro-democracy activists—including those with Agnes Chow (who is fluent in Japanese and has interacted with SEALDs members in the past) and meetings between lawmakers from the liberal Constitutional Democratic Party and the Reiwa Shinsengumi—reinforce the perceived ties between the Hong Kong protests and Japan's liberal faction. Because the Japanese rightists tend to be hostile towards liberal social movements in Japan, they similarly display a negative attitude towards the Hong Kong protests, which they perceive as aligned with these movements.

In sum, consistent with the analysis of disseminators examined in RQ1, the content analysis of pro-China narrative tweets revealed a clear distinction between left-leaning and right-leaning perspectives. Left-leaning pro-China narrative tweets focus on the historical support provided by the CIA and NED to pro-democracy movements in the service of US national interests. From a critical standpoint, they argue that similar US interference is behind the Hong Kong protests. By contrast, right-leaning pro-China narrative tweets draw parallels between Hong Kong protests and liberal social movements in Japan, such as SEALDs, claiming that liberal forces they oppose—particularly the US Democratic Party and its perceived allies in the CIA and NED—are behind these movements.[4]

RQ3: what segments of users are reached by pro-China narrative tweets?. Next, using the metrics introduced in the *measures* section above, we analysed the types of Twitter users who are being reached by pro-China illiberal narratives. Specifically, we analysed five account categories to demonstrate the reach of the pro-China illiberal narratives concerning the Hong Kong protests (Table 4). Note that the core accounts are further divided into 'Leftist core accounts' and 'Rightist

Table 4. Proportion of reach by cluster.

	Leftist core accounts	Rightist core accounts	Neutral non-core accounts	Non-core accounts uninterested in Hong Kong	Peripheral accounts	Total
Leftist cluster	0.21%	0.08%	3.54%	77.99%	18.25%	100.08%
Rightist cluster	0.10%	0.14%	3.11%	64.96%	31.83%	100.14%

Note: Due to rounding errors and the overlap of 12 accounts between the "Leftist core accounts" and "Rightist core accounts," the totals do not add up to exactly 100%. See footnote 5.

core accounts', increasing the total number of categories to five.[5] These five categories encompass the accounts that tweeted or retweeted leftist or rightist content, along with all of their follower accounts.

Table 4 presents the proportions of these five categories after excluding redundancy. Tweets from the leftist cluster were more likely to reach leftist core accounts than rightist core accounts (0.21% vs. 0.08%). Conversely, tweets from the rightist cluster, though less distinctly, were more likely to reach rightist core accounts than leftist core accounts (0.14% vs. 0.10%). This indicates these narratives tend to reach ideologically homogeneous networks more effectively, even when their contents are similar content.

However, in the context of participatory propaganda, the reach to core accounts is less significant compared with the reach to peripheral accounts—those who might not have a prior interest in the Hong Kong protests or who encounter retweets incidentally from non-core accounts—because reaching these less-engaged groups can increase the number of new adherents to illiberal narratives. In this regard, there are notable differences between the leftist and rightist clusters. First, the reach rate to the non-core accounts uninterested in Hong Kong is higher for the leftist cluster than the rightist cluster (77.99% vs. 64.96%), suggesting that the leftist cluster is relatively more effective at reaching individuals who have clear ideological alignments but do not tweet about Hong Kong. By contrast, the reach rate to the peripheral accounts was higher for the rightist cluster than for the leftist cluster (31.83% vs. 18.25%). These peripheral accounts include users who do not exhibit clear ideological leanings, do not follow partisan accounts, and do not show a particular interest in the Hong Kong protests. Therefore, the rightist cluster is relatively better at reaching a broader, more general audience who might not be politically engaged or interested in specific issues like the Hong Kong protests.

Two factors may explain why the rightist cluster more effectively reaches peripheral accounts. First, as Yoshida et al. (2021) note, the rightist cluster and moderate accounts have higher mutual follow rates than the leftist cluster. Additionally, rightists use more emotion-laden words that facilitate message propagation, such as "dislike," and their linguistic style, particularly in the use of adjectives, aligns more closely with moderates, making their tweets more appealing to peripheral accounts. Second, as shown in Table 1, the rightist cluster shows interest in non-political topics like anime (e.g. "Love Live!") and games, suggesting they leverage such non-political interests to spread illiberal narratives to apolitical peripheral accounts.

Study 2

Study 2 addressed two theoretical questions that could not be addressed in Study 1. First, because Study 1 is observational, it did not determine whether exposure to the pro-China narrative on Twitter leads to attitudinal change. However, whether the illiberal narrative induces attitudinal change is theoretically critical for participatory propaganda. Propaganda disseminated by state actors does not necessarily aim to persuade; instead, it may serve other functions, such as signalling the regime's strength to suppress challenges against the state (Huang, 2015) or being motivated by personal incentives, such as the career advancement of diplomats (Xiaolin, 2024). By contrast,

participatory propaganda, in which ordinary social media users engage, cannot rely on such effects; without persuasion, it holds little meaning. Therefore, it is crucial to determine whether exposure to the illiberal narrative promotes its acceptance when discussing the theoretical implications of participatory propaganda. Study 2 aimed to answer this question.

Second, Study 2 also sought to explain the engagement of both leftists and rightists in Japan with participatory propaganda, as observed in Study 1. Sharp power, of which participatory propaganda is a part, is primarily seen as targeting the division of public opinion in democratic countries, making cross-ideological acceptance of the illiberal narrative a theoretical puzzle. Unlike findings from previous studies (e.g. Starbird et al., 2019), why is the illiberal narrative herein disseminated across ideologies in Japan? Specifically, Study 2 examined the aversion to political protests observed in the rightist cluster in Study 1, suggesting that if such aversion drives rightists towards illiberal narratives, it could refine our understanding of sharp power. In this case, participatory propaganda may not always deepen ideological divisions; it can sometimes find acceptance across ideological lines, underscoring the contingent nature of its effects.

Leftists' acceptance of pro-China narratives in Japan is somewhat expected because Japanese left-wing individuals often adopt a sympathetic view of China, partly due to historical reflections on Japan's wartime aggression across Asia, which creates fertile ground for these narratives. Therefore, the potentially more intriguing insight from Study 1 is that typically China-critical rightists engage with pro-China participatory propaganda. The analysis of tweet content suggests that right-wing individuals in Japan exhibit an aversion to liberal social movements, often associating the Hong Kong protests with past liberal movements in Japan, such as SEALDs. This observation raises an intriguing possibility regarding the nuanced relations between aversion to protests and the acceptance of illiberal narratives.

Aversion to protests in Japan has been identified as a factor explaining the low level of non-electoral political participation in the country (Nishizawa, 2004; Pekkanen, 2006). Analysing cross-national online survey data, Yamamoto (2017) demonstrated that, compared with Koreans and Germans, Japanese individuals are more inclined to perceive social movements such as protests as not representative of public opinion, as ineffective in achieving policy changes, and as frightening phenomena that induce anxiety regarding public safety and social order. Similarly, Nishizawa (2004), examining representative Japanese survey data from 1996, reported that 72.9% of voters expressed a desire to avoid involvement with protests or rallies. In sum, a widely shared proscriptive protest norm exists in Japan (Ando, 2013).

In Japan, not only is political protest itself avoided, but individuals who participate in such activities are also socially marginalized. Kobayashi et al. (2021) demonstrated through comparative experiments across nine regions that Japanese people tend to socially avoid individuals who participate in political protests. This tendency appears unique to Japan, as it was not observed in other East Asian contexts, such as South Korea or Hong Kong. Such aversion to protests acts as a barrier to participation in non-profit organisations and civic associations (Sakamoto et al., 2019, 2020). Furthermore, survey data from Sakamoto et al. (2019) reveal that over 70% of respondents perceive protest participants as leftists—a proportion higher than those who view the Japanese Communist Party or labour unions as leftist. Although there are

protests by right-wing groups, such as nationalists and xenophobes, the dominant perception of protest participants as leftists contributes to a particularly strong aversion to protests among right-wing individuals (Sakamoto et al., 2019, 2020).

Although aversion to protests in Japan has been studied as a significant barrier to non-electoral political participation, the relation between aversion to protests and acceptance of illiberal narratives has not yet been examined. Aversion to protests, especially among Japan's right-wing individuals, may increase their receptivity to pro-China narratives seeking to delegitimize the Hong Kong pro-democracy protests or hinder acceptance of narratives that value the spontaneity of Hong Kong citizens seeking self-determination and democratization—narratives that are mainstream in democratic countries. This dynamic may paradoxically lead right-wing individuals, who are typically critical of China, to become involved in participatory propaganda that supports these pro-China narratives. In sum, the characteristic aversion to protests in Japan could potentially become a vulnerability through which illiberal narratives gain traction. To explore this possibility, we tested the following hypotheses:

H1: Exposure to illiberal narratives promotes a pro-China interpretation of the Hong Kong protests.

H2: Exposure to mainstream narratives promotes a pro-Western interpretation of the Hong Kong protests.

H3: The effect of H1 is stronger for individuals with a greater aversion to protests.

H4: The effect of H2 is weaker for individuals with a greater aversion to protests.

H1 and H2 examined the main effects of narratives on the interpretation of the Hong Kong protests. H3 investigated whether individuals who dislike protests are more likely to accept pro-China narratives that delegitimize the Hong Kong protests. H4 tested whether individuals who dislike protests are more resistant to accepting mainstream interpretations of the Hong Kong protests. Both H3 and H4 explored whether aversion to protests in Japan could be a key factor contributing to the broad acceptance of illiberal narratives.

Methods

In January 2024, an online experiment was conducted with 1,317 Japanese adults who were recruited through PureSpectrum. Quota sampling based on gender, age, and residential area was implemented; nevertheless, there was an underrepresentation of older women and those from rural areas. The sample was 55.66% male, with a mean age of 50.22 years ($SD = 15.03$). After consenting to participate in the experiment, participants responded to demographic variables and covariates, including ideology and aversion to protests. Aversion to protests was measured using six Likert items on a five-point scale, including 'Political protests are annoying' and 'I don't want to associate with people who participate in political protests'. See Supplementary Materials SI4 for the complete list of scale items. Responses were coded so that higher values indicate greater aversion, then summed and further linearly transformed to a range of 0–1 (Cronbach's alpha = 0.85).

Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of three groups: control group, pro-China narrative group, or mainstream narrative group, and presented with a corresponding vignette. See Supplementary Materials SI5 for the full description of the vignettes. For the control group, basic and neutral information about Hong Kong, such as its history and position as an international financial centre, was provided, briefly mentioning the large-scale protests in 2019. The description for the control group did not include value judgments or interpretations regarding the Hong Kong protests. In the pro-China narrative condition, it was argued that the CIA and NED are involved in protests and anti-government movements worldwide, citing examples such as the Jasmine Revolution and the Maidan Revolution, and persuading that the Hong Kong protests are no exception but rather an interference in domestic affairs orchestrated by the US. This narrative is identical to the illiberal narrative examined for its dissemination in Study 1. In the mainstream narrative group, it was asserted that the background of the Hong Kong protests includes events such as the Umbrella Movement in 2014 and subsequent political repression, highlighting China's increasing influence. This narrative aligns with mainstream interpretations by governments and media in Japan and Western democracies. A 15-second delay was implemented to ensure that participants read each vignette carefully before proceeding to the next page.

After reading the vignette, the dependent variable was measured. The dependent variable assessed support for the illiberal interpretations related to the Hong Kong protests using six items, such as 'Hong Kong protests were radicalized because they were incited by US intervention' and 'Hong Kong protests were sparked by a spontaneous uprising of Hong Kong citizens demanding freedom (reversed)'. See Supplementary Materials SI4 for the complete list of scale items. Responses were coded so that higher values indicate greater acceptance of the illiberal interpretation of the Hong Kong protests, then summed and linearly transformed to a range of 0–1 (Cronbach's alpha = 0.77).

Analysis

First, an ordinary least squares regression model was estimated, with support for the illiberal interpretation of the Hong Kong protests as the dependent variable and treatments as the independent variables (Model 1 in Table 5). The results show that the pro-China narrative group exhibited significantly stronger support for illiberal interpretations of the Hong Kong protests than the control group, supporting H1. Conversely, the group exposed to the mainstream narrative showed significantly weaker support for illiberal interpretations than the control group, supporting H2. Support for H1 indicates that exposure to the illiberal narrative promotes its acceptance. Therefore, the reach of the illiberal narrative, as examined in RQ3 of Study 1, suggests that it serves as effective participatory propaganda by influencing the attitudes of those who receive it, particularly by strengthening favourable attitudes towards the Chinese government.

Next, to test H3 and H4, a model including the interaction terms between treatments and aversion to political protests was estimated (Model 2 in Table 5). The interaction term between the pro-China narrative and aversion to political protests

Table 5. Regression models predicting support for the illiberal interpretation of the Hong Kong protests.

DV: Support for the illiberal interpretation of the Hong Kong protests		
	Model 1	Model 2
	Coef. (B)	
Pro-China narrative	0.038**	0.027
	(0.010)	(0.025)
Mainstream narrative	–0.021*	–0.090**
	(0.010)	(0.024)
Aversion to political protests		0.185**
		(0.033)
Pro-China narrative × Aversion to political protests		0.034
		(0.049)
Mainstream narrative × Aversion to political protests		0.154**
		(0.048)
Constant	0.362**	0.274**
	(0.007)	(0.017)
Observations	1,317	1,317
R-squared	0.027	0.135

Standard errors in parentheses.
**$p < 0.01$, *$p < 0.05$.

did not show a significant coefficient ($B = 0.034$, *n.s.*), thus H3 was not supported. However, the interaction between the mainstream narrative and aversion to political protests showed a significant coefficient ($B = 0.154$, $p < .01$). To illustrate this interaction effect, predicted values for the strength of illiberal interpretations of the Hong Kong protests were calculated for those with high ($M + SD$) and low ($M—SD$) levels of aversion to political protests, and plotted in Figure 1.

Figure 1 shows that individuals with a stronger aversion to political protests exhibited greater support for illiberal interpretations of the Hong Kong protests, suggesting that the general dislike of political protests among Japanese individuals also influences their views on the Hong Kong protests. Among those with a low aversion to political protests, the mainstream narrative group showed significantly lower support for illiberal interpretations of the Hong Kong protests compared with the control group. However, in groups with a strong aversion to political protests, no significant differences were observed between the control and mainstream narrative groups, indicating that the adoption of a liberal interpretation of the Hong Kong protests through exposure to the mainstream narrative was muted in the presence of a stronger aversion to protests. This suggests that the aversion to political protests among Japanese, as indicated by Kobayashi et al. (2021), diminishes the persuasive effect of the mainstream narrative as a counter-narrative to illiberal narratives, thereby creating a conducive environment for the acceptance of the pro-China narrative.

The correlation between aversion to political protests and ideology was 0.07 ($p < 0.05$), indicating a tendency for individuals with right-leaning ideologies to dislike political protests more strongly. Therefore, in addition to leftists, right-leaning individuals, who tend to have a relatively low affinity towards China, might also engage in participatory propaganda supporting pro-China narratives on Hong Kong protests, induced by their dislike of protests. However, the correlation between aversion to political protests and ideology is relatively weak. Thus, the aversion to protests among Japanese people is spread across ideological differences, suggesting

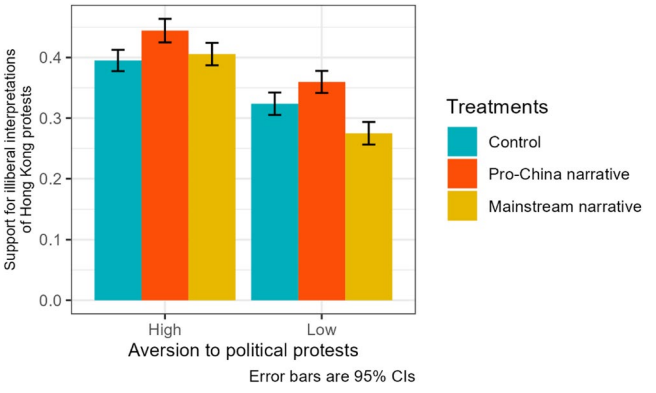

Figure 1. Interaction effects between treatments and aversion to political protests.

that many Japanese are potentially inclined to participate in, or be persuaded by, participatory propaganda that seeks to delegitimize anti-authoritarian pro-democracy movements.

Discussion

Drawing on Japanese Twitter data and an online experiment in Japan, this study investigated involvement in participatory propaganda aimed at delegitimizing the 2019 Hong Kong protests. The results reveal that the illiberal narrative, which posits that the Hong Kong protests were riots incited by the CIA and NED, was accepted and propagated by both leftist and rightist users. The leftists, due to historical guilt over Japan's past aggression towards China and an affinity for socialism and communism in the latter half of the twentieth century, are often predisposed to a relatively pro-China stance, making them more susceptible to Chinese propaganda. The relatively stronger affinity toward China observed among the leftist group, compared to the rightist group, has arguably contributed to the greater popularity of illiberal narratives about the Hong Kong protests within the leftist cluster (see Table 2). However, a distinctive feature of participatory propaganda in Japan is that right-wing users also participated in spreading the illiberal narrative.

The analysis of tweets indicated that the involvement of rightists in participatory propaganda may be associated with their aversion to left-wing political protests. Right-leaning individuals in Japan who despise domestic left-wing social movements and leftist politicians appeared more receptive to pro-China narratives that delegitimize the Hong Kong protests by associating them with these disliked groups. The analysis in Study 2 partially supports this interpretation. While both pro-China and mainstream narratives about the Hong Kong protests have persuasive effects, the pro-China narrative alone retains its persuasive power when there is a general aversion to protests, making it difficult to accept liberal interpretations of the protests as social movements seeking freedom and democracy. This finding suggests that in the context of the discursive struggle over the Hong Kong protests in Japan, the spread of illiberal

narratives is not confined to one side of the ideological divide but has the potential to encompass both sides.

The theoretical implication of this finding is significant. Studies on sharp power have posited that the goal of authoritarian influence operations is to 'sow discord' within target countries. For instance, when Russia intervened in disputes over the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, it was revealed that Russia's Internet Research Agency impersonated both left-leaning accounts supporting the BLM movement and right-leaning accounts opposing it, orchestrating and fuelling conflict (Starbird et al., 2019). However, in the case of participatory propaganda concerning the Hong Kong protests in Japan, both left-leaning and right-leaning factions were involved in spreading the illiberal narrative, suggesting that the outcome of influence operations may not necessarily be discord within the public, but rather a cross-ideological consensus on illiberal narratives. Furthermore, the backdrop of the acceptance of illiberal narratives across ideological divides appears to be the aversion to protests, particularly among right-leaning Japanese, as suggested by Study 2. Although frequent left-leaning political protests marked the 1960s in Japan, current protests are small-scale and rare. Part of the reason is that protesters are perceived as threats to harmonious human relations (Kobayashi et al., 2021). Yet, protests remain a critical form of non-electoral participation. When involvement in specific forms of political participation is shunned, it may create vulnerabilities that allow for the penetration of illiberal narratives.

This study has several limitations. First, it focused on participatory propaganda using a specific illiberal narrative in one country, requiring further research to assess its generalizability. While some argue that narratives from authoritarian states have limited persuasive power (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2021), it is essential to examine both who engages in propaganda dissemination and why they do so. Second, Study 1 could not fully determine whether accounts promoting the illiberal narrative were genuinely volunteering or part of an astroturfing operation linked to the Chinese government. Although Chinese propaganda accounts during the 2019 Hong Kong protests were often easily identifiable (DiResta et al., 2020), the rise of generative AI may have enabled more sophisticated impersonations, complicating the distinction between genuine users and fabricated identities. Finally, this study only analysed Twitter, while modern influence operations often involve multiple platforms, creating a 'propaganda ecosystem'. Understanding participatory propaganda in such cross-platform environments will be crucial in future research.

Notes

1. Williams (2022) notes that the NED significantly increased funding to pro-democracy groups in Hong Kong during 2019 – 1920, with some recipients receiving direct funding outside of NGOs, likely for their safety. However, this funding alone is considered insufficient to have mobilized large-scale protests or to indicate an intent for regime change.
2. However, even among the left-wing, the Japanese Communist Party maintains a critical stance towards the Chinese Communist Party regime.
3. To ensure the robustness of the results, we ranked the feature words using Keyness (Bondi & Scott, 2010) instead of TF-IDF. The outcomes of this analysis are presented in SI1 in the Supplementary Materials. The analysis using Keyness also demonstrated consistent results.

4. To ensure the robustness of the results, we ranked the feature words using Keyness (Bondi & Scott, 2010) instead of TF-IDF. The outcomes of this analysis are presented in SI3 in the Supplementary Materials. The analysis using Keyness also demonstrated consistent results.
5. Twelve accounts are included in both the "Leftist core accounts" and "Rightist core accounts" listed in Table 4. This overlap arises because cluster detection is performed at the tweet level, allowing one tweet from a given core account to be classified into the Leftist cluster while another tweet from the same account is categorized in the Rightist cluster. If the "Leftist core accounts" and "Rightist core accounts" are collapsed, the four types of account categories become mutually exclusive.

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Notes on contributors

Tetsuro Kobayashi is a professor at the School of Political Science and Economics, Waseda University. He received his PhD from the University of Tokyo. His research interests focus on political communication, political psychology, and public opinion in East Asia. His work has been published in major communication journals, including *Communication Research*, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, and *Human Communication Research*.

Fujio Toriumi is a professor at the University of Tokyo's Graduate School of Engineering. He received his PhD from the Tokyo Institute of Technology. His research interests are computational social science and AI for society. He serves as vice president of the Society for Computational Social Science of Japan.

Mitsuo Yoshida is an associate professor at the Institute of Business Sciences of the University of Tsukuba in Japan and the founder of TechTech Inc., which provides a news search engine. He received his PhD from the University of Tsukuba in 2014. His research interests include the science of science, computational social science, and natural language processing.

Takeshi Sakaki is a visiting researcher at the University of Tokyo's Institute for Future Initiatives and a lecturer at Rikkyo University. He earned his PhD in engineering in 2013. He was named one of the Top 2,000 AI Researchers in 2020 by Tsinghua University. His research interests include the science of science, computational social science, and natural language processing.

ORCID

Tetsuro Kobayashi http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0162-538X
Fujio Toriumi http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3866-4956
Mitsuo Yoshida http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0735-1116
Takeshi Sakaki http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5830-4352

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