

Does Soft Propaganda Work?

The Impact of Inequality Rhetoric on Opinions toward Economic Inequality in China

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Abstract

Does soft propaganda work in influencing opinions, and if yes, whose opinions? Soft propaganda promotes pro-regime attitudes in a subtle and sophisticated way. This study examines the effects of carefully framed rhetoric of economic inequality on opinions toward inequality in an officially claimed socialist country, China. Economic inequality is widely perceived as excessive in China. The widening inequality contradicts the official ideology that claims to represent the interests of all Chinese people; therefore, the Chinese government and official media cover the issue of economic inequality carefully. The rhetoric on inequality praises the Chinese government for serving the people and emphasizes the government's policy efforts in reducing inequality. How does this inequality rhetoric affect attitudes toward inequality? With an original survey experiment in the Zhejiang province, this study finds that soft propaganda is effective in influencing low- and high-income respondents but backfires among the middle-income respondents, who view economic inequality as unfair and intolerable after exposure to the rhetoric.

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