



Chinese audiences wait in the lobby of a Beijing cinema 4 October 2021 to watch the movie *The Battle at Lake Changjin*. Released in 2021, the war movie commissioned by the Central Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party was a cornerstone component of the party's one hundred-year anniversary celebration. It depicts combined North Korean and Chinese People's Volunteer Army forcing U.S. forces to retreat in a retelling of the Battle of Chosin Reservoir fought during the Korean War. With a budget of \$200 million, the movie is the most expensive film ever produced in China. The film had remarkable national and global financial success, becoming the second-highest grossing film worldwide in 2021, earning \$913 million, and the highest-grossing Chinese film produced on record. The film ends with the caption, "The great spirit of the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid (North) Korea will eternally be renewed! Eternal glory to the great martyrs of the People's Volunteer Army!" (Photo by Lou-Foto, Alamy)

Chinese Propaganda

The Hollywood Effect

Cori E. Dauber, PhD

Professor Mark D. Robinson

D. Alexander Jones

Jolie Koonce

Steven A. Meeks III

Zane Mehta

Concerns about covert Chinese influence campaigns increased over the last several years, according to both the popular and academic presses as well as government reports.¹ The concern is valid, and the general tone of urgency entirely warranted. Our concern is that while we focus on covert Chinese efforts to manipulate the United States, their attempts to do so overtly should not be ignored. For thirty years, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has slowly, consciously, and purposefully expended enormous effort to build an indigenous film industry. The effort is now paying off in terms of the quality of Chinese propaganda appearing on mainstream media-sharing platforms. We consider the motivations behind this effort, the value China perceives it is getting from the effort, how we might analyze these videos, and what motivates it to do this now.

The Department of Defense defines propaganda as “any form of communication misleading in nature

designed to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes, or behavior of any group to benefit the sponsor.”² Given that definition, attention needs to be paid to all the propaganda efforts of the PRC. As the Department of State's Global Engagement Center stated in 2023,

Cori E. Dauber is a professor of communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-Chapel Hill). She holds a PhD from Northwestern University, an MA from UNC-Chapel Hill, and a BS from Northwestern, all in communication. She previously served as visiting research professor at the Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College. She is the author of *YouTube War: Fighting in a World of Cameras in Every Cell Phone and Photoshop on Every Computer* (U.S. Army War College Press, 2010) and coeditor of *Visual Propaganda and Extremism in the Online Space* (U.S. Army War College Press, 2014).

Mark D. Robinson is the director of the Media Arts Space at UNC-Chapel Hill. He holds an MA and a BFA from Chapel Hill. He has presented his work to the Carter Center and the National Defense University and published in venues (with Cori E. Dauber) such as *Jihadology.net*, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, and *Perspectives on Terrorism*.

Every country should have the ability to tell its story to the world. However, a nation's narrative should be based on facts and rise and fall on its own merits. The PRC employs a variety of deceptive and coercive methods as it attempts to influence the international information environment. Beijing's information manipulation spans the use of propaganda, disinformation, and censorship. Unchecked, the PRC's efforts will reshape the global information landscape, creating biases and gaps that could even lead nations to make decisions that subordinate their economic and security interests to Beijing's.³

The PRC may only be a “competitor,” but in the propaganda domain, it acts as if it is an enemy of the United States and its allies, even an enemy at war.

Understanding the PRC's propaganda methods and how they function should receive a high priority, for not only America's general population but also for the U.S. Army specifically. Much of the propaganda the PRC produces and attempts to distribute to Western populations focuses on its military power relative to ours. Furthermore, a large percentage of the propaganda videos it releases are sourced to and produced by (at least, claimed publicly to be a product of) the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

Modern Media

The value of propaganda in wartime has been established back to the classical period: the Greeks used propaganda, as did the Romans. Sun Tzu, the ancient Chinese authority on warfare (still taught in their service academies today), emphasized its value, as did Mao Zedong, still the ultimate and unassailable source.⁴

The use of propaganda truly escalated in the West during the two world wars when all major combatants had vast propaganda organizations to facilitate the production of materials for internal and external audiences. During World War I, for example, the U.S. government engaged in an aggressive censorship program

D. Alexander Jones is a member of the class of 2025 of UNC-Chapel Hill, majoring in economics.

Jolie Koonce is a 2023 graduate of UNC-Chapel Hill who majored in philosophy and peace, war, and defense.

(ostensibly to avoid any possible risk to public morale). The war was presented as an American effort to save “civilization” from the depredations of the “Hun”—as in those who had marauded across the world alongside Attila. This was a heavily racialized framework and an odd one given that the Germans were a largely white, Christian nation. World War II, of course, saw the introduction of more modern forms of mass media harnessed for the use of propagandists. Radio and especially film were used by the Allied and the Axis powers in new and powerful ways.⁵

Part of the reason for the intensity of propaganda and the extensive efforts of the main World War II combatants was that media and media technology had evolved to a critical point, where the propagandists could—and did—capitalize on the power of the visual image. Research from communication, mass communication and journalism, psychology, advertising, and public relations all support the power of the visual image relative to the word alone. As powerful as the visual image generally is, moving images can be even more powerful. This is true for several reasons. First, we are hardwired to follow motion. Images may appeal to and successfully grab our attention, but moving images hold our attention.⁶

Second, visual propaganda—and, again, moving images in particular—creates a number of benefits for the propagandist that are not available through words alone. Images, for example, make it possible to reach the illiterate, whether that means the very young, a segment of the population who is illiterate, or a population who may not read the dominant language⁷ or even the language spoken in the video at all.⁸

And, of course, in film or video, images may be accompanied by sound: dialogue, musical soundtrack, sound effects, or sound that makers present as the supposedly contemporaneous sound accompanying the action unfolding on the screen. Audio makes possible an entirely separate channel of emotional appeal working in concert with the visual. Sound creates cognitive and emotional linkage between the audience and the image, as the sound reaches out from the 2-D image into and through the 3-D reality of the audience.⁹

China's Propaganda Efforts

It is especially important to focus on China's recent visual propaganda efforts. The quality of the

propaganda is astonishing, certainly when compared to that of subnational extremist or terrorist groups and even to material coming from Hollywood itself. Yet the speed with which China moved from relatively modest efforts to its current output makes this especially noteworthy: the learning curve is unprecedented. The change was notable enough and rapid enough to prompt the question, “How did they do that?”

To answer that question, it requires one to go back thirty-plus years, back to when the Chinese seemingly decided that if they were going to compete in “soft power” in earnest, they would need a film industry that could compete with the United States.¹⁰ They understood achieving this goal would require a commitment of billions of dollars over many years, yet nonetheless began to implement that exact strategy. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) also realized it would be impossible to achieve the target on their own: Hollywood's cooperation would be required. Over that time span, China has brilliantly leveraged its market power to do just that. The CCP financed Hollywood films, coproduced films with Hollywood studios, and used the production of those films as opportunities for its people to learn everything they needed from Hollywood to render Hollywood itself obsolete, at least within China (and in some foreign markets).¹¹ At this point, films imported to the PRC (e.g., American-made films) are no longer needed to fill Chinese movie theaters, because Chinese audiences prefer Chinese-made films about Chinese stories when they are of comparable technical quality.¹²

When examining Chinese propaganda materials, specifically videos, one immediately notices their quality and high-production value, which is the net result of China making these investments; equipment, training, everything involved in building out an indigenous film industry over a period of years. They look like nothing so much as very short, high-production-value movies. That is evidence that there is a good chance these videos were produced by people trained in a system

Zane Mehta is a member of the class of 2025 at UNC-Chapel Hill, majoring in political science and peace, war, and defense.

Steven A. Meeks III is a member of the class of 2024 at UNC-Chapel Hill, majoring in psychology and peace, war, and defense.



Official movie poster for *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (2021) (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)



modeled on Hollywood, or even potentially by individuals trained by Hollywood professionals.

Why is this happening now? Particularly within its region, China invested substantially in various soft power measures and received measurable returns for its investment: multiple polls showed, over a period of years, that the public in these countries had demonstrably more positive attitudes toward the PRC than before the investments were made. The problem from China's perspective: the positive attitudes were not permanent, nor did their investment insulate them against negative attitudes forming in those countries, which, based on the PRC's later actions, created disgruntled publics.¹³

Over the last twenty years or so, as the PRC has behaved more aggressively in the region across various domains, changes in PRC policies often directly and negatively impacted average people. Attitudes toward the Chinese were—almost inevitably—impacted. Cultural exchanges and college scholarships aside, when the Chinese fishing fleet repeatedly and aggressively invaded their neighbors' exclusive economic zones, threatening smaller vessels (therefore, their livelihoods), polling results in the region were at some point going to reflect those aggressive acts. In Laos, the Chinese “Belt

and Road Initiative” bought fabulous new infrastructure the Laotians could never have afforded on their own. However, the resulting debt load is crushing the Laotian economy despite the government paying at least some of the debt off by yielding control over some of these new projects to the Chinese, who now effectively own them. Laos sacrificed its economy for fabulous infrastructure projects, which Laos no longer controls. Unsurprisingly, the political result of the Chinese efforts resulted in the Laotian public slowly but surely registering more positive feelings toward the United States—the country that, in living memory, bombed Laos—rather than toward the Chinese who built its infrastructure.¹⁴

Analyzing Chinese Propaganda

When analyzing any communicative text, the first step is to determine the audience for which the text



Actor Wu Jing portraying Wu Qianli, the rough and ready commander of the Revolution's 7th Company in the 2021 film *The Battle at Lake Changjin*. (Screenshot courtesy of YouTube)

was intended. Determining efficacy requires first assessing the persuasiveness of the communication, which of course begs the question: Persuasive to whom? Depending on who the maker is and what the text is, making that determination can often become extremely complicated.

Working with Chinese media, the analyst has an immediate advantage. Materials intended for an internal Chinese audience will be posted to Weibo, a social media platform meant expressly for the Chinese population. We can confidently say this because it will be behind the “Great Firewall.”¹⁵ It is possible, but unlikely, that anyone other than citizens of the PRC will be on that platform. At the very least, Weibo is certainly not the mechanism Chinese authorities would choose as a vehicle for persuading a non-Chinese population. When materials are intended for external

audiences, on the other hand, whether produced by the CCP or the PLA, the responsible institution will post the material to mainstream Western platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, or TikTok (owned by Beijing but intended for external audiences). These platform determinations simplify the question of who the audience for any given item is (at least at a first pass). As Bethany Allen wrote,

It's not unusual for foreign governments in a variety of countries to hand the management of their social media accounts to outside firms. What's unusual about the China case, however, is that these foreign social media platforms are blocked domestically. The rise of Chinese

government agencies officially building their presence on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram underscores the asymmetrical messaging—viewing the platforms as tools to project propaganda and other official rhetoric internationally while preventing information from flowing back home.¹⁶

The analyst only needs to look at where a given item was posted. It is also the case that the Chinese have content-sharing arrangements with media outlets in other countries. In other words, some of the material our team has examined may have appeared on various news outlets worldwide and may have appeared without any attribution suggesting it was sourced from Beijing.¹⁷ (Our interest is exclusively in the short propaganda videos posted to social media. Chinese cinematic films are, no doubt, propagandistic vehicles and marketable outside China, thanks to their decades-long partnerships with Hollywood studios. But those films are beyond the scope of this analysis.)

To make a precise argument about the relative quality of video-based propaganda requires a defensible metric for the evaluation. Quality is not simply a subjective measure of “how one feels” about a visual product, nor is it simply a statement that a given video is “good” or “bad.” A usable metric that can serve as a basis for comparison between videos must be grounded in technical standards of *quality* and *craft*.

The University of North Carolina (UNC) team initially developed an assessment tool for evaluating Islamic State (IS) video propaganda.¹⁸ Because the tool must be matched to the specifics of the materials, the tool was modified for a subsequent study of video game motifs in jihadist materials.¹⁹ An additional modification for use in the study of right-wing materials is underway but not yet complete.²⁰

Our team modified the tool to reflect the substantial jump in the quality of materials between the highest-end products of terrorist groups and those produced by Chinese state entities post the influence of Hollywood. The evaluative model forms a grid where the x axis provides a scale in percentages to grade the elements of production value from 0 to 100 percent. Production value is a measure of craft, of the skill necessary to maintain a story’s believability, specifically marked by an absence of breaks in continuity. A high evaluation or percentage reflects a project in

which high-end Hollywood materials exemplify the standards. The y axis is comprised of evaluative points of media production and audio and visual communication: essentially, this is a list of the elements of video production that can be graded in terms of quality (see tables 1 and 2).

The vertical axis provides the opportunity to grade a video’s technical quality on characteristics that are arranged into themes or topics. The production elements convey how effectively a video will appeal to its target audience and, more specifically, how the work engages with the efficacy of content (e.g., with the quality of graphics or camera focus that might appear), with the message (e.g., the way symbols are employed), specific technical questions (compression, framing), aesthetic choices made in the video, aesthetic choices made in the audio, and aesthetic choices that were culturally informed.

For example, the UNC team analyzed the video posted in 2022, *To the Blue Sea*.²¹ It tells the story of a day in the life of a Chinese aircraft carrier evidently on station, out in the ocean. One reason Chinese propaganda is compelling is that it isn’t *just* technically sophisticated it is technical sophistication in service to a *story*. The difference between IS and al-Qaida videos wasn’t just that IS materials were far more technically sophisticated (they certainly were), it was that IS had figured out the importance of telling a story. Almost all their videos tell a story, while very few al-Qaida videos do. *To the Blue Sea* starts with an officer arriving to observe aircraft to be launched in the morning, an excuse for multiple overhead shots of the carrier in the middle of the ocean (emphasizing that China is now operating a blue water navy), and it ends with planes recovered at night. Multiple shots in that opening sequence are too reminiscent of the film *Top Gun* to be a coincidence, and they shoot around the inconvenient fact that they’re working with a “ski slope” deck. (It is shown later.)

But after that opening sequence, the real power of the video lies in the fact that the story speaks through different characters. Characters, of course, make a story relatable. The way the makers of this video shift from one character’s perspective to another’s reveals the intent of the makers—their thoughtfulness throughout the production process is apparent. The opening sequence ends with a shot of an officer who had just arrived by helicopter, signaling his importance, on the

bridge, looking out over the deck, and beyond him, in the distance, several deckhands make their way to a hatch. There is no attempt to highlight them beyond the fact that they are in the shot. But the focus of the video then immediately shifts to the deckhands, a subject “hand-off” reminiscent of the opening scene of *The Conversation*, a seminal U.S. film.²²

Similar shifts occur throughout. This kind of move demonstrates preproduction planning, narrative strength, character development, framing, postproduction including color correction, and all the elements or markers of intention-filled high value production work. For example, the audience initially follows a senior enlisted man in that group visible over the officer’s shoulder. He moves down various ladders, deeper and deeper below decks, while a vignette demonstrates his mentoring of a very young sailor. There is another shift to show us the scene from the perspective of what appears to be a birthday cake, as a group of young sailors join the senior man in a celebration for the youngest. As they all smile, the story no longer addresses professionalism and discipline, so much as themes of teamwork and camaraderie.

Eventually, the audience follows a diminutive female deckhand who is responsible for securing the planes above and below deck. Scenes following her carrying the obviously heavy chains and securing the planes are intercut with her difficult workouts, assuring the audience of her physical capacity to carry out her duties to the best of her ability. Her character demonstrates the

enthusiasm and complete commitment of the carrier’s crew, apart from the pilots, who are very much *not* the stars of this film.

Throughout, the audience is shown, through exciting camera angles and the use of constant, unpredictable edits, the carrier’s capacity as a tool for Chinese power projection. Multiple jets can protect the carrier or attack other targets. The jets are shown as sleek, modern, powerful, and able to operate as a unit, multiplying their power. (They are even shown engaged in midair refueling.) The rest of the carrier group make “cameo” appearances after these short character sequences—surface ships launching cruise missiles, even submarines. The quality and success of the video are only called into question with the final visual and historic medley of the development of Chinese carrier naval power. This “tack on” sequence is common to other PLA videos, signifying a separate control mechanism as if two hands are at work here.

Another video, *China’s PLA Army Enlists Rap-Style Music Video to Recruit Young Soldiers*, focuses not on the navy but on the combined arms team, aimed specifically at a younger demographic. This judgment is possible because the soundtrack is a rap song, a strong callout to a younger demographic.²³ And, second, rapid cuts drive forward the video edits—the pace of the edits often accelerates. This kind of rapid “MTV edit” is often associated with younger makers attempting to attract younger viewers. Ironically, research suggests that depending on how the material is edited, it may well work



A screenshot from *To the Blue Sea*, a video promoting the Chinese navy published 22 April 2022. (Screenshot by authors)



A screenshot from *China's PLA Army Enlists Rap-Style Music Video to Recruit Young Soldiers*. The first ten seconds of this video appear to be an imitation of earlier versions of recruiting ads for the U.S. Marines. (Screenshot by authors)

against the audience forming strong memories of what they have viewed.²⁴

The video does not start as a rap video. In fact, the first ten seconds appear to be an imitation of earlier versions of recruiting ads for the U.S. Marines. A young man in full dress uniform slowly and carefully pulls on his perfect white gloves, which he uses to wipe off the metal on his shoulder boards. He stands against a dark background, never revealing his face. We never see all of him—the camera focuses very tightly on the parts of him relevant to each shot in sequence. First, the gloves, then the shoulders, then (from behind) the torso as we watch him carefully put on his hat. The shots merge into a scene characterized by swelling orchestral music.

A narration begins as a graphic plays for a few seconds. We watch very young soldiers run as a group while carrying apparently very heavy packs. The audience, via a jib objective camera angle, observes a small group of tankers who, at the direction of a team leader, run synchronously to jump into the hatches of their tanks. The choreography is impressive, both how carefully timed the men must be to synchronize their actions, and how perfectly still their comrades, already waiting for them in the

tanks, have to be in order to create perfect stillness, which signifies intense discipline.

Except, upon careful inspection, the men rush to join crew members waiting in the tanks, who are so perfectly still because they are, in fact, dummies. No disrespect to their IQ, the maker of the video has literally deployed mannequins dressed in uniform rather than risk deploying fallible human beings who are, after all, capable of sneezing, moving, looking in the wrong direction, or doing any of a thousand things extras have done over the years to spoil a director's elaborate setup. Significantly, from this scene, the makers demonstrate a high level of preparedness and planning, of what is referred to as preproduction. The shot reflects planning an order of magnitude greater than what the investigators observed in any IS video. The planning assures that any image and sound will be captured at a high-production level, and the video will accurately reflect the intended message: one of a careful, disciplined, synchronous team where tanker and tanks become one.

Subsequently, images of soldiers training are intercut rapidly but not so rapidly as to be off-putting. Rather, when it's combined with music, whose tempo continues to increase, it's broadcasting a message of



A screenshot from *China's PLA Army Enlists Rap-Style Music Video to Recruit Young Soldiers*. Soldiers can be seen rushing to join crew members waiting in tanks, who happen to be mannequins dressed in uniform. (Screenshot by authors)

responsiveness (to unseen events presumably to an overarching environment).

The rap song begins at marker 0:41, and the quick staccato pacing drives the action forward, reflected in the images. The Air Force and the Navy make appearances (someone has to fire all those missiles after all) starting at 1:00, and the Marines and what appear to be Chinese SEALs show up just before 1:25. They appear first in dress uniform, then training—wriggling through the mud, even engaging in the Chinese version of Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL (BUD/S) training, followed by scenes of many missiles fired.

Toward the final third of the video, images of Chinese satellites appear, a view of Earth from space, a command center reminiscent of NASA's from years of both news and cinematic depictions of spacecraft launches from Houston. Images (animated) of satellites above Earth are interspersed with those of the Chinese military, and space power technology hangs above the planet, serenely looping Earth in orbits with no other country's equipment visible, conveying Chinese global dominance and control of the skies.

For all the frenetic activity (and editing), perhaps the most interesting thing about this video is how

uneven it is in quality throughout. At even the most basic level, the question of how crisp and clear the image is varies widely across slightly more than three minutes. The product informs the audience that the project was created by multiple media teams, using more than one set of equipment and guidelines or objectives.

These two videos, in aggregate, are roughly comparable in quality as expressed via the UNC grids in tables 1 and 2. At the end of the day, both communicate hostile intent to the West (and its allies), clearly and well. The vision in both videos is unified, clear, and purposeful, designed by a purposeful hand with a clear goal for the messaging strategy these videos represent. The intensity of the underlying hostility toward the Western audience is evident. After all, the point of visual communication and the use of high-production-value product is that it accomplishes what lower quality materials fail to do: clear quality leaves the audience little doubt about the message and intent.

Why This Matters

Deterrence is most simply expressed as a relationship between capability and will. The U.S. military capability relative to the PRC has decreased in recent

years, which is hardly a state secret. On purely quantitative measures, the Chinese military has edged closer to that of the United States in recent years and certainly could pose a threat in certain Pacific scenarios. The qualitative difference among the forces continues to give the United States the edge in most scenarios.²⁵ Yet not so long ago, the United States was required as a matter of doctrine to have the capacity to win a major regional conflict in the Pacific. That was intended to be a Korean scenario, not a war with China, but the doctrine still set a force requirement for a Pacific military engagement that has since lapsed. For U.S. deterrence of China to be assured, there needs to be no doubt that the United States would be able to not only defeat China in a potential military conflict but defeat them overwhelmingly—and quickly. Anything less, anything that can leave doubt as to the outcome of what such a war might be or providing a victory only after a prolonged and costly war puts deterrence in doubt. The ability to deter falls into doubt because deterrence rests on will alone.²⁶

Deterrence, remember, is an equation: *Deterrence = f(x) where x is a relationship between capability and will.* Altering one side of the equation requires an equal operation to the other. Once the United States' military capability relative to China's is perceived to be reduced, its ability to deter us becomes a possibility. Our ability to deter them therefore shifts. No longer capable of deterring them by the simple fact of our overwhelming military capacity, we must have the ability to signal we are not deterred, which hangs on the question of will—which had not been as central when our military capability was obviously overwhelming. A balanced outcome hangs on whether the United States possesses the will—and can communicate that will in advance of the fact—to defend Taiwan if need be.²⁷ Only if we can persuasively communicate the will to fight can we avoid the need to actually do so.

There are two problems. The first, of course, is that will is an ineffable quality—it is invisible—unlike capability that is easily communicated since it rests fundamentally on hardware, which can easily be seen and therefore counted and measured. Deterrence, in other words, rests less on a nation's actual will than on its adversary's perception of that will, which may or may not be accurate. The accuracy of the assessment rests on the measurement of signs that are, by definition,

always going to be probabilistic. Allowing an adversary to misjudge one's will, underestimating that will, for example, can be destabilizing and dangerous. On the other hand, crafting circumstances so that an adversary misjudges one's will as stronger than it is in reality can be stabilizing since the misperception will tend to convince the assessors that the risks of initiating conflict are too costly to justify the effort. But, again, that begs the question, "How does one communicate will?"

The second problem is that the challenge faced by the Chinese in communicating will is far simpler than that faced by the United States. The asymmetry is stark: for the United States, if an American president chose to present a determined commitment to defend Taiwan, that communication could be undermined if the White House staff disagreed (as has already happened several times to President Joseph Biden), or if public opinion polls suggest American public opinion would not support a long-term commitment to a Taiwan at war, or if a division persists in Congress over what our policy should be. For China, will comes down in practice to the will of a single man: if Xi Jinping says they are committed to "reunification" by force, if necessary, then no one doubts that is what China's policy will be, period.

Yet current U.S. actions have made the level and the certainty of its commitments to allies unclear: the debacle of the pull-out from Afghanistan, characterized by the thousands upon thousands of allies left behind despite the commitments made to them; the political polarization and general dysfunction in Congress, leaving our political leaders seemingly paralyzed and the increased (and increasingly public) questioning of support for the Ukrainians, culminating in a last-minute funding deal to avoid a government shutdown characterized by the removal of all funding for Ukraine, despite explicit claims that the United States would provide support for them to the end—and which was enough to bring down the speaker of the house who negotiated that deal. The combination of these issues means that our will regarding a possible Chinese attack on Taiwan cannot be taken for granted. The CCP will not merely be questioning our will: once it sees our will as a possible weak point, China will work to erode it, by whatever means are at its disposal, certainly including the use of propaganda.

While the Western allies currently believe that they are in a state of "peace," Chinese

security planners have quite a different perception. They believe that China is already engaged in an intense struggle that they often describe as a form of warfare—political warfare. The primary instruments used have been activist diplomacy, propaganda, media manipulation, information campaigns, intense cyber operations, subversion, political corruption, economic coercion, facilitated trade in fentanyl and other opioids to the U.S. and the West, and the preemptive occupation and militarization of contested territories.²⁸

Arguments regarding China's weakness in a plausible scenario for them taking Taiwan militarily in fact prove the risk inherent to the moment. Given Xi's apparent commitment to the unification of the island with the PRC, by force if necessary, and given the Chinese have the same capability to assess the weakness of their position that we do and may believe that the longer they wait, the worse their position will become, the window of opportunity for a Chinese military takeover is closing in their perception. Some analysts argue that China's economic contraction is not going to be reversed, and data reflects that their demographic decline certainly will not be.²⁹

Therefore, the best bet for the Chinese is to deter us from becoming involved, to convince us that in the event they do move on Taiwan, the United States should simply stay out of it—not because we would lose necessarily—but because of the questions they want us to ask: Is

this our fight? Is it worth what it would cost us in blood and treasure? No one believes we could defend Taiwan at this point without serious expenditures in casualties, military equipment, and money, perhaps extended over years. Simultaneously, the Chinese attempt to persuade the Taiwanese not to fight—again, because resistance simply is not worth the effort, the cost in lives, and the inevitable damage to so much of Taiwanese society.

The videos the PRC is posting to mainstream American sites about the strength (and capacities) of its military should be read through this lens as attempts to deter both American and Taiwanese responses to a PRC move on Taiwan. Many of these videos, if posted to sites intended for internal consumption, could easily be read as part of recruitment drives for the Chinese armed forces or as attempts to raise support and morale for such a war, whatever the costs, hardships, or losses a conflict might require.

But when posted to social media sites unavailable to the average Chinese citizen, the same material must be read differently. Posted to YouTube and thus unavailable to young Chinese men, the videos are hardly going to serve as effective components of a recruitment drive but instead as signs of capacity and will. ■

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Notes

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4. Philip M. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda*, 3rd ed. (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 31 July 2003); Fumio Ota, "Sun Tzu in Contemporary Chinese Strategy," *Joint Force Quarterly* 73 (2nd Quarter, 2014): 76–80, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-73/jfq-73_76-83_Ota.pdf?ver=2014-03-26-120732-250; Anne-Mary Brady and Wayne Juntao, "China's Strengthened New Order and the Role of Propaganda," *Journal of Contemporary China* 18, no. 62 (2009): 767–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670560903172832>.

5. For a quick history of propaganda efforts, see David Welch, *The Story of Propaganda in 50 Images* (London: British Library, 2022). Despite the title, the book has a good overview of the Nazi use of radio. In addition to their use of radio, the Nazis essentially nationalized the film industry, ensuring the only materials produced were those consistent with the messages the government had authorized. This was particularly true for newsreels. See Klaus Kreimeier, *The Ufa Story: A History of Germany's Greatest Film Company, 1918–1945*, trans. Robert and Rita Kimber (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
6. Benjamin H. Detenber and Robert F. Simons, "Roll 'Em: The Effects of Picture Motion on Emotional Responses," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 42, no. 1 (1998): 113–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838159809364437>; see also Robert F. Simons et al., "Attention to Television: Alpha Power and Its Relationship to Image Motion and Emotional Content," *Media Psychology* 5, no. 3 (2003): 283–301, https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532785XMEP0503_03.
7. Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Strongmen: Mussolini to the Present* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2021), 98. For example, Ben-Ghiat writes that only "about 30 percent of the population could read Italian when the [Mussolini] dictatorship started (most people were fluent in dialects) making visual propaganda crucial."
8. See Zhao Alexander Huang and Rui Wang, "'Panda Engagement' in China's Digital Public Diplomacy," *Asian Journal of Communication* 30, no. 2 (2020): 118–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2020.1725075>. China's "panda diplomacy" has gone on for decades, and it has made possible an extensive system of visual materials, both from the Chinese side and from Western zoos, teaching Western audiences that the "symbol" of China is cute, cuddly, adorable, friendly, easy to handle (since the majority of videos focus on babies, not full-grown adults). Many of these videos are available on YouTube, in Chinese, with no subtitles, and the language is completely irrelevant—the point is to watch someone playing with cute baby pandas.
9. Uri Hassan et al., "Neurocinematics: The Neuroscience of Film," *Projections* 2, no. 1 (Summer 2008): 1–26, <https://doi.org/10.3167/proj.2008.020102>; Abdorreza Naser Moghadasi, "Evaluation of Neurocinema as an Introduction to an Interdisciplinary Science," *Cinej Cinema Journal* 8, no. 2 (Fall 2020): 307–23, <https://doi.org/10.5195/cinej.2020.267>.
10. Regarding soft power, see Michael Keane, "Keeping Up with the Neighbors: China's Soft Power Ambitions," *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 3 (2010): 130–35, <http://doi.org/10.1353/cj.0.0218>; for a discussion of Chinese concerns over "cultural" trade imbalances, see Joseph Nye, "The Rise of China's Soft Power," Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 29 December 2005, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/rise-chinas-soft-power> (originally appeared in the *Asian Wall Street Journal*). The results are more of cultural products, at one point, being imported than exported. In 2005, the author who first coined the term soft power warned of China's rapid rise in that realm—and explicitly noted their lack of a Hollywood equivalent as one of the things holding them back.
11. The indispensable source on this argument is Erich Schwartzel, *Red Carpet: Hollywood, China, and the Global Battle for Cultural Supremacy* (New York: Penguin Press, 2022).
12. Shirley Li, "How Hollywood Sold Out to China," *The Atlantic* (website), 10 September 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2021/09/how-hollywood-sold-out-to-china/620021/>; Erich Schwartzel and Rachel Liang, "Not Even Tom Cruise Can Charm China's Moviegoers into Seeing Hollywood Films," *Wall Street Journal* (website), 20 July 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/not-even-tom-cruise-can-charm-chinas-moviegoers-into-seeing-hollywood-films-11629444444>.
13. Tang Siew Mun et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2019 Survey Report* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 29 January 2019), https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/TheStateofSEASurveyReport_2019.pdf. The ASEAN Studies Centre at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute conducted a survey across the region on China's soft power in 2019 but polled only regional experts and stakeholders. It does not suggest China's soft-power expenditures have been particularly successful. Only 8.9 percent of respondents believed China would become a benevolent power, while 45.4 percent believed China's goal was to turn the region into its sphere of influence (p. 18). Only 1.7 percent have "high confidence" China would do the right thing when it came to contributing to global peace and security, prosperity, and governance (p. 26) (Although 36 percent had little, and 14.6 percent had no confidence in the United States, so there's that [p. 30]). That said, the United States is still by far the choice of respondents as a location for their child's college education (p. 33). "China's \$10bn Annual Spending on Soft Power Has Bought Little of It," *Economist* (website), 24 May 2019, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2019/05/24/chinas-10bn-annual-spending-on-soft-power-has-bought-little-of-it>. This article begins with two charts that tell the story: the line representing the number of Chinese cultural institutions overseas goes diagonally to the right, while "average net approval of Chinese leadership" in 123 countries goes almost straight down, though it does begin to bounce back a bit.
14. Shibani Mahtani and Ore Huiying, "China's Promise of Prosperity Brought Laos Debt—and Distress," *Washington Post* (website), 12 October 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2023/laos-debt-china-belt-road/>.
15. Simon Denyer, "China's Scary Lesson to the World: Censoring the Internet Works," *Washington Post* (website), 23 May 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia-pacific/chinas-scary-lesson-to-the-world-censoring-the-internet-works/2016/05/23/413afe78-fff3-11e5-8bb1-f124a43f84dc_story.html.
16. Bethany Allen, *Beijing Rules: China's Quest for Global Influence* (London: John Murray Publishers, 2023), 135. WeChat is a distinct platform used by Chinese speakers living outside of China, and many users are largely dependent on it. As a result, users must be very cautious: if they don't self-censor, they risk having their accounts blocked by Chinese authorities, and since many link their bank accounts to the platform that is a risk they can't take. But, again, materials posted clearly are obviously not intended to persuade the non-Chinese. See Alvin Lim, *A Look into WeChat: Enabling an Analyst to Search and Monitor Content* (Riga, LV: NATO Centre for Strategic Excellence, January 2022), <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/download/A-look-into-WeChat-FINAL-32ff9.pdf>.
17. Global Engagement Center, *Reshape the Global Information Environment*, 8.
18. Mark D. Robinson and Cori E. Dauber, "Grading the Quality of ISIS Videos: A Metric for Assessing the Technical Sophistication of Digital Video Propaganda," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 42, no. 1–2 (2019): 70–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1513693>.
19. Cori E. Dauber et al., "Call of Duty Jihad: How the Video Game Motif Has Migrated Downstream from Islamic State Propaganda Videos," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 3 (June 2019): 17–31, <https://pt.icct.nl/article/call-duty-jihad-how-video-game-motif-has-migrated-downstream-islamic-state-propaganda>.

20. Ashley Mattheis, Mark Robinson, and Austin Blair, "Plug and Play Propaganda: Understanding Production Quality in Atomwaffen Division Videos," Global Network on Extremism and Technology, 23 July 2020, <https://gnet-research.org/2020/07/23/plug-and-play-propaganda-understanding-production-quality-in-atomwaffen-division-videos/>.

21. Chinese Navy: "To the Blue Sea"/Promo/003 Aircraft Carrier to be Revealed/PLAN 73rd Anniversary, posted by "時事中News from China," YouTube video, 6:18, 22 April 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hv8yjuyaGSw>.

22. *The Conversation*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola (Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures, 1974).

23. China's PLA Army Enlists Rap-Style Music Video to Recruit Young Soldiers, posted by "People's Daily, China 人民日报," YouTube video, 3:06, 2 May 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rTdOnDSPZ_Q. For what it's worth, this is described by whoever made the post as "the first hip-hop video made by the PLA."

24. Brian G. Southwell, "Information Overload? Advertisement Editing and Memory Hindrance," *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 13, no. 1 (2005): 26–40, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15456889ajc1301_2.

25. Alistair Gale, "China's Military Is Catching Up to the US. Is It Ready for Battle?," *Wall Street Journal* (website), 20 October 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-military-us-taiwan-xi-11666268994>.

26. See Mark F. Cancian, Matthew Cancian, and Eric Heginbotham, *The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2023), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/first-battle-next-war-wargaming-chinese-invasion-taiwan>.

27. Julian E. Barnes and Edward Wong, "In Risky Hunt for Secrets, U.S. and China Expand Global Spy Operations," *New York Times* (website), 17 September 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/17/us/politics/us-china-global-spy-operations.html>. That is why Chinese intelligence gathering seems to be currently laser focused on answering exactly that question.

28. Ross Babbage, *The Next Major War: Can the US and Its Allies Win against China?* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2023): 15.

29. *Ibid.*, 1–11. Babbage argues that from the Chinese point of view, the fear is that their own strategic power may have peaked, and therefore it's possible that their window of opportunity is closing. Regarding the demographic constraints, see page 42.

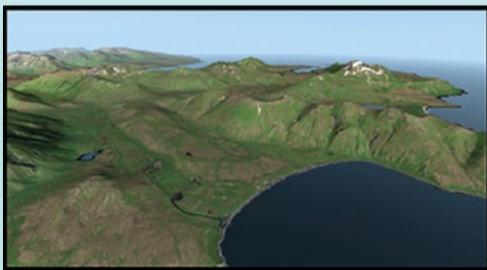


New Virtual Staff Ride



The Battle of Attu (May 1943)

Combat Studies Institute is currently developing a virtual staff ride (VSR) for the Battle of Attu, part of the campaign in the Aleutian Islands against the Japanese in World War Two. The VSR is set for release in 2024, and it will provide insights into fighting on difficult terrain that includes the tundra-like surface known as muskeg as well as a challenging climate. The study will also offer relevant insights into numerous aspects of warfare to include offensive and defensive operations, joint operations, and mission command. This staff ride will demonstrate how the 7th Division battled and defeated nature's obstacles as well as the Japanese.



Screen shot of Attu terrain in development. The VSR technician is replicating the rivers and lakes as they appeared in 1943.

The Battle of Attu uses simulated 3D terrain presented in front of the audience to help immerse participants in the terrain. It serves as an excellent training event for units interested in fighting on difficult terrain and in a tough climate, and also units that want to become better acquainted with the Northern Pacific region.

To learn more about virtual staff rides, visit <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Educational-Services/Staff-Ride-Team-Offerings/>



Table 1. Rap Style

"Rap Style"	CRITERION	SCORE										NOTES	
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
MESSAGING													
AUDIENCE													
	Explicit Target Audience												
	Appeal												
	Target Delivery Success												
	Marketing												
CONTENT													
	CHARACTER: Continuity (PLA One=All)												
	CHARACTER: Identifiable, Empathy, Quality of Acting												
	Content Organization												
	Narratives and Implication												
	SYMBOLOLOGY: Confucist												
	SYMBOLOLOGY: Marxist												
	SYMBOLOLOGY: Nationalist												
	Visual/Artistic Sophistication												
MESSAGE													
	Focused Valence of Message												
	Graphics												
	Intention												
	Media Element Delivery												
	Metadata												
	Scale of Message -- local, regional, national, or international												
	Specific Message Success												
MEDIA PRODUCTION													
OVERALL TECHNICAL IMPACT													
	Cinematography												
	Delivery Technique - Compression												
	DRC-A												
	DRC-V												
	Editing Craft Enhances Video/Story												
	Evidence of Pre-Production												
	Evidence of Production												
	Evidence of Post-Production												
	Image Framing (Scale: flattened to 3D or intention)												
	Resolution: audio/video												
	Set: Quality and Location												
	SOPHISTICATION OF AESTHETIC CHOICES: A trained eye/hand exerts standardized industry stylists												

Table 1. Rap Style (continued)

CULTURALLY SPECIFIC AESTHETICS (category name tentative???)																
CRAFT EDITS: reinforces spontaneity and impatience informed by the democratization of digital media																
CRAFT EDITS: youth style (MTV aesthetic) comprised of rapid edits, flickering, flash edits, reverse, slow motion																
Culturally Informed Aesthetic - a Trained Eye/Hand Exerts Standardized, Historic Cultural Stylistics																
Poetic - Characterized by the removal of -- Shift from strict Chinese access points to more universal																
Reflects the entertainment maker is most familiar with, given languages world appeal and propogation over movie marketing and filtering																
Timing -- reflects target demographic typical/pop forms (games as example)																

(Table by authors)

Table 2. To the Blue Sea

"Rap Style"	CRITERION	SCORE										NOTES		
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10			
MESSAGING														
AUDIENCE														
	Explicit Target Audience													Generally sophisticated but delivery image comp, weak, not tremendous - lower than others in series - appeared
	Appeal													
	Target Delivery Success													
	Marketing													
CONTENT														
	CHARACTER: Continuity (PLA One=All)													
	CHARACTER: Identifiable, Empathy, Quality of Acting													
	Content Organization													
	Narratives and Implication													
	SYMBOLOLOGY: Confucist													
	SYMBOLOLOGY: Marxist													
	SYMBOLOLOGY: Nationalist													
	Visual/Artistic Sophistication													
MESSAGE														
	Focused Valence of Message													
	Graphics													
	Intention													
	Media Element Delivery													
	Metadata													
	Scale of Message -- local, regional, national, or international													
	Specific Message Success													
MEDIA PRODUCTION														
OVERALL TECHNICAL IMPACT														
	Cinematography													
	Delivery Technique - Compression													
	DRC-A													
	DRC-V													
	Editing Craft Enhances Video/Story													
	Evidence of Pre-Production													
	Evidence of Production													
	Evidence of Post-Production													
	Image Framing (Scale: flattened to 3D or intention)													
	Resolution: audio/video													
	Set: Quality and Location													

Table 2. To the Blue Sea (continued)

CULTURALLY SPECIFIC AESTHETICS (category name tentative???)																			
CRAFT EDITS: reinforces spontaneity and impatience informed by the democratization of digital media																			
CRAFT EDITS: youth style (MTV aesthetic) comprised of rapid edits, flickering, flash edits, reverse, slow motion																			
Culturally Informed Aesthetic - a Trained Eye/Hand Exerts Standardized, Historic Cultural Stylistics																			
Poetic - Characterized by the removal of -- Shift from strict Chinese access points to more universal																			
Reflects the entertainment maker is most familiar with, given languages world appeal and propogation over movie marketing and filtering																			
Timing -- reflects target demographic typical/pop forms (games as example)																			

(Table by authors)