When Autocrats Threaten Citizens With Violence: Evidence from China*

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Abstract

When do autocrats employ their propaganda apparatuses to threaten citizens with violence? And do these threats condition citizen behavior? We develop a theory of propaganda-based threats in autocracies that builds on insights from experimental psychology. We argue that even credible threats of violence are costly, and so are reserved for moments when protests are most likely. Since threats of violence are employed sparingly, we also expect them to be effective. We test the theory with data from China, the world's most populous autocracy. We collect all 164,707 articles published between 2009 and 2016 in the *Workers' Daily*, a state-run newspaper that focuses on domestic issues and targets a non-elite audience. The Chinese government, we find, employs propaganda-based threats overwhelmingly around the anniversaries of ethnic separatist movements in Tibet and Xinjiang provinces. Using an instrumental variables strategy, we show that these threats decrease protest rates by a large margin.

Word Count: 12,453

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1 Introduction

The dynamics of autocratic politics have undergone important shifts since the end of the Cold War. As the rate of elite coups has declined (Goemans and Marinov 2014), mass protests have emerged as a chief threat to autocratic survival. In turn, scholars have sought to understand the dynamics of protest: who participates (Rosenfeld 2017), how they organize (Howard and Hussain 2013), and which tactics are most effective (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Beber, Roessler and Scacco 2014; Enos, Kaufman and Sands 2017). Scholars have also sought to understand how autocrats attempt to inoculate themselves: when autocrats incarcerate dissidents (Truex 2018), under what circumstances repression is circumscribed by external constraints (Carnegie and Marinov 2017), and how autocrats employ censorship and propaganda to manipulate their citizens' beliefs (King, Pan and Roberts 2013; Huang 2015; Little 2017; King, Pan and Roberts 2017; Rozenas and Stukal 2018).

This paper addresses two questions: When do autocrats use their propaganda apparatuses to threaten citizens with violence? Are these threats effective? We develop a theory of propaganda-based threats that builds on insights from experimental psychology. We argue that threats of violence are costly. For propaganda apparatuses that aim to persuade citizens of regime merits – and hence invest in acquiring some amount of credibility – threats of violence undermine those efforts. For propaganda apparatuses that aim to signal to citizens the regime's repressive capacity – for instance, by broadcasting absurdly positive propaganda that everyone knows to be false – the force of a threat may diminish in how often it is issued. Threats of violence may also give special salience to moments that are already politically sensitive: moments when citizens are inclined to protest a regime's past crimes. For all these reasons, we expect propaganda-based threats of violence to be used sparingly: when the regime is most concerned about mass protests. Since we expect threats to be deployed to maximize their effects on citizen behavior, we also expect threats to be effective.

To answer these questions, we focus on China, the world's most populous autocracy. We employ computational tools to collect all 164,707 articles published between 2009 and 2016 in the *Workers' Daily (工人日报)*, a state-run newspaper that focuses on domestic issues for a non-elite audience. We then identified every explicit threat of violence against citizens. We find that threats are overwhelmingly associated with the anniversaries of ethnic separatist movements in Tibet and Xinjiang provinces: the Tibetan "Liberation," Tibetan Rebellion, Serf Emancipation Day, and Xinjiang Uprising. This is consistent with our theoretical expectations, but also adds nuance. Explicit threats of violence appear to be targeted disproportionately at political out-groups: ethnic or regional identity groups that are excluded from the regime's core constituency. Huang (2015) suggests that the Chinese government's pro-regime propaganda is itself interpreted as threatening by citizens. Consistent with this, we find that explicit threats of violence are tightly correlated with spikes in pro-regime propaganda.

In turn, the calendar of propaganda-based threats that we uncover suggests a novel identification strategy that enables us to plausibly measure the causal effect of propaganda-based threats on popular protest. Our identification strategy rests on two features of China's political geography. First, propaganda in the *Workers' Daily* is set at the national level, but must occasionally respond to local conditions, which are salient in one province but unknown in other provinces. As a result, citizens in one province are occasionally "treated" with propaganda content that is intended for citizens in geographically and culturally distant provinces. Second, because China is so ethnically diverse and geographically sprawling, the ethnic separatist anniversaries in Tibet and Xinjiang that drive propaganda-based threats are salient only in those provinces, and effectively unknown elsewhere. We argue that ethnic separatist anniversaries in Tibet and Xinjiang plausibly condition protest rates in *geographically and culturally distant provinces* only through the propaganda-based threats that the regime issues via the propaganda apparatus.

We provide a range of evidence that this is indeed the case. First, we conducted a nationally representative survey that asks citizens to identify the dates of a range of holidays, anniversaries, and events. As expected, the dates of these ethnic separatist anniversaries are unknown to citizens outside Tibet and Xinjiang, which makes clear that they lack political salience in geographically and culturally distant provinces. Second, we show that China's security apparatus does not repress protests outside Tibet and Xinjiang during these separatist anniversaries *at higher rates* than other days. This suggests that, during ethnic separatist anniversaries, Chinese security services are *not* on high alert *outside* Tibet and Xinjiang provinces. Finally, as a precaution, we exclude not only Tibet and Xinjiang from our analysis, but also seven other provinces that are geographically contiguous, contain substantial numbers of co-ethnics, or contain substantial numbers of other ethnic minorities. After dropping these nine provinces, we are left with a sample that nonetheless includes 88.5% of Chinese citizens. We find that propaganda-based threats indeed have a plausibly causal effect on protest levels nationwide. By doubling the number of references to "stability" or "harmony" (from 9 references per day to 18), China's propaganda apparatus halves the number of protests over the course of the subsequent week.

To the best of our knowledge, this paper is the first to study – and measure the effects of – explicit threats of violence that autocrats issue to citizens via the propaganda apparatus. In so doing, it advances two growing literatures. Scholars have learned a tremendous amount about autocratic propaganda: why it is employed (Edmond 2013; Gehlbach and Sonin 2014; Huang 2015), when (Egorov, Guriev and Sonin 2009; Qin, Strömberg and Wu 2018; Rozenas and Stukal 2018), its effects (DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007; Enikolopov, Petrova and Zhuravskaya 2011; Adena et al. 2015), and the cognitive mechanisms whereby those effects are achieved (Little 2017). Broadly, this literature conceptualizes propaganda as designed to persuade citizens: either of the regime's merits or its repressive capacity (Gehlbach, Svolik and Sonin 2016, 578). Scholars have also begun to take seriously the role of fear in repressive environments. Young (2018), for instance, finds that cuing

fears of political violence renders citizens less willing to engage in dissent, even without any new information about the government's capacity for violence or willingness to employ it. Accordingly, Young (2018) concludes, "it may be easier for autocrats to influence citizens through the more emotional channels of propaganda, including fear of repression." Most broadly, this paper suggests that threats of violence are a critical component of political communication in autocracies, and that these threats have distinctive analytical properties. Our results are consistent with the possibility that autocrats use propaganda to cue fear strategically in order to discourage collective action.

This paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents our theoretical framework. Section 3 introduces our corpus of *Workers' Daily* articles and describes our measures of threats. Section 4 shows that propaganda-based threats are driven overwhelmingly by the anniversaries of ethnic separatist movements in Tibet and Xinjiang. Section 5 provides evidence that explicit threats of violence in the *Workers' Daily* reduce protest rates. Section 6 concludes with suggestions for future research. The Online Appendix provides additional information.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Strategies of Autocratic Propaganda: Persuasion vs Domination

Scholars increasingly recognize that autocrats employ two distinctive propaganda strategies. In one, propaganda serves to persuade citizens of regime merits. There are a range of ways that propaganda apparatuses achieve this. They can acquire a reputation for credibility by occasionally conceding bad news, (Gehlbach and Sonin 2014; Guriev and Treisman 2015; Egorov, Guriev and Sonin 2009; Chen and Xu 2015), or they can concede bad news but frame it in some way that is both plausible and that obscures the government's responsibility (Rozenas and Stukal 2018). This strategy has a long historical antecedent. Joseph Goebbels, architect of Nazi Germany's propaganda apparatus, insisted on truth, "otherwise the enemy or the facts might expose falsehoods." Since broadcasting exclusively positive news would "fairly compel the German public to listen to foreign and enemy broadcasts," Goebbels instructed state media to report information that damaged the government (Doob 1950). This strategy also appears to underpin state television in Vladimir Putin's Russia (Enikolopov, Petrova and Zhuravskaya 2011; Adena et al. 2015; Rozenas and Stukal 2018).

In the other strategy, propaganda serves to signal to citizens the autocrat's capacity for repression (Edmond 2013). As George Orwell wrote, forcing citizens to consume propaganda that everyone knows to be false serves to dominate them, and to broadcast the regime's capacity for domination to others. In turn, the regime's capacity for repression becomes common knowledge among citizens, which helps suppress dissent (Little 2017). This insight underlies Wedeen (1999)'s account of Syria under Hafez al-Assad and Huang (2015)'s work in contemporary China. Huang (2015, 420) describes it succinctly: "Such propaganda is not meant to 'brainwash' people …about how good the government is, but rather to forewarn the society about how strong it is via the act of

the propaganda itself." Note that when propaganda is designed to dominate citizens – and to signal their domination to other citizens – absurdly positive coverage of the regime is itself threatening.

2.2 Why Propaganda-Based Threats are Useful

We define a threat as some explicit – or at least commonly understood – claim by the government that anti-regime behavior will be met with violence. As a result, it is analytically distinct from the sort of absurd pro-regime propaganda that serves to dominate citizens. Repressive governments can threaten citizens in a range of ways. They can dispatch security forces to potential protest locations. They can employ violence against certain segments of the population to discourage collective action among some other segment of the population. They can use codewords that remind citizens of past violence or make clear that the government will employ violence in the future in response to certain behaviors. For these threats to shape citizen behavior, they must be received. This is the chief benefit of broadcasting a threat via the propaganda apparatus. Repressive governments can threaten many citizens simultaneously, at relatively little cost.

Explicit threats of violence may render citizens less likely to engage in protest in a range of ways. Perhaps most obviously, explicit threats of violence may signal to citizens the consequences of a certain form of dissent, or the consequences of dissent at a given moment. Of course, citizens may know the government's capacity for violence, but explicit threats of violence may serve as a vivid reminder. Alternatively, threats of violence may also induce a purely emotional response: *fear*. In Zimbabwe, for instance, Young (2018) finds that cuing fears of political violence among opposition sympathizers reduces their willingness to engage in anti-regime dissent, even without acquiring any new information about the government's capacity for violence or willingness to employ it. Aldama, Vásquez-Cortés and Young (2018) explore this formally. Political psychologists find that fear leads to more pessimistic risk assessment, and hence risk aversion (Johnson and Tversky 1983; Lerner and Keltner 2000, 81; Lerner et al. 2003; Druckman and McDermott 2008; Guiso, Sapienza and Zingales 2013; Cohn et al. 2015).

In short, threats of violence are useful. They may remind citizens of the consequences of protest, or they may cue fear. Each channel should reduce the likelihood of protest.

2.3 Why Propaganda-Based Threats are Costly

Regardless of whether autocrats employ propaganda to persuade or to dominate – from the discussion in Section 2.1 – issuing explicit threats of violence is also costly. We identify three mechanisms for this.

2.3.1 Mechanism 1: Source Derogation (Propaganda as Persuasion)

First, when pro-regime propaganda aims to persuade citizens of regime merits, we expect the *source derogation* mechanism to be salient. The reason is that publishing threats alongside content that is designed to persuade citizens should invalidate the persuasive content. Put simply, a regime that threatens citizens with violence for asserting basic rights does not privilege their interests. This mechanism is consistent with Bayesian rationality. If citizens are strictly rational, then, in response to threats, citizens should update their beliefs about the regime's commitment to citizens' interests.

Source derogation has been widely accepted among psychologists, who have long explored why individuals resist persuasion.[1] Many of these accounts rest on the theory of psychological reactance, which suggests that humans have an innate desire for autonomy and independence. When that freedom is somehow threatened or eliminated, they are compelled to maintain, or restore, the opinion or behavior that was threatened (Brehm and Brehm 1981; Burgoon et al. 2002; Rains 2013). Psychologists refer to these as "threats to freedom." These threats may be mild: messages that are clearly designed to limit an individual's autonomy to craft and maintain their own beliefs. These threats may also be more strident: messages that use the imperative form or otherwise leave no option for refusal (Kronrod, Grinstein and Wathieu 2012). In turn, messages that constitute threats to freedom compel individuals to contest a message's *source*, and hence elicit source derogation. Smith (1977) documents source derogation along three dimensions: objectiveness, expertness, and trustworthiness. Put simply, when exposed to threatening information, individuals evaluate the source of the message "as someone less expert, as less objective, and as less trustworthy."

The source derogation mechanism has clear implications for propaganda-based threats. Building credibility with readers requires conceding policy failures (Gehlbach and Sonin 2014; Rozenas and Stukal 2018), which makes them common knowledge and helps citizens coordinate protests (Egorov, Guriev and Sonin 2009). In short, building credibility is costly. Propaganda apparatuses that aim to persuade citizens of regime merits should attempt to avoid source derogation, rendering threats of violence rare.

2.3.2 Mechanism 2: Boomerang Effect (Propaganda as Persuasion or Domination)

Messages that constitute threats to an individual's freedom may elicit a second response: a *boomerang effect*, in which individuals contest the message's *content*. Individuals do so by engaging in less (more) of the encouraged (discouraged) behavior (Baek, Yoon and Kim 2015). As a result, messages that include threats to freedom may not only prove ineffective, but also lead to the opposite of the desired result (Clee and Wicklund 1980; Ringold 2002). The boomerang effect also has clear implications for understanding propaganda-based threats in autocracies. If citizens perceive the threat as a warning against mass protests in response to an event or grievance, then the boomerang effect suggests that the threat itself could endow that event or grievance with some additional or

[1] For one prominent account about when citizens are open to persuasion, see Cialdini (2006).

special salience. In turn, the explicit threat may help catalyze the episode of collective action that it sought to discourage. This, indeed, is one reason why Chinese censorship emboldens China's online activists to engage in even more dissent than they would otherwise (Roberts 2018; Hobbs and Roberts 2018). The boomerang effect can be placed in a Bayesian context as well. By issuing a threat prior to some event, a regime may signal to citizens that it regards that event as a focal moment for protests: that the regime believes that other citizens are prepared to engage in collective action around a specific day.

The boomerang effect has clear precedence in China. On April 26, 1989, the *People's Daily* published an editorial that was profoundly threatening. There would be "no peace," it warned, if student protesters failed to disband. The editorial elicited a boomerang effect: Tens of thousands of citizens joined students in Tiananmen Square the next day. In short, the boomerang effect should deter propaganda-based threats of violence in both strategic contexts: where autocrats employ propaganda to persuade and to dominate.

2.3.3 Mechanism 3: Desensitization (Propaganda as Domination)

Even if absurdly positive propaganda makes the regime's repressive capacity common knowledge among citizens, there is no *ex ante* reason to believe that propaganda apparatuses employ pro-regime propaganda and explicit threats in the same way, at the same time, or to the same effect. Indeed, when pro-regime propaganda is explicitly designed to threaten citizens, as Huang (2015) argues, regimes may wish to employ explicit threats of violence as well. The reason is that the force of absurdly positive propaganda may diminish over time. In turn, explicit threats of violence may provide a useful and vivid reminder of the regime's capacity for violence.

Psychologists refer to this mechanism as *desensitization*: "a reduction in emotion-related physiological reactivity to real violence" (Carnagey, Anderson and Bushman 2007). Desensitization has been widely documented by experimental psychologists. The canonical experiment entails exposing treatment and control groups to some manner of violence via some media platform, and then measuring the physiological responses of both groups to some subsequent exposure to violent stimulus. To ensure that the desensitization mechanism is robust, psychologists have varied a range of features in the canonical experiment: the medium of exposure to violence (television, movies, and video games), the kind of violence to which subjects are exposed (fictitious or real-life), age (children or adult), and measurement of the physiological response (heart rate or galvanic skin response). Across variants, past exposure to violence renders people less sensitive to violence in the future.[2] The link between repeated exposure to violence and subsequent desensitization is so widely accepted that it now constitutes part of military training (Grossman and Degaetano 1999).

We are unaware of any experimental studies that test whether individuals become desensitized to

[2]The literature on desensitization is large. See, among others, Lazarus et al. (1962), Linz, Donnerstein and Adams (1989), Thomas et al. (1977), Thomas (1982), Cline, Croft and Courrier (1973), Bartholow, Bushman and Sestir (2006), and Carnagey, Anderson and Bushman (2007).

threats of violence in the same way as to *actual violence*. One analog, however, may be how citizens in Western democracies have responded to threats of terrorism. Although this literature is small, scholars have observed important variation. Waxman (2011)'s central argument is that, in response to *sustained* terrorist attacks during the Palestinian Intifada, Israeli citizens "became accustomed to terrorism and adapted accordingly. …The effects of ongoing, chronic terrorism may significantly differ from the effects of a one-off terrorist attack." For Waxman (2011), American citizens were so affected by the September 11, 2001, attacks precisely because they had no precedence. This view was anticipated by Wardlaw (1989), who predicted that repeated terrorist attacks would ultimately result in a society's indifference, and is increasingly common in the popular press. In *Slate*, two political scientists dubbed it "terrorism fatigue": "ISIS attacks," they wrote, "are losing their ability to terrify" (Amarasingam and Clarke 2017).

2.4 Hypotheses

These mechanisms suggest that propaganda-based threats of violence are costly. The source derogation mechanism suggests that, when propaganda aims to persuade, threats invalidate its capacity to do so. The desensitization mechanism suggests that repeated threats over time diminish their force. The boomerang effect suggests that threats may endow politically salient grievances or moments with even more significance to citizens. For all these reasons, threats of violence should be reserved for when autocrats need them most: when protests are most threatening. This constitutes our first hypothesis, and it focuses on *temporal* variation within countries.

Our second hypothesis focuses on cross-country variation in how often threats are employed. The source derogation mechanism suggests propaganda-based threats should be especially costly where autocrats employ propaganda to persuade citizens of regime merits. The reason, again, is that threats of violence undermine these claims. In a setting like China, where propaganda signals the regime's capacity to dominate its citizens, we expect the baseline threat rate to be higher than autocracies that use propaganda to persuade. Put differently, the protest likelihood threshold for issuing a threat should be lower in autocracies, like China, that use propaganda to dominate rather than persuade.

Finally, since propaganda-based threats should be employed sparingly, we expect them to be effective. To be sure, whether propaganda-based threats reduce protest rates depends on a range of factors: how frustrated citizens are, how mobilized they are, how vulnerable they believe the regime is. But if autocrats reserve threats of violence for moments of genuine crisis, then citizens should know this. By reminding them of the consequences of protest, explicit threats should condition their behavior.

For reasons of data availability, we restrict attention to the first and third hypotheses: that explicit threats of violence are driven by a society's calendar of collective action, and that threats of violence render protests less likely.

3 Data

3.1 China and the *Workers' Daily*

Empirically, we focus on China, where the government's propaganda apparatus serves to broadcast its capacity for repression (Huang 2015). Although students of propaganda routinely focus on the *People's Daily*, which circulates primarily among elites, we focus on the *Workers' Daily*, which circulates widely among the working classes. It reports a daily circulation of 960,000, nearly twice the weekday circulation of the *New York Times*.[3]

Mao Zedong established the *Workers' Daily* in 1949, just months after the PRC was founded. It targeted Chinese workers, who were then central to the CCP's legitimacy. Its language was colloquial, and it routinely replaced "politicized" content from the *People's Daily* with labor issues of genuine interest to readers. The *Workers' Daily* even highlighted regime policy failures of particular concern to labor: misuse of bonuses, deprivation of leisure time, and worker safety. Reflecting this, on the eve of the Cultural Revolution, the *Workers' Daily* had a daily circulation of 400,000. Although the *Workers' Daily* ceased publication during the Cultural Revolution, during the 1980s it reached a daily circulation of 2,440,000.[4]

China's economic take-off transformed the status of workers: from politically important and socially mainstream to weak and marginalized. Accordingly, the *Workers' Daily* shifted its target audience. In addition to its original readership of industrial labor, union leaders, and SOE employees, the *Workers' Daily* now caters to migrant workers, intellectuals, and civil servants.[5] The *Workers' Daily* has retained its reputation for relatively legitimate news content, and its target audience is now far broader than at any point in its year history.

3.1.1 Measuring Propaganda-Based Threats: Supervised Learning

To identify threats of violence in the *Workers' Daily*, we scraped the entire *Workers' Daily* online archive between 2009 and 2016, which yielded 164,707 unique articles. We then read several thousand articles to create a list of all possible coverage topics. We identified 29 topics, which appear in Table 1. We randomly sampled 500 articles, which we refer to as our training set, and labeled each with as many topic labels as appropriate.

[3] On Weibo, China's social media platform, the *Workers' Daily* counts 1,400,000 subscribers.
[4] http://oilobserver.com/history/article/922
[5] https://baike.baidu.com/item/工人日报/10001344

Table 1: Topic List

corruption	culture	democracy and rights	economy
education	electoral politics	environment	government action
international cooperation	international news	law enforcement	legal system
media	military	nation	natural disaster
obituary	protest	public health	religion
science	social	sports	stability
terrorism	traffic	war	weather
youth			

Note: The blue label reflects our gold standard set of threats: articles which focus on social stability maintenance. The red label reflects our broader measure of threats: articles that discuss law enforcement capabilities and the internal security apparatus.

We identified two coverage topics that routinely threaten citizens. They appear in Table 1 in blue and red, respectively. The first is widely regarded by observers of Chinese politics as profoundly threatening: allusions to "social stability maintenance" (维稳). "The term," Huang (2015, 426) writes, "is broadly understood as a code word for maintaining the stability of the existing regime."[6] It is routinely associated with Deng Xiaoping's response to the Tiananmen Square massacre: "stability overrides everything." We regard articles labeled as "social stability" as constituting our gold standard. This set has no false positives: Each social stability article is profoundly threatening. To accommodate the possibility of false negatives – articles that threaten in some other way – we identify a second topic, which highlights the capacity of the law enforcement apparatus. By emphasizing the loyalty and efficiency of regime security services, the propaganda apparatus may communicate to citizens that anti-regime behavior will be quickly detected and repressed. We refer to this as our "law enforcement" set of threat articles.

After labeling our training set, we processed our corpus for text analysis and implemented a multi-label topic model.[7] Between 2009 and 2016, our classifier identified 16 social stability articles (2.3 per year) and 45 law enforcement articles (6.4 per year). We validate our classifier in two ways. First, we asked a native speaker to read a random sample of 300 articles, and, to each, apply all appropriate topic labels. We then compared these human classification decisions with the results of the topic model. We did so by employing a binary classification decision *for each topic in each article*: whether, for instance, a social stability tag or a law enforcement tag was appropriately

[6]See also Chen (2013), Steinhardt (2016), Yue (2012), Benney (2016), Yang (2017), Sandby-Thomas (2011), and Wang and Minzner (2015).

[7]Before classifying articles, we employed standard text preprocessing practices. We removed numbers, symbols, and punctuation. We used the `jieba` segmenting algorithm to split chunks of Chinese text into constituent words. We used the `multilabel` classifier in Python's `sklearn` module. The multi-label classifier employs a linear support vector classifier one-versus-rest model to assign as many topics as appropriate to test set articles.

applied. We then computed an overall accuracy rate by topic. Figure 1 reports these accuracy rates. For each topic along the y-axis, the cells are shaded by accuracy rate. The legend on the right visualizes our accuracy gradient, with red representing random accuracy and blue representing perfect accuracy. The accuracy rates, which appear in gray are high across topics, and especially so for threat labels. Our classifier identified articles about social stability with a 95% accuracy rate and articles about law enforcement with an 89% accuracy rate. We also validate the topic model by inspecting the most common words for each topic. The results appear in the Online Appendix. Again, it has substantial validity.

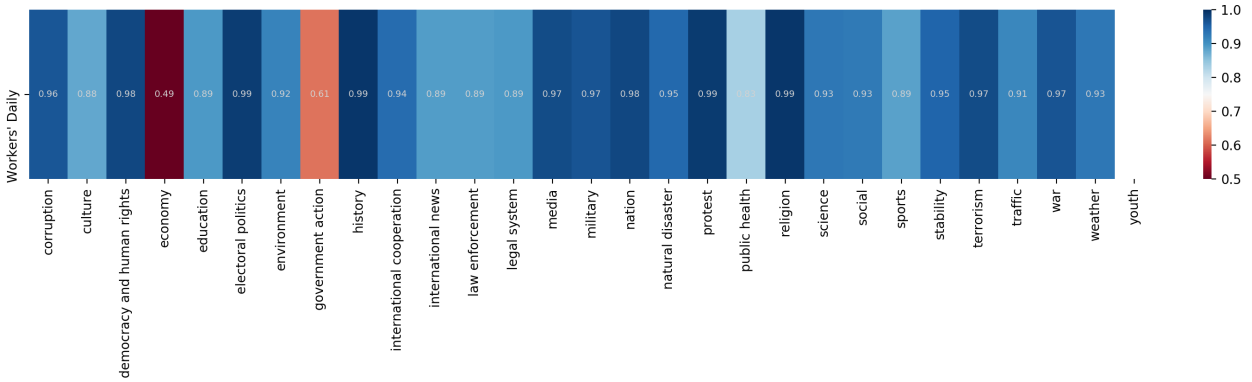

Figure 1: Validation of the classifier.

3.1.2 Measuring Propaganda-Based Threats: Word Frequency Counts

We identify propaganda-based threats in a second way: by measuring frequency counts for two terms that are closely associated with repression in China: "stability" (稳定) and "harmony" (和谐) . "Stability" is routinely employed to underscore the regime's commitment to maintaining social stability. "Harmony" is so widely identified as a threat that it has entered colloquial speech. The phrase "being harmonized" (被和谐了) is used as a euphemism for being detained, arrested, or censored. Critically, these words are seldom employed *not* in a threatening context. The Online Appendix presents a series of articles that make this clear.

These word frequency counts are particularly attractive for measurement purposes. The topic labels from Section 3.1.1 constitute a dichotomous indicator: whether some article j focused on either social stability or law enforcement. It includes no information about an article's length, or what share of the article sought to threaten citizens with violence. We show below that the *Workers' Daily* generally publishes no more than one such article per day. By contrast, from the empirical distributions in Figure 2, these word frequency counts are continuous: combined, ranging from 0 to 188 per day, with a mean daily count of 17.3. Accordingly, they enable us to measure

how threatening was *Workers' Daily* content on day t.

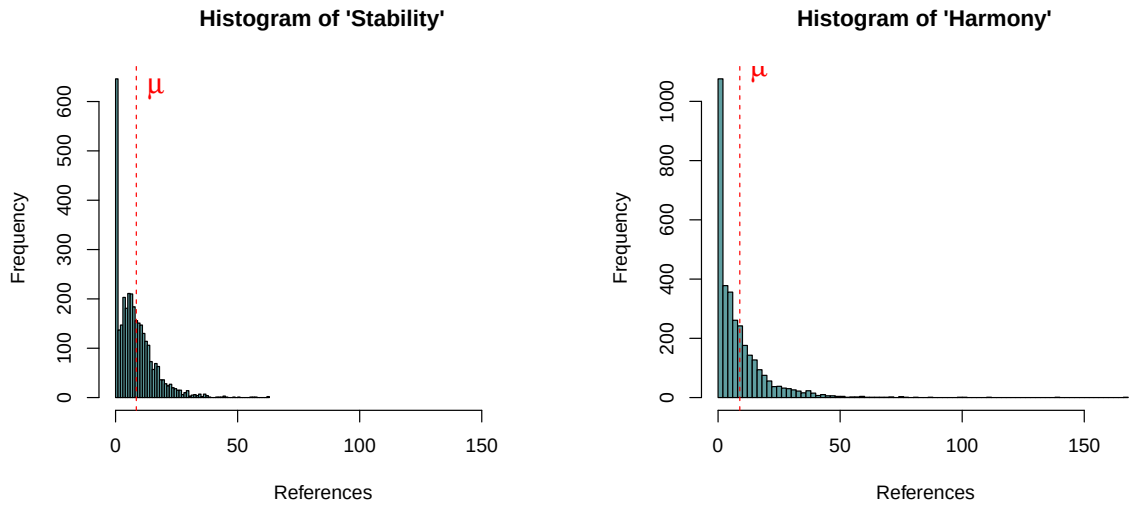

Figure 2: Histogram of word frequency counts. The left panel gives the distribution of "stability" references per day. The right panel gives the distribution of "harmony" references per day. Mean values are shown in red.

3.2 Collective Action in China

We use protest data from Manfred Elfstrom and the China Labour Bulletin (CLB), a non-governmental organization in Hong Kong that advocates for labor rights in China. Drawing on international, domestic, and social media, they maintain a geocoded dataset of all known strikes and protests. Elfstrom's dataset covers the period between 2006 and 2012, while the CLB dataset covers the period between 2011 and 2016.[8] To maximize coverage, we merged the Elfstrom and CLB datasets. We did so after confirming that their respective coding rules and sources are essentially identical, as all available information suggests they are. We exploit the fact that the two datasets overlap in 2011 and 2012. In the Online Appendix, we show that the two datasets are essentially identical in 2011 and 2012. Accordingly, the variable $Protests_t$ records the number of protests in province i on day t. For 2006 through 2010, we use Elfstrom's data; for 2011 through 2016, we use CLB data. We also employ year-level fixed effects to accommodate unobserved differences in the data generating process.

Figure 3 presents two empirical distributions: the number of protests each day, and the number of protests over the course of the coming week. The mean values for the two distributions – 2.9

[8]See Elfstrom (2019) for an introduction to these data. An earlier version of these data covering 2008-2012 was analyzed by Distelhorst and Hou (2017). Note that social media reports are an accepted way to measure unrest in China, as the government does not release official data on protests (Cai 2010; Wallace and Weiss 2015).

and 20.2, respectively – are shown in red. We use both protest measures as outcome variables in the statistical models below. The Online Appendix includes a range of descriptive statistics about protests by province and over time. There is some evidence that, at the province level, protests are correlated with economic output, which may reflect higher levels of social media use or urbanization rate. Likewise, there is also evidence that the rate of protests has increased over time.

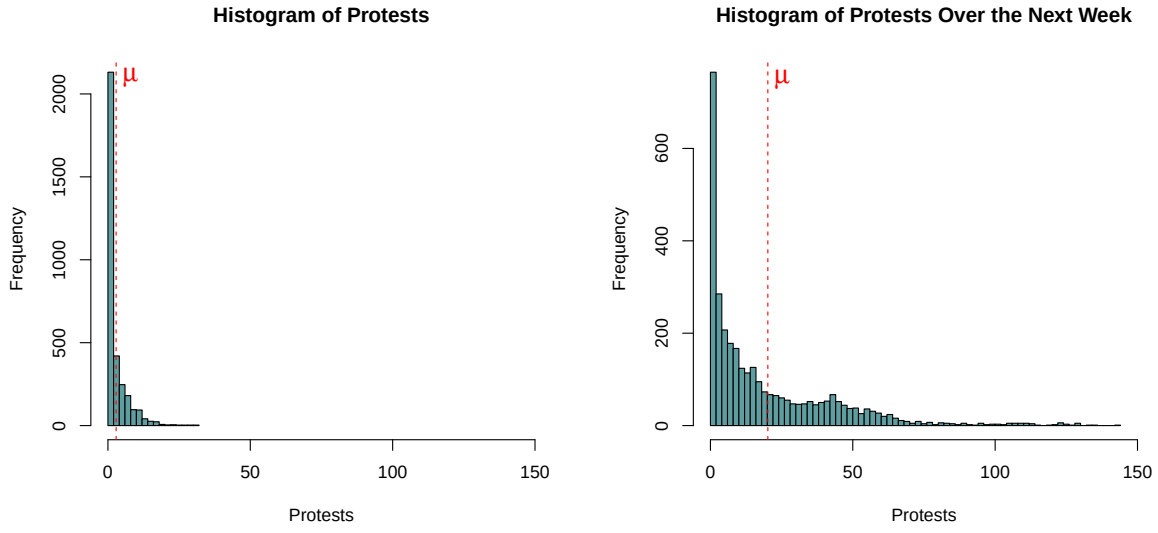

Figure 3: Histogram of protests. The left panel gives the distribution of protests per day. The right panel gives the distribution of protests per week. Mean values are shown in red.

4 Calendars of Threats and Protests

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

The top panel of Figure 4 visualizes the life cycle of threats. We index each calendar day as $d \in \{1, 365\}$, and then, for each day d along the x-axis, the left and right y-axes report our measures of threats. The left y-axis reports the total number of times, per day, between 2006 and 2016 that the *Workers' Daily* mentioned "stability" and "harmony," as well as two other terms associated with social stability maintenance: "social stability" and "police." The right y-axis reports the number of articles, by day, that are classified as social stability and law enforcement. In the Online Appendix, we show that our measures of threats are correlated.

The bottom panel visualizes the life cycle of protest in China. Again, we index each calendar day as $d \in \{1, 365\}$, and then, for each day d along the x-axis, we compute the total number of protests across the country between 2006 and 2016. The two dashed horizontal lines indicate daily protest

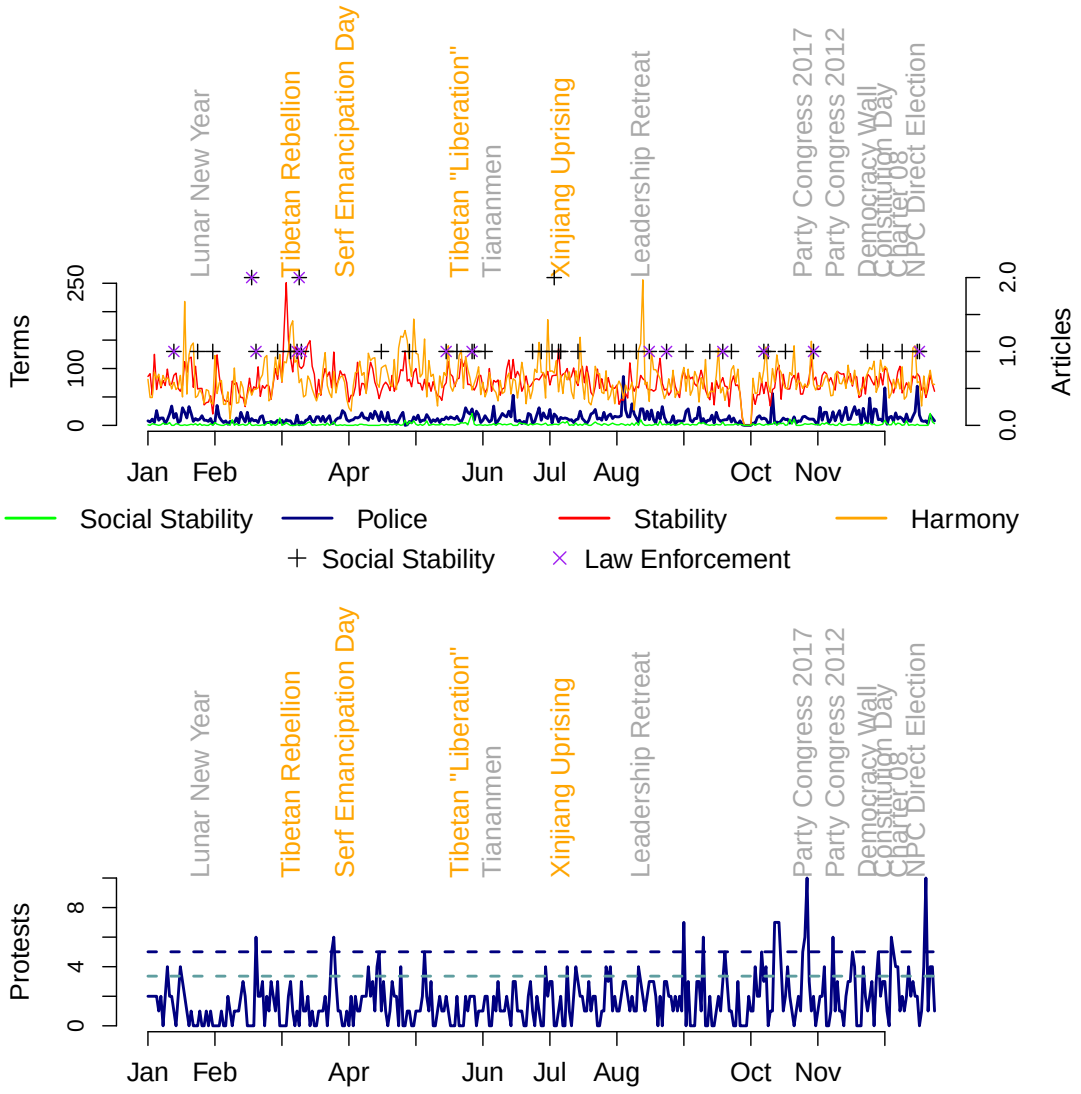

Figure 4: The life cycles of threats and protest in China. In the top panel, the left y-axis gives the total number of times that keywords – social stability, police, stability, and harmony – were published on day t, and right y-axis gives the total number of articles labeled as "social stability" or "law enforcement" published on day t. In the bottom panel, the y-axis records the total number of protests on day t. The light blue lines gives the mean protest level plus one standard deviation. The dashed navy line indicates the two standard deviation threshold. Ethnic separatist anniversaries appear in orange; pro-democracy anniversaries and major political moments appear in gray.

levels equal to the mean plus one or two standard deviations, respectively. These descriptive statistics make clear that China's propaganda apparatus does not issue threats randomly or frequently.

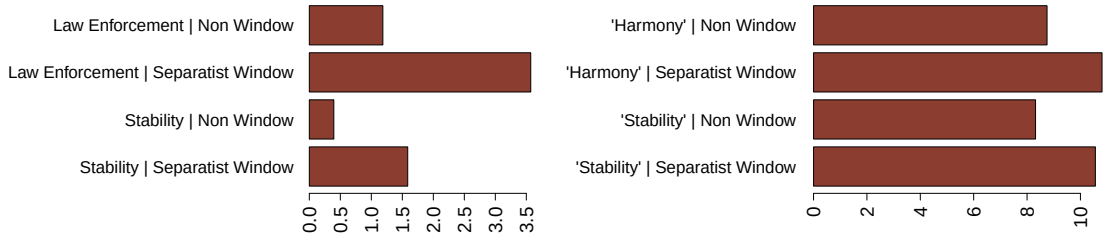

Figure 5: Rates of propaganda-based threats. The left panel reports topic model data. The top two bars restrict attention to our law enforcement threat definition. The bottom two bars restrict attention to our social stability threat definition. The x-axis gives the percent of days on which a threat occurred according to the windows defined along the y-axis. Anniversary windows reflect a seven day period centered on the anniversary itself. The right panel reports term frequency data. The x-axis gives the number of times a given term was referenced per day, during ethnic separatist windows and otherwise.

Rather, as our theory suggests, propaganda-based threats appear to cluster around politically sensitive moments, when citizens are engaged in politics and aware of their shared frustrations with the regime. We label two sets of politically sensitive dates above both panels: the anniversaries of ethnic separatist movements, as well as scheduled political meetings and anniversaries of failed pro-democracy movements. We discuss them in turn.

Anniversaries of Ethnic Separatist Movements

Modern China has experienced two major separatist movements, one in Tibet and one in Xinjiang, which have simmered for decades. These separatist movements have accumulated four anniversaries that are now focal moments for protests and, as a result, government repression *in those provinces*. These anniversaries are deeply salient – for citizens and the regime – within Tibet and Xinjiang, but not elsewhere. Table 2 describes these anniversaries.

Figure 4 suggests that these ethnic separatist anniversaries compel the government to issue propaganda-based threats. Figure 5 confirms this. The left panel reports descriptive statistics for threat measures based on topic models. Social stability articles are four times as likely during separatist windows, defined as the seven day period centered on a separatist anniversary, and law enforcement articles are three times as likely during separatist windows. The right panel reports our threat measures based on term frequency counts. References to "stability" and "harmony" are 20% more common during separatist windows. These threats may be directed principally at ethnic minority populations in Tibet and Xinjiang, but citizens across China are exposed to them.

Table 2: Ethnic Separatist Anniversaries

Date	Anniversary	Description
May 23	Tibetan "Liberation"	After founding the PRC in 1949, Mao was keen to reassert state authority in Tibet, which had enjoyed de facto autonomy in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries due to the collapse of the Qing Dynasty. Mao launched a military intervention and on May 23, 1951, forced Tibetan leaders to sign the Seventeen Point Agreement, which stated that Tibet was part of China.
March 10	Tibetan Rebellion	On March 10, 1959, the Tibetan Rebellion began in Lhasa, the capital. The PLA put down the rebellion on March 20, forcing the Dalai Lama to flee to India. 7,000 Tibetan refugees followed him that spring. The exile community celebrates the day as Tibetan Uprising Day. The anniversary has occasioned Tibetan protests since, as well as increased levels of repression in Tibet. [9]
March 28	Serf Emancipation Day	CCP authorities commemorate the crushing of the Tibetan Rebellion as Serf Emancipation Day. On March 28, 1959, Premier Zhou Enlai dissolved the Tibetan government and assigned policymaking authority to the Preparatory Committee of the Tibet Autonomous Region. The decision was publicized nationally by Xinhua.
July 5	Xinjiang Uprising	Following news of a factory altercation between Uygher and Han workers in Guangdong, on July 5, 2009, protests broke out in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang. The protest drew over 1,000 and became violent, targeting Han people and businesses. Officially, 197 were killed and 1,721 injured. Unofficial tolls are much higher. Over 1,000 Uyghers were arrested, 30 of whom received death sentences. Mosques were closed and communications networks cut. Local police surveillance, armed patrols, and citizen brigades have increased during subsequent anniversaries.

Anniversaries of Failed Pro-Democracy Movements and Political Meetings

The bottom panel of Figure 4 suggests that protests cluster around the anniversaries of China's failed pro-democracy movements: Tiananmen, Democracy Wall, Constitution Day, Charter 08, and NPC Direct Elections. We discuss these pro-democracy anniversaries in greater detail in the Online Appendix. There is more limited evidence that major political meetings, like the quinquennial Party Congress and the annual leadership retreat, also occasion protests. Scholars increasingly recognize that the government prepares for these focal moments in advance: by arresting dissidents, increasing censorship, and flooding social media with pro-regime content (Truex 2018; King, Pan and Roberts 2013, 2017). The top panel of Figure 4 suggests that the government may issue propaganda-based threats as well.

4.2 Specification

To probe the timing of propaganda-based threats more systematically, we estimate models of the form

$$\begin{aligned} y_t &= \alpha + \beta_1 \left(\text{Ethnic Separatist Anniversary Window}_t\right) \\ &\quad + \beta_2 \left(\text{Pro-Democracy Anniversary Window}_t\right) + \phi X_t + \gamma_s + \epsilon \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

where t indexes day, s indexes year, and vector X_t gives day-level covariates. To accommodate unobserved characteristics by year, we include year fixed effects, given by γ_s. Our dichotomous outcome variable, $Threat_t$, assumes value 1 if the *Workers' Daily* published an explicitly threatening article on day t and 0 otherwise. Our continuous outcome variable, $Count_t$, counts the number of times that the *Workers' Daily* published either "stability" or "harmony" on day t. We use logit models for dichotomous outcomes and negative binomial models for count outcomes.

Our explanatory variables of interest are *Ethnic Separatist Anniversary Window*$_t$ and *Pro-Democracy Anniversary Window*$_t$. Although we expect threats to cluster around these anniversaries, we accommodate the possibility that the regime may issue threats several days before or after. Accordingly, we construct anniversary *windows*, ranging from the anniversary plus/minus one day to the anniversary plus/minus five days.

We are unaware of any features that may be correlated with these anniversary windows and propaganda-based threats, save one. We include in X_t a measure of underlying political instability. The variable *Recent Protests*$_t$ counts the number of protests that occurred across the country on day $t-1$.[10] The year fixed effects, given by γ_s accommodate any unobserved annual features, such as changes in underlying economic conditions, changes in the data generating process, and changes in the government's political strategy. In the Online Appendix we estimate models that include

[10]Note that the results are substantively unchanged if we control for the number of protests that occurred across the country over the preceding week.

year-level covariates: GDP, population, rural population share, sex ratio, and urban unemployment rates.

4.3 Results

The results appear in Tables 3 through 6. Tables 3 and 4 use social stability and law enforcement topic labels, respectively, as the outcomes of interest; Tables 5 and 6 use "stability" and "harmony" word counts as the outcomes of interest. The results are consistent with our theoretical expectations, similar across models, and virtually identical across outcome variables.

The Chinese government is far more likely to issue propaganda-based threats around the anniversaries of ethnic separatist movements. The effect is large and substantively meaningful. From Tables 3 and 4, the daily odds that the government publishes a social stability or law enforcement article are between 330% and 530% greater around ethnic separatist anniversaries than on any other day of the calendar year. From Tables 5 and 6, each day within an ethnic separatist anniversary window witnesses between 14% and 26% more mentions of "stability" and harmony." By contrast, we find no evidence that the anniversaries of failed pro-democracy movements are associated with propaganda-based threats. These results are substantively unchanged when we include year-level covariates as well as year-fixed effects in the Online Appendix, though the sample size is somewhat smaller. Tables 5 and 6 also suggest that protests on day $t-1$ compel the government to issue propaganda-based threats.

Even for a government as repressive as the Chinese Communist Party, explicit threats of violence are rare. These results are consistent with our theoretical expectations, but they add nuance. The anniversaries of failed pro-democracy movements appear to be associated with protests, yet only the anniversaries of ethnic separatist movements elicit propaganda-based threats. Why? We regard this as an important direction for future research. It is possible, for instance, that autocrats reserve explicit threats of violence for political out-groups. Intuitively, insofar as explicit threats of violence may alienate their recipients, repressive governments may reserve them for groups of citizens who are especially marginalized politically or who are repressed at especially high rates.

In China, for instance, Tibetans and Uyghers constituted just 1.4% of the population in 2016. While the government may prove unable to suppress a nationwide pro-democracy movement, it likely can rule the small Tibetan and Uygher communities with pure force. Accordingly, in Tibet and Xinjiang, repression is widespread. The government routinely conducts military patrols; imposes curfews, internet, and cellular shutdowns; and incarcerates Tibetans and Uyghers in mass. In Xinjiang, the government has even banned the Quran, the name "Mohammed," and "unreasonably long" beards. At least 120,000 and perhaps as many as one million Uyghers are being held in re-education camps (Phillips 2018). Given the depth of hostility among Tibetans and Uyghers for the Beijing government, threats of violence are also less costly than they otherwise might be. While threats directed at ethnic Han citizens may elicit source derogation and the boomerang effect, the

government is already maximally unpopular in Tibet and Xinjiang.

Table 3: When Autocrats Issue Propaganda-Based Threats: Social Stability Topic

	Dependent variable:					
	Social Stability Topic					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Ethnic Separatist Anniversaries						
Anniversary	−15.275					
	(2,841.667)					
1 Day Window		0.591				
		(1.040)				
2 Day Window			1.663***			
			(0.586)			
3 Day Window				1.265**		
				(0.584)		
4 Day Window					1.363**	
					(0.554)	
5 Day Window						1.209**
						(0.564)
Pro-Democracy Anniversaries						
Anniversary	−15.065					
	(2,774.881)					
1 Day Window		−16.038				
		(2,641.730)				
2 Day Window			−15.872			
			(2,047.488)			
3 Day Window				−15.934		
				(1,740.651)		
4 Day Window					−0.116	
					(1.054)	
5 Day Window						0.482
						(0.788)
Other Covariates						
Recent Protests	−0.596	−0.590	−0.615	−0.577	−0.589	−0.602
	(0.610)	(0.611)	(0.618)	(0.617)	(0.619)	(0.619)
Constant	−4.754***	−4.769***	−4.938***	−4.886***	−5.020***	−5.081***
	(0.580)	(0.583)	(0.598)	(0.597)	(0.612)	(0.621)
Year Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	3,281	3,281	3,281	3,281	3,281	3,281

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

4.4 Threats and Pro-Regime Propaganda

Scholars increasingly understand Chinese propaganda as a signal to citizens: that the government's capacity for repression is so substantial that it can compel citizens to consume propaganda content

Table 4: When Autocrats Issue Propaganda-Based Threats: Law Enforcement Topic

	Dependent variable:					
	Law Enforcement Topic					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Ethnic Separatist Anniversaries						
Anniversary	−16.265					
	(2,892.280)					
1 Day Window		0.291				
		(0.732)				
2 Day Window			1.336***			
			(0.402)			
3 Day Window				1.174***		
				(0.386)		
4 Day Window					1.301***	
					(0.353)	
5 Day Window						1.118***
						(0.356)
Pro-Democracy Anniversaries						
Anniversary	−16.238					
	(2,804.682)					
1 Day Window		−16.242				
		(1,619.225)				
3 Day Window			−0.839			
			(1.018)			
3 Day Window				0.301		
				(0.536)		
4 Day Window					0.382	
					(0.490)	
5 Day Window						0.607
						(0.431)
Other Covariates						
Recent Protests	−0.267	−0.261	−0.269	−0.267	−0.278	−0.290
	(0.390)	(0.390)	(0.393)	(0.394)	(0.396)	(0.396)
Constant	−3.895***	−3.895***	−4.028***	−4.097***	−4.184***	−4.213***
	(0.382)	(0.383)	(0.390)	(0.394)	(0.401)	(0.404)
Year Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	3,281	3,281	3,281	3,281	3,281	3,281

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 5: When Autocrats Issue Propaganda-Based Threats: "Stability" Count

	Dependent variable:					
	Stability					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Ethnic Separatist Anniversaries						
Anniversary	0.235*					
	(0.139)					
1 Day Window		0.128				
		(0.082)				
2 Day Window			0.162**			
			(0.064)			
3 Day Window				0.172***		
				(0.055)		
4 Day Window					0.230***	
					(0.049)	
5 Day Window						0.243***
						(0.045)
Pro-Democracy Anniversaries						
Anniversary	−0.111					
	(0.142)					
1 Day Window		−0.022				
		(0.082)				
2 Day Window			−0.013			
			(0.064)			
3 Day Window				0.013		
				(0.055)		
4 Day Window					0.040	
					(0.050)	
5 Day Window						0.053
						(0.047)
Other Covariates						
Recent Protests	0.184***	0.182***	0.181***	0.182***	0.183***	0.185***
	(0.039)	(0.039)	(0.039)	(0.039)	(0.039)	(0.039)
Constant	2.666***	2.665***	2.659***	2.651***	2.635***	2.621***
	(0.042)	(0.042)	(0.042)	(0.042)	(0.042)	(0.042)
Year Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	3,272	3,272	3,272	3,272	3,272	3,272

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 6: When Autocrats Issue Propaganda-Based Threats: "Harmony" Count

	Dependent variable:					
	Harmony					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Ethnic Separatist Anniversaries						
Anniversary	0.261					
	(0.169)					
1 Day Window		0.057				
		(0.100)				
2 Day Window			0.140*			
			(0.078)			
3 Day Window				0.159**		
				(0.067)		
4 Day Window					0.161***	
					(0.060)	
5 Day Window						0.147***
						(0.055)
Pro-Democracy Anniversaries						
Anniversary	−0.113					
	(0.172)					
1 Day Window		0.013				
		(0.100)				
2 Day Window			0.052			
			(0.078)			
3 Day Window				0.090		
				(0.067)		
4 Day Window					0.106*	
					(0.061)	
5 Day Window						0.093
Other Covariates						
Recent Protests	0.167***	0.165***	0.165***	0.165***	0.165***	0.165***
	(0.047)	(0.047)	(0.047)	(0.047)	(0.047)	(0.047)
Constant	2.539***	2.539***	2.531***	2.521***	2.513***	2.509***
	(0.050)	(0.051)	(0.051)	(0.051)	(0.051)	(0.051)
Year Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	3,272	3,272	3,272	3,272	3,272	3,272
Note:						*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

that everyone knows to be false (Huang 2015). In a sense, spikes in pro-regime propaganda are themselves implicitly threatening. Accordingly, we might expect spikes in pro-regime propaganda to be correlated with propaganda-based threats. Both, after all, are threatening.

To explore this, we measure pro-regime propaganda by identifying every reference to the Chinese Communist Party on day t, and then extracting the 10 words before and after. Drawing on standard semantic dictionaries, we measured how fulsome or critical were these 20 words.[11] The variable *Positive Coverage*$_t$ constitutes our measure of pro-regime propaganda, and it gives the number of fulsome words, less critical words, among the 20, summed for day t. Since we are interested in *spikes* in pro-regime propaganda, we define a "high propaganda day" as when the observed level of *Positive Coverage*$_t$ is greater than or equal to the sample mean plus κ standard deviations. To ensure robustness, we let κ range from 0.25 to 2.0. We estimate the model

$$y_t \quad = \quad \alpha + \beta \left(\text{High Propaganda Day}_t\right) + \epsilon \tag{2}$$

where t indexes day. In Table 7, the top two panels report results for social stability and law enforcement topic threats; the bottom two panels results for "stability" and "harmony" counts. Across outcome variables and κ threshold values, we find, the Chinese government's propaganda apparatus employs pro-regime propaganda and threats of violence at roughly the same moments. Most strikingly, from the bottom two panels, high propaganda days are associated with roughly four additional references to "stability" and six additional references to "harmony."

This is consistent with our theory of threats and existing research that understands Chinese propaganda as itself implicitly threatening. They appear to be complements, with explicit threats of violence most common during moments of profound political tension.

5 Do Threats of Violence Work?

5.1 Selection Bias

Ascertaining whether threats reduce protests is complicated by the fact that governments issue threats strategically. The PRC government is far more likely to threaten violence against citizens during politically sensitive moments, when citizen frustrations are most likely to coalesce into mass protests, and in response to protests on day $t-1$. Empirically, then, there are likely to be two competing effects: a negative effect on protest due to the threat, and a positive effect on protest due to the underlying political tensions that compelled the government to threaten.

[11] We segmented each word in our corpus, dictionaries, and list of identifiers. We removed numbers, symbols, and punctuation from the corpus before generating the concordance segments from which we extracted our measure of tone. See Grimmer and Stewart (2013) and Carter and Carter (2018).

Table 7: Threats and Propaganda

	Dependent variable:							
	Social Stability Topic							
	$\kappa = 0.25$	$\kappa = 0.5$	$\kappa = 0.75$	$\kappa = 1.0$	$\kappa = 1.25$	$\kappa = 1.5$	$\kappa = 1.75$	$\kappa = 2.0$
High Propaganda	0.006^{*}	0.011^{***}	0.013^{***}	0.016^{***}	0.018^{***}	0.015^{**}	0.006	0.008
	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.008)
Constant	0.004^{***}	0.003^{***}	0.004^{***}	0.004^{***}	0.004^{***}	0.004^{***}	0.005^{***}	0.005^{***}
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Observations	3,287	3,287	3,287	3,287	3,287	3,287	3,287	3,287
R^2	0.001	0.003	0.003	0.003	0.003	0.001	0.0002	0.0003
	Dependent variable:							
	Law Enforcement Topic							
	$\kappa = 0.25$	$\kappa = 0.5$	$\kappa = 0.75$	$\kappa = 1.0$	$\kappa = 1.25$	$\kappa = 1.5$	$\kappa = 1.75$	$\kappa = 2.0$
High Propaganda	0.003	0.012^{*}	0.015^{**}	0.016^{**}	0.024^{**}	0.025^{**}	0.019	0.024^{*}
	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.010)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.013)
Constant	0.013^{***}	0.012^{***}	0.012^{***}	0.013^{***}	0.013^{***}	0.013^{***}	0.013^{***}	0.013^{***}
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Observations	3,287	3,287	3,287	3,287	3,287	3,287	3,287	3,287
R^2	0.0001	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.002	0.001	0.001	0.001
	Dependent variable:							
	"Stability"							
	$\kappa = 0.25$	$\kappa = 0.5$	$\kappa = 0.75$	$\kappa = 1.0$	$\kappa = 1.25$	$\kappa = 1.5$	$\kappa = 1.75$	$\kappa = 2.0$
High Propaganda	4.585^{***}	4.114^{***}	3.689^{***}	3.522^{***}	3.671^{***}	3.035^{***}	3.119^{***}	2.978^{***}
	(0.338)	(0.399)	(0.470)	(0.554)	(0.670)	(0.766)	(0.817)	(0.870)
Constant	7.639^{***}	7.967^{***}	8.161^{***}	8.269^{***}	8.336^{***}	8.393^{***}	8.403^{***}	8.417^{***}
	(0.146)	(0.142)	(0.140)	(0.139)	(0.137)	(0.137)	(0.137)	(0.137)
Observations	3,287	3,287	3,287	3,287	3,287	3,287	3,287	3,287
R^2	0.053	0.031	0.018	0.012	0.009	0.005	0.004	0.004
	Dependent variable:							
	"Harmony"							
	$\kappa = 0.25$	$\kappa = 0.5$	$\kappa = 0.75$	$\kappa = 1.0$	$\kappa = 1.25$	$\kappa = 1.5$	$\kappa = 1.75$	$\kappa = 2.0$
High Propaganda	6.113^{***}	6.041^{***}	6.461^{***}	6.138^{***}	5.551^{***}	5.576^{***}	6.090^{***}	6.234^{***}
	(0.503)	(0.591)	(0.692)	(0.818)	(0.992)	(1.133)	(1.207)	(1.285)
Constant	7.773^{***}	8.139^{***}	8.331^{***}	8.522^{***}	8.674^{***}	8.729^{***}	8.736^{***}	8.753^{***}
	(0.217)	(0.211)	(0.207)	(0.205)	(0.203)	(0.202)	(0.202)	(0.202)
Observations	3,287	3,287	3,287	3,287	3,287	3,287	3,287	3,287
R^2	0.043	0.031	0.026	0.017	0.009	0.007	0.008	0.007

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

This is precisely what we observe. We estimate a naive model of the form

$$\text{Protest}_{t+1:t+7} = \alpha + \beta\,(\text{Threat}_t) + \phi X_t + \psi W_s + \gamma_s + \epsilon \quad (3)$$

where t indexes day, s indexes year, and the vectors X_t and W_s include day- and year-level covariates, respectively. To accommodate unobserved characteristics by year, we include year fixed effects, given by γ_s. Since our outcome variable is effectively continuous – the number of protests across the country over the next seven days – we employ OLS. We use our standard set of threat measures. The results appear in Table 8. The estimated coefficients for social stability and law enforcement topics hover around 0. For "stability" and "harmony" word counts, the estimated effect on protest levels is negative and statistically significant, but substantively almost meaningless. For the number of nationwide protests over the next week to fall by just one, these results suggest, the Chinese propaganda apparatus would have to publish 15 additional references to "stability" and 20 additional references to "harmony." This is *more than double* the baseline rate.

5.2 Identification Strategy

The results in Section 4 offer an opportunity to address the possibility of selection bias, and hence obtain plausibly causal estimates of the effect of propaganda-based threats on protest. We treat those results as a model of the treatment assignment mechanism: of how the Chinese government chooses when to threaten citizens. We then use this treatment assignment mechanism as the foundation for instrumental variables (IV) estimates.

Our key idea is that *Workers' Daily* content is set at the national level, but must occasionally respond to local conditions. As a result, provinces that are geographically and socially distant from each other are occasionally "treated" with propaganda content that is directed at the other province's readership. In practice, this identification strategy entails identifying events that generate mass protests in province i, induce the government to issue propaganda-based threats to citizens in province i, but are effectively unknown in some geographically and culturally distant province j.

The ethnic separatist anniversaries identified in Section 4 provide a suitable instrument. They are highly salient in Tibet and Xinjiang, but, because of China's ethnic diversity and sprawling geography, essentially unknown throughout much of Han China. Put differently, we exploit these profoundly salient events in Tibet and Xinjiang to probe whether the propaganda-based threats induced by those events decrease protests by Chinese citizens elsewhere.

5.3 Exclusion Restriction

To be a valid instrument, anniversaries of ethnic separatist movements in Tibet and Xinjiang must reduce protests elsewhere only through their effects on propaganda-based threats. This exclusion

Table 8: Naive Estimates of Threats and Protest

	Dependent variable:			
	$\text{Protests}_{t+1:t+7}$			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Social Stability	−0.374			
	(2.769)			
Law Enforcement		0.557		
		(1.547)		
"Stability"			−0.070***	
			(0.026)	
"Harmony"				−0.049***
				(0.017)
Recent Protests	2.663***	1.667***	1.688***	1.686***
	(0.529)	(0.074)	(0.075)	(0.075)
Separatist Window	−2.605***	−2.043***	−1.788**	−1.886***
	(0.795)	(0.731)	(0.734)	(0.730)
Pro-Democracy Window	6.625***	5.368***	5.315***	5.270***
	(1.186)	(1.090)	(1.089)	(1.089)
Log GDP	−691.054***	−527.759***	−527.381***	−532.450***
	(24.250)	(23.377)	(23.344)	(23.390)
Log Population	7,879.511***	5,948.561***	5,940.678***	5,977.090***
	(805.076)	(744.139)	(743.129)	(742.986)
Rural Population Share	−3,123.816***	−2,489.962***	−2,454.449***	−2,510.460***
	(425.469)	(391.731)	(391.434)	(391.149)
Sex Ratio	23,873.710***	19,833.380***	18,922.770**	20,308.630***
	(8,053.456)	(7,395.003)	(7,392.446)	(7,384.682)
Urban Unemployment Rate	−1,210.566***	−976.255***	−945.443***	−998.679***
	(266.884)	(245.258)	(245.186)	(244.980)
Constant	−104,429.000***	−80,357.270***	−79,453.290***	−81,042.020***
	(12,005.540)	(11,079.350)	(11,068.900)	(11,063.640)
Year Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2,549	2,549	2,549	2,549
R^2	0.736	0.777	0.778	0.778
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

restriction would be violated if the Chinese government deploys security forces in provinces other than Tibet and Xinjiang during ethnic separatist anniversaries, and these security force deployments reduce protest rates. We employ three strategies to rule out this possibility.

Dropping Provinces

Ethnic separatist anniversaries prompt state repression in Tibet and Xinjiang. Shortly before the 50th anniversary of the Tibetan Rebellion, for instance, Zhang Qingli, the CCP chief in Tibet, told local riot police that "We must keep a watchful eye, and with clenched fists, constantly be on the alert. We must resolutely and directly strike at criminal elements who dare to stir up incidents. We must foil the separatist schemes of the Dalai clique" (FlorCruz 2009). The regime regularly imposes province-wide security alerts, organizes military parades, and bans foreign travel in Tibet and Xinjiang around these anniversaries. Likewise, in 2013, one Xinjiang party member told reporters that "during each anniversary, he had to patrol the neighborhood or visit residents for a whole month to ensure stability" (Choi and Zuo 2013). We exclude Tibet and Xinjiang from the analysis.

We also exclude the four provinces that border Tibet and Xinjiang: Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan. We do so because these neighboring provinces may have Tibetan and Uygher communities along the Tibet and Xinjiang borders. Indeed, there is substantial evidence that regional security apparatuses in these neighboring provinces treat the ethnic separatist anniversaries as politically sensitive. In 2017, for instance, the CCP blocked internet in the 10 Sichuan counties that neighbor Tibet in the weeks surrounding the Tibetan Rebellion anniversary (Finney 2017).

We drop three other provinces from the sample as well. First, Ningxia contains the Hui ethnic group, which is China's second largest Muslim population. While the Hui are ethnically, linguistically, and culturally distinct from Uyghers and do not have separatist aims, they may be more sympathetic to Uygher concerns than ethnic Han citizens. Second, Inner Mongolia is home to several prominent ethnic minority communities, which, again, may be more sympathetic to Uygher concerns than ethnic Han citizens. Third, separatist anniversaries may have special significance in Beijing, but for different reasons. Uygher terrorists conducted bombings in Beijing in 2013, and so Beijing residents may bear some lingering frustration towards the government for permitting a security lapse or for failing to indemnify affected residents. Anecdotal reports suggest that anti-terrorism precautions in Beijing were heightened after the 2009 Uygher bombing in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang (Yang Fan 2014).

In total, we drop nine provinces where the regime is likely to deploy additional security forces – or place existing security forces in high alert – during ethnic separatist anniversaries in Tibet and Xinjiang. The map in Figure 6 visualizes our final province sample. Tibet and Xinjiang appear in red; the seven other provinces we exclude appear in green. In 2016, the nine provinces we exclude accounted for 11.5% of Chinese citizens. Our sample, in white, accounted for 88.5% of Chinese

citizens.

Figure 6: Map of China. Provinces with separatist movements appear in red. Our analysis excludes these provinces, as well as those in green. The remaining provinces are shaded in white.

Are Citizens Aware of Ethnic Separatist Anniversaries?

Next, we conducted a nationally representative survey to confirm that citizens in our final province sample are unaware of ethnic separatist anniversaries from Tibet and Xinjiang. This is important for two reasons. First, if citizens are unaware of these ethnic separatist anniversaries, then there is no reason to think that they constitute moments of political tension. Likewise, there is no reason to think that the regime has, in the past, placed its security services on high alert.

The survey was conducted in November 2018, and counted 1,000 respondents. It was fielded over the internet by a professional survey company in China.[12] It was balanced to be nationally representative on gender, age, province, and income. Balance statistics appear in the Online Appendix. Our survey protocol consisted of a standard battery of demographic questions, followed by the question, "What is the day of X? (Please respond from memory, do not search on the internet)," where X represents a series of 13 political, cultural, and sensitive holidays.[13] Respon-

[12]This survey was granted "exempt" status by our university's institutional review board. Because its content is politically sensitive, we have disclosed the name of the survey firm to the journal editors but not in the text. This is becoming standard for sensitive survey research in China. See, for example, Johnston and Quek (2018).

[13]For example, 青年节是几号? (请不要在线搜索，从记忆中回答)

dents answered in an open-ended text response box.[14] In pre-testing, the survey routinely took native-speaking undergraduate students around 3 minutes to complete. To ensure that respondents were not searching for answers online, we dropped all responses that took longer than 5 minutes to complete. This restriction reduced our sample size to 521.

The results appear in Figure 7. The left panel restricts attention to the national sample. As expected, Chinese citizens accurately identify the dates of major cultural and political holidays, as the top bars make clear. Also as expected, however, Chinese citizens are almost totally unable to correctly identify the dates of ethnic separatist anniversaries in Tibet and Xinjiang provinces. Put simply, these dates are salient *only* in Tibet and Xinjiang.

Readers may be concerned that respondents were simply too scared to acknowledge these politically sensitive anniversaries, perhaps because they feared being detected by the government's online surveillance apparatus. To ensure this was not the case, we recruited a second sample of Chinese undergraduates studying abroad at an American university. This university has a large Chinese student population and will be disclosed after the review process. This sample consists of 80 students, and was recruited through snowball sampling. Among China's most highly educated citizens and far from the government's surveillance apparatus, these students are "most likely cases" for recognizing sensitive anniversaries. Reflecting their educational background, undergraduates at this university were able to recognize major cultural and political holidays with precision. Again, however, virtually none were able to identify the dates of ethnic secessionist anniversaries in Tibet and Xinjiang.

Not only do these results suggest that Chinese citizens are unaware of ethnic secessionist anniversaries in Tibet and Xinjiang. Indeed, they also suggest that the Chinese government has not drawn attention to these holidays by mobilizing its repressive apparatus on these dates.

Is the Security Apparatus on High Alert?

Fortunately, our data enable us to confirm that the security apparatus is not on high alert in Han China. The Elfstrom/CLB dataset records whether the Chinese government's security apparatus responded to a given protest j by employing violence against participants. The key idea is that if, during the ethnic separatist anniversaries that are so salient in Tibet and Xinjiang, the security apparatus is indeed on high alert *in Han provinces*, it should be more likely to repress protests that emerge during these anniversaries. To test this, we estimate the model

$$\begin{aligned} \Pr\left(\text{Repression}_j = 1 | \text{Protest}_j = 1\right) &= \alpha + \beta\left(\text{Ethnic Separatist Anniversary Window}_j\right) \\ &\quad + \phi X_j + \gamma_s + \epsilon \end{aligned} \tag{4}$$

where j indexes protest, γ_s gives year fixed effects, and the vector X_j gives protest-level controls.

[14] In the appendix, we visualize just how incorrect were respondents' guesses, among those who did not respond "Don't know" or provide an illegible answer. There is virtually no clustering around the correct anniversary date.

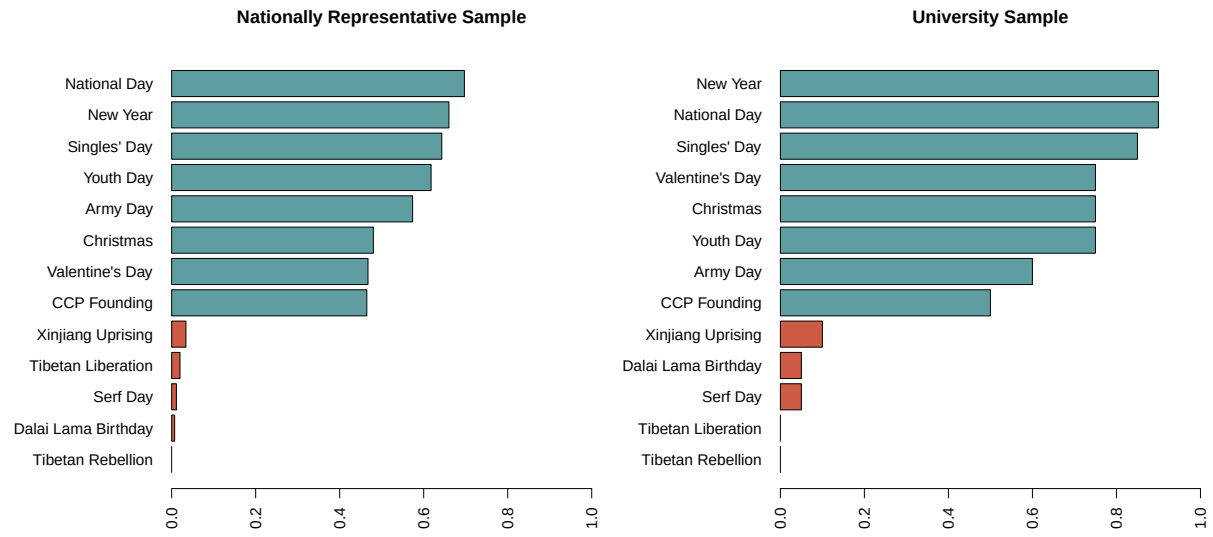

Figure 7: Chinese citizens are overwhelmingly unable to identify the dates of ethnic separatist anniversaries in Tibet and Xinjiang provinces.

The results appear in Table 9, and they suggest that protests that emerge during ethnic separatist anniversaries in our province sample are indeed no more likely to be repressed than those that emerge on other days of the year. Rather, the best predictor of whether a protest will be repressed is the number of protests that have emerged in the preceding week. Put otherwise, in our final province sample, local security apparatuses mobilize in response to past protests, not ethnic separatist anniversaries in Tibet and Xinjiang. There is simply no evidence that the regime's security apparatus is on high alert during ethnic separatist anniversaries *outside* the nine provinces that we exclude from analysis. Since these nine provinces account for just 11.5% of the population, this geographic restriction comes at relatively little cost in forgone population coverage.

In short, we believe the exclusion restriction holds for three reasons: virtually no Chinese citizens recognize ethnic separatist dates, the probability of repression is statistically unchanged during these dates, and we conservatively focus only on Eastern provinces that are ethnically and geographically distant from the 1.4% of citizens who live in Xinjiang and Tibet.

5.4 IV Specification

To probe the effect of propaganda-based threats, we create the variable $Protests_{t+1:t+7}$, which counts the total number of protests across the country – save for the nine provinces we exclude – over the course of a coming week. This accommodates the possibility that *Workers' Daily* content may take several days to fully disseminate, or for citizens to update their beliefs following a threat.

Table 9: State Repression of Popular Protests During Ethnic Separatist Anniversaries

	Dependent variable:			
	Repression			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Recent Protests	0.056**	0.054**	0.028	0.028
	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.029)	(0.029)
Ethnic Separatist Anniversary Window	−0.100	−0.091	−0.238*	−0.237
	(0.103)	(0.107)	(0.140)	(0.147)
Pro-Democracy Anniversary Window	−0.057	−0.057	0.024	0.022
	(0.077)	(0.077)	(0.097)	(0.097)
Minority Province		0.006		0.065
		(0.068)		(0.098)
Minority Province × Separatist Window		−0.101		−0.026
		(0.375)		(0.479)
Log GRP			−8.334**	−8.409**
			(3.948)	(3.949)
Log Population			155.476***	156.451***
			(57.048)	(57.070)
Rural Population Share			−0.934***	−0.972***
			(0.273)	(0.279)
Sex Ratio			0.018***	0.018***
			(0.007)	(0.007)
Urban Unemployment Rate			0.047	0.042
			(0.052)	(0.052)
Constant	−1.489***	−1.488***	−1,752.055***	−1,762.768***
	(0.197)	(0.197)	(632.531)	(632.763)
Year Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	No	No
Observations	9,262	9,262	5,336	5,336
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Our second stage model is

$$\text{Protests}_{t+1:t+7} = \alpha_P + \beta_P \left(\widehat{\text{Threat}}_t\right) + \phi_P X_t + \psi_P W_s + \gamma_{Ps} + \epsilon_P \quad (5)$$

where t indexes day and s indexes year. The endogenous regressor $\widehat{\text{Threat}}_t$ is the propaganda-based threat level predicted by the first stage:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Threat}_t &= \alpha_T + \beta_T \left(\text{Ethnic Separatist Anniversary Window}_t\right) \\ &\quad + \phi_T X_t + \psi_T W_s + \gamma_{Ts} + \epsilon_T \end{aligned} \quad (6)$$

In both models, vector X_t includes two day-level covariates: whether day t falls within a pro-democracy anniversary window, and the number of protests that occurred across the country on day $t-1$. Vector W_s includes year-level covariates observed at the national level: logged GRP, logged population, rural population share, sex ratio, and urban unemployment. The parameter γ_s gives year fixed effects.

We use as the endogenous regressor our word count measures of threats – references to "stability" and "harmony" by day – which are both continuous and non-negative. So too is our outcome measure of nationwide protests, from the right panel of Figure 3. Accordingly, we implement the IV estimator using two-stage least squares.

5.5 Results

The results appear in Table 10. Models 1 through 3 use the daily number of references to "stability" as the endogenous regressor; Models 4 through 6 use the daily number of references to "harmony." The bottom panel gives the first stage estimates; the top panel gives the second stage estimates. The models pass standard weak instrument tests at the 1% level and Wu-Hausman cotnsistency tests at the 10% level. The first stage results are consistent with those in Tables 5 and 6. Ethnic separatist anniversaries are strongly correlated with threats, as are protests on day $t-1$.

In the second stage, we find strong evidence that propaganda-based threats reduce the daily rate of protest in provinces that are geographically and culturally distant from Tibet and Xinjiang. For a unit increase in the predicted number of references to "stability" and "harmony," the number of protests across the country over the subsequent week falls by between -0.65 and -1.6. These results are visualized in Figure 8. When the *Workers' Daily* makes no reference to "stability," the predicted number of protests nationwide is roughly 48. When it publishes the mean number of references to "stability" – roughly 9 per day – the predicted number of protests falls to roughly 40. At 16 references, or the mean plus 1 standard deviation, the predicted number of protests falls to roughly 30. We estimate similar effects for "harmony."

These effects are substantively meaningful. To halve the number of protests over the course of a subsequent week, China's propaganda apparatus must publish eight additional references to

"stability" or "harmony" on day t. This represents a doubling of its baseline daily rate of 8.5 "stability" references and 8.9 "harmony" references. The government's propaganda apparatus issues threats sparingly. When it does, we find, citizens take them seriously.

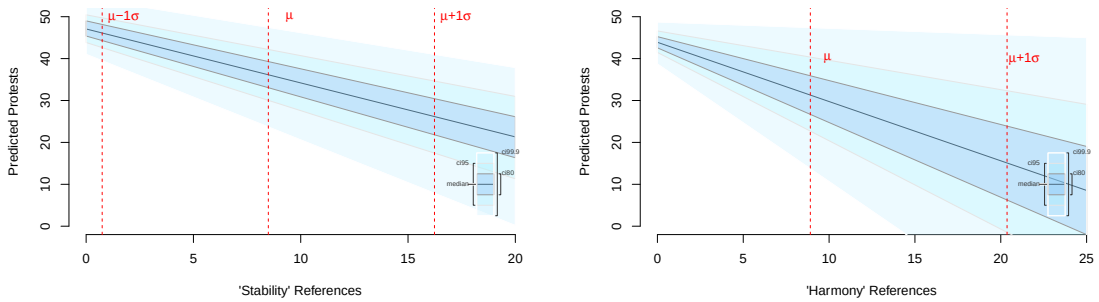

Figure 8: Simulation from IV Model.

5.6 Robustness Checks

The Online Appendix includes a range of robustness checks. First, we show that our results are robust to shifting the size of the protest window. Second, in 2013 Uygher separatists conducted a terrorist attack in Beijing. Scholars have confirmed that "Uygher terrorism" was virtually never discussed in the national media before 2013, but increasingly so after 2013. We show that our results are robust to focusing only on the 2009-2012 period.

Third, our results are also robust to dropping Guangdong, a populous southern province. A factory brawl between Han and Uygher workers in Guangdong sparked the 2009 riot in Urumqi, Xinjiang, which features in our set of ethnic separatist anniversaries. Guangdong also experienced a Uygher terrorist attack in 2015. Though we find no evidence that Guangdong's provincial security apparatus is more repressive during secessionist windows, nor that citizens in Guangdong are more aware of Uygher secessionist anniversaries, we nonetheless confirm that our result is robust to this check.

Fourth, we confirm that our results are robust to controlling for and/or dropping winter months. In China, the winter months experience major population movement (larger than the Hajj in the Muslim world) because of the Lunar New Year. The data generating process for protests during these months may simply be different than in the spring and summer, when our ethnic secessionist anniversaries occur. For instance, the Lunar New Year is a focal point for protests among migrant laborers about back pay. The regime may respond differently as well. Accordingly, we confirm that our results are robust to excluding or controlling for this period so that it does not enter our counterfactual.

Table 10: IV Results

	Dependent variable:					
	Protests$_{t+1:t+7}$					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Second Stage						
"Stability"	-1.440^{**}	-1.297^{***}	-0.645^{***}			
	(0.588)	(0.389)	(0.224)			
"Harmony"				-1.569^{**}	-1.404^{***}	-0.788^{**}
				(0.713)	(0.540)	(0.344)
Recent Protests		5.273^{***}	3.421^{***}		5.475^{***}	3.769^{***}
		(0.857)	(0.604)		(1.154)	(0.854)
Pro-Democracy Window			5.224^{***}			4.295^{***}
			(1.110)			(1.502)
Log GDP			-586.569^{***}			-674.912^{***}
			(23.132)			(53.339)
Log Population			$6{,}226.620^{***}$			$6{,}888.957^{***}$
			(749.228)			(1,004.186)
Rural Population Share			$-2{,}545.334^{***}$			$-3{,}231.862^{***}$
			(406.282)			(526.250)
Sex Ratio			12,776.340			$29{,}023.670^{***}$
			(7,988.475)			(10,015.320)
Urban Unemployment Rate			-769.645^{***}			$-1{,}426.668^{***}$
			(263.968)			(354.847)
Constant	29.352^{***}	18.899^{***}	$-76{,}415.730^{***}$	31.106^{***}	17.966^{***}	$-97{,}364.010^{***}$
	(5.005)	(5.589)	(11,300.110)	(6.368)	(6.819)	(15,506.310)
First Stage						
Separatist Window	2.241^{***}	2.322^{***}	3.275^{***}	2.061^{***}	2.142^{***}	2.674^{***}
	(0.506)	(0.446)	(0.549)	(0.750)	(0.667)	(0.850)
Recent Protests		1.541^{***}	1.555^{***}		1.567^{***}	1.711^{***}
		(0.311)	(0.365)		(0.466)	(0.566)
Pro-Democracy Window			-0.445			-1.548
			(0.819)			(1.270)
Log GDP			-23.941			-131.684^{***}
			(16.751)			(25.963)
Log Population			263.361			1,055.917
			(556.122)			(861.965)
Rural Population Share			428.347			-520.795
			(293.960)			(455.626)
Sex Ratio			$-12{,}613.990^{**}$			10,298.850
			(5,564.284)			(8,624.402)
Urban Unemployment Rate			408.652^{**}			-499.289^{*}
			(184.394)			(285.803)
Constant	8.318^{***}	14.117^{***}	8,533.339	8.749^{***}	12.410^{***}	$-19{,}602.970$
	(0.140)	(0.359)	(8,293.738)	(0.208)	(0.537)	(12,854.940)
Year Fixed Effects	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Observations	3,287	3,287	2,556	3,287	3,287	2,556
Second Stage R^2	-0.076	0.493	0.676	-0.334	0.165	0.490
First Stage R^2	0.006	0.233	0.090	0.002	0.215	0.109
F Statistic	19.610^{***}	99.317^{***}	28.035^{***}	7.539^{***}	89.503^{***}	34.691^{***}

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Excludes Tibet, Xinjiang, Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, and Beijing.

Finally, readers may wonder whether the effect of propaganda-based threats goes through local labor leaders, who constitute a core readership of the *Workers' Daily*. That is, instead of signaling directly to citizens, threats in the *Workers' Daily* instead signal to local CCP officials and union leaders that they should ensure that protests do not emerge at specific times. To be clear, this is consistent with our argument, as the lower protest rate would be driven by the propaganda-based threat. Nonetheless, the evidence suggests that this causal pathway is unlikely. If this labor union signaling mechanism obtains, then the effect of propaganda-based threats on protests would likely be driven by a reduction in protests at state-owned enterprises, where CCP labor unions are more organized. Accordingly, we show that the IV results are robust to dropping protests that occur at state-owned enterprises. We also leverage our survey data to show that CCP members are no more likely to recognize ethnic separatist dates than other citizens. This suggests that this pathway is not particularly important, for if local CCP members routinely changed their behavior on these dates, they would recognize them.

6 Conclusion

Popular protests constitute a chief threat to the world's autocrats, and they emerge according to a well-defined calendar: during election seasons, and on the anniversaries of historically sensitive events. Autocrats know this, and prepare in advance: by incarcerating opposition leaders, amplifying their censorship efforts, and engineering social media campaigns.

In this paper, we show that autocrats also employ propaganda-based threats of violence. These threats are issued sparingly, however, and, in China, timed to coincide with anniversaries of ethnic separatist movements that occurred in Tibet and Xinjiang. This is consistent with our theoretical framework. Regardless of whether autocrats employ propaganda to dominate their citizens or persuade them, explicit threats of violence are costly. In turn, they should be timed for maximum effect: at moments when mass protests are most likely. Our results also suggest that explicit threats of violence may be reserved for political out-groups, who are especially marginalized. We view why as an important direction for future research.

The Chinese government's calendar of propaganda-based threats offers an opportunity to plausibly measure whether threats of violence actually affect citizen behavior. Because China is ethnically diverse and geographically sprawling, the ethnic separatist anniversaries that are profoundly salient in Tibet and Xinjiang are effectively unknown throughout much of the country. Indeed, there is no evidence that the regime's security apparatus *in other provinces* is on high alert during these anniversaries. This is the premise of our identification strategy. Since propaganda is set at the national level but must occasionally respond to local conditions, citizens in provinces that are geographically and culturally distant from Tibet and Xinjiang are occasionally "treated" with content that is not intended for them. Accordingly, it is quite plausible that ethnic separatist anniversaries in Tibet and Xinjiang condition protests in geographically and culturally distant provinces *only*

through the propaganda-based threats that the regime directs at Tibet and Xinjiang in the pages of the *Workers' Daily*. Our IV estimates suggest that, by doubling the number of references to "stability" or "harmony," China's propaganda apparatus halves the number of protests over the course of a subsequent week.

Though propaganda-based threats appear to reduce the rate of popular protest, it is nonetheless possible that threats impose other costs on repressive governments. Roberts (2018), for instance, finds that censorship emboldens China's online activists to engage in more dissent. Might being threatened with violence compel citizens to engage in more anti-regime activity in the future? Do threats of violence issued by the government damage social capital, perhaps by increasing social distrust? Do threats affect citizens' perceptions of political risk, and thus their economic decisions? If explicit threats of violence reduce the probability of popular protests, then surely they have other effects as well. We regard these as important directions for future research.

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