

POLITICAL PROPAGANDA IN NORTHEAST AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

Seminar series on “State and Society in East Asia”

February-May 2023

Université Libre de Bruxelles

Pierre Petit¹, Vanessa Frangville²

The seminar series featured contributions focused on China, Japan, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand, with the aim of understanding how large-scale communication campaigns are organized (or were organized in the recent past) to influence local audiences and increase their engagement with current policies and ideologies. With the authoritarian turn and the militaristic developments occurring in much of East and Southeast Asia, addressing this topic seems particularly relevant. Our initial questions were numerous, but some of them held greater significance, such as: the need to explore propaganda by examining its material aspects and the emotions it evokes; the need to examine propaganda through the actions of diverse actors rather than treating it as an abstract concept; the necessity to delve into the agency of the audience, recognizing that they should not be simplistically considered passive recipients. In summary, we emphasize the need for ethnographic attention to move beyond overly mechanistic approaches that assume propaganda’s effectiveness solely through the content of its messages. In light of this perspective, we present ten concluding thoughts.

Agents

The literature on propaganda typically centers on the “message”, providing limited insights into the network of agents responsible for its production or

1 Laboratoire d’Anthropologie des Mondes Contemporains (Université libre de Bruxelles)
Email: Pierre.Petit@ulb.be

2 Philxte/EASt, centre de recherche sur l’Asie de l’est (Université libre de Bruxelles)
Email: Vanessa.Frangville@ulb.be

the concrete and practical aspects of its distribution. Throughout the seminar series, it became evident that the anonymity of propaganda producers is the norm: revealing the contingencies and the “backstage” of propaganda can potentially diminish its effectiveness, as propaganda is often intended to appear self-evident. This emphasizes the need to prioritize ethnographic research on the way artists are trained in institutions and academies, contributing to the development of a national style, as well as on the day-to-day administration of propaganda by a street-level bureaucracy. This last aspect was a focal point in Judith Audin’s (EHESS) presentation, *Notifying the people on the city’s walls: Political signs and the making of the Chinese State “from the bottom up”*, which examined the role of mass and grassroots organizations (particularly residents’ committees) in giving form to propaganda. In summary, as Audin pointed out, crucial questions for ethnographers include: who are the individuals responsible for placing signs on the city’s walls? Who represents the Chinese state at the street level?

Materiality

The material aspects of propaganda also warrant close attention. The presentations demonstrated a wide variety of materials, including posters, films, mangas, banknotes, video clips, photographs, monuments, and memorabilia. Visual propaganda may be overemphasized in this list (compared to textual propaganda for example), which reflects the available empirical evidence. Sonic propaganda, on the other hand, deserves more attention.

The focus on materiality blurred certain conventional boundaries. Propaganda is not confined to public spaces but also infiltrates domestic settings. The lines between political propaganda and consumer culture can be ambiguous too, with manga and cosplay relaying political propaganda in Japan, or commercial advertisements intertwined with political slogans in Vietnam and Laos. In any case, propaganda materials often allow forms of creative reinterpretations that go beyond their original content.

Stability

Excluding war time periods, the primary objective of propaganda is to establish an atmosphere of self-discipline and to instruct individuals in proper behavior to maintain social order and political stability. Propaganda does not exclusively target ordinary citizens: officials or representatives of governmental institutions are also important recipients. The extensive use of propaganda in public (and sometimes domestic) spaces creates an aura of the omnipresence of the State or monarchy: wherever you are, you are being watched. Marking the State’s presence everywhere appears more critical than the content of the propaganda

messages themselves, as most people have already internalized these messages. The ubiquitous presence of the king's image in Thailand, even in locations previously associated with the democracy movement, was similarly discussed by Michael Herzfeld (Harvard University) in his presentation titled *Khwampenthai: Propaganda and karma in the creation of an ethno-national identity*.

Reception

A very common blind spot in the study of propaganda concerns its reception. Regimes that produce propaganda materials are generally not inclined to share information about their impact. Therefore, it is much simpler to study the materials produced by propaganda agencies than to investigate how people react to them. In any case, while achieving an objective measure of the reception and impact of propaganda seems out of reach, it is possible to study interactions and dialogues. Susan Bayly from the University of Cambridge has taken up this challenge in her conference titled *The eye of the visionary state: Gendering moral citizenship in late-socialist Vietnam*. She explored the range of emotions triggered by political propaganda among urban residents of Hanoi, showing how educated passers-by often ignored coarse propaganda posters: silence is here an active strategy.

Certain propaganda materials and characters can also become a part of popular culture, or of a culture of resistance against the State. This can result in various consequences, from the creation of different, bottom-up messages in the same space to the hijacking of propaganda material to convey new meanings.

The Future and ideal society

A central theme in propaganda is representing the future. All the presentations highlighted the visual and mental imaginaries of the future and the benefits—both material and moral—of an “ideal” society that is yet-to-come. This aspect makes propaganda an ideal subject for the emerging field of anthropology of the future. The various propaganda materials show case what life “ought to be”—emphasizing the positive aspects while concealing anything negative related to the future. This is particularly evident in the “spiritual civilization” discourse promoted by contemporary Chinese authorities, as discussed by Thomas Boutonnet from the université de Strasbourg in his conference on *Propaganda, social control and social harmony in 2000s' China*.

Heroes

Propaganda relies on abstractions and generic figures, such as the recurring trio of the peasant, the worker and the soldier in China, Vietnam and Laos. However, this alone may not be sufficient to achieve influence: it needs to be embodied

by specific individuals who serve as role models. Heroes and heroines can take various forms, such as martyrs of the revolution or “fathers of the nation” of which figures like Mao, Ho Chi Minh, Kaysone, or Rama V are perfect examples. Additionally, more lively and relatable figures play a role, as discussed by Vanessa Frangville from the Université Libre de Bruxelles in her presentation on *Third Sister Liu. The trajectory of a propaganda film, 1960-2020*. Third Sister Liu relates the story of a talented singer living in a distant province of China who challenges and ridicules imperial authorities, heralding the revolution to come. Interestingly, this famous film was remade for different purposes abroad, and provided references for new forms of resistance in present-day China.

Søren Ivarsson from Chiang Mai University presented *Contested heritage and calls for political change in Thailand: Amnesia, counter-remembrance and the material legacy of the 1932-coup*, diving into the complexities of a contested figure, Phibun, a military officer who played a central role in Siam’s transition to constitutional monarchy in the 1930s. Successively idolized and rejected, his destiny is a reminder that the heroes of the past can be silenced or discredited as circumstances change.

Villains

While we expected propaganda to be replete with enemies and villains, the presence of “bad guys” in propaganda is not mandatory, but depending on context and circumstances. Enemies from outside and enemies from the inside are more common during wartime periods or during social revolutions, such as the Great Leap Forward or the Cultural Revolution in China. In such contexts, the identification of the enemy is usually explicit. Interestingly, there is a difference between countries in this regard: while Chinese propaganda seems quite fond of villains, Vietnamese and Lao propaganda is less prone to display them.

Gender

Propaganda should not be considered as gender conservative by nature. It can challenge prevailing gender norms, particularly during revolutionary periods or wartime. Female fighters, women operating tractors, and girls smashing representations of “the gang of four” have appeared in Chinese propaganda posters collected by Stefan Landsberger from the University of Amsterdam in recent decades, as shown in his conference titled *The politics of art, or the art of politics*.

Aside from the occasional challenge of norms, propaganda is generally conservative in its approach to gender. Female images are often used to show case the harmony of the multi-ethnic nation or to promote the values of family farming and the country, as prominently seen in China, Vietnam, and Laos. Propaganda also frequently portrays the beauty of the “Land of Smiles” in Thailand.

In his talk *Popular culture and the remilitarization of Japan*, Jeffrey Hall from Kanda University of International Studies discussed the over representation of women in Japanese military propaganda (as compared to their effective presence in the army), providing a reassuring image of military careers; or the attempt to encourage recruitment in younger demographic by the extensive use of sexy heroines in manga, a popular vector among young people.

Hot and cold propaganda

Propaganda has its own rhythms and intensities. It sometimes functions as background noise, with repetitive, predictable, and possibly sedating messages that may not grab public attention. Then it suddenly inflames passions, particularly among individuals who fully identify with the cause of the Party or the nation, and who are ready to risk their lives in defense of this superior cause. These phases can be described as “cold propaganda” and “hot propaganda”, a model inspired by Michael Billig³ on nationalism. Hot propaganda can only be successful if it follows years or decades of cold propaganda that paved the way, as argued by Pierre Petit from the Université Libre de Bruxelles in his conference *Propaganda in Laos*. For example, the everyday propaganda of the Lao regime, repeatedly features film sequences of the “Liberation war”, displaying national harmony through a triad of women in ethnic attire and focusing on the That Luang stupa as the palladium of the nation. This cold propaganda serves as a background, setting the stage for the possible ignition of hot propaganda should national integrity be threatened.

And more...

This seminar offered valuable insights into various aspects of propaganda, but it was not possible to address all relevant issues. Some topics were briefly mentioned, and here are a few additional points: propaganda cannot be understood as a strictly national phenomenon, as many propagandists receive international training, and propaganda materials circulate globally. Moreover, there are voluntary differentiations between national styles, for example, Vietnamese and Chinese. Propaganda should also be examined in the perspective of filiation with previous forms of art, as was done by Baj Strobel in her conference *Political propaganda in Laos 1975-2000*, which notably investigated the connections between socialist propaganda posters and devotional paintings in Buddhist temples. Exploring the relationships between political and religious propaganda (the latter being eponym of the concept) and understanding how political leaders may draw on religious charisma are gateways to understand the role of

3 Billig M., 1995. *Banal Nationalism*. London, Sage.

Pierre Petit & Vanessa Frangville

religion in shaping propaganda messages. We would also compare propaganda seeking to establish continuity with the past and propaganda that aims to create conditions for historical amnesia (or “historical airbrushing”, as proposed by M. Herzfeld). Other dimensions of propaganda include the importance of local semantics, the ways it engages with the youth, and activist curatorship, as discussed by S. Ivarsson. Since time was too short to delve much into those aspects, it is hoped that these remaining questions will be addressed in the next seminar series scheduled for 2024-2025.