

Exposure Without Persuasion: Ideology, Regulation, and Audience Choice in Chinese Television

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Why Chinese TV dramas?

- Television dramas are the most widely consumed entertainment content in China:
97.8% of the population spend 152 minutes per day, with about 30% devoted to TV dramas (National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA), 2016)
- TV dramas are also a central instrument of ideological policy
- The drama production industry is also commercially important.

Institutional Background

- Political ideology embedded in TV dramas has been closely monitored by the Chinese government.
- A two-step system
 - ▶ Registration (2006-) and licensing system (2004-) for dramas aired on channels.
 - System and policy
- Post-2014 regulatory shock (NRTA)
 - ▶ Shift from implicit guidelines to explicit regulation of airtime, quantity, and scheduling of specific drama types.
 - ▶ Promote red-themed dramas; restrict highly commercialized genres
 - ▶ Aim: promoting Party and socialist values.

Policies since 2014 to regulate dramas aired on TV Channels

Year	Promote	Demote
2014	Sep-Oct: Satellite channels must broadcast dramas with themes of patriotism and anti-fascism.	Airtime of historical idol dramas \leq 15% on satellite channels, and no two aired consecutively.
2015	July-Sep: Each channel needs to broadcast 1-2 anti-fascism dramas.	Airtime of historical idol dramas \leq 15% on satellite channels, and no two aired consecutively.
2016	Sep-Oct: Channels must broadcast patriotism and anti-fascism dramas. In Oct, satellite channels must broadcast red revolution dramas during prime time.	Historical idol dramas cannot exceed 15% of airtime on satellite channels and cannot be aired consecutively. Total airtime for fantasy dramas (including immortal fantasy, magical fantasy, and immortal heroes) cannot exceed 50%.
2017	In July, channels have to broadcast red revolution or military-themed dramas during prime time.	Historical idol dramas cannot exceed 15% of airtime on satellite channels and cannot be aired consecutively. In Aug, satellite channels cannot broadcast overly entertaining dramas during prime time.
2018	Recommended dramas with themes to commemorate the reform and opening-up.	
2019		Limit palace intrigue dramas. Aug-Oct: Cannot broadcast overly entertaining historical idol dramas.
2020	Should broadcast Anti-fascism, anti-Japan, red revolution drama; broadcast the theme of poverty alleviation	Limit palace intrigue dramas.

How do stricter broadcast regulations affect ideological content in TV dramas and audience outcomes?

- 1 Measuring ideology - *two compatible dimensions*
 - ▶ Commercial scores (*audience-preferred*)
 - ▶ Political scores (*government-preferred*).
- 2 Drama-level analysis (causal) :
 - ▶ Both political and commercial scores decline
- 3 Audience-level pattern (descriptive):
 - ▶ Ideological exposure and intake both decline after 2014
 - ▶ Intake declines more due to reduced viewing time.

⇒ **Key takeaway:** Regulation reduces both political and commercial scores; ideological intake declines substantially, driven by reduced viewing time.

What explains the observed outcomes? (skip)

Data

- NRTA registration (2006–2019, 13k dramas) & licensing (2004–2020, 7k)
- CSM airing & viewership data (2006–2020, 759k airing records)
- Final sample: 6,607 dramas (5,249 TV; 1,358 online)
- Douban: text + ratings (matched for ~6,300 dramas)

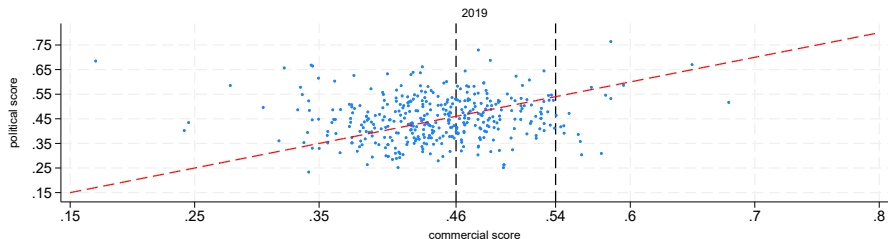
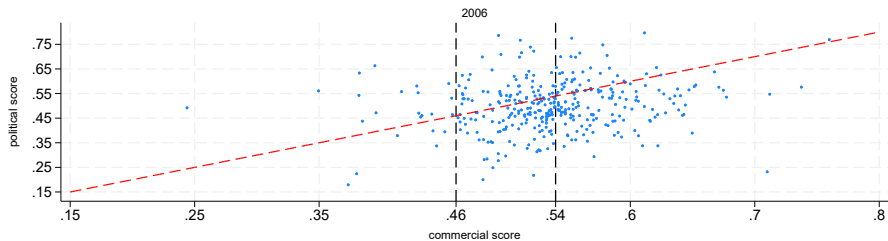
Measuring ideology

- Commercial score: text-based model trained on *Douban ratings*
- Political score: text-based model trained on *official awarded/criticized lists*
- Same text features, different training labels
- Both scores normalized to [0,1]

Measurement Validation

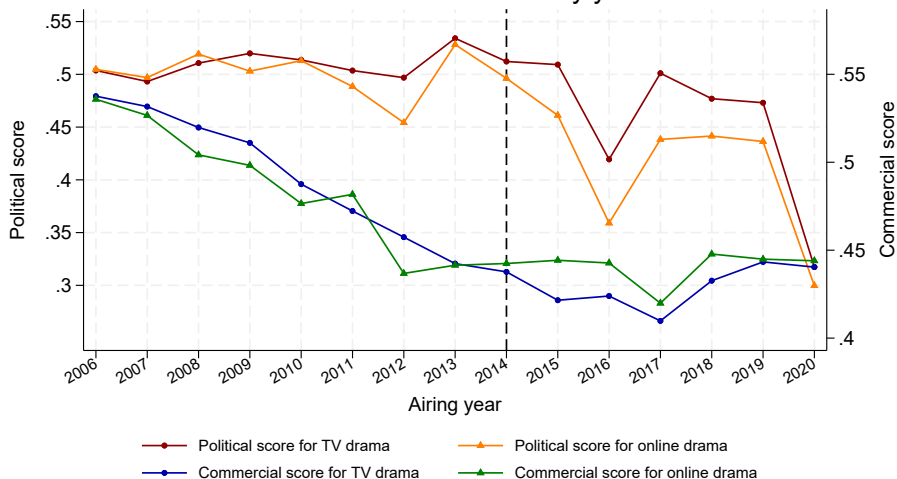
- 1 External validity
 - ▶ Awarded dramas → higher political scores $P_{\text{scores of awarded}}$
 - ▶ Censored/criticized dramas → lower political scores $P_{\text{scores of criticized}}$
- 2 Economic relevance
 - ▶ Commercial score strongly predicts:
 - ★ Douban ratings
 - ★ Viewership / reach rates
- 3 Distinct dimensions
 - ▶ Political and commercial scores are not perfectly correlated
 - ▶ Capture different aspects of content
- 4 Robustness
 - ▶ Robust to alternative model specifications (LASSO, WLS)
 - ▶ Robust to alternative weighting schemes
 - ▶ Robust to controlling for commercial content when constructing the political score

Ideological Distribution of Aired Dramas Over Time



Analysis of Ideology at the Drama Level

Mean scores of dramas by year



Regression results confirm the same pattern.

Ideology in Response to Demotion Policies

Policies demoting commercial dimension (TV channels only):

Table 3 Impact of demotion policies

VARIABLES	(1)		(2)		(3)		(4)		(5)		(6)	
	Historical Idol Drama		Fantasy Drama		Palace Intrigue Drama							
	Year(14_17)		Year(16)		Year(19_20)							
	Political	Commercial	Political	Commercial	Political	Commercial	Political	Commercial	Political	Commercial	Political	Commercial
Demoted*Year()	0.0089 (0.0127)	-0.0559*** (0.0086)	-0.1006*** (0.0329)	-0.0650*** (0.0124)	-0.1020* (0.0590)	-0.0722*** (0.0236)						
Int*Demoted*Year()	0.0246 (0.0164)	0.0478*** (0.0115)	0.1061*** (0.0348)	0.0594*** (0.0175)	0.1170* (0.0632)	0.0580** (0.0250)						
Observations	6,318	6,318	6,318	6,318	6,318	6,318						

Shares of genres Channel Vs Online

Ideology in Response to Promotion Policies

Policies promoting political dimension (TV channels only):

Table 4 Impact of promotion policies

VARIABLES	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Anti_fascism		Red_revolution_millitary	
	Year(1416_20)		Year(1617)	
	Political	Commercial	Political	Commercial
Promoted*Year()	-0.0367*** (0.0103)	-0.0559*** (0.0068)	-0.0339*** (0.0091)	-0.0460*** (0.0057)
Int*Promoted*Year()	0.1179*** (0.0332)	-0.0179 (0.0236)	0.0392 (0.0870)	0.0294 (0.0432)
Observations	6,318	6,318	6,318	6,318

Discussion at the Drama level

- Demoting commercial ideology:
 - ▶ Dramas on TV Channels: commercial scores decrease while political scores decrease or remain unchanged
- Promoting political ideology:
 - ▶ Dramas on TV Channels, both political and commercial scores decrease.
- Policies aimed at increasing political content instead reduce both political and commercial scores, consistent with *complementarities* between political and commercial dimensions.

Ideology Exposure and Intake

Ideological exposure is the ***available content***:

- Sum of (minutes \times ideology) across all accessible dramas

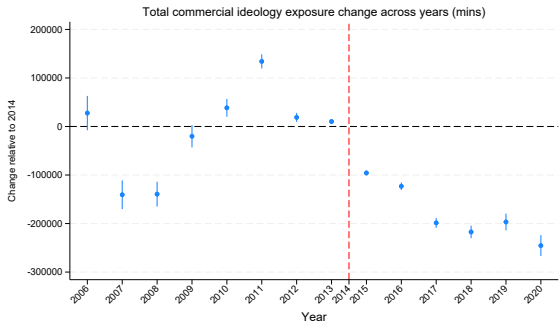
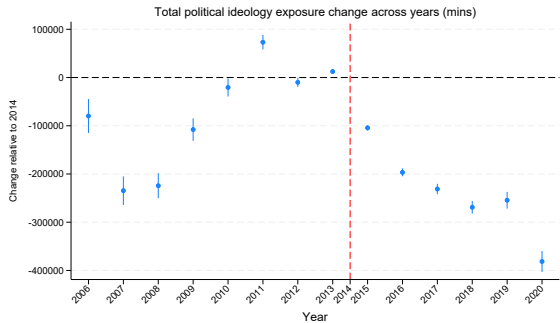
Ideological intake is the ***consumed content***:

- Sum of (reach rate \times minutes \times ideology)

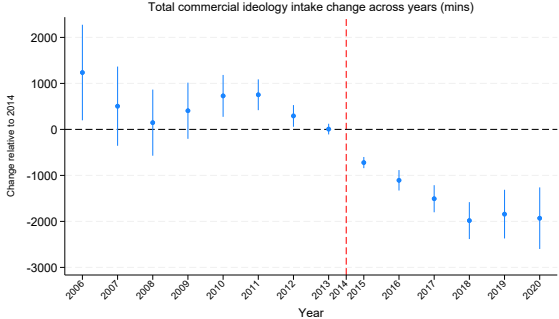
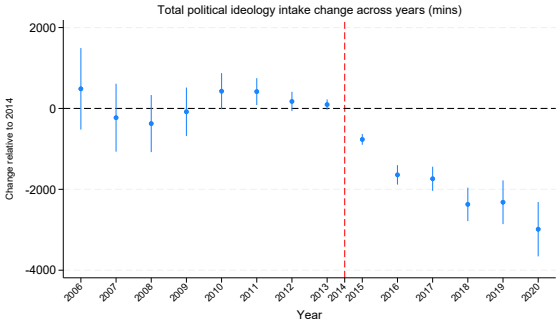
The key difference:

- Exposure = availability
- Intake = consumption (depends on audience behavior).

Exposure



Intake



Decomposition

In this paper we focus on **newly released dramas**. Therefore the total broadcast/viewing time of new dramas can **decline over time**, making the **extensive margin** important.

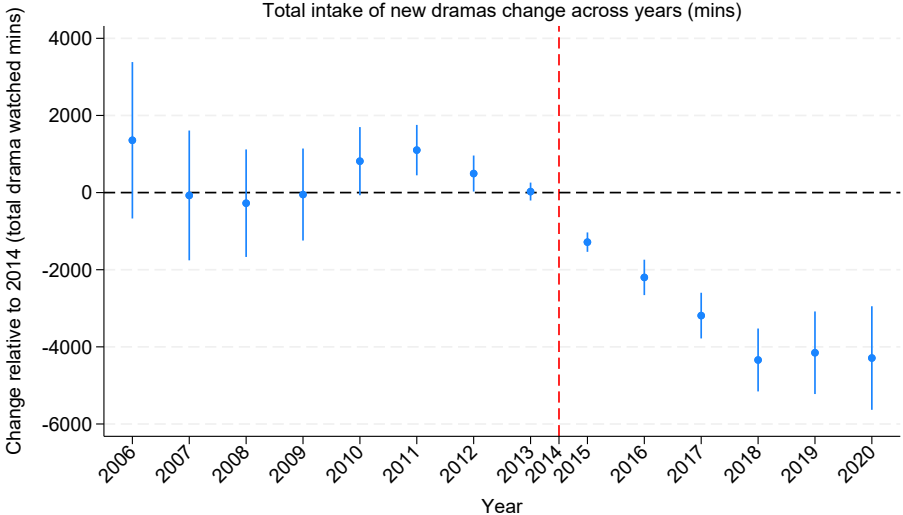
Core Identity

$$\text{Ideological Outcome}_{it} = \underbrace{\text{Time}_{it}}_{\text{minutes}} \times \underbrace{\text{Ideological Intensity}_{it}}_{\text{content per minute}}$$

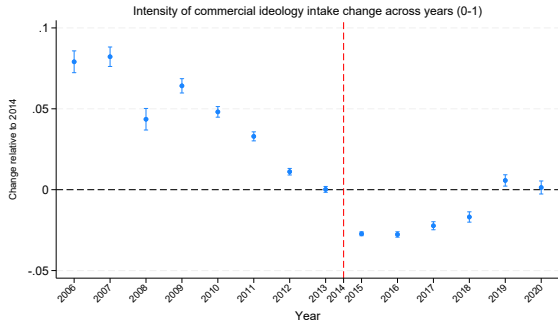
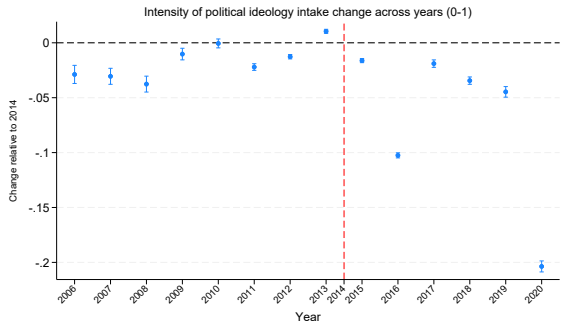
$$Ide_{it} = T_{it} \times I_{it}$$

- **Extensive margin** T_{it} : total minutes of new dramas broadcast or viewed
- **Intensive margin** I_{it} : (audience - weighted) ideological intensity per minute

Extensive margin - intake



Intensive margin - intake



Mechanism: extensive vs. intensive margins

- Extensive margin (time): ↓↓↓ → main driver
- Intensive margin (content per min.): small & mixed → secondary

Research Question 2 (skip)

RQ2: What explains the observed outcomes?

To understand the outcomes in RQ1, we examine the role of TV channels and the drama production market. (descriptive)

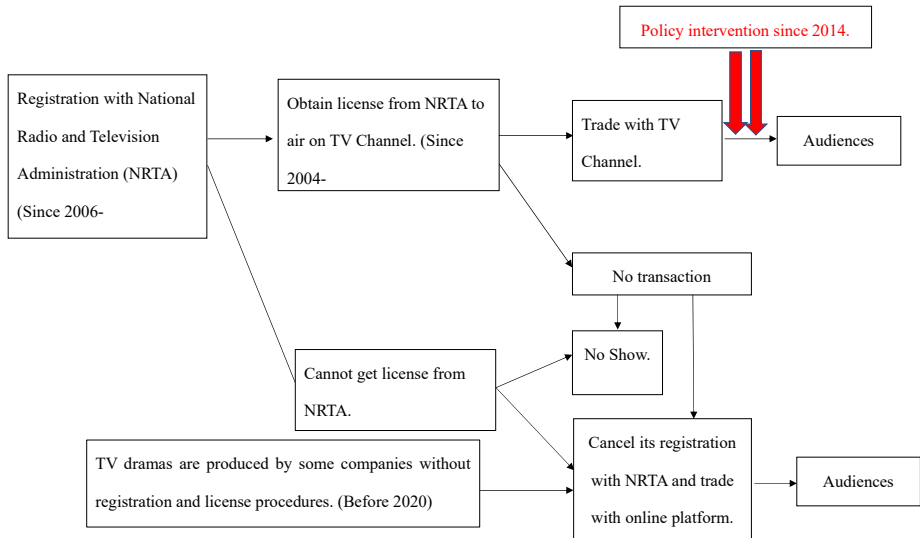
- 1 How TV channels adjusted broadcasting decisions? ↓ new dramas broadcasting ↓ viewership
- 2 How the drama production industry evolved, particularly the role of government investors
 - ▶ The market moves toward monopolistic competition
 - ▶ The share of government investors declines before 2014 but stabilizes afterward
 - ▶ Investors with party background tend to support dramas with higher political scores

Conclusion

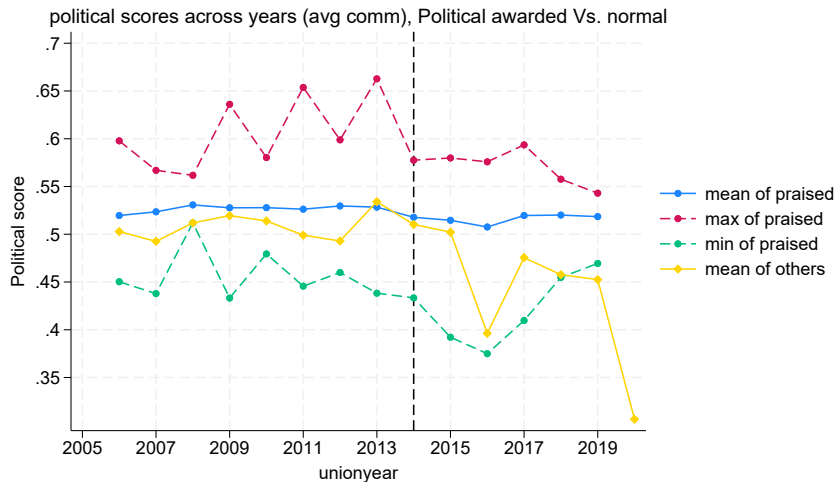
- Main findings
 - ▶ Regulation reduces both political and commercial content
 - ▶ Ideological intake declines much more than exposure
- Interpretation
 - ▶ Policies targeting content can reduce overall supply and consumption
 - ▶ Political and commercial content are complements, not substitutes
- Implication
 - ▶ Regulation may weaken ideological influence by reducing audience engagement

Systematic Controls on TV Channels

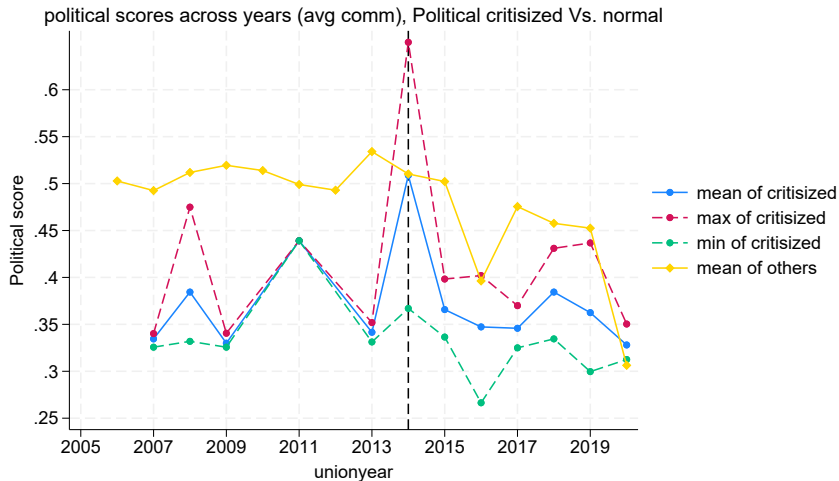
A drama from producer to audience



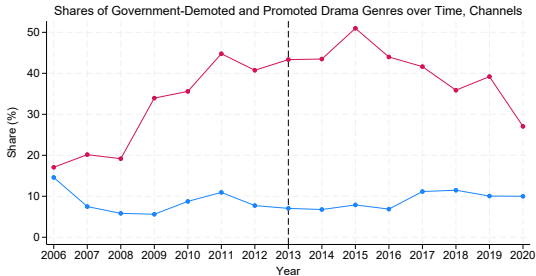
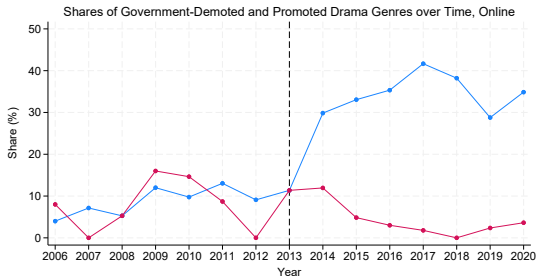
Political Scores of Awarded dramas



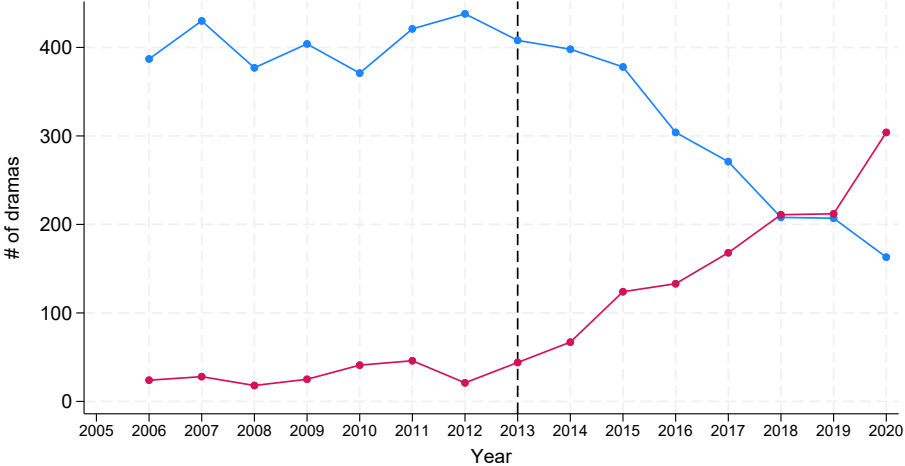
Political Scores of Criticized Dramas



Big Picture: Share of various Drama Genres across Years



Big Picture: Number of Dramas across Years



—●— # of dramas aired on TV —●— # of dramas aired online