

Does China's State Media Use Travel as Propaganda?

Evidence from TikTok and Douyin



Senior Honors Thesis

Submitted March 31st, 2025

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1 Governmentally-Based Organizations: A New Generation of Influencers

Finger-scrolling. Message-typing. Content-making. In the age of social media, more than 5.17 billion individuals, or around 63 percent of the world, flock to diverse online forums (Statista 2025). By 2014, furthermore, more than 76 percent of world leaders utilize social media to establish an online presence, connecting with previously unreachable communities and countries (Barberá and Zeitzoff 2018). Discussing countries from China to the United States, news networks such as the New York Times, NBC news, and Associated Press pondered over the purpose of nations' increasing connections abroad. Within these platforms, furthermore, some reporters speculate that governments utilize disinformation to incite chaos in other nations, while others assert that the promotion of social media increases the chance of trade partnerships between diverse nations (Hvistendahl et. al. 2023; Ingram 2019; Ortutay 2024; Olenski 2018). With the slew of clashing claims breaking onto major news networks, therefore, we cannot help but think—why are governments, akin to their chronically-online teenager counterparts, also becoming social media gurus?

To respond to the previous question, I would argue that the debate of government social media usage for an international audience often lands on two main explanations: increasing international influence—also known as soft power expansion—or acquiring economic gain. In terms of international influence, scholars attribute cases such as Korea's miracle "Hallyu Wave," or the international Korean cultural boom, for example, back to the nation's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and their usage of media (Jin 2024). With Korean Pop music, culture, and food being some of MOFA accounts' main content, MOFA illustrated the overarching Korean Government's goals on showcasing their culture and national unity to people worldwide (ibid.). Alternatively, scholars attribute travel booms in locations such as the Arabian Gulf Region as

effects to governments utilizing social media as a means for economic gain. Specifically, nations around the region acquired over 158 million views on travel-related YouTube videos, which later correlated to the increased number of 47 million visitors in the region (UNWTO 2008; Hussain 2024).

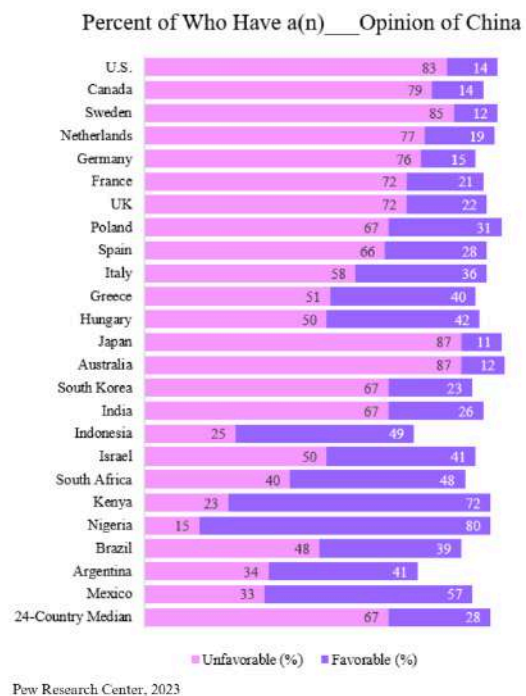
China, in this instance, is a case study that encapsulates both of the above possibilities mentioned. With an arsenal of 286 non-provincial, government-run social media accounts, the puzzle of which strategy China prioritizes over the other seem to remain (互联网新闻信息稿源单位名单, 2021). Recently, Western academics attributed the increase in travel posting on Chinese government-run social media accounts to China's desire to utilize soft power globally. For example, in the recently-published article by the New York Times, "Why Chinese Propaganda Loves Foreign Travel Bloggers," western scholars discussed cases such as foreign bloggers allowing social media users to attain a more positive and diversified view on China as a nation after watching their content (Wang 2025; Wang 2024). Furthermore, after the period of quarantine, bloggers within China are also asserted by scholars to help repair the tarnished reputation of China from COVID-19 by proclaiming the "truth" of Chinese daily life (ibid.). Further, if China emphasizes rebuilding its image abroad in forms such as broadcasting its soft power by showcasing its natural imagery on social media, China could have the ability to not only ease the prejudices from COVID-19, as mentioned before, but also follow suite with its policy of peacefully developing as a hegemony and establishing its presence culturally and ideologically on an international basis (Xi 2024). In the realm of economic development, however, scholars have discussed the prevalence of social media and digital economy in augmenting the Chinese economy, occupying 39.8 percent of China's total GDP (Liu et al. 2024; Li 2025; Tobey 2024). Utilizing social media, furthermore, Chinese locations such as Harbin

received over a record amount of \$831.97 million USD in tourist revenue in 2024, exceeding their top revenues from 2019 (Xinhua 2024).

With research backing both claims, one cannot help but start wondering if there is one motivation—whether persuading global citizens for the betterment of China’s image or ensuring the inflow of more capital internationally—that China favors over the other. To resolve this puzzle, I chose to look at the particular case of travel posting, as well as China’s rationale behind such posts, during and after Chinese Zero-COVID policies. With both the relative objectivity in identifying if a post is travel-oriented or not as well as the around 57 percent of social media users reporting to utilize online resources to research travel and 84 percent of leisure travelers noting to use the internet as information to plan destinations, budgeting, and transportation, the deployment of travel posts by nations for either political or economical agendas are hard to deny (List 2024; Nexakati et al. 2015).

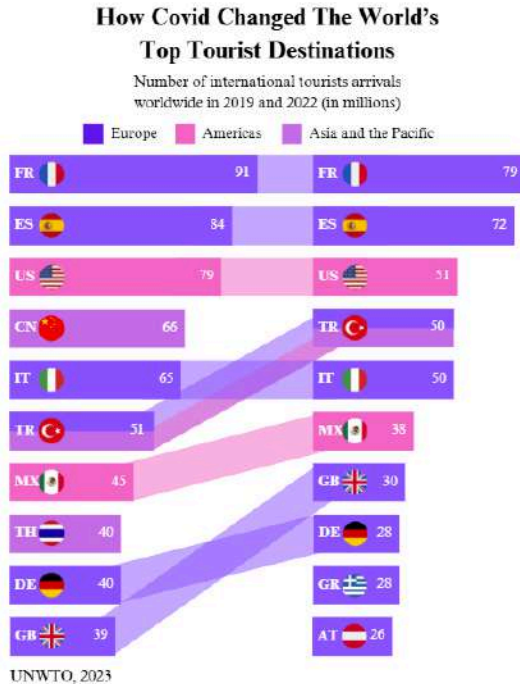
Through my research, I assert that, if the number of travel posts on Chinese government accounts remain stagnant following the period of Zero-COVID, China focuses on soft power as its primary foreign policy. Global perceptions of China reached a dramatic low during the pandemic, as seen from the median of 28 percent positive views on China following the period of Zero-COVID restrictions, which China might logically seek

Figure 1



to increase.(China Daily 2024; Silver et al. 2023).

Figure 2



However, if the number of Chinese travel posts increased following the period of quarantine, this would be consistent with China focusing more on increasing economic gain through tourism. Looking at the chart below, while other countries rebounded their tourism numbers after the end of the pandemic, some even increasing in scale, China, one of the initial top four popular travel destinations in 2019, fully exited out of the top ten tourist destination list in 2022 (UNWTO 2023).

Therefore, China could also potentially decide

to increase their travel posting frequency to attract more foreign visitors.

To supplement my research, I also consider the types of provinces China showcases on social media, and if they favor some provinces over others.

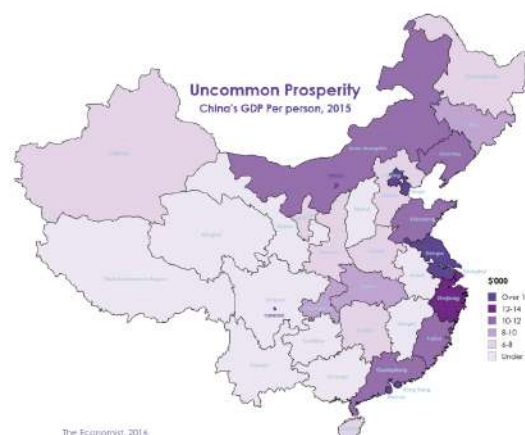
If China was to broadcast its locations for reinforcing international image and soft power, it might favor more economically well-off or politically-contested locations, given the well-off provinces have better economic structures that allows easier advertising, and that China could showcase its control over contested regions towards a global audience (Cao et al. 2015). For instance, these more preferred provinces may involve areas such as the extravagant and scenic coastal areas like Jiangsu and Shanghai, and Beijing as well as politically-contested regions such as Hong Kong, Tibet, and Taiwan, as seen through the maps below (Maxwell 2006; The

Economist 2016). Additionally, I will also note posts without distinct locations as a form of soft power, given their focus is not specifically on travelling to a location.

Figure 3



Figure 4



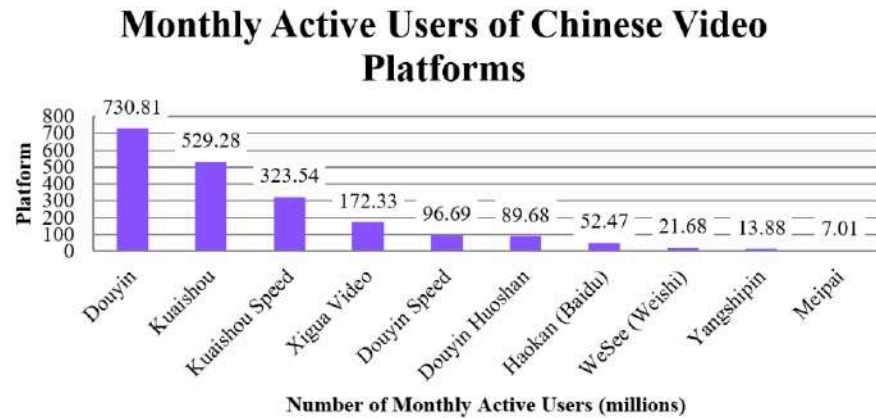
Note: Taiwan is not depicted on the maps, but it is a region contested by China.

However, if China chooses to favor its economy, it may possibly choose to broadcast lesser well-off and lesser frequently travelled-to locations to ensure an overall increase in its GDP through its COVID-19-impacted sectors such as restaurants, transportation, and entertainment (Wang et al., 2021). Some heavily-impacted provinces China may focus on could include Gansu, Shaanxi, and Yunnan, as seen through the Economist map above (The Economist 2016). In other cases, it might even feature more niche locations, such as local villages.

With the previous points of contention and curiosity in mind, this study will utilize the widespread effects of social media, as stated earlier, in gauging the messages China wishes to spread domestically and abroad surrounding the concept of travel. To conduct such research, this study will primarily focus on the comparison between two platforms—Douyin and TikTok—managed by the same company—Bytedance (Bytedance 2024). Furthermore, this study will be observing my control group, Douyin users, with 730.81 million out of its 755 million active users being China-based, as well as my experimental group, TikTok, being blocked in

China, boasts a more diverse 113 million out of 1.5 billion users being America-based, and 109.9 million as Indonesia-based as its top users, as seen below (Verot 2023; Statista 2023; Chan 2024). Given both platforms have nearly identical functions but drastically different audiences, the posts created by cross-platform accounts will, most likely, differ from each other.

Figure 5



Verot, 2023

Figure 6

Where TikTok is the Most Popular With Adults

Countries with the estimated highest number of TikTok users aged 18+ in 2023*



*Audience addressable by ads. India (blanket ban in place) and China (Chinese audiences use Douyin) excluded.

Statista, 2023

The study targets all four government-run accounts run by the Chinese government that were active on both TikTok and Douyin from June 2022, a period during Zero-COVID, to June 2023, five months after Zero-COVID restrictions have been lifted (Chinese Government 2021). In the result of my study, I find that Chinese foreign policies focus more on increasing economic gain, while domestic policies work to influence public opinion.

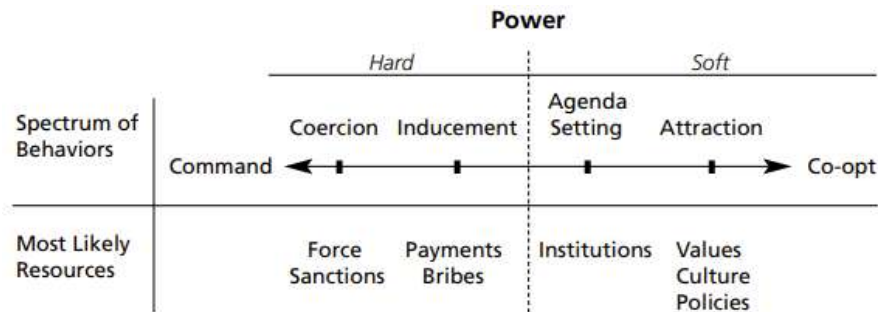
As a method of analysis, I scrape the posts on both platforms, followed by categorizing them into travel and non-travel categories. Additionally, I also collect regions corresponding to each post. Afterwards, I analyze and explain the resulting trend, comparing the amount of travel-related posts pre- and post-Zero-COVID as well as the frequency of each of China's 34 province-level areas to solve the previously-established puzzles (China Digital Space 2005). I then discuss the results as a manner to distinguish the motive of accounts in pursuing a soft power objective, compared to an account aimed to promote tourism. Finally, I discuss the manners of further research in this field of study using a topical analysis to supplementarily address the limitations of analyzing text as data.

2 Theory and Previous Work

2.1 Soft Power Projection

Developed in 1990 by Joseph Nye, soft power is defined as when a nation “gets other countries to *want* what it wants,” and resides alongside military and economic power as the three types of power exercised by nations (Wilson 2008; Nye 1990; Nye 2004). Furthermore, soft power, by definition, is also debated by scholars on whether it resides as a sub branch of hard power, according to mainly realist thinkers, asserting that soft power itself roots itself in a language version of coercion and hard power given its idealistic nature, or if it is an independent entity, generally claiming that hard power by itself is unsustainable for a nation to broadcast its

power globally (Mattern 2005; Layne 2010; Nye 1990; Gallarotti 2011; Zahran and Ramos 2010). Attached below is a simple graphic demonstrating the different types of power usage, according to Nye (Nye 2005).



Note: This is Figure 1 from Nye's Soft Power and Higher Education, 2005.

Additionally, some scholars believe in the possible melange of both soft and hard power, coining the concept as “smart power,” where the usage of either soft or hard power by a nation is not mutually exclusive, and the nation balances between the two strategies (Nye 1990; Wilson et al. 2008).

Keeping these definitions and categorizations in mind, the first section of the literature review will discuss different case studies surrounding tactics nations utilize to increase their soft power throughout history, and eventually apply previous analogies to China before and after the lifting of COVID restrictions.

2.1.1 Historical Soft Power Usage

While soft power projection is a recently-developed term, its existence arguably existed from ancient times to current. The rudimentary origins of soft power began during the *ancien regime* as a method of boasting their culture and power to other nations to create a more powerful silhouette of the country itself. During the centralized reign of King Louis XIV, specifically, the French were noted to have meticulously focused on creating a concrete identity,

such as in fashion, in hopes of better projecting their power to neighboring countries (Frans and Aryani 2023; Melissen 2005). Likewise, following the Franco-Prussian War, France furthered their agenda in repairing and promoting their culture through the creation of the Alliance Française, a language-promoting organization (Nye 2002). Similarly, when Prince Grigory Aleksandrovich Potemkin of Russia conquered Ukraine, or New Russia, he similarly planned the post-conquest tour in 1787 with staged workers and cheering crowds to enhance Russia's international image as one that is loved by the people of other nations (Kunczik 2016). Furthermore, as seen through the seven Ming Dynasty voyages from 1405 to 1433, also known as Zheng He's "Treasure Ships" (宝船; *baochuan*) China extended their prowess through bringing extravagant products to foreign lands. Through these methods as well as anti-piracy policies in Southeast Asia, China was able to boast an extensive tribute system and deference from neighboring countries, similar to the examples as illustrated prior (Finlay 2013).

Later, the extension and projection of soft power evolved from showcasing the strength of a nation to the ability of a nation to provide aid to other nations as a manner to showcase its capability of serving as a "benevolent" proto-hegemony. As the two World Wars ravaged the nations, the United States miraculously was left almost untouched due to its geographical location as well as economical interactions (Stillwell 2022). As a result, the United States obtained the unique ability to gain trust and from other nations not only through its trade in commodities such as weapons to the Allied Powers and through the Lend Lease Act in World War Two, but also through assisting specific nations, such as the Republic of China, on their fight against the encroaching Japanese soldiers, through the enlisted Flying Tigers (UNODC 2019; Kimball 1971; Yenne 2016).

Following the world wars, the United States continued to extend its influence internationally through the Marshall Plan, assisting European nations for recovery (Nye 2004). Through the frequent interactions between Europe and the US due to transactions, as such, pop culture motifs with subtle democratic messaging involving youthfulness, modernity, and freedom also acquired massive traction throughout the war torn continent, allowing, as argued by Wagnleitner, to have assisted in the democratization of European nations (Wagnleitner 1999). Also, as China politically transformed into a communist government, it extended itself towards marxist-based communities worldwide, as seen through Chairman Mao and the Chinese Communist Party's influence, protection, and support towards the Black Panther Party within the United States, establishing themselves as a symbol of anti-imperialist and anti-racism movements (Evans 2021).

2.1.2 Modern Uses for Soft Power

While historical scholars have been in general agreement surrounding the utilization of soft power, a cacophony of contrasting opinions are apparent within the modern, more globally-aware world surrounding soft power usage.

Global Positioning Some scholars, in this case, primarily claim nations utilize soft power to strategically position themselves in the world (Gallarotti 2011; Fan 2008). Examples of such are portrayed in communities such as the European Union (EU) and its focus on serving as the medium of normative power—creating “norms” such as liberty, sustainability, and human rights—for Europe as a whole. Through joining the EU, then, a nation can have the ability to establish themselves as an endorser of the aforementioned democratic beliefs, allowing them to seek fellow allies within the organization that share the same ideals (Manners 2002, pg.8; Goldthau and Sitter 2015). Similarly, under the guise of vulnerability, scholars have frequently

noted India's ability to utilize such as a manner of promoting itself as a still-developing country as a manner to acquire aid from the United States or political support from Russia as a source of engagement slightly outside of the communist bloc (Jaishankar 2018; Hymans 2009). Likewise, the actions of China in unarming themselves with the four "no's"—no hegemony, no alliance in terms of military, no race for arms, and no power politics—and, instead, to be positioning themselves as benevolent negotiators and cooperators are discussed by multiple scholars as China posing as an amicable global partner (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024; Rahman 2019; Herrington 2011; Lee et al. 2024).

Spreading Culture Alternatively, others claim that soft power is most highly utilized through the promotion of a nation's culture (Nye 2019; Zanella et al. 2024). For example, South Korea boasts of the recent phenomenon of "Hallyu," or the "Korean Wave," an effect corresponding to the spread of Korean popular culture, and therefore its ideals, overseas. As a result of highly intended international marketing strategies, such as teaching Korean Pop Music idols to learn multiple languages, scholars have discussed its results, such as North Koreans defecting across the border and the South Korean culture gaining international traction (Kim 2019; Moita 2021; Yoon 2023; Nye et al. 2019). Likewise, in the case of the United Kingdom (UK), the creation of the British Council, as discussed by scholars, showcases the UK's usage of soft power due to its promotion of education internationally, resulting in a positive effect in international interactions, such as with its improved relations with Egypt or a generally overall positive impression of British policies, as a result from the program's alumni (Phillips 2024; Lomer 2016, Pg.598). Similar to the United Kingdom in this context, numerous scholars supporting the promotion would argue that China primarily projects its soft power into the form of over 550 Confucius Institutes, though arguably with lesser success (Ford 2022). Through this

project, scholars supporting the theory of cultural-based soft power projection asserts that it provided a platform of cultural and Chinese ideological exchange with other nations, in addition to feeding the host nations the version of history, culture, and customs China prefers on being broadcasted towards the rest of the world (Yang 2010; Zhou and Luk 2016; Lo and Pan 2014; Huang and Xiang 2018).

Promoting Economics Lastly, scholars also assert that soft power is sometimes utilized as a manner to promote economic objectives. In the context of Russia prior to the Russo-Ukrainian war, scholars argued that it demonstrated soft power through establishing Russian as the primary language of negotiation within the Central and Eastern Europe blocs and establishing Russian nonprofits in aforementioned locations and the Middle East, assisting it to proliferate economically through its monopoly of natural resources, such as the Gazprom oil monopoly (Hill 2006; Borshchevskaya 2021; Rutland 2008). Some scholars also argue that Japan also utilized soft power to economically prosper, as seen through its presence in Japanese-worded Hong Kong fashion journals, translated Japanese comic books into languages such as Korean, Indonesian, and Thai, as well as the merchandise line of Japanese-based characters, such as Hello Kitty, Poke'mon, and Beyblade in nations worldwide (Otmazgin 2008; Yayushi and McConnell 2008; Smith 2013; Tsutomu 2008). China, in the field of economic gain through the utilization of soft power, can iconically be recognized for its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (State Council of the People's Republic of China 2015). Through its goal of connecting China to regions such as the Mediterranean Sea and Europe—much like the ancient Silk Road—scholars argue that China is able to accumulate a cohort of allies, allowing it to benefit economically through trade, negotiations, and mutual security protection (Carminati 2020; Voon and Xu 2019; Jakimów 2019; Duarte and Ferreira-Pereira 2021).

2.1.3 Global Tensions, Soft Power, and China

While scholarly debates might illustrate various assertions surrounding the utilization of soft power, seen through the inclusion of China in all three reasons of scholarly debate, utilizations are not always mutually-exclusive. However, when discussing the results of applying soft power in the context of rising tensions in today's world, especially China, scholars tended to resort to a more divisive debate surrounding its effectiveness in easing tensions, or, on the contrary, exacerbating an already-taut situation.

Soft Power as an Enabler to Easing Tensions Within the global context, the enabling ability of soft power could be seen in, for example, the context of the European Union (EU). Due to the publication surrounding collective benefits and protection the members are able to receive, scholars noted its effects on the integration of post-Eastern bloc nations, such as Hungary, Estonia, and the Czech Republic, easing possible tensions and increasing the shared values between neighboring countries (Ricard 2024; Bogomolov and Lytvynenko 2012). Seemingly parallel to the topic of China soft power strategies, scholars such as Clarke (2017) have similarly commented that the utilization of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) acts as a successful platform for resolving long-term economic, geopolitical, and domestic challenges between China and other nations, allowing China to more easily carry out its foreign policies (Holt 2020; Wuthnow 2012). Seen through both cases, the utilization of soft power to bring individuals from diverse nations together assists in not only ensuring clear and understanding communication between all nations, but also pushes forth the agendas of nations involved in a peaceful manner.

Soft Power as a Hindrance to Easing Tensions In the case of the United States, scholars have commonly pointed out the controversy between the United States' projection as the leader of diplomacy and their actions abroad, whether in cases such as soldiers committing

atrocities to suspected terrorists in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, during the War on Terror policy, or the support for select authoritarian nations, such as Saudi Arabia. Such actions, in turn, led to international critiques (Layne 2010; Carothers and Feldman 2023; Telhami 2003). In like manner, scholars have commonly noted the political failure of China's promotion of the Confucius Institutes (CIs). Firstly, CIs overextends itself into not just the realm of auditing history and presumed propaganda, but also the unpredictability of funding for the institutions of other nations, resulting in a multitude of Confucius institutes shutting down in nations such as the United States. The shutting down of Confucius Institutes, as such, are argued by scholars to mar China's reputation as a reliable partner on the international stage (US Government Accountability Office 2023; Latinhen 2015; Hubbert 2019).

2.1.4 Are China's state media travel posts a form of soft power?

In the context of social media, scholars have scrutinized over the extent of soft power impacts before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, the debate stemmed everything from the diversification of soft power during China leading to a downturn in political sentiments throughout Zero-COVID policies in news networks to an upturn in views surrounding China following the restrictions in 2024, as seen on YouTube's influx of replays and subscribers, but nothing surrounding (Kim et al. 2023; Yang 2024; Melin 2021). While plenty of research has been conducted surrounding the *amount* of soft power China applies, a gap seems to be apparent on *why* China applies soft power in the context of social media.

While the scope of my research specifically focuses on travel posts, I hope to not only assert the amount of soft power China is utilizing surrounding the subject, but also to clarify the reason for China's possible use of soft power, at least in one sector. Given the aforementioned debates, then, I would like to test whether China's use of soft power during and after COVID,

most likely will align itself with the latter two reasons for utilizing soft power—establishing itself as an international cultural icon—through, for example, boasting its 59 world heritage sites—as well as utilizing its soft power as a manner to rebuild its economy and re-stimulate global trade (UNESCO 1985).

2.2 Promotion of Tourism

As briefly skimmed upon within the introduction, there are two main categories of tourism—Outbound and inbound. *Outbound* tourism refers to the “moving *out*” of domestic individuals to other nations outside of their nation of origin. On the contrary, *inbound* tourism refers to the “moving *in*” of foreign travelers to the nation in consideration (UNWTO 2008, pg.15).

Given the nature of the study surrounding observing the manner China attracts non-Chinese citizens in the form of travel posts, this portion of literature review will predominantly focus on inbound tourism.

2.2.1 Politics of Tourism

According to past scholars, governments are often incentivized to promote inbound tourism because of three effects—economic growth, preservation and conservation, as well as improved international relations.

Economic Growth Firstly, scholars have speculated that nations favor the promotion of inbound tourism due to its ability to bring economic abundance to the nation (Sahli and Carey 2013; Dwyer et al. 2010). Utilizing an augmented Cobb–Douglas production function as a manner to capture exports (inbound tourism), Medina-Smith’s (2001) investigation on Costa Rica illustrated that inbound tourism increases the total factor productivity—the overall amount of productivity a nation has, combining its human (labor input) and infrastructure (capital input)

contributions—and therefore increases the overall wellbeing of the nation. The aforementioned modified equation is illustrated below, where y_t is the real GDP, p_t is the population, i_t is either the gross domestic income (GDI) or the gross fixed capital formation (GFCF), x_t is the real exports of goods and services, and ϕ_t are corresponding constants:

$$y_t = \phi_0 + \phi_1 p_t + \phi_2 i_t + \phi_3 x_t + \mu_t \quad (1.2)$$

With such in mind, this equation can be applied in the context of Spain and Italy. Specifically, Cortes-Jimenez and Pulina (2009) assert that inbound travel allowed for the economy in both nations to prosper (Liu and Wu 2019). Further, this assertion was supported by observations seen in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) increase from having 11 percent of the world's GDP to 30 percent from 1990 to 2014, correlating to the increase in travel and domestic infrastructure renovation (Rasool et al. 2021).

Preservation and Conservation Other scholars would alternatively argue that nations pursue the promotion of travel as a method to ensure preservation and conservation programs are continued within their nation (Freytag and Vietze 2012). Conceptually speaking, scholars have noted the general increase in GDP from ecological tourism, as seen below:

	I	II	III	IV
Dependent variable	GDP growth 2003–2006		GDP growth 2008–2011	
Model	M1	M2	M1	M2
constant	0.2002*** (2.709)	0.0922* (1.731)	0.1863** (2.550)	0.2178** (2.492)
TApCapita	−0.0074 (−1.271)		−0.0439*** (−3.374)	
TRpGDP		0.0174** (2.415)		0.0151** (2.048)
GDP2003	−1.92E-06*** (−3.155)	−2.17E-06*** (−3.659)	2.55E-08 (0.017)	−8.93E-07 (−0.580)
OpenT	0.0003*** (3.244)	0.0003*** (3.207)	0.0002 (1.433)	0.0001 (0.649)
HDIEDu	0.0968 (1.481)	0.2030*** (4.042)	0.0037 (0.081)	0.0120 (0.201)
Kprice	−0.0092 (−1.481)	−8.33E-05 (−0.017)	0.0080 (1.543)	0.0095 (1.583)
IEF	−0.0013 (−1.571)	−0.0013* (−1.698)	−0.0020* (−1.679)	−0.0027** (−2.079)
R ² adj	0.0990	0.1993	0.2381	0.1688
N	131	130	130	129

Notes: For sources see Table A1. Dependent variable is the respective growth of per capita GDP. Absolute t values are given in parenthesis. *Significant at the 90% level. **Significant at the 95% level. ***Significant at the 99% level.

Comparing strategies that focus on mass tourism, illustrated through the variable, *TApCapita*, to ones focused on sustainable tourism, illustrated through the variable, *TRpGDP*, a negative correlation is showcased between TApCapita to GDP growth, as seen in models I and III, as compared to the positive statistical difference in tourism receipts (TRpGDP) between the years to GDP growth, as demonstrated in models II and IV (Freytag and Vietze 2012). Take Namibia and South Africa, as an example of the previous observations. Scholars have noted that, since the private landowners have acquired permission to take care of wildlife within their private properties, wildlife tourism, whether from general sightseeing or big game hunting, has boomed, allowing for earnings to be cycled back into ecological preservation within the nation (Freytag and Vietze 2012; Freytag and Vietze 2009; Muir-Leresche and Nelson 2000). In the context of China, its encouragement of ecotourism is synonymous with its promotion of threatened and endangered wildlife. Through establishing pandas as one of its natural and cultural icons as China's endeavor for promoting community-based ecotourism (CBET), household incomes within Sichuan, China, increased an average per capita income of 29.5 percent from both high and low altitudes, allowing the community to, in turn, give back towards conservation efforts (Ma et al. 2019; Cui et al. 2019; Kontoleon et al. 2002).

This claim, however, has also faced a multitude of dissent. From discussing the ineffectiveness of ecotourism surrounding the loss of bird biodiversity as an influx of tourism to the, in reality, not-so-significant impact of pandas on the increase of ecotourism (Metrick and Weitzman 1998, pg. 31; Su 2019).

Strengthened International Relations Alternatively, scholars may also implement travel as a manner to strengthen their reputation globally (Jalalpour and Shojaeifar 2014). Individuals that both simply reviewed its image or have travelled to Thailand, for example, are noted by

previous scholars to reflect on the nation in a positive light, allowing for Thailand to thrive on the international stage (Ingram et al 2013; Yiamjanya and Wongleedee 2014).

Despite the aforementioned assertions, an overwhelming number of scholars, instead, argue for the opposite. A scholar against the concept of travel strengthening international relations may argue, instead, that a strong tourism network builds upon the foundations of good international relations (Matthews and Richter 1991; Wujie 2023). China travellers to Japan, for example, are noted to scholars to have a corresponding tourism responsive to the wellness of political relations (Su et al. 2021; Cheng et al. 2016).

2.2.2 How Governments Promote Tourism

This section will examine three common ways governments promote tourism, as commented on by previous scholars—visa incentives, partnerships, and marketing.

Promotion Through Visa Incentives Firstly, scholars have observed that nations often provide incentives for travel as a manner of acquiring more tourists (Neumayer 2008). Often appearing in the form of visa waivers, nations such as Kenya attempted to implement such onto the global scale, but to little avail due to the policy’s alleged “discrimination” towards nations not included. Indonesia, similarly, utilized a visa-free policy post-COVID-19 as a manner to rebound tourism rates, but similarly met a dismayingly negative effect most likely due to obstacles faced in maintaining destination appeal and managing visitor quality (Ikiara et al. 2001; Li et al. 2024).

Likewise, scholars observe this phenomenon in the context of China. Following the end of Zero-COVID in late December of 2023, China published its *Visa-free entry in to Mainland China* policy, where foreign citizens were permitted to enter China without a visa if they satisfied requirements such as visits to Hainan Island, holders of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation

(APEC) Business Travel Card, and staying for a 72 hour visa free transit period (China Visa Application Service Center 2023). While scholars have commonly noted a negative response in applying visa-free policies, scholars, in response to the Chinese policy, have debated of, instead, a significant increase in the spillover as a result of the foreign tourism within China, leading to a positive 0.4 percent growth in positive change in factors such as the economy (Gu 2024).

Promotion Through Partnerships Scholars have alternatively noted that nations might be majorly promoting tourism through partnerships. As the most prominent type of partnerships, scholars illustrate Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs), or partnerships governments create with private sectors for a public project within sectors such as regional modifications, infrastructure development, and economic recovery as a successful outlet for inducing travel (Ng et al. 2012). Russia post-COVID, for example, successfully leveraged public-private partnerships as a manner to recover from the decrease of travel throughout the quarantine (Shubtsova et al. 2020; Halkier et al. 2016). Within Zimbabwe, scholars have similarly noted that PPPs has assisted in increasing the overall appeal of the nation to travellers from its ability in allowing for public projects, such as for nature conservation, to become more affordable by the government (Sai et al. 2015; Kanokanga et al. 2019).

Lastly, China is noted by scholars to serve as a powerhouse for experimenting with PPPs (Xiong et al. 2020). For example, these partnerships could be observed through collaborations between the two sectors in locations such as Macao, where the local governing body worked alongside tourism businesses to successfully recuperate post-COVID and the existing cooperation of educational institutions with tourism, assisting inbound tourists in receiving a more well-rounded insight from their trip (Wan et al. 2022; Chai et al. 2023).

Promotion Through Marketing Finally, scholars are also aware that nations utilize diverse marketing strategies to acquire traction for travel. In the context of the “100 percent Pure New Zealand” Campaign, scholars often praised the positive impact the marketing strategy, surrounding promoting New Zealand as a tourist destination through methods such as involving the campaign in internationally-acclaimed media, such as the Lord of the Ring movies, has brought onto the nation’s tourism receipts from target nations such as the United Kingdom and Japan (Piggott et al. 2004; Morgan et al. 2002; Bell et al. 2008; Patil 2019). In conjunction with New Zealand, the "Incredible India" Campaign showcased another case of success surrounding the promotion of tourism through governmentally-directed marketing campaigns. Utilizing initially a series of images, such as ones shown below, India artistically incorporated their culture into minimalistic backdrops, merging the “I” in “India” with the discussed cultural topic, where the I is resembled as the stripe or a yoga position (Geary et al. 2013; Federici 2019).



2.2.4 Application of Tourism in the Context of Research

At first glance, it might be quite puzzling why I did not provide a section for China in the tourism marketing section above. While other nations are noted to have various travel-based projects, China is not known for one iconic marketing project broadcasted worldwide. However, returning to the topic of Douyin and TikTok, China is observed by various scholars to utilize its existing yet dispersed governmental social platforms as a manner to promote and guide tourism

to specific locations, such as Ningxia, Xi'an, and Hainan to its international visitors (Liu et al. 2024; Ma 2024; Jie 2023; Wengel et al. 2022).

Thus, integrating the discernment of aforementioned authors, my thesis will specifically observe China's digital marketing strategies as a manner to campaign itself across an international audience. If the purpose of travel posts in China's state media are to promote tourism, then more so on TikTok and lesser on Douyin, I hypothesize that content such as nature, culture, new travel policies, and public-private partnerships will appear more when China is in need of inbound travellers, and some provinces will have a higher likelihood of becoming the "poster child" of China's marketing efforts. Given the context of Zero-COVID, then, if the motivation is to promote travel, then we will most likely observe an increase in posts of this kind following the release of the travel ban on January 8th, 2023 (Global Times 2022).

2.3 Integration of Theories

As demonstrated within the paper, it is probably not the case that one of the two strategies -- soft power or tourism -- takes complete precedence over the other. Instead, this paper seeks to address the gap in political analysis literature surrounding the comparison between these two topics in order to analyze if China favors one policy over the other, or if both are equally utilized. Following such, the paper seeks to distinguish the strategies that China utilizes to promote either option.

3 Conceptualizing the World of Post Zero-COVID

3.1 China, Covid, Economics, and Soft Power

China is noted as the nation that observed the longest lockdown worldwide in response to the Covid-19 virus (Burki 2022). Beginning on January 23rd, 2020, the Chinese government deployed the Zero-COVID policy to keep domestic cases of COVID-19 virus as low as possible,

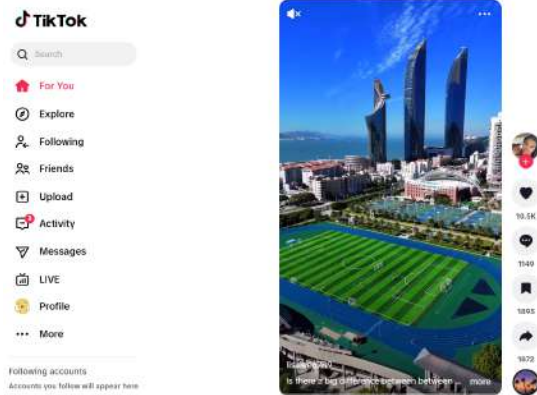
engaging in a total nationwide lockdown (The Lancet 2020). As a result, only two individuals within China died of covid mid-April, 2020, to March, 2022 (Burki 2022). While the Zero-COVID policy was lifted on December 7th, 2022, travel bans were not lifted until a month later on January 8th, 2023 (Wilson and Flahault 2023; Zhou and Tian 2023).

While the reopening of doors from China to other countries could be considered as a joyful event, the opinions of China following the quarantine states otherwise. Following the period of China's travel restrictions, China not only exited out of the top 10 visited countries in the world, but also was viewed negatively by 67 percent of individuals from 24 nations surveyed in 2023 (UNWTO 2023; Silver et al. 2023). With China's stagnated economy and tarnished reputation, the study will, once again, seek to discover which one of the two China will prioritize to repair.

To observe the aforementioned points, this study uses the platforms Douyin and TikTok, which are both owned by Bytedance (Bytedance Corporate Structure, 2023).



With near-identical logos, both platforms function through a main “For You Page (FYP),” where videos with an average of 39 seconds long are displayed on the home page, providing short and concise bursts of information for the viewers (Statista 2023).



TikTok Home Page



Douyin Home Page; highlighted bar on left side of page translates to “recommended”

Because of their similarity, as well as Douyin mainly orienting itself towards a Chinese audience and TikTok being blocked in China but still serving as an active social media platform worldwide, I use posts on TikTok as the experimental group and Douyin as the control group to conduct the following research (Chan 2024).

3.2 Mechanisms to Determine China’s Choice of Priority

3.2.1 Research Question

With the previous background in mind, the following sections further describe the mechanisms needed to answer the research question—*Through the analysis of pre, during, and post COVID-19 trends on TikTok and Douyin, does China use guided social media posts to mainly promote its soft power abroad or to boost its economy?*

3.2.2 Case Selection

My observational study analyzes the frequency and subjects of travel posts as opposed to other general posts utilizing the time during, and after the Zero-COVID period, namely June 2022 to June 2023, as the baseline of comparison, given my research seeks to understand whether the Chinese government is utilizing the posting travel on their TikTok or Douyin accounts to assist their projection of soft power or simply to acquire a higher influx of

international travelers. To categorize and count travel-specific videos, I will be looking for videos that involve attractions, scenery, or culture within the accounts, in addition to making a note of their place of origin to track if China's state media tends to promote one region over another.

To test the viability of the claim, I collect a random 33.33 percent sample of total posts from TikTok and Douyin-based China state media social media accounts and analyzed for travel prevalence. To do this, I collected a sample of 4 most active governmental accounts on both TikTok and Douyin from the official list of government accounts, out of 12 accounts with TikTok and Douyin extracted from a total of 286 non-provincial accounts on the Chinese website (互联网新闻信息稿源单位名单, 2021). Given both Douyin and TikTok are owned by the company, ByteDance, and the governmental organizations sampled on both platforms are also the same, the parallel nature of the setup allows for us to observe the different tactics the government utilizes on domestic (Douyin) versus international (TikTok) facing platforms (Bytedance Corporate Structure 2023).

I leverage the sudden end of the Zero-COVID travel ban as a shock to help better understand the purpose of state media travel posts on international and domestic facing social media. If travel posts on social media are intended to promote economic gain, we might expect that travel videos to increase following Zero-COVID's travel ban, provided that China would be more adamantly promoting travel videos to entice international travellers to flock to its provinces. Alternatively, the posting pattern surrounding travel on Chinese governmentally-run accounts could mainly remain the same throughout the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, in turn illustrating China's possible usage of travel and tourist attractions as more of a soft power based objective. Lastly, I will be comparing the ratio between travel and all videos on both

platforms to observe if China has a different goal in mind to their international viewers versus their domestic counterparts, whether that is in regards to the projection of soft power or economic gain, or directing them to different provinces for travel.

3.2.3 Hypotheses

With the puzzles brought up in the previous sub-section, in addition to utilizing Douyin (domestic audience) as my control group and TikTok (foreign audience) as my experiment group, I formulate my questions surrounding travel posting into three distinct possible answers, as follows.

H1: If China creates travel posts, during the period of Zero-COVID travel bans, it is evident that China is utilizing social media more as a manner of soft power projection.

Explanation: Given China's hope of bettering its reputation on the international scope as a manner to acquire more favorable relationships with nations, China may be posting, even through a period where travel is restricted, to boost its reputation globally (Luo et al., 2021).

H2: If China had a visible increase in travel posts following the period of quarantine, it showcases China's utilization of travel posts in social media as a manner to boost its economics.

Explanation: Alternatively, given China receives an average total amount of 8.02 percent percent, over the last ten years, of GDP shares from tourism, in addition to the massive 7.1 percent drop from 2019 to 2020 and 4.6 percent share recovery from 2022 to 2023, China's increase of travel posts following the period of Zero-COVID travel restrictions might reveal China's general shift in policy during the time period (Blazyte, 2024).

H3: China significantly targets specific provinces for travel in respect to their intended audiences due to either soft power projection or hopes of increasing tourism earnings in certain regions over others.

Explanation: Some provinces within China are known to receive more tourists than others due to their higher degree of marketability and accessibility (Tan et al., 2024). Given such, it would make sense for China to target some specific provinces over others as well on TikTok and Douyin, in accordance with their socioeconomic levels, if the nation favored an economic objective towards the foreign audience. Alternatively, if China targets more politically-contentious locations, such as Hong Kong and Tibet, the nation's goal might alternatively be to spread soft power abroad (Hass and Madan 2024).

4 Quantitative Methodology

4.1 Data

To acquire the data for my research, I plugged in all 286 central government-based (中央) social media account names within the Chinese Government's official list of internet news information sources (互联网新闻信息稿源单位名单) onto TikTok and Douyin to verify their existence. Out of the accounts, only 12 were active on both platforms. I then entered time constraints ranging from June 2022 to June 2023 to compare the time period leading to the release of the Zero-COVID Travel Ban on January 8th, and the accounts' behavior following the end of the travel ban(The Lancet 2023). After eliminating inactive accounts during the time constraint, I concluded with 4 total accounts to utilize for the study—People's Daily, CGTN, Guangming Daily, and Haiwainet.

Next, I, with the help of researcher Chang, scraped TikTok and Douyin posts from all four government-run accounts that were active throughout the Zero-COVID Period in China

using a Python webpage scraper. In total, I collected 2903 posts from TikTok and 6214 posts from Douyin from the time period. Retrieving the author name, posting time, links to the videos, URLs, play counts, and share counts, I then randomized both of the post collections before choosing around $\frac{1}{3}$ of my data as my sample—966 TikTok posts and 2070 Douyin Posts—as I did not have enough time to manually code all of the posts.

As mentioned in greater detail in a later section, I then primarily categorized posts in both samples into either “travel” or “not travel” by using a binary variable (1=Travel; 0=Not Travel).. I also specifically collected the locations and if the travel post is village-based.

Subsequently, I compiled my resulting data surrounding travel into histograms to gauge the amount of change in posting behavior before and after the lift of Zero-COVID travel ban. I also created a trinomial graph involving the monthly posting behavior to mathematically explain the change in the frequency of travel posts throughout the target time period.

Regarding the “possible objective,” “animals,” and “location” categories, I imputed the collected data into bar charts as a manner to determine China’s predominant political—and possibly soft power—objectives, if they heavily rely on specific animals to promote and project their national identity, and whether different locations are targeted towards domestic and international audiences.

Finally, in order to further determine the role of economy within the Chinese government’s post-Covid policies, I further compared the frequency of different locations posted by the governmental accounts, according to gathered data, alongside existing frequencies surrounding domestic and inbound tourism towards provinces as well as provincial economic development.

4.2 Explaining Preliminary Outputs

Seen from the guiding question and hypotheses, this study seeks to compare the frequency of travel posts before and after Zero-COVID as a manner to better gauge the purpose of state social media posts about travel. Therefore, I utilized the categories retrieving the author name, posting time, links to the videos, URLs, caption, play counts, and share counts as a manner to analyze my data.

Figure 7

create_time	author_uniqu	desc	share_url	statistics.play	statistics.comment	statistics.share	create_time	author_uniqu	desc	share_url	statistics.play	statistics.com	statistics.shar	travel
2022-06-01 13:5	halwainetuse	#halwainetuse	https://www.ig	2290	3	0	2022-06-01 2:4	halwainet	赵立坚微笑说六	https://www.ig	0	7	31	0
2022-06-02 7:4	peoplesdaily	Training of dra	https://www.ig	101	1	0	2022-06-01 3:1	mmbarnt	四川凉山6.1级地震	https://www.ig	0	84559	109018	0
2022-06-05 14:	halwainetuse	#halwainetuse	https://www.ig	1772	9	0	2022-06-01 19:	mmbarnt	地震发生时，距	https://www.ig	0	55435	18676	1
2022-06-05 14:	halwainetuse	#halwainetuse	https://www.ig	1853	3	0			王毅：中美关系	https://www.ig	0			
2022-06-05 15:	halwainetuse	#halwainetuse	https://www.ig	295	0	0	2022-06-01 22:	CGTN		https://www.ig	0	178	498	0
2022-06-05 23:	guangming35	西班牙将结束疫	https://www.ig	7305	1	173	2022-06-02 0:	halwainet	上海“圈闭”疑全世	https://www.ig	0	0	5	0
2022-06-06 23:	guangming35	瓶...#guangm	https://www.ig	429	0	1	2022-06-02 16:	CGTN	剑桥大学将取消	https://www.ig	0	3671	599	0
2022-06-08 10:	peoplesdaily	Open an oil-pc	https://www.ig	111	0	0	2022-06-02 13:	CGTN	祝贺！我国成功	https://www.ig	0	40	13	0
2022-06-10 23:	guangming35	1.5万亿种花	https://www.ig	5980	9	34	2022-06-03 10:	CGTN	明天出征！神舟	https://www.ig	0	9	22	0
2022-06-11 0:4	guangming35	香港深漂记	https://www.ig	1364	2	3	2022-06-03 20:	CGTN	叶嘉莹：中国	https://www.ig	0	580	253	0
2022-06-11 4:31	guangming35	【光明新报道】	https://www.ig	121	0	0	2022-06-03 20:	mmbarnt	神十四航天员将	https://www.ig	0	48501	21272	0
2022-06-16 19:	halwainetuse	#halwainetuse	https://www.ig	504	0	0	2022-06-03 23:	CGTN	每一次科学问天	https://www.ig	0	6914	9009	0
2022-06-17 0:4	guangming35	刘华才：点色	https://www.ig	1715	0	3	2022-06-04 17:	CGTN	梦想驱动！武大	https://www.ig	0	92	41	0
2022-06-17 12:	peoplesdaily	jianbing (煎饼)	https://www.ig	120	0	0	2022-06-04 17:	mmbarnt	“神十四”航天员	https://www.ig	0	137	6274	0
2022-06-17 22:	guangming35	托斯卡纳之旅	https://www.ig	1541	0	4	2022-06-04 18:	halwainet	冠军苏炳添！武	https://www.ig	0	0	10	0
2022-06-19 0:3	guangming35	法国知度洪惠	https://www.ig	528	1	3	2022-06-04 18:	CGTN	徒手、比心、敬	https://www.ig	0	16	7	0
2022-06-19 3:5	guangming35	【光明新报道】	https://www.ig	194	0	1	2022-06-04 19:	mmbarnt	神箭升空！点	https://www.ig	0	25332	9890	0
2022-06-19 20:	guangming35	朱提供供供	https://www.ig	632	0	3	2022-06-04 20:	mmbarnt	点箭祝贺！神	https://www.ig	0	10322	6125	0
2022-06-20 22:	guangming35	李尔伟进	https://www.ig	103143	10	26	2022-06-05 19:	halwainet	美国费城手	https://www.ig	0	0	37	0
2022-06-20 23:	guangming35	航里情	https://www.ig	19739	26	241	2022-06-05 21:	mmbarnt	群众自发送到	https://www.ig	0	14179	3347	0

Notes: Scraped data from Tiktok and Douyin, respectively

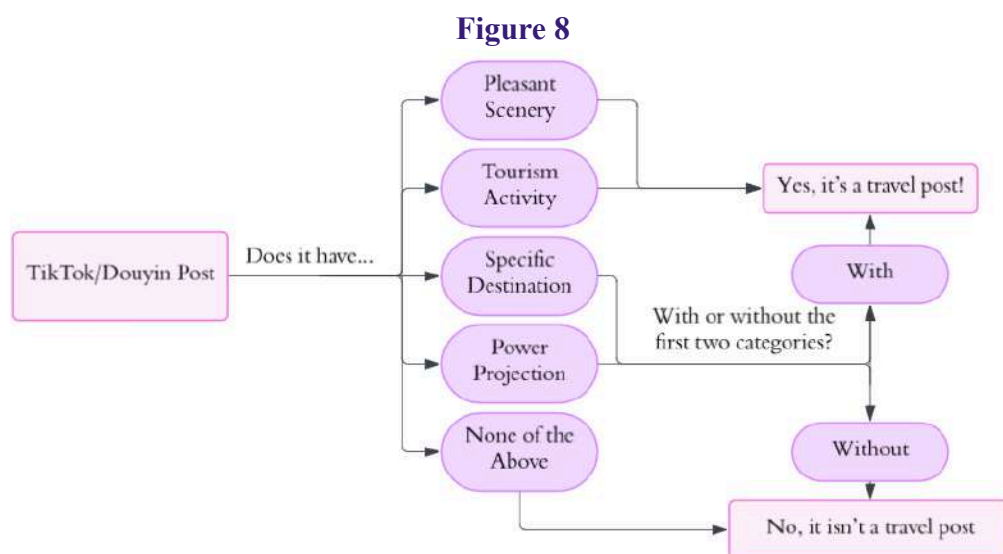
To analyze the aforementioned scraped data, I first hand-coded categories based on diverse constraints before utilizing R to count the amount of travel posts present every month. Further, as a way to address the drastically different amount of posts on TikTok and Douyin, I then found the percentage between travel posts and total posts every month. Finally, to compare the prevalence of travel posts as a whole on both platforms, I calculated the percentage of all travel posts to the total number of posts on TikTok and Douyin.

4.3 Defining the Outcome

While there is subjectivity surrounding the categorization of posts, I try to create and maintain a standardized criteria for both travel and location, as described below.



4.3.1 Travel Analysis

I utilize a dummy variable to determine the travel-based nature of a post. Given the possible subjectiveness of determining if a post should be categorized as travel or not, I—prior to labelling the data set—set two individually-viable cases that a post would be considered as one correlated to travel: if the post showcases a pleasant scenery of China or mentions a tourism activity (i.e. amusement parks, nature spots, cultural events, etc.). Additionally, I exclude any mention of destination or posts surrounding power projection concepts such as construction or the military from being categorized as a travel post, unless they mention either of the two criteria above. I depict this categorization process in the following flowchart.



Furthermore, showcased below are two examples from TikTok and Douyin, Respectively, that would describe if a post is classified as travel or not.

Travel Post	Not Travel Post
-------------	-----------------

Video	 <p><i>Source: TikTok, People's Daily</i></p>	 <p><i>Source: Douyin, CGTN</i></p>
Caption	<p>“Training of dragon boat drifting is in full swing in Diejiao Village, south China’s Guangdong province as the #DragonBoatFestival is coming. Drifting through the sharp turns is a local tradition that has been practiced and performed since Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).”</p>	<p>“明天出征！神舟十四号载人飞船飞行乘组确定”</p> <p><i>Translation: “We’re taking off tomorrow!” The Shenzhou-14 space crew confirms.</i></p>
Data Input & Explanation	<p>Travel = 1; The post involves a tourist activity (Dragon Boat Festival) and it also includes location (Guangdong Province)</p>	<p>Travel = 0; Does not include pleasant scenery nor tourism activity (2 main criterias)—space travel is still a far reach for many, and China is not located in space.</p>




While these are only two examples, posts that are considered as travel can, as seen above, involve any combination of the mandatory criterias—pleasant scenery or tourism activity—with or without the other two optional criterias—a specific destination or a showcase of power projection.

4.3.2 Location Analysis

While often existing in conjunction, all mentioned locations might not necessarily be to encourage travel. To resolve this dilemma and not overlook location for being utilized for

alternative purposes, I collect, in addition to location, the political objectives of posts to more deeply understand the Chinese government's rationale, which will be expanded upon in the next section. Additionally, for travel posts that did not have a specific destination, I coded the "location" category as "N/A." This is to possibly justify the hypothesis surrounding the utilization of travel broadcasting as a soft power or travel to China as a whole, as opposed to economic gains for certain provinces that need more economic assistance.

Regardless of the government's intention, I collected locations, if they were mentioned in either the video or the caption, to note the posting frequency of different provinces. I underlined or bolded context clues to assist in the ease of reading my determination of location.

	In-Video Location	In-Caption Location	Travel Without Location
Video	 <p>Source: Douyin, CGTN</p>	 <p>Source: TikTok, People's Daily</p>	 <p>Source: TikTok, People's Daily</p>
Caption	<p>“#三星堆今日份‘上新’！可爱的着裙立发人像将被提取😊”</p> <p>Translation: #Sanxingdui Today's "new item!" Cute human statues wearing dresses and upright hair will be</p>	<p>“A herd of more than 30 wild Asian elephants are seen hunting for food in mountain forest of Xishuangbanna, SW China's Yunnan. Local wildlife authorities watch closely to make sure their safety.”</p>	<p>“Thick snow blanketed NW China, turning the land into a world of ‘frozen.’ #China #chinatiktok”</p>

	<i>excavated</i> 😊		
Data Input & Explanation	Sichuan Province; Noted in both video and caption, but had to research further to ensure Sanxingdui's Archeological site resided in Sichuan Province.	Yunnan Province; Noted in Caption.	No specific province found outside of the clue, "NW China." However, because the content is a travel post, I put an N/A in the location category.

Under location, I also created a sub-category of “village” to indicate if a post is meant to showcase a community within a more rural area. While the criteria for a village post is very narrow and specific, I will still provide two examples below of the categorization of a “non-village” versus a “village” travel post.

	Village	Non-Village
Video	 <p><i>Source: Douyin, haiwainet</i></p>	 <p><i>Source: TikTok, haiwainet.uscenter</i></p>
Caption	<p>“第37集 #说说我们村儿特别策划足迹#【农业园里一年四季都有水果摘】</p> <p>‘有枇杷，有桃子，有梨子，有葡萄。’世业镇先锋村四季春农业园负责人叶明兰说，2014年，农业园有110亩。如今已经有了170亩，水果的品种也越来越丰富。‘现</p>	<p>“#beijing #China #travel #Asian #World”</p>

	<p>在, 农业园一年四季都有水果摘。’#说说我们村儿##海外网乡土中国采访#”</p> <p><i>Translation: Episode 37 #talking about our village’s special planning footprints# [there are fruits to pick from during all four seasons in the plantation]</i></p> <p><i>“There are loquats, there are peaches, there are pears, there are grapes.” Ye Minglan, the person in charge of Sijichun plantation in Xianfeng Village, Shiye Town, said, in 2014, the plantation was 110 acres. Today, we already have 170 acres, with an increasingly diverse assortment of fruits. “Now, there are fruits to pick from during all four seasons in the plantation.”</i></p> <p><i>#talking about our village##Haiwainet interviews China’s homelands [or a euphemism for rural areas]#</i></p>	
Data Input & Explanation	<p>Village; The post mentions the term “village” multiple times and is very focused on the agrarian farmlands.</p>	<p>Not Village; While the posts involves the showcase of a “community” in China, it is illustrating Beijing, China’s capital, which is not a village underneath the criteria of my research.</p>

Through this collected data, I attempted to gauge on a deeper level if China is advertising underrepresented provinces or politically-oriented provinces more internationally to, again, match with their overall economic or soft-power projection incentives. I also seek to find if intentions flip prior to or following the Zero-COVID travel ban.

4.4 Statistical Models

Primarily, I utilized statistical models to analyze the frequency of travel posts, my response variable, over time, my explanatory variable. With the results, I seek to analyze China’s

more in-depth and underlying priorities for promoting travel through utilizing social media. To analyze these two variables, I summed up monthly totals using R as well as utilized regression analysis, histograms, and trinomial graphs. Additionally, I include in my study a supplementary variable—location—in addition to later topical analyses. To measure these variables, I utilize bar graphs. For every step, I replicate it for both TikTok and Douyin data, with data from Douyin being my control group, as it is a platform occupied by generally Chinese users (Verot, 2023).

4.4.1 Monthly Totals

To total the amount of travel and overall posts per month on both TikTok and Douyin as a basis for data analysis, I first manually entered “0” into all posts prior to the release of Zero-COVID travel bans—from June 1st, 2022 until January 7th, 2023—and “1” for all categories after—from January 8th 2023 until June 30th, 2023—inside of the *after.zero.covid* category (Volpicelli 2023). Then, I ensured that my raw scraped data is sorted correctly by the month. Following such, I utilized the following two pieces of code based on a monthly basis, and repeated it for both sets of data.

4.4.2 Regression Analysis

I first ran a regression analysis to test whether travel posts increased after the lifting of Zero-COVID, for both TikTok and Douyin. To conduct such, I utilized the following linear regression formula. I further note the definition of each variable in the terms of the study:

After performing the linear regression on TikTok travel posts, I demonstrate my results utilizing the standard linear regression model, as well as the substitute for each variable:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X + \epsilon$$

Dependent variable (Y): Number of Travel Posts

Independent dummy variable (X): Zero-COVID (Before = 0; After = 1)

Intercept (β_0): Posts per month

Intercept (β_1): Posts added/subtracted
following Zero-COVID

ϵ : Residual error term for unexplained probabilities

4.4.3 Histograms

As a form of preliminary analysis surrounding the change of travel posts, I created histograms to showcase the direct shift between travel posts counts prior to and following the lift of travel restrictions created from China's Zero-COVID policies on January 8th of 2023 (Global Times 2022).

4.4.4 Trinomial Graphs

Following my entry of monthly data on travel and total posts, I utilized two trinomial graphs, each with the travel and trinomial posts, to determine a best-fit equation that represents the fluctuation of travel posts from June 2022 to June 2023, as well as the change in difference between travel and total post ratios during the time period.

To create the trinomial graph, I used the following code for TikTok. Furthermore, I replicated the code with the Douyin variables. I then create trinomial formulas that find the best fit line for the graphs.

4.4.5 Bar Graphs

To justify the fluctuation of travel posting frequencies, as seen above, I rely heavily on the utilization of bar graphs to determine the most plausible reason for China's motives. More specifically, I take the bar graphs on the variables of soft power usage, animals, and locations that are listed prior.

5 Results

Figure 9: TikTok Travel Counts

Months	Total Posts	Travel Posts	Percentage
--------	-------------	--------------	------------

(Travel/Total) x 100			
Total	966	214	22.15
2022-06	48	5	10.42
2022-07	63	9	14.29
2022-08	73	13	17.81
2022-09	69	8	11.59
2022-10	72	25	34.72
2022-11	61	14	22.95
2022-12	52	13	25.00
2023-01	57	21	36.84 (ZC=50; PZC=34.69)
2023-02	70	15	21.43
2023-03	114	22	19.30
2023-04	112	21	18.75
2023-05	88	18	20.45
2023-06	87	30	34.48

Figure 10: Douyin Travel Counts			
Months	Total Posts	Travel Posts	Percentage (Travel/Total) x 100
Total	2070	105	5.07
2022-06	151	9	5.96
2022-07	151	10	6.62
2022-08	130	11	8.46
2022-09	154	9	5.84
2022-10	127	10	7.87
2022-11	123	6	4.88
2022-12	148	11	7.43
2023-01	123	3	2.44 (ZC=0; PZC=2.88)
2023-02	94	1	1.06
2023-03	300	8	2.67

2023-04	237	7	2.95
2023-05	187	10	5.35
2023-06	145	10	6.90

Note: Percentages within both tables are rounded to the nearest hundredth. Provided that Zero-COVID travel restrictions were lifted on 2023-01-08, ZC stands for when Zero-COVID policies were active, and PZC stands for post-Zero-COVID policies, or when the travel restraints were lifted.

5.1 Main Results

Through my data, I find that—consistent with my second, economic-based hypothesis—TikTok travel posts increased following the end of Zero-COVID travel restrictions, tangentially with the decrease of travel posts without location, suggesting China’s possible motivation to promote a travel-based economy. However, I also note substantial numbers of travel posts even during Zero-COVID, without a sudden increase following the lift of Zero-COVID travel restrictions, indicating that there could also be an underlying soft power motivation.

In comparison, Douyin travel posts decreased significantly after the end of the Zero-COVID travel ban, showcasing that travel posts may serve a purpose of domestic propaganda. As a supplement, I also note the high frequency of politically-sensitive locations, such as Taiwan and Tibet, frequently mentioned as destinations for travel.

Figure 11: Effect of Zero-COVID Travel Restrictions on Social Media Travel Posts

	Estimate Std.	Pr (> t)
TikTok	8.738	0.021**
Douyin	-2.929	0.088*

*p < 0.1; **p < 0.05

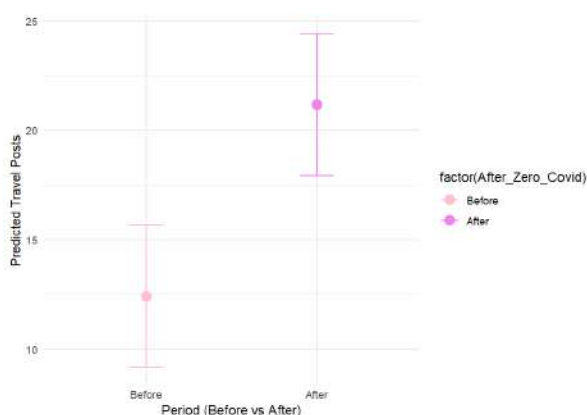
Note: All data points were rounded to the nearest thousandth.

Given such, the table above presents the amount of travel posts counted per month. While, at first glance, the number of travel posts seem quite similar from TikTok to Douyin, Douyin has more than two times the amount of posts as TikTok.

Regarding the percentages, therefore, I note that above $\frac{1}{20}$ of TikTok posts are travel-based while less than $\frac{1}{20}$ of Douyin posts are specifically geared towards travel.

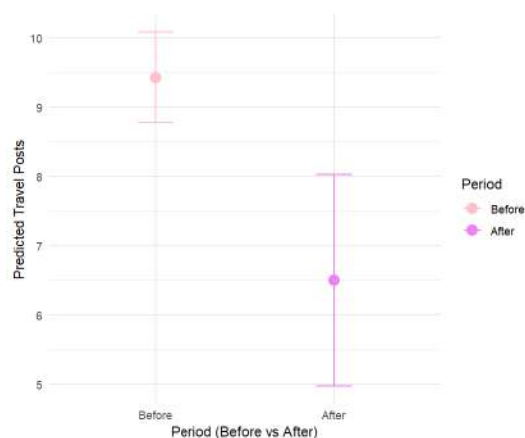
Looking at the following histograms derived from the lists of data above, furthermore, I note that TikTok observed an *increase* in average travel posts per month, from 12 posts per month to 21 posts per month following quarantine while Douyin observed a *decrease* in average travel posts per month, from around 9.5 posts per month to 6.5 posts per month.

Figure 12



Tiktok Average Travel Posts Per Month, Before and After Zero-COVID policies

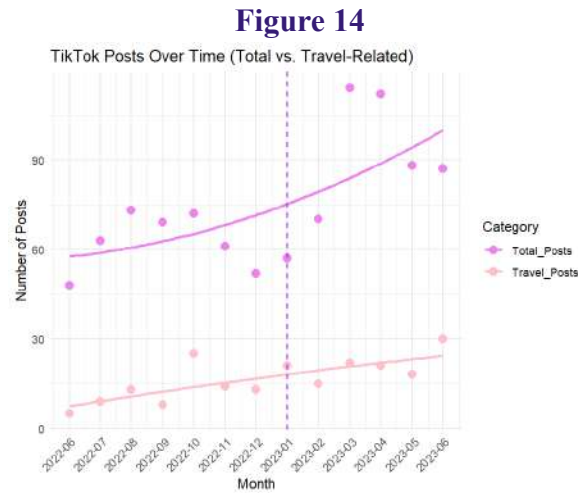
Figure 13



Douyin Average Travel Posts Per Month, Before and After Zero-COVID policies

5.1.1 TikTok's Results

In more specific detail, I noted the plotted trend of total number TikTok posts per month and the total travel posts per month on TikTok, before extracting the formula for both best-fit curves.



Note: The best fit lines are created using trinomial equations. Furthermore, the vertical purple dashed line indicates the end of Zero-COVID travel bans.

Generally speaking, I observe an upward trend in both lines. However, looking at the equation for both below and taking the derivative, the total posts line seems to exponentially increase, especially after the release of Zero-Covid Travel restrictions, as indicated by the purple line, while the travel posts are increasing at a much slower rate.

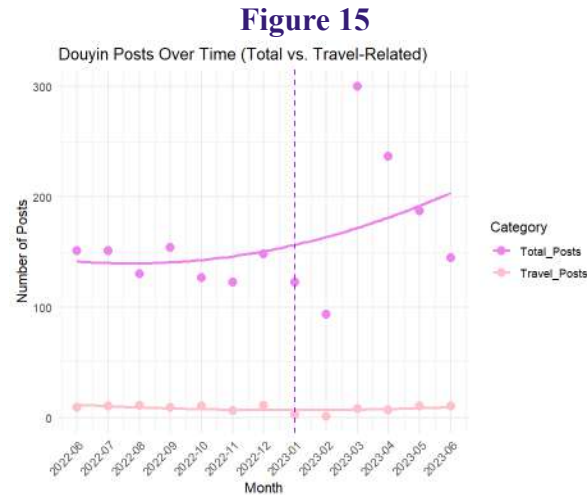
TikTok's Regression Running the regression and substituting in terms for TikTok, specifically, I acquire the following equation:

$$Travel = 12.429 + 8.738 \times ZeroCovid + \epsilon$$

Noted here, There seems to be a 8.738 average increase in travel posts following the end of Zero-COVID, while travel sat around an average of 12.429 posts per month during the period of China's Zero-COVID policies.

5.1.2 Douyin's Results

In conjunction with TikTok, I also plotted my data from Douyin below with the number of total and travel posts over the number of months.



Note: The best fit lines are created using trinomial equations. Furthermore, the vertical purple dashed line indicates the end of Zero-COVID travel bans.

While, similar to TikTok, I could note a generally an upward trend for total posts, travel posts seem to slightly decrease following the release of Zero-COVID travel restrictions, although not drastically.

Douyin's Regression Utilizing the same variables as the TikTok regression, I acquire the following equation that demonstrates the difference between travel posts during and following Zero-COVID:

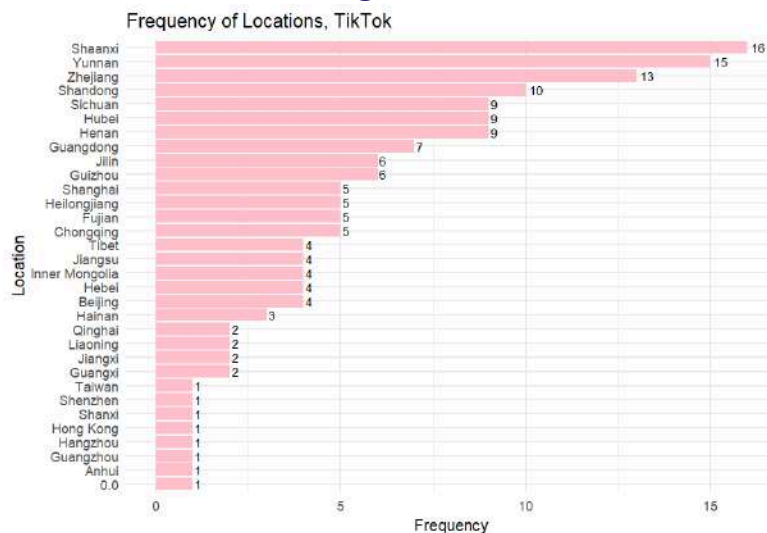
$$Travel = 9.429 - 2.929 \times ZeroCovid + \epsilon$$

Noted here, There seems to be a 2.929 average decrease in travel posts following the end of Zero-COVID, while travel sat around an average of 9.429 posts per month during the period of China's Zero-COVID policies. This, furthermore, illustrates that more travel-related posts were created by the Chinese government during, as opposed to following the lift of Zero-COVID restrictions, demonstrating, again, China's possible usage of travel posts here mainly for domestic political messaging.

5.2 Location Analysis

5.2.1 TikTok's Tactics

Figure 16



Lastly, attached above includes the frequency of locations mentioned within TikTok travel posts. Seen above, the top three provinces mentioned are Yunnan, Shaanxi, and Zhejiang. According to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Zhejiang is ranked 5th out of 31 provinces, Shaanxi is ranked 13th, and Yunnan is ranked 23rd (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2024).

I also considered these provinces in the context of China's tourism site rankings by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China (中华人民共和国文化和旅游部). Counting the "Quintuple A Tourist Sites" (5A景区)—or top tourist sites—that each of the top three provinces have, I note that Zhejiang, with 22 sites, ranks 2nd in the nation for outstanding tourist locations, Shaanxi, with 14 sites, ranks 7th, and Yunnan, with 10 sites, ranks 14th (Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China, 2025).

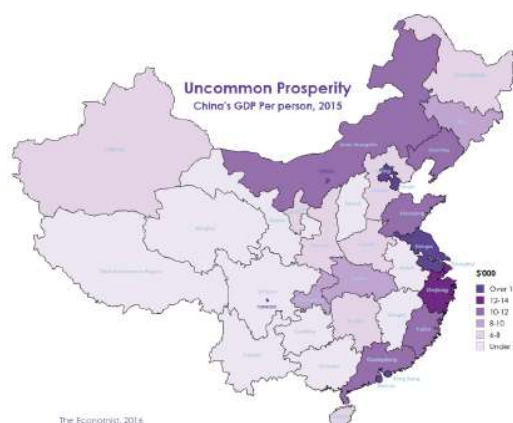
Given the spread of both economic and and tourist locations of the top three provinces, China, in terms of travel locations, seems to dabble between more developed and more

tourist-based provinces and vice versa to ensure an even spread between provinces. Furthermore, given Yunnan, the least well-off in terms of economics and tourism of the three, is promoted the most within travel posts, such could hint of China's subtle push towards encouraging equal economic development in all provinces.

Figure 17

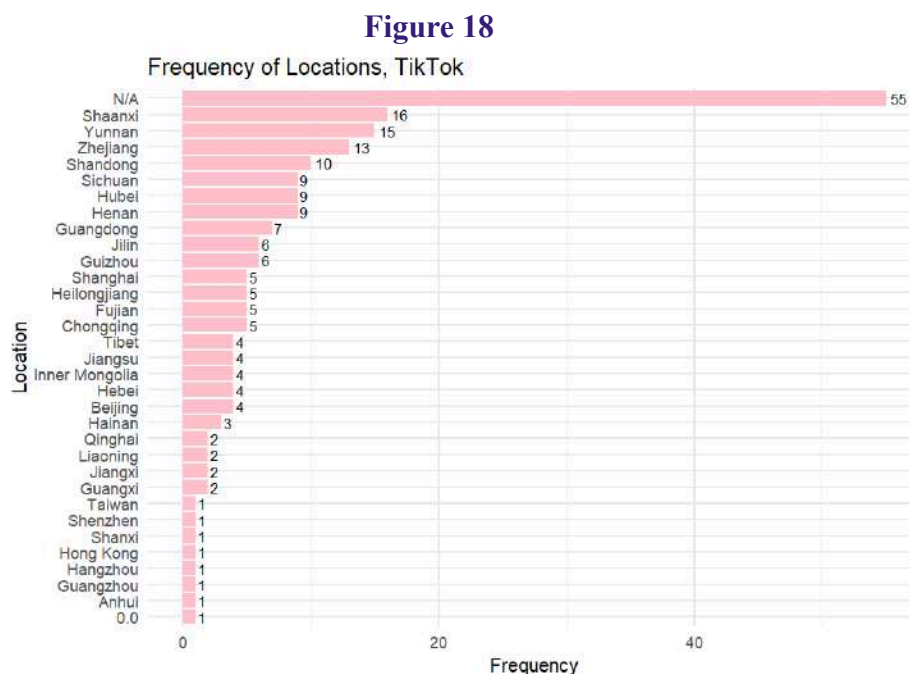


Figure 4



Note: The left demonstrates the frequency of locations shown in TikTok Travel posts, while the right showcases China's GDP in each province. Comparing the two, TikTok seems to cover a diverse spread of socioeconomic levels in provinces, further illustrating government intentions in promoting economic gain in both well-established travel destinations as well as promoting economic growth in the destinations that are less economically-developed. Also note that Taiwan was not included in both maps, but recall that it was mentioned only once on TikTok travel posts.

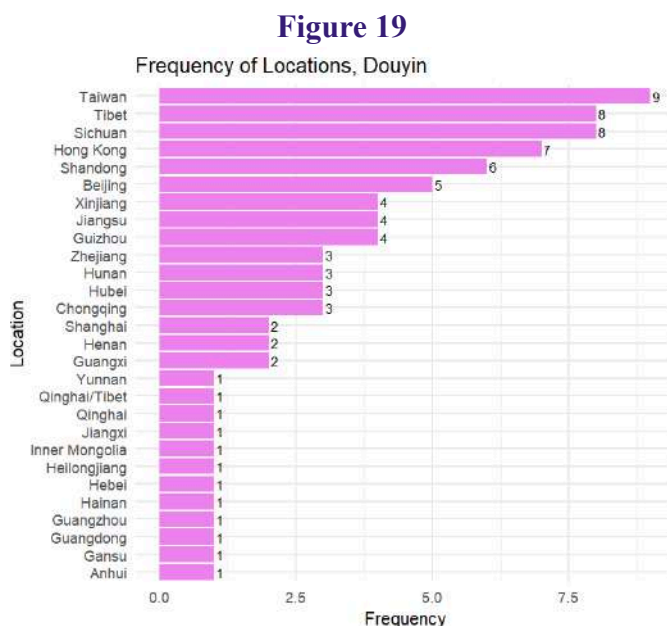
To further showcase China's usage of travel as a manner to promote economic growth, I also collected data of travel without locations using the indicator, "N/A," as shown below.



I further calculated the percentage of posts before and after the release of Zero-COVID travel ban, which was regarded as statistically significant ($p = 0.00276^{**} < 0.05$). More specifically, around 36.264 percent of posts were labelled as N/A before the lift of the travel restrictions. Following the lift of travel restrictions, however, only 17.886 percent of posts were labelled as N/A. In this context, I would argue that, alongside the increase in travel posts overall, China became more focused upon integrating specific travel locations into their social media accounts to specifically recommend travel locations to international visitors.

5.2.2 Douyin's Deal

Showcasing Douyin's emphasis on politics and propaganda further, it is integral to note that contested locations are amongst the most-showcased locations within the government. More specifically, this involves Taiwan, Tibet, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang, all of which are in the top 7 provinces within the bar chart (Wu, 2025; Sperling 2004; Fung and Chan 2017; Bovington and Tursun, 2004). This further proves that the Chinese government utilizes Douyin as a manner to unify and bring attention to spread political messaging to its domestic audience.



Supplementing these statistics, Douyin also differentiates from TikTok by having 30 out of its 99 total travel posts being village-related posts, where the content focuses on showcasing the wonder of rural lifestyle, a possible nod towards known government goals of rural gentrification (Yang and Xu, 2022). Therefore, I note that the government seems to more adamantly further their political agendas on Douyin, utilizing travel posts, as opposed to TikTok.

Figure 20



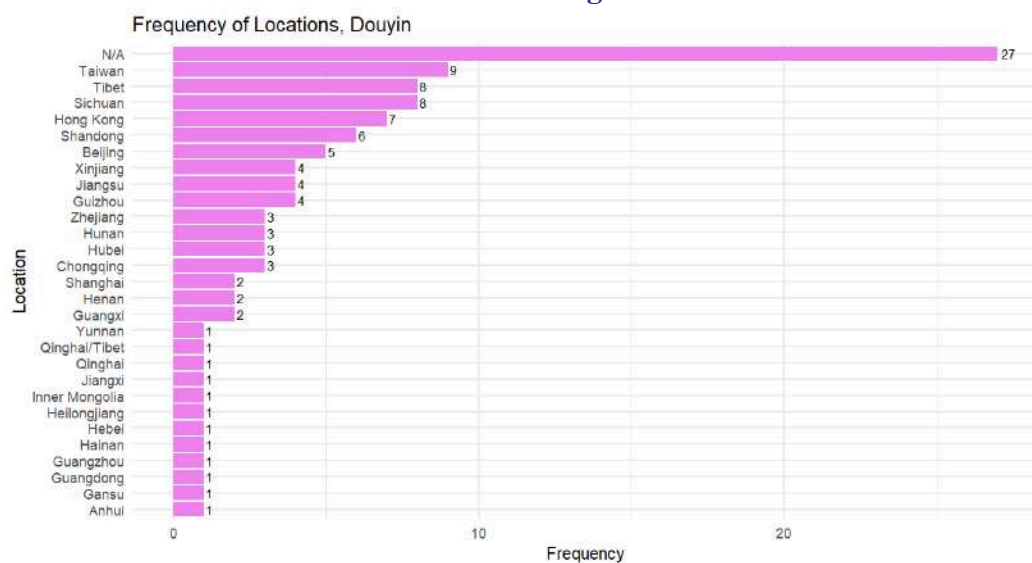
Figure 3



Note: The left chart showcases the map version of the frequency chart. Resemblance of this could be seen in the map to the right created from Maxwell's (2006) writing depicting the contested locations of China. While Taiwan is, again, not depicted in the map above, it is one of the most frequently-posted location, alongside Tibet. Overall, this showcases China's domestic prioritization of spreading travel posts as a manner of political messaging.

Supplementing the results here, Douyin also observed a statistically significant ($p = 0.009*** < 0.01$) decrease in "N/As" following the release of travel restrictions, with 34.848 percent of its travel posts being N/A prior to the release of Zero-COVID travel restrictions, but only 10.256 percent of its travel posts not labeled with a specific location.

Figure 21



Provided with the previous data, however, the reasoning behind the decrease in travel posts without locations is more correlated to the possible increase in promoting soft power by more frequently stating contested locations in posts, such as Taiwan, Tibet, or Hong Kong, as opposed to economic gain.

5.3 Re-addressing the Hypotheses

Utilizing the information showcased within the last few subsections, I note that the results from Douyin seem to support the first hypothesis, while the outputs from TikTok support the second hypothesis. Furthermore, the chosen locations to advertise for travel, seen from both Douyin and TikTok, reinforces the first two hypotheses, supporting the third hypothesis.

H1: If China creates travel posts, during the period of Zero-COVID travel bans, it is evident that China is utilizing social media more as a manner of soft power projection.

Explanation: According to the results of this study, government accounts, both on TikTok and Douyin, appear to post travel throughout and after the period of Zero-COVID travel bans. Comparing the two, however, Douyin—my control group—prioritizes more on travel posting during the travel ban as opposed to TikTok, seen from the average decrease of 4 posts per month after the travel ban, as opposed to TikTok, which had a 9 post per month increase following the period of Zero-COVID travel restrictions (Figure 12; Figure 13).

Supplementing my research, domestic China, during the installation of Zero-COVID policies, is noted by other scholars to incite a state-mobilized movement against the virus, endorsing policies that advocate for a sense of national unity, complete with the “civilian hero” and “miracle government” archetypes, displaying, again, the prioritization of politics (Fu, 2021; Cui and Tong, 2021).

H2: If China had a visible increase in travel posts following the period of quarantine, it showcases China's usage of travel posts in social media as a manner to boost its economics.

Explanation: This hypothesis aligns with the data collected from TikTok. While Douyin's travel posts illustrated a visible decrease following the period of quarantine, TikTok's travel posts experienced a visible increase in numbers following the lift of the travel ban (Figure 12).

The collected histograms supplement the aforementioned claim. As discussed prior, the locations that were the most frequently mentioned within TikTok involve both a spread of available tourist sites as well as economic development. Observing simply the top three locations China advertises, China seems to promote sites with a spread of socioeconomic well-being and touristy locations, most likely to continue economizing off of well-established tourist sites but also promote the upbringing of lesser-well-off sites (cite histogram).

My research surrounding foreign policy is supplemented by China's actions immediately following the release of Zero-COVID travel bans. In addition to posting travel videos, China also eases visa restrictions for 38 nations, resulting in 58 percent of all visits to China in the first half of 2024 being visa-free (Xinhua 2023; The Economist 2024). Furthermore, China's prioritization of economic gain through travel is also seen through governmental initiatives in creating guides for foreigners on using WeChat Pay and Alipay, the main payment platforms in China (Xinhua 2024).

H3: China significantly targets specific provinces for travel in respect to their intended audiences due to either soft power projection or hopes of increasing tourism earnings in certain regions over others.

Explanation: To answer the question surrounding China’s international political strategy, then, I would argue again that China prioritizes economic gain internationally. Observed from the collected TikTok data and as aforementioned in the previous section, I note that China, on TikTok, favored the promotion of a diverse spread of travel locations as a manner of increasing tourism earnings (cite graph). Furthermore, China was noted to slightly promote Shaanxi, a lesser-economically developed province, over other regions, showcasing China’s slight push towards evening out economic gain in its provinces (ibid.).

To supplement my results, I note China’s long-term deployment of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and the Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI), both to stimulate economic growth in lesser-economically developed provinces (World Bank 2017; Tian et al. 2022). More specifically, SEZs are chosen provinces to seek foreign investment while the BRI attempts to stimulate provincial trade with foreign parties (ibid.). Provided China’s previous intentions on utilizing different methods to promote their provincial economics, thus, the implementation of specific provinces to promote travel and economic gain would come at no surprise.

5.4 Robustness Checks

In order to verify the viability of my study, I first conduct a robustness check by using an “author fixed effects” model, where I choose CGTN as the reference category and compare the change in posts following the lift of Zero-COVID travel restrictions on my three other analyzed accounts—Guangming Daily, Haiwainet, and People’s Daily. I then run a Tukey Test on CGTN to compare its effects to other accounts.

5.4.1 TikTok’s Toughness

Figure 22: Author Fixed Effects Regression Using CGTN as a Reference, TikTok

	Estimate Std.	Pr (> t)
Guangming Daily	-0.024	0.420

(guangming35)		
Haiwainet		
(haiwainet.uscenter)	0.073	0.097
People's Daily		
(peoplesdaily)	0.564	$< 2e^{-16}$ ****

*p<0.1; ****p<0.001

Figure 23: Tukey Test on CGTN, TikTok

Pr (> t)	
Guangming Daily to CGTN	
(guangming35-cgtnofficial)	0.847
Haiwainet to CGTN	
(haiwainet.uscenter-cgtnofficial)	0.336
People's Daily to CGTN	
(peoplesdaily-cgtnofficial)	<0.001****

****p<0.001

Note: All data points were rounded to the nearest thousandth. Furthermore, actual account names are included in parentheses underneath the platform name.

Looking at the figures above, the change following the lifting of Zero-COVID travel restrictions is mainly positive, other than Guangming Daily, by a marginal amount. This demonstrates that the data surrounding the increase of travel posting following the end of Zero-COVID is generally robust, in terms of TikTok.

Furthermore, seen from both the main fixed effects test and the Tukey Test on CGTN, People's Daily seems to contribute the most towards travel posts out of all accounts, and showcased a significant change prior to and following Zero-COVID restrictions. Tangentially, People's Daily claims itself to be China's "most influential and authoritative newspaper" that, in theory, "brings...the latest news dispatches of policy information and resolutions of the Chinese Government" (People's Daily). Provided that the news platform is run by the Chinese government, then, its heavy promotion of travel could also be attributed to the Chinese

government's aim to boost economics through travel towards an international audience (互联网新闻信息稿源单位名单, 2021).

5.4.2 Douyin's Durability

Figure 24: Author Fixed Effects Regression Using CGTN as a Reference, Douyin

	Estimate Std.	Pr (> t)
Guangming Daily (guangmingribao)	-0.108	$1.25e^{-8}$ ****
Haiwainet (haiwainet.uscenter)	-0.095	$< 2e^{-16}$ ****
People's Daily (peoplesdaily)	-0.096	$2.68e^{-13}$ ****

****p<0.001

Figure 25: Tukey Test on CGTN, Douyin

	Pr (> t)
Guangming Daily to CGTN (guangming35-cgtnofficial)	0.847
Haiwainet to CGTN (haiwainet.uscenter-cgtnofficial)	0.336
People's Daily to CGTN (peoplesdaily-cgtnofficial)	<0.001****

****p<0.001

Note: All data points were rounded to the nearest thousandth. Furthermore, actual account names are included in parentheses underneath the platform name.

In contrast to the statistics discussed within the TikTok section, all four accounts, utilizing both of the above tests, showcased a significant decrease in travel posts following the release of travel restrictions. This once again supports the claim that China is more focused on promoting political objectives towards the domestic audience, as posts surrounding travel and

previously-mentioned contested locations were higher during the Zero-COVID period (Cite table).

5.5 Alternative Explanations

There are two alternative explanations that I will address within this paper: Perhaps, travel posts are simply created to lure in viewers to the governmental accounts. Alternatively, perhaps, travel posts are only meant as simply another form of entertainment for viewers. However, this section will work to dispel these “perhapses.”

Firstly, I argue that travel posts are not created with the sole purpose to lure in international viewers to Chinese governmental accounts because of the amount of interactions they receive. Utilizing average comment counts per video as the analyzer of interaction, the average travel video on TikTok only received a count of 18.883 comments per post, while other videos receive an average comment count of 34.439 comments per post. This shows that posting Travel-based videos, based on their history, might not be the most ideal strategy for the Chinese government, if it was simply to garner a larger international following on TikTok.

While not specifically relevant to garnering an international following, Douyin, similarly, only receives an average of 9271.8 comments per post for travel videos, while other videos receive an average of 18129.89 comments per post, showcasing, also, that travel videos are not specifically used to garner views on the platform.

Further, I would disagree that travel posts, especially the ones without locations, are only meant as another form of entertainment. Showcased through the data above, posts without locations significantly decreased after the lifting of Zero-COVID’s travel ban, with TikTok’s location-less travel posts decreasing by 18.478 percent and Douyin’s posts decreasing by 24.592. This drastic change would not have happened if the posts were solely meant for entertainment.

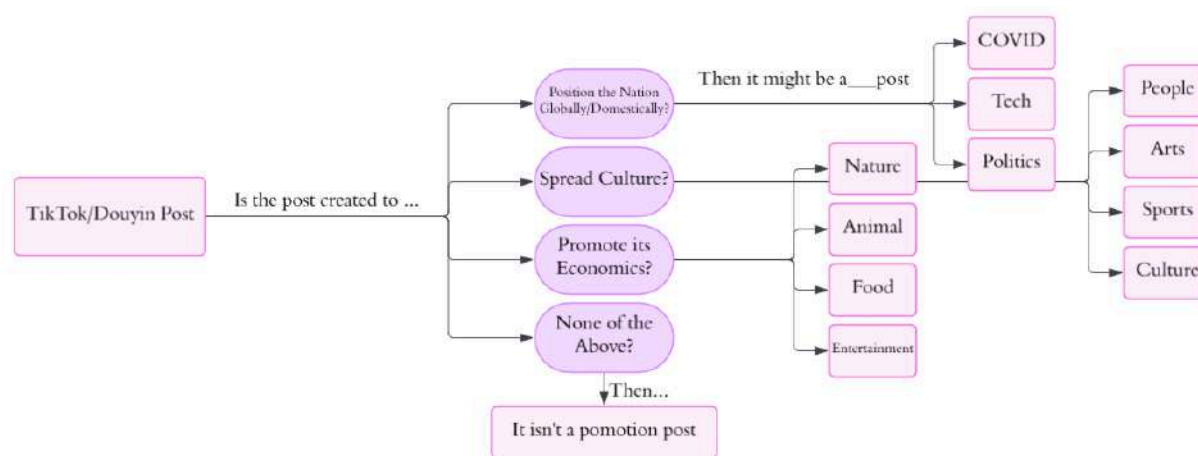
6 Topical Analysis

6.1 Categorization

Despite the dispelled “perhapses” in the previous section, I was unable to utilize travel posts to address the increase in overall posts on TikTok and Douyin within my research (Figure 14; Figure 15). Additionally, I noted that—albeit with significant changes following the lift of Zero-COVID travel restrictions—China created travel posts for both TikTok and Douyin even before the lift of the Zero-COVID travel restrictions. Therefore, as a manner to not over-simplify Chinese policies and exclusively claim that China only used TikTok, specifically, for economic objectives, I added a topical analysis category to my data as a manner to analyze China’s possible underlying political promotion strategies and preferences on engaging its social media audience.

Whether a travel post or not, I deemed a post as a “promotion of China” when any posts, either directly and indirectly, are created to *position the nation globally or domestically, spread culture, or promote its economics*—the three uses of modern soft power, as defined earlier. Within these three categories, I created the specific subcategories—politics, technology, covid, people, arts, culture, sports, nature, animal, food, and entertainment to further identify China’s posting topics. Furthermore, if I deemed the post to not be politically-motivated, I did not categorize the video into any subcategories. Finally, while some posts may demonstrate traits from multiple subcategories, I chose the singular subcategory that fit the video the best.

Figure 26



Note: Attached above is a flowchart of promotion posts, as well as the posts contained within each category.



Global Positioning As mentioned within the literature review, I consider global positioning as a nation's utilization of soft power and political promotion to strategically position themselves in the world. To categorize global positioning-related posts, I utilized the labels: covid (COVID-19), tech (technology), and politics.

Given COVID-19 was discovered from China, China would, strategically speaking, want to demonstrate their proactive efforts and care towards the pandemic as a manner to illustrate themselves as a responsible global power (Hao and Wang 2022). Because of such, the mention of COVID-19 within posts would fall underneath the broader topic of global positioning. To label posts with the term, "covid," the concept of COVID-19 simply has to be mentioned in the video in a politicized format.

	COVID-19 Post	Not COVID-19 Post
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Video	 <p><i>Source: TikTok, guangming35</i></p>	 <p><i>Source: Douyin, rmr bxmt</i></p>
Caption	<p>“卫长:截至2月1日 剩逾863万冠病疫苗 #guangming #光明日报 #TikTok新闻 #tiktoknews #newsattiktok #beritaditiktok #卫生部长 #冠病 #新冠肺炎 #疫苗 #过期 #剩余”</p> <p><i>Translation: “Minister of Health: As of February 1, there are more than 8.63 million COVID-19 vaccines still available #guangming #guangming daily #TikTok News #Newsattiktok #beritaditiktok #HealthMinister #COVID19 #vaccine #expired #remaining”</i></p>	<p>“出席中国共产党第二十次全国代表大会代表全部选出。”</p> <p><i>Translation: “All the delegates to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China have been elected.”</i></p>
Data Input & Explanation	<p>Covid; The post mentions COVID-19 in two instances.</p>	<p>Not Covid; Does not include any note of COVID-19 related information. However, the post correlates with the “politics” category.</p>

Given one of China’s objectives is to project itself as a benevolent global superpower in the world, the nation could be inferred to wish to showcase itself as technologically developed (Lee et al. 2024). Therefore, I created the category, “tech,” to categorize posts where China’s government-run accounts showcase its technological developments, whether military or civilian-based.

	Technology Post	Not Technology Post
Video	 <p><i>Source: Douyin, CGTN</i></p>	 <p><i>Source: TikTok, peopledaily</i></p>
Caption	<p>“酷炫！#东方明珠塔#AR#烟花秀”</p> <p><i>Translation: “Cool! #Oriental Pearl Tower #AR #Fireworks Show”</i></p>	<p>“What's scarier than a rollercoaster? Riders got stuck upside down 20 meters high in the air for over 20 minutes due to a power outage at a theme park in China's Hebei. Everyone was brought down safely afterward. #China #chinesetiktok”</p>
Data Input & Explanation	<p>Tech; Video and captions showcases both augmented reality and fireworks on a high-tech tower.</p>	<p>Not Tech; The roller coaster shown does not contribute to power projection, and the coaster being stuck does not contribute to China's image of technological development.</p>

Lastly, the presence of politics is also central to global positioning. In the context of categorization, I noted three main reasons that I would categorize a post with the label “politics”: if the post involved direct political messaging, if it featured a political official (e.g. Xi Jinping), or if it involved the showcase of political prowess through military (e.g. The Chinese National Day Demonstration with the Chinese military).



	Political Post	Not Political Post
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Video	 <p><i>Source: TikTok, cgtntofficial</i></p>	 <p><i>Source: Douyin, CGTN</i></p>
Caption	<p>“#China on Friday accused the #US of bullying by attempting to strip it of the status of a developing country, saying the status is not decided by #Washington. The U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Thursday passed the Ending China's Developing Nation Status Act, a #bill that would require the State Department to pursue changing China's status as a developing nation in international organizations. #politics #mofa #news #cgtnt”</p>	<p>“新冠病毒和季节性流感有无可比性？#刘欣独家专访世界卫生组织发言人”</p> <p><i>Translation: Is the new COVID-19 comparable to seasonal flu? #Liu Xin Exclusive Interview with the Spokesperson of the World Health Organization</i></p>
Data Input & Explanation	<p>Politics; Video and captions includes both political messaging and a political official (China foreign ministry spokesperson).</p>	<p>Not Politics; Not directly related to politics, more related to the COVID-19 category.</p>

Spreading Culture Defined also within my literature review, the spreading of culture refers to building international awareness and fondness over a nation's culture in order for the nation to gain sympathy and liking abroad (Yang 2010; Zhou and Luk 2016; Lo and Pan 2014; Huang and Xiang 2018). Therefore, the subcategories within spreading culture—people, arts,



sports, and culture—generally involves showcasing a unique trait that China has towards people on the platform.

While “people” by itself might seem like a strange categorization out of context, I utilized this subcategory as a manner to note down if the post showcased an essence of “Chinese cultural virtues” derived from philosophers such as Confucius, an important school of thought to the Chinese relevant in today’s world (Tiwald, 2014). Furthermore, I argue this as a cultural strategy, as it illustrates the kind and benevolent nature of Chinese people. Therefore, to label a post as “people,” the post must involve a demonstration of virtue, hinting for viewers to think, “hmm..maybe the Chinese people are nice.”

	People Post	Not People Post
Video	 <p>Source: Douyin, rmr bxmt</p>	 <p>Source: TikTok, cgtnofficial</p>
Caption	<p>“平凡人的勇敢和善良，总能给予我们力量。2022辛苦了，2023加油！”</p> <p><i>Translation: The bravery and kindness of ordinary people can always give us strength. Thank you for your hard work in 2022, let’s keep at it in 2023!</i></p>	<p>“The #flame for the #Hangzhou2022 #AsianGames was lit on Thursday at the Archaeological Ruins of Liangzhu City, marking the 100-day #countdown to the #opening #ceremony for the event, which is set to run from September 23 to October 8. #sports #news #cgtn”</p>
Data Input	People ; Video and captions include	Not People ; Not directly related to

& Explanation	the showcase of kindness as a virtue in the Chinese people.	demonstrating unique virtues of the Chinese people.
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The arts, similarly, demonstrate another method that China showcases their unique cultural traditions, seen, for example, within the modern usage of Confucius's six arts—rites, music, archery, chariotry, calligraphy, and mathematics (Lee, 2022). For the case of this study, however, I defined art utilizing a more globally-understood definition, given TikTok, especially, is a platform meant for a global audience. Therefore, I noted the category as a demonstration of creative expression, whether in the form of craftsmanship (e.g. wood carvings, calligraphy, painting), physical expression (e.g. dancing, interactive installations), or music.

	Arts Post	Not Arts Post
Video	 <p><i>Source: TikTok, peoplesdaily</i></p>	 <p><i>Source: Douyin, CGTN</i></p>
Caption	<p>“A picturesque scene of beauty was created by a 220-meter-long chain of glowing rafts moving across the river like a dragon in southwest China. #China #chinesetiktok”</p>	<p>“#圭亚那驻华大使周雅欣接受CGTN邀约, 用中文为大家朗诵宋代#王安石的一首诗《元日》并送上新年祝愿。#我在全世界为你读诗 #诗约万里#聚V计划 #新年快乐”</p> <p><i>Translation: Chinese ambassador to Guyana, Zhou Yaxin, accepted the invitation of CGTN to recite a poem "New Year's Day" by #Wang Anshi of</i></p>

		<i>the Song Dynasty in Chinese and sends New Year wishes. #I read poems for you all over the world #Poetry reaches thousands of miles #V gathering plan #Happy New Year</i>
Data Input & Explanation	Arts ; Video and caption showcases an artistic installation.	Not Arts ; While the video recites a piece of poetry, the post focuses more on the cultural aspect—Lunar New Year—over the art aspect.

Furthermore, provided that the demonstration of sports in videos showcases a sense of competitiveness, camaraderie, and national identity of the Chinese people, I further created this category as a manner to demonstrate a significant alternative method that China utilizes to promote and spread their culture (Houlihan, 2004). For a post to be categorized as “sports,” it simply needs to include an activity that is commonly noted as a sport in its video and/or its caption.

	Sports Post	Not Sports Post
Video	 <p><i>Source: Douyin, haiwainet</i></p>	 <p><i>Source: TikTok, haiwainet.uscenter</i></p>
Caption	<p>“祝贺！吴敏霞入选国际游泳名人堂”</p> <p><i>Translation: Congratulations! Wu</i></p>	<p>“#haiwainetuscenter #china #goodpeople #好人 #汽车冲进水塘修房师傅分奔救人”</p>

	<i>Minxia was chosen to enter the international swimming hall of fame”</i>	<i>Translation: #haiwainetuscenter #china #goodpeople #goodpeople # Car crashes into pond, repairmen rush to respectively rescue people</i>
Data Input & Explanation	Sports ; Video and captions both include a recognized sport. In this case, the sport is swimming.	Not Sports ; Woman in the post was not intentionally in the water nor swimming as a sport. The post did not intend for itself to be a sports post.

Finally, the category, “culture,” involves any other activity that showcases a specific tradition or beliefs that the Chinese people commonly perform or believe in, as well as anything else that is of cultural heritage. For example, this may involve everything from celebrating the Spring Festival to observing traditional lifestyles, to discussing the four gentlemen of flowers of China.



	Culture Post	Not Culture Post
Video	 <p><i>Source: TikTok, peoplesdaily</i></p>	 <p><i>Source: Douyin, CGTN</i></p>
Caption	<p>“What a unique experience! A cable car ride lets people enjoy a bird's-eye view of the Tang-Dynasty-style buildings in Luoyang, C China's Henan. #China #chinatiktok #fy #viral #foryou #Henan #luoyang #tangdynasty”</p>	<p>“‘画中人即是眼前人’ CGTN#宋画仿妆挑战赛完美复刻宋画中的精致妆容 #千年调宋代人物画谱#仿妆”</p> <p><i>Translation: “The person in the painting is now the person in real life” CGTN #Song Dynasty Imitation</i></p>

		<i>Makeup Challenge perfectly replicates the Song Art Style's delicate makeup #a thousand years to extract characters from art #imitation makeup</i>
Data Input & Explanation	Culture ; Video and captions both showcase demonstrations of a traditional lifestyle within a re-creation of Tang style buildings.	Not Culture ; While the post is describing Song traditions, its main focus is on art, not culture.

Promoting Economics I define the strategy of promoting economics as showcasing the high quality of their commodities as a manner to acquire revenue, much like my discussion of the Japanese economic soft power strategy within my literature review. Within the posts, I mainly noted four distinct categories where China may have utilized posting strategies as a manner to boost their national economic growth—nature, animal, food, and entertainment (Otmazgin 2008; Yayushi and McConnell 2008; Smith 2013; Tsutomu 2008).



I first categorize the showcasing of nature as a soft power in the economics category, as ecotourism occupies 172.4 billion US dollars in the global travel industry, as recorded in 2022 (Statista 2025). Therefore, I label the post as “nature” when natural scenery is showcased as a manner to indicate its possible intention of hooking viewers into the Chinese ecotourism industry.

	Nature Post	Not Nature Post
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Video	 <p>Source: Douyin, CGTN</p>	 <p>Source: TikTok, peoplesdaily</p>
Caption	<p>“4月7日，山东菏泽。‘中国牡丹之都’菏泽市大面积种植的牡丹陆续进入盛花期，吸引游客前来观赏。其中，坐落在牡丹区的曹州牡丹园占地2000余亩，拥有牡丹品种1200多个，是目前世界上牡丹芍药种植面积最大、品种最多的植物园林。该园是在明清以来风格不一、大小不等的十几处牡丹园的基础上发展起来的。#牡丹”</p> <p><i>Translation: April 7th, Heze, Shandong. Peonies planted on a large scale in Heze, the "Peony Capital of China", are gradually entering their blooming period, attracting tourists to admire it. Among them, the Caozhou Peony Garden, located in the Peony District, covers an area of more than 2,000 acres and has more than 1,200 peony varieties. It is currently the botanical garden with the largest peony and peony planting area and the most varieties in the world. The garden was developed on the basis of more than a dozen peony gardens of different styles and sizes from the Ming and Qing Dynasties. #peony</i></p>	<p>“A bevy of swans enjoys leisure time on a misted lake after snow, adding a touch of liveness to the freezing winter in Rongcheng, E China's Shandong. #China #chinatiktok”</p>

Data Input & Explanation	Nature ; Video and captions both showcase an area with natural foliage (peonies, in this case).	Not Nature ; More specifically, I would label this post as “animal,” as its focus is more on the swan.
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On a similar note, I also note the presence of animals in posts as a way for China to promote its ecotourism economy. In addition to simply labelling the post as “animals,” however, I further collected the type of animals showcased in the video, mainly noting the presence of pandas—the Chinese national animal—and other indigenous Chinese animals, to gauge if China is trying to promote a national identity (Songster, 2018).

	Animal Post	Not Animal Post
Video	 <p><i>Source: TikTok, peoplesdaily</i></p>	 <p><i>Source: Douyin, rmr bxmt</i></p>
Caption	<p>“13 panda cubs born in 2022 at Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding send their best #NewYear2023 wishes! #China #chinatiktok”</p>	<p>“这一幕萌化了！奶奶干完活，小奶狗把凳子推给奶奶坐。”</p> <p><i>Translation: This scene is so cute! After grandma finished working, the little puppy pushed the stool for grandma to sit on.</i></p>
Data Input & Explanation	Animal ; Video and captions include the showcase of pandas, which are a type of animal.	Not Animal ; While there is an animal in the scene, it is not utilized to promote economic gain.

Furthermore, I also noted the showcase of certain foods unique to China as a manner of promoting economics. Besides food costing money by itself, tourists are known to spend more than 40 percent of their budget on food, on average, while travelling (Karim, 2010). To categorize food, then, I labeled a post as “food” when I saw the focus of the video involved food or eating.

	Food Post	Not Food Post
Video	 <p><i>Source: Douyin, haiwainet</i></p>	 <p><i>Source: TikTok, peoplesdaily</i></p>
Caption	<p>“山东饺子、山西刀削面.....来一口正宗中国味#哇嘎哩供”</p> <p><i>Translation: Shandong dumplings, Shanxi sliced noodles...let's have a taste of authentic Chinese flavor</i></p> <p><i>#For wows (the food channel name)</i></p>	<p>“Two phoenix-like golden pheasants were seen frolicking with each other in Pingdingshan, Henan Province, creating a beautiful scene beyond words. #China #chinatiktok”</p>
Data Input & Explanation	<p>Food; Video and captions showcase different Chinese foods that possible tourists need to try.</p>	<p>Not Food; While there are pheasants in this post, they do not look like, or were intended to be by the Chinese government, to look appetizing.</p>

Along the lines of video-watching audiences feeling amused following a quick depiction of the giant panda, the unveiling of a unique dish, or a showcase of stunning scenery, I also noted

when China is specifically showcasing other methods of entertainment. From posting exciting roller coasters to upcoming concerts, I label the category of “entertainment” as whenever a post illustrates an activity a visitor could do that would cost money in exchange for fun, that is not nature, animals, or food.

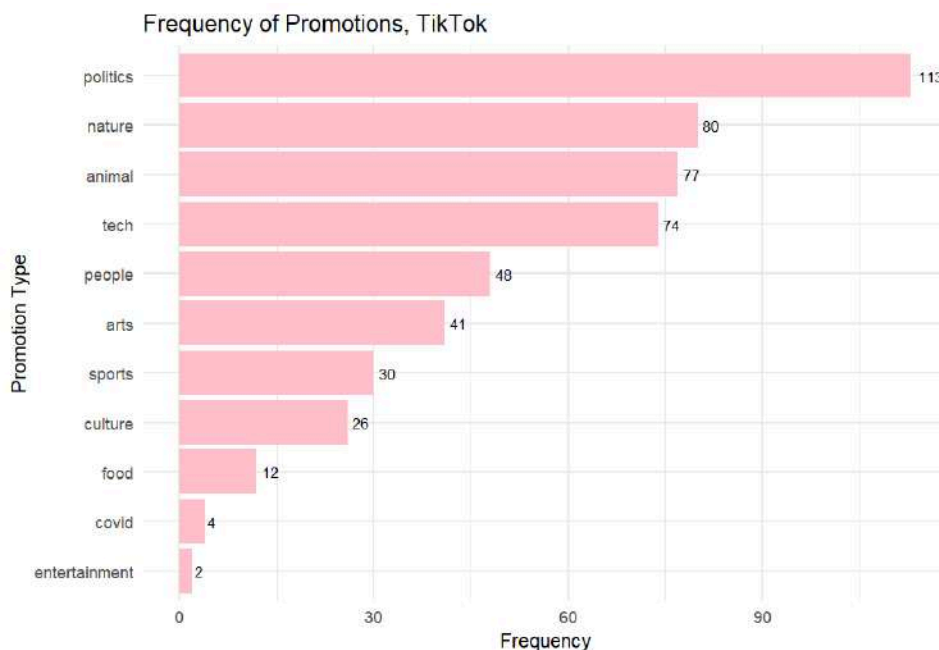
	Entertainment Post	Not Entertainment Post
Video	 <p>暴雨中的游乐园可以体验 坐在洗衣机里的感觉 Experiencing an amusement park in the rain on top of the situation is a really nice one</p> <p><i>Source: Douyin, CGTN</i></p>	 <p><i>Source: TikTok, peoplesdaily</i></p>
Caption	<p>“暴雨中的游乐园可以体验坐在洗衣机里的感觉”</p> <p><i>Translation: You can feel like being in a washing machine from going to an amusement park in pouring rain.</i></p>	<p>“Chinese mom turned recycled boxes into a detailed doll house for her daughter! #China #chinatiktok #viral #foryou #fy #motherlove #Love #handcrafts”</p>
Data Input & Explanation	<p>Entertainment; Post showcases both entertainment structures while trying to justify why being in an amusement park is fun, even when it rains.</p>	<p>Not Entertainment; While the doll house may be entertaining for the mom’s daughter, this post does not showcase a way of entertainment for the masses.</p>

6.2 Results

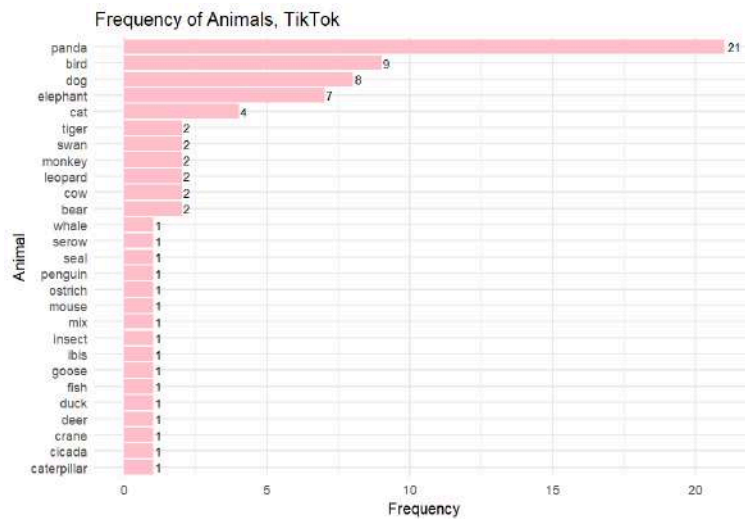
6.2.1 TikTok’s Trends

Showcased in the bar graph below, the top usages of China promotions revolve around politics—a category that takes a 33 post lead above the next three—nature, animals, and tech.

Figure 27



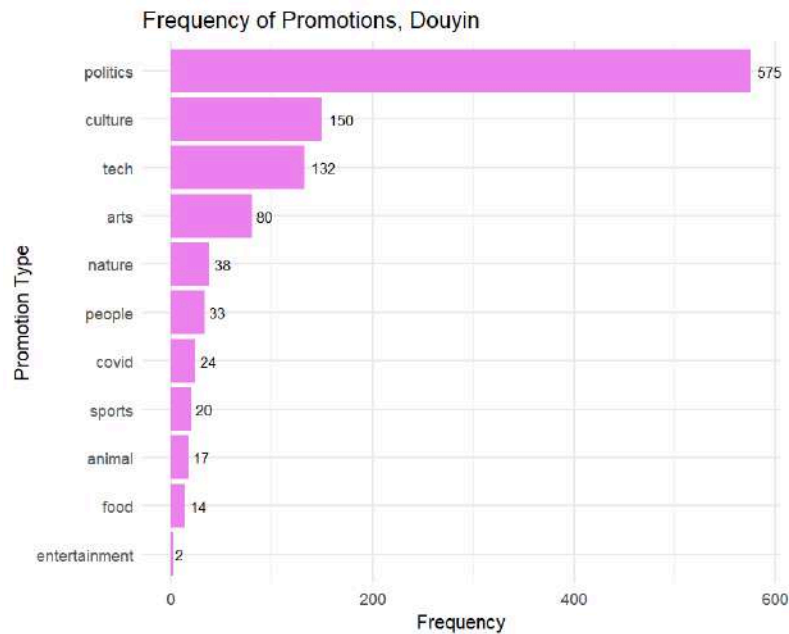
In addition to the conclusion from TikTok that China is trying to prioritize economic gain from a foreign audience, as seen from travel posts, this bar graph showcases evidence of China's supplemental attempts in broadcasting its national identity abroad. For example, global positioning and promoting economic strategies seem the most frequently utilized, with politics and tech within the first category, while nature and animals reside in the latter. Combined, the categories within global positioning occur only 30 posts more frequently than promoting economic strategies, showcasing that China values the spread of national identity, in addition to the encouragement of economic gain to an international audience, as shown from the main research.

Figure 28

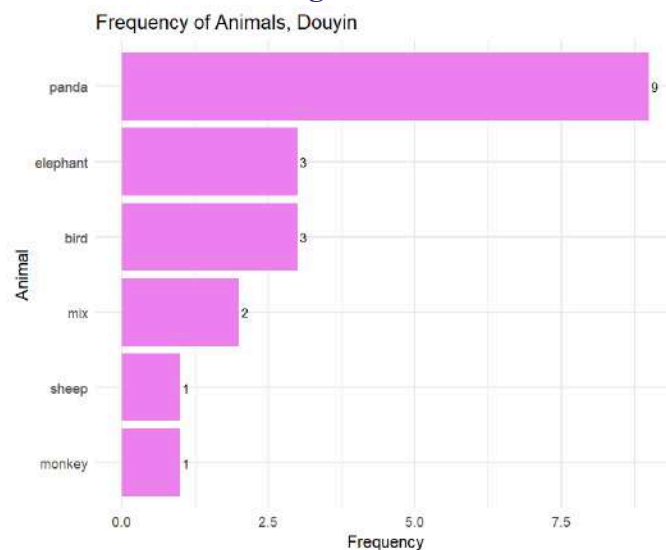
To further assert this claim, the data above displays China posting pandas, the national animal of China, around 2.2 times more frequently than the next most frequently posted animal, birds (Songster 2018). Further, China might also post about pandas more to acquire additional visitors to tourist locations such as the Chengdu Panda Reserve, which alone receives over 20 million visitors annually, a number higher than Disneyland (Sasaki 2025).

6.2.2 Douyin's Data

Similar to the trend discovered in TikTok, the most commonly utilized type of Chinese promotion also revolves around politics. However, politics is utilized to around 3.86 times more than the following categories of culture, tech, and arts. Therefore, the drastic difference between politics and culture illustrates the predominance of spreading government-directed political messaging on the government social media accounts for domestic audiences.

Figure 29

With the goal of spreading government-directed political messaging in mind, then, it does not come without a doubt that the most frequently used animal is, once again, the panda. Provided that animal posts were not frequent on governmentally-run platforms, and that Douyin is tailored to a more domestic audience, pandas still appeared 3 times more often than the next two most frequently-shown animals, elephants and birds.

Figure 30

Consistent with China's objective on Douyin being significantly more focused on spreading political ideals, as observed in the main travel research, the slightly more frequent showcase of the national animal—panda, is most likely to establish a feeling of national identity and camaraderie (Songster, 2018).

7 Concluding Remarks

“You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose. You're on your own. And you know what you know. And YOU are the one who'll decide where to go...”

-Theodore Geisel

7.1 Discussion

I mention Theodore Geisel in my conclusion not because I agree with him. Instead, within the modern age, the figment of choice when deciding travel—or considering political opinions—often depends upon the opinions heard within the information-filled social media network (Ausat 2023). Within my thesis, I discuss the manners of social media, or more particularly, Chinese government-run social media, attempts to influence individuals worldwide.

Using TikTok as my experimental group, I discover that China prioritizes the re-stimulation of its domestic economy when targeting an international audience (H2). Firstly, this is demonstrated through the significant increase of travel posting with locations after the lift of Zero-COVID travel bans (Figure 12). Secondly, this is further supported by the wide range of socioeconomic locations China showcases on TikTok as well as the emphasis on political and economic topics such as politics, nature, animal, and tech shown through the topical analysis (Figure 27; Figure 28).

Comparing these results to my control group, Douyin, China is significantly more focused on promoting political topics towards its domestic audience over anything else (H1). First, Douyin's data corroborates with this claim through the platform's general similar number in posting travel posts throughout the months observed, with a slight decrease following the lift of Zero-COVID travel restrictions (Figure 13). Also, China significantly advertises much more politically contested locations, such as Taiwan and Tibet, as destinations for travel, in addition to creating more politically-oriented posts overall, as indicated by the topical analysis (Figure 19; Figure 29).

To ensure the significance of the four accounts—CGTN, Guangming Daily, Haiwainet, and People's Daily—I also run both an author fixed effects test, with CGTN being the referencing point, and a Tukey Test on CGTN (Figure 22; Figure 23; Figure 24; Figure 25). Through such, I observed, again, a significant increase in travel posts on TikTok and a significant decrease on Douyin (*ibid.*). I further noted the case of People's Daily—self-noted as China's most adamant political news network—on TikTok, where it was also the one posting the most travel posts following the lift of Zero-COVID restrictions (People's Daily).

7.2 Limitations

Most blaringly, my results from this study completely dispels the laments of the Western reporters: The data observed does not support the accusation that China uses travel social media content to spew propaganda (Hvistendahl et. al. 2023; Ingram 2019; Ortutay 2024; Olenski 2018).

While this is true, it is important to note that my study specifically concerns publicly-known, government-run accounts. While these accounts can proudly assert their political beliefs domestically, with its loyal fanbase of 766.5 million, these government-run

accounts most likely needed to re-strategize their appeal in order to compete for the attention of over 2 billion international TikTok users (Statista 2025). Therefore, I also hypothesize for a probability that the Chinese government, if they had other objectives, utilized unofficial accounts to push for other political agendas (Neagli 2021; Lu and Pan 2022). Unfortunately, however, the observation of unofficial accounts possibly run by the Chinese government is outside the scope of this specific research.

7.3 Future Research

Hence, a good place to start building upon the results of this research is to conduct the same research, but with semi-official or unofficial accounts on TikTok and Douyin run by the Chinese government. Provided that official Chinese state media might act differently on the international front to enhance its image, the utilization of semi-official or unofficial accounts will most likely allow for a deeper analysis on China's specific intentions following the release of Zero-COVID travel restrictions.

Another direction to take future research might be to look deeper into the topical analysis section. While I ran basic histograms to collect the frequency of each category, a study surrounding how the category frequencies changed prior to and following Zero-COVID travel restrictions may build upon this study with more nuanced results.

Alas, we return to the debate of whether China's state media uses travel as propaganda. To this, I would answer yes, no, and maybe. Observing the data from Douyin, I would argue yes, China uses travel as propaganda to further its domestic policy agendas. Observing the data from TikTok, I would argue no, as travel posting is illustrated to hold a more economic goal. Lastly, looking onwards towards future studies and in Chinese state media, I would answer maybe. With

the possibility of deeper nuances to be discovered surrounding travel, the topic would most possibly remain in open debate.

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