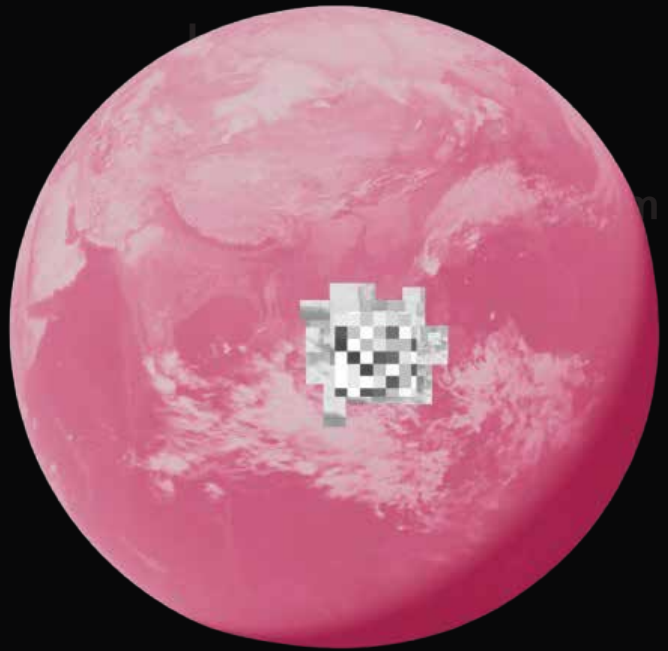


THE YALE REVIEW OF

Between
Censorship
and Consumption:
Legal Implications of the Barbie (2023) Ban
and the Future of Vietnam's
Film Industry

Cover Story by
Nghia Cong Pham



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Dear Reader,

It is with great pleasure that we open the 16th volume of the Yale Review of International Studies with our annual Global Issue. The pieces selected for this issue push beyond the boundaries of what we often consider straightforward, "textbook" history. At a time marked by renewed great power competition and a broader strategic reordering of the world order, these authors look past familiar narratives to uncover the subtler threads of power that shape people's quotidian lives.

With considerations of artistic cinema, evolutions of language, and inter-provincial dynamics, this issue reminds us that politics extends far beyond elections, treaties, and formal institutions. Culture, identity, and memory emerge in these pieces as central forces in how political actors assert and contest influence and authority. We get to explore China's linguistic politics, censorship of Barbie (2023) in Vietnam, and debates over Québécois secession, opening discussions that showcase how soft power operates across time and place.

These pieces have been selected for their pertinence to contemporary debates and the discussions they open about the forces that shape our world. We hope this issue encourages you to think more expansively about international relations and to appreciate the challenges people around the globe face as they navigate questions of recognition and belonging.

Sincerely,
Isabel Mestey-Colon and Vittal Sivakumar
Editors-in-Chief

NGHIA CONG PHAM

TOBEY SCHWIMMER

ZHANG YIMING

Essays

Between Censorship and Consumption: Legal Implications of the Barbie (2023) Ban and the Future of Vietnam's Film Industry

Abstract

On July 3, 2023, Vietnam denied a streaming license to *Barbie* (2023) over its alleged depiction of the Nine-Dash Line, reflecting the state's enduring use of censorship to assert geopolitical narratives. This paper examines Vietnam's censorship regime through legal analysis, historical precedents, and social media data to evaluate its inconsistency and economic repercussions. Applying the theory of paternalistic governance, it argues that such censorship reinforces ideological control, fosters piracy, and undermines the creative economy. The *Barbie* ban ultimately reveals how Vietnam's geopolitically driven media restrictions compromise both domestic artistic growth and its broader international image.

1.0 Introduction

The South China Sea dispute is a complex territorial and maritime conflict involving China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and Taiwan, centered on competing claims over the Spratly and Paracel Islands.¹ China's claims are grounded in historical records, referencing ancient maps that feature the "Nine-Dash Line," a demarcation encompassing nearly 90 percent of the South China Sea.² Historically, the Line has been used to assert rights over the disputed areas, notwithstanding

1 "Territorial disputes in the South China Sea | Global Conflict Tracker," *Council of Foreign Relations* (CFR), <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/territorial-disputes-south-china-sea>.

2 "Chinese 'monster' ship reinforces nine-dash line in South China Sea," *Radio Free Asia*, June 27, 2024, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/southchinasea/monster-ship-nine-dash-06272024035841.html>.

the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruling in the 2016 *Philippines v. China* case, which found that the Nine-Dash Line violated the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).³ Among the claimants, Vietnam has been one of the most vocal in contesting China's position, and tensions between the two countries remain at an all-time high.

In recent years, the dispute has pervasively spilled over into film production and digital media, continuing to evoke strong reactions from netizens around the world. In Vietnam, the depiction of the Nine-Dash Line in Hollywood films has emerged as a key cultural-geopolitical flashpoint, pitting the citizens' defense of national sovereignty against one of the most ordinary pastimes: watching a movie. Over the years, several international productions and their financiers have been accused of including the map that contains the line as a soft form of political endorsement, allegedly to gain access to the lucrative Chinese box office.⁴ In response, Vietnam's

Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism (MOCST) has censored multiple high-profile films. Notable blockbusters, including *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), *Abominable* (2019), and *Uncharted* (2022), were banned for depicting disputed areas as falling under Beijing's control, directly conflicting with Vietnam's territorial stance and overall understanding of cultural integrity. Most recently, *Barbie* was pulled from Vietnamese theaters in July 2023 for allegedly featuring a map with the Nine-Dash Line. The ban ignited widespread debate across international media, social platforms, and within Vietnam, becoming a reflection point on how state censorship shapes cultural diplomacy and public perception of

Vietnam's place within contested geopolitical narratives.

Ho Chi Minh City-based journalist Michael Tatarski noted that the decision to ban *Barbie* received more international coverage than any Vietnamese story since the 2019 Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi.⁵ Not in mere terms of popularity, the 2023 ban on *Barbie* marks a critical juncture in the intersection between artistic expression and the legal framework amid Vietnam's emerging media landscape. This paper seeks to answer the following question: *To what extent does the censorship of films like Barbie effectively achieve Vietnam's objective of protecting its values, and*

3 "Territorial disputes in the South China Sea, History, Maps, China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Philippines, Malaysia, & Facts." *Britannica*, February 28, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/territorial-disputes-in-the-South-China-Sea>

4 "Will Hollywood learn from disappointing 'Barbie' payoff for pandering to China?." *The Daily Signal*. July 27, 2023. <https://www.dailysignal.com/2023/07/27/barbie-box-office-flop-china-is-cautionary-tale-studios-catering-beijing/>.

5 "The 'Barbie' ban," *Vietnam Weekly*, July 6, 2023, <https://thevietnamweekly.substack.com/p/the-barbie-ban>.



"THE BARBIE CASE REVEALS THE LIMITS OF VIETNAM'S MARKET PRAGMATISM, EXPOSING CENSORSHIP AS A TOOL OF GEOPOLITICAL POSITIONING RATHER THAN A CONSISTENT CULTURAL POLICY."

what — intentional or inadvertent — consequences does it produce in practice? The inquiry also examines the broader Vietnam’s gradual shift toward a neoliberal framework, which reimagines the relationship between entrepreneurs and consumers, against the backdrop of a regulatory apparatus that remains surprisingly static or slow to evolve. As such, the *Barbie* ban placed mounting pressures on how consumption is conceptualized and controlled in Vietnam and its years to come.

For clarity and analytical coherence, this paper categorizes the issues into three sections. Section 2.0 examines how Vietnam’s stringent film censorship regime has consistently constrained the creative industries while remaining legislatively stagnant. It also investigates the rationale behind the *Barbie* ban within the broader context of Vietnam’s censorship practices and criticisms entailed on the international level. Section 3.0 applies the theory of paternalistic governance to analyze Vietnam’s film and media landscape, arguing that the legal framework is shaped more by ideological control than by regulatory clarity, resulting in inconsistent enforcement and reinforcing state-led nationalist narratives. The final section addresses the rise of film piracy, which presents growing challenges to Vietnam’s copyright law in the post-Đổi Mới era and in an increasingly digital media environment. It concludes with a preliminary economic assessment of the *Barbie* ban, taking into account Vietnam’s robust moviegoing culture and the film’s unrealized commercial potential.

2.0 Vietnam’s Cinema Law and International Impact Post-*Barbie* Ban

This section aims to explore the inconsistent and economically influenced nature of film censorship in Vietnam in assessing subversive content via Vietnam’s Cinema Law (2022). Through a comparison of films such as *Kong: Skull Island* (2017), *Journey from the Fall* (2006), *Rambo* (1985; 2008), and *Barbie* (2023), the analysis highlights how the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism (MOCST) prioritizes economic liberalization and shows great promises of cultural integration; however, when it comes to subversive content — i.e., social evils, content that engages with Vietnam’s wartime history or geopolitical sovereignty — the application of censorship standards is uneven. That is, while some politically charged films are permitted due to their commercial appeal or tourism value, others are outright banned for similar themes.

Drawing on Nguyen-Vo’s framework of “liberal market freedoms,” I argue that economic incentives frequently override ideological concerns, *except* in cases involving the Nine-Dash Line, which consistently provokes government bans. The *Barbie* case reveals the limits of Vietnam’s market pragmatism, exposing censorship as a tool of geopolitical positioning rather than a consistent cultural policy. As such, Vietnam’s embrace of economic modernization has not dismantled the entrenched censorship apparatus that governs cultural production. The persistence of strict film regulation amid growing economic openness reflects

Vietnam's dual-track strategy: embracing market liberalization without extending the same freedoms to political expression or cultural production.

Beyond the language of the Cinema Law itself lies the weak enforcement and lack of legal clarity. Rather than establishing consistent precedents and releasing public statements, the MOCST's responses to controversial films reflect a misaligned scope of mission that has attracted substantial international criticism. The absence of meaningful legislative reform in the wake of these incidents suggests that censorship in Vietnam remains reactive and inconsistent, with limited long-term regulatory consequences. I conclude this section with several key suggestions with an emphasis on decentralization and modernization of film censorship and classification.

2.1 To Ban or Not to Ban: Social Evils and Inconsistency in Setting Precedents

Under Vietnam's Cinema Law, the government regulates all aspects of cinematographic activity, including permissions, obligations, and restrictions, with special scrutiny on politically sensitive content.⁶ These adjudications, carried out by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism (MOCST), are often intended as efforts to protect cultural heritage, thereby contributing as a huge factor in shaping the cultural discourse within Vietnam's borders. The MOCST's provisions define political sensitivity as content that "sabotage[s] the great national unity bloc; damages the interests of Vietnam, its people, and cultural values" and/or "disseminate[s] reactionary ideology and social crimes."⁷ In practice, politically sensitive content is treated as a form of symbolic "tê nạn xã hội" (social evil) when it challenges national narratives, sovereignty claims, or the legitimacy of Vietnam.

However, the question of *what* constitutes content deemed in violation has long presented an inconsistent, and often subjective, hurdle in setting regulatory precedents. In 2017, *Kong: Skull Island* — a film set in the 1970s and laced with Vietnam War "aesthetics" — was not only approved by Vietnamese authorities but also celebrated as a tool for promoting tourism, despite its violent imagery and thinly veiled wartime symbolism. In the same vein of political scrutiny, *Journey from the Fall* (2006) — a film offering a poignant portrayal of post-war re-education camps and the Vietnamese diaspora — was, otherwise, denied distribution for its defamation of Vietnamese re-education policies. The Vietnamese government labeled the film as "reactionary" and accused it of distorting the nation's post-war history, leading to the confiscation of DVD copies across the country.⁸ Here, both films engage with politically sensitive topics, yet were evaluated through different lenses.

6 "Luật Điện Ảnh 2022," *Thư Viện Pháp Luật*, accessed June 6, 2025, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Van-hoa-Xa-hoi/Luat-Dien-anh-2022-486445.aspx>.

7 "Luật Điện Ảnh 2022," *Thư Viện Pháp Luật*

8 "Một bộ phim độc hại xuất hiện trên thị trường," *Báo Sài Gòn Giải Phóng*, May 17, 2007, <https://www.sggp.org.vn/mot-bo-phim-doc-hai-xuat-hien-tren-thi-truong-post310070.html>.

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**"VIETNAM'S DUAL-
TRACK STRATEGY:
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EXPRESSION
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A similar inconsistency appears in the treatment of the *Rambo* franchise. *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) was banned in Vietnam for its portrayal of Vietnamese characters and alignment with anti-communist narratives, which were considered politically unacceptable at the time.⁹ However, the 2008 installment, titled *Rambo*, was approved by Vietnamese censors and screened in theaters across the country,¹⁰ indicating a shift toward a more open-minded approach to foreign films despite its past. Although, in recent years, narratives about the Vietnam War have become oversaturated or, at the very least, have lost appeal for many filmmakers, the absence of documented criteria continues to obscure how political content violations are defined and enforced.

In Vietnam's ongoing push for market liberalization, a film's commercial appeal often takes precedence over its political sensitivities. Empirically, *Kong* (2017), a single installment of the larger franchise, earned a lifetime gross of \$568,652,812,¹¹ compared to *Journey from the Fall*, which brought in \$641,039.¹² While specific box office figures from Vietnam are unavailable, the fact that controversial films, particularly those with politically sensitive themes, frequently pass review by the MOCST suggests that a certain threshold of economic incentive may be sufficient to override concerns regarding "social evils." Nguyen-Vo introduces a concept that strongly resonates with Vietnam's commodity during its early period: commercial sex as "a function of government-initiated [Vietnam's] liberal market freedoms," through her case study of the film *Gái Nhảy* (Bar Girls) (2003).¹³ She challenges conventional perceptions of what is socially "real" and interrogates the government's role in intervening in society and regulating symbolic "social evils," particularly when the film achieved "unprecedented box office receipts and blazed the trail for a commercially viable domestic film industry."¹⁴

This pattern of economically motivated censorship is also evident in Vietnam's approval of Hollywood blockbusters like the aforementioned *Kong* (2017) and *Da 5 Bloods* (2020). From imperialist adventure fantasies¹⁵ to stylized retellings of the Vietnam War involving katanas in the jungle,¹⁶ these films reflect a continued foreign fixation on Vietnam's wartime past. Moving beyond this narrative seems an almost impossible task.¹⁷ In competing with

9 "Latest 'Rambo' movie now showing in Vietnam," *NPR*, April 18, 2008, <https://www.npr.org/2008/04/18/89750324/latest-rambo-movie-now-showing-in-vietnam>.

10 *Ibid*.

11 *Kong: Skull Island*, n.d., Box Office Mojo, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt3731562/?ref_=bo_se_r_1

12 *Journey from the Fall*, n.d., Box Office Mojo, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0433398/?ref_=bo_se_r_1

13 Thu-Huong Nguyen-Vo, *The Ironies of Freedom: Sex, Culture, and Neoliberal Governance in Vietnam* (University of Washington Press, 2008).

14 Nguyen-Vo, *Ironies of Freedom*, 15.

15 "In 'DA 5 Bloods,' Vietnam is just another backdrop for American pain," *Foreign Policy*, September 8, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/09/vietnam-chadwick-boseman-da-5-bloods-imperialism/#:~:text=Spike%20Lee%27s%20recent%20Netflix%20Vietnam,at%20home%20to%20imperialism%20abroad>.

16 "Kong: Skull Island' refights the Vietnam War with katanas and a dead triceratops," *The Washington Post*, October 26, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/act-four/wp/2017/03/13/kong-skull-island-refights-the-vietnam-war-with-katanas-and-a-dead-triceratops/>.

17 "Vietnam lures Hollywood crews but censorship hangs over film sector," *Nikkei Asia*, July 1, 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Business-Spotlight/Vietnam-lures-Hollywood-crews-but-censorship-hangs-over-film-sector>.

regional neighbors like Thailand and the Philippines for foreign investment, and in its broader effort to integrate into the global economy, Vietnam has shown a willingness to accommodate politically ambiguous or ideologically uncomfortable narratives when there are clear economic gains. In doing so, the government appears willing to “milk the same storyline” repeatedly, so long as it serves its developmental objectives.

Could it have been more strategic *not* to ban *Barbie* (2023)? The censorship of this movie presents a manufactured exception. *Barbie* was found to contravene Vietnam’s Cinema Law under Points D, Clause I, Article 9, which stipulates: “Distorting national



"IN VIETNAM'S ONGOING PUSH FOR MARKET LIBERALIZATION, A FILM'S COMMERCIAL APPEAL OFTEN TAKES PRECEDENCE OVER ITS POLITICAL SENSITIVITIES."

history, denying revolutionary achievements; insulting the nation, historical figures, and national heroes; [and] misrepresenting or infringing upon national sovereignty...¹⁸ Unlike narratives about the Vietnam War or other portrayals of symbolic “social evils,” the South China Sea dispute strikes a deeper chord with Vietnamese citizens. To date, over six productions have been banned for visualizing the Nine-Dash Line, making it one of the most politically charged topics in Vietnamese censorship. This pattern raises a hypothesis: films with lucrative economic potential are generally permitted unless they explicitly reference the South China Sea.

This contradiction is especially ironic, not only because *Barbie* promised substantial box office returns that undermine the state’s economic priorities, but also because Warner Bros. confirmed that the map in question was simply a fictional doodle, amplifying the absurdity of the ban.¹⁹ The only official comment came from Vi Kiến Thành, Vietnam’s Director of Cinematography, who casually dismissed the issue in an interview with *Tuổi Trẻ Online*: “I haven’t received this information, but that’s just someone’s opinion. Whatever opinion they have is their business.”²⁰ Rather than

18 “Luật Điện Ảnh 2022,” *Thư Viện Pháp Luật*.

19 “Did ‘Barbie’ cross the line? How a ‘child-like’ map stirred a South China Sea dispute,” *NBC News*, July 7, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/warner-bros-defends-barbie-banned-vietnam-south-china-sea-map-rcna93013>.

20 “Phim Barbie bị cấm chiếu ở Việt Nam vì có hình ảnh ‘đường lưỡi bò,’” *Tuổi Trẻ Online*, July 3, 2023, <https://tuoitre.vn/phim-barbie-bi-cam-chieu-o-viet-nam-vi-co-hinh-anh-duong-luoi-bo>.

applying consistent standards, the MOCST's censorship decisions reflect cursory political preference and unprecedented calculation for South China Sea's entangled geopolitics.

After all, the MOCST's failure to enact meaningful reform or provide a reasonable explanation was met with diplomatic criticisms tantamount to a rejection of its censorship practices. The agency continues to fall short of establishing consistent legal

precedents, as demonstrated not only in the Barbie case but also in earlier film bans. Far from safeguarding "cultural heritage," Vietnam's censorship regime increasingly functions as a political instrument, with the MOCST wielding broad discretionary power, often without substantive justification for the political concerns involved. This legal vagueness, in turn, weakens the credibility of its censorship enforcement.

2.2 Policy Vagueness and Censorship Enforcement Amid Diplomatic Reproach

Censorship barriers are compounded by the unpredictable criteria used to define violations of national security or identity, making

it difficult for Vietnam to fulfill its stated objectives of promoting cultural integration and advancing cultural diplomacy. In *The Roles of Film Development Policy in Vietnamese Cinema*, Nguyen (2022) details the objectives of Vietnam's film policy:

"[to build] an advanced Vietnamese film industry, imbued with national identity, composing many works of ideological, educational, aesthetic and entertainment value, achieving high socio-economic efficiency, by regulations, in the direction of literary and artistic development of the Party and State in the new period. Developing Vietnamese film towards modernity and international integration. The State creates a legal corridor and equal opportunities for organizations and individuals to participate in the development of the film career."²¹

According to Nguyen, the one-party state aims to construct a

bo-20230703120307715.htm.

21 T. A. Q. Nguyen, "Assess the Roles of Film Development Policy in the Field of Vietnamese Cinema," *WSEAS Transactions on Environment and Development* 18 (2022): 534-542, <https://doi.org/10.37394/232015.2022.18.52>.



"FAR FROM SAFEGUARDING 'CULTURAL HERITAGE,' VIETNAM'S CENSORSHIP REGIME INCREASINGLY FUNCTIONS AS A POLITICAL INSTRUMENT."

legal framework that promotes equal opportunity and preserves cultural and political stability, grounded in national identity. But what it fails to acknowledge is that the arbitrary banning of politically sensitive films undermines its very vision of an “open legal corridor.” Producer Charlie Nguyen, known for *Crouching Tiger* and *Hidden Dragon 2*, saw his own gangster film *Bụi Đời Chợ Lớn* become a flashpoint in censorship debates when its 2013 release was canceled, allegedly due to violent content deemed incompatible with the country’s moral code. Calling such restrictions a “hindrance” to the industry, Nguyen remarked, “We just want it to be spelled out — what is a violation of the law? Most filmmakers don’t know.”²² The MOCST’s continued silence has created a regulatory gridlock: as Vietnam pursues global economic integration, hasty censorship in the name of preserving national identity ultimately undermines its stated goals of fostering creativity, international engagement, and socio-economic growth.

It is, indeed, perplexing that even filmmakers are not able to pinpoint what ground their creative work has infringed on the law beyond “political violation.” Both filmmakers and regulators find themselves constrained by a censorship regime characterized by stringent enforcement and outdated, loosely defined legislation. For example, foreign filmmakers face mounting obstacles in putting forth their artistic visions due to increasingly restrictive rules on fictionalized political content. Prior to the *Barbie* incident, the government had already established a complex set of requirements for international media companies, which must be navigated to gain approval for activities ranging from on-location filming to digital screenings.²³ Under the revised 2022 Cinema Law, foreign filmmakers are subject to an onerous process, including the submission of script summaries in addition to the original application.²⁴

Regulators in the film sector are similarly affected. A notable example of regulatory failure occurred in 2019, when *Abominable* initially bypassed Vietnam’s review system and was screened for approximately ten days before being pulled in response to public backlash over its depiction of the controversial Nine-Dash Line.²⁵ The incident prompted swift disciplinary action: eleven MOCST officials were formally reprimanded for negligence in upholding regulatory standards,²⁶ and the film’s distributor, CJ CGV, was fined VND 170 million (USD 7,300).²⁷ Despite frequent clerical oversights, Vietnamese regulators operate under strict scrutiny and face tangible consequences when censorship provisions are not rigorously upheld.

Inevitably, the lack of meaningful regulatory reform reflects a misaligned scope of mission that has drawn considerable

22 “Vietnam Lures Hollywood Crews,” *Nikkei Asia*.

23 “Vietnam Cinema Law 2022: Key regulations & Enforcement,” *The-Shiv*, May 9, 2025, <https://the-shiv.com/vietnams-law-on-cinema/>.

24 “Vietnam Lures Hollywood Crews,” *Nikkei Asia*.

25 “Phim Bị Tổ Có ‘Đường Lưỡi Bò,’ Cục Điện Ảnh Kiểm Duyệt Phim Lại Lỗi?,” *Báo Xây Dựng*, August 4, 2023, <https://baoxaydung.vn/phim-bi-to-co-34duong-luoi-bo34-cuc-dien-anh-kiem-duyet-phim-lai-loi-192438111.htm>.

26 *Ibid*.

27 “Vietnam Cinema Department head fired over Chinese map claim,” *VietNamNet News*, October 30, 2019, <https://vietnamnet.vn/en/vietnam-cinema-department-head-fired-over-chinese-map-claim-583337.html>.

international backlash. Films like *Abominable* and *Flight to You* bypassed initial review processes and only drew scrutiny after public backlash,²⁸ demonstrating that regulatory enforcement tends to focus on damage control rather than proactive adherence to content guidelines. Despite growing calls for reform that better balances political sensitivity with artistic expression, the decision to ban *Barbie* ignited widespread diplomatic and public debate. On July 4th, 2023, China's Deputy Director and spokesperson Mao Ning criticized Vietnam's prohibition of *Barbie* screenings, asserting that, "[r]elevant country should not link the South China Sea issue with normal cultural exchange," and that "China's position on the South China Sea issue is clear and consistent."²⁹ Warner Bros., the film's producer, also defended its stance, insisting the movie was not politically charged and that the depiction was a scribbled make-believe drawing.³⁰ While other regional actors refrained from commenting, the Philippines explicitly chose not to follow suit after Vietnam's decision. On July 11, 2023, the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board (MTRCB) of the Philippines issued a statement explaining that the map depicted in the film illustrated the route of a fictional journey integral to the story and did not portray the dubious "nine-dash line." MTRCB emphasized, however, that the Philippines remains committed to stringent evaluation in future cases.³¹

While *Barbie* ignited a wide range of responses, previous bans over similar issues have had little effect on Vietnam's film policy or public diplomacy. The absence of legislative amendments following these incidents suggests that censorship remains reactive rather than reform-driven, with limited long-term regulatory consequences. This pattern highlights the need for a more transparent and forward-looking censorship framework that can move beyond symbolic gestures and meaningfully reconcile cultural diplomacy with artistic freedom.

2.3 Suggestions: Two-Pronged Approach in Modernizing Film Governance

Vietnam's current film censorship framework suffers from a lack of legal clarity and transparency. Although some officials, such as Deputy Phạm Nam Tiên of Dak Nong province, have defended the work of censorship councils as well-intentioned and aimed at ensuring the distribution of "clean" films, concerns

28 DreamWorks' 'Abominable' film banned in Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines for showing China's claim over disputed seas," *Global Voices*, January 23, 2020, <https://globalvoices.org/2019/10/28/dreamworks-abominable-film-banned-in-vietnam-malaysia-and-the-philippines-for-showing-chinas-claim-over-disputed-seas/>; "First Barbie, then BLACKPINK, now Netflix: Why has Vietnam banned the series 'Flight to You'?", *Euronews*, July 11, 2023. <https://www.euronews.com/culture/2023/07/11/first-barbie-then-blackpink-now-netflix-why-has-vietnam-banned-the-series-flight-to-you>.

29 "Vụ Việt Nam cấm phim Barbie: Trung Quốc nói 'không nên gắn chuyện Biển Đông với trao đổi văn hóa,'" *VOA Tiếng Việt*, July 5, 2023, <https://www.voatiengviet.com/a/7168176.html>.

30 "MTRCB allows 'Barbie' to screen in PH, finds no depiction of 9-dash line," *Rappler*, July 12, 2023, <https://www.rappler.com/entertainment/movies/mtrcb-allows-barbie-screen-philippines-amid-nine-dash-line-issue/>.

31 "MTRCB allows 'Barbie' to screen in PH, finds no depiction of 9-dash line," *Rappler*, July 12, 2023, <https://www.rappler.com/entertainment/movies/mtrcb-allows-barbie-screen-philippines-amid-nine-dash-line-issue/>.

persist over the councils' intrusive influence and their tendency to compel filmmakers to modify content in order to obtain screening licenses.³² Since 2022, no meaningful revisions or amendments have been introduced, leaving a legal vacuum where both creators and audiences are left uncertain about what constitutes a “political violation.” The absence of codified standards has resulted in inconsistent enforcement and fueled frustration within the industry. As director Nguyễn Hữu Tuấn notes, “Vague and unspecific regulations will force members of film censorship councils to interpret these regulations according to their personal understanding, which can lead to unfairness in film censorship.”³³

By contrast, neighboring countries have responded to similar challenges with proactive reform. China's 2017 Film Industry Promotion Law introduced standardized criteria and transparency mechanisms to counter long-standing criticisms of arbitrary censorship.³⁴ India's 2021 Cinematograph Amendment Proposal similarly sought to formalize oversight of politically sensitive content while introducing age-based classification systems and explicit penalties for non-compliance.³⁵ These reforms represent a shift toward greater predictability and professionalism in content regulation.

Vietnam's 2022 draft revision of the Law on Cinematography makes an initial step in this direction by proposing to decentralize censorship authority. Under Article 32, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism would establish national councils while delegating additional classification responsibilities to provincial councils and press agencies. Films distributed online would be self-classified by creators, with oversight from both the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Information and Communication (MIC). While these proposed changes reflect a more flexible and decentralized model, they still fall short of addressing the fundamental issue: the absence of transparent, principle-based criteria for determining what qualifies as politically or culturally unacceptable content.³⁶

Moving forward, Vietnam should adopt a two-pronged approach to promote cross-border e-commerce and modernize its film governance. First, the government must codify objective, accessible guidelines that clearly define the legal boundaries of artistic expression, accompanied by a requirement for post-ban public statements. This step is critical to enhancing transparency and restoring public trust. The task of drafting and disseminating these statements should be delegated to the MIC, in support of decisions made by the MOCST. Second, Vietnam should implement a post-release review model, similar to those adopted in India and China, which shifts censorship from preemptive control

32 “Revising the Law on Cinematography: A new film censorship and classification system in the making,” *Vietnam Law & Legal Forum*, June 11, 2021, <https://vietnamlawmagazine.vn/revising-the-law-on-cinematography-a-new-film-censorship-and-classification-system-in-the-making-38047.html>.

33 *Ibid.*

34 “Film Industry Promotion Law in China,” *Media Classification*, 2016, <https://mediaclassification.org/timeline-event/film-industry-promotion-law-china/>.

35 “Cinematograph Amendment Bill 2021 approved; strict penalty on film piracy,” *Business Standard*, April 19, 2023, https://www.business-standard.com/india-news/cinematograph-amendment-bill-2021-approved-strict-penalty-on-film-piracy-123041900596_1.html.

36 “Revising the Law on Cinematography,” *Vietnam Law & Legal Forum*.



**"THE ABSENCE OF
LEGISLATIVE AMENDMENTS
FOLLOWING THESE
INCIDENTS SUGGESTS
THAT CENSORSHIP
REMAINS REACTIVE
RATHER THAN REFORM-
DRIVEN, WITH LIMITED
LONG-TERM REGULATORY
CONSEQUENCES."**

to accountability-based oversight. Such reforms would not only bring Vietnam's practices in line with international standards but also support a more open, innovative cinematic environment that balances cultural sensitivity with creative freedom.

Nguyen Quang Dong, Director of the Institute for Policy Studies and Media Development of the Vietnam Digital Communications Association, has endorsed this transition, advocating for a "post-licensing" inspection model. He argues that such a model is more compatible with the current realities of the film industry than the existing "pre-licensing" approach.³⁷ The controversy surrounding *Barbie* illustrates the shortcomings of the current system: because the map in question was never seen firsthand by most citizens, confusion arose over whether the image truly represented the contested Nine-Dash Line or was, as Warner Bros. described, merely a fictional, scribbled design. This lack of clarity underscores the need for transparent post-release communication and clearly defined legal standards.

3.0 State-Driven Censorship in Fostering Paternalistic Governance

This section explores the domestic implications of Vietnam's film censorship regime. It looks at the various consequences of state media control factoring in the long-standing tradition of nationalist sentiment shaped by the country's colonial, wartime, and postwar history. I studied and analyzed discourse on Facebook, Vietnamese news outlets, and Reddit, representing both domestic and international perspectives. Using topic modeling, semantic word analysis, and comparative pie charts, the analysis traces how nationalist language is circulated and normalized in online spaces. These methods allow for a systematic breakdown of linguistic patterns across platforms, highlighting how censorship not only shapes the content of public conversation but also structures the ideological framing through which that content is received and interpreted. To avoid biases in collecting samples, I utilized CommentExport to collect all comments (including nested comments) instead of going by categories.

The aftermath of the ban reveals that, although the government is highly aware of sensitivities surrounding the South China Sea dispute, its control over the flow of information shapes public opinion in ways that largely support state decisions. In turn, Vietnam's inherently digitized collectivist culture allows public agitation to be construed as a driving force for censorship, enabling the creation of a more uniform mode of media consumption. Here, I apply Chomsky's concept of "manufacturing consent," a propaganda model in which public acceptance of government policy is based on selective or partial information disseminated through state-aligned mass media. Despite the availability of diverse digital platforms, ideological messaging remains tightly structured. By limiting access to alternative perspectives that might challenge the dominant narrative, the state effectively curtails opposition.³⁸ Vietnam's media censorship,

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Vintage, 1995).



operating in tandem with its film regulation apparatus, functions as a double-edged sword: it asserts national sovereignty while subtly molding public consensus.

Despite the volatility of public sentiment, the government's tight control over media and discourse functions as a form of strategic management. Justified under the banner of national security, press censorship filters out dissent and deviance, reinforcing a closed-loop system of political conformity.

This framework helps explain the noticeable discrepancy between public support and opposition to the Barbie ban, as well as the government's refusal to release the map in question, leaving citizens blindsided to the truth of the matter. In this light, Barbie serves as a culminating case: it not only exemplifies Vietnam's circular logic of paternalistic censorship but also constrains viewers' political expression, access to alternative narratives, and ethical engagement with global media.

"A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD: IT ASSERTS NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY WHILE SUBTLY MOLDING PUBLIC CONSENSUS."

3.1 The Discrepancy between Domestic and International Reactions Post-Barbie Ban

Facebook and Vietnamese news outlets are prevalent platforms for political discourse for many Vietnamese citizens, particularly in discussions surrounding domestic policies. In mainly discerning the supportive population and running it against its opposition, neutral, ambiguous, and irrelevant comments will be of its siloed category. These findings presume that netizens' supportive tones align with the state's values as *protective* rather than *restrictive* of their freedom. Therefore, running through manual tonal and semantics analysis, supportive and strongly supportive comments (i.e., "supporting the ban," "exactly," "must ban," and the like) are inferred to a positive degree of nationalism. An analysis of tonal interactions in Facebook comment sections and Vietnamese news websites reveals that Vietnamese netizens largely supported the government's decision to ban *Barbie*.

As shown in *Figure 1.1*, a majority (56.5 percent) of Facebook comments expressed a positive stance toward the ban. Specifically, 371 comments (43 percent) were classified as supportive, while 115 comments (13.5 percent) were slightly supportive. In contrast, only 37 comments (4.4 percent), including those categorized as slightly opposed, expressed opposition, resulting in a support-to-opposition ratio of approximately 600:47. *Figure 1.2* highlights a similar trend in local news comment sections. Of the 109 analyzed comments, 65.2 percent were either supportive or slightly supportive of the ban, while just 6.8 percent — including slightly opposed comments — expressed opposition, reflecting a support-to-opposition ratio of approximately 600:63.

Vietnamese Netizens' Reactions to the 'Barbie' Ban on Facebook

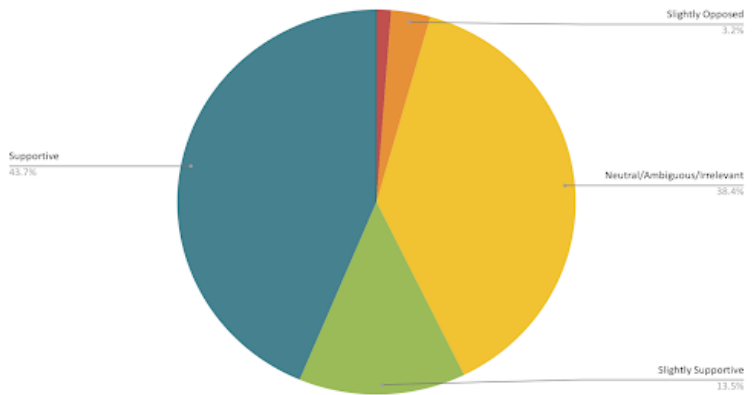


Figure 1.1. Tonal Analysis of Comments on Facebook Posts

Vietnamese Netizens' Reactions to the 'Barbie' Ban on Vietnamese E-News

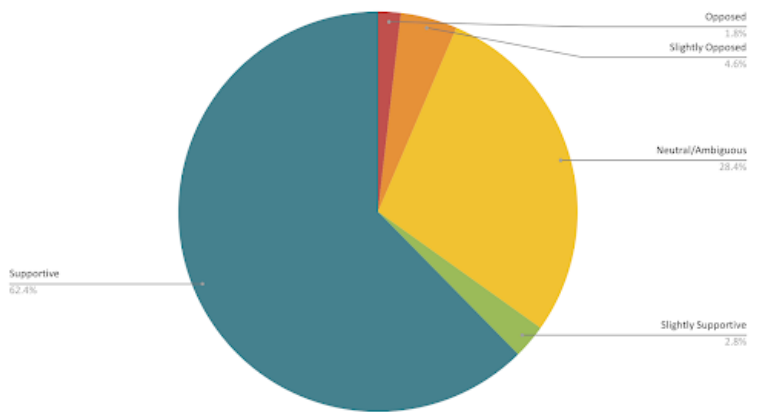


Figure 1.2. Tonal Analysis of Comments on the Vietnamese News Domain

Figure 1.3 presents a separate set of semantic analyses of a Facebook post by Moli Cline, as it presents a different and more extreme angle of the discourse. The post discusses the “top 10 frequent comments from Chinese netizens reacting to the ban,” many of which are hostile and/or contain derogatory mockery. In response, Vietnamese commenters display a shared predominant reaction: 95.5 percent express support for the government, with 86.6 percent relying heavily on anti-Chinese sentiment and derogatory language. Here, these responses are, too, interpreted as aligning themselves with the government’s decision to enforce the ban.

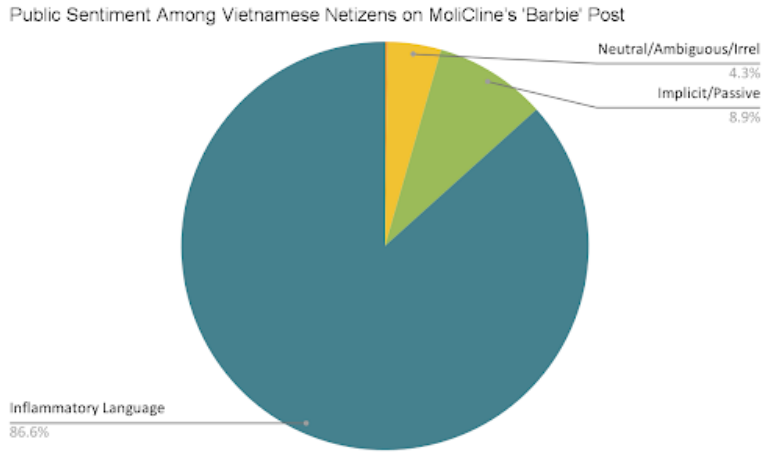


Figure 1.3 Semantics Analysis of Comments on Moli Cline's Facebook Post

A stark contrast emerges on the international forum. The data presented in *Figure 2.1* reveals a broader spectrum of mixed comments on Reddit, with a slight predominance in the categories of neutrality/ambiguity/irrelevance (56.4 percent) and opposition (26.2 percent). Notable patterns include discussions of international theories concerning U.S.-China relations, focusing on topics such as theories of film commercialization, macroeconomic analysis on box-office revenues, and policies on China's film import quota. These discussions occur on a broader scale rather than centering on the Vietnamese government's ban per se. Among the opposition, several comments reflect personal opinions questioning the rationale behind the Vietnamese government's decision to ban *Barbie*. This skepticism often stems from either a perceived lack of convincing justification for the action or insufficient knowledge of the issue.

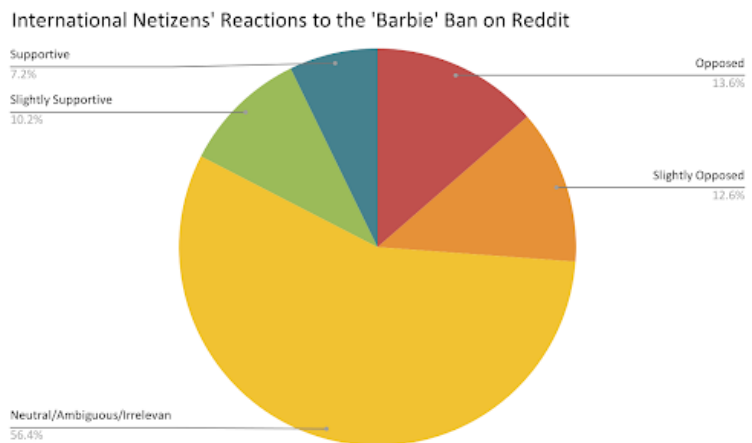


Figure 2.1 Tonal Analysis of Comments on Reddit

3.2 Discussion: Collectivism and the Strategic Management of Public Sentiment

One plausible explanation for the prevalent alignment of Vietnamese citizens with state ideologies is the country's deeply rooted sense of collectivism. Despite the widespread use of social media in Vietnam, there is limited research on what drives user satisfaction, given that platforms like Facebook only became widely accessible in recent years due to past government restrictions. In their comparative study on *Content versus Connection*, Krishen et al. (2019) examine the cultural differences between Vietnam and the U.S., attributing them to Vietnam's collectivist orientation and the U.S.'s individualism, and how these differences shape social media use and satisfaction. In collectivist cultures such as Vietnam, users are more likely to value emotional connection and social harmony, whereas users in individualist cultures prioritize information-seeking and self-expression.³⁹ These tendencies reflect deeper socio-cultural values, shaped by Confucian ideals, communist governance, and contrasting communication styles.

A notable example appears in the Facebook post by Moli Cline, which drew over 1,500 comments, with many containing iterations of a joke referencing “nhân dân tệ” (literally “Chinese yuan” but playfully reframed as “bad [Chinese] citizens”). Such linguistic patterns underscore how digital expressions of nationalism often blend humor with collective sentiment, reinforcing digitized group identity. Moreover, Vietnam's underdeveloped internet infrastructure and the underrepresentation of the Vietnamese language online contribute to information quality being a less central concern.⁴⁰ When applying this framework to the data collected for this study, the findings support this cultural distinction. User reactions overwhelmingly aligned with the government's ban on *Barbie*, which elicited emotionally charged, near-unanimous agreement. This reflects the growing role of socio-political sensitivity pertinent to the Nine-Dash Line and the collective sentiment in shaping Vietnam's digital discourse. Additionally, the repetition of similar comments across platforms suggests a low emphasis on content diversity or informational quality, and instead points to a pattern consistent with rage-baiting formats designed to stimulate emotional rather than critical engagement.

The ban on *Barbie* thus exacerbated domestic tensions; but was this merely inadvertent? In *Regional Agitation, Life is Your Creation*, Vu argues that “while banning the film may be an overreaction that makes the Vietnamese government appear overly sensitive in the eyes of the international public, the government's somewhat theatrical reaction to the season's most anticipated piece of pop culture is drawing more attention to the dispute.”⁴¹ She

39 Anjala S. Krishen, Oksana Berezan, Shweta Agarwal, and Praveen Kachroo, “Social Media Networking Satisfaction in the US and Vietnam: Content versus Connection,” *Journal of Business Research*, (2019): 93–103, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.03.046>.

40 Ibid.

41 Minh Phuong Vu, “Regional Agitation, Life Is Your Creation: Vietnam's Barbie Ban Explained,” *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, July 14, 2023, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/austra>



"IN THE AGE OF ALGORITHM-DRIVEN PLATFORMS, CENSORSHIP HAS BECOME A TOOL THE GOVERNMENT CAN USE TO SUBTLY SHAPE PUBLIC SENTIMENT AND AFFIRM ITS IDEOLOGICAL POSITION."

contends that this strategic censorship approach stems, in part, from the shortcomings of Vietnam's earlier tactics in the 2010s, which involved "toy[ing] with the idea of evoking public anger to bolster nationalist protest against Chinese violations at sea."⁴² At the time, amplifying public attention was believed to provide Vietnam with diplomatic leverage in negotiations with Beijing. However, the strategy ultimately proved unsustainable, as managing nationalist outrage without it spiraling out of control became increasingly difficult.

Vu highlights a critical element of the Vietnamese government's risk mitigation strategy: banning controversial films is viewed as a low-cost, low-risk mechanism for maintaining political control. Compared to the unpredictability of managing spontaneous nationalist protests, censorship offers a more contained and symbolic method for signaling political positions. However, this argument presupposes that censorship and the orchestration of public anger are mutually exclusive strategies. In reality, these tools often operate in tandem.

Evidence from social media supports this convergence. For example, in response to Vietnam's ban on *Barbie*, Moli Cline's Facebook post drew strong public engagement, with 86.6 percent of the comments employing inflammatory language to defend the government's decision. On Reddit, while harsh language appeared more sporadically, users expressed anti-China and anti-Vietnam sentiments, albeit not always directly linked to censorship effectiveness. In the age of algorithm-driven platforms, censorship has become a tool the government can use to subtly shape public sentiment and affirm its ideological position. In this context, public outrage is not a side effect but a strategic asset within Vietnam's system of paternalistic media governance.

3.3 Paternalistic Governance: Press Censorship in Controlling Nationalistic Sentiments

Ever since *Đổi Mới*, the economic renovation that began in the late 1980s, Vietnam has gradually multilateralized its partnerships with neighboring countries, prompting a shift in its foreign policy-making process. Thayer argues that what was once the exclusive domain of Communist Party elites — insulated from social pressures — is now increasingly influenced by public opinion.⁴³ Among these pressures, anti-China sentiment stands out as particularly volatile. Thayer notes that Vietnamese public opinion on China has grown so toxic that it threatens the political legitimacy of the one-party regime, especially if the government is seen as failing to counter Chinese assertiveness in the South China

lianoutlook/regional-agitation-life-is-your-creation-vietnams-barbie-ban-explained/.

42 Ibid.

43 Carlyle A. Thayer, "Vietnam's Foreign Policy in an Era of Rising Sino-US Competition and Increasing Domestic Political Influence," *Asian Security* 13, no. 3 (2017): 183–199, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2017.1354570>.

Sea.

Yet, while foreign policy may be increasingly sensitive to public sentiment, this does not necessarily signal a loosening of state control. Rather, as seen in Vietnam's film industry, the state continues to exert significant influence over how public opinion is formed and expressed. Despite the liberalizing reforms of *Đổi Mới* and the rise of social media, censorship remains a central tool through which the government manages discourse on sensitive issues, including the South China Sea. In this context, public outrage is not always spontaneous; it is often channeled in ways that reinforce state ideology rather than challenge it.

In Vietnam, two key actors shape this environment: government-backed online operatives and nationalist netizens. While both serve to defend the state's ideological stance and suppress dissent, they occasionally find themselves at odds. This tension became especially visible in June 2018, when public backlash erupted over the proposed Special Economic Zone Law and the Cybersecurity Law. The latter, which extended state control over digital platforms, sparked widespread protests not only among ordinary citizens but also within segments of the state apparatus. Despite the law's eventual adoption, Vietnamese Facebook users continued to post updates as a form of resistance against the official surveillance.⁴⁴ The law itself thus underwent multiple delays and revisions in response to public pressure, reflecting the government's cautious negotiation of digital governance. According to Nguyen-Thu, within this contested and evolving digital space, social media users remain vigilant, often awaiting the next political scandal as a test case to gauge the government's threshold for repression. This dynamic underscores the fragile balance between state control and public resistance in Vietnam's digital future.

Although nationalism and public anger are not entirely within the government's control, public opinion is often shaped — and strategically deployed — in ways that align with state ideology through the party's official “mouthpieces.” By law, mainstream media outlets, such as newspapers, periodicals, and broadcasting services, are state-owned institutions. Oversight of the media system primarily falls under two regulatory bodies: the Ministry of Information and Communication (*Bộ Thông Tin và Truyền Thông*) and the Central Propaganda and Education Commission (*Ban Tuyên Giáo Trung Ương*). Over the past decade, these agencies have made a concerted effort to ensure that media professionals across all platforms align with the Party's ideological goals, despite rapid changes in the economy and media technology (Nguyen-Thu 2018).⁴⁵ In Bass's (2017) *Censorship in Vietnam: Brave New World*, Vietnam's Law on the Media requires journalists to “propagate the doctrine and policies of the Party, the laws of the State, and the national and world cultural, scientific and technical achievements [of Vietnam].”⁴⁶

This institutional framework reinforces a deeply asymmetrical relationship between the Vietnamese public and

44 Giang Nguyen-Thu, “Vietnamese Media Going Social: Connectivism, Collectivism, and Conservatism,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 77, no. 4 (2018): 895–908, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911818002504>.

45 Thomas A. Bass, *Censorship in Vietnam: Brave New World* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv346v4d>.

46 Nguyen-Thu, “Vietnamese Media Going Social,” 897.

the state, one in which the government remains the primary and authoritative source of information. As a result, state messaging is seamlessly embedded into public discourse, shaping both the production of information by choosing what to include and what to omit. Nguyen-Thu provides another striking example: the 2018 state-sanctioned coverage of the Gạc Ma Island battle with China, which broke years of official silence. In this event, the coverage was tightly managed as it honored the event without challenging the Vietnam–China relations, illustrating how censorship in Vietnam does not merely restrict speech, but also orchestrates the tone and boundaries of public expression.⁴⁷ It is important to recognize that the Vietnamese government is not unaware of the power and volatility of public opinion. In fact, they are rather strategic in calibrating when and how to leverage public outrage while maintaining peaceful relations with China.

In recent instances of film censorship, however, the Vietnamese government has taken a more explicit stance on the South China Sea dispute that marked a departure from earlier approaches that euphemized Vietnam-China relations, where anti-Chinese sentiment was more subtly and organically leveraged. Dr. Trần Thanh Hiệp, Chairman of the National Council for Film Appraisal and Classification of Vietnam (Hội Đồng Quốc Gia Thẩm Định và Phân loại Phim Việt Nam), stated that all films, regardless of the producing country or origin, must comply with Vietnamese law when brought into Vietnam for screening. On July 21, 2022, he emphasized that “the Council is concerned with whether the film complies with the law and whether it violates Vietnamese law... even if a film is artistic or entertaining, if it violates or touches upon national interests, the rights of the nation, or Vietnam’s territorial sovereignty, it will never be allowed to be screened in Vietnam.”⁴⁸ Press Law mandates has remained consistent in serving as a “forum for the people *and* as the mouthpiece of the Socialist Party.”⁴⁹ In *The Politics of Press Censorship in Vietnam*, Cain argues that direction toward reform is not as linear as commonly believed, a relevant model for examining the role of the state-owned print and online press as an arm of Vietnam’s post-communist marketization project. Like its institutional counterpart, the approach is contingent to its newly economic reforms.

The surge in attention following the *Barbie* ban illustrates how state censorship can be strategically employed to align public sentiment with Vietnam’s perceived national consensus. Framed as a protective extension of national media policy, censorship serves both the state’s market liberalization agenda and its ideological stance on territorial sovereignty. By presenting the ban as an act of defending national sovereignty, the government embeds its decision within a patriotic narrative that resonates with the public and discourages dissent.

47 Ibid.

48 “Phim Barbie Bị Cấm Chiếu Tại Việt Nam Vì Có Cảnh ‘Đường Lưỡi Bò,’” VOV2.VN, accessed June 24, 2025, <https://vov2.vov.vn/van-hoa-giai-tri/phim-barbie-bi-cam-chieu-tai-viet-nam-vi-co-canh-duong-luoi-bo-43162.vov2>.

49 Geoffrey Cain, “Kill One to Warn One Hundred: The Politics of Press Censorship in Vietnam,” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 19 (2013): 85–107, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161213508814>.

4.0 Piracy & Economic Trade-off in Vietnam’s Movie-watching Culture

Đổi Mới transitioned Vietnam from a centralized economy to a socialist-oriented market system, leading to significant GDP growth, increased foreign direct investment, poverty reduction, and reintegration into the global economy.⁵⁰ Reforms were accompanied by legal overhauls in trade and enterprise law, as well as Vietnam’s accession to global intellectual property agreements, such as TRIPS and WIPO.⁵¹ These gains, however, did not translate into immediate robust growth for the creative sectors. Despite the targeted efforts to revive the film sector, which led to gradual improvements in infrastructure, production equipment, and cinematic technology in the mid-1990s,⁵² the film industry faced major challenges exiting the “Chế Độ Bao Cấp” (Subsidy Period), and entering the early Đổi Mới years, due to severe funding cuts and minimal state and legal backing.⁵³

Vietnam’s market for creative works remains severely stunted due to worsening piracy and debilitating market access barriers.⁵⁴ The country is home to some of the world’s most frequented illegal websites, and issues like the widespread use of piracy devices and unauthorized streaming apps continue to escalate.⁵⁵ In compiling data on social media reactions, a latent category of “piracy count” is implemented to empirically measure the proportion of comments referencing illicit access. Although this represents a small fraction, the data suggests that the ban on *Barbie* exacerbated piracy. Through this intellectual property lens, Vietnam’s film sector appears increasingly vulnerable: banned films are often disseminated illegally on free websites, deterring foreign filmmakers and investors who never move past the “legal corridor.” Despite the recent rise of paid streaming platforms, it remains a slowly-fixed issue.

4.1 Intellectual Property Provision and Film Piracy

Among the earliest legislative efforts to protect artistic expression was Decree 142/HĐBT (1986), Vietnam’s first legal document on intellectual property (IP), which outlined basic copyright principles. Over the following years, the government recognized significant gaps in protection and, seeking to attract foreign investment in its creative and film industries, incorporated copyright into the 1992 Constitution under Article 60. With assistance from WIPO experts, Vietnam then enacted the 1994

50 “Vietnam: Raising Millions Out of Poverty,” IMF, August 14, 2018, <https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/VNM/vietnam-raising-millions-out-of-poverty>.

51 “Vietnam – Protecting Intellectual Property,” International Trade Administration | Trade.gov, January 30, 2024, <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/vietnam-protecting-intellectual-property>.

52 “Điện Mạo Điện Ảnh Việt Nam Trong Hơn 30 Năm Đổi Mới Và Hội Nhập,” Vietnam+ (Vietnam-Plus), November 8, 2023, <https://www.vietnamplus.vn/dien-mao-dien-anh-viet-nam-trong-hon-30-nam-doi-moi-va-hoi-nhap-post906747.vnp>.

53 “Lịch Sử Ngành,” Cục Điện Ảnh, n.d., https://www.cucdienanh.vn/lich-su-nganh_page12.html.

54 *IIPA 2020 Special 301 Report on Copyright Protection and Enforcement*, International Intellectual Property Alliance (IIPA), 2020, <https://www.iipa.org/files/uploads/2020/02/2020SPEC301REPORT.pdf>.

55 *IIPA 2020 Special 301 Report on Copyright Protection and Enforcement*.

Ordinance on the Protection of Copyright, aligning more closely with international standards. This ordinance was later replaced by the 1995 Civil Code, which further defined authors' rights within a civil framework. These developments culminated in the comprehensive 2005 Intellectual Property Law, which consolidated previous legislation into 222 clauses and established copyright protection as a fundamental human right.⁵⁶

Đổi Mới marked a turning point in Vietnam's economic trajectory; however, its liberalizing effects did not extend fully to the country's cultural or legal treatment of media IP. Piracy in the film sector continued to be a widespread issue in Vietnam in the late 20s, largely due to the lack of effective enforcement of the country's copyright legislation. Vietnam currently ranks third in Southeast Asia and ninth globally in terms of copyright infringement, with an estimated 80 percent of violations occurring on digital platforms.⁵⁷ The most commonly pirated materials include television shows, films, music, and books. In 2022, the country reportedly suffered economic losses of approximately \$350 million due to copyright violations.⁵⁸

A latent content analysis of Vietnamese netizens' responses to the *Barbie* ban reveals subtle yet recurrent acknowledgments of film piracy. 47 coded comments explicitly referenced watching or sharing the film illegally that signals a casual normalization of piracy in digital discourse. On Facebook, one user commented, "T ủng hộ xem lậu phim này. Mà nói thật, bị bóc vắn đề lưỡi bò thì có chiều ở VN cũng thất thu!" (translation: "I support pirating



"THERE IS NO VERIFIED CAUSAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CENSORSHIP OF BARBIE AND INCREASED PIRACY IN VIETNAM."

this film. Honestly, with the Nine-Dash Line issue exposed, even if it were shown in Vietnam, it would have flopped"). On Reddit, a user similarly noted, "I don't think pirating it would lead to a big difference in viewing experience." The semantics and tone of these comments, often casual, indifferent, or even humorous, illustrate a persistent normalization of piracy and reflect a broader societal desensitization to the illegality of such practices. This risk of digital echo chambers suggests that state-imposed censorship may

56 Kim, Hieu Bui, Dao Nguyen Ngoc Anh, Phuoc Nguyen Van, and Phuoc Nguyen Van. "Copyright Protection of Digital Content in Vietnam's Internet Age." *International Journal of Religion* 5, no. 8 (May 23, 2024): 779–91. <https://doi.org/10.61707/cp782c83>.

57 "Việt Nam loses US \$350 million due to copyright infringement," *VietNamNews.vn*, accessed June 24, 2025, <https://vietnamnews.vn/economy/1594476/viet-nam-loses-us-350-million-due-to-copyright-infringement.html>.

58 Ibid.

inadvertently encourage illicit access, further complicating efforts to enforce intellectual property rights.

Piracy, in some forms, parallels the political positioning of Vietnamese netizens. It functions as a collectivist cultural phenomenon and emerges as a byproduct of state censorship. In *Russian Media Piracy in the Context of Censoring Practices*, Kiriya and Sherstoboeva explain how the Soviet Union established a highly centralized system of state control over all media and cultural industries, using specialized agencies to censor and regulate cultural production.⁵⁹ By organizing propaganda through mass production and free or affordable access, the state fostered habits of widespread media consumption tied to ideological conformity. These practices ingrained a cultural expectation that access to media should be free later conflicted with market reforms in Vietnam's post-unification media culture.

Although Vietnam is not obligated to monitor the dissemination of films it has banned, from an industry-driven Western perspective, the country's limited accountability in protecting creative rights creates a structural disadvantage for copyright holders. Article 5, Point D of Vietnam's *Cinema Law 2022* stipulates that the acquisition or transfer of ownership or usage rights to film scripts and films with high ideological and artistic value applies only to works that promote Vietnam's image, land, and people.⁶⁰ In other words, films are protected from piracy only when their content aligns with state objectives. The language of this provision is exclusionary and

grants authorities broad discretionary power. Greater transparency is therefore needed to explain why a clip of fewer than three seconds in *Barbie*, which carries no substantive political message, was deemed unprotected under this clause. According to MUSO, *Barbie* accounted for 8.1 percent of audience share on unlicensed piracy sites as of the week ending October 29, 2023.⁶¹ Although there is no verified causal relationship between the censorship of *Barbie* and increased piracy in Vietnam, the longstanding cultural expectation that unauthorized access is acceptable renders formal legal enforcement largely ineffective.

With the practice of xem chùa, a colloquial term for watching content for free, remaining culturally pertinent, it becomes increasingly difficult to develop effective advocacy projects aimed



"THIS RISK OF DIGITAL ECHO CHAMBERS SUGGESTS THAT STATE-IMPOSED CENSORSHIP MAY INADVERTENTLY ENCOURAGE ILLICIT ACCESS."

59 Kiriya, Ilya & Sherstoboeva, Elena. (2015). *Russian Media Piracy in the Context of Censoring Practices*. *International Journal of Communication*. 9. 839-851.

60 "Luật Điện Ảnh 2022," *Thư Viện Pháp Luật*, accessed October 5, 2025, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Van-hoa-Xa-hoi/Luat-Dien-anh-2022-486445.aspx>.

61 MUSO. "Film Piracy: What Audiences Are Consuming Right Now," n.d. <https://www.muso.com/magazine/film-piracy-what-audiences-are-consuming-october23>

at protecting artists. Producer Tran Thi Bich Ngoc notes that while filmmakers and producers have voiced concerns about piracy, these efforts tend to only surface primarily when their own works are affected.⁶² The industry's response thus remains fragmented and lacks a unified front, resulting in limited pressure on law enforcement agencies. According to Ngoc, a key issue lies in the ambiguity surrounding the definition of "commercial loss," which makes it difficult for film studios to pursue intellectual property claims under current legal frameworks such as those outlined by the Motion Picture Association (MPA). As Akej (2013) observed, prior to Đổi Mới and the liberalization of Vietnam's economy, the concept of private intangible property was virtually nonexistent, as, in a general consensus, creative works were state-funded and regarded as collective cultural assets.⁶³ The transition to a market-oriented model created confusion because consumers were now expected to pay for content that had once been freely accessible.⁶⁴ Although penalties for copyright violations exist and can extend to criminal charges, enforcement remains weak due to a lack of sustained motivation and institutional follow-through.

That said, as Ha Nguyen et al. notes, "while the practice of paying for movies was relatively unfamiliar just a few years ago, it is now gaining traction among Vietnamese youth."⁶⁵ Major streaming services such as Netflix, HBO, and AppleTV have begun localizing content to meet the evolving demands of Vietnamese audiences. Legal streaming offers higher-quality, faster, and more complete access to content, aligning with the values of a digitally savvy, creative, and influential younger generation.⁶⁶ Indeed, the growing preference for paid content suggests a promising shift toward reducing the prevalence of piracy; nevertheless, the Vietnam's one-party system and media censorship are not the sole causes of piracy, the state's authoritative control over content dissemination, combined with stagnant copyright enforcement and the lack of legal precedent through litigation, has contributed to entrenched consumer habits that normalize the unauthorized use of copyrighted material.

4.2. Economic Trade-off and Vietnam's Cinema-going Culture

When estimating *Barbie's* hypothetical box-office performance in Vietnam, its movie-going culture is a vital factor. Tran provides valuable insights into regional film culture in Ho Chi Minh City, which breaks down audience preferences for movie-watching venues by age group.⁶⁷ The findings highlight the

62 Motion Picture Association, "Producer Tran Thi Bich Ngoc on Fighting Piracy, Championing Filmmakers, and Vietnam's Huge Potential," Motion Picture Association, January 25, 2024, <https://www.motionpictures.org/2024/01/producer-tran-thi-bich-ngoc-on-fighting-piracy-championing-filmmakers-and-vietnams-huge-potential/>.

63 Charlotte Akej, "Vietnam and the Piracy Problem" (LL.M. thesis, Lund University, Faculty of Law, 2013), <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/289946426.pdf>.

64 Akej, "Vietnam and the Piracy Problem."

65 T. V. H. Nguyen, T. M. A. Ngo, N. D. Tu, Q. T. Ta, and T. P. T. Tran, "Encouraging Compliance with Intellectual Property Law about Film Copyright among Vietnamese Youth," *Journal of Economic and Banking Studies* 5 (2023): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.59276/jebss.2023.06.2525>.

66 Ibid.

67 Tran Thi Yen, *Vietnam's Film Industry: Audiences and Their Choice of Movies (in Ho Chi Minh*

continued popularity of public cinemas, with preferences nearly evenly divided between theatrical films and home-based TV series. Figure 4.1 shows that 49.63 percent of respondents prefer the cinematic experience of movie theaters, while 50.37 percent favor watching TV series at home.⁶⁸ This near-even split reflects the diversity of viewing habits in Ho Chi Minh City and suggests that both theatrical and home entertainment formats remain culturally significant, offering filmmakers and producers an opportunity to tailor content to both mediums.

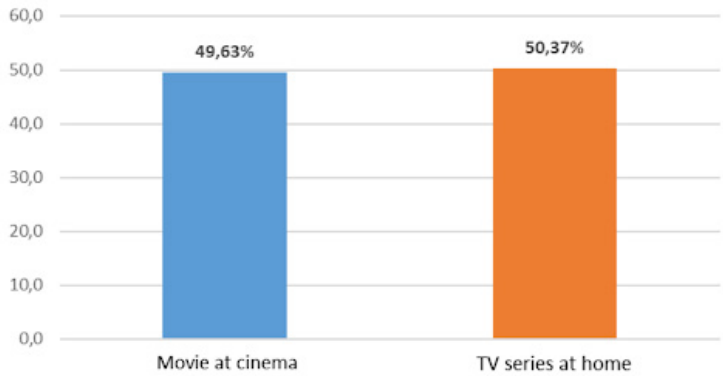


Figure 4.1: Vietnam’s Film Industry: Audiences and their choice of movies

Chairman Nguyen Dac Vinh, during the 15th National Assembly debating the draft Law on Cinematography, emphasized that the revised law clarifies state responsibilities and promotes industry development, while capping foreign investment in Vietnamese cinema establishments at 51 percent to align with international commitments.⁶⁹ In terms of foreign production input, American films currently dominate the Vietnamese cinema market, accounting for 49 percent of all screened films, compared to only 19 percent for domestic productions.⁷⁰ This disparity highlights both Vietnam’s reliance on international cinema and the growing appetite among local audiences for global narratives. Had it been released domestically, *Barbie* could have represented a significant market opportunity, having grossed \$810.8 million internationally and \$1.45 billion worldwide.⁷¹

Within this context, overly stringent or superficial censorship does more than restrict free expression. It risks undermining socio-economic efficiency by limiting access to high-performing international content and discouraging foreign distributors from participating in the Vietnamese market due to unresolved piracy concerns. Furthermore, hasty or ideologically motivated censorship disrupts the organic development of artistic

City, Vietnam (bachelor’s thesis, Tomas Bata University in Zlín, 2024), https://digilib.k.utb.cz/bitstream/handle/10563/54928/tran_2024_dp.pdf.

68 Ibid., 49.

69 “Draft Revision to Cinematography Law Debated,” *VietnamPlus*, May 25, 2022, <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/draft-revision-to-cinematography-law-debated-post229203.vnp>.

70 Tran, *Vietnam’s Film Industry*, 28.

71 *Barbie*, Box Office Mojo, accessed June 24, 2025, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt1517268/?ref_=bo_se_r_1.

and literary sectors by constraining creative exchange and leaving domestic creators without sufficient legal safeguards.

5.0 Conclusion

“There are a number of cases in international relations where people do this,” said Professor Jackson of American University. “It is always about trying to control the narrative — and trying to control the narrative in such hyper-meticulous detail that you would even go after a background shot in the *Barbie* movie.”⁷² Vietnam’s film censorship regime stands at the intersection of state ideology, market liberalization, and global cultural participation. As demonstrated, censorship in Vietnam is not guided by a consistent legal or ethical framework but by an uneven application of exclusionary power that is both economically motivated and ideologically selective. Consequently, as evidenced by the *Cinema Law* and the MOCST’s opaque handling of controversial films, the censorship infrastructure suffers from weak enforcement, the absence of public accountability, and a failure to establish legal precedent.

The *Barbie* case further illustrates the tightening media environment and the growing challenge of piracy. While Vietnam has embraced economic modernization, a dual-track system persists in which market liberalization is encouraged only insofar as it does not challenge political orthodoxy or national narratives. Piracy has consequently emerged as one of the most significant byproducts of censorship, with the country hosting some of the most heavily trafficked illegal streaming websites and facing ineffective enforcement mechanisms. As the data from this study indicate, the *Barbie* ban not only fueled public discourse but also indirectly incentivized piracy, as audiences turned to unauthorized online access. Despite improvements in streaming infrastructure, adoption remains slow, and confidence within creative industries continues to lag.

The absence of a reliable legal framework deters investment and constrains the film sector’s long-term growth.

Vietnam’s censorship regime is thus a complex product of historical legacies, ideological control, and neoliberal compromise, operating under a paternalistic model that favors control over creativity, conformity over pluralism, and protectionism over innovation. If Vietnam seeks to cultivate a vibrant, globally integrated film industry, it must shift from opaque censorship toward transparent and accountable regulation. Ultimately, the country’s ability to realize the full potential of its economic liberalization and people-centered media reforms in the digital age depends on reconciling its ideological rigidity with the demands of cultural and creative openness.

72 American University, “What Statement Is Vietnam Making by Banning ‘Barbie’?” American University Washington D.C., August 11, 2023, <https://www.american.edu/sis/news/20230811-what-statement-is-vietnam-making-by-banning-barbie.cfm>.



**"THE INTERSECTION OF STATE IDEOLOGY,
MARKET LIBERALIZATION, AND
GLOBAL CULTURAL PARTICIPATION."
LIBERALIZATION, AND GLOBAL CULTURAL
PARTICIPATION."**

Appendices

Findings (In Table Chart)

Platform	Opposed	Slightly Opposed	Neutral	Slightly Support	Support	Piracy Count
Beatvn Facebook	1	2	9	19	40	5
KSC Facebook	9	25	317	96	331	28
Moli Cline Facebook	0	3	65	136	1324	0
Reddit Thread 1	38	31	153	17	28	11
Reddit Thread 2	66	36	182	52	26	1
Reddit Thread 3	13	41	150	19	8	2
Thanh Nien News	0	0	0	0	25	0
VNExpress News	0	0	0	0	10	0
VOA TV News	2	5	31	3	33	0
TOTAL	129	143	907	342	1,825	47

Codebook

Terms of Analysis	Definition	Example(s)
Opposed	<p>Comments expressing strong opposition to the Vietnamese government’s decision to ban the <i>Barbie</i> movie. These comments often feature criticism of the ban, the government, or the broader sociopolitical context.</p> <p>Characteristics: Predominantly in English, with some Vietnamese and Chinese comments. Frequently link the decision to movie piracy, mock the government, or question the rationale behind the ban. Often include anti-Vietnamese, anti-socialist, or anti-communist sentiments. May indicate disbelief in the reasoning for the ban or fail to see the nine-dash line in the movie. Reference illegal streaming or piracy of the movie.</p> <p>Key Vocabulary: “overly sensitive,” “dramatic,” “fueled by nationalism,” “communists,” “bribery”</p>	<p>“It’s clearly a sea route, and the entire map is just literally a crappy blob. This is just whoever was in the Vietnamese film censorship committee being upset they bribed the wrong person, or they’re overly sensitive.”</p>

<p>Slightly Opposed</p>	<p>Comments that disagree with the ban and/or question the motive thereof, but use less derogatory or inflammatory language compared to those in the “Oppose” category.</p> <p>Characteristics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Predominantly in English, with some Vietnamese and Chinese comments. - Question the ban as unnecessary or excessive and describe the government’s actions as a “joke.” - May discuss methods to circumvent the ban, including illegal viewing. <p>Key Vocabulary: “joke,” “unserious,” “ridiculous”</p>	<p>“Is this some kind of a troll ?? Or movie-promoting joke? That map is so childish and ridiculous that nobody in their right mind would see anything but a crude child's drawing of the world.... far from having any substantial political meaning or relevance.”</p>
<p>Neutral</p>	<p>Comments that are ambiguous or do not engage directly with the ban or express an opinion on it. These include off-topic remarks, tagged mentions, or irrelevant content.</p> <p>Characteristics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Written in both Vietnamese and English. - No clear stance on the Barbie ban. 	<p>“Ngô Thị Phương Trang =))))))))) về với phim kinh dị i ban iu”</p>
<p>Slightly Supportive</p>	<p>Comments that show mild support and/or insinuate a sentiment for the Vietnamese government’s decision to ban the Barbie movie.</p> <p>Characteristics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mostly in Vietnamese. - May criticize movies that contain or allegedly contain the nine-dash line. - Do not strongly affirm the ban but hint at approval. <p>Key Vocabulary: “thua,” “coi phim khác,” “(=))”), “hết cứu,” “cút,” “đường lưỡi bò,” “chán,” “ngứa”</p>	<p>“Vừa lăm”; “Chừa”; “[coconut emoji]”</p>
<p>Supportive</p>	<p>Comments that express clear support and/or insinuate a strong sentiment for the Vietnamese government’s decision to ban the Barbie movie.</p> <p>Characteristics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Almost entirely in Vietnamese. - Contain anti-Chinese or nationalist sentiments. - Show strong disapproval or hatred for movies that include or allegedly include the nine-dash line. <p>Key Vocabulary: “nhân dân tệ,” “xâm lấn,” “trung quốc,” “đất nước,” “thiên liêng,” “tệ,” “phạt,” “chó,” “ngu,” “ủng hộ,” “đường lưỡi bò”</p>	<p>“Cái bọn cư dân mạng TQ rất buồn cười. Cứ lúc nào <u>lquan</u> đến <u>vdđ</u> gì là cno toàn cmt câu “Việt Nam! Là tinh nào vậy ??” cno cứ nghĩ cmt câu này là thượng đẳng nhưng chỉ tỏ ra cno ngu vcl thôi 😂”; “Ủng Hộ”; “cầm chiếu là đúng rồi”</p>

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U.S. Response to Canada's 1970's Fissure: Washington Values Separatism's Political Currency, Eyes Western Canada, and Wields Influence Through Restraint

On the morning of October 5th, 1970, agents of Front de Liberation du Quebec (FLQ), a militant Quebecois separatist group, commandeered a Montreal taxi and kidnapped British Diplomat James Cross.

The kidnapers initially targeted American Diplomat John Topping, but upon recognizing that the American Consul's grand home provided an easy means of escape, they abandoned their target at the last minute. Standing in place of the U.S. Ambassador to Canada Adolph Schmitt, Rufus Smith, telexed to Washington that "U.S. Consul General Montreal is safe and alert."¹ Quebec's deputy Premier Pierre Laporte was not so lucky. In the days following the Cross kidnapping, the F.L.Q. considered their next potential victim, United States Information Agency official James DeCou. Yet DeCou lived on Montreal's Nun's Island, and in the wake of the Cross kidnapping, police surveillance of bridges surrounding the island prohibited an easy getaway. Instead, on October 10th, the F.L.Q. kidnapped Quebec Minister Pierre Laporte while playing

¹ Jean-François Lisée, *In the Eye of the Eagle*, (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1990), p. 73.

catch with his son on his front lawn.²

Frenzied media coverage riled attention to Quebec's demands for self-determination, and 3,000 people gathered at a Separatist rally in Montreal on October 15th. In response to years of FLQ terrorism and growing political fervor in the Province's largest city, on October 16th, Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau declared the War Measures Act for the first time since World War II. Tanks subsequently roamed the streets of Montreal while police conducted warrantless raids.³ The broader American public grew concerned about the 'October Crisis' unfolding amongst their ever-pacifist neighbors. In the NBC Evening News opening segment on October 18, Edwin Newman began; "In all honesty, it has to be said that we Americans do not usually pay a great deal of attention to what goes on in Canada. This time there is more concern about it and we are following it much more closely."⁴ Newman inquired as to the "frustration that caused these people to this extent in their terrorism," and foreign correspondent Paul Cunningham professed that "many of the French in Quebec have felt like second-class citizens."⁵

Once a domestic issue confined to Canadian politics and the spheres of the U.S. foreign policy community, the Quebec Separatist question had reared its head in the American consciousness. American leaders would have to reckon with questions of a fissuring Canada, while the FLQ's original targeting of American diplomats only heightened the stakes. Looming even further in the background of American considerations were concerns over the prospect and implications of a split within the United States' largest trading partner, a NORAD and NATO ally, and its continental neighbor.

In the wake of Canada's October Crisis and the ensuing Quebec separatist question, this paper contends that the United States strategically pursued a non-intervention stance in order to actively serve American interests. While U.S. officials proclaimed a non-intervention policy in the name of reverence for Canadian sovereignty, declassified documents illustrate the U.S. 's cold, calculated, and even opportunistic approach to one of its closest allies. As the October Crisis unfolded, the Nixon administration and the C.I.A would first observe separatist clashes through the lens of strategic gain and political currency. In subsequent years, as the Quebec separatist movement gained real political success, the State Department consciously exercised restraint in order to compel both sides to be conciliatory to American interests as they competed for Washington's evasive support. All the while, as Washington refused to support Ottawa, the Americans discreetly shifted business to respond better to either outcome of the future Separatist referendum, and utilized backchannel diplomacy

2 Lisée, *In the Eye of the Eagle*, p. 77.

3 "The October Crisis," CBC/Radio-Canada History, accessed March 11, 2025, <https://www.cbc.ca/history/EPISCONTENTSE1EP16CH1PA4LE.html>.

4 Canadian Consulate General to The Under Secretary of State for External Affairs, October 20th, 1970. Problems in Canada - NBC News Special, P.70, <https://declassified.library.utoronto.ca/items/show/17163>

5 Ibid



**"MANY OF THE FRENCH
IN QUEBEC HAVE FELT
LIKE SECOND-CLASS
CITIZENS."**

to engage strategically with its potential new Quebecois neighbor. Finally, as diplomats would report their strategy to the Carter White House, new evidence of the administration's sympathies for Quebec separatism, as well as opportunistic discussion of annexing western Canada in the wake of separation, only further suggest that self-interests motivated the United States not to intervene against Quebec. In sum, the United States' non-intervention strategy exploited the utility of a bifurcating Canada. In effect, the United States strategically pursued 'non-intervention' in order to wield significant influence, rather than relegate Washington to sideline observation out of respect for Canadian sovereignty.

This argument poses a series of implications for both Canadian-American diplomacy and broader intervention theory. For one, demystifying the guise of idealist claims of a 'special partnership' with our 'friends' up North presents new depth to today's souring relationship with Canada. As President Trump appeals to Canadian annexation, this paper offers new evidence that the Carter Administration considered the prospect of annexing what remained of Canada in the event of Quebec's separation. Citing this evidence and more documents, this paper challenges the conventional wisdom of the US's preference for Canadian unity as Quebec separatism first gained momentum in the 1970s. But in addition to shining new light on the history of Canadian-American relations, this paper also offers new challenges to today's conventional intervention theory. To be sure, dismantling Nixon and Carter's public claims to reverence for Canadian sovereignty supports realist theories that self-interests take primacy in international diplomacy. However, the U.S. response to Quebec separatism presents a case study that complicates axioms that involvement correlates to influence abroad, as well as assumptions that a state's non-involvement decision is merely a concession of power to avoid prohibitive costs. Rather, the US expressly exercised a non-intervention strategy towards Quebec separatism in order to *actively* serve U.S. interests and wield influence.

Background information—The Question of French-Quebec

This paper does not endeavor to provide a rigorous history of the complexities underlying French-Canadian separatism's origins. Nonetheless, when the Quebec question crashed into the American consciousness, the US intelligence community was well-informed of its nuances. As far back as 1950, the Central Intelligence Agency's Report on Canada identified the problem of Quebec Separatism, succinctly outlining the cultural and historical sensitivities that lay at the core of French-Canadian tensions:

“The French-Canadians are a powerful minority group in Canada which exerts a significant influence on many major political decisions. With 77 percent of the French Canadian population concentrated in the province of Quebec...This minority group makes up nearly one-third of the total population of Canada. These three and one-half million French-Canadians, who are a proud and sensitive race, descendants of the original Norman settlers, have refused to be assimilated. They have preserved unimpaired not only their racial qualities but also a habit

and philosophy of life which are completely foreign to those of the English-speaking citizens beside whom they exist. Their chief aim is cultural and racial survival; and with a birth rate considerably higher than that of English-Canadian they count on continuously strengthen their position. This preservation of cultural identity stems from the Quebec Act of 1774, whereby the British Government guaranteed the French-Canadian people security in their religion, language, and civil laws.”⁶

The CIA went on to recognize that spiritual leaders, such as “Roman Catholic clergy” have doubly preserved “French-Canadian cultural traditions.”⁷ Critically, the study also identified that beyond cultural conflicts, the tensions were an economic one for French Canadians; the report notes French Canadians had “a lower standard of living” and were therefore “jealous of the dominating position of English Canadians in industry within the province.”⁸ While the report overstates the French-English division, it does identify the combination of cultural, economic, religious, and factors that would define the Quebec separatist movement for the coming decades. As for the outlook and ramifications of the French-Canadian question, however, the CIA’s predictions would fall flat. Citing “eighty-two years of satisfactory cooperation within the confederation between English and French Canadians,” the C.I.A. concluded that “despite minor friction... interracial stability is assured.”⁹

Subsequent decades would require the U.S. intelligence community to reevaluate their analysis. By 1963, Prime Minister Lester Pearson emphasized to Ambassador to Canada William Butterworth that the “gravity of the crisis about French Canada could not be underestimated,” furthermore noting his concern that it “would be the most difficult and dangerous issue with which his administration would have to deal.”¹⁰ In turn, in the wake of Pearson’s report that the Canadian “Confederation... was at stake,” the incoming Nixon administration took notice of the increasing possibility of Quebec separation.¹¹ In 1969, Henry Kissinger commissioned a National Security Memorandum to inquire about the “present strength of the Quebec separatist movement,” its likelihood “to increase over the above time spans,” and which “factors will affect its strength.”¹² In response, the National Security Council would provide a series of errant predictions,

6 Central Intelligence Agency, “CANADA,” May 5, 1950, accessed via CIA FOIA Reading Room, March 11, 2025, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78-01617A001700050001-7.pdf>, p. 17-18.

7 Central Intelligence Agency, “CANADA,” p. 18.

8 Ibid

9 Ibid

10 Memorandum of conversation between U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, and Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson, May 23, 1963, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963, Volume XIII, Western Europe and Canada*, Document 450, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v13/d450>.

11 Memorandum of conversation between U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, and Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson, May 23, 1963, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963, Volume XIII, Western Europe and Canada*, Document 450, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v13/d450>.

12 Henry A. Kissinger, “National Security Study Memorandum 9,” January 23, 1969, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XXI, Western Europe; NATO, 1969–1972*, Document 3, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v41/d3>.

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contending that “the Quebec separatist movement...has relatively minor public support...and seems to be diminishing.”¹³ The report further forecasted “a decrease in separatist activity over the next five years.”¹⁴ Only a year later, the kidnappings and the ensuing ‘October Crisis’ proved these predictions starkly off the mark.

Literature Review

Considering the stakes of a potential new nation bordering the United States, there is a relative dearth of literature on the U.S. response to Quebec separatism. Nonetheless, this paper both builds on the limited existing literature on US-Quebec separatist relations, but also contends that existing literature overstates Washington’s passivity and preference for Canadian unity. This challenge, in turn, works towards shedding new light on the motivations behind America’s non-intervention decision during the 1970’s Quebec crisis. Moreover, examining the more opportunistic calculations undergirding the US non-intervention decision also challenges broader assumptions that indecision or prohibitive costs force a non-intervention decision—rather than the active pursuit of a state’s self-interests.

Contemporary media coverage generally advanced the narrative that the US strongly valued Canadian unity but passively



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observed Canadian domestic affairs. Public statements such as Nixon’s 1972 address to the Canadian Parliament shaped this report. As the President diplomatically revered Canada’s efforts “to bring a wide variety of peoples and provinces...into a great national union,” Nixon also stipulated that the US and Canada should remain “self-reliant.”¹⁵ Nixon’s successor, President Jimmy

13 Information in Response to National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM) No. 9, Entitled: “Review of the International Situation.” National Security Council, January 20, 1969, p. 9, in *Gale Primary Sources* https://go-gale-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=Monographs&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=SingleTab&retrievalId=e716cd01-75d0-4efa-bece-e87be2f53bee&hitCount=257&searchType=BasicSearchForm¤tPosition=141&docId=GALE%7CCK2349554063&docType=Report&sort=-Pub+Date+Forward+Chron&contentSegment=ZUSD&prodId=USDD&pageNum=8&contentSet=GALE%7CCK2349554063&searchId=R3&userGroupName=chic_rbw&inPS=true

14 Ibid

15 Richard Nixon, “Address at a Joint Meeting of the Canadian Parliament,” *The American Presidency*

Carter, would walk a similar tightrope; “the confederation would be my preference, but that is a decision for the Canadian people to make.”¹⁶

Among the press, these statements helped shape a narrative that the “Carter administration ...carefully steered clear of any hint of interfering in its neighbor’s internal affairs” but “agree[ed] with Trudeau that Canada’s breakup would be a major tragedy.”¹⁷ More provocative journalism questioned the sensational possibility that the US was hoping for a Canadian fissure that could drive the U.S. to annex the remaining provinces of Canada.¹⁸ Nonetheless, like the more mainstream coverage of US stance on Canadian sovereignty, these stories also identified that officials feared the prospective political fallout of making a “contingency plan.”¹⁹ For instance, journalists noted that Soviet disinformation using false CIA letterheads had duped Ottawa officials into believing the US was supporting Quebecois independence, a campaign which further deterred any annexation discussion amongst the Americans.²⁰ In sum, media coverage generally advanced the report that US officials were thoroughly interested in preserving Canadian national unity but sought to respect Canadian sovereignty by not intervening. Even for narratives that alleged more subversive, ulterior interests amongst American bureaucrats, these reports held that political sensitivities still tied officials’ hands in intervening in affairs up north. Subsequent analysis will reveal, however, that the Carter Administration was, in fact, considering such a plan to annex Western Canada in the event that Quebec was to secede.

Scholarly literature on the US stance towards Quebec sovereignty generally follows the more dominant media narrative that the US passively supported Canadian unity. In turn, conventional wisdom still relegates US involvement in Canadian separatism to the limits of simply preferring Canadian unity, rather than examining U.S. involvement. John Heard Thompson’s *Canada and the United States: Ambivalent Allies*, for example, critically desanctifies the “foreign policy myths of post-1945 Canada” to hold that “nothing was sacred,” including nominal claims to the “special relationship” with Canada.²¹ This paper supports Thompson’s challenge to the idealism surrounding US-Canadian diplomacy. However, when it comes to the Quebec question, Thompson relegates the U.S. response to Quebec separatism to a simple one sentence reduction: “the State Department gave independence no encouragement.”²² Thompson falls short in revealing how his own study of the transactional nature of the Canadian-American partnership applied to Quebec separatism, instead reducing Washington’s non-interventionist

Project, April 14, 1972, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-joint-meeting-the-canadian-parliament>.

16 David Binder, “Carter Discusses Future of Quebec; He Meets Trudeau,” *New York Times*, February 22, 1977, <https://www.nytimes.com/1977/02/22/archives/carter-discusses-future-of-quebec-he-meets-trudeau.html>.

17 “Canada: Secession v. Survival,” *Time*, February 13, 1978, <https://time.com/archive/6849664/canada-secession-v-survival/>.

18 “Diplomacy: The Specter of Separatism,” *Time*, December 26, 1977, <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,919212-2,00.html>.

19 *Ibid*

20 *Ibid*

21 John Herd Thompson and Stephen J. Randall, *Canada and the United States: Ambivalent Allies*, 4th ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008), 248.

22 Thompson, *Ambivalent Allies*, 264.

stance to simple rejection of Quebec separatism.

In the Eye of the Eagle, the only historical study devoted principally to American responses to Quebec separatism, is less complicit in this reduction of the US's involvement. To the author Jean Francois Lisee's thorough credit, the author interviewed C.I.A. officials and accesses an abundance of declassified U.S. memos. In the process, Lisee conclusively proves that the CIA agents were not involved in Quebec separatism, and this paper's argument, of course, hinges upon the authority of Lisée's rigorous study to prove that the US did not intervene via covert C.I.A. action.²³ Nonetheless, owing to the book's publication in 1990, Lisee could not include insights gleaned from more recently declassified sources that document the deliberations of the highest-level American officials. Among these missing documents are multiple conversations between US Ambassador Thomas Enders and the Carter White House (one of which Lisee himself called a "bombshell" in 2018), a Presidential Briefing which included a map of prospective Canadian annexation in the wake of successful Quebec separation, tapes documenting Nixon's valuation of the crisis, and more.²⁴ Instead, Lisee's 1990 analysis is beholden to more bureaucratic statements of preference for Canadian unity, rather than the opinions of high-level US leaders who responded to political audiences, and could deviate from bureaucratic opinions to entertain more opportunistic ideas. In turn, Lisee's anchoring to the documents of lower-level officials drives him to overstate the United States' preference for Canada and undermines his position that the United States was only an "involved spectator."²⁵

Challenging perceptions of America's passivity and preference for Canadian unity during the 1970's crisis provides further implications that self-interests chiefly guided American officials' decision not to intervene against Quebec. This reality in turn complicates conventional wisdom about intervention and involvement calculations. Lindsey O'Rourke, for example, in *Covert Regime Change: America's Secret Cold War*, implicitly relegates the non-intervention decision to a 'fallback' concession adopted in the face of prohibitive costs, rather than exploring non-intervention's potential to serve as the most advantageous strategy. O'Rourke's only explanation for why "a state may not intervene even when the strategic benefits of intervention are very high," is because the "mission will be prohibitively costly or is unlikely to succeed."²⁶ Still, this paper does value O'Rourke's identification of the "broader geostrategic value that policymakers attach to replacing the target government," and she even localizes how a hostile government in Canada would provide an extraordinary impulse for America to intervene in the face of Quebec separatism: from the US perspective, having a friendly government

23 Lisee devotes pages 322-326 to prove that the C.I.A. was not involved in Quebec separatism. Lisee's study hinges upon a number of sources, including interviewing unnamed C.I.A. officials, as well as the Head of the C.I.A. Ottawa station, Cleveland Cram.

24 "Pierre Trudeau May Have Asked Business Leader to Move Jobs from Quebec, Says U.S. State Department Document," *CBC News*, February 17, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-u-s-trudeau-parti-quebecois-1.5922938>.

25 Lisée, *In the Eye of the Eagle*, p. 107.

26 Lindsey A. O'Rourke, *Covert Regime Change: America's Secret Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), p. 59.

in Canada is inherently more valuable than having a friendly regime in Cameroon because Canada is a much more powerful country, a major trading partner, and geographically contiguous.²⁷

To be sure, the 1970's the Quebec separatists would not constitute a "friendly government" to the U.S., and subsequent sections will reveal the multi-pronged threat of Quebec separatism to American interests. Aside from the obvious threats of separatists' plans to kidnap American ambassador, Canadian Ambassador Thomas Enders, for instance, would relay concerns to the White House about the "vigorous radical minority in the P.Q....whose economic ideology is anti-capitalist," and could "dominate...the rest of the moderate leadership" in order "to take over the direction of affairs in Quebec city" and "set the province onto a pattern of hostility towards all of North America."²⁸ By O'Rourke's logic then, Quebec separatism posed real geostrategic risks to America, and the U.S. would have likely intervened— though likely via covert action to not risk alienating a new neighboring state in the event of mission failure. Nonetheless, despite Quebec separatism posing a poignant threat, the U.S. pursued neither covert nor overt intervention to protect U.S. interests as the Quebec crisis unfurled. While O'Rourke offers no insights into the self-interested motivations which can guide a state to prioritize non-intervention over intervention, primary sources revealed that USA policymakers made a concerted decision not to intervene in Quebec separatism in order to actively wield strategic gain.

Quebec Separatism's Anti-American Agenda

French Meddling

The Quebec situation first complicated US foreign policy as it served as an opportunity for French meddling. Troubles began during French President Charles De Gaulle's 1967 visit to Quebec, in which he proclaimed a rallying call to Quebec separatism, "Vivre le Québec."²⁹ The speech drew concern from Canadian and US officials alike. A 1967 Central Intelligence report noted that De Gaulle used "Quebec to hammer away at his theme that the US threatens the independence of all the Western powers," and concerns subsequently reached as far as the President.³⁰ Reporting on De Gaulle's meddling, the Daily Brief to President Kennedy referred to the proclamation as a "definite gesture toward Quebec separatists," further noting that while De Gaulle was "ambiguous on just how France would help French Canadians achieve their 'liberating goals,'" the agency remained still concerned that "De Gaulle has made it clear he anticipates a special role in forwarding

27 O'Rourke, *Covert Regime Change*, p. 58.

28 "New York: The Monumental Plot," *Time*, February 26, 1965, <https://time.com/archive/6627302/new-york-the-monumental-plot/>; Thomas Enders, "How the National Unity Crisis May Play Out," telegram to National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, October 1, 1977, National Archives and Records Administration, p. 12, <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=252204&dt=2532&dl=1629>.

29 "Charles de Gaulle's 'Vive le Québec libre' speech 50 years later," CBC News, July 24, 2017, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/charles-de-gaulle-speech-50th-anniversary-1.4218130>.

30 Central Intelligence Agency, "Central Intelligence Bulletin: Canada: De Gaulle Has Offended the Canadians" July 26, 1967, accessed via CIA FOIA Reading Room, March 11, 2025, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp79t00975a010100210001-5>.

such aspirations.”³¹ The C.I.A.’s Central Intelligence Bulletin likewise briefed the agency on the stakes of De Gaulle’s meddling, noting that “De Gaulle’s aggressive views on French-Canadian sovereignty...focused on resistance to US domination” as well as the “role of French Canada in assuring a global outlook for the French language.”³² Of particular note, the C.I.A furthermore drew attention to De Gaulle’s association with Rene Levesque, a rising political figure in the Quebec Separatist party; the briefing noted that De Gaulle was pursuing his expansionist, Anti-American “aims through his espousal of an association of two Canadas similar to that recently endorsed by Quebec politician Rene Levesque.”³³ For Charles De Gaulle, who opposed American hegemony as well as aspired to expand France’s own influence, Quebec separatism served as a conduit to target America and enable DeGaulle’s expansionist agenda.

A Diplomatic Thorn with Canada

The Quebec situation also worked to sour Canadian-American diplomacy. For Canadian officials beholden to a significant Quebecois voter base, demands to appease French-Canadians would undermine the US-Canadian partnership. In 1967, Canadian Ambassador Butterworth reported, for instance, that the “Pearson gov’t has been working out more policies, at variance with US views and harmful to US interests” in order to “strike a theatrical and supposedly popular pose at US expense in the leadership race,” and “yank Uncle Sam’s beard” in order to “[paper] over controversy with Quebec.”³⁴ Additionally, in an even greater menace to American interests, Butterworth noted that Quebec separatism provided the conditions ripe for “Canadian economic nationalists,” who viewed “economic nationalism as the kind of issue...on which both French and English politicians could agree.”³⁵ Finally, with the departure of Pearson and Canada’s transition to new Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, the Quebec question posed real concerns over Canada’s drift towards Cold War neutralism. U.S. Canadian Ambassador Linder reported that, owing to “attendant deep and genuine concern about discontent in Quebec,” the new Prime Minister “has taken firm decision to... de-emphasize the Canadian military role in NATO.”³⁶ As the Quebec separatist movement gained steam, it complicated a series of Canadian-American diplomatic negotiations from the NATO establishment to transnational trade and economic policy.

Concerns Over Rene Levesque and His Rising P.Q. Party
Separatism’s gaining political traction heightened American concerns. Testifying to Washington’s significant concern

31 Central Intelligence Agency, *President’s Daily Brief*, August 1, 1967, accessed via CIA FOIA Reading Room, March 11, 2025, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/0005973936>.

32 Central Intelligence Agency, “Central Intelligence Bulletin,” November 28, 1967, accessed CIA FOIA Reading Room, March 11, 2025, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp-79t00975a010500220001-0>.

33 *Ibid*

34 Embassy in Canada to Department of State, telegram, October 23, 1967, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XII, Western Europe*, Document 342, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v12/d342>.

35 *Ibid*

36 U.S. Embassy in Canada to Department of State, Thomas Linder telegram to the Department of State, July 7, 1969, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XXI, Western Europe; NATO, 1969–1972*, Document 96, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v41/d96>.

for Quebec Separatism, the C.I.A. briefed the President of the United States on a local Quebecois politician's intention to create a Separatist party. On December 2nd, 1967, the report notes that "Rene Levesque has announced that he will form a political party dedicated to making Quebec a sovereign state," a move which provided the "Quebec separatists an important shot in the arm," and offered the party a "popular, dynamic leader they had always lacked."³⁷ Considering that "it was Levesque's program for Quebec, incidentally, that De Gaulle endorsed in his press conference this week," the U.S. further disfavored Quebecois separatism gaining traction as it presented a new opportunity for French interference.³⁸ But for American officials, the real threat lay with the dynamic leadership of Levesque at the helm of the Parti Quebecois. This Quebec separatist party would become so topical that American diplomats would refer to it casually as the 'P.Q.' in the coming years.

Black Nationalism, Cuba and the Quebecois

To add to the stakes of Levesque and the P.Q. party's gaining prestige, more radical separatists would likewise participate in cultural movements contrary to US interests. The Front Liberation Quebecois would denounce the war in Vietnam, for example, and engage with the likes of Cuba and the Black Panthers. In 1964, the Department of State in Washington relayed to the American Embassy in Ottawa that it was "seriously concerned over reports that Second Continental Congress for Sovereignty, Independence of American Nations and Solidarity with Cuba is scheduled to be held in Montreal" as it served as "a communist sponsored meeting designed [to] provide [a] pro-Castro, anti-US sounding board."³⁹ Concerns over Quebec separatism's affiliation with communists would likewise require Presidential attention in 1968, when the Daily Brief informed President Lyndon B. Johnson that the "Hemispheric Conference to End the War in Vietnam ended...with an expected declaration of support for the Liberation Front and an unexpected vote of support for the Quebec separatist movement."⁴⁰ Further associating Quebec separatism with radical ideology, at the conference, "two Liberation Front representatives" were joined by the likes of "Black Panther chairman Bobby Seale who pledged solidarity with the Vietnamese against the US."⁴¹

Quebec separatism thus threatened American interests on a wide range of issues, from Vietnam to N.A.T.O., economics, French interference, and association with Black Nationalism. Nonetheless, while the American intelligence community and Presidential Briefings paid grave attention to the troubles riddling Canada, the

37 Central Intelligence Agency, *The President's Daily Brief*, "December 2, 1967, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/05974151>.

38 *Ibid*

39 *Department of State Telegram to American Embassy in Ottawa*, 1964, in Gale Primary Sources, https://go-gale-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=Monographs&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=SingleTab&retrievalId=b4bbd716-8b91-4dd6-9781-8e08cad8e586&hitCount=257&searchType=BasicSearchForm¤tPosition=81&docId=GALE%7C-CK2349145997&docType=Cable&sort=Pub+Date+Forward+Chron&contentSegment=ZUSD&prodId=USDD&pageNum=5&contentSet=GALE%7CCK2349145997&searchId=R2&userGroupName=chic_rbw&inPS=true

40 Central Intelligence Agency, *The President's Daily Brief*, *December 4, 1968*, accessed via CIA FOIA Reading Room, March 11, 2025, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/0005976495>.

41 *Ibid*

general American public did not reconcile with Quebec separatism until October 1970.

The Nixon Administration First Takes an Opportunistic Eye: ‘The October Crisis’

While officials had privately wrestled with questions of Quebec separatism for decades, tanks roaming Montreal streets during the ‘October Crisis’ propelled questions of Quebec separatism into a new American audience. Canadians in turn grew concerned about the American public’s attention, and the Canadian Department of External Affairs attentively monitored the U.S. reaction to its domestic affairs. The agency meticulously combed American media sources while soliciting reports from Canadian consulates to gauge American interests in the affair. Letters from Canadian consulates in San Francisco, New York, and Washington relayed to Ottawa the American media’s coverage of the ‘October Crisis,’ and its unsavory circus of tanks and police.⁴²

The U.S. government, conversely, adopted a more exploratory posture of the events plaguing its northern neighbor. President Nixon, who would later label Trudeau as an “asshole,” first savored the fiasco.⁴³ In a departure from Pierre Trudeau’s liberal platform, the Prime Minister had authorized police to conduct searches without warrants and denied detainees counsel.⁴⁴ Lisée’s *In the Eye of the Eagle* thus attends to the President’s Morning News update on the War Measures Act, in which Nixon editorialized to his Chief of Staff Bob Haldeman in the margins; “H. –Watch the Press. They will defend their ‘liberal’ friend!”⁴⁵

But even beyond the President’s own editorials, for an opportunistic Nixon White House, Trudeau’s militaristic response possibly legitimized unprecedented force against American dissident groups. Documents declassified in 2007 reveal that the Nixon administration examined Quebec separatism as part of its broader efforts to implement the infamous Tom Huston’s “Huston Plan.” White House Assistant Counsel Tom Huston’s plan outlined mechanisms to expand covert surveillance and authorize break-ins to monitor dissident groups. J Edgar Hoover would ultimately reject the plan, while White Counsel John Dean’s copy of the “Huston Plan plan” would contribute towards Nixon’s impeachment trial (and Dean himself was later sentenced to jail).⁴⁶ However, before the music stopped in the Nixon administration, John Dean, who was assigned to institute the Huston Plan, seemingly inquired into the capacity for an American President to employ measures similar to Trudeau’s “War Measures Act.” Nevertheless, Tom Huston would ultimately inform Dean that “a situation comparable to that in Quebec,” and “would not lend itself to the invocation of unusual security” including “measures such as the suspension of habeas

42 “Political Affairs - Internal Security - Task Force on Kidnapping - Public Reaction in Countries Other Than Canada - United States of America,” Canada Declassified, 7-Oct-70 to 11-Dec-70, <https://declassified.library.utoronto.ca/items/show/17163>

43 Jean-François Lisée, *In the Eye of the Eagle*, (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1990), p. 79.

44 “The October Crisis,” CBC/Radio-Canada History, accessed March 11, 2025, <https://www.cbc.ca/history/EPISCONTENTSE1EP16CH1PA4LE.html>.

45 Jean-François Lisée, *In the Eye of the Eagle*, (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1990), p. 79.

46 National Security Archive, “Spying on Americans: Infamous 1970s White House Plan for Protest Surveillance Released,” June 25, 2020, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/intelligence/2020-06-25/spying-americans-new-release-infamous-huston-plan>.

corpus.” The report further noted “the Nixon administration should plan on, and be content with, the use of existing powers within the limits imposed by the Constitution,” especially considering “the power of the courts to review executive actions and the safeguarding of individual rights.”⁴⁷ For a conservative Nixon administration, the Quebec Crisis could not afford the White House expanded authority despite their aspirations.

Nonetheless, for a Nixon administration occupied in an inflation-era trade war with Canada, Quebec separatism did pose a convenient tool to rally American economic nationalism and trade hostility with Canada. In preparation for Nixon’s Ottawa address in 1972, Oval Office Nixon tapes released in 2002 reveal that he identified utility in the Quebec separatist affair. In anticipation of his upcoming visit to those “Goddamn Canadians” where he would have to give a speech on Canada’s “right to be a big country” (even though he privately confined “they never will be”), Nixon solicited advice on how to engage with Trudeau.⁴⁸ Noting that he would “like to see [Trudeau] lose frankly” and would “do the very minimum I can get away with,” Connally proposed the utility in the domestic crisis engulfing Canada; “Quebec has come out with their succession program... their whole damn platform on what they

would do.”⁴⁹ Notably, the Treasury Secretary John Connally explained that “This helps us, and this helps you, and this helps the American businessman.”⁵⁰ For Nixon, even while Quebec separatism required Canadian officials to condemn American interests, the affair provided significant political currency. As Nixon attempted to mount his own economically nationalist platform, the President noted that Trudeau and his move to “kick the Yankee” to appease

the Quebecois would doubly serve in guiding the American public “to think we are fighting back.”⁵¹ When Nixon traveled to Ottawa to deliver his speech then, Nixon would notably begin his Ottawa Parliament address in French.⁵²

The President’s refusal to grant an exemption to Cuba embargoes would further indicate his refusal to concede points to the Federalist Canadians on the Quebec matter. When an American



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47 Tom Huston, Memorandum for John Dean, October 26 1970, in *Gale Primary Sources* https://go-gale-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=Monographs&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=SingleTab&retrievalId=f9a06324-9d42-4d3a-97ac-5186b21c04ce&hitCount=257&searchType=BasicSearchForm¤tPosition=149&docId=GALE%7CCK2349696731&docType=Memo&sort=Pub+Date+Forward+Chron&contentSegment=ZUSD&prodId=USDD&pageNum=8&contentSet=GALE%7CCK2349696731&searchId=R2&userGroupName=chic_rbw&inPS=true

48 Oval #706: April 11, 1972, Nixon Tape Audio Archive 41:23, 42:02, http://nixontapeaudio.org/chron3/rmn_e706c.mp3.

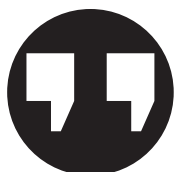
49 Oval #706: 42:12-42:16, 42:20.

50 Oval #706: 42:47.

51 Oval #706: 43:05-43:12.

52 Richard Nixon, “Address at a Joint Meeting of the Canadian Parliament,” *The American Presidency Project*, April 14, 1972, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-joint-meeting-the-canadian-parliament>.

company's Quebec subsidiary sought to produce train locomotives for export to Cuba, the Canadian government requested an exemption to the embargo against American sales to Cuba. In a memo to the President, Kissinger noted that "the Canadian Government has made it clear...that a refusal...in this case would result in a very unfavorable political reaction in Canada."⁵³ The report further pointed to the "impact the sale would have on the economy of Quebec, which is now experiencing serious unemployment." In turn, owing to "the very great importance attached to this issue by the Government of Canada," Kissinger and Secretary of State Shultz both recommended that Nixon "approve issuance of the license allowing the Canadian firm to sell locomotives to Cuba."⁵⁴ Nevertheless, Nixon simply initialized his rejection of the request. Canadian officials later regarded the rejection as "explosive."⁵⁵ Left only with Nixon's initials to gauge the President's calculations, it is unclear what exactly motivated Nixon to reject the aid to Quebec. Nonetheless, it is clear that the American-Canadian relationship was souring, and as the Nixon administration entertained the value of Quebec separatism behind closed doors, the President offered little aid to the Canadian government as it wrestled with the Quebec crisis.



**"THE PRESIDENT
OFFERED LITTLE AID
TO THE CANADIAN
GOVERNMENT AS IT
WRESTLED WITH THE
QUEBEC CRISIS."**

C.I.A. Takes Notice: Separatism Undermines Canadian Economic Nationalism

As Trudeau mounted an increasingly anti-American Canadian nationalist economic platform, the C.I.A. would likewise recognize the tradeoffs of hostile Quebec separatism. As far back as 1968, when Prime Minister Trudeau's victory surprised C.I.A. officials who favored Foreign Minister Paul Martin, Quebec separatism afforded a refrain to gauge how economically hostile a "flamboyant" Trudeau would be towards American interests.⁵⁶ As Canadians were increasingly adopting a nationalist policy to wean off reliance on American foreign investment during the 1970's era inflation, Quebec separatism kept Truedueau's hands tied in domestic affairs.⁵⁷ When Trudeau assumed office, the C.I.A. report noted that the "Trudeau government has given clear priority to domestic affairs in the legislative program" such as the French Canadians' demand for "constitutional reform."⁵⁸

53 Henry Kissinger and George Shultz to President Nixon, memorandum, March 14, 1974, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume E-11, Part 1, Documents on Mexico; Central America; and the Caribbean, 1973-1976*, Document 279, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve11p1/d279>.

54 Ibid

55 Ibid

56 Eberlee, Sam. "The View from Langley: The CIA and Pierre Elliott Trudeau in the Era of "Canada First" Economic Nationalism." *The Canadian Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (2023): 367-386. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/913581>; Central Intelligence Agency, "The President's Daily Brief," April 6, 1968, accessed via CIA FOIA reading room, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/0005974367>

57 Eberlee, Sam. "The View from Langley"

58 Central Intelligence Agency, *Central Intelligence Bulletin*, "Canada: Trudeau government emphasizes domestic affairs," September 14, 1968, accessed via CIA FOIA reading room, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp79t00975a012100050001-1>.

In subsequent years, the Quebec separatist movement would continue to prove its utility by stalling the Trudeau Administration's nationalistic economic policies. By 1971, the C.I.A. remained concerned about Ottawa's move to introduce "legislation to limit takeovers of Canadian businesses by US firms" over "concern in Canada...mounting recently over the dominant position of US business."⁵⁹ To be sure, the Quebecois themselves were doubly complicit in this anti-American position. The C.I.A. noted, for example, the directory of "Premier Rene Levesque, head of the separatist-oriented Parti Quebecois, who said last January that Quebec could no longer look to foreigners for economic development."⁶⁰ The P.Q.'s moves to "take over the American-controlled Asbestos Corporation" in Quebec would further prove that the Levesque pursued Anti-American protectionism as his party "remain[ed] committed to greater economic and political control of provincial affairs by the French-speaking Quebecois."⁶¹ But as the P.Q. "soured the investment climate in Quebec," in the eyes of the CIA, the separatist movement simultaneously served American interests in working against Trudeau's increasingly nationalistic political ambitions:

Trudeau, while concerned with global economic issues, has had little time to deal with them in recent months because of domestic political and social problems. The unexpected victory of the separatist Parti Quebecois in Quebec last November has severely complicated federal-provincial relations. The government has been groping for a strategy to cope with the separatists largely at the expense of dealing with economic problems. Trudeau's failure so far to deal effectively with the separatist threat has seriously undermined his political credibility.⁶²

And as the C.I.A. was observing separatism to weaken Trudeau's political position, the agency would seemingly prefer Trudeau's competitor, Opposition Leader Joe Clark, in the upcoming 1979 election. The agency noted that the Opposition Leader Clark had "want[ed] to be seen as philosophically closer to the US than the Liberal Party of Prime Minister Trudeau," whom the agency noted "has espoused in this decade the so-called Third Option of expanding links to other industrialized states in order to diminish the predominant US position in Canada."⁶³

Even while Quebec separatism encroached on American business and pushed Trudeau to adopt more economically nationalist terms, the Quebec crisis still weakened a leader whom the CIA regarded as increasingly contrary to American interests. Quebec

59 Central Intelligence Agency, "CANADA: Legislation to limit takeovers of businesses by US firms," *Central Intelligence Bulletin* July 7, 1971, accessed via CIA FOIA reading room, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp79t00975a019400110001-4>.

60 Central Intelligence Agency, *National Intelligence Daily Cable*, "CANADA: Sour Investment Climate," October 29, 1977, accessed via CIA FOIA reading room, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp79t00975a030400010028-3>.

61 Ibid

62 Central Intelligence Agency, "Canada: Canadian perspectives," *National Intelligence Bulletin*, April 26, 1977, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp79t00975a030000010044-9>.

63 Central Intelligence Agency, "Canada," *National Intelligence Daily*, January 30, 1979, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp79t00975a031000200001-4>.

separatism's work to stall Trudeau's economically nationalist platform offers yet another explanation for why CIA officials were reporting from Langley rather than on the ground, intervening in Quebec.

State Department Plays Coy as Quebec and Ottawa Vie for Uncle Sam: '76 Separatist Victory

This section endeavors to explain how non-intervention proved the most effective tool for the American government to guide the Quebec affair into serving U.S. interests. Even while the Americans internally preferred a unified Canada, diplomats refused to 'take the bait' in intervening against Quebec, as doing so would only further galvanize the Quebec movement into assuming a cheap, politically expedient, anti-American stance. Instead, through its restraint, America compelled Levesque and the parti Quebecois to adopt a more moderate tone on N.O.R.A.D. and other Amerinca investment issues. Simultaneously, on the other side of the coin, Canada's reliance on American foreign investment empowered Americans to restrain from granting the Canadians interventionary support against the Quebecois. In turn, American restraint would likewise require Ottawa to be conciliatory as they courted evasive American intervention. In the process, through a non-intervention stance, the U.S. actively guided both sides to reveal their plans as they competed for American support, and the US was even able to neutralize much of the Quebecois threat to NORAD agreements and American business.

Ottawa courts US intervention, but economic leverage defines American restraint

When Quebec separatism first entered the global spotlight during the 'October Crisis,' even as the Canadians tried to make the Quebec issue an American one, US diplomats quickly recognized that they possessed the upper hand. When Secretary of State William Rogers visited Ottawa in November, for instance, Rogers informed Nixon of the Canadian's fragility, noting that "The most striking single aspect of our visit to Ottawa... was the preoccupying, almost obsessive, concern of the Canadians for the survival of the Confederation."⁶⁴ Further testifying to the angst amongst Canadian officials, Rogers reported that "Canadian ministers and officials spoke freely in private conversations about the possibility of a break-up of the country" and "even speculat[ed] about what choices might then be made by the different regions and provinces."⁶⁵ For Ottawa officials desperately attempting to appease Quebecers, Rogers identified that America would serve "as a convenient whipping boy for Canadian politicians." Still, Rogers noted Washington wielded significant leverage over Ottawa:

The Canadians face a dilemma: there is evidently widespread unease at the very large place foreign investment has in Canada's economy; yet without a

64 William P. Rogers, "Memorandum from Secretary of State Rogers to President Nixon," November 24, 1970, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XLI, Western Europe; NATO, 1969-1972*, Document 104, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v41/d104>.

65 Ibid

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continuing infusion of capital from abroad it will be difficult to reduce the intolerably high levels of unemployment now prevailing in Quebec and the Maritime Provinces. And unless Canada can do something about unemployment, separatist sentiment will grow.⁶⁶

The Canadians had once again catered to Quebec separatists by deploying an anti-American stance. Nonetheless, US officials recognized that Ottawa's reliance on American investment would keep the Canadians beholden to U.S. interests as the Federalists navigated their country's fissure. In subsequent years, this leverage would empower American officials to refuse to help their allies in Ottawa. The C.I.A. likewise noted America's position 1971; "Trudeau, who can be arrogant about his pragmatism...is all too aware that the United States remains the only source for the large scale capital investment Canada needs if it is even...to remain one nation."⁶⁷

American economic leverage would continue to define its non-intervention stance after the 1976 Quebec Provincial election. The election shook Ottawa's Federalists and surprised the Quebecois themselves. Campaigning on a pledge for a referendum on Quebec separation in his term, Levesque and his Parti Quebecois overwhelmingly swept the provincial elections in an unexpected victory. On November 15th, 1976, the Parti Quebecois took 71 out of 110 seats, breathing new life and legitimacy to the separatist movement.⁶⁸ The dynamic P.Q. leader which the C.I.A. had first flagged to President Kennedy in 1967, Rene Levesque, recalled the importance of the watershed moment for the separatist movement; "It was more than a sweep, it was a tidal wave...all our veterans elected and re-elected."⁶⁹ Adding insult to injury for the Canadian federalists, separatist revolutionaries imprisoned during the 'October Crisis' were now elevated to government office. Levesque notes, for example, that "the poet Gérald Godin...tasted sweet revenge by defeating the man who had him locked up in October 1970."⁷⁰ Ottawa likewise understood the stakes of the moment, and would begin to reach out to coordinate its new strategy with the U.S. to resolve the affair.

Two days following the 1976 Separatist victory, Trudeau began courting U.S. intervention. Trudeau first aimed to naturalize U.S. intervention by revealing sensitive information about his administration's strategy with American Ambassador Thomas Enders. On November 17th, Enders reported to the Department of State that in "a 40-minute talk" Trudeau would let "Levesque make

66 Ibid

67 "Foreign Reaction to the New U.S. Economic Policy," Central Intelligence Agency, November 1971, accessed via Gale Primary Sources,

https://go-gale-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=Monographs&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=SingleTab&retrievalId=74b3a051-4182-496c-aa13-fbabfc-7de7e0&hitCount=14&searchType=BasicSearchForm¤tPosition=1&docId=GALE%7C-CK2349673902&docType=Report&sort=Relevance&contentSegment=ZUSD&prodId=USDD&pageNum=1&contentSet=GALE%7CCK2349673902&searchId=R3&userGroupName=chic_rbw&inPS=true.

68 Andy Riga, "Nov. 15, 1976: Parti Québécois Victory Shakes Canada," *Montreal Gazette*, July 15, 2020, <https://www.montrealgazette.com/news/article544038.html>.

69 Ibid

70 Ibid

the first move,” and he planned to “try to move focus from Ottawa-Quebec duel to decisions on Quebec economy, on which PQ (Parti Quebecois) badly at odds with itself” because the PQ internally spanned “from bourgeois to Maoist.”⁷¹ Thereafter, Trudeau aimed to naturalize American cooperation by suggesting routes American officials could take to mediate Quebec separatism; Enders recalled that “Trudeau expressed concern about... the possible role Americans may have in it,” and suggested possible avenues for the Americans to play a role in preserving Canadian unity.⁷² For example, Trudeau indicated to the American ambassador that “investors should not take any precipitate action either to pull out of or invest in Quebec, but rather should adopt a waiting stance while making clear to the new government that they wish assurances about their future in the province.”⁷³ But Trudeau would have to extend further for American involvement, and passively flamed American anxieties over foreign meddling in Quebec. As the Ambassador recalled, Trudeau explained that:

If the Separatists continue to gain, some Americans might come to believe that they could deal with Quebec and the single or several remaining pieces of Canada. But, Trudeau said, there would be little in that for the US. Given European (read French) and potentially Soviet and Chinese interest in Quebec, an international competition for influence in the province could occur. A similar struggle would go on between the various elements of the Separatist movement, and it could not be excluded that a radical state might appear on the St. Lawrence with outside, hostile support. Trudeau added that he would not want to wave a bogeyman but thought this possible.⁷⁴

Trudeau tried to court American intervention by both sharing sensitive information and positioning the Quebec issue as a mutual problem.

Nevertheless, even while Trudeau both appealed to real American alarm and aimed to invite American cooperation, the conversation would end without an American involvement pledge. Ambassador Enders’ commentary explains the American reluctance. For one, the U.S. was once again conscious of its leverage over Trudeau. Enders noted Trudeau was “very interested in meeting with the new administration early on in order to see how his own action to improve economic performance can be coordinated with that of the United States.”⁷⁵ Once again, American leverage had empowered the Americans to deny Trudeau’s bid for U.S. intervention. But even more importantly, as Quebec separatism appeared increasingly imminent, Americans began to question if they were picking the right horse in siding with Federalist Canada. Enders questioned Trudeau’s capacity to resolve the crisis, noting

71 U.S. Embassy in Canada to Department of State, telegram, November 18, 1976, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume E–15, Part 2, Documents on Western Europe, 1973–1976*, Document 120, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76vol15p2/d120>.

72 Ibid

73 Ibid

74 Ibid

75 Ibid

that in the face of the “Separatist victory,” Trudeau’s government was “taken by surprise,” while Trudeau “displayed no optimism” and made “no effort ...to describe for me a scenario in which everything comes out all right.”⁷⁶ Enders further warned that Trudeau himself “described Levesque as a “formidable, totally committed adversary.”⁷⁷ Trudeau and the Federalist Canadians were losing their ‘favorite’ status, in the eyes of American officials, and the value of intervening, and thereby alienating a potential new Quebecois nation, was quickly dwindling.

By December of 1976, as Trudeau’s passive strategy to let the P.Q. implode was failing, the Americans once again leveraged the Prime Minister’s diminished position to balk at supporting Federalist Canada. Enders explained to Washington that “the difficulty in Ottawa’s strategy, of course, is that there is no assurance the PQ will beat itself.”⁷⁸ Enders furthermore noted that “Although the PQ victory and Levesque’s subsequent statements are scaring off...foreign investment,” the vast majority of which was American, Enders relayed “there is no assurance that the resulting worsening economic situation will hurt the PQ.”⁷⁹ In fact, Enders noted that the P.Q. could “argue that the investment dry-up is only another demonstration of Quebec’s ‘colonial status,’” a move which he noted would serve in “strengthening, not weakening, the drive for independence.”⁸⁰ As such, the Canadians now ironically needed the Americans to preserve their foreign investment in fledgling Quebec, and Enders notes that “Cabinet members...are urging investors to hang in there, carry on their normal operations, and make such deals with the Levesque government as they think are economically justified.”⁸¹ In the face of increasing separatist momentum, Ottawa could not risk alienating US investment, even as the Americans offered no involvement in return for his strategy sharing.

Recognizing his own dwindling position as the P.Q. gained momentum in the months following its 1976 victory, Trudeau opted for more discrete means of courting American intervention. To avoid testifying to the growing asymmetry in his status with the Americans, Trudeau would transfer the compromising burden of strategy-sharing to senior advisor Marc Lalonde. Lalonde confided to Enders that he wanted to use a “preemptive referendum held by the Federal government throughout Canada to take advantage of the low current support for separation and to try to lay the issue to rest.”⁸² Still hoping to earn American cooperation, Ottawa had continued to loop Americans in as monitored the affair. Moreover, Enders noted that “Trudeau told both Desmaris and Sinclair...that

76 Ibid

77 Ibid

78 U.S. Embassy in Ottawa to Department of State, telegram, December 22, 1976, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume E–15, Part 2, Documents on Western Europe, 1973–1976*, Document 122, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve15p2/d122>.

79 Statistics Canada, *Canada Year Book 1976-77* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1977), 1010, https://www66.statcan.gc.ca/eng/1976-77/197610181010_p.%201010.pdf; U.S. Embassy in Ottawa, telegram, December 22, 1976, doc. 122.

80 Ibid

81 Ibid

82 U.S. Embassy in Ottawa, telegram, December 22, 1976, doc. 122.

one of the obstacles to setting a strategy on Quebec is uncertainty as to what US business and the US Government will do,” but the Ambassador surmised in his comment to the State Department that “Trudeau’s remark on the uncertainty of US reactions was probably intended to reach us, as he knew that both Desmarais and Sinclair would be seeing me.”⁸³ Trudeau and the American officials alike recognized that the US had all the cards, even as Trudeau sought to avoid these optics.

Owing to Federalist Canada’s weakening position, Ottawa increasingly sought U.S. intervention. Nevertheless, America leveraged foreign investment to require Ottawa to constantly update the US foreign policy community, even as Washington offered no involvement in return. America was thus satisfied with its capacity to monitor the alarming situation, and the Canadian government’s desperation provided little reason to end the Canadians’ courtship with an involvement pledge. A State Department memo thus notes that “although U.S. involvement will be difficult to avoid,” the memo identifies the utility in this non-intervention strategy: “Because of this preoccupation and its desire to enlist U.S. public support for a united Canada, the Trudeau Government may become more accommodating to U.S. interests.”⁸⁴



**"THE POSSIBILITY OF
ALIENATING A NEW POTENTIAL
QUEBECOIS NATION-STATE
FURTHER COMPELLED
AMERICAN RESTRAINT AS
QUEBEC GAINED MOMENTUM
TOWARDS ITS 1980
SECESSION REFERENDUM."**

*State Department
Hedges Bets with Quebec*

The possibility of alienating a new potential Quebecois nation-state further compelled American restraint as Quebec gained momentum towards its 1980 secession referendum. But America’s non-intervention stance also allowed officials to engage with a newly amenable separatist party. Direct intervention would have only served to

galvanize the Quebecois in an anti-American rallying cry, while the absence of American rejection invited the Quebecois to negotiate with American interests.

In a report to the White House, although Enders noted “the first U.S. interest is in Canada staying together,” he also acknowledged that restraint against Quebec would be critical to protecting American interests in the event of successful Quebec secession. Enders professed that “We should continue our present positive but non-interventionist stance toward Canadian national unity” in order to “avoid major shocks that could radicalize French

83 Ibid

84 “The Quebec Situation Outlook and Implications,” *Rene Levesque Former Premier of Quebec Document 493 of 518*, Document Case Number: F-1988-00197, Access via State Department FOIA Reading Room.

Canada and set it into permanent hostility toward English Canada and potentially toward us.”⁸⁵ Moreover, noting that Canada was on a path towards the “Confederation’s inevitable transformation,” Enders recommended the US should “hedge our bets with a much more intense cultivation of Quebec contacts.”⁸⁶

Examinations of discussions between US consulate officials and top-ranking P.Q. officials explain the “hedging” utility of America’s non-intervention position. The day following the P.Q. ‘s surprise victory in 1976, for instance, the U.S. government would enjoy unparalleled access to officials in the highest levels of P.Q. government. Claude Morin, the new Quebec Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, would call American Consul General Francis McNamara to court American support. As Trudeau and other Ottawa officials had, Quebecois would also share intimate party strategy in order to earn American good will. Morin informed McNamara, for instance, that a “Referendum to determine wishes of Quebecois on independence issue may come in two years’ time,” a timeline critical for US officials attempting to assess the situation.⁸⁷ Morin would even go on to share more sensitive information about his own party’s flat-footedness; “Morin confided that he and his colleagues have not yet decided what form of referendum” and that Morin “laughingly confided that we [the P.Q.] did not expect a recent election victory and were waiting until after the election to define policy.”⁸⁸ In the absence of US intervention, the PQ would share intimate information with Washington just as Ottawa had, affording the United States a near-omniscient capacity to assess the crisis from the perspective of both Ottawa and Quebec City.

Moreover, in the absence of U.S. intervention against their separatist movement, the P.Q. would likewise follow Ottawa to be more conciliatory to US interests. McNamara would report that Morin would assume a newly endearing tone, noting that “He said he hoped USG understood Parti Quebecois govt is not made up of radicals and wished to pursue moderate, friendly relations in North American tradition with the rest of Canada and with the U.S.”⁸⁹ And even while McNamara would push back to inform Morin that the “USG would prefer a strong, united Canada,” Morin would still place “emphasis on need” for the P.Q. “to define defense policy.” McNamara recognized this to be “a clear effort to reassure us that independent Quebec will take what it views as a realistic view towards continental defense and recognize legitimate US concern.”⁹⁰ While the P.Q. had once adopted an Anti-NATO, neutralist platform, this old “pacifist plank in party platform,” the P.Q. ambassador argued to McNamara, “was drawn up by the small group of intellectuals who were important in the foundation

85 Thomas Enders, “How the National Unity Crisis May Play Out,” telegram to National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, October 1, 1977, *National Archives and Records Administration*, Declassified in 2009, P. 2 <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=252204&dt=2532&dl=1629>.

86 Ibid

87 U.S. Consulate in Quebec City to Department of State, telegram, December 3, 1976, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume E–15, Part 2, Documents on Western Europe, 1973–1976*, Document 121, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve15p2/d121>.

88 Ibid

89 Ibid

90 Ibid

of the PQ.” Instead, Morin would relay that the P.Q.’s “present leadership... recognized the need for a change in defense policy and accepts the fact that ‘pacifism is impossible’ in the North American context.”⁹¹ In his commentary, McNamara would thus conclude with a nod to further utility restraint had offered in the U.S. move to not pledge against Quebec; “Morin and Levesque are anxious that USG not see PQ as disruptive force inimicable to American interests.”⁹²

In his report to the White House, Thomas Enders would summarize the value in US’s non-intervention strategy to Carter’s National Security advisor, Zbigniew Brezinski. Enders would note that thanks to America’s “arm’s length relationship” during the Quebec affair, “as part of its sovereignty association play,” the P.Q. sought to demonstrate “that an independent Quebec could get along no worse and perhaps better with us.”⁹³ Moreover, Enders would similarly relay Morin’s message that “Levesque is...changing the PQ’s attitude on NORAD and NATO to positive.”⁹⁴ Additionally, after a decade of Quebec hostility to foreign investment, Enders further noted that Levesque would likewise begin in “Wooing regional and business opinion in the U.S.”⁹⁵ Still, Enders would ultimately recommend that the White House adopt more Ottawa-allegiant approach, holding that “We should begin to consider now our stance during the referendum campaign” and should work to “consider whether the U.S. may not have some role to play to make sure the referendum outcome is consistent with Confederation’s gradual transformation, not its rupture.”⁹⁶ Nonetheless, new



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evidence suggests that the White House would not share the same degree of preference for Federalist Canada as the Canadian ambassador.

Carter Administration Contemplates Quebec’s Utility

By April of 1977, a year following the Quebec separatist success in provincial elections, Brezinski would brief President

91 Ibid

92 Ibid

93 Enders, “How the National Unity Crisis May Play Out,” October 1, 1977, p. 13.

94 Ibid

95 Ibid

96 Enders, “How the National Unity Crisis May Play Out,” October 1, 1977, p. 3.

Carter that “The possibility of Quebec’s secession from the Canadian confederation...cannot be discounted” and had “entered the gray area of possibility.”⁹⁷ Brezinski thus stressed to the President that “It is important for us to be thinking about the consequences for us—and our likely options—if indeed the confederation unravels in the next two or three years.”⁹⁸ By June, Brezinski was once again drawing the President’s attention to the Quebec question, this time noting that “The resolution of the Quebec issue clearly is important to us” as “U.S. investments there amount to 5 billion,” while Quebec also remained an “integral part of the North American defense arrangements.”⁹⁹ Nonetheless, even as the resolution of Quebec separatism posed real stakes to American interests, Brezinski also recognized the utility of U.S.’s non-intervention stance; Brezinski stressed to the President the necessity to maintain the non-intervention strategy, noting that although the “US is likely

to be pressed by Ottawa to come down firmly on the side of a united Canada,” Brezinski explained that “walking the line...enunciated in February...may become harder but will be no less necessary.”¹⁰⁰ Referring to Carter’s February statement in which he prefaced his “preference for Canadian Unity” with a statement that Quebec secession was “a decision for the Canadian people to make,” Brezinski thus urged the President to follow the judgment of State Department officials. The White House recognized that America’s scrupulous maintenance of non-intervention policy was actively serving U.S. interests—even as the Canadians urged Washington to take a side.



"THE WHITE HOUSE RECOGNIZED THAT AMERICA'S SCRUPULOUS MAINTENANCE OF NON-INTERVENTION POLICY WAS ACTIVELY SERVING U.S. INTERESTS."

Of even greater note, Brezinski’s notably more positive approach to Quebec separation further guided his non-intervention recommendation. In his 1977 Memorandum for President Carter, Brezinski noted that “an independent Quebec a decade hence would

97 Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Memorandum for the President: ‘Quebec Secession?’” *NSC Weekly Report* no. 10 (April 22, 1977): p. 5, in *Gale Primary Sources* https://go-gale-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=Monographs&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=SingleTab&retrievevalld=d2c7eb74-65c7-4ae8-ab26-fe9c174f426a&hitCount=257&searchType=BasicSearchForm¤tPosition=175&docId=GALE%7CCK2349470029&docType=Memo%2C+Report&sort=Pub+Date+Forward+Chron&contentSegment=ZUSD&prodId=USDD&pageNum=9&contentSet=GALE%7CCK2349470029&searchId=R1&userGroupName=chic_rbw&inPS=true.

98 Ibid

99 Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Memorandum for the President: ‘Quebec and the Future of Canada’” *NSC Weekly Report* no. 15 (June 3 1977): p. 4, in *Gale Primary Sources* https://go-gale-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=Monographs&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=SingleTab&retrievevalld=a8be6635-1a33-4f7e-8032-33431086d3c0&hitCount=257&searchType=BasicSearchForm¤tPosition=177&docId=GALE%7CYFZKYB864488723&docType=Memo%2C+Report&sort=Pub+Date+Forward+Chron&contentSegment=ZUSC&prodId=USDD&pageNum=9&contentSet=GALE%7CYFZKYB864488723&searchId=R1&userGroupName=chic_rbw&inPS=true%5C

100 Ibid



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be likely to establish good relations with the United States," and he further held that the "victory of the pro-Independence PQ party... reflected local desires for good government as much a drive for more autonomy on Quebec's part."¹⁰¹ Even more notably, Brezniski held that the factors which "would be cause for concern" were not the French-Canadians, as almost all State Department officials assessed. Rather, Brezniski contended that Quebec separation could possibly galvanize "Anglophone Canada" to "become more nationalistic, tempted by anti-Americanism."¹⁰² Moreover, Brezniski would supplement his atypical threat assessment of Quebec with an even bolder proposition of the long-term effects of separation:

Over the longer run, however, fragmentation would be inevitable. Some of the Western provinces might be attracted by association with the United States. These are not issues for the immediate future, but they are concerns for the next decade. Who knows, by 1990 there may be a Confederation of North America (CNA) instead of USA! Such a possibility is depicted on the attached map.¹⁰³

Carter staffers anecdotally recalled to Author Jean Francois in 1990 that Brezniski commissioned a map exploring annexation of a splintering Canada. Upon interviewing Brezniski, Lisee would report that "Brzezinski denies having asked for the map, and no one knows who finally saw it."¹⁰⁴ This document, declassified in 2009, reveals that Brezniski did, in fact, commission such a map, and he showed it to the President of the United States. While it's impossible to know if Carter himself was eying Western Canada, his Chief National security advisor was certainly entertaining such an expansion.

Brezinski's selective relay to the President of a cable from Thomas Enders further suggests Brezniski's consideration of Canadian annexation.¹⁰⁵ In a Presidential Briefing Brezniski would note that "a recent cable from Ottawa argues that the next three years are likely to decide whether Canada survives as an entity."¹⁰⁶ Thereafter, Brezniski did refer to Enders' anti-

101 Ibid

102 Throughout research, the author found Brezniski to be the only American official identifying Anglo-Canadians as a threat to American interests. In 1977, the State Department's 26 page report on Quebec separatism identified only that Anglo-Canadians could take to violent protests in response to the imposition of nationwide French language laws; Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Memorandum for the President: 'Quebec and the Future of Canada'" *NSC Weekly Report* no. 15 (June 3 1977): p. 5.

103 Ibid; See Appendix for Map.

104 Lisée, *In the Eye of the Eagle*, p. 156.

105 While Brezniski makes no mention of Enders to be his source, the author infers the connection. Enders began his telegram from the Ottawa Embassy to Brezniski: "the next three years will in all likelihood decide whether Canada survives as an entity while gradually adjusting to Quebec Nationalism," and Brezniski informs the President of "A recent cable from Ottawa argues that the next three years are likely to decide whether Canada survives as an entity while accommodating gradually to Quebec nationalism." Moreover, Brezniski's report seems to cite Enders' reference to Trudeau's suspicion that U.S. was harboring hopes of a "land-bridge" to Alaska. Both documents are dated in October of 1977.

106 Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Memorandum for the President: 'Canada Alert'" *NSC Weekly Report* no. 32 (October 14 1977): p. 6, in *Gale Primary Sources* https://go-gale-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=Monographs&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=SingleTab&retrieveAllId=84ede715-82ce-48f3-9de3-70efaa126417&hitCount=257&searchType=BasicSearchForm¤t-

Quebecois suggestion to “Give Canadians the sense of security they need in a time of troubles,” and Enders’ recommendation that Washington should “[draw] our economies closer together and maximiz[e] our political contact.”¹⁰⁷ Nonetheless, in his brief to the President, Brezinski would label the Ottawa-allegiant policy a “Double-edged sword to say the least.”¹⁰⁸

Granted, Brezinski did consider more anti-Quebecois interventionary methods. On “what the U.S. might do,” Brezinski proposed “ruling out special economic favors for an independent Quebec,” or even “ruling out any interest in confederation with parts of a fragmented Canada” because “the Embassy argue[d] that Trudeau suspects us of harboring hopes for a “land-bridge to Alaska.”¹⁰⁹ Still when it came to Enders’ admonitions against the prospective “emergence of an aggrandized United States,” and the Ambassador’s fears that it “would expose us more to the envy of allies...to the fears of the Soviet Union,” Brezinski’s report notably neglects to mention this part of Enders’ analysis.¹¹⁰

From maps of Canadian annexation to selective reporting and to an atypical threat assessment of Quebec, all of which diverged from the recommendations of key State Department officials, this evidence sheds light on the testimony of the Canadian Ambassador to Moscow, Robert Ford. When meeting Brezinski in 1978, Ford recalled that although Brezinski was born in Poland, “[Brenzinski] went to private schools in Montreal and he sensed the arrogance of the English-speaking students at the schools, vis-a-vis not only French Canadians but also people like himself.”¹¹¹ Ford further informed Lisee, “He was just completely turned against the English Quebecer as a result of that.”¹¹² Reporting to a “somewhat worried Trudeau” on his meeting with a Quebec-sympathetic Brezinski then, Ford would note that the National security advisor “showed considerable, considerable sympathy for the point of view of the Quebec separatists at the time” (though Ford would correct himself to say “I wouldn’t say separatists necessarily, but certainly nationalists.”).¹¹³ Trudeau and Ford would ultimately conclude that Brezinski’s sympathies did not shape U.S. policy, though this new evidence at the very least challenges that conclusion. Brezinski’s 1967 study, which discussed the prospect of the US annexing Western Canada in the wake of separation, only further complicates his potential allegiances.¹¹⁴

It would be misleading to espouse the potentially opportunistic concerns of Brezinski with that of President Carter

Position=179&docId=GALE%7CCK2349136812&docType=Memo%2C+Report&sort=Pub+Date+-Forward+Chron&contentSegment=ZUSD&prodId=USDD&pageNum=9&contentSet=GALE%7CCK2349136812&searchId=R8&userGroupName=chic_rbw&inPS=true

107 Enders, “How the National Unity Crisis May Play Out,” October 1, 1977, p.2.

108 Ibid; Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Memorandum for the President: ‘Quebec and the Future of Canada’” *NSC Weekly Report* no. 32 (October 14 1977): p. 6.

109 Ibid

110 Enders, “How the National Unity Crisis May Play Out,” October 1, 1977, p. 11.

111 Ibid

112 Lisée, *In the Eye of the Eagle*, 157-158.

113 Ibid

114 “Diplomacy: The Specter of Separatism,” *Time*, December 26, 1977, <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,919212-2,00.html>.

nor the United States foreign policy community. Moreover, Carter's examination of such a prospect by no means exposes a concerted appeal to capitalize on the Quebec crisis to annex Western Canada. Nonetheless, documents directly refuting the denial of Carter's top National Security advisor thoroughly complicate the U.S.'s official position of passive preference for Canadian neutrality. At the very least, as the United States considered the potential of absorbing new territory in the wake of Quebec's separation, this mere discussion of annexing Western Canada would have only augmented the value of not intervening on behalf of the Canadian Federalists in Ottawa.

Conclusion

Despite fears that the Canadian Federation was inevitably marching towards some sort of fissure, the P.Q.'s 1980 referendum on Quebec separation would ultimately fall short by a 10% margin.¹¹⁵ Concerns over Canada's splintering would largely subside after the Federalist victory, and American officials would not have to properly reconcile with the potential for a new Quebecois nation until the 1995 Quebec referendum. In anticipation of the P.Q.'s 1995 referendum on Quebec (which would fail by just a .5% margin), President Clinton noted that the "United States...has enjoyed its excellent relationships with a strong and united Canada, but we recognize... that your political future is, of course, entirely for you to decide."¹¹⁶ At least publicly, the original 1970s non-intervention strategy defined Washington's Quebec stance decades later. Still, many documents on this new tide of Quebec separatism remain classified, and it is unclear whether more discrete interests may have motivated an American non-intervention.

Nonetheless, what does remain clear is that from the 'October Crisis' martial law fiasco, to the Separatists' surprising sweep in the 1976 Provincial election, the U.S. actively pursued a non-intervention policy in the face of Quebec separatism's most abrasive crash into the American discourse. In part guiding the non-intervention decision were Nixon and the C.I.A.'s valuation of separatism's political currency, the Carter administration's Quebec sympathies and annexation considerations, and the State Department's move to craftily guide both sides to be conciliatory to US interests as they vied for evasive support. To be sure, this paper has by no means aimed to illustrate the United States' response to Quebec separatism as an insidious ploy to destroy Canada and annex the remnants. Similarly, this paper did not allege that the United States preferred the chaos of separatism over an existing stable partnership with Canada. Nonetheless, in the face of this tumult, the US concertedly exercised a non-intervention stance not out of respect for Canadian sovereignty but to serve United States interests.

115 Élections Québec, "Referendum on the 1980 Sovereignty-Association Proposal for Québec," accessed March 11, 2025, <https://www.electionsquebec.qc.ca/en/results-and-statistics/referendum-on-the-1980-sovereignty-association-proposal-for-quebec/>.

116 Directeur général des élections du Québec, "1995 Referendum on Québec's Accession to Sovereignty," October 30, 1995, <https://www.electionsquebec.qc.ca/en/results-and-statistics/1995-referendum-on-quebecs-accession-to-sovereignty/>; William J. Clinton, "Remarks to the Canadian Parliament in Ottawa," February 23, 1995, in The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-canadian-parliament-ottawa>.

To best serve these interests and wield influence in the affair, the United States strategically and concertedly leveraged a non-intervention strategy. In the process, they guided both the Quebecois and Ottawans states serve a range of interests in Washington. Nixon allowed separatism's anti-American fervor to ferment in order to rally his own economically nationalist platform, while the C.I.A. let separatism work towards stalling Trudeau's increasingly hostile platform. Taking after these utilitarian non-intervention positions, the State Department exercised restraint in order to commoditize Washington's support, and compel both Quebecers and Ottawans to be conciliatory as they sought to earn it. All the while, as Carter's National Security Advisor entertained opportunistic Quebecois sympathies, he explicitly recommended the President to remain steadfast in rejecting Ottawa's bids for support. In sum, from Langley, to the White House, to the Department of State, Washington officials throughout the 1970's recognized restraint and non-intervention to most aptly serve their own unique interests. While theory often regards the non-intervention decision as a concession to the potential costs of failure, this paper aimed to provide a case study on the oft-overlooked potential for non-intervention to be the preferred and most influential option.

Even beyond theoretical implications, examining evidence of the political considerations underwriting US non-involvement, as well as opportunistic discussion of absorbing Western Canada, also provides new depth to today's landscape of souring diplomacy between the United States and Canada. Economic nationalism and even annexation discussions once again dominate American relations with yet another Prime Minister Trudeau. In turn, re-examining America's original response to Quebec separatism offers new insights into America's strategy towards Canada today. Back in the 1970's, the United States' wielded non-intervention to leverage the separatist situation to Washington's advantage. Nonetheless, the U.S. only earned this luxury against the backdrop of decades of cultivating soft economic power through trade and foreign investment. As the United States considers economic isolationism today then, policymakers should take note of the leverage that foreign investment provided in mediating the Quebec threat; even without intervening, Washington managed to guide the menacing Quebec separatism affair to serve US interests.

Appendix

Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Memorandum for the President: 'Quebec and the Future of Canada'"
NSC Weekly Report no. 15 (June 3 1977): p. 6, https://go-gale-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=Monographs&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=SingleTab&retrievalId=a8be6635-1a33-4f7e-8032-33431086d3c0&hitCount=257&searchType=BasicSearchForm¤tPosition=177&docId=GALE%7CYFZKYB864488723&docType=Memo%2C+Report&sort=Pub+Date+Forward+Chron&contentSegment=ZUSC&prodId=USDD&pageNum=9&contentSet=GALE%7CYFZKYB864488723&searchId=R1&userName=chic_rbw&inPS=true%5C



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On the Linguistic Boundary of Public Reason in China: The 'State—We' Narrative and the Specter of Fascism

Abstract

In contemporary Chinese cyberspace, political discourse is frequently shaped by the rhetorical framework of “State—We”¹ (国家—我们), in which the state is personified as a moral agent and indistinguishably fused with the collective “we” of society. This paper explores how such linguistic patterns obscure the fundamental boundaries between state and society, leading to a discursive environment where emotional populism, identity politics, and language authoritarianism override public reason on Simplified Chinese Internet.²

Drawing on Isaiah Berlin’s dual concepts of positive and negative liberty,³ as well as Habermasian theory of the public sphere, the study investigates the role of language in constructing political legitimacy and moral authority online. It further analyzes the Schmittian residues of sovereign unity and Rousseauian assumptions of “*power as good*” in simplified Chinese digital discourse, exposing the potential risks of fascist or ultranationalist tendencies embedded in everyday expressions.

Through comparative references to classical rhetoric, modern constitutional thought, and contemporary examples of “keyword abuse”,⁴ this paper argues that political language has become deontologized and emotionalized, hollowing out the communicative

1 Refers to a rhetorical framework prevalent on the Simplified Chinese internet in which “State” and “we” are fused into a singular collective identity, displacing individual agency and blurring boundaries between state and society.

2 Denotes the Chinese cyberspace predominantly using Simplified Chinese characters, primarily within mainland China, as distinct from Traditional Chinese or International Internet.

3 Berlin, I. (1969). “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *Four Essays on Liberty*. Oxford University Press.

4 The phenomenon of deploying terms like “justice”, “freedom”, “socialism” or “liberation” carelessly in online commentary, irrespective of their technical or philosophical contexts, resulting in semantic distortion.

rationality essential to democratic modernity. Ultimately, the study calls for a reconstruction of the ethical boundaries of political language in the Chinese public sphere, grounded in the values of pluralism, procedural justice, and civic responsibility.

Keywords

Chinese internet; political discourse; State–We narrative; public sphere; language politics; modernity; rhetorical legitimacy

Chapter One — Introduction: The Derealization of Political Responsibility and the Paradox of Chinese Modernity

Since the Enlightenment, modernity has often been interpreted as a project of emancipation in the history of social thought. It represents, in Montesquieu’s eyes, the differentiation of the three branches of power; in Locke’s theory, the establishment of the social contract; and for Habermas, the rise of the public sphere. Accompanying the transition of sovereign power from Hobbesian, divine-like authority to a civic politics rooted in rational discourse, modern society has, since the late 18th century, entered what Isaiah Berlin termed an “*age of calm and moderation*.”⁵ Yet as Zygmunt Bauman compellingly argues in his reflection *Modernity and the Holocaust*, modernity has never been purely rational. On the contrary, it is often embedded in bureaucratic, technocratic, and administrative systems that obscure moral judgment and public responsibility. This produces, especially in moments of crisis, a “*well-organized but morally hollow*” illusion of civilization. When Hannah Arendt examined Eichmann in Jerusalem, she echoed Bauman’s view: the Holocaust was not born from primitive evil, but was the very expression of modernity. Even when “structurally incomprehensible,” as Bauman wrote, the transformation of language from a vehicle of critique into an instrument of systemic control allowed evil to wear the garb of rationality. The banality of evil no longer needed demonic camouflage—only administrative acquiescence and the erosion of language’s moral integrity.

This paradox of modernity resurfaces today in a particularly alarming form on the Simplified Chinese internet: the establishment of a discursive framework we might call the “*State–We*” narrative. In this framework, the “State,” a highly abstract political signifier, is often invoked as a morally exempt agent of sovereign action. Expressions like “*The State has intervened*” (“国家出手了”) or “*Hand it over to the State*” (“上交给国家”) are ubiquitous. At the same time, the term “we” has been rhetorically mobilized as a collective identity marker that gradually displaces individual

5 In the opening of Isaiah Berlin’s *The Roots of Romanticism*, he characterizes the Enlightenment as “an age of calm and moderation,” emphasizing its ethos of rationalism and orderly progress



"HISTORICALLY, CHINESE YOUTH HAVE OFTEN SERVED AS THE FIRST LINE OF RESISTANCE AGAINST AUTHORITARIANISM AND DESPOTISM."

judgment, personal responsibility, and dissenting discourse. Expressions like “*The U.S. and the West are sanctioning/perishing us.*” (“美西方制裁/意图消灭我们”) “*We have become powerful today.*” (“我们今天强大了”) “*We have to confront Japan in the South China Sea.*”⁶ (“我们必须在南中国海对抗日本”) have become legitimizing symbols for dividing camps and executing discursive violence in the name of collective interest. This narrative not only erodes the distinction between state and society, between administrative authority and the will of the people, but also renders the Chinese Communist Party’s rule into a form of Leviathan that transcends constitutional mechanisms—logically irrefutable, politically unassailable, and morally beyond reproach. It transforms the public sphere from a space of rational deliberation into an echo chamber of collectivist sentiment.

Among the vast user base of China’s internet, young people—ranging from secondary school students and undergraduate learners to recently employed youth—have emerged as the core demographic in expressing political sentiments online due to their frequent and immersive internet engagement. Historically, Chinese youth have often served as the first line of resistance against authoritarianism and despotism: from the revolutionary members of the Tongmenghui⁷ (同盟会) opposing Qing imperial rule, to student protests against economic exploitation by the Nationalist government in Taiwan in 1947,⁸ to the student-led democratic movements of 1986 or 1989 (e.g., the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and massacre), and more recently, the anti-extradition protests in Hong Kong in the late 2010s. Yet history also offers cautionary examples. Ayatollah Khomeini, the Iranian revolutionary leader, once referred to schools as “barracks for the soldiers of God (Allah).” When the “State” is granted a priori moral immunity, and when “we” becomes an unnegotiable, non-exitable, and absolute imperative—akin to what Kant might call a categorical command—then what John Stuart Mill warned against in *On Liberty* as “*the tyranny of prevailing opinion and feeling,*”⁹ more dangerous than that of government, may quietly transform Chinese youth into unwitting guardians of the tombs of constitutionalism and democratic rule.

This paradox echoes what Alexis de Tocqueville foresaw as the perils of democratic conformity, but it also raises new and pressing questions for the study of modernity in twenty-first-century China.

This paper adopts an interdisciplinary perspective that bridges political linguistics and theories of modernity to analyze the structural mechanisms and historical genealogy of the “State–We” narrative in the Simplified Chinese internet. Drawing on Jürgen Habermas’s concept of the public sphere, Isaiah Berlin’s distinction between positive and negative liberty, Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language use, and Max Weber’s typology of legitimate authority,

6 This phrase reflects the ongoing nationalistic sentiment and the concern over Japan’s growing military presence in the region, coupled with the broader geopolitical struggle in East Asia, especially when the U.S. maintain its military deployment

7 The Tongmenghui (Chinese Revolutionary Alliance) was a political organization founded in 1905 by Sun Yat-sen and other revolutionaries with the goal of overthrowing the Qing Dynasty and establishing a republican government in China.

8 Refers to the February 28 Incident (二二八事件), a large-scale anti-government uprising in Taiwan that was violently suppressed by the Nationalist regime, resulting in thousands of civilian deaths.

9 Mill, J. S. (1859). *On Liberty*. London: John W. Parker & Son. See Chapter III: “Of Individuality, as One of the Elements of Well-Being.”

the study seeks to explore how political language, under the guise of “modernization,” may subtly erode the foundations of public reason. As Zygmunt Bauman once observed,¹⁰ *“The problem with modernity is not that it is too little rational, but that it can be too rational, to the point of forgetting the irreducibility of the human.”* In this spirit, the task is not merely to analyze how such words are used, but to interrogate a deeper question: When the public sphere becomes de-subjectified and de-responsibilized, might China be on a path toward its own variant of fascism?

Admittedly, some may argue—as do many scholars—that the emergence of National Socialism in Italy and Germany occurred within societies that had already transitioned, in the terms of legal historian Henry Maine, “from status to contract.”¹¹ By contrast, China, with its long-standing tradition of grassroots autonomy and Confucian notions of familial-state isomorphism, remains a paradigmatic example of a kinship-based, identity-oriented society. However, this explanation falters when one considers the case of Japan: despite undergoing nearly half a century of modernization, it too veered toward fascism in the early 20th century. Thinkers like Kita Ikki,¹² who articulated ideologies strikingly similar to European fascism, were paradoxically executed by the very regime that partially adopted his views. This contradiction may be best understood through the lens of modernity itself—particularly the instrumentalization of politics and the “social dislocation” caused by rapid economic transformation.

Faced with this paradox of language and structure, perhaps the most urgent task is to return to the ethical foundations of political speech. Reaffirming the role of public reason against the tide of emotive rhetorical tyranny may be our first step toward truly understanding the present.

Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework — From the Politics of Language to the Pathologies of Modernity

To understand the emergence, dissemination, and impact of the “State–We” narrative within the contemporary Simplified Chinese internet, we must first develop a theoretical lens capable of piercing the surface of language and excavating its underlying political-philosophical foundations. This chapter draws upon the insights of political linguistics, theories of modernity, and liberal political philosophy to construct an analytical framework for the study. On this basis, it seeks to address a set of pressing questions: When the “State” functions as both a moral shield and a Leviathan in practice, and when “We” becomes the apparatus of social coercion and the tyranny of the majority, what institutional structures, linguistic mechanisms, and political psychologies lie beneath this phenomenon? And how do these elements converge to reshape a public sphere that ought to be governed by freedom and reason?

10 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cornell University Press, 2000), Preface.

11 Maine, H. S. (1861). *Ancient Law: Its Connection with the Early History of Society, and Its Relation to Modern Ideas*.

12 A Japanese political theorist (1883–1937) associated with proto-fascist ideology, executed after the February 26 Incident despite some ideological overlap with the militarist regime.



"FACED WITH THIS PARADOX OF LANGUAGE AND STRUCTURE, PERHAPS THE MOST URGENT TASK IS TO RETURN TO THE ETHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF POLITICAL SPEECH. REAFFIRMING THE ROLE OF PUBLIC REASON AGAINST THE TIDE OF EMOTIVE RHETORICAL TYRANNY MAY BE OUR FIRST STEP TOWARD TRULY UNDERSTANDING THE PRESENT."

1. *Habermas and the Transformation of the Rational Public Sphere*

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas argues that modern civil society once possessed what he terms the *bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit*, or “bourgeois public sphere.” This was a discursive arena centered on rational-critical debate, situated outside the state yet capable of exerting moral oversight upon it. However, the sustainability of such a public sphere rests on several core prerequisites: transparency of information, equal access to political participation, adherence to the rules of rational discourse, and—most crucially—a clear and institutionalized distinction between state and society.

When the term “State” in digital discourse comes to replace more specific institutional entities—such as the State Council, the courts, CCP’s party organs, or even the National People’s Congress and its Standing Committee¹³—the public sphere is effectively stripped of its interlocutor. In parallel, when “We” is misused as a rhetorical instrument for moral coercion and majoritarian tyranny, the public sphere is further degraded into a space of depersonalized performance, devoid of individual agency or civic responsibility. This condition mirrors what Habermas warned against as the “*pseudo-public sphere*”¹⁴—a structure that, under the banners of “enthusiasm” and “unity,” turns language into a tool of submission and friend-enemy demarcation, rather than a medium of rational-critical communication.

2. *Berlin’s Dual Concept of Liberty: From Protection to Domination*

In Berlin’s seminal essay *Two Concepts of Liberty*, Isaiah Berlin distinguishes between negative liberty—freedom from external interference—and positive liberty—freedom to realize one’s own potential and exercise self-mastery. He warns that without clear boundaries, positive liberty is especially susceptible to collectivist distortions. When the definition of freedom becomes contingent upon an identity-driven conception of “*who we are*,” it can evolve into the ideological architecture of a centralized, homogenizing empire—a political vision sustained by illusions of legitimacy and the will to control.

This logic is vividly manifested in the Simplified Chinese internet discourse. On the one hand, the State is portrayed as the embodiment of collective moral will, with all of its actions justified as serving the unified interests of “*us*.” On the other hand, dissent, criticism, or even skepticism is reframed as betrayal—symbolic of an enemy that falls outside the bounds of the imagined “*we*.” In this way, the ideal of positive liberty is not harnessed to empower individual agency, but rather deployed to discipline public expression and enforce conformity.

13 The National People’s Congress (NPC) is the highest legislative body of the People’s Republic of China, responsible for formulating, amending, and repealing laws, as well as approving major state affairs.

14 See Habermas, J. (1989). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. MIT Press, esp. Ch. 6

3. Wittgenstein and the Misuse of “Big Words”

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein famously asserts that “*meaning is use*”¹⁵—that words do not possess inherent definitions, but acquire meaning through their practical application. In extreme political contexts, abstract terms such as “State,” “Justice,” “Freedom,” “Communism,” or “Capital” often function as instruments of symbolic mobilization. These “*big words*” are appropriated by ideological factions to summon allegiance, discipline dissent, and manufacture illusions of legitimacy. As a result, language ceases to refer to concrete realities or ethical principles and is reduced instead to empty slogans of action. This semantic paradox mirrors Rosa Luxemburg’s lament: “*Freedom—how many crimes are committed in your name.*”

On the Simplified Chinese internet, for example, “State” has come to stand in for all institutional bodies—from courts and ministries to legislative assemblies—transforming into a symbol of de-responsibilized authority. It dissolves public accountability by abstracting away the agents of governance. Meanwhile, “We” is frequently weaponized to suppress dissent and conceal social heterogeneity. Such rhetorical abuse is not historically unprecedented. Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Maoist China all made strategic use of the “State–We” formulation, deploying these terms to construct hegemonic national narratives and silence public criticism. The Russian writer Yevgeny Zamyatin, in his dystopian novel *We*, allegorized this very linguistic dynamic as the foundation



"WHEN THE TERM 'STATE' IN DIGITAL DISCOURSE COMES TO REPLACE MORE SPECIFIC INSTITUTIONAL ENTITIES ... THE PUBLIC SPHERE IS EFFECTIVELY STRIPPED OF ITS INTERLOCUTOR."

of authoritarian conformity.

Beyond the “State–We” narrative, the devaluation of “big words” permeates political philosophy, political economy, political science, historiography, and neoclassical economics. Terms like “*capital*,” “*surplus value*,” “*involution*,”¹⁶ (内卷) “*class struggle*,” and even “*Nazi*” have undergone semantic drift in online discourse, especially within Chinese digital culture. Stripped of their theoretical and historical rigor, they now function as ideological placeholders—converging structurally with the logic of the “State–We” paradigm.

15 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), §43

16 Involution normally means “irrational competition under stagnation” on Simplified Chinese Internet,

4. Weber and Structures of Authority: How the “State–We” Narrative Constructs a Legitimacy Illusion

Max Weber famously classified legitimate authority into three types: traditional, legal-rational,¹⁷ and charismatic.¹⁸ While the institutional framework of the Simplified Chinese internet discourse ostensibly adheres to a legal-rational model, its dominant political language often reproduces a form of charismatic authority. In this configuration, the “State” is portrayed as the embodiment of supreme moral virtue, while “We” becomes an extension of this transcendent authority.

Under such a regime of discourse, legitimacy is no longer grounded in procedural justice or rational-legal norms, but in affective loyalty and moral identification. This rhetorical structure elevates “patriotism” as the only socially sanctioned emotional posture, while branding any form of dissent or critical reflection as “unpatriotic” or a “lackey of the West.” As a result, the space for public reason is foreclosed, replaced by what Weber would call a “legitimacy illusion”¹⁹: a form of symbolic governance that appears stable on the surface, but rests on fragile foundations of emotive conformity.

The foundation of this linguistic regime—and by extension, of the entire “State–We” narrative—can, following Weber’s insights, be understood as a novel form of virtual charisma.²⁰ In this configuration, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party assumes a transformed Messianic function,

reflecting the people’s latent yearning for a national savior. This is exemplified in cultural expressions such as the iconic slogan “*Without the Communist Party, there would be no New China*,” (没有共产党就没有新中国) as well as the paternalistic rhetoric surrounding pandemic governance.

It is important to note that this paper’s critique of the “State–We” discourse does not stem from any a priori political stance. Rather, it situates the phenomenon within a broader historical-theoretical context. There are notable parallels between the revolutionary trajectory of the Chinese Communist Party and Ibn Khaldun’s theory of cyclical dynastic transformation, particularly as reinterpreted by University of Chicago professor Mohammed A. Al-Jamāl in his model of the “Khaldunian Integrative Revolution.”²¹

17 authority based on codified procedures and institutional legitimacy

18 legitimacy derived from perceived extraordinary qualities of leaders or ideologies

19 an appearance of legitimacy grounded in emotional identification rather than institutional rationality

20 a non-individualized, institutionally embedded form of charismatic authority

21 Ibn Khaldun (1382) explored the political construction and legitimacy of governance in Islamic societies in his *Muqaddimah*, proposing a theory of state formation based on social dynamics and eco-



"WHEN THE DEFINITION OF FREEDOM BECOMES CONTINGENT UPON AN IDENTITY-DRIVEN CONCEPTION OF 'WHO WE ARE,' IT CAN EVOLVE INTO THE IDEOLOGICAL ARCHITECTURE OF A CENTRALIZED, HOMOGENIZING EMPIRE."

However, when modernity is introduced as a historical variable, the moral legitimacy once rooted in China's rural revolutionary base gradually migrates into urban spaces, expanding across the nation in tandem with modernization and national unification. This transformation constitutes the sociological foundation of what we may now call China's virtual charisma in the digital age.

Chapter Three: Linguistic Practices and the Construction of Power in the “State–We” Narrative — An Empirical Study of the Simplified Chinese Internet

On the Simplified Chinese internet, political discourse often materializes the concerns discussed in the theoretical framework. This chapter presents an empirical study of language usage and power construction in digital spaces, focusing on real examples from social media, forums, and online commentary. It examines how the State–We narrative manifests in everyday political conversations, and how it shapes perceptions of authority, community, and legitimacy.

1. Shifting Discursive Terrain: The Substitution of “State” for “Government”



"ABSTRACT TERMS SUCH AS 'STATE,' 'JUSTICE,' 'FREEDOM,' 'COMMUNISM,' OR 'CAPITAL' ... CEASE TO REFER TO CONCRETE REALITIES."

On the Simplified Chinese internet, the term “State” has permeated political discourse as a highly symbolic signifier. Compared to functionally specific terms like “government,” “central authorities,” “courts,” or “legislatures”—each of which delineates distinct institutional roles and organizational boundaries—“State” serves as a totalizing rhetorical device. While it

simplifies complex political processes, it simultaneously obscures the boundaries of responsibility and accountability.

Expressions such as “*Hand it over to the State*,” “*The State has stepped in*,” or “*The State protects us so well*” are not only ubiquitous on platforms like Weibo (微博), Zhihu (知乎), Bilibili (B站), and Douyin (抖音/TikTok China), but also emblematic of a linguistic pattern that collapses executive, judicial, and legislative functions into a singular abstract subject. This subject—the “State”—is then endowed with unquestionable legitimacy and moral superiority. Such a discursive framework not only violates the foundational principles of modern constitutional governance, including checks and balances, separation of powers, and accountability, but also constructs a Schmittian vision of sovereignty in which “*State and society become one*”—a hallmark of fascist state nationalism.

Carl Schmitt famously argued that sovereignty resides in the power to decide the state of exception.²² Within the discursive context of the Simplified Chinese internet, the term “State” is routinely invoked under a logic of perpetual exception. This logic enables the unique form of virtual charisma—discussed earlier—to position itself as a moral bulwark against imagined threats such as “foreign forces,” “hostile elements,” “color revolutions,” and “anti-China rhetoric.” Through this invocation, the State narrative acquires political legitimacy not through legal procedures or institutional deliberation, but through the affective projection of danger.

Fundamentally, this logic rests on a Rousseauian moral premise: the presumed benevolence of the general will (*volonté générale*).²³ At the same time, it implicitly draws from a Hobbesian assumption that “sovereignty cannot be unjust.”²⁴ In practice, this framework functions to disarm political critique of state actions, replacing accountability with a moralized absolutism.

2. Who Are “We”? The Ambiguity of Reference and the Trap of Conflation

Mirroring the semantic inflation of the term “State,” the pronoun “we” has undergone a discursive proliferation on the Simplified Chinese internet. In expressions such as “our confrontation with the United States,” “the West is suppressing us,” or “hostile forces seek to divide us,” “we” functions as a mechanism for binding political loyalty with social identity. Yet “we,” which ought to signify a pluralistic and self-reflexive social subject, has quietly become synonymous with the State.

This linguistic collapse exemplifies what Jürgen Habermas calls the “colonization of the public sphere”²⁵: a process whereby language spaces intended for autonomous civic judgment are infiltrated and reorganized by sovereign discourse. In this reconfiguration, “we” no longer refers to the diverse individuals that constitute society but is re-signified as a singular, abstract collective identity. The demand for this discursive unity renders “we” a boundary-drawing instrument—one that excludes dissenters by labeling them as “western enemies” (美西方敌人) “traitors” (卖国贼) “agents of foreign influence” (带路党/殖人) or “Han collaborators.” (汉奸)²⁶ These terms are used as pejoratives against dissenters in nationalist online discourse.

Here again, Yevgeny Zamyatin’s dystopian novel *We* offers a potent political metaphor: a totalizing imperial order that annihilates difference, dissolves individuality, and imposes state control over every dimension of life. In the context of Chinese cyberspace, the “we”-form becomes a rhetorical architecture that builds a binary between a unified in-group and a hostile out-group. Its function is not to represent the complexity of social reality, but to enable emotional mobilization through language.

22 Schmitt, C. (2005). *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (G. Schwab, Trans.). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1922)

23 Rousseau, J.-J. (1762). *The Social Contract*.

24 Hobbes, T. (1651). *Leviathan*.

25 Jürgen Habermas. (1989) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*

26 used as pejorative terms against dissenters in nationalist online discourse



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3. *The Misuse of "Big Words" and the Rise of Emotional Political Language*

As Wittgenstein famously argued, "*the meaning of a word is its use in the language.*" On the Simplified Chinese internet, terms such as "*liberation,*" "*freedom,*" "*exploitation,*" "*capital,*" "*oppression,*" and "*communism*" frequently appear in political discourse as unmoored signifiers—invoked without semantic training or contextual grounding. Rather than functioning as analytic categories, these "*big words*" often become proxies for moral posturing or expressions of political identity. This phenomenon is not unique to the Chinese context, but its severity is amplified by the de-professionalization of discourse, the rapid pace of social media communication, and the ubiquity of moral-emotional expression.

Consider expressions such as "*capitalists are exploiting us,*" "*Western freedom is just a pretext for interfering in other countries,*" or "*supporting Israel makes you a capitalist lackey.*" These Maoist-era rhetorical forms merge class-based narratives with nationalist sentiment, blur the line between ideology and empirical reality, and appeal more to collective anger than reasoned deliberation. Such language reflects the emergence of what may be termed *affective politics*, where anger and tribal belonging become the primary currencies of expression in the absence of genuine platforms for public dialogue.

In this context, Rosa Luxemburg's oft-quoted warning—"*Freedom, how many crimes are committed in your name*"—is ironically inverted. "*Freedom*" itself becomes an empty accusatory vessel, as expressions like "*Western double standards*" or "*Western freedom is just capitalist freedom*" flatten complex political ideas into sloganized moral binaries. In doing so, such rhetoric erodes the very possibility of deep individual participation in political reasoning and civic life.

4. *The "State–We" Conspiracy: A Political Rhetorical Community of Collusion*

When the "State" is sacralized, "We" is politicized, and ideological signifiers are misused with impunity, a new political-rhetorical community quietly emerges in digital space. This community is no longer built upon the foundations of social contract theory or institutional justice, but upon affective identification and shared antagonisms. Such a configuration marks a fundamental betrayal of Wilhelm von Humboldt's vision of human diversity²⁷ and represents a profound erosion of the rational public sphere as conceived in modernity.

In this political formation, legitimacy is no longer derived through procedural or institutional validation, but is instead granted through ephemeral emotional consensus—what may be described as a form of populist immediacy in which "*public opinion equals justice.*" Simultaneously, responsibility is no longer distributed among accountable institutions or individuals. It is absorbed into the collective moral shell of the "State–We" alliance, reducing political

²⁷ Humboldt, W. von. (1792). *On the Limits of State Action* (T. G. McLaughlin, Trans.). Cambridge University Press

responsibility to a mode of collective attribution. This aligns closely with Max Weber’s diagnosis of the “*legitimacy illusion*,” wherein the sense of belonging to a unified political collective induces the public to view structures of domination as morally legitimate—thereby eroding the mechanisms of public accountability.

Chapter Four — Historical Roots and Cross-Civilizational Comparisons of the “State–We” Narrative: From Classical Collectivism to Modern Authoritarianism

1. Classical Narratives of the State–Collective: From the Greek Polis to the Roman Republic

In the political language of Greco-Roman antiquity, the *polis* and the *res publica* were not merely institutional forms—they were ethical commitments to a shared civic existence. In the writings and speeches of figures like Cicero, Aristotle, Pericles, and Cato the Elder, recurring rhetorical motifs such as “*fatherland*,” “*common destiny*,” and “*the interest of the republic above all*” established a discursive structure in which the collective we became inseparable from the state itself. The polis was not only the place of citizenship but the totality of life; individual liberty derived from one’s active participation in public affairs. To be part of “we” was to be part of the state.

In his *Funeral Oration*, Pericles famously described Athens as “the school of Hellas,” glorifying the citizen’s willingness to die for the honor of the collective. Cicero, in *De Re Publica*, argued that the essence of republican governance lay in “*res publica res populi est*”—the public matter is a matter of the people. Such language built what might be termed a “*community of virtue*” within the political community, where the “*State–We*” structure acquired an inherent moral legitimacy and became intertwined with the rational public sphere.

However, history also revealed the latent dangers of this structure: when “we” becomes a justification for collective violence, democracy itself may devolve into a tyranny of the majority. In *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides’ Athens is a “*fevered state*,”²⁸ one that “*forgets reason in its passion*,”—ruthless toward Melos, vengeful toward internal dissenters. The “*State–We*” structure, pushed to its extreme, produced a moral trap of collective righteousness. When Thucydides breathes the air of Melos or marches alongside the doomed Sicilian expedition, can one still uncritically praise his homeland for the rivers of blood spilled in the name of war? Perhaps the execution of Socrates stands as the most enduring answer.

2. The Chinese Tradition of Familial-State Conflation²⁹ and the Mandate of Heaven

In contrast to the Greco-Roman model of political philosophy, classical Chinese political culture developed a distinct version of the “*State–We*” structure—one grounded in the analogy between

28 “a polity driven by emotional excess and political absolutism

29 “a worldview that models state governance on kinship hierarchy

familial ethics and political governance. From foundational texts such as the *Shangshu* (Book of Documents), *Liji* (Book of Rites), and *Spring and Autumn Annals* to later works like the *Dadai Liji* and *Zhen'guan Zhengyao*, rulers frequently likened “governing the state to managing a household.” (家天下) This political language anthropomorphized and patriarchalized the state, casting it as the moral source and paternal figure of the polity.

While discourses of the Mandate of Heaven,³⁰ moral governance (德治de zhi), and “people-based rule” (民本) evolved over dynastic history, they all remained within the conceptual boundaries of a fundamental assumption: the indivisibility of family and state. Here, “the State is We” was not the outcome of rational deliberation or civic consensus, but the product of a historically sedimented cultural-authoritarian logic. It served as the bedrock of collective political identification in the Chinese context.

It is particularly important to note that the Confucian hierarchy encapsulated in the maxim “cultivate the self, regulate the family, govern the state, and bring peace to all under Heaven” (修身齐家治国平天下) inherently places the State at the moral apex of social order, while “we” becomes a rhetorical placeholder for obedience and identification. In imperial-era documents, edicts, and even

folk expressions, the oft-quoted phrase by Huang Zongxi—“天下兴亡，匹夫有责” (“The rise and fall of the state is the responsibility of every individual”)—has endured not only as an expression of patriotic sentiment but also, in certain contexts, as a justification for collectivist ethics within a homological structure, particularly in matters involving foreign relations.

This intellectual legacy provides fertile cultural ground for the contemporary popularity of the “State–We” narrative on the Simplified Chinese internet. As Fei Xiaotong observed in *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*, Chinese society is best understood not as a group-based model but as one of “differential association” (差序格局),³¹ wherein relational obligations radiate outward in graded concentric circles. The state, in this schema, stands at the apex of moral responsibility. Rather than being challenged, this conception of political obligation is amplified by the affective mechanisms of internet discourse.

3. *The Return of Modern Totalitarianism in China: Fascist Discourses and Collective Illusions within the “State–We” Narrative*

In modern political history, the cases of German National Socialism and Italian Fascism serve as sobering warnings about



"THROUGH THIS INVOCATION, THE STATE NARRATIVE ACQUIRES POLITICAL LEGITIMACY NOT THROUGH LEGAL PROCEDURES OR INSTITUTIONAL DELIBERATION, BUT THROUGH THE AFFECTIVE PROJECTION OF DANGER."

30 “Tianming You Chang” (Heaven’s mandate is constant) is a concept from Shang Shu (ca. 1100–400 BCE), which embodies the Mandate of Heaven theory in ancient Chinese political philosophy.

31 social pattern based on relational gradation rather than group solidarity

the dangers of reinforcing the “State–We” narrative. As Habermas observed in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, totalitarian regimes systematically manipulate public language and media to sacralize collective identity and extinguish dissent, thereby constructing the illusion that “*the State is the People.*” This rhetorical maneuver reached its apex in Joseph Goebbels’s infamous slogan: “*Du bist nichts, dein Volk ist alles*” (“You are nothing, your people are everything”). Remarkably, this phrase continues to circulate widely on the Simplified Chinese internet, often shared uncritically by users lacking foundational training in political philosophy.

This discursive vulnerability has allowed Nazi cultural symbols to gain disturbing traction among segments of the Chinese online public. On October 24, 2023, the German Embassy in Beijing issued a public statement condemning the normalization of Nazi imagery in Chinese digital spaces. Although the tone of the statement was itself problematic,³² it nevertheless reflected a deeper structural issue: amidst the outbreak of violence in Gaza, some Chinese netizens—operating under the ideological framework of the “State–We” narrative—transposed their sympathy for the Palestinian people (a sentiment that is, of course, morally valid and humane) into a disturbing affinity for Nazi Germany’s crimes against humanity.

This rhetorical slippage can be explained in part by the middle term in a flawed syllogism: the Jews are perceived as synonymous with the modern Israeli state; China’s (*we*) ideological posture has been historically antagonistic toward Israel since 1949; therefore, any perceived enemy of Israel is met with uncritical empathy—even if that enemy is Nazi Germany. Such logic illustrates how the “State–We” narrative can foster a deeply distorted moral compass, wherein geopolitical allegiances override universal ethical norms.

In the rhetorical construction of *Volksgemeinschaft*—the “national community”—Nazi Germany defined the “*we*” strictly along Aryan racial lines. The State was no longer merely a representative of national interest; it became the embodiment and instrument of a singular lifestyle. Within this discursive logic, state power acquired absolute legitimacy, and the boundaries of “*we*” became the violent frontiers

of exclusion.

The result was a program of mass extermination targeting Jews, Slavs, homosexuals, and individuals with disabilities. Notably, the latter two groups had not been subject to extermination on such a scale during the Armenian Genocide thirty years prior, nor in the Rwandan Genocide fifty years later—underscoring the uniquely radical consequences of an ideological language pushed to its extreme.

Even within democratic regimes, this pattern of rhetorical



"TOTALITARIAN REGIMES SYSTEMATICALLY MANIPULATE PUBLIC LANGUAGE AND MEDIA TO SACRALIZE COLLECTIVE IDENTITY."

³² The Weibo account of the German Embassy in Beijing called those Chinese people who stood for Nazi or made a mix of the Israeli flag and the swastika “fool” on October 24, 2023

extremism can emerge. During the era of McCarthyism³³ in the United States, civil liberties enshrined in the First Amendment were sacrificed on the altar of anti-Communist hysteria. The “we” of American national identity was weaponized by political actors who persecuted dissenters within the federal government under the guise of patriotic vigilance.

In *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Zygmunt Bauman argued that it was precisely the forces of modernity—bureaucratic rationality, centralized state power, and linguistic simplification—that transformed mass murder into a “*rationalized, legally sanctioned technical process*,” rather than an aberrant historical anomaly. Hannah Arendt similarly emphasized that modern totalitarianism rarely begins with violence; rather, it begins with the manipulation of language and the simplification of reality.

On the discursive level, binary oppositions such as “we” versus “them,” “Chinese” versus “hostile forces,” or “proletariat” versus “bourgeoisie” become institutionalized through both formal and informal political speech. Euphemisms like “cleansing,” “purification,” “stringing up,”³⁴ or “liberation” confer moral legitimacy on the process of exclusion—until that process becomes irreversible. On the Simplified Chinese internet, we increasingly witness the uncritical reuse of Nazi symbols such as the swastika and the memetic normalization³⁵ of extreme phrases like “*Retake the island, eliminate all people*” (留岛不留人, in reference to Taiwan) or “*Exterminate foreign powers*” (清除外部势力, often directed at the West). These trends reveal the re-emergence of a



"SUCH LOGIC ILLUSTRATES HOW THE 'STATE-WE' NARRATIVE CAN FOSTER A DEEPLY DISTORTED MORAL COMPASS, WHEREIN GEOPOLITICAL ALLEGIANCES OVERRIDE UNIVERSAL ETHICAL NORMS."

collective political hallucination—one rooted in and structured by the linguistic architecture of the “*State-We*” narrative.

4. Virtual Charismatic Authority and the Logic of Digital Loyalty

According to Max Weber’s typology of legitimate domination, “*charismatic authority*” derives from the leader’s personal

³³ You should know, a period of intense anti-Communist suspicion in the U.S. during the early Cold War, marked by censorship and blacklisting

³⁴ originating from the Russian Revolution, these terms refer to violent political practices often associated with authoritarian regimes. “吊路灯” (hanging street lamps) historically referred to public executions or extrajudicial killings used as a method of eliminating political opponents.

³⁵ the repetition of extreme or violent rhetoric through viral digital formats, detached from moral reflection

magnetism and extraordinary abilities. In the contemporary context of the Simplified Chinese internet, this type of authority has been digitally reconstituted by platform logics and symbolic leadership. Online influencers who embody overt political correctness and nationalistic symbolism now function as intermediaries in the “*State–We*” narrative. Through short videos, livestreams, and micro-blogs, they transform affective mobilization into quasi-religious forms of political belief.

A paradigmatic manifestation of this trend is the emergence of fan-culture–style (饭圈化)³⁶ political language. Netizens adopt a “protect-the-leader” mentality in their treatment of state representatives—ranging from foreign ministry spokespeople and defense officials to nationalist internet celebrities living abroad. Expressions such as “*he’s been wronged*,” “*he clapped back*,” or “*he won again*” are not critiques of policy substance, but emotional affirmations of charisma.

This phenomenon exemplifies what may be called a “*digital logic of loyalty*,” wherein public language becomes a performative game of allegiance—eerily reminiscent of the loyalty displays prevalent during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and ’70s. In this model, discourse serves not deliberation, but symbolic submission.

Chapter Five – Exiting the Crisis of Modernity: Rebuilding Public Reason and Rethinking Language Politics

1. *The Collapse of Language Politics and the Hollowing of Public Rationality*

Under the prevailing discursive logic of the “*State–We*” narrative, public discourse is increasingly characterized by symbolization, polarization, and emotionalization. The public sphere—originally envisioned as a space for political expression, social negotiation, and normative dialogue—has been gradually reduced to a stage for declarative allegiance and repetitive loyalty performance.

As Wittgenstein cautioned, the misuse of “*big words*” has become a defining feature of online discourse in the Simplified Chinese internet. Terms such as “*justice*,” “*freedom*,” “*equality*,” “*capital*,” “*imperialism*,” “*colonialism*,” and “*communism*”—concepts that require precise contextual and theoretical grounding in political philosophy and the social sciences—are now frequently deployed in inflammatory rhetoric. In the hands of users untrained in theory, these terms undergo semantic distortion and functional displacement, serving aims antithetical to their original critical



"THE PUBLIC SPHERE... HAS BEEN GRADUALLY REDUCED TO A STAGE FOR DECLARATIVE ALLEGIANCE AND REPETITIVE LOYALTY PERFORMANCE."

36 a media environment where loyalty and emotion override critical discourse

intent.

One of the most illustrative examples is the contested usage of the term “*freedom*.” It may refer to Rousseau’s notion of the general will, Mill’s conception of freedom from interference, the Sarmatian model of noble privilege, or the capitalist idea of market freedom. When online discourse in the Simplified Chinese internet reduces “*freedom*” to mere “*licentiousness*” or equates it wholesale with “*Western imperialism*,” what we witness is not simply a misreading—but the collapse of public reason itself. It evokes, in a deeply ironic way, the return of a chaotic, popularized version of elective despotism in the Chinese political imagination.

This phenomenon exemplifies what Zygmunt Bauman described in *Modernity and the Holocaust* as the crisis of instrumental reason: language ceases to serve mutual understanding and instead becomes a technical instrument used to demarcate class, ideology, and moral allegiance. In contemporary China, this instrumentalization is exacerbated by platform dynamics—algorithmic recommendation systems, emotionally charged engagement loops, and the prioritization of immediacy over reflection all conspire to marginalize reasoned discourse. As a result, the ruins of public rationality are overrun by performative spaces, hollowed of critical content, making it ever more difficult to take even the first step toward reconstructing a rational, deliberative public sphere.

2. *The Dual Dimensions of Liberty: Insights from Isaiah Berlin*

Confronting the current dilemma requires a return to the conceptual foundations of liberty itself. In his seminal essay *Two Concepts of Liberty*, Isaiah Berlin famously distinguished between “*negative liberty*” and “*positive liberty*”. Both are indispensable elements of modern political discourse, but when misused or selectively emphasized, they can give rise to linguistic tyranny or empty formalism.

In the context of the People’s Republic of China, the legal and judicial regulation of speech reflects an ambiguous fusion of these two liberties. Unlike the United States, which protects speech through the absolutism of the First Amendment,³⁷ or Germany, which tempers freedom with constitutional limits on hate speech,³⁸ China’s system treats expression as both a collective right and a privilege granted by the state. This fusion creates a semantic tension: citizens are told they possess freedom, yet that freedom exists only so long as it aligns with an unspoken definition of “*the public interest*”. When any form of criticism or ideological divergence is labeled “*unpatriotic*” or “*anti-Party*,” it effectively erodes both negative and positive liberty.

This legal and rhetorical ambiguity creates fertile ground for the expansion of the “State–We” narrative. As long as a particular emotional position is deemed to reflect “mainstream values,” it can attain moral legitimacy within the public sphere—even if it involves criminal incitement—without the need for rational justification grounded in utilitarian or constitutional principles.

37 The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution explicitly states that “Congress shall make no law... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press,” providing broad protection for freedom of speech.

38 Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany (Grundgesetz), Article 5

How might we correct this trajectory? In the current context, I argue for the construction of a public language ethics³⁹—one that balances the imperative of human diversity with a renewed sense of discursive responsibility.⁴⁰ As Wilhelm von Humboldt emphasized in *The Limits of State Action*,⁴¹ “The true meaning of freedom lies in allowing the manifold diversity of humanity to unfold naturally in the realm of experience.”

Accordingly, we must not only protect the right to express, but also retrain the ethical sensibility of expression itself—that is, to ask: in what manner, under what conditions, and for what public purpose does speech constitute a responsible act?

3. Habermas’s Theory of Communicative Rationality⁴²: Reclaiming the Negotiative Function of Language

In *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Jürgen Habermas argues that the foundation of rationality lies not in instrumental reason, but in communicative rationality. He identifies four validity claims that any meaningful public language must satisfy: intelligibility, truth, legitimacy, and sincerity.

Within the “State–We” narrative, we witness the systematic erosion of these communicative conditions:

- Intelligibility: Key political terms suffer from semantic inflation and conceptual drift. Though the language may sound familiar, it lacks shared logical grounding and often devolves into ad hominem labeling.

- Truth: Information—especially concerning party history—is selectively curated or distorted, and in moments of external political tension, emotional rhetoric frequently supplants factual judgment.

- Legitimacy: Positions are deemed “correct” without deliberation, and dissenting views are routinely met with personal attacks rather than reasoned debate.

- Sincerity: Political discourse becomes a performative display of allegiance—an exercise in virtue-signaling or factional alignment—rather than a genuine effort toward understanding or truth-seeking, transforming many participants into twenty-first-century versions of Thrasymachus.⁴³

In this light, Habermas’s model of the public sphere offers a powerful theoretical framework for resisting the overextension of the “State–We” narrative. By restoring the mechanisms of deliberation, we can reposition public expression not as a vehicle for emotional catharsis, but as a medium grounded in responsibility, mutual recognition, and civic ethics.

Naturally, we must acknowledge the structural limitations that

39 an ethical framework that governs not just what is said, but how and why it is said in public discourse

40 the normative obligation to speak in ways that uphold public reason and civic deliberation

41 Mill, J. S. (1859). *On Liberty* (Translated from the German edition, 1854). John W. Parker and Son.

42 Jürgen Habermas (1981), *The Theory of Communicative Action*

43 a Sophist in Plato’s *Republic* who argued that justice is nothing but the interest of the stronger

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confront the institutional public sphere in contemporary China. As such, any strategy premised on Habermasian ideals is likely to adopt a conservative posture in terms of its practical implementation.

Rather than expecting top-down reform of public institutions, the more realistic trajectory lies in cultivating normative change through civic education, strengthening media ethics, and refining the regulatory frameworks of digital platforms. These incremental measures aim not at immediate transformation, but at the gradual normalization of political language and the critical deconstruction of the “State–We” narrative.

4. The Limits of Collectivism and the Ethics of Individual Responsibility: From Luxemburg to Mill

Ultimately, we must recognize that the root of the problem lies not merely in the misuse of language, but in the moral displacement and diffusion of responsibility produced by uncritical collectivism.

As Rosa Luxemburg wrote in *Reform or Revolution*, “Freedom is always the freedom of those who think differently.” She understood that in revolutionary contexts, abstract and elevated language often becomes a tool of suppression. Likewise, John Stuart Mill, in *On Liberty*,⁴⁴ articulated his well-known harm principle—that the exercise of social power must be restrained, and no invocation of collective interest should be allowed to override the conscience and judgment of the individual.

In the contemporary digital discourse of the Chinese internet, the rhetorical use of “we” frequently erases the individual’s rational agency within the tidal wave of collective outrage. Public discussion devolves into moral coercion⁴⁵ and discursive purges—hallmarks of what Mill would term the tyranny of the majority.

It is therefore essential to promote a mode of political expression that embraces difference, acknowledges ambiguity, and respects individual subjectivity. In such a paradigm, the “State” is no longer an unquestionable Leviathan, and “we” ceases to function as a totalizing identity. Instead, both must be continually reconstituted through processes of communicative negotiation and civic reciprocity.

Conclusion: The Linguistic Myth of the “State–We” and the Limits of Modernity

“There is nothing new under the sun.”⁴⁶ The dominance of the “State–We” narrative on the Simplified Chinese internet is not a uniquely contemporary pathology, but rather a historical variation of how power-laden language and identity politics have fused within the trajectory of modernity. This narrative anthropomorphizes and moralizes the will of the state, displacing governance mechanisms that should be grounded in the separation of powers, legal constraints, and social deliberation. In their place, emotional mobilization and the construction of collective identity have assumed center stage—thus presenting public reason with a formidable challenge posed by

44 Mill, J. S. (1859). *On Liberty*. John W. Parker and Son.

45 ideologically charged language tactics used to silence dissent

46 Stated by Ecclesiastes 1:9

authoritarian and proto-totalitarian tendencies.

Through the insights of Carl Schmitt, Isaiah Berlin, and Jürgen Habermas, we are reminded that language is never merely a vessel for expression—it is the very infrastructure that shapes social reality and regulates political behavior. In the digital age, the flattening of discursive space has enabled “we” to crystallize into an illusion of unanimous public will, while the “State” is increasingly imbued with near-religious legitimacy. This fusion of “State–We” into a monolithic linguistic framework represents, as Zygmunt Bauman warned in his reflections on the Holocaust, an extreme trajectory within modernity’s internal logic: when rationality is decoupled from ethics, and technique becomes an end rather than a means, public discourse descends into a void of coldness and unreason.

This paper does not deny the legitimate function that collective identity can serve in nation-building and social integration. Indeed, many of China’s modern economic achievements have been inseparable from such cohesion. However, it is imperative to stress the semantic boundaries and moral limits of this collective identity. A return to the foundational commitments of modernity is urgently needed: skepticism toward power, faith in reason, respect for diversity, and responsibility to concrete human beings.

Within this normative horizon, the public sphere should not be a rhetorical mechanism for projecting a unified popular will, but rather a platform for inclusive deliberation—a space that tolerates conflict, encourages dissent, and honors difference.

For contemporary China, escaping the symbolic trap of the “State–We” narrative requires both institutional and cultural responses. On the institutional side, it entails the gradual expansion of democratic participation mechanisms. On the cultural and

communicative side, it calls for a renewed ethical framework governing public discourse. From integrating language ethics and critical thinking into the educational system, to sustained academic inquiry into the politics of language, to technological self-reflection by media platforms on semantic manipulation—all of these form feasible pathways toward the restoration of public reason.

Ultimately, this paper aims to sound a warning: within any highly mobilized system of collective language, it is the individual—his agency, his moral responsibility—that is often the first to be sacrificed. When people divide the world into “us” and “them,” they inevitably begin to fracture the “us” as well. The first step in turning the blade upon one’s own kin is to sharpen it against the foreign other.

The allure of collectivism lies not only in Gustave Le Bon’s “crowd psychology,” but also in the enduring desire among the



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Chinese people for national rejuvenation throughout the twentieth century. Yet precisely because of this historical longing, we must remain ever vigilant in the face of the rhetorical spell of the “*State–We*” narrative. Citizenship today demands not the rejection of belonging, but conscious participation; not the negation of the collective, but the reconstruction of deliberation; not the intoxication of expression, but the burden of linguistic responsibility.

In this sense, reestablishing the ethical boundaries of political language is not merely a defensive act—it is an act of immunization, a refusal to allow the cancerous logic of fascism to metastasize within the Chinese context.

The public sphere admits no gatekeepers. It is not the sole province of intellectuals or scholars, but a terrain of shared moral labor. It is also, increasingly, the lens through which the world observes and understands the evolving political culture of China. The deconstruction of the “*State–We*” narrative, in my view, is not only a task of enduring academic value—it is the very cornerstone upon which a democratic and free China must be built.

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