

# Mandarin, Monitors, and Marginalization: The Digital Machinery of Uyghur Oppression

In 2021, a Uyghur shopkeeper in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China appeared in a short video that spread across social media. Uyghurs are a Turkic-speaking, predominantly Muslim Indigenous people whose language, religion, and history differ from those of the Han Chinese majority. Facing the camera, he repeated familiar lines from many similar videos filmed in the region, declaring that U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's statements about Uyghur genocide were "complete nonsense" and that he should "shut up." Months later, a joint investigation by ProPublica and The New York Times revealed why so many videos followed the same formula. His clip was just one of more than 3,000 nearly identical videos in which ordinary Uyghurs repeated Mandarin-scripted lines, filmed in different neighborhoods, expressing the same sentiment. Every testimonial was delivered in Mandarin, not Uyghur, symbolizing a broader project of linguistic purity that treats minority languages as obstacles to national cohesion and modernization. The forms of oppression once enacted in classrooms through educational policy are now reproduced through digital platforms and circulated to global audiences.

This study therefore asks: How is social media weaponized by the Chinese government as a tool of linguistic and cultural oppression against the Uyghur population? How do Uyghur communities use digital spaces to resist this oppression and reclaim cultural agency?

To understand how digital spaces have become tools of both oppression and resistance for Uyghurs, this paper analyzes four case studies to understand both the government's strategies of linguistic control and the forms of resistance that oppose them. I first examine a study conducted on nearly 3000 scripted testimonial propaganda videos to show the use of social media to impose an authoritative narrative that denies abuse and redefines Uyghur identity through Mandarin performance. I then investigate the so-called "proof-of-life" videos to show how state-run news stations are weaponized to discipline dissent, manipulate emotion, and coerce Uyghurs into publicly disavowing their relatives abroad. *It must be noted that these testimonial and proof-of-life videos have since been removed from Western platforms; I therefore analyze them using archived screenshots and documentation from ProPublica and UHRP.* Next, I trace the evolution

of online activism by examining Uyghur-language blogs, their systematic dismantling, and the 2024 bans on Uyghur-language apps and communication platforms to demonstrate how linguistic suppression migrated into digital space. Finally, I turn to diaspora activism (specifically the Instagram account @TouchofTurkestan) to illustrate how Uyghurs outside China reclaim cultural visibility and linguistic agency online. However, this section is necessarily more limited, as oppressive content is far more abundant, coordinated, and archivally preserved than resistance content. Across these cases, I use the frameworks of linguistic imperialism, linguistic capital, and linguistic economics to interpret how media enforces control and how communities respond.

I argue that while social media has been weaponized in the pursuit of linguistic and cultural domination, these same platforms also offer Uyghur communities tools for self-representation, memory, and solidarity. Given the asymmetry of resistance and oppression, I urge readers to call out disinformation where they encounter it, to support Uyghur-led cultural and political work, and to remain alert to how digital platforms can either enforce or resist state power.

## Mandarin Dominance and Uyghur Subversion

Academic conversations about China's pursuit of linguistic purity happen at political, cultural, and economic levels, explaining how Mandarin came to dominate Uyghur life before this hierarchy migrated onto digital platforms. These conversations often use three theoretical frameworks. Linguistic imperialism, as defined by Phillipson (1992), describes how dominant groups use institutions like schools, media, and policy to elevate one language while subordinating others. Linguistic capital, as defined by Bourdieu (1986), explains how certain languages gain social value and prestige, shaping access to authority, resources, and identity. Linguistic economics, as defined by Marschak (1965), treats language as human capital and links linguistic proficiency to economic opportunity and mobility. Together, these frameworks show how language functions as a political, cultural, and economic instrument of power.

Viewed through a linguistic imperialism lens, linguistic anthropologist Dwyer (1998) argues that the promotion of Mandarin is a project of control: the state determines which languages "matter," constructing hierarchies that shape minority self-perception (p. 74). Sociolinguist Zhou (2003) traces how post-1949 script reforms and education policies institutionalized Mandarin's supremacy, determining who may participate in political and economic life, on what terms, and

using which language (p. 158). Linguist Bradley (2005) similarly observes that official classification systems often merge smaller linguistic communities under broader ethnic labels which makes it difficult to preserve distinct ethnic identities (p. 8). Collectively, these political forces create a structure in which minority languages are tolerated only so long as they do not challenge state priorities.

Viewed through a linguistic capital lens, education researcher Rosa Shir (2009) critiques the social effects of the “bilingual education” program designed to transition students from Uyghur to Mandarin. In 2017, officials in Hotan Prefecture in Xinjiang banned Uyghur-language instruction from kindergarten through high school, banned Uyghur books, and warned students not to speak their mother tongue (pp. 28–29). This program effectively erased Uyghur-language and positioned Mandarin as the only form of linguistic capital recognized by the state. From an educational standpoint, education researchers Linda Tsung and Ken Cruickshank (2009) describe how Mandarin dominance creates subtractive bilingualism: minority children lose fluency in their mother tongue without gaining full mastery of Mandarin, leaving them culturally disconnected and academically disadvantaged (pp. 556–557).

A similar redistribution of linguistic capital appears among the Tujia people in Hunan Province. Anthropologists Brassett and Brassett (2005) describe the Tujia language as “approaching the final phase of a long period of sustained decline,” a process accelerated not only by historical contact with Han Chinese but by contemporary pressures such as labor migration, Mandarin schooling, and mass media exposure (p. 75). In Bourdieu’s terms, Mandarin has become the dominant linguistic capital, and parents consistently express the desire for their children to adopt Mandarin as their mother tongue because it is viewed as essential for educational and economic success (p. 88).

Through Marschak’s (1965) linguistic economics, economist Wang (2021) argues that Mandarin proficiency operates as economic capital: it opens access to education, employment, and regional mobility, reducing poverty. Many minority families internalize this logic, and Wang’s empirical findings from his analysis of China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) from 2010 to 2018 show that a one-unit increase in Mandarin proficiency reduces the individual poverty index by 7.4% (p. 7). Despite economic growth, Wang (2021) warns that when Mandarin is valued solely for its market utility, other languages and forms of cultural knowledge become devalued. He calls this

“language poverty,” a narrowing of linguistic options that reduces what economist and philosopher Amartya Sen describes as “capability freedom,” or the ability to participate meaningfully in one’s culture, education, and community (p. 2).

Today, the linguistic hierarchy that devalued Uyghur and removed it from classrooms now governs social media platforms. As information and communication scholars Rebecca Clothey, Emmanuel Koku, Erfan Erkin, and Husenjan Emat (2016) show, Uyghur-language blogs once offered space for cultural commentary and coded dissent (pp. 863–866), but these spaces have steadily narrowed. Uyghur oppression now reappears as app restrictions, censorship protocols, and scripted propaganda videos.

## Propaganda Campaign as Abuse Denial

The first case concerns a propaganda video campaign investigated by ProPublica and The New York Times (Kao, Zhong, Mozur, & Krolik, 2021). After the U.S. State Department declared in January 2021 that China was committing genocide in Xinjiang, Chinese authorities rapidly produced and uploaded more than 3,000 testimonial videos between January and June. These clips flooded YouTube and Twitter (platforms blocked inside China) with state-scripted messages designed to discredit international criticism, particularly that of former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

A wide range of Uyghur laymen, like shopkeepers, students, and retirees, appeared in these clips repeating standardized Mandarin talking points. One frequent element was a critique of Pompeo, as exemplified in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Uyghur shopkeeper in a state-scripted “testimonial” video telling former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to “shut up.” This video originally circulated on the Xinjiang government’s Pomegranate Cloud app and reposted to Twitter on Feb. 12, 2021. As of 12/07/2025, the Western-platform version is no longer accessible.

Many videos dismissed international reporting as “complete nonsense” (“胡说八道”), a standardized phrase that surfaces in more than 600 coordinated videos (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Uyghur woman responding to foreign criticism by saying “He is just talking nonsense” in a selfie-style video produced for state distribution. This video originally circulated on the Xinjiang government’s Pomegranate Cloud. As of 12/07/2025, the Western-platform version is no longer accessible.

Another recurring formula was the assertion of being a “native Uyghur” (“土生土长”), a state-scripted authenticity claim meant to signal local credibility and deflect accusations of coercion (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Uyghur man stating “I’m a native Uyghur in Xinjiang” in a winter landscape, following the same testimonial script emphasizing local happiness and stability. This video originally circulated on the Xinjiang government’s Pomegranate Cloud. As of 12/07/2025, the Western-platform version is no longer accessible.

ProPublica reported that local propaganda authorities produced the clip and that some participants confirmed officials had written their lines. At least one shopkeeper redirected journalists to his assigned government handler. The propaganda pipeline was carefully engineered: videos first appeared on Pomegranate Cloud, an official Party news app, before being pushed internationally with English subtitles through coordinated “warehouse accounts” that distributed large volumes of propaganda content (Kao et al., 2021). Doing this distorts global perception while suppressing activism.

The testimonial propaganda videos exemplify the linguistic dynamics Shir (2019) identifies in contemporary Xinjiang: a shift from “covert toleration” to “overt prohibition and symbolic erasure” of Uyghur (p. 160). In these clips, Uyghurs speak only in Mandarin, performing state-scripted speech acts that signal Uyghur as an unsafe or illegitimate public language. This aligns with Tsung and Cruickshank’s (2009) account of subtractive bilingualism, where minority speakers lose their mother tongue without gaining full, empowered proficiency in the dominant language (pp. 556–557). The videos stage precisely this hierarchy: Uyghur is erased while Mandarin becomes the sole channel for demonstrating legitimacy and compliance. Phillipson’s

linguistic imperialism further clarifies how state media operate as institutions that elevate Mandarin while subordinating Uyghur, and Bourdieu's notion of linguistic capital shows why performing Mandarin becomes the only "valuable" linguistic resource—proof of loyalty and political reliability. Together, these frameworks illuminate how digital performances in Mandarin function as mechanisms of discipline, erasure, and the production of a compliant political subject.

As Rebiya Kadeer, a prominent Uyghur activist and former political prisoner, observed after seeing her granddaughters appear in such a video, "They know they're not speaking the truth. But they have to say what the Chinese government wants them to say." This example of brainwashing is through total control over who speaks, how they speak, and in which language Uyghur identity can exist.

## **State News as an Instrument of Coercion**

State-run news outlets such as CGTN and China Daily have been repeatedly weaponized to control Uyghur narratives, producing a range of video formats that discipline dissent, display coerced loyalty, and reshape global perceptions of life in Xinjiang. Among these formats, the so-called "proof-of-life" video has become one of the most chilling examples. As the Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP, 2021) documents, these videos almost always appear after relatives abroad speak publicly about missing family members. Individuals are filmed under visible surveillance, speaking only in Mandarin, repeating scripted lines such as "I am safe" or "my life is good," and sometimes even criticizing the very relatives who are advocating for them.

The mise-en-scène is meticulously staged: bright carpets, stacked nan, and bowls of fruit construct a fantasy of abundance, while stiff body language betrays coercion. In CGTN's interview, Memet Tohti Atawulla's family insists, "我们现在过得特别幸福" ("We live a very happy life now") (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Screenshot from a CGTN interview with the family of Memet Tohti Atawulla, who state “We live a very happy life now” while surrounded by staged displays of abundance. As of 12/07/2025, the original CGTN link is not publicly accessible.

Emotional manipulation is another tactic. In footage of Aziz Niyaz and his wife, CGTN films the couple “discovering” their daughter’s activism, prompting tears and confusion to evoke guilt and fear among the diaspora (Figure 5). The message is unmistakable: speaking out risks harming your family and disrupting their supposedly “beautiful lives.”



**Figure 5.** Screenshot of CGTN footage showing Aziz Niyaz and his wife being presented with state-curated material about their daughter in Turkey, who had spoken publicly about abuses. As of 12/07/2025, the original CGTN link is not publicly accessible.

CGTN also deploys character attacks. Hashadi, a local Women’s Federation official, publicly insults activist Sayragul Sauytbay as “人渣” (“scum”) to smear her credibility and intimidate others (Figure 6). These reputational attacks function as a warning to potential whistleblowers.



**Figure 6.** Screenshot from a March 2020 CGTN interview with “Hashadi,” the Vice-Chairwoman of the Women’s Federation in Zhaosu County, calling Sayragul Sauytbay a “degenerate” after Sauytbay fled China and exposed camp conditions. As of 12/07/2025, the original CGTN link is not publicly accessible.

In a China Daily broadcast, Iminjan Seydin urges his daughter Samira Imin to return, praising China’s “shocking” development to project prosperity and normalcy (Figure 7). These videos mask repression while pressuring activists to remain silent or come home.



**Figure 7.** Screenshot from a China Daily video of Iminjan Seydin in May 2020, praising China’s development and urging his daughter, Samira Imin, to return. As of 12/07/2025, the original China Daily link is not publicly accessible.

What unites these videos is not simply propaganda but linguistic coercion. As Dwyer (1998) notes, the state determines which languages “matter” (p. 74), and public participation becomes possible only in the dominant language. Here, Mandarin is not a communicative choice but a required performance of allegiance. Zhou’s (2003) observation that standardization governs “who may participate and on what terms” (p. 158) appears vividly: the only acceptable way for Uyghurs to appear publicly is through scripted Mandarin affirmations of loyalty.

Through Bourdieu’s lens, these videos turn Mandarin into coerced linguistic capital—a currency of safety rather than opportunity. Tsung and Cruickshank’s (2009) subtractive bilingualism also takes on a darker dimension: the suppression of Uyghur in these videos signals that the heritage language is incompatible with political safety. Phillipson’s linguistic imperialism is likewise visible in its most literal form—the state controls not only the message but the language through which the message must exist.

Ultimately, proof-of-life videos function as psychological weapons against the diaspora. By tying activism to family safety, they make speaking out dangerous. Through staged performances of Mandarin obedience, they allow Uyghur identity to appear only on state-approved linguistic terms: tightly regulated, conditionally permitted, and always under surveillance.

## Evolution of Online Activism

Clothey, Koku, Erkin, and Emat (2016) document how Uyghur activists and ordinary citizens used blogs and online platforms to share minority-language content and circulate cultural narratives (p. 859). These Uyghur-language blogs functioned as spaces to express identity, preserve heritage, and question official state narratives in their own language. Their analysis shows that bloggers relied on indirect communication, using “veiled language such as metaphors, sarcasm, and humor, or references to traditional Uyghur sayings... to make a direct point, in an indirect way” (p. 866). Despite constant surveillance, Uyghurs continued to type, publish, and connect. Blogging in Uyghur carried a risk of authorities shutting down blogs, so bloggers warned one another to “be careful about what they write,” citing consequences for subversive speech and reminders that “one sentence causes 10 years of dark suspension” (pp. 869–870). Even so, these platforms enabled individuals and communities to produce “hidden transcripts” that challenged government narratives (p. 863; see also pp. 870–871).

After 2017, this fragile space collapsed as there was intensified policing, mass internment, and expanding digital surveillance which led to Uyghur-language blogs being shut down, co-opted, or erased. By the early 2020s, the online sphere described by Clothey et al. had effectively vanished (pp. 872).

In April 2024, Radio Free Asia reported that Chinese authorities issued formal warnings and imposed bans preventing Uyghurs from using platforms such as WeChat (messaging, payments, business transactions, and government services) and Douyin (news, video content, and social media) (Hoja, 2024). These restrictions were enforced through police home visits, interrogations, and arrests, with individuals targeted for chatting in Uyghur, sending photos, or maintaining contact with relatives abroad (Hoja, 2024). Due to this, families lost the ability to send voice messages, operate small businesses, or stay connected with loved ones. Smaller Uyghur-language apps were removed entirely and replaced by surveillance systems.

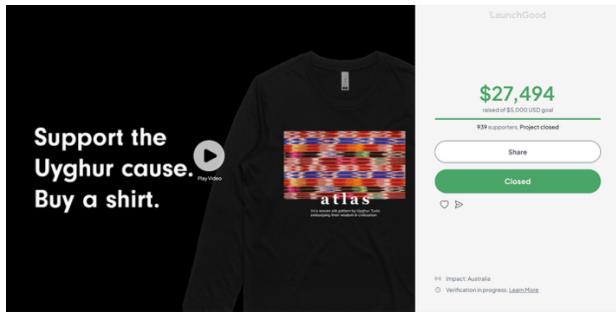
The app bans are an example of linguistic imperialism enacted through technological means and Uyghur is treated as a risk to national security and order. Bradley (2005) would argue that because the government “groups ‘related but distinct tribes’ together for administrative convenience” (p. 2), they can easily label entire communities, like Uyghur, as security threats and therefore justify their exclusion from the platforms that allow daily communication, commerce, and family life.

Building on Brassett and Brassett’s (2005) claim that Mandarin provides access to “education, employment, and broader social networks” (p. 88), the Uyghur case reveals that Mandarin is now the only safe language to use. Speaking Uyghur labels individuals as risky subjects and transforms linguistic capital from enabling mobility to enforcing control.

Finally, through Wang’s (2021) framework of linguistic economics, the removal of WeChat and Douyin produces what he calls “language poverty,” a “narrowing of linguistic options” that restricts people’s ability to participate in education, community, and economic life (p. 2). Because these platforms are essential for transactions, client communication, and basic services, Uyghurs are placed at a direct economic disadvantage for using their own language. This imposes an ultimatum: learn Mandarin or be poor.

## Diaspora Voices as Resistance

Because Western social media operates outside China’s surveillance apparatus, the fourth case highlights resistance through @TouchofTurkestan, an Instagram account created by Elham, a Uyghur diaspora activist in Adelaide, Australia (Manadath, 2021). Her posts showcase cultural expressions that cannot circulate safely inside China, transforming the page into a hub of diasporic visibility. It shares family histories, preserves Atlas (a traditional patterned silk fabric) textile traditions, and mobilizes support for Uyghur-led causes, most notably the Atlas shirt fundraiser, which generated over \$27,000 for advocacy groups (see Figure 8).



**Figure 8.** Screenshot from the *Atlas* campaign, with \$27,494 raised from 939 supporters.  
[https://www.launchgood.com/v4/campaign/together\\_for\\_uyghurs\\_under\\_oppression](https://www.launchgood.com/v4/campaign/together_for_uyghurs_under_oppression).

Elham uses Instagram as both an aesthetic and political platform. In one post, she shares a photo of a Uyghur girl dancing in a vibrant Atlas-patterned dress and doppa (hat), hashtagged #UyghurTurk and #atlaspattern, with the caption “Dance time♪ #UyghurTurk #girl #etles #atlaspattern” (Manadath, 2021; @touchofturkestan, Instagram, Sep 22, 2018). Other posts feature fundraising campaigns, book recommendations, or Uyghur cuisine, often paired with bilingual captions to educate international audiences and connect dispersed Uyghurs. As Elham explains, “We make our voices heard over social media because the mainstream media doesn’t do us Uyghurs justice” (Manadath, 2021).



**Figure 9.** Screenshot from @TouchofTurkestan’s Instagram post featuring a young Uyghur girl dancing in a traditional *Atlas*-pattern dress and doppa.  
[https://www.instagram.com/p/BoDSA0mgI\\_Y/](https://www.instagram.com/p/BoDSA0mgI_Y/).

@TouchofTurkestan challenges the linguistic hierarchy enforced inside China. While state propaganda compels Uyghurs to perform scripted Mandarin, this diaspora account circulates Uyghur language, textiles, and stories beyond state surveillance, restoring the symbolic value that “bilingual education” and standardization policies sought to erode. In Bourdieu’s terms, the page converts Uyghur cultural practices into publicly recognized forms of linguistic capital, assigning prestige to expressions marginalized inside China. Elham’s fundraising campaigns and global audience also counter what Wang (2021) calls “language poverty,” generating revenue, networks, and visibility through Uyghur culture itself. By curating a digital archive that sustains memory,

rebuilds community, and reframes Uyghur identity as vibrant and self-defined, the account reopens capability freedoms that state policy attempts to close, asserting a linguistic and cultural presence the state cannot extinguish.

## Conclusion

Across propaganda feeds, coerced interviews, shuttered blogs, and banned apps, this paper has shown how the Chinese government uses social media to decide who may speak and in what language a people may exist. The goal is not only to silence Uyghur voices but to script them so thoroughly in Mandarin that Uyghur identity appears only in its state-approved form. When a language is stripped from classrooms, removed from screens, and punished in communication, it becomes clear that linguistic oppression is not ancillary to political violence—it is political violence.

And yet, resistance sustains. Diaspora creators like @TouchofTurkestan rebuild what has been erased in China: memory, culture, and pride. Their posts of Atlas silk, dance, and family stories constitute a cultural archive the government cannot confiscate. These acts do not reverse the damage occurring in Xinjiang, but they insist that Uyghur identity exists far beyond the narratives the government tries to write.

As global audiences, we therefore hold a responsibility: to recognize digital propaganda when we encounter it, to support Uyghur-led cultural and political work, and to understand that the platforms we use daily can either reinforce repression or protect the voices that authoritarianism seeks to erase. The story of Uyghur digital life is not only one of surveillance and coercion, but also one of communities continually finding new ways to speak, connect, and be seen.

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