

# Chinese Propaganda Is No Longer Inward Facing and Profusely Positive: A Case Study of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang

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## Extended Abstract

Over the last decade China has become the United States' main global geopolitical competitor. Cyberspace, and social media platforms troubled by computational propaganda, are crucial domains in this competition (Bolsover, 2017). Previous studies have shown that Chinese propaganda has mostly consisted of effusively supportive messages about the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), primarily targeting the domestic population, but also citizens of bordering states with positive messaging (Brady, 2012; King et al., 2017). Our study reveals that Chinese digital manipulation campaigns are changing— Chinese propaganda now targets a range of foreign audiences and contains more marked negativity. In this study we examine Twitter-based propaganda related to the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, an ethnic and religious minority in China who have experienced well-documented domestic human rights abuse and, as such, become the focus of major international concern (Maizland, 2022; Shichor, 2015).

In December 2021, Twitter released tweets posted between March 2019 and March 2021 from 2,048 accounts that were removed because of their involvement with amplification of 'Chinese Communist Party narratives related to the treatment of the Uyghur population in Xinjiang.' (Twitter, 2021) We analyzed this dataset and detected several languages, with most of the tweets being written in either Mandarin Chinese, English, or Japanese. For the purposes of this study, we focused our analysis on 10,985 Mandarin Chinese and 10,771 English tweets. For the English tweets, a substring search was used to identify tweets directly related to Xinjiang or the Uyghur community (retweets were excluded). To correlate the tweets to news articles written, we utilized a dataset from LexisNexis containing news article headlines from *China Daily*. Considering the time frame of the Twitter dataset in question, we limited our headline dataset to articles published from March 2019 to March 2021. We also utilized a substring search to identify relevant headlines from this time period. The substring search found 310 relevant articles.

Topic modeling was conducted to understand the trends of the datasets, utilizing the Python module Gensim and running the script on Google Colab. To account for the differences across mediums and languages, three topic models were constructed: an English tweet topic model, a Mandarin Chinese topic model, and a *China Daily* headline topic model. For each model, a list of stop words was utilized to remove common or unrelated words from the topic model results. For each model, four or five topics were used to classify all of the documents. After categorizing each document into a topic, the topics from the tweet topic models were analyzed to detect spikes in activity; this was done using an outlier analysis. In doing so, our analysis identifies the specific

days where Chinese propaganda activity around a topic increased dramatically. We correlated these spikes to global events involving the Uyghurs at those times.

Figure 1 shows the final results of the Mandarin Chinese Twitter, English Twitter, and *China Daily* topic models. Each circle represents a topic created by the topic model and the graphs show that cluster's correlation with other topics. Each topic cluster has a word frequency attached to it, highlighting the most frequent words in a given cluster. Figure 2 shows the frequency of tweets for a given topic in Mandarin Chinese and English. As shown, most topics within the same language spike on the same day. It was also found that tweets from Chinese disinformation actors pivoted from Mandarin Chinese to English after April 29, 2020.

While the topic models used created four or five topic clusters, both cluster proximity and outlier analysis suggest that these topics can be aggregated into two broader themes—spreading positive messaging about Xinjiang and depicting Western narratives negatively. Of relevant tweets, 52.6% of Mandarin Chinese tweets focused on calling Western narratives false and the other 48.1% focused on pro-China messaging. These percentages were almost identical for the English topic modeling (52.2% of tweets depicted Western entities negatively and 47.8% spread positive narratives about China). The results of the social media topic models contrast with the *China Daily* results, which found that 73.3% of headlines related to false Western narratives, and 26.7% spread positive narratives about the region. Outlier analysis of the tweets and research into global events for that spikes were directly related to global events surrounding the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. For example:

- June 26, 2020: 9 days after Trump signs Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act into law
- December 14, 2020: International Criminal Court dismisses Uyghur case because of territorial jurisdiction
- January 7, 2021: Chinese Embassy tweet about Uyghur women blocked from Twitter for dehumanization

The results of our analysis suggest that Chinese propaganda is evolving, from a strategy that has been internally focused to a campaign that is more internationally oriented and uses more attacks towards foreign enemies of the CCP. Evidence of this can be found in the fact that tweets were written in several languages, including Mandarin Chinese, Japanese (a regional power), and English (for Western, and primarily U.S. audiences).

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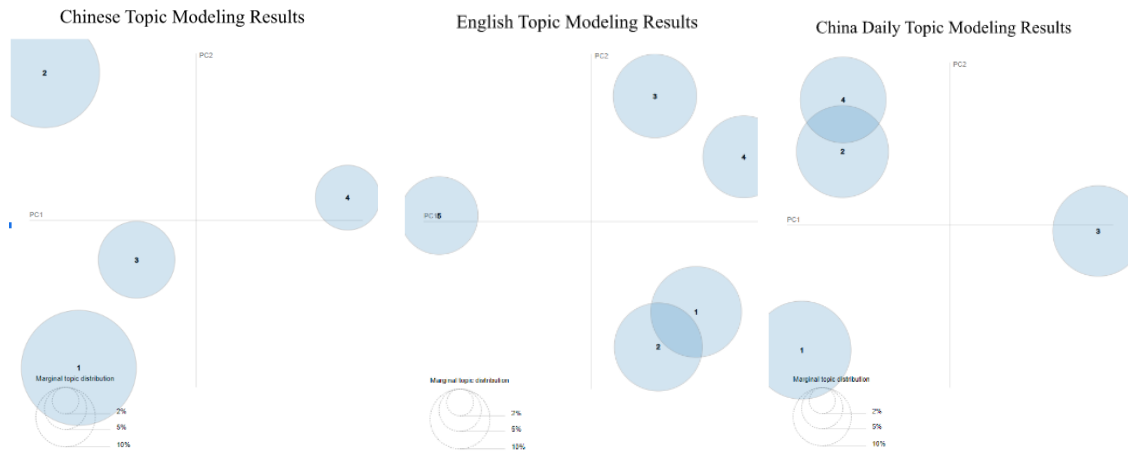


Figure 1: Topic Models: Mandarin Chinese Tweets, English Tweets, and China Daily Headlines

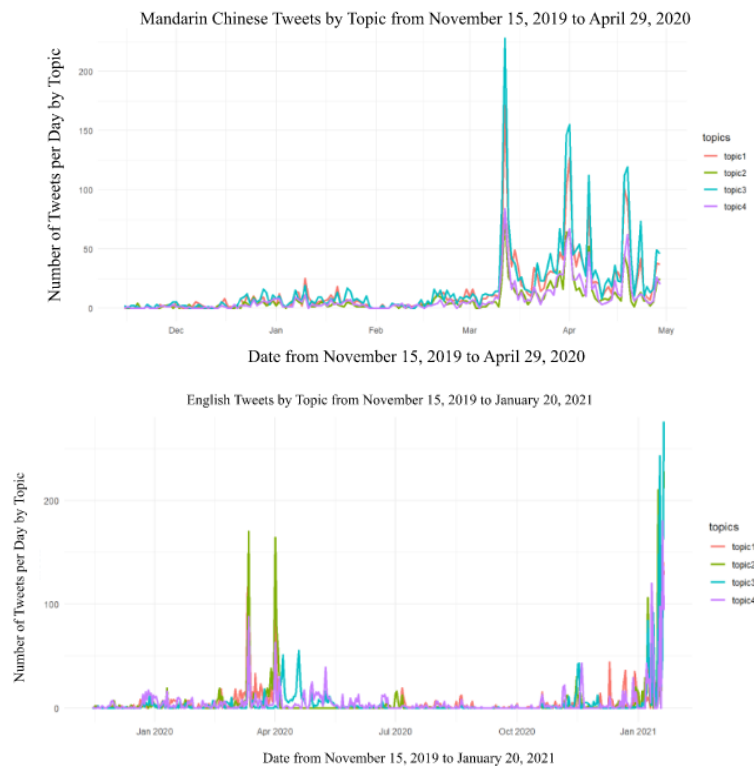


Figure 2: Outlier Analysis of Mandarin Chinese Tweets from November 15, 2019 to April 29, 2020 and English Tweets from November 15, 2019 to January 20, 2021