

One Topic, Two Networks: Evaluating Two Chinese Influence Operations on Twitter Related to Xinjiang

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1 Introduction

This report explores the narratives and tactics of two distinct China-linked datasets from Twitter’s December 2021 inauthentic network takedowns. The first network, which we will call CNHU, consisted of fake and coordinated accounts that boosted CCP narratives about Xinjiang and the minority Uyghur population, shared positive information about the local government’s efforts to fight COVID, and amplified Chinese state media. Twitter attributed the activity to the Chinese government generally.

The second network, which we will call CNCC, also focused on communicating official CCP narratives about Xinjiang, with a particular focus on reaching international audiences through purported first-person video testimonials from Uyghur individuals describing their lives. This takedown was specifically attributed to an entity by the name of Changyu Culture, a private company acting on behalf of the government. This operation is unique in that it is the first China-linked takedown attributed by Twitter to a specific private company within the country.

2 Key Takeaways

The activity observed in the CNHU and CNCC datasets was perhaps most notable for its overlap with recurring activity that had been detected, reported on, and taken down previously. Indeed, even during the period between when Twitter provided SIO analysts with the datasets and the publishing of this report, SIO analysts observed clusters of newly-created accounts leveraging the same hashtags, displaying the same operational features, promoting the same narratives, and boosting official, attributable state media. The persistence in narratives and tactics—despite the seeming lack of any reach, engagement, or impact—is notable, and reinforces the challenge of deterring motivated actors with removal alone.

An outstanding feature of this cluster of takedowns is the attribution of CNCC to a non-governmental entity, Changyu Culture. Researchers including at [BuzzFeed News](#), the [Stanford Internet Observatory](#), and the [Oxford Internet Institute](#) have observed a rise in outsourcing state-linked information operations to third-party mercenary organizations. This outsourcing activity has been observed in operations originating from several countries in the MENA region, as well as Russia. This is the first time, to our knowledge, that Twitter has attributed an operation to a specific commercial organization within China; however, [China analysts](#) have begun to note instances of tenders for privately-run influence activities, suggesting that this contracting behavior may be more common than previously thought.

There was some overlap in the timing of the operations and some commonality in content and hashtags. However, beyond their topical overlap, SIO analysts found no activity linking the CNHU and CNCC networks; the accounts did not mention those in the other network, nor retweet the other network’s content. The

networks, however, demonstrate overlap with existing [published work](#) and by social media analysts on Twitter.

3 Background: Previous Chinese Influence Operations

The Chinese Communist Party has long taken a [full-spectrum approach](#) to shaping international public opinion about China, leveraging all available types of overtly-attributable media channels, as well as covert means of influence, to spread its messaging. It employs hundreds of journalists and [spends billions of dollars](#) to promote its image abroad, and has directly or indirectly [purchased hundreds](#) of overseas Chinese-language newspapers in a bid to improve coverage of the mainland. Several of its overt English-language state-run publications, such as CGTN, and prominent public figures, such as key government ministers, have large followings on Western social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube as well. Promoting a positive image of China is core to the CCP's propaganda strategy.

Beginning in 2019, those same social media companies began to discover and take down networks of covert accounts that they attributed to the CCP. In August 2019 [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [YouTube](#) suspended thousands of accounts for coordinated inauthentic behavior and attributed the activity to the CCP. This was the first time China had been publicly linked to a state-sponsored influence operation by one of the Western social media platforms. The accounts voiced CCP talking points while attempting to obscure their state links behind a variety of personas, masquerading as independent media or as ordinary people in Hong Kong with strong opinions about local protest movements. A year later, in June 2020, Twitter suspended another network of accounts linked to China. In its [blog post](#) on the 2020 operation, Twitter stated that the technical links used to identify and attribute the operation were consistent with the activity identified in August 2019.

TWITTER TAKEDOWN TIMELINE

-
- | | |
|--------------|--|
| August 2019 | • Approximately 200,000 accounts suspended, with a narrative focus on Hong Kong and Guo Wengui |
| June 2020 | • 23,750 main accounts and approximately 150,000 amplifier accounts suspended, with a narrative focus on Hong Kong, Guo Wengui, and COVID-19 |
| October 2021 | • 2,016 CNHU accounts and 112 CNCC accounts suspended, with a narrative focus on Xinjiang |
-

This ‘respawn’ dynamic is a feature of pro-CCP influence operations that has also been observed by Graphika, a network analysis company. Graphika first

identified a large-scale spam network linked to Twitter's first CCP-attributed dataset, which consisted primarily of YouTube channels that posted nature and animal videos designed to appeal to a widespread audience, with the occasional political propaganda video mixed in. This content strategy may have been an attempt to conceal the true goal or provenance of the channel from platform detection, or simply to reach broad unsuspecting audiences with the political content. The "Spamouflage" network, as it was dubbed, was made up of "active and prolific - but ultimately low-impact - cross-platform political spam" used to promote pro-CCP narratives about Hong Kong and later COVID-19. Since Graphika first published its findings in [September 2019](#), it has tracked the resurfacing of the network multiple times in 2020 and most recently in 2021.

The narratives spread by accounts in both the 2019 and 2020 operations on Twitter had topical overlap: both operations defended the Hong Kong police and China's rule of law in Hong Kong while disparaging protesters. Both operations also attacked Chinese billionaire dissident and conspiracy theorist Guo Wengui. The newer operation did incorporate an additional narrative focus, on [COVID-19](#), and suggested that [despite the earlier network takedown](#) the CCP still considered social media to be a worthwhile battlefield for shaping public opinion. The COVID-19 tweets in the 2020 operation presented a favorable image of China's pandemic response, while at the same time criticizing the response of those seen as adversaries or critics (Hong Kong activists and the U.S. Government, among others). [Some tweets spanned these narratives](#), by, for instance, asking how Hong Kong rioters could create chaos at a time when China and Hong Kong should be uniting to face the pandemic.

3.1 The 2021 Campaign: Comparison to Past Operations

As with the 2019 and 2020 takedowns, the accounts in the 2021 dataset consist largely of primitive personas with few biographical details, nonsensical names, few followers, and very low engagement; larger-following and older accounts appear to be previously-compromised repurposed entities. Accounts in the dataset once again appeared to try to flood conversation around salient topics with favorable narratives, rather than infiltrate target populations or develop large-scale followings of legitimate social media users.

One notable distinction in the December 2021 takedown is specific to its attribution: the CNCC dataset, attributed to an organization known as Changyu Culture (described in detail below), marks the first time that a CCP-linked influence operation has been attributed to a [mercenary organization](#) by Twitter. [Previous work](#) by the Stanford Internet Observatory has observed that Facebook and Twitter are more frequently attributing takedowns to digital marketing and PR companies—with the Changyu Culture attribution being just the latest example of this trend.

A second distinction is the emergence of a new primary focus: While the December 2021 CNCC takedown dataset does include some tweets about Hong Kong, COVID-19, and Guo Wengui, these topics are not the primary focus of either

operation. Rather, this time, the primary focus is a positive presentation of the CCP's actions with regards to Xinjiang. The Chinese government's involvement in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) has gained global attention as numerous human rights groups have **accused** the government of committing human rights abuses in the region. Under mounting diplomatic **pressure**, the CCP's efforts in this operation are most likely an attempt to change the global narrative so that China is seen in a more favorable light on the international stage—another manifestation of the same overall strategy of creating a positive opinion of China that is observable in prior overt and covert propaganda efforts across broadcast and social media.

3.2 Media and Research Coverage of China's Influence Operations About Xinjiang

Xinjiang is home to diverse communities of Turkic Muslims, including more than **12 million Uyghurs**. Throughout the 1990s and early 2010s, tensions between the **Han Chinese and Uyghur communities** intensified and occasionally erupted into violence, including terrorist attacks associated with Uyghur separatist movements, such as the **1997 bus bombings** in Xinjiang's capital, Ürümqi. In 2014, following **another string** of deadly attacks, Chinese President Xi Jinping **officially launched** China's "People's War on Terror," which, according to **Chinese state media reporting** at the time, sought to eradicate extremism and "win the ideological battle against separation and infiltration." Repression and surveillance efforts by the CCP—**already underway by 2014**—thereafter intensified.

As part of the People's War, the region has become even more heavily surveilled, with frequent checkpoints leveraging **facial-recognition technology**. According to numerous investigative reports, including from the **United Nations**, the **New York Times**, **Amnesty International**, the **Wall Street Journal**, **Buzzfeed**, **Reuters**, the **Council on Foreign Relations** and others, since 2017 the Chinese government has detained between several hundred thousand and more than one million people in the northwest province of Xinjiang in what the government describes as "re-education camps." According to **leaked documents** published by the New York Times, inmates undergo indoctrination and interrogation for months to years in order to become loyal supporters of the CCP. Investigative journalists and **former camp** residents have also reported that China has imposed other repressive measures such as **surveillance**, **forced labor**, and **forced sterilizations**.

Previous work on the variety of propaganda methods that the CCP uses to influence international perceptions of its Xinjiang surveillance and re-education policies has been published by the **Australian Strategic Policy Institute** (ASPI), **CNN**, and others. In a **report** published in March 2021, ASPI observed that since early 2020 there has been an increase in "the Chinese Government and state media's use of US social media networks to push alternative narratives and disinformation about the situation in Xinjiang." The same **report** discussed a seemingly coordinated information operation on Twitter and YouTube in which state-affiliated accounts amplified videos from a YouTube channel belonging to '昶宇文化Changyu Culture', the organization to which one of the December

2021 Twitter datasets is now attributed. Links to Changyu Culture's YouTube channel appeared in the CNCC tweets that Twitter shared with SIO, and the account @dishapa65190266, which ASPI suspected to be Changyu Culture's official corporate Twitter account, was included in the takedown.

ASPI's report goes on further to describe Changyu Culture's association with the [United Front](#), a nebulous Party-run influence organization, via contracts with the [Xinjiang Audio-Video Publishing House](#), a state-owned media organization. Our investigation additionally associates Changyu Culture with a Xinjiang local government (Yuepu Lake County) via a propaganda tender request and award.

In addition to the ties to work published by ASPI, the two December 2021 datasets provided to SIO by Twitter appear to contain accounts similar to those in other news coverage. In June 2021, [ProPublica](#) and [The New York Times](#) published a joint in-depth investigation into China's propaganda tactics surrounding Xinjiang. The investigation examined over 3,000 videos posted to YouTube and Twitter that deny any wrongdoing by the Chinese government and criticize foreign officials who have publicly said otherwise. The videos were collected between February 18, 2021 and June 2, 2021, which overlaps by a few months with the tweets in the CNHU and CNCC datasets. The videos identified by the journalists cover themes similar to those promoted by the accounts in the Twitter datasets as well. In particular, the coverage prominently references propaganda related to former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo making "inappropriate remarks" about the rights of Uyghurs in Xinjiang; this activity began after Pompeo released an official [press statement](#) on January 19, 2021 which detailed the State Department's observation of "the Party's increasingly repressive treatment of the Uyghurs and other ethnic and religious minority groups."



Figure 1: A screenshot of one of the videos discussed in the New York Times and ProPublica investigation.

4 The CNHU Network

The CNHU network removed by Twitter in December 2021 was attributed to the Chinese Communist Party. Content shared by the network focused heavily on Xinjiang and is consistent with a desire, on the part of the CCP, to control the global narrative around Xinjiang. Much of the content is in English; the accounts

boosted English-language articles and messages originally spread by Chinese state media outlets and used English-language hashtags, likely in an effort to reframe global debate or to **crowd out** critical/adversarial narratives. In this section, we outline the contours of the network before describing different Xinjiang-related themes that it promoted.

4.1 Network Contours (Accounts + Engagements)

The CNHU dataset consisted of 2,016 accounts that produced a total of 31,269 tweets. The accounts were created between April 13, 2019 and February 21, 2021, with a large number of accounts created on a handful of days in March and April 2021. For example, 422 accounts were created on March 12, 2020, 240 were created on March 31, 2020, and 187 accounts were created on March 11, 2020. These three dates alone account for the creation of more than 40% of all accounts in the dataset.

The accounts in the CNHU dataset had very small followings. The account with the largest following had only 485 followers, and more than half of the accounts (1,459) had none. Many of the account usernames consisted of a first name followed by 4 or 5 numbers, Twitter's auto-assigned format for a username if a new account creator does not choose a specific one. Some of the display names were repeated; seven accounts had the display name "eartha," each of which had the username "eartha" followed by 4 letters. Most of the display names were in English, but some were in Chinese. The accounts were thinly veiled, with minimal evidence of any attempt to craft plausible personas—only 26 accounts had a user profile description at the time that they were taken down.

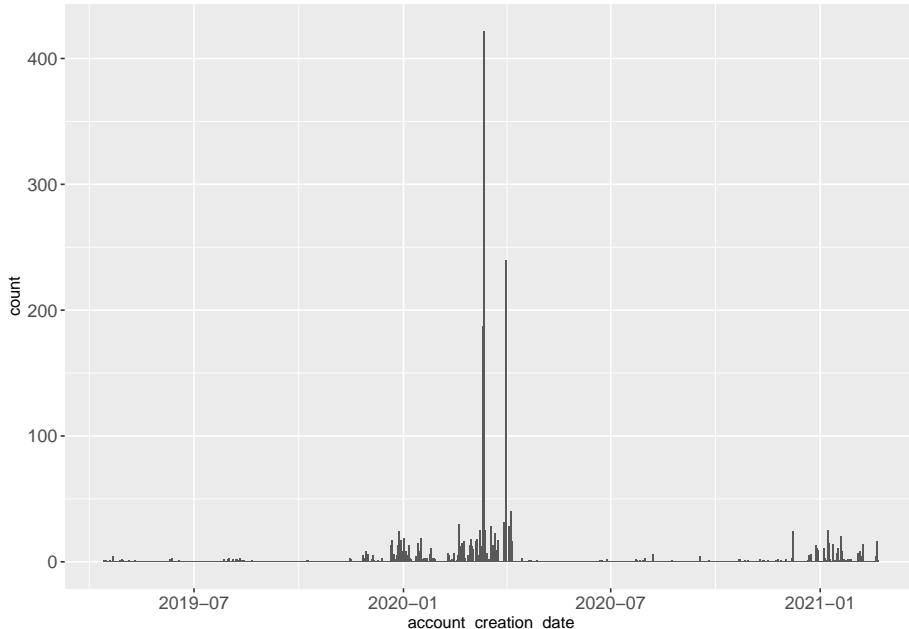


Figure 2: Number of accounts created by date.

The overwhelming majority of tweets in the CNHU set received no engagement

(calculated as the sum of likes, replies, retweets, and quote-tweets): 30,414 of the 31,269 total tweets received 0 engagements, and another 495 tweets received only 1 engagement. The tweet with the highest number of engagements received only 279 engagements.

4.1.1 Top Mentions

The accounts primarily produced original tweets; less than 10% of the tweets were retweets and only 3.8% were in reply to another tweet.

The tweets occasionally mentioned other users. The users most frequently mentioned typically fall into one of two categories: Chinese state media accounts, or participants in the public conversation about Uyghurs in Xinjiang (such as Uyghur activists, or those who have commented extensively on Uyghur rights). SIO analysts examining CNHU account interactions with these other users noted two primary strategies: bombarding Uyghur activists with mentions, possibly to overwhelm them or crowd out their voice, and promoting official state media accounts, possibly to give the impression of outsized support for pro-CCP narratives or to drive them into the mainstream conversation. These actions broadly align with two tactics described in a recent Washington Quarterly piece by Jessica Brandt: China “coopt[s] critical conversations on its rights record,” and “manufactur[es] the appearance of popular backing.”

Rank	Account Mentioned	Times Mentioned	Notes
1	@ErkinSidick	506	Dr. Erkin Sidick is the President of the Uyghur Project Foundation and an activist for Uyghurs
2	@Dolkun_Isa	489	Dolkun Isa is the President of the Uyghur Congress
3	@globaltimesnews	484	Official account of Global Times, Chinese state media
4	@fuck_next	477	Account does not appear in the Internet Archive
5	1336313886895648770	290	Unknown account
6	@adrianzenz	283	Adrian Zenz is a Senior Fellow in China Studies at Voices of Communism. He researches Xinjiang and Tibet
7	@UyghurCongress	273	Official account of the World Uyghur Congress, an organization that promotes Uyghur human rights
8	@HKokbore	265	Ilshat H. Kokbore is the President of the Uighur American Association.
9	@mikepompeo	225	Official account of former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo
10	@Erkin_Azat	221	Kazakh journalist-in-exile who has reported on the Xinjiang detention centers
11	@nuryturkel	192	Uyghur-American attorney, Commissioner of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom
12	@jenniferatntd	159	Jennifer Zeng is a Falun Gong activist
13	@AsiyeUyghur	159	Netherlands-based Uyghur activist
14	@CGTNOfficial	150	Official account of CGTN, China state media
15	@SpokespersonCHN	145	Official account of Hua Chunying, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Director General, Information Department, MFA PRC

Table 1: Fifteen Twitter accounts most frequently mentioned by accounts in the CNHU network takedown.

4.2 Narratives

Accounts in the dataset shifted narrative focus over time. In 2019 and the first few months of 2020, tweets were primarily non-political filler and nonsense. They included random phrases, and a higher portion were in Chinese than in the months to come. In 2021, however, the tweets became tightly concentrated on Xinjiang. Tweets echoed the CCP party line, often tweeting content on this topic produced by state media—sometimes directly, through quote-tweets, and sometimes more subtly, such as by sharing images of articles written by state media without linking to the content directly.

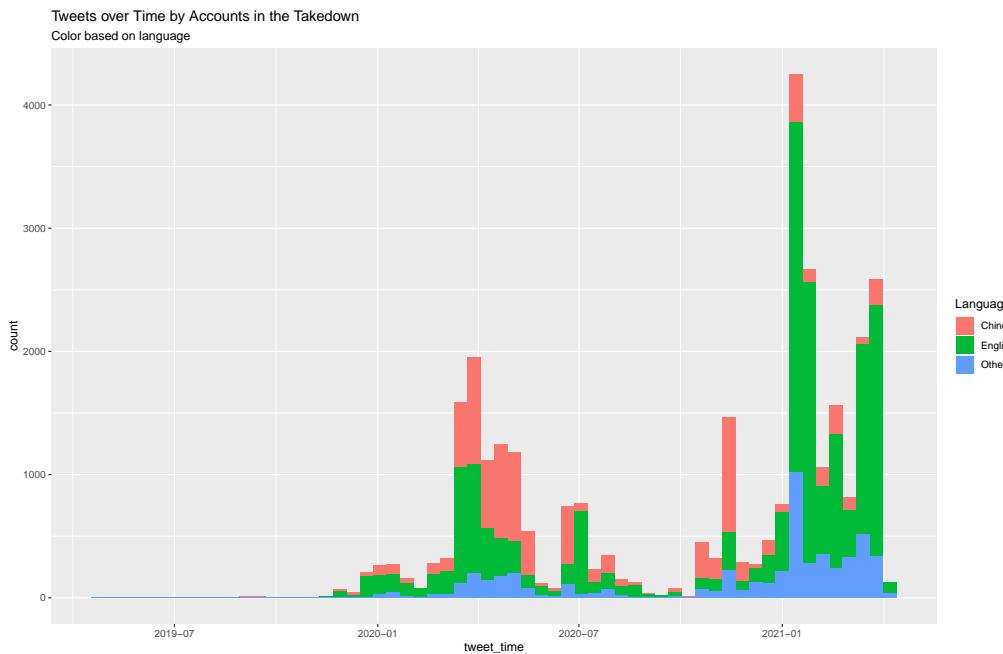


Figure 3: Tweets in the dataset by language (coded “Chinese,” “English,” or “Other”). The first spike of tweets in 2020 were primarily non-political filler content in Chinese or English. The spike of tweets in 2021 are primarily in English and are focused on Xinjiang.

The top ten hashtags present in the tweets all reflect this focus; examples include #Xinjiang in upper case, lower case, and in Chinese, #XinjiangOnline, #StopXinjiangRumors, and #China. These hashtags accompanied tweets claiming that treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang was good and that the West, and the United States specifically, was lying about the treatment of minorities there for political purposes.

Rank	Hashtag	Count
1	Xinjiang	11307
2	XinjiangOnline	2666
3	StopXinjiangRumors	2066
4	xinjiang	1637
5	新疆 (Translation: Xinjiang)	1121
6	Pompeo	735
7	Uyghur	621
8	Urumqi (Note: Urumqi is the capital of Xinjiang)	557
9	China	556
10	新疆是个好地方 (Translation: Xinjiang is a good place)	333

Table 2: Ten hashtags most frequently used by accounts in the CNHU network takedown.

In Figure 4, we re-plot tweets in the dataset based on whether they include a hashtag (or multiple hashtags). Accounts in the dataset rarely used hashtags before January 2021, at which point they were deployed en masse to amplify narratives spread by state media about Xinjiang.

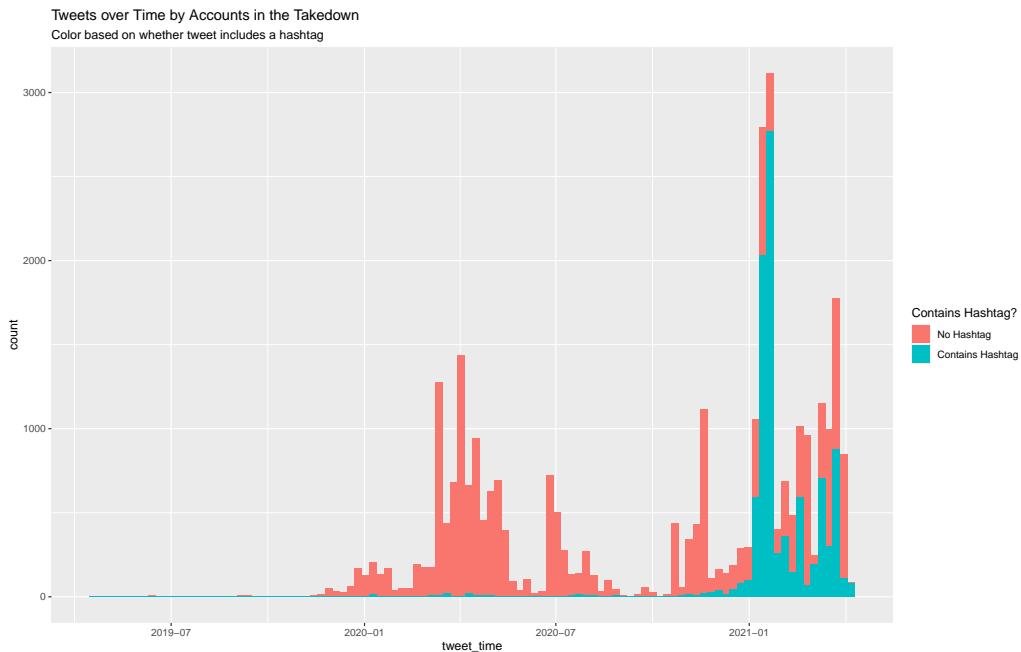


Figure 4: Hashtag prevalence over time for tweets in the CNHU dataset.

The Xinjiang-related content expressed a range of CCP talking points that have appeared regularly in state media. These include, but are not limited to, content arguing that:

- Xinjiang is stable and the treatment of Uyghurs there is great.
- Xinjiang “education and vocational centers” are necessary to prevent terrorism.
- The West is lying about Xinjiang, hypocritical about human rights abuses, and/or using Xinjiang as a political tool. U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo was a particular focus here after he claimed that China is committing genocide against Uyghurs.

4.2.1 Positive Treatment in Xinjiang

One recurring theme pushed by accounts in the dataset was that people in Xinjiang live peaceful and happy lives. Accounts posted an image of a China Daily article, “Short videos depict peaceful and happy lives in south Xinjiang,” that describes a series of short videos where “graduates from vocational and education training centers in the region” speak about “their peaceful and happy lives with promising futures.”



Figure 5: Example of an image of a China Daily article that was posted by accounts in the dataset. Like many of the images in the dataset, the image includes a watermark that was not present in the original China Daily article. We discuss these watermarks further in Section 4.3 on page 22.

4.2.2 Xinjiang Policy as Necessary to Combat Terrorism

Another theme of the Xinjiang-content among tweets in the CNHU dataset amplified the CCP-narrative that “education and training centers in southern Xinjiang” are necessary to protect human rights. Over 1,000 tweets from January 19, 2021 to January 21, 2021 include “Xinjiang’s counter-terrorism measures protect human rights”—the title of a China Daily [article](#) on the subject.



Figure 6: Example of a screenshot of a video about positive experiences in Xinjiang that was shared by an account in the takedown.

These tweets typically exhibited a few patterns: They frequently used hashtags #Xinjiang or #XinjiangOnline and included a link to the China Daily article. Most of them mentioned other accounts—sometimes accounts that were removed in the dataset, and sometimes academics, Uyghur politicians, or activists. They received little or no engagement (only three of the tweets received any engagements.) Finally, they often included an image of a China Daily article, oftentimes with a watermark of a Twitter handle included in the takedown.

In Figure 7 on the next page, we show six examples of these tweets with the same watermark over the image. Like in many other cases, tweets were repetitive tweets derived from the headlines of the state media they were sharing.

4.2.3 Responses to Secretary of State Pompeo

On January 19, 2021, one day before the Biden administration would take office, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo released a [press statement](#) titled, “Determination of the Secretary of State on Atrocities in Xinjiang.” In the statement, Secretary Pompeo wrote that the PRC, under the CCP, has “committed crimes against humanity” and has “committed genocide” against the predominantly Muslim Uyghurs and other ethnic and religious minority groups in Xinjiang.

Pompeo had been highly critical of the CCP’s human rights abuses throughout his time as Secretary of State and has a large social media following. According to a [report](#) by ASPI, by 2020, Pompeo had the Twitter account with the most likes on tweets containing the word “Xinjiang.” The use of the term ‘genocide’, however, was a significant step. The Chinese Communist Party and affiliated state media strongly condemned the declaration.

Chen Weihua, the China Daily EU Bureau Chief, responded to Pompeo’s subsequent tweet with the declaration: “Less than 24 hours before Secretary of Disinformation Mike Pompeo is gone for good. Time to celebrate.”

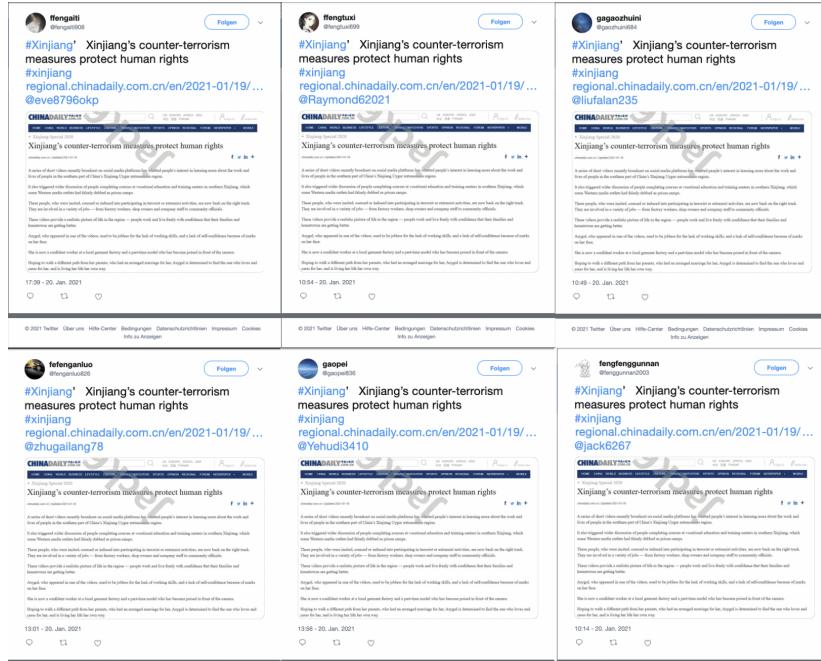


Figure 7: Examples of accounts in the dataset sharing a link to a China Daily article. The screenshot of the article frequently had a watermark over it of partial twitter handles of accounts removed in the dataset.



Figure 8: Chen Weihua **responds** to Secretary Pompeo's determination that the PRC is committing genocide by calling Secretary Pompeo "Secretary of Disinformation."

The following day the Spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy in the United States **said** that Pompeo's statement "ignores facts and makes groundless attacks on the Chinese government's policy on Xinjiang." Further, that "The so-called "genocide" in Xinjiang is simply a lie. It is a farce used to discredit China."

In addition to responding through overt channels, the CCP leveraged accounts in the CNHU dataset to amplify these claims. For example, on January 21, 2021, 26 accounts in the dataset quote-tweeted a **press statement** published by Tianshannet, a Chinese state-media outlet in Xinjiang, "Stern Statement by the People's Government of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region on Refuting US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's Xinjiang-related Lies."

In each case, the tweet consisted of the first line of the press statement: "On January 19th, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo published Xinjiang-related lies, ignoring the facts and deliberately smearing the good situation and the happy life of people of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang," followed by several punctuation signs or symbols—a possible sign of automation. As was typical with tweets in the dataset about Pompeo, these tweets received 0 engagement, and were likely used in an attempt to increase the popularity of the tweet they quoted.

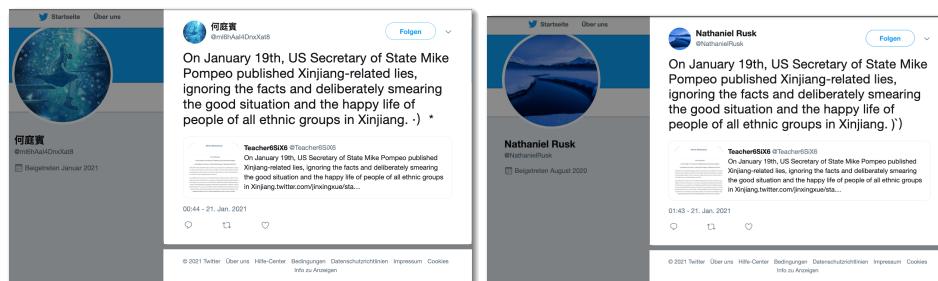


Figure 9: Two of the 26 accounts in the dataset that quote-tweeted Teacher6Six6 sharing a press release criticizing Mike Pompeo. In each case, the quote-tweet included the first line of the press statement, followed by several punctuation marks. [Internet Archive](#)

Pompeo-related tweets by accounts in the dataset often amplified content from state media sources directly. For example, 31 accounts quote-tweeted the Global Times sharing its article "Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide." Here, the accounts shared the title of the article followed by several punctuation marks. We discuss these characters, which we believe may evidence of automation, in Section 4.3.2.

These examples demonstrate how well-resourced states wage what we call "full-spectrum information operations" using overt and covert propaganda tools in complementary ways. Here, we see covert social media accounts amplify overt state media, likely in an attempt to create the appearance of widespread support for official narratives.



Figure 10: An account in the CNHU dataset quote-tweeting the Global Times, with an article titled “Pompeo’s art of the life: From coronavirus to genocide.” This quote-tweet and others like it in the dataset end with punctuation marks and symbols. The ProPublica-New York Times investigation identified this artifact as a sign that the tweets were posted sloppily by software.

4.2.4 Responses to the West

Beyond tweeting about Pompeo, accounts in the dataset also framed Western press coverage and statements about Xinjiang and the Uyghur issue as fraught with conspiracy theories, or as a political ploy. On March 27, 2021, accounts shared an article from CGTN titled, “Beijing: So-called Xinjiang Uygur issue is U.S. strategic conspiracy.” The article includes a video of Lawrence Wilkinson, former chief of staff to U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, in which he talks about a potential for the CIA to destabilize China through Uyghurs.

The accounts also shared articles from state media that made accusations that the United States was using the Uyghur issue as a political tool. For example, accounts shared links to an op-ed in China Daily, “Uyghurs a bargaining chip in US-China trade war.” The article claims that the United States cannot compete with China on fair terms, and thus has turned to “dirty tricks,” such as lying about the treatment of Uyghurs, to justify its trade war. A number of tweets focused on similar things, such as an ECNS.CN article “China urges West to halt interference under guise of human rights at UN session.”

The focus was broader than just the United States. Accounts shared tweets about China sanctioning U.S. and Canadian individuals, expressing dissatisfaction with Global Affairs Canada’s remarks on human rights in Xinjiang, and noting that China was formulating countermeasures against planned EU sanctions.

4.2.5 Memes

Past research on social media influence operations—notably efforts by Russia’s Internet Research Agency in 2016—have noted the use of memes to reach target audiences in accessible language. As one CNA report on the use of memes notes, “Visual memes often (though not always) use humor, irony, and sarcasm in order to resonate emotionally.”

Many of the tweets in the dataset included images, frequently memes from third



Figure 11: An account in the dataset sharing a tweet by Lijian Zhao claiming that Xinjiang-related measures by the UK & Canada are “based on nothing but lies & disinformation.” A reverse image search of the account’s profile picture additionally reveals it has been used heavily in other locations.

parties such as China Daily. These memes claimed that the media was biased towards China and argued that the United States was hypocritical about criticizing human rights abuses in Xinjiang.

4.2.6 Content Beyond Xinjiang: COVID-19 and the Hong Kong Protests

Although Xinjiang was the primary focus of political tweets in the dataset, we also found some tweets in both English and Chinese about the COVID-19 pandemic and the Hong Kong Protests. As observed in prior takedowns, some tweets referenced both the Hong Kong protests and the COVID-19 pandemic simultaneously, such as by criticizing Hong Kong protesters for worsening the pandemic with their actions, and contrasting this with the need for order and obedience to the Chinese government. Those tweets start on January 29, 2020 and concentrate around the months of March, April, and September of 2020.

The majority of the tweets relating to the COVID-19 pandemic seem to come from a few accounts, which later were also involved in countering criticism against the Chinese government’s policies in Xinjiang.

One of the two most prolific accounts used the display name “Avanti 阿凡提”; the Chinese is a transliteration of “Avanti”. 阿凡提 is normally rendered as “Afanti” or “Effendi”, which itself is derived from the Turkish word meaning “teacher” or “sir.” The story of Afanti is a popular Central Asian folktale; this folktale was transmitted to Chinese culture through the Uyghurs. Among Chinese people, Afanti is generally seen as a representative of Uyghur culture. Furthermore, this user’s profile picture shows the famous depiction of Afanti riding his donkey backwards. This profile had 342 followers and was following 749 users. The majority of their tweets were related to Xinjiang and Uyghur affairs, but in their posts related to COVID-19, they shared a combination of apolitical COVID-19 content, criticism of the United States’s response, and positive news of China’s battle against the virus. The majority of this content was retweets of real users, including prominent pro-CCP accounts such as Nathan Rich and Carl Zha.



Figure 12: Tweets in the dataset shared memes contending that the Western media was biased against China and that the United States was hypocritical in criticizing China for human rights abuses.



Figure 13: Left, tweets in the dataset shared a meme criticizing the United States for human rights abuses in Syria. Right, tweets in the dataset shared an infographic criticizing the BBC.



Figure 14: A tweet sharing positive news about China's pandemic response from Nathan Rich; it was retweeted by "Avanti 阿凡提" on April 11, 2020.

This user that was retweeted, Nathan Rich, is a well-known pro-CCP YouTuber. This tweet appears to criticize the US's lack of response, because it suggests proof that the US had reports about the new virus months ahead of its spread in the country; the allusion to Fort Detrick references the former location of the U.S. bioweapons program from the 1940s to 1960s, and the suggestion that COVID originated there is a claim that has appeared within conspiracy theories about the pandemic.

A second account, with 219 followers, and who followed 571 other users, used the display name “善莫大焉&Be Kind”, which is the second half of an idiom. The idiom is “知错能改，善莫大焉”, roughly meaning “knowing your faults and being able to correct them, that is a good thing”. Their bio, which includes both Chinese and English, reads “我們可以自由交談，但只限於西方國家， / 偏見是自由的，但僅限於西方， / 歧視是被禁止的，但恐華癥是例外。 / It is free to talk, but only for the west, it's forbidden to discriminate, but sinophobia is the exception”. The accompanying English text provides a translation of the Chinese text; the only difference is that the phrase “it is free to talk” is actually “we are free to talk” in the original Chinese text. What is notable is that the text is written in the traditional Chinese script, which may suggest that the user is choosing to target a Taiwanese or Hong Kong audience to promote pro-China views, or attempting to create the impression that they are in or from one of those locales.

Both of these tweets were posted by China-affiliated users with state-linked account labels: the Global Times is a tabloid closely-linked to the Chinese government and Lijian Zhao is a member of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Both images share positive news about China's battle against the pandemic. In a), we see that, by early March of 2020, there are no longer any new confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Xinjiang. The user's decision to retweet Xinjiang-related content in regards to the pandemic is likely a part of their larger campaign to fight criticism against China's Xinjiang policies. In b), we see that China has not only gotten the pandemic under control, but it has also started to provide help to other countries against this pandemic.

In addition to this amplification, the second account posted many original tweets



Figure 15: Two tweets retweeted by the second account regarding China’s response to the pandemic. They both speak positively of China’s response. Left, we see a tweet that references both the pandemic and Xinjiang, and was retweeted by the account on March 13, 2020. Right, we see an example of China highlighting its generosity for assisting Pakistan with COVID-19 and other issues; this was retweeted on March 10, 2020.

in the form of replies. These tweets, in English (though with some grammatical and punctuation errors), often criticize the United States’ COVID-19 response, as well as those who call attention to China’s treatment of the Uyghurs.

Some examples (all posted on January 27, 2020):

- “@sunfloweraidil Disgusting, the virus now threatens lives of Chinese, but guys like you are still making rumors about it. Do have any conscience?”
- “@aiww Do you really care about people who are threatened by the merciless virus? Do you really care about people in Xinjiang? If you do, you won’t make such words.”

And on January 29, 2020:

“@TeresaW17993222 @shiroihamusana @nazir_lord But I heard this: The US bloody hands are on making the #Wuhan virus and releasing it in #china. They want to bring China on its knees & make it desperate for the already prepared and ready to transfer US-made cure. #USmade disasters & cures are to make #USFirst.”

4.2.7 Hong Kong

The Hong Kong-related tweets promote a pro-China view. There are nine tweets containing the phrase “Hong Kong needs a stable political environment to restore its economy香港 #香港”; the last two sets of characters are the Chinese characters for Hong Kong. The original tweets were written by different accounts, and then retweeted by different accounts. They were all retweeted from the period of April 18, 2020 to April 24, 2020, and do not appear to be from a headline or published media.

Among the Hong Kong-related tweets were Cantonese language tweets. The



Figure 16: One of the tweets containing “Hong Kong needs a stable political environment to restore its economy香港 #香港” that the Internet Archive has archived; this was retweeted by @gaoheqin69 on April 18, 2020.

language is evident by the characters used; due to different grammatical particles, Cantonese has adopted its own unique set of characters.



Figure 17: One of the Cantonese tweets that @luosixi1998 shared; it was retweeted on April 9, 2020.

The text says:

#香港 面對狼子野心嘅泛暴和佢哋嘅爪牙利用「顏色革命」顛覆香港，全港市民應時刻保持警惕，提防泛暴派嘅一切陰謀計量，堅定地支持特府「止暴抗疫」為守護全港市民嘅生命健康出一份力！

The translation is “#HongKong Facing the wild ambition of violence and their pawns using the ‘Color Revolution’ to subvert Hong Kong, all Hong Kong citizens should always be vigilant, beware of the conspiracies of the rioters, and firmly support the government’s ‘stop the violence and fight the pandemic’ campaign for the sake of all Hong Kong citizens’ lives and health!”

The choice of the traditional Chinese script and Cantonese writing suggest that

this original tweeter was either attempting to masquerade as a Hong Konger to counteract the Hong Kongers in support of the protests, or may be an actual Hong Konger who supports the Chinese government.

4.3 Tactics

4.3.1 Change in content over time

The date of the first tweet in the set is April 20, 2019, and all of the tweets are random phrases and pictures until January 6, 2020, when a Xinjiang-related, pro-China tweet appears. In the month of January 2020, Xinjiang, COVID-19, and Hong Kong-related tweets start to appear; however, random tweets still comprise the majority of the content. This unrelated material may have been the accounts trying to gain legitimacy, or attempting to secure followers. Sometimes purveyors of networks of accounts ‘farm’ them, to ensure that their creation dates are not the day before they are put to use for political operations (a red flag to observers).



Figure 18: Examples of the early content. The tweets contain a random phrase, sometimes drawn from pop culture, along with an irrelevant image with a watermark in the name of the account.

These accounts eventually become more political; @sunyangen73 eventually turns to defending China’s policies in Xinjiang.

Several accounts undergo this transformation, in which they start off posting non-political and random phrases and images. They then end up tweeting political posts, such as copy-pasta defending China’s Xinjiang policies.

4.3.2 Signs of coordination

Many of the accounts’ tweets contained signs of coordination and automation. In the ProPublica-New York Times investigation into “[How China Spreads Its Propaganda Version of Life for Uyghurs](#),” the authors highlight several patterns of coordination among the accounts. These include:



Figure 19: A political tweet, defending China's policies in Xinjiang; it was posted on January 20, 2021.

1. “The accounts often posted messages that were identical but for a random string of characters at the end with no obvious meaning, either four Roman letters, five Chinese characters or three symbols such as percentage signs or parentheses.”
2. “The text of several of the accounts’ tweets contained traces of computer code, indicating that they had been posted, sloppily, by software.”

Reviewing posts by accounts in the dataset, we noted repeated evidence supporting the ProPublica-New York Times claims. Accounts frequently posted identical content ending with four or five seemingly random capital letters, or with traces of computer code. We reached out to ProPublica and The New York Times, who shared a list of 310 accounts that were part of their reporting. Of those 310 accounts, 170 were included in the CNHU dataset, and 140 were not. The 140 accounts that were not included in the CNHU dataset were, however, also no longer live on Twitter. It is unclear whether they are part of a different network or taken down under an unrelated policy such as spam.

Of note, we find that these patterns begin on January 20, 2021, when accounts tweeted several different Xinjiang messages en masse. These include, with bold of the appended characters added for emphasis:

- #XinjiangOnline Vocational education and training is key measure to protect human rights [https://t.co/FO7tARlKJe \\$*](https://t.co/FO7tARlKJe)
- Short videos depict peaceful and happy lives in south Xinjiang[https://regional.chinadaily.com.cn/en/2021-01/19/c_583673.htm ...*](https://regional.chinadaily.com.cn/en/2021-01/19/c_583673.htm ...)
- Real life stories from Xinjiang best refutation of US allegation-
http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2021-01/19/content_77131026.htm (✉)

The timing of this coordination is noteworthy. As discussed in Narratives Section 4.2, on January 19, 2021, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated that China was committing genocide against Uyghurs. The following day, accounts began tweeting state media articles en masse, often (but not always) displaying signs suggesting automated posting. It may be that these accounts were coopted or

Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide _Ä_	1/21/21 4:44
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide)&+;	1/21/21 4:46
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide Ô•Ô¤`	1/21/21 4:52
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide ,Ä(1/21/21 5:02
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide Ô¤_Ô¤à	1/21/21 5:07
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide Ô¤,Ä,Ä¶	1/21/21 5:57
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide -Σ,Ä,Ä¶	1/21/21 6:55
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide +Ô¤â&+	1/21/21 8:00
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide ~`	1/21/21 8:10
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide *),Ä	1/21/21 8:48
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide \$`	1/21/21 8:48
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide -Σ(%	1/21/21 8:58
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide ~~	1/21/21 9:02
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide ~~~	1/21/21 9:19
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide Ô¤\$,Ä	1/21/21 9:20
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide ^`^	1/21/21 9:21
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide Ô¤ä,Ä)	1/21/21 9:29
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide %)%	1/21/21 9:30
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide ,Ä\$,\$	1/21/21 9:37
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide `Ô¤äÔ¤•	1/21/21 9:43
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide),Ä¶Ô¤•	1/21/21 9:53
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide ,Ä,Ä¶(1/21/21 9:56
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide ,Ä\$~	1/21/21 9:57
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide -Σ&~	1/21/21 10:13
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide Ô¤•Ô¤•~	1/21/21 10:17
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide ,Ä_*	1/21/21 10:22
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide `Ô¤•%	1/21/21 10:27
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide ~&+\$	1/21/21 10:40
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide Ô¤•(^	1/21/21 10:42
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide Ô¤äÔ¤•~	1/21/21 10:45
Pompeo's art of the lie: From coronavirus to genocide Ô¤ä(^	1/21/21 10:56

Figure 20: On January 21, 2021, accounts in the dataset posted the title of a Chinese state media article followed by seemingly random symbols.



Figure 21: Example of four accounts in the dataset tweeting an identical sentence, with four random letters. In total, 59 tweets included “Regular press conference” followed by four letters.

purchased to wage a concerted pushback to Pompeo's statement.

In addition to random letters and characters, we also observed accounts post images—both seemingly random images and images of articles from Chinese state media outlets—with watermarks over the images. In their report, “Strange Bedfellow on Xinjiang: The CCP, fringe media and US social media platforms,” Zhang, Wallis and Meers described similar watermarks from coordinated, inauthentic Twitter accounts. The authors [write](#):

The watermarks may be used to help operators determine which images each account will post. Accounts that share images with the same watermark might belong to one group controlled by the one operator or tasker. In this network, the posting patterns of these fake accounts using the same text and retweeting the same content are indicators of an inauthentic and coordinated campaign.

These watermarks were present both on politically-relevant content as well as filler content shared by the accounts.

4.3.3 Retaliating Against Critics of CCP Policy in Xinjiang

Accounts in the dataset amplified critiques of international individuals and organizations that had criticized CCP policy in Xinjiang. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), which has previously published reports critical of the Chinese government, was one such organization of interest.

For example, 37 accounts in the dataset tweeted an identical “research of University debunks #Xinjiang ‘forced labor’ allegation” followed by a link to a CGTN article and 4 random capital letters. The 37 tweets were all original tweets (not retweets) and none of them had any engagements. The accounts are clearly coordinated, all posting the identical sentence in their tweet while omitting the first word of the CGTN article’s title *“Field research of Jinan University debunks ASPI’s ‘forced labor’ allegation”* (emphasis added).

The CGTN article is about a report by Nilufer Gheyret and Ning Chen that attempts to contradict an ASPI report’s conclusions that the Chinese government was engaging the Xinjiang Uyghurs and other Muslim minority ethnic workers in “forced labor.” The report was covered in state media outlets including CGTN, China Daily, Xinhua Net, and En.People.CN.

Criticism of the BBC was additionally prominent in the dataset. On February 2, 2021, Hill, Campanale, and Gunter of the BBC published an [article](#), “‘Their goal is to destroy everyone’: Uighur camp detainees allege systematic rape.” In response to the article, accounts shared content that claimed to refute BBC claims. For example, on February 5, 2021, 58 accounts posted the tweet “China refutes BBC report on women’s rights abuses in Xinjiang” followed by a link to a CGTN article and four random capital letters. From February 11 to February 13, 2021, 100 tweets included the line “Xinjiang official accuses BBC of lying, spreading rumors”—the title of a China Daily article—with accounts often tagging BBC-related Twitter accounts.

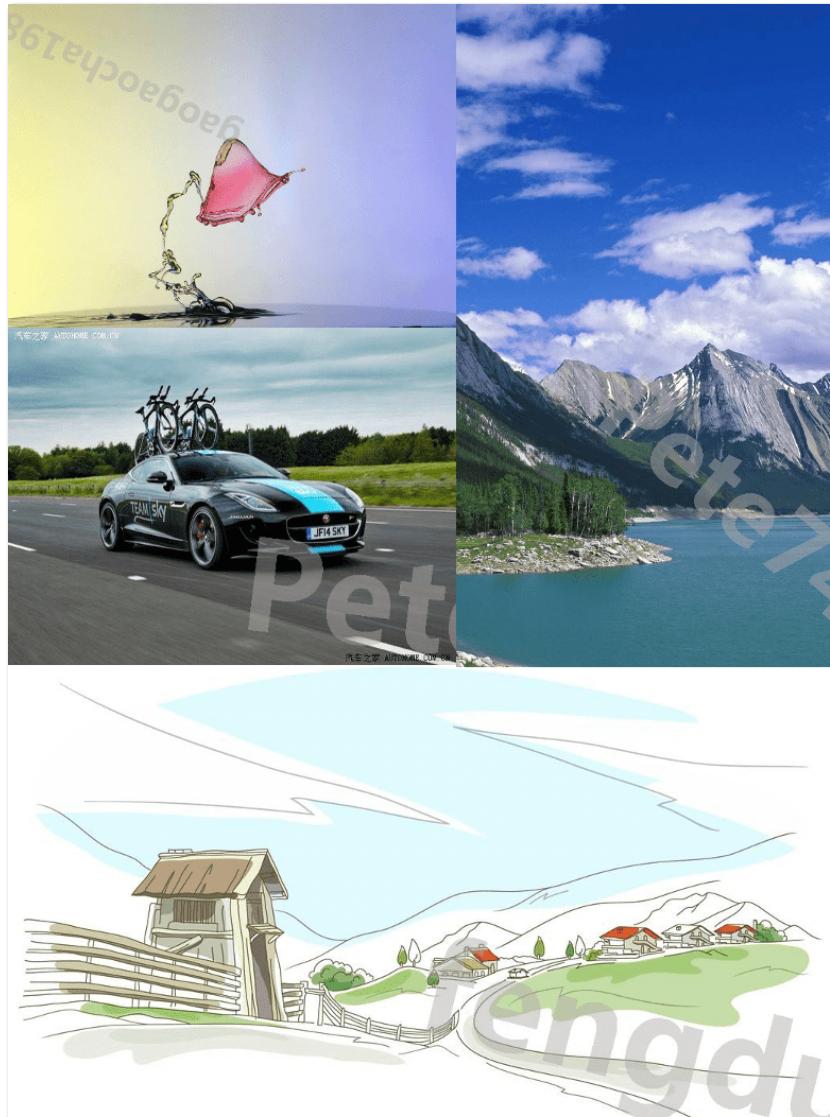


Figure 22: Miscellaneous images shared by accounts in the dataset that include watermarks of user screen names. The watermark feature was present on both political and apolitical content-such as stock photos shown above.



Figure 23: Accounts in the dataset shared a link to coverage of a report by Nilufer Gheyret and Chen Ning claiming to rebuke an ASPI report about Chinese forced labor.

In addition to tweets about ASPI and the BBC, the accounts retweeted a CCTV tweet “#China refutes so-called research report on #Xinjiang: official <https://youtu.be/AXX5kOHTSA>” from March 18, 2021. The tweet includes a YouTube video of Xu Guixiang, a spokesperson for the Xinjiang regional government, claiming that “the so-called ‘research report’ harbors insidious political agenda, full of shoddy content, flawed logic and absurd conclusions.” The spokesperson states that the ‘research report,’ which was authored by Adrian Zenz, is the cause of a political disinformation campaign. Zenz’s Twitter account, in turn, was the 7th most mentioned account in tweets in the takedown.

5 The CNCC Network

5.1 Network Contours (Accounts + Engagements)

The CNCC network consisted of 112 suspended accounts and 35,924 tweets attributed to a private organization, Changyu Culture. The accounts were created between January 19, 2012 and February 23, 2021, with the majority of accounts (102 out of 112) created in January and February 2021. The Twitter accounts were active until March 29, 2021.

The accounts seem to fall into two clusters: The first cluster consists of accounts created in 2021, which are 101 out of the total dataset of 112 accounts. Of this subset, 100 accounts did not have any followers. These accounts were minimally active for just a few days after they were created. Like the CNHU dataset, they seem to be created in batches on a handful of days, albeit much smaller batches,

ranging from 3 to 23. In this set of 101 accounts, the screen names consisted of random letters and numbers. While they made up the majority of accounts in the dataset, they only collectively tweeted 354 times, a mere 0.1% of all tweets in the dataset.

The other cluster consists of 11 accounts that were created before 2021; while most of these were created in 2020, four were created between 2012 and 2017. Unlike most of the other accounts in the dataset, they have names and followers, ranging from 5,379 followers to 112,829 followers. Their tweets account for most of the dataset (35,386 out of 35,924 tweets). Unlike the larger cluster of accounts, these 11 accounts tweeted about things other than Xinjiang prior to 2021.

Several accounts in the 11-account cluster that were created in 2020 began their Twitter presence as spam accounts trying to build up followers. The histories of these spam accounts are not deleted. For example, the account @ericaasenn tweeted about porn for most of its lifetime, until it changed its focus to tweeting about Xinjiang on September 9, 2020. In fact, the majority of tweets in the dataset (33,130 out of 35,924) occurred before 2020, and were unrelated to Xinjiang narratives.

The distribution of languages over time provides another illustration of how the majority of tweets were unrelated to the operation (see Figure 24).

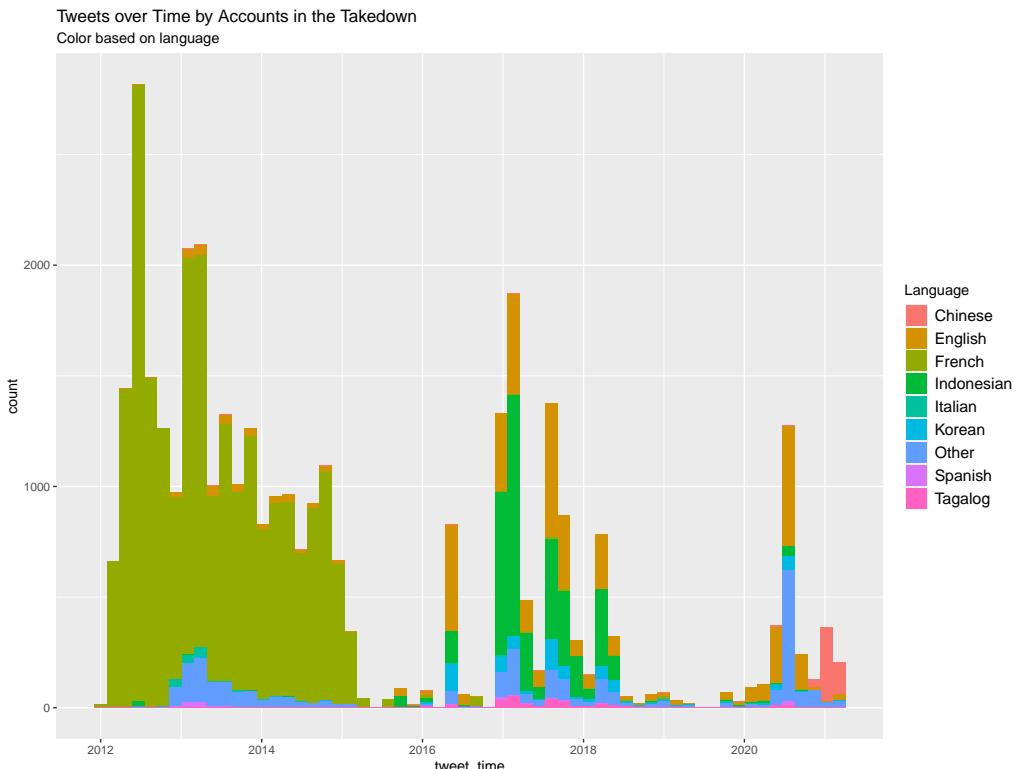


Figure 24: A breakdown of tweets in the CNCC dataset by languages used over time.

A little less than half (48%) of all tweets had zero engagement, meaning no

likes, replies, retweets, or quote-tweets. Only 1,822 tweets had more than 10 engagements. There was some evidence of anomalous engagement, perhaps from another inauthentic or spam ‘clickfarm’-type network; for example, 432 tweets received between 42 and 54 replies, but no likes or shares.

5.2 Who is Changyu Culture?

This dataset was attributed by Twitter to Changyu Culture, a private Xinjiang-based production studio specializing in propaganda [films](#). Changyu Culture was founded in 2016. In October 2020 it won a ¥1m (\$150,000) [tender](#) from a Xinjiang county-level propaganda department for the production of propaganda as part of the “Contact, Communication, Fusion” campaign.

The “Contact, Communication, Fusion” campaign was first introduced in January 2010 by then-President Hu Jintao in response to the 2009 riots in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang. The policy was intended to “promote ethnic harmony” but also “improve national unity and societal stability.” Scholars have noted that the Party’s shift away from “diversity” rhetoric toward “fusion” policies has coincided with the mass incarceration of Chinese Uyghurs in concentration camps.¹

We cannot state definitively that the takedown’s tweets included propaganda specifically contracted for this campaign, but the campaign’s thematic focus aligns closely with the tweets in this takedown. As stated elsewhere, a main theme of the tweets in this takedown is reinforcing the perception of ethnic harmony in the northwest region of China.

Changyu Culture’s legal representative is Zhao Xiang, who assumed control of the company in July 2017. The company’s office—decorated with Hollywood movie posters and potted plants—is located just off the Heping West Canal in downtown Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang. In addition to ethnic propaganda videos, Changyu Culture also produces [public health videos](#). Its headcount is between 10 and 50 people, according to information provided to a [Xinjiang-specific hiring portal](#).

We are unsure about the intended audience of these tweets or Changyu Culture’s tender more generally; the tender’s issuance and winner were both announced publicly but its stipulations were not. Many Chinese dissidents use Twitter as an online gathering space because the Chinese government cannot censor it; it is possible that Changyu Culture’s tweets are directed at domestic or overseas Chinese-speaking audiences, rather than English speakers. As evidence for this hypothesis we note that some of the tweets in the dataset are Chinese-language only; however, on the whole, we cannot state with confidence who the intended audience is.

5.3 Notable Accounts

There are a few notable accounts in the CNCC dataset from within the cluster of 11 accounts. The first is the account @MinBoxRadio, which tweeted 22,728

¹https://www.google.com/books/edition/_Securing_China_s_Northwest_Frontier/cmF3DwAAQBAJ



Figure 25: An image of an office interior purporting to belong to Changyu Culture, as posted on an online job portal.

times—accounting for about 63% of all tweets in the CNCC dataset. The account was created in January 2012, and had 7,902 followers.

The account seems to be related to a french radio program, “MineBox Radio” and shares links to the website, mineboxradio.com, which is the most shared domain in the CNCC dataset. The website links to a Facebook Page which seems to mirror its content from the Twitter account before beginning to tweet about Xinjiang on September 11, 2020. The Facebook page describes itself as “100% geek webradio !” (translated from French), and before its last post on January 17, 2015, seemed to be run by French university students.

While its Facebook account stopped posting in January, 2015, its Twitter account remained active, promoting its radio program where it discussed topics from album releases to the Hobbit 3. In 2017, the tweets discuss that the MineBoxRadio alumni are pursuing other projects. Between July 2017 and September 10, 2020, the Twitter account only tweeted 32 times, occasionally checking in and asking what had become of the community since the Minebox days.

Following a long lag of over a year, @MinBoxRadio tweeted again on September 11, 2020, amplifying the clothing brand Chanel’s Twitter account. Then, a few hours later it sent its first tweet about Xinjiang: “La lutte contre la nouvelle épidémie de #COVID19 au #Xinjiang, en #Chine, s'est étendues à #TikTok” (Translated: The fight against the new # COVID19 outbreak in #Xinjiang, #China has extended to #TikTok). MineBox Radio does not have a TikTok account or link to any TikTok posts, though there are hashtags and content related to Xinjiang on TikTok.

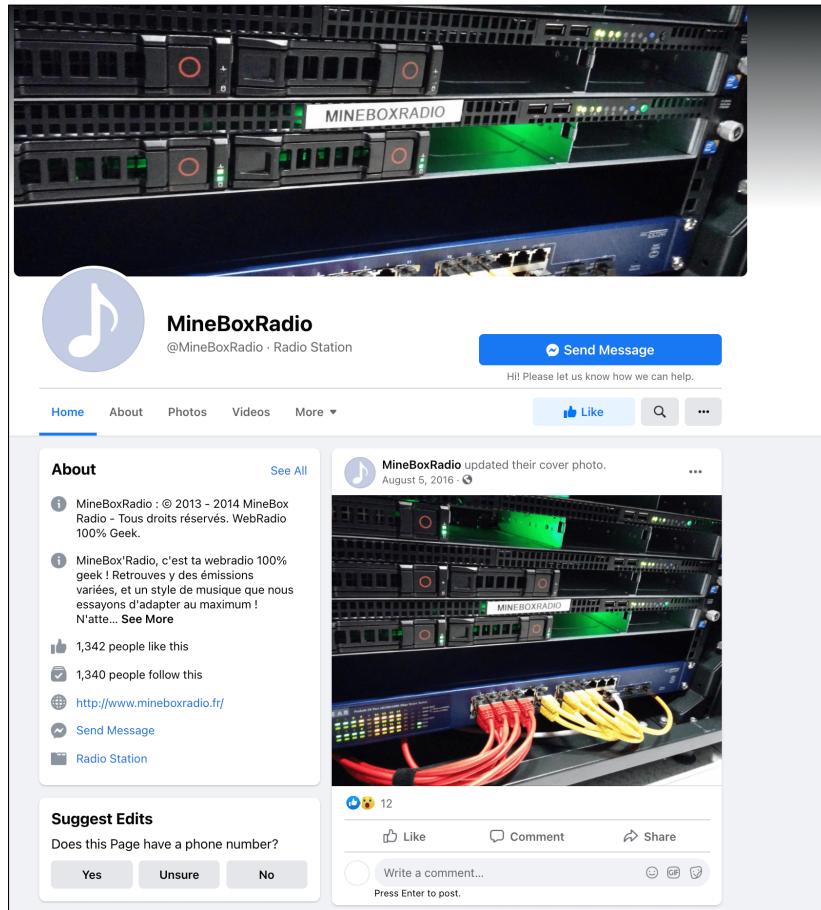


Figure 26: A screenshot of the Facebook Page linked to the website Mine Box Radio. The Page stopped posting regularly in January 2015, and changed its profile and cover photo in August 2016.

In a reply to this first tweet about Xinjiang, a user whose first name is listed on the MineBoxRadio website as an administrator noted that the account had been hacked and that they were working on reporting it to Twitter.



Figure 27: Comments on the suspended tweet from @MinBoxRadio state that the account had been allegedly hacked.

Following its topical focus change to Xinjiang, the account tweeted only 119 times. While prior to the September 11, 2020 post most of the tweets had been in French, subsequently the tweets were primarily in English. A few scattered French-language tweets promoted similar narratives to those in English, such as retweeting the Chinese Embassy in France discussing how Kashgar (a city in Xinjiang) is a great place to visit, and discussing how China has lifted millions people out of poverty.

The second interesting account in the CNCC dataset is @VisualsGallery, which had the largest number of followers in the dataset with 112,829. The account was created in October 2017 and only tweeted 275 times. Most of its early tweets were in English and Tagalog, seeking to grow its followers through ‘follow back’ tweets. Similarly the account shared many images of nature, food, and celebrities.

These early tweets received significant engagement, with an average of 3,902 total likes, comments, and shares, and a maximum of 32,923. Then, on June 19, 2020, it retweeted an account sharing a video about “baked Nan” (bread) in Xinjiang; this video is still up on YouTube and has received 169 views as of October 5, 2021. The account tweeted mostly in English and sent a handful of tweets retweeting prominent accounts, such as People’s Daily. It seemed to be trying to pretend to be someone from Xinjiang. Some of the tweets were not overtly political, such as those commenting on the food in Xinjiang, but others were. One tweet in English stated, “I am a bridge. What? Yes, I am communication bridge in my hometown. I can teach others mandarin!” Engagement on @VisualsGallery dropped precipitously after the seeming takeover in June of 2020. Towards the end of its time on Twitter, @VisualsGallery shared more links to YouTube videos from users suspended by the platform.



Figure 28: An example of the images @VisualsGallery shared before it switched its narrative focus to Xinjiang. The Tweet received 55 retweets and 111 Likes. Tweet archived by the WayBack Machine.

There are two accounts in the dataset that have 褚宇文化 or "Changyu Culture" in their display name. The accounts, @dishapa65190266 and @seo_yea_ji were created on August 9, 2020 and September 7, 2015 respectively. Both accounts had exactly 5,379 followers at the time they were suspended. The first account, @dishapa65190266, was discussed by ASPI in the [March 2021 report](#) we referenced above; it only tweeted 19 times, and only in English. @dishapa65190266 tweeted about the vibrant old city of Kashgar in Xinjiang and shared compilation videos ostensibly of Uyghurs sharing the truth. @dishapa65190266 received some engagement on its posts, accumulating 451 likes on one post. However, it stopped posting in October 2020.

The other account with Changyu Culture in the display name, @seo_yea_ji, began its Twitter presence tweeting in Malay and trying to increase its follower count by tagging other users to retweet it. From 2015 to 2020 the account roleplayed on and off as the [famous South Korean actress](#). Some tweets show an occasional Korean character, but the account continued to tweet in Malay and Indonesian while discussing Twitter followings and trends. At one point in January 2017, @seo_yea_ji tweeted in Indonesian, “GM account I’m just confused about who I want to be :((do you want western or korean??”? Images of the account from the Internet Archive as of August 8, 2020, do not match the ‘Changyu Culture’ version from the Twitter dataset; the profile description from the WayBack Machine describes the account as a role player account, not the real actress’s account, and notes that it uses images of the actress from a younger age than she currently is in real life. Additionally, the account was active until October 3, 2020, but does not mention Xinjiang in English, Chinese, or Korean; its creation predates the establishment of Changyu Culture. Therefore, it is unclear what the purpose of the account was



Figure 29: A screenshot of one of the videos amplified by the account, @VisualsGallery.

or why it bore the Changyu Culture display name.

5.4 Hashtags And Narratives

Similarly to the CNHU dataset, a collection of topics appeared in the CNCC cluster. However, while topics overlapped, most had very few tweets.

5.4.1 Hong Kong, COVID-19, and Guo Wengui

A small portion of the tweets in the dataset discuss Hong Kong and COVID-19. In total there were 17 tweets which mentioned COVID-19 related key terms, 43 tweets that mentioned Hong Kong related terms, and 6 which mentioned Guo Wengui related terms (these numbers are not mutually exclusive, some tweets mentioned more than one theme).² The tweets about Hong Kong are from four accounts—three from the cluster of 11 older accounts and one, @rVLo6kArqgRx9Qx, from the 101 accounts created post-2021. The accounts tweeted favorable narratives about the Hong Kong government sporadically throughout the dataset, from November 2020 through March 29, 2021. The narrative discussion about Hong Kong and the accounts that tweeted about it do not seem to overlap with the narratives and accounts focused on Xinjiang; this echos findings from prior CCP-attributed takedowns in which distinct accounts were used to discuss emerging topics.³

²COVID-19 related key terms: 肺炎, 疫情, 武漢肺炎, 武汉肺炎, 武漢疫情, 武汉疫情, 新冠病毒, 中國加油, 中国加油, 冠状病毒疫情, coronavirus, COVID, COVID19, epidemic; Hong Kong related key terms: 香港, 暴徒, 守護香港, 守护香港, 香港警察, 游行, 黑警, 废青, 香港暴徒, 香港遊行, 香港游行, 止暴製亂, 止暴制乱, 警察, 暴徒废青, 反修例, 港独, 逃犯条例, 顏色革命, 颜色革命, 祖國; Guo Wengui related terms: 郭文贵, 郭骗子, 郭, 龚小夏, 班农, 郭文贵间谍, 郭文貴, 间谍, Guo, Guo Wengui

³https://github.com/stanfordio/publications/raw/main/20200611_China_Report.pdf



Figure 30: A screenshot taken from a tweet by @seo_yea_ji preserved by the WayBack Machine's internet archive on August 8, 2020. The images posted by the account feature the actress Seo Yea Ji with her castmates in the show “It’s Okay to not be Okay.”

In contrast to the Hong Kong-focused tweets which were mostly in Chinese, the COVID-19 related tweets are mostly in English. The tweets discuss the “fight” in Xinjiang and how the province “defeated the new #COVID19 epidemic.” As in previous operations, the tweets also criticize those who are critical of the CCP, such as Guo Wengui, Steve Bannon, and Dr. Yan Li-Meng, a Chinese virologist **who wrote a paper alleging** that China had created COVID-19 in a lab. For example, a tweet by @chaoticeveel read, “Bannon created novel coronavirus conspiracy theory, Guo Wengui cooperate, join hands to turn the spearhead of novel coronavirus to other countries. #DrLiMengYan #闫丽梦 #班农” (hashtags translated to: “Yan Limeng #bannon”). The tweets received very minimal engagement.

5.4.2 Xinjiang

The term “Xinjiang” or 新疆 was first mentioned on June 19, 2020 and appeared 473 times in the CNCC dataset; the CNCC dataset produced a much smaller number and portion of tweets about Xinjiang compared to the CNHU dataset. However, on average, the tweets that mentioned Xinjiang in the CNCC dataset received higher engagement. Figure 31 on the next page shows the distribution of when the term was used, indicating that focus on the topic didn’t occur until around early February, 2021.

The 35 tweets about Xinjiang before 2021 are primarily in Chinese and English. Some of the tweets focus on the poverty alleviation and overall increased quality of life in Xinjiang.

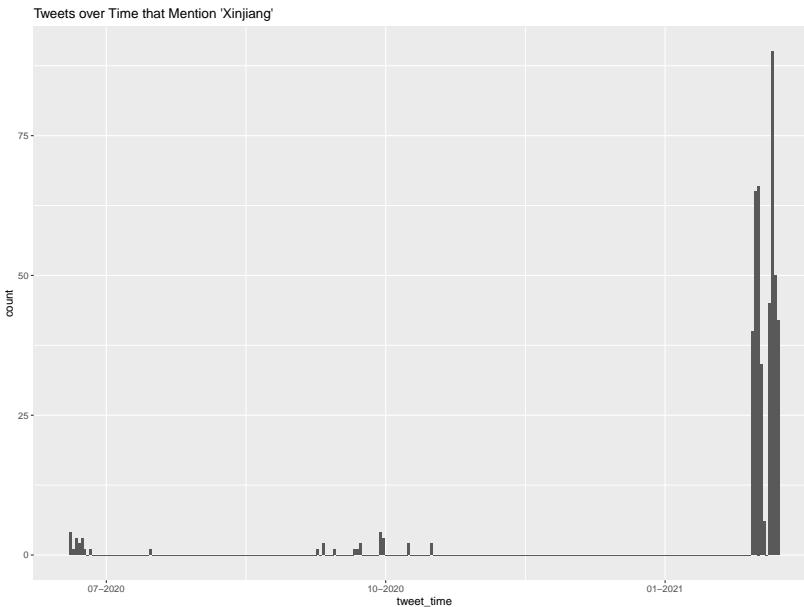


Figure 31: Record count of mentions of the term “Xinjiang” both in English and Simplified Chinese.

The fourth and fifth most popular hashtags in the dataset were #StopXinjiangRumors and #蓬佩奥 or “Pompeo” in English. The two hashtags were only used together and accounted for 438 tweets in the dataset. The hashtags began on January 30, 2021 and were used until February 7, 2021. As noted in the CNHU section above, it seems evident that these tweets and hashtags are a direct response to Secretary Pompeo’s remarks about genocide. The text of the tweets accompanying the hashtags repeat a handful of messages that all communicate the same message: the tweets state that they are “very happy” (translated) and that Pompeo has no right to judge their way of life. One tweet called Pompeo a “madman” (translated).

5.4.3 Media

The media content from accounts in CNCC dataset are mostly videos, either clips uploaded or URLs directing Twitter users to an external site such as YouTube. There were 10 accounts in our dataset that shared tweets containing videos focused on Xinjiang. Each account shared between three and seven videos. These accounts collectively tweeted 48 times, and shared 43 unique videos (some tweeted the same videos).

As with the videos identified by the New York Times and ProPublica investigation described above, these videos have both Chinese and English subtitles, and seem to be made as a response to Pompeo’s remarks. The videos generally follow the same format: one person is usually featured and begins the video by saying they recently heard of a foreigner named Pompeo. The speaker then asserts Pompeo is wrong, and that they actually live a happy and fulfilling life. Some of the videos show the speaker at their place of work or performing activities they love as

purported evidence that they are not repressed as Pompeo claims.



Figure 32: A still from a video refuting the claims of Secretary of State Pompeo

Other prominent themes promoted in the videos include a focus on material prosperity in Xinjiang due to the Party-State's leadership and supportive policies; some speakers in the videos discuss earning more than 200,000 yuan a year (equivalent to 30,920 USD). A second prominent focus was on how "Local culture" is "well-preserved" as a part of diverse, multicultural "Chinese tradition." The speakers in the video are proud to be part of the "Chinese nation" or the "country's family." Notably, religion is not discussed in the videos. "Uyghur culture" is instead interpreted into musical instruments, singing, dancing, and handicrafts.

The videos (except for three) are in Mandarin Chinese, instead of local languages and dialects. One video that uses the Uyghur language has a speaker working for Party-State's television network. The other two have elderly people as the principals of the video (see, for example, Figure 32).



Figure 33: Unlike most of the speakers in the videos who use Mandarin Chinese, this video is in the Uyghur language.

In addition to the videos directly uploaded to Twitter, accounts also posted links to

YouTube videos. In total there were 102 tweets sharing YouTube videos between June 9, 2020 and February 21, 2021. The majority of these videos were related to Xinjiang (a handful were clips from a Korean TV show). The majority of these videos have since come down as their associated accounts were removed by YouTube. There were seven videos shared in the dataset that were still live on YouTube when SIO reviewed the CNCC tweets.



Figure 34: A screenshot of a YouTube video shared by one of the Twitter accounts.

Videos by Changyu Culture's own channel were all shared via external URL linked to Changyu's YouTube account. One video series, "True Stories From Xinjiang" (《来自新疆的真实故事》), was promoted by the @VisualsGallery account on February 21, 2021. This series is particularly significant due to its clear attribution to high-profile Party-State agencies and an international publicity event.

Until October 2021, there are video series under the "True Stories From Xinjiang" campaign co-produced by News Office, International Liaison Department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (中联部新闻办), coordinated by News Office and Foreign Affairs Office of Xinjiang's provincial government.

Screenshots of Chinese coverage of the series are shown in Figure 36 and Figure 37.

Since the release notes that the International Liaison Department (instead of the Propaganda Department/中宣部) is responsible, the content is likely targeting an international audience. A major initiative on February 23, 2021 by the two departments was titled "CCP's Story: Topic of Xinjiang." Three hundred and ten delegates affiliated with more than 80 countries and 190 political organizations participated.

The first video in the series is a representative example of the type of narratives in the videos: A Han Chinese tutor named Zhang Wenxiang from Xinjiang University discusses having successfully taught Mandarin to preschool children in Kashgar

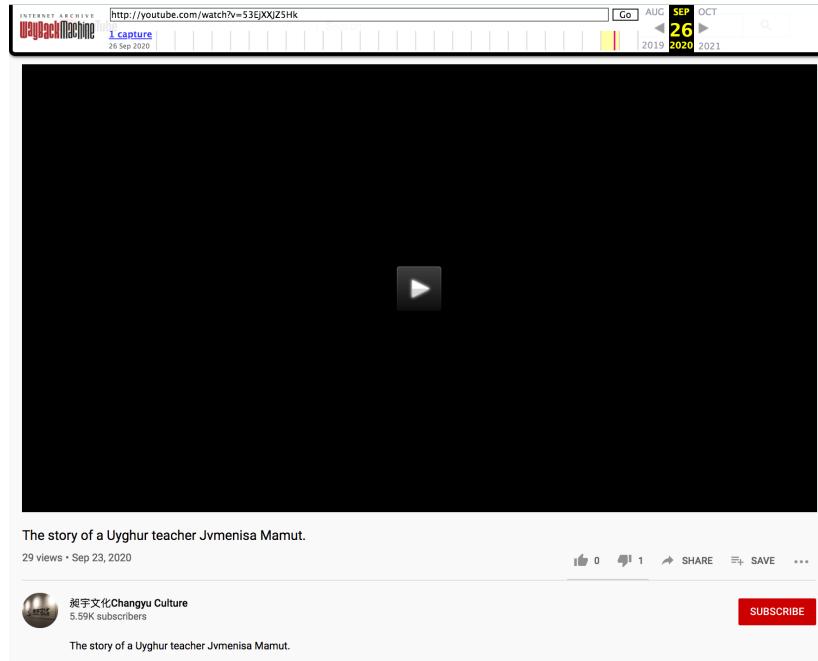


Figure 35: A screenshot of the WayBack Machine preserves the since-taken down video from Changyu Culture’s YouTube channel. The video was shared by @dishapa65190266 on September 23, 2020.

(“国家通用语言”, literally “Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language” according to respective legislation) and personal hygiene, with his plentiful love and the Party-State’s blissful policy of setting up public kindergartens.

Unlike the short clips found in the CNCC tweet content, videos in this YouTube series generally use 6 minutes to tell complete stories with clear, accentuated protagonists. Political messages are more “latent”; for instance, Zhang Wenxiang’s narrative focuses on his love for and responsibilities to the kids while praise for the policy of public kindergartens were hidden in parents’ statements.

The propaganda videos tied to the CNCC dataset vary greatly in terms of duration, theme, and quality. Changyu Culture appears to have carefully crafted short documentaries about the exotic, daily experience in Xinjiang in its September 2020 attempt; the initiative was flagged by journalists and investigators, likely due to the artificial nature of both the videos and the network promoting the content. The January-February 2021 content protesting Mike Pompeo’s genocide accusation was also seemingly easily detectable; the fake nature of the accounts promoting the material attracted investigator attention. However, the video series “True Stories From Xinjiang” is notable for its comparatively high quality and profile.

5.5 Tactics

Some of the tactics displayed in the CNCC dataset paralleled those in the CNHU dataset, though on a much smaller scale in terms of number of tweets. Specifically,

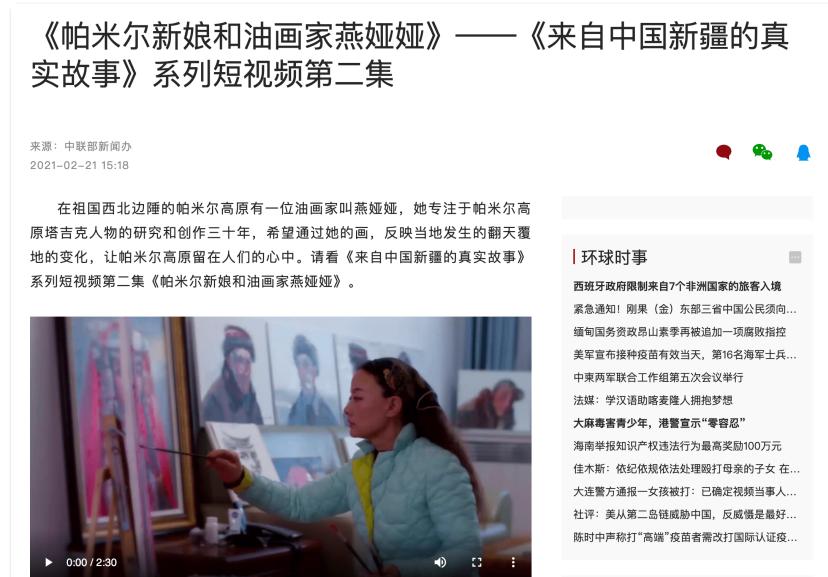


Figure 36: **Coverage** of the one of the videos in the series “True Stories of Xinjiang.” The topic of the video is an oil painter called Yan Yaya. She lives in the Pamir mountains and her paintings focus on the Tajik people living there.



Figure 37: An **article** giving a preview of the first five videos of the second season of “True Stories of Xinjiang”. The episodes depict China’s Xinjiang policies in a positive light, such as people benefiting from relocation and boarding schools.

accounts in the dataset showed some form of coordination with tweets posted within the same minute that share the exact same text. For example, beginning in January 2021, accounts from the 101 cluster tweeted the exact same text on multiple occasions. In total, there were 43 unique phrases among 438 tweets that mentioned Xinjiang in 2021, and these phrases were tweeted by batches of accounts ranging from two to fourteen.

Similarly to CNHU, some accounts from the cluster of 11 older accounts—@MinBoxRadio, @chaoticeveel, @VisualsGallery—and one account from the 101 cluster, @rVLo6kArqgRx9Qx, amplified state-linked accounts such as the Chinese state media outlets People’s Daily (@PDChinese) and CGTN in French (@CGTNFrancais), as well as government officials such as Lijian Zhao (@zlj517) and the Chinese Embassy in France (@AmbassadeChine). However, these state-linked accounts were only mentioned a handful of times each.



Figure 38: The three screenshots show the title of the first episode in the series, “Me and My Little Angels”; a boy’s mother testified that her son “couldn’t speak Mandarin and wasn’t polite to other people, (after going to public kindergarten) he pays attention to personal hygiene.”

There were a few unique tactics that differed from CNHU, such as the use of repurposed older accounts with preexisting large followings, and the use of video content rather than memes or images. The repurposing of accounts, however, was observed in Twitter’s first attributed dataset to the PRC in 2019.

Within the operation, the two clusters of 11 accounts and 101 accounts seemed to have different tactics of spreading pro-CCP narratives related to Xinjiang. The older accounts shared YouTube videos in 2020 while the newer accounts shared video clips directly to Twitter, which are analyzed above. Similarly, the majority of their operations took place at different times with only a few accounts from the older cluster tweeting in 2021.

6 Conclusion

The repeated “respawning” of inauthentic account networks focused on Xinjiang highlights both the continued importance of this issue to CCP leadership, and the continued challenge for social media platforms responsible for deterring state actor manipulation campaigns.

Once again, attributed influence networks exhibited thematic consistency, with a strong rhetorical frame focused on “telling China’s story” and bolstering the CCP’s reputation. Once again, the inauthentic influence networks got little to no pickup from authentic accounts, and extremely minimal engagement. This was, in other words, largely more of the same activity that researchers have highlighted in other China-attributed takedowns, from stylistic, operational, and impact perspectives.

The direct attribution of the CNCC network to a nongovernmental outsourced organization, however, is noteworthy. Prior outsourcing and mercenary activity observed in other regions has leveraged social media marketing entities with significant experience and demonstrable capabilities in attracting audiences and generating viral content. That was not the case here; there was little that appeared markedly innovative besides a higher polish and improved strategic deployment of video content. Further investigation into CCP tenders for social media activity on Western platforms is in order.



The Stanford Internet Observatory is a cross-disciplinary program of research, teaching and policy engagement for the study of abuse in current information technologies, with a focus on social media. The Stanford Internet Observatory was founded in 2019 to research the misuse of the internet to cause harm, formulate technical and policy responses, and teach the next generation how to avoid the mistakes of the past.



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