

# Strange bedfellows on Xinjiang

## The CCP, fringe media and US social media platforms

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### Executive summary

This report explores how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), fringe media and pro-CCP online actors seek—sometimes in unison—to shape and influence international perceptions of the Chinese Government’s human rights abuses in Xinjiang, including through the amplification of disinformation. United States (US) based social media networks, including Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, along with Chinese-owned TikTok (owned by Chinese company ByteDance), are centre stage for this global effort.

The Chinese Government continues to deny human rights abuses in Xinjiang despite a proliferation of credible evidence, including [media reporting](#), [independent research](#), [testimonies](#) and [open-source data](#), that has revealed abuses including [forced labour](#), [mass detention](#), [surveillance](#), [sterilisation](#), [cultural erasure](#) and [alleged genocide](#) in the region. To distract from such human rights abuses, covert and overt online information campaigns have been deployed to portray positive narratives about the CCP’s domestic policies in the region, while also injecting disinformation into the global public discourse regarding Xinjiang.

Our key findings:

- Since early 2020, there’s been a stark 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. Chinese state media accounts have been most successful in using Facebook to engage and reach an international audience.
- The CCP is using tactics including [leveraging US social media platforms](#) to criticise and smear [Uyghur victims](#), journalists and [researchers](#) who work on this topic, as well as their organisations. We expect these efforts to escalate in 2021 (we note targets for [the sanctions](#) announced 22 March 2021 by the



Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs included European politicians and researchers working on Xinjiang who are now being [targeted online by Chinese state media](#)).

- Chinese Government officials and state media are increasingly amplifying content, including disinformation, produced by fringe media and conspiracist websites that are often sympathetic to the narrative positioning of authoritarian regimes. This amplifies the reach and influence of these sites in the Western media ecosystem. Senior officials from multilateral organisations, including the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations (UN), have also played a role in sharing such content.
- The Xinjiang Audio-Video Publishing House, a publishing organisation [owned](#) by a regional government bureau and affiliated with the CCP's [United Front Work Department](#), has funded a marketing company to create videos depicting Uyghurs as supportive of the Chinese Government's policies in Xinjiang. Those videos were then amplified on Twitter and YouTube by a network of inauthentic accounts. The Twitter accounts also retweeted and liked non-Xinjiang-related tweets by Chinese diplomatic officials and Chinese state-affiliated media in 2020.

This research involved the following activities:

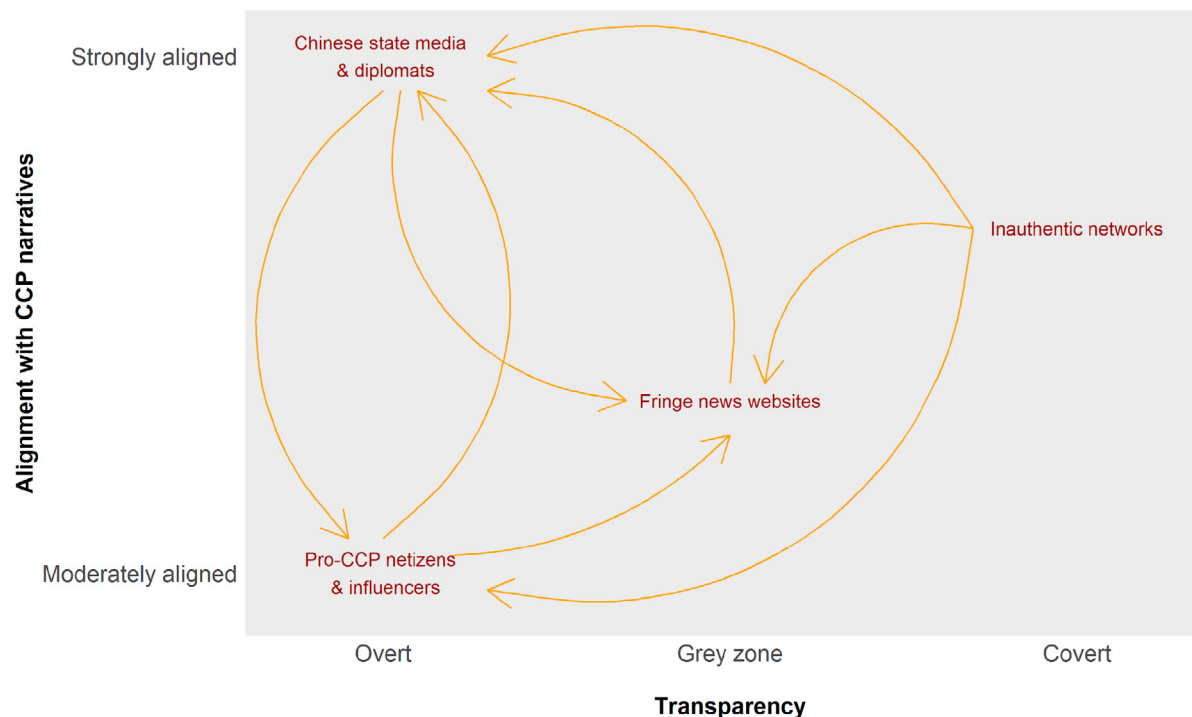
- We collected publicly available social media mentions of 'Xinjiang' between 1 January 2014 and 1 February 2021 on Twitter and Facebook.
- We analysed 272,875 public Facebook posts collected using the social media analytics platform CrowdTangle and 958,416 tweets on Twitter collected using the open-source tool Twint.
- We conducted manual content analysis of Xinjiang-related hashtags on TikTok: #Xinjiang, #Uyghur and #新疆 (Xinjiang in Mandarin).
- RStudio was used to analyse the data using the tidyverse, ggplot2 and other packages.
- We used other open-source tools, including reverse image search engines, the network analysis program Gephi and the Wayback Machine, to find and archive deleted websites.

## Tactics and techniques

The CCP's propaganda tactics and information campaigns are evolving to contest global narratives on sensitive issues. In January 2021 for example, Zhuang Rongwen, Director of the Cyberspace Administration of China and a deputy minister in the Central Propaganda Department, gave a [speech](#) pointing out the need for the CCP to avoid negative or critical perspectives in domestic reporting, exercise strict control over content and find innovative methods to spread propaganda on social media platforms. Previous [ASPI research](#) has noted the CCP's use of proxy voices to attempt to distract from international criticism on politically sensitive issues. This report also highlights how the CCP is seeking to extend its global diplomatic and state media messaging by [awarding tenders](#) to Chinese companies to create and disseminate online content supportive of the party's preferred narrative on Xinjiang.

The Chinese Government leverages a range of covert and overt actors to shape narratives on US social media platforms, including its diplomats on Twitter, state-owned media accounts, pro-CCP influencers and coordinated inauthentic networks (Figure 1). In tandem, those entities amplify misleading narratives and disseminate disinformation.

Figure 1: CCP influence actors with arrows indicating amplification relationships



Our analysis of Twitter and Facebook data uncovered multiple approaches intended to influence global narratives on Xinjiang, but we focused on two different online tactics. First, Chinese state-owned media outlets and Chinese diplomats leveraging fringe media; and second, pro-CCP actors amplifying Chinese state-affiliated accounts.

Chinese state-owned media outlets and Chinese diplomats both use and amplify online sources that are both fringe and highly favourable to the Party ideologically. This appears to be part of an effort to counter credible media reporting and research. These third-party actors being amplified aren't necessarily influenced directly by the Chinese Government, but they frequently produce content that supports the same positions and narratives the CCP seeks to present to global audiences. This report focuses on the fringe media outlet *The Grayzone* and how its articles are promoted by Chinese state-affiliated actors.

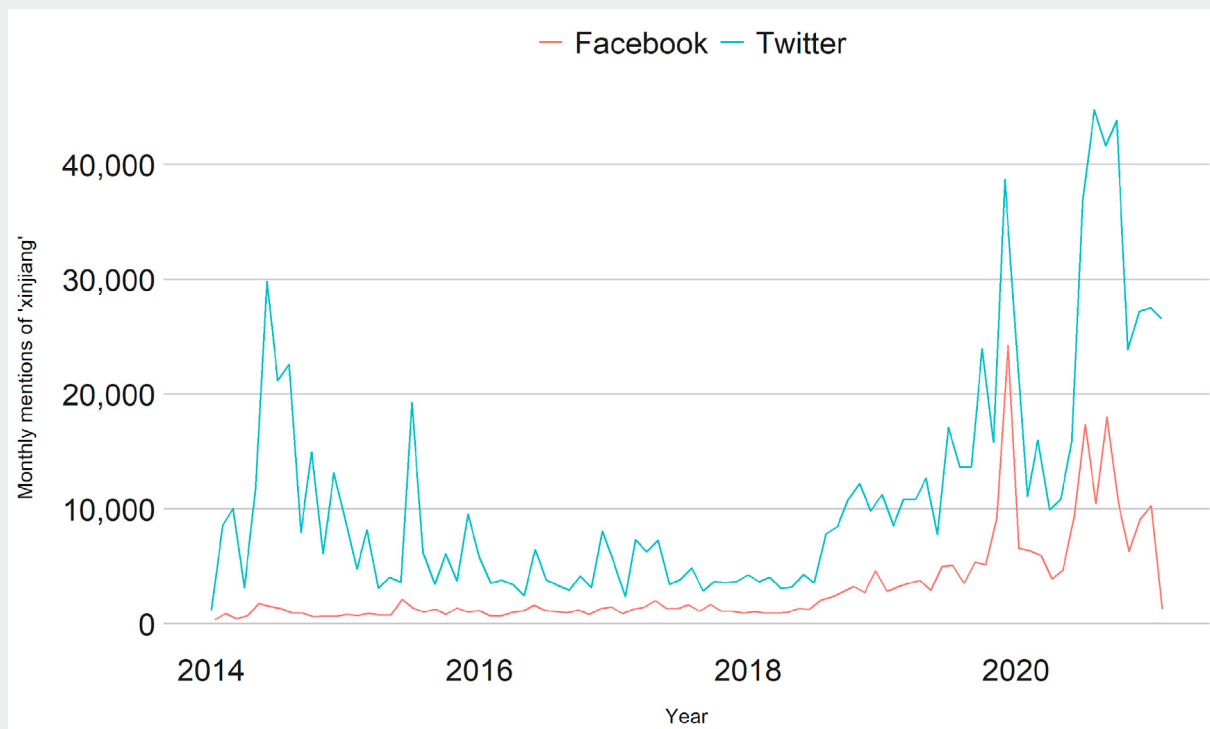
The use of third-party content in state-sponsored disinformation and information campaigns is important, as it has the potential to amplify less factually credible media outlets while also shaping public discourse and international governance. An example of where third party content has entered mainstream public discourse is the use of *The Grayzone* content by [Gabby Stern](#) (World Health Organisation (WHO) Director of Communications) and [Alena Douhan](#) (UN Special Rapporteur on the negative impact of unilateral coercive measures on the enjoyment of human rights) to support their arguments on Twitter.

The other phenomenon is that pro-CCP actors have previously amplified Chinese state media and diplomatic accounts on US social media platforms and [disseminated disinformation](#) using inauthentic accounts. This report investigates a new pro-CCP information campaign on YouTube and Twitter that involves the publication of video content about the livelihoods of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, using a routinely positive portrayal of domestic and cultural idylls. Those videos have been boosted by inauthentic accounts on YouTube and Twitter. While attribution of the Twitter accounts is difficult without technical signals, we contend this campaign is very likely linked to the Chinese state for two reasons: The first is that some of the accounts involved were [previously attributed to the Chinese state by Twitter](#). The full dataset of those accounts has been [analysed by ASPI's International Cyber Policy Centre](#) (ICPC). The second is that the key content creator being amplified in this network is a government-affiliated Xinjiang-based company.

## Overview: Xinjiang political discourse over time

Our dataset of Twitter and Facebook posts shows that mentions of Xinjiang have steadily increased since 2018 (Figure 2) and that mentions of Xinjiang have become highly political. The most liked and shared social media content using the keyword ‘Xinjiang’ in our dataset was posted by Chinese state media and US government officials.

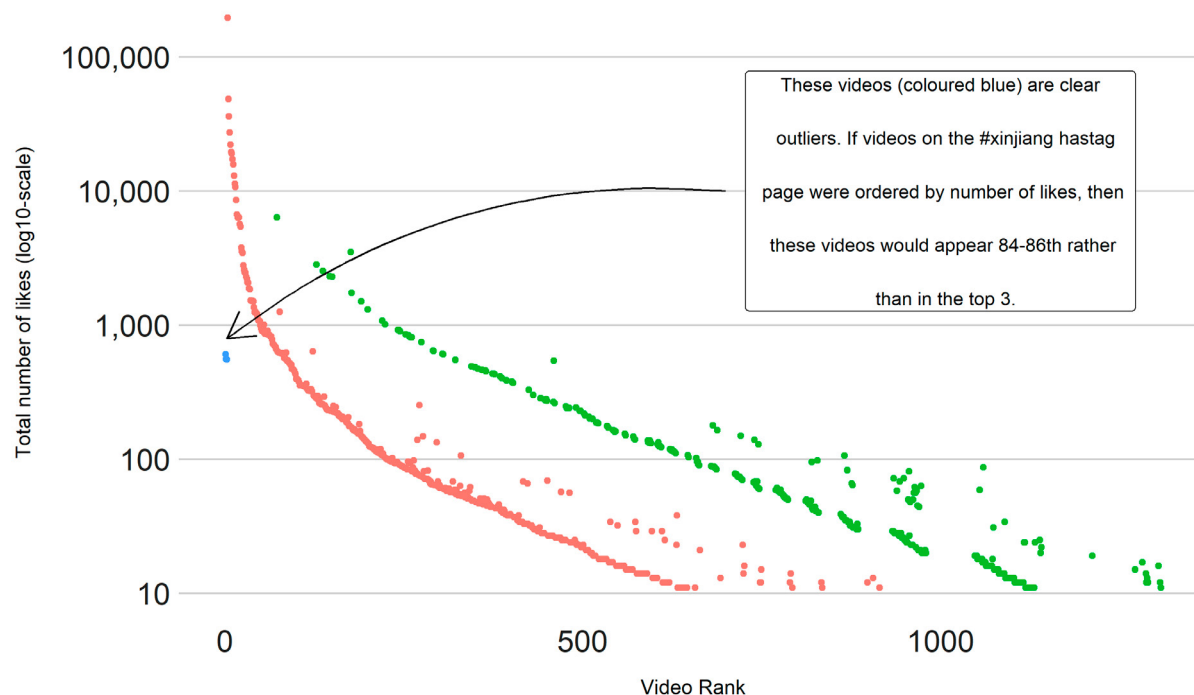
Figure 2: Total monthly mentions of ‘Xinjiang’ on Facebook and Twitter between 1 January 2014 and 1 February 2021



Peak mentions of Xinjiang occurred in November–December 2019 and July–August 2020. The former coincided with the ‘[China cables](#)’ released by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists on 24 November 2019, the US Congress [passing](#) the Uighur Act of 2019 and multiple UN officials [raising serious concerns](#) about the application of the Counter-Terrorism Law of the People’s Republic of China. The second was likely due to a combination of the June 2020 publication of a [Jamestown Foundation report](#) by Adrian Zenz about alleged Uyghur sterilisation, a joint UN [statement](#) by 27 countries on Xinjiang and Hong Kong, and the US [passing sanctions over the repression of China’s Uyghurs](#). All of which resulted in increased international condemnation and critical discussion of China’s Xinjiang policies.

On TikTok, previous analysis has shown that politically sensitive Xinjiang-related content may be [moderated or curated](#). TikTok is owned and operated by the Chinese company ByteDance, which [collaborates](#) with public security bureaus across China and plays an active role in disseminating CCP propaganda on Xinjiang. In August 2020, ASPI ICPC [research](#) found that, out of 444 publicly visible videos using the hashtag #Xinjiang, only 5.6% were critical of the CCP’s policies in the region. Analysis of the #Xinjiang hashtag in March 2021 showed similar results: the hashtag had more than 9 million views in total, but the top three videos on the [#xinjiang hashtag page](#) depicted beautiful Xinjiang landscapes and had fewer than 600 likes each. It is unclear how videos are ordered on TikTok hashtag pages, but our analysis suggests they are typically ordered at least partially by the number of likes received (videos with more likes are generally listed higher on the page, see Figure 3). One video with the caption ‘Free Uyghur’ had 2,831 likes and was ranked 129th on the page whereas other videos with similar likes appeared among the top 30 videos.

Figure 3: Position of video on [#xinjiang hashtag page](#) (rank) plotted against number of likes the video received. Red dots represent videos ordered by the number of likes it has. Green dots are videos appearing lower in the page compared to videos with similar likes. Blue dots represent the top three videos appearing on the top of the #xinjiang hashtag page (these depicted beautiful Xinjiang landscapes).



In addition, the Xinjiang hashtag in Mandarin ([#新疆](#)) had more than 900,000 views distributed between 245 publicly accessible videos, but only one video was critical of CCP policies. In contrast, there appears to be less effort to curate the [#uyghur](#) and [#uyghurlivesmatter](#) hashtags, which had nearly 65 million and 9 million views, respectively, and most videos in the top 20 were critical of the CCP.

Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo and Douyin (the Chinese equivalent of TikTok) provide rich and domestically created content for Chinese diplomats and state media to amplify on US social media networks. On 16 March 2021 for example, China's foreign ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian [posted](#) a video from Douyin on Twitter highlighting the 'peaceful' lifestyle and 'beautiful' landscapes of Xinjiang.

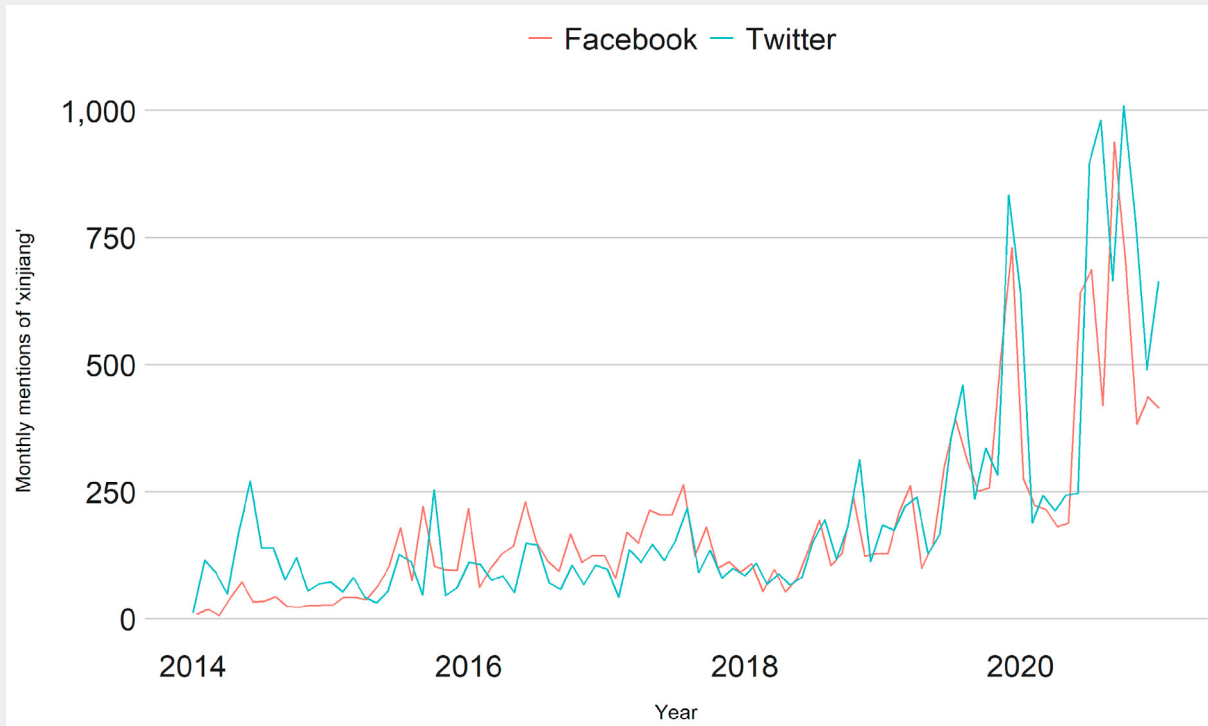
Since the end of 2019, there's been an increase in the use of Facebook and Twitter accounts by Chinese Government and state media (see Figure 4 below) to push alternative narratives and disinformation about the situation in Xinjiang, often by amplifying third party content. Over that period, the most active accounts posting about Xinjiang were mostly Chinese state media or accounts whose content can often align with CCP narratives. For example, [Jerry's China](#), an account by an Australian living in Guangdong, posted 697 times on Twitter about Xinjiang in 2020 and was [retweeted](#) by Li Bijian, the Consul General of China in Karachi, Pakistan, among others.

The narratives being pushed by Chinese diplomats, state media and pro-CCP netizens include:

- allegations that reporting of Xinjiang statistical data is misleading and abuses the data – particularly around topics such as birth rates, population growth and number of re-education camps.
- allegations that Western media and organisations are not independent, are biased in their research and reporting on Xinjiang, or both.

- assertions that accusations of human rights abuses in Xinjiang are a smear campaign by anti-China forces to undermine the CCP and interfere in China's domestic affairs.
- claims that the Uyghur people living in Xinjiang support Chinese Government policies in the region.

**Figure 4: Monthly mentions of Xinjiang by Chinese diplomatic and state media accounts on Facebook and Twitter, 2014 to 2020**

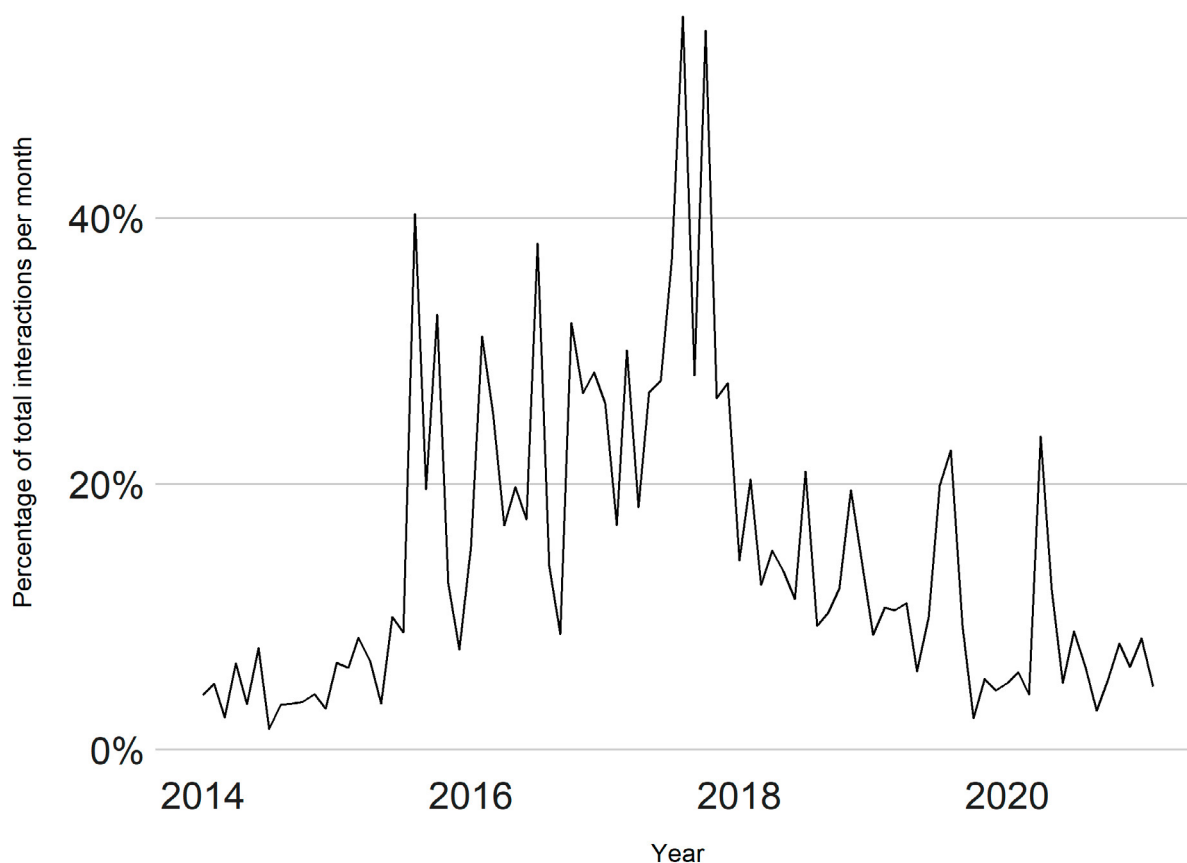


The CCP, however, is losing control over the Xinjiang narrative on US social media platforms. In 2018, the Twitter accounts of *Xinhua News*, the *China Daily*, the China Global Television Network (CGTN) and the *Global Times* were the top four accounts that accumulated the most likes for tweets mentioning Xinjiang. But, by 2020, the official Twitter account of the then US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo received the most likes for tweets mentioning Xinjiang. *Xinhua News* was the only Chinese state media account remaining in the top 10 (see Appendix 1).

On Facebook, it is a different situation. Public Chinese state media accounts have engaged and reached more users than on Twitter. According to CrowdTangle data from 2018 to 2020 that examines public pages and groups, public Chinese state media accounts were consistently in the top 10 Facebook accounts accumulating the most likes on their posts mentioning Xinjiang (see Appendix 1).

Other most-liked accounts on Twitter mentioning Xinjiang in 2020 included the Twitter accounts of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China, Xinjiang scholar Adrian Zenz, the US State Department and Kenneth Roth, the executive director of Human Rights Watch—all of whom cited evidence from multiple credible sources and all of whom are critical of the Chinese Government's human rights abuses in Xinjiang. Prior to 2018, Chinese state media accounts mentioning Xinjiang accounted for more than 40% of all interactions on the topic in some months, but since 2018 that's steadily decreased to less than 10% on average (Figure 5). Part of that decline can potentially be attributed to a shift in tactics by the CCP to leverage a growing population of online pro-CCP influencers and inauthentic networks, resulting in a contraction of its state media and diplomatic account interactions. Overall, twitter users criticising and supporting CCP domestic policies in Xinjiang have increased over time and diluted statements made by CCP officials and state media on US social media platforms.

Figure 5: Percentage of Chinese diplomatic and state media interactions (likes and retweets) compared to total interactions with posts mentioning Xinjiang, per month, 2014 to 2020



To combat its loss of narrative control in the global online environment, the CCP has retaliated by spreading disinformation and by [smearing Uyghurs who speak out, journalists, researchers and organisations](#) working on Xinjiang issues (including ASPI itself). It has also used [legal threats](#) and leveraged pro-CCP influencers and inauthentic accounts to amplify those messages. Previous ASPI ICPC [research](#) has provided a snapshot of the CCP's ongoing information campaign currently targeting the BBC, for example.

## Seeding doubt and distraction through fringe media

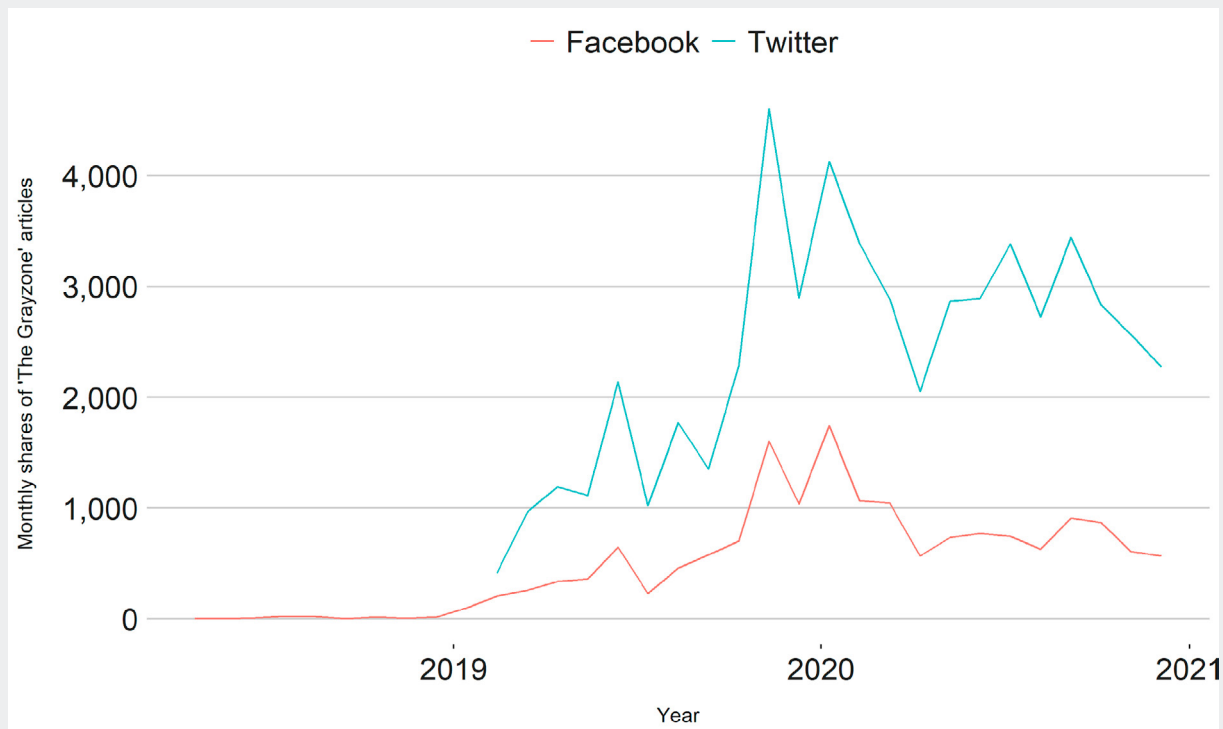
In our data collection, we observed that from early 2020 Chinese-state linked information operations have used fringe media outlets and individuals to counter negative stories.

Fringe media outlets are media sources that may lack clearly defined editorial policies and journalistic practices, such as distinguishing between news and opinion and fully disclosing ownership, financing and conflicts of interest. In some cases, such as the pro-Kremlin news agency [News Front](#), they appear to pursue specific ideological goals; in other cases, they appear to exist primarily to generate income.

Fringe media outlets can provide valuable dissenting voices in public debates and reporting about groups and issues that larger outlets ignore. However, some fringe media organisations promote conspiracy theories that align with their political views and are vulnerable to manipulation. This includes manipulation by state-owned media outlets in authoritarian countries, which find their content useful for creating the perception that there are 'independent' assessments that favours their interests. This can create misleading authority and credibility for particular narratives.

*The Grayzone* is one fringe news source, and its reach has been amplified by Chinese and [Russian state-affiliated entities](#). Between December 2019 and February 2021, *The Grayzone* was cited in English at least 252 times in Chinese state-owned news outlets (the *Global Times*, CGTN and Xinhua) and a further 61 times in *People's Daily Online* articles. Before December 2019, we could find no mentions of *The Grayzone* by Chinese media outlets in either English or Chinese. Peak total shares of *The Grayzone* articles on Twitter and Facebook also coincided with their amplification by Chinese state media outlets (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Monthly shares of *The Grayzone* articles on Twitter and Facebook between April 2018 and December 2020**



*The Grayzone's* [top 12 stories of 2020](#) include [accusations](#) that Xinjiang forced labour stories are falsified by the US Government and the military–intelligence complex to drive a new Cold War (note: this included criticism of ASPI and the Center for Strategic and International Studies). The founders of *The Grayzone* have been interviewed by Chinese state media outlets, including the [Global Times](#) and [CGTN](#), and have been featured on Russian state media outlets [RT](#) and [Sputnik Radio](#).

Chinese diplomats and state media appear to have first started amplifying *The Grayzone* in December 2019 after the outlet published an article attempting to discredit Adrian Zenz. According to CrowdTangle data, that article attracted more than 8,500 Facebook interactions. Chinese Government spokesperson Zhao Lijian first [retweeted](#) the article on 30 December 2019, followed by Chinese Government spokesperson Hua Chunying, who [tweeted](#) the article months later in March 2020. Now it continues to be actively used in online attempts to counter references to the incarceration of Uyghurs in China. According to [SimilarWeb](#), *The Grayzone* gets 61.17% of its traffic from social media and around 89.63% of that traffic from Twitter (as of February 2021).

In addition to the CCP pushing out *The Grayzone* articles on social media, an Australian journalist [tweeted](#) in February 2021 that the Chinese embassy in Australia was circulating *The Grayzone* articles to the Australian media (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Screenshot of email sent to media by the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Australia

Good Morning,  
 Please find the article from The Grayzone  
 about Adrian Zenz's report regarding Xinjiang.  
<https://thegrayzone.com/2021/02/18/us-media-reports-chinese-genocide-relied-on-fraudulent-far-right-researcher/>  
 --  
 Media Section  
 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in  
 Australia

### The Grayzone and the CCP's reach

To analyse the impact of *The Grayzone* articles on US-based social media platforms, we studied a network of accounts on Twitter interacting with Chinese diplomats, state media and officials of international organisations. Using the statistical program software R and packages (rtweet, ggraph and the tidyverse), we collected the retweets of the following tweets from the Chinese Foreign Ministry (see screenshots of them in figures 8 and 9 below):

- China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Zhao Lijian's [retweet](#) of an article from *The Grayzone* criticising the US affiliation of the Network of Chinese Human Rights Defenders and Adrian Zenz's research (posted 30 December 2019).
- China's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's [tweet](#) of the same article from *The Grayzone* (posted 12 March 2020).

Figure 8: Tweets by Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespeople Hua Chunying and Zhao Lijian

 **Hua Chunying 华春莹**   
 @SpokespersonCHN  
 China government account

It seems that some US officials enjoy smearing China around the clock & around the world. What they say about Xinjiang is the LIE of the CENTURY. LYING and CHEATING won't make you nobler and greater. Why not come to Xinjiang and see with your own eyes?

  
 Washington, DC  
 Democracy Now!  
 Adrian Zenz | Independent Researcher

China detaining millions of Uyghurs? Serious problems with claims by US-backed... Far-right Christian fundamentalist Adrian Zenz helped popularize claim China detained millions of Uyghur Muslims. He says he's "led by God" on a "mission" [thegrayzone.com](https://thegrayzone.com)

3:07 PM · Mar 12, 2020 · Twitter Web App

356 Retweets 122 Quote Tweets 2.1K Likes

 **Lijian Zhao 赵立坚**   
 @zlj517  
 China government account

Claims that China detained millions of Uyghur Muslims are based largely on 2 studies. A closer look at these papers reveals US government backing, absurdly shoddy methodologies, a rapture-ready evangelical researcher named Adrian Zenz. [@ajitxsingh](#) [@MaxBlumenthal](#) [@China\\_Amb\\_India](#)

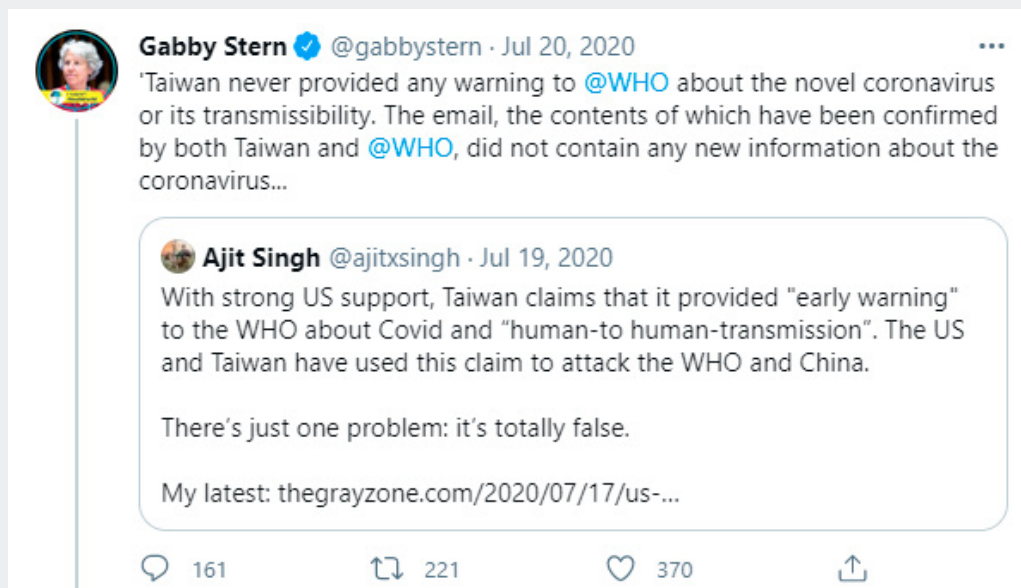
 **The Grayzone** @TheGrayzoneNews · Dec 25, 2019  
 Claims that China has detained millions of Uyghur Muslims are based largely on two studies.  
 @ajitxsingh & @MaxBlumenthal examine these dubious papers, their US government backers, shoddy methodologies – and the rapture-ready "researcher" Adrian Zenz.  
[thegrayzone.com/2019/12/21/chi...](https://thegrayzone.com/2019/12/21/chi...)

11:12 PM · Dec 30, 2019 · Twitter Web App

169 Retweets 42 Quote Tweets 420 Likes

In our analysis, we also included WHO Communications Director Gabby Stern’s [retweet](#) of another article by *The Grayzone* (posted 20 July 2020, see Figure 9 below) which, due to her position as an official of a global organisation, would have likely influenced Twitter users. The article Stern posted questioned Taiwan’s claim that it had provided early information about the coronavirus and its transmissibility and appeared to support the WHO and China’s position on the issue. In addition, we included any other tweets posted in the date range from 21 December 2019 to 12 October 2020 that linked to this [piece](#) in *The Grayzone*, titled “China detaining millions of Uyghurs? Serious problems with claims by US-backed NGO and far-right researcher ‘led by God’ against Beijing”.

Figure 9: WHO Communications Director, Gabby Stern’s tweet on 20 July 2020



We identified a small community of pro-CCP Twitter accounts - possibly a combination of authentic and inauthentic users - interacting with those tweets. In addition, Gabby Stern’s retweet received more than 750 interactions (replies, retweets, likes) and her influential position as the WHO’s Director of Communications likely lent credibility to *The Grayzone*.

While we don’t allege a causal link between actors on social media, there were some network effects in our dataset worth exploring (see Appendix 2). Only 19 accounts (3% of the total network) retweeted more than one of the tweets that we originally selected, but these accounts posted other similar links and tweets and tended to retweet Chinese state media and diplomatic accounts. Those accounts also appeared to engage with mostly authentic users who support pro-CCP positions.

Of those 19 accounts, 13 displayed striking similarities in their content-sharing behaviours which may possibly indicate inauthentic activity. Their timelines showed sporadic posting patterns in the second half of 2020, with the exception of two accounts (‘spookfessor’ and ‘holoaxan’), which had been posting since April 2020 (see Appendix 2).

## The ‘This is Xinjiang’ campaign

Our data collection for this report also uncovered a covert coordinated information operation on Twitter and YouTube by Chinese state-affiliated actors amplifying videos from a YouTube channel called ‘[昶宇文化Changyu Culture](#)’. The videos appear to have been created by a Chinese company, also called Changyu Culture. This company was supported by [funding](#) from the Xinjiang Audio-Video Publishing House, a publishing organisation [owned](#) by the Chinese government’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Bureau of Radio, Film and Television and affiliated with the United Front Work Department of the CCP. The videos depict positive biographies of Uyghur people supposedly attending ‘vocational centres’ in Xinjiang and supporting the Chinese government’s policies in the region.

This section analyses a subset of 145 Twitter accounts and three YouTube channels that have been active since February 2020. Many of the Twitter accounts have been suspended since the beginning of the investigation, indicating these accounts have already been flagged by Twitter, possibly for unusual activity. To be clear: ASPI ICPC has been unable to determine the owner of the Twitter accounts, but the combination of posts positively portraying Chinese domestic policies in Xinjiang, the network’s amplification of other Chinese state-owned Twitter accounts and the content of the YouTube videos suggest a Chinese state-affiliated or pro-CCP actor. We could, however, attribute one Twitter account to the Changyu Culture company. The following sections present our evidence to support these claims.

### Characteristics of the accounts

We found the Twitter accounts had little impact on or engagement with legitimate users, had few or no followers and followed few other accounts (Figure 10). Most accounts tended to use Western names and have anime characters, Asian women or natural landscapes as profile pictures. Such pictures have often been used as profile pictures in past [Chinese state influence campaigns](#).

**Figure 10: Suspicious account with low follower numbers that shares only Chinese state-affiliated media**

Yau Pisey Wong  
@PiseyYau

amazing! CCP treats children in southern [#Xinjiang](#) like this!  
where is the [#concentration](#) [#camp](#)?

5 views

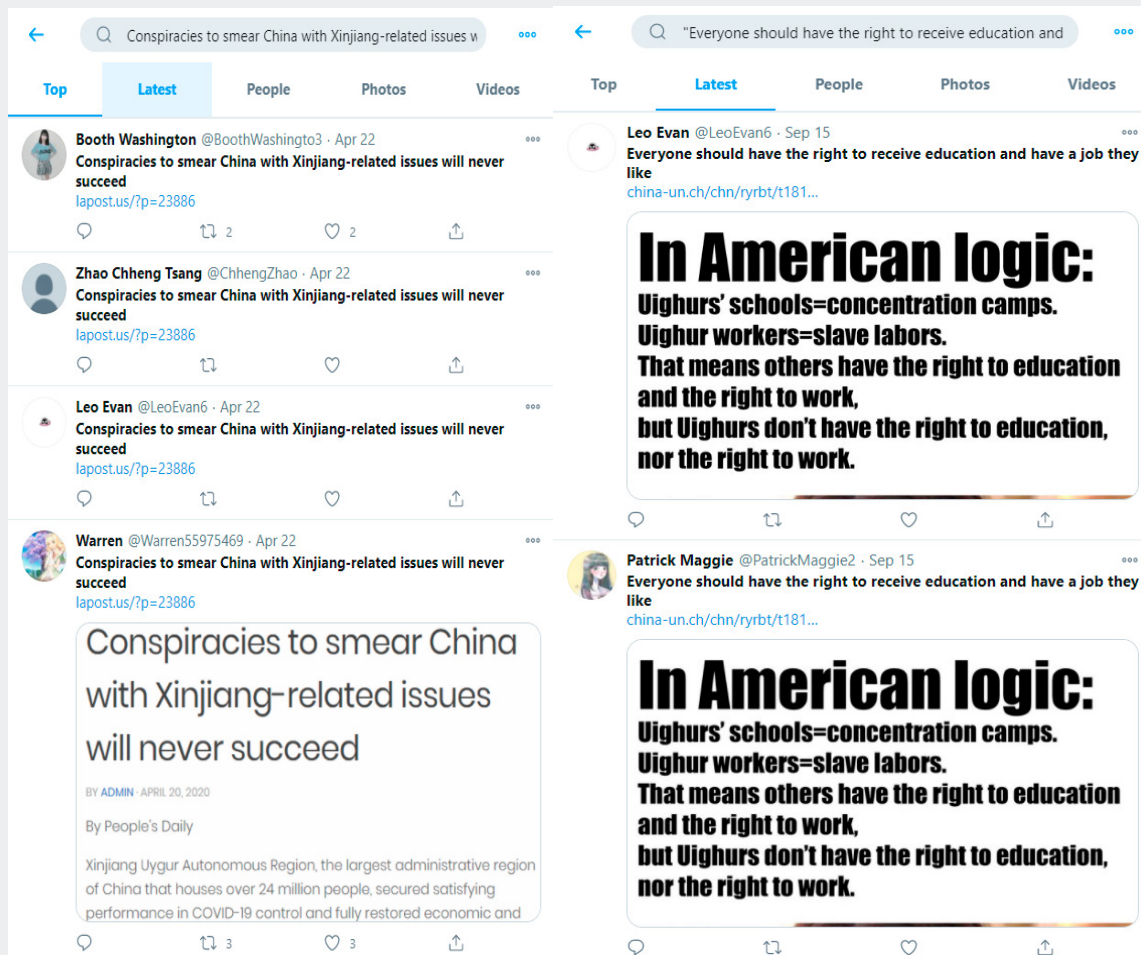
0:00 / 0:39

CGTN @CGTNOfficial · Jun 2, 2020  
China state-affiliated media  
[#Xinjiang refutes claim of detaining children in preschool facilities](#)  
[news.cgtn.com/news/2020-06-0...](#)

11:11 PM · Jun 2, 2020 · Twitter Web App

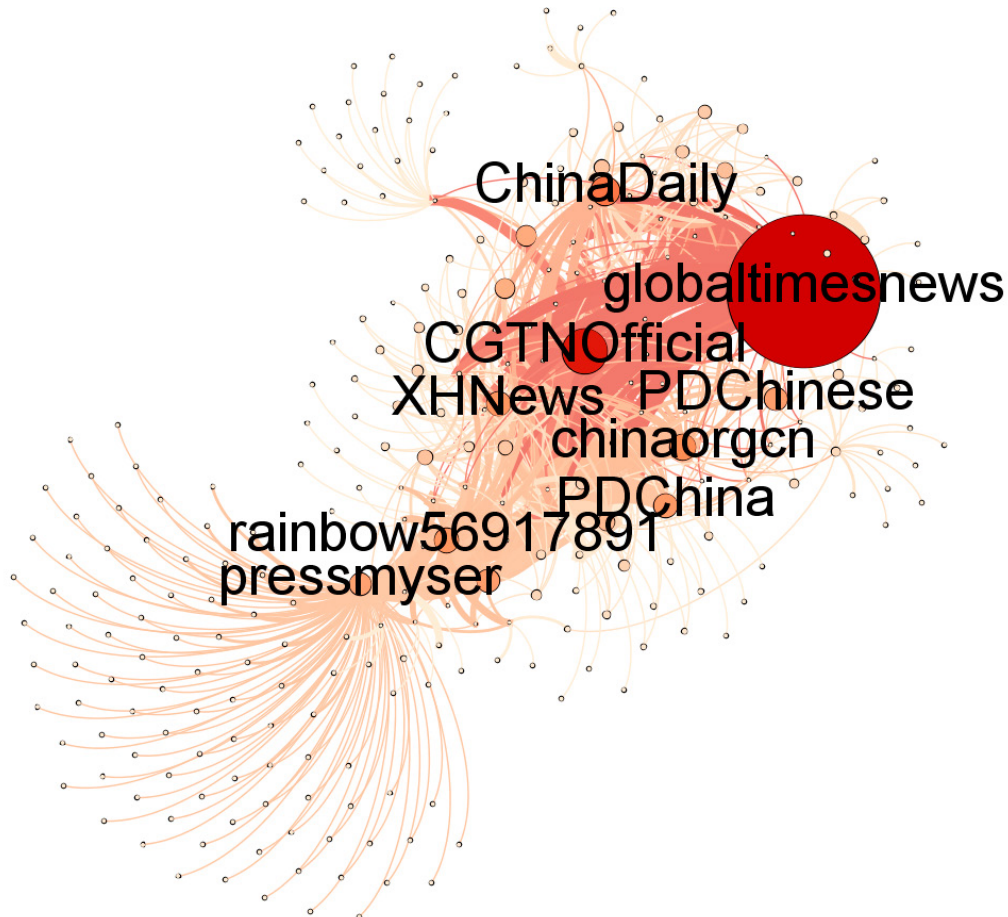
In our sample, accounts tended to use the same tweet text, which made it easy to find other accounts in the network (Figure 11). We suspect these phrases were replicated either automatically or by manual copying-and-pasting.

**Figure 11: Accounts replicating headlines or using similar phrases and images**



Network analysis shows an insular community sharing and retweeting only articles by Chinese-state media, Chinese diplomatic officials and videos from the '昶宇文化Changyu Culture' YouTube channel. The network graphic in Figure 12 shows large red circles representing accounts that were highly retweeted, whereas small and white nodes were rarely retweeted. The Twitter account of the *Global Times* was by far the most engaged account by the network.

Figure 12: Retweet network of suspicious accounts and the accounts they retweeted, coloured and sized by the number of times the account was retweeted



All of the accounts in our data sample were created in 2020 and mostly in the second half of the year. Some accounts were probably purchased commercially and belong to a Chinese-speaking [Dracula-quoting bot-network](#) that was also [discovered](#) in [ASPI's analysis](#) of a [June 2020 Twitter information operation](#) linked to the CCP (Figure 13). This bot network is most likely primarily used as a commercial product but has also become an asset used in state-linked political information operations.

Figure 13: Screenshot of recently created and unreported inauthentic accounts tweeting about Xinjiang, with biographies quoting Dracula



In this new separate (but related) network, accounts were posting and engaging with videos about Uyghurs in Xinjiang from June 2020 onwards. In February 2020 and possibly earlier, accounts in this network also shared news articles on the Hong Kong National Security Law, the US Covid-19 response and the Black Lives Matter protests (we've [highlighted this in previous work](#)). However, most of the content disseminated in this network focused on disputing evidence of, and criticism about, Uyghur forced labour and detention. The articles ranged from accusations of smear campaigns and denials of Western media investigations to positive depictions of life in Xinjiang.

For example, a link to a *Global Times* article about Xinjiang regional government officials rejecting claims of forced labour and re-education camps was [posted](#) separately by 44 accounts within a period of 90 minutes on 21 December 2020. All 44 accounts attached the same image, with a watermark that didn't appear in the original *Global Times* article (Figure 14). Other images shared by accounts in this network also contained similar grey transparent watermarks (see Appendix 3).

Figure 14: Screenshots of accounts sharing the Global Times image with watermarks circled in yellow for emphasis



### Amplifying YouTube videos

Two other accounts of particular interest were 'rainbow56917891' and 'pressmyser', which exclusively shared YouTube videos from the '昶宇文化Changyu Culture' channel. Both accounts have now been suspended from Twitter.

Before the suspension, 'rainbow56917891' had posted at least 80 videos from the channel, with most posts receiving two or fewer retweets and likes. Posts with more than 50 interactions (retweets, reactions and replies) had similar numbers of retweets and likes from the same group of accounts and used natural landscape photos as profile pictures, indicating potential inauthentic amplification.

The '昶宇文化Changyu Culture' YouTube channel had more than 5,460 subscribers but only 949 user views as of November 2020, suggesting that most of the channel's subscribers haven't watched any of the videos. Typical global YouTube channels have many more views than subscribers, since only a small portion of viewers subsequently subscribe (for example, the world's most popular YouTube channel, 'T-Series', has more than 170 million subscribers but more than 142 billion views). The suspicious number of Changyu Culture subscribers suggests that a large number of Google accounts have been created to boost the channel by subscribing but not watching the videos to amplify the view count. According to the YouTube analytics website [Social Blade](#), the Changyu Culture channel had negative video views in September 2020, suggesting that accounts were possibly deleted by YouTube, resulting in video view counts decreasing that month.

The Changyu Culture channel was created in August 2015 but posted its first video only in September 2020. More than 180 videos in total have been uploaded to the account. Most videos uploaded by this channel had fewer than 20 views as of February 2021 and are in Mandarin with English subtitles (Figure 15).

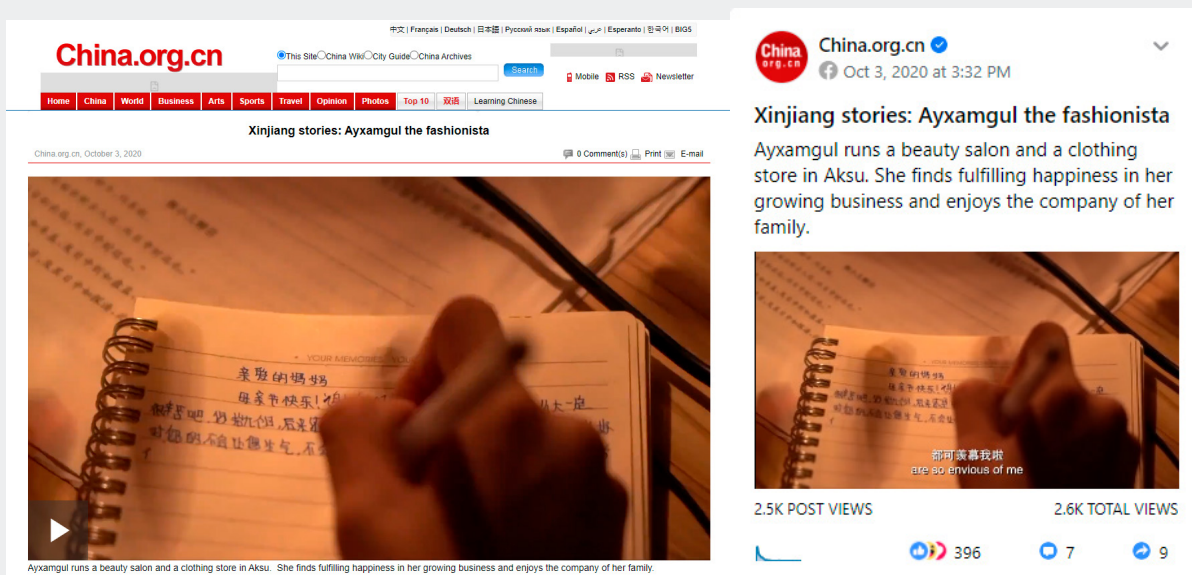
Figure 15: Screenshot of ‘昶宇文化Changyu Culture’ About page taken on 10 November 2020



The videos present the biographies of multiple Uyghur individuals who have allegedly attended ‘vocational education and training centres’ and have been ‘rehabilitated’ after returning to their communities with ‘new’ skills and values. The video with the most views features a ‘former trainee’ who was [interviewed](#) in January 2020 by CGTN. ASPI ICPC can’t vouch for the authenticity or inauthenticity of the biographical videos.

Occasionally, the channel’s videos were boosted by Chinese state media. On 3 October 2020, Chinese state media outlet *China.org.cn* published one of Changyu Culture’s videos on its [website](#) and posted a Facebook [video](#) that received nearly 400 reactions and was viewed more than 2,000 times, according to CrowdTangle data (Figure 16). Other Changyu Culture videos were also shared on the *China Daily* [website](#) and Facebook [page](#).

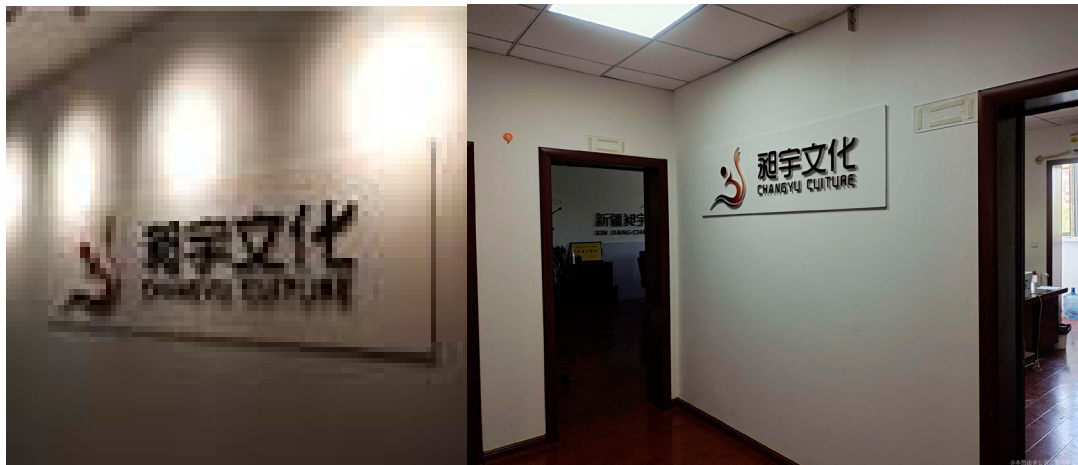
Figure 16: Screenshots of China.org.cn article and Facebook post featuring one of Changyu Culture’s videos



The YouTube channel appears to be associated with a private Chinese advertising and public relations company called [Xinjiang Changyu Culture Co. Ltd](#), which was founded in 2016 in Urumqi - the capital city of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. The company is [listed](#) on the Chinese job recruitment website *BOSS Zhipin* (Boss直聘), where it states that it has fewer than 20 employees. The company logo and photos of its office match the logo in the profile photo of the ‘昶宇文化Changyu Culture’ channel (Figure 17).



Figure 17: ‘昶宇文化Changyu Culture’ YouTube profile picture (left); Changyu Culture company photo on BOSS Zhipin (right)



Tender documentation [shows](#) that Changyu Culture was awarded a 600,000 yuan (~US\$90,000) procurement contract in late 2019 to produce a media project called ‘这里是新疆’ (‘This is Xinjiang’) by the Xinjiang Audio-Video Publishing House, which is [owned](#) by the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Bureau of Radio, Film and Television. The bureau’s deputy director was once [Xu Guixiang](#), who held multiple senior positions within the CCP’s Propaganda and United Front Work departments. The Xinjiang Audio-Video Publishing House’s organisational [chart](#) shows that its leadership is also composed of CCP officials.

Changyu Culture also appears to have a [Twitter account](#) with the handle ‘@dishapa65190266’. We can infer this account may belong to the company because the cover photo is an original image taken inside the company’s offices (Figure 18). This was determined by matching objects in the cover photo and objects found in the photos listed on the company’s *BOSS Zhipin* page (see Appendix 4).

Figure 18: Changyu Culture Twitter account

← 昶宇文化 (Changyu Culture)  
19 Tweets



⋮   ✉   Follow

**昶宇文化 (Changyu Culture)**  
@dishapa65190266

一群有理想的年轻人聚在一起，以视频反映生活，记录生活。  
A group of young men with dreams come together to video life and record what we've seen.

[Translate bio](#)

📅 Joined August 2020

4,406 Following   4,355 Followers

This account was created in August 2020, but all its tweets before 21 September 2020 have been deleted. We know previous tweets existed because we used Twitter's search function to look for [replies to tweets](#). The tweets were mostly from Hindi-language accounts and other accounts listing '@dishapa65190266' in [Follow4Follow](#) threads. It has more than 4,000 followers, many of which were most likely purchased or followed by other accounts before it was sold.

A further indication of inauthentic behaviour is the fact that many of the accounts in the Twitter network that share content from the '昶宇文化Changyu Culture' YouTube channel have already been restricted or deleted by Twitter, probably after they were detected by Twitter's detection systems for identifying unusual activity.

## Conclusion

Efforts by the CCP to contest narratives about Xinjiang continue to evolve as the party exploits the reach of US-based social media platforms and uses Western fringe media outlets to influence audiences likely to be less sympathetic to mainstream reporting. These efforts are multipronged and cross-platform. Research by [ASPI](#) and [others](#) has identified how a media ecosystem of shared interests, comprising state-sponsored assets and opportunistic proxies, consistently seeds Russian disinformation into international political discourse. The CCP's diplomatic and state media messaging is linked to the party's objective of improving its so-called [discourse power](#). As one part of that effort we see the Chinese state using tactics similar to Russia in the online media environment, in order both to gain traction with audiences in the West, and to distract and distort investigations of human rights abuses in Xinjiang by international civil society. As this report shows, some of the CCP's efforts are more effective at driving impact than others. However, the significant statements from the Cyberspace Administration of China on the importance of innovation in propaganda work suggest that the CCP will continue to trial new ways of distracting from, and suppressing where it can, international criticism of its systems of governance and control – especially on Xinjiang.

This report identifies elements of the ecosystem through which the CCP launders and seeks to amplify its propaganda and disinformation. The consistent amplification of *The Grayzone* by Chinese state media, suggests that this is coordinated targeting of an audience that the CCP assesses to be vulnerable to its counter-messaging on Xinjiang.

China's approach to diplomatic and state media messaging has had to adapt in order to project power and influence in an open internet environment, where it has fewer levers to control information and shape opinion than it does over [the Chinese internet](#). Shock tactics, disinformation, the circulation of conspiracy theories and leveraging fringe media outlets and individuals when their narratives align are new tools in the CCP's propaganda arsenal as it attempts to portray its control of Xinjiang positively in the face of credible, mounting evidence of human rights abuses and international criticism.

## Appendix 1

There's a battle for control of the Xinjiang narrative across US social media platforms. In 2018, the top four Twitter accounts with the most likes on tweets containing the keyword 'Xinjiang' were those of *Xinhua News*, the *China Daily*, CGTN and the *Global Times*. By 2020, *Xinhua News* had almost doubled the number of likes it had in 2018 but was only the tenth most liked account (Table A1.1). Former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's account had the most likes among posts mentioning Xinjiang.

**Table A1.1: Twitter accounts with most likes on tweets mentioning Xinjiang from 2018 to 2020 (total likes among all tweets)**

2018		2019		2020	
xhnews	27,393	azzamizzulhaq	107,702	secpompeo	373,439
chinadaily	19,088	secpompeo	85,297	xinhuatravel	178,065
cgtnofficial	16,222	solomonyue	69,240	mediavenir	160,509
globaltimesnews	14,432	cjwerleman	60,444	azzamizzulhaq	98,057
pdchina	9,550	globaltimesnews	53,783	ipacglobal	90,856
tarekfatah	9,062	chinadaily	44,695	rodrigodasilva	81,149
evazhengll	7,677	pdchina	44,468	adrianzenz	75,735
marcorubio	7,437	xinhuatravel	44,411	statedept	62,634
sophiehrw	7,089	statedrl	39,467	kenroth	62,140
ustadtengkuzul	6,748	cgtnofficial	39,248	xhnews	51,775

According to CrowdTangle data, the top 10 accounts on Facebook with the most likes on their posts mentioning Xinjiang have mostly been public Chinese state media accounts. The 'U.S. Department of State: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, & Labor' made the top 10 in 2019 but not in 2020. Note that CrowdTangle only provides data on publicly available posts on Facebook Pages and Groups and does not provide data on private posts or comments.

Table A1.2: Facebook accounts with the most liked posts mentioning Xinjiang from 2018 to 2020 (total likes among all posts)

2018		2019		2020	
CGTN	414067	CGTN	2900073	CGTN	5787299
China Xinhua News	293077	People's Daily, China	1180037	People's Daily, China	1680369
China Daily	289993	Global Times	879034	Xinhua Culture&Travel	800487
Global Times	212343	China Daily	622199	China Xinhua News	762482
Aksi Cepat Tanggap	207951	China Xinhua News	551483	Global Times	647697
People's Daily, China	183040	CCTV	497286	China Daily	646973
CCTV	61421	Xinhua Culture&Travel	290852	Discover Xinjiang	453582
China Plus Culture	41831	Aksi Cepat Tanggap	212010	Discover China	408321
China Xinhua Sci-Tech	40038	FlyOverChina	193327	China Xinhua Sci-Tech	361696
Cordova Media	35732	U.S. Department of State: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, & Labor	190539	FlyOverChina	360139

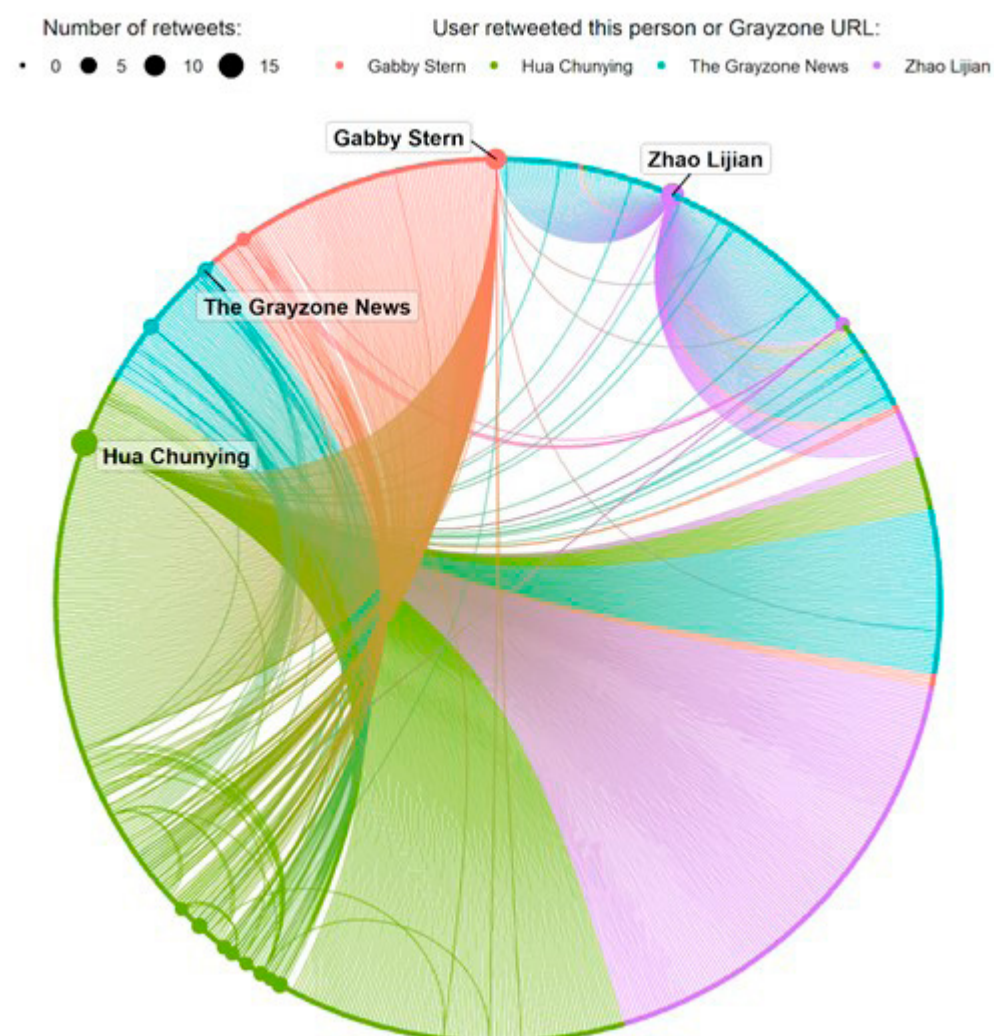
## Appendix 2

Figure A2.1 shows the accounts in our dataset that had retweeted at least one of:

- the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Information Department’s Zhao Lijian’s [tweet](#) of *The Grayzone* article
- China’s Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s [tweet](#) of the same *The Grayzone* article
- WHO Communications Director Gabby Stern’s [retweet](#) of Ajit Singh’s *The Grayzone* article
- any other tweets sharing the *The Grayzone* [article](#).

Figure A2.1: Retweet network; users are arranged around a circle and lines are drawn connecting users who retweeted each other

### Retweet Relationships



The timelines of 13 accounts that had retweeted more than one of the listed tweets above also showed sudden spikes in activity for several accounts (See Figure A2.2 below). Of these accounts, most have only recently become active despite the accounts being created on various dates over the past five years or abandoned and then reactivated again at a later date.

Figure A2.2: Tweeting profiles of accounts



There are also some subgroups within these 19 accounts that retweet each other. In Table A2.1, tweets are ordered by how many times they were retweeted among the account dataset. Likewise, users tended to tweet the same links (Table A2.2).

Table A2.1: Text of tweets retweeted by accounts

Tweet	Twitter accounts
Even when #China is leading the world with several #vaccines in advanced stages of R&D and with ample production capacity, it still decided to join #COVAX.	NinetyNineShake, ExChinesePak1, fchaumac_chau, ronyeap, SINOPAKDREAM, wuwhtay
Those lecturing others should first examine themselves. They cannot cover up their entrenched poor human rights records by blaming China. A few examples: #China continues to focus on ensuring that developing countries have equal access to appropriate, safe and effective #vaccines.	NinetyNineShake, AliHumdani, ExChinesePak1, ronyeap, SINOPAKDREAM, xav68696618
#China just signed an agreement with #Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, officially joining #COVAX.	NinetyNineShake, fchaumac_chau, ronyeap, SINOPAKDREAM, wuwhtay
BAN, SANCTION, ARREST...Disregard allies or non-allies 1987 TOSHIBA 2014 ALSTOM Now HUAWEI, TIKTOK, WECHAT Who's NEXT?	ExChinesePak1, fchaumac_chau, ronyeap, SINOPAKDREAM, wuwhtay
China contributes the largest number of peacekeepers in the world of any member of the UN Security Council. Respect ☐ ☐ <a href="https://t.co/WnOfm2ihzH">https://t.co/WnOfm2ihzH</a>	NinetyNineShake, AliHumdani, ExChinesePak1, SINOPAKDREAM, xav68696618
Germany: 1904-1908 Colonizers killed over 100000 Namibian natives. In 2004 no "reparation", replaced with "healing of wounds". <a href="https://t.co/6f2TxfpT1">https://t.co/6f2TxfpT1</a>	NinetyNineShake, AliHumdani, ExChinesePak1, fchaumac_chau, SINOPAKDREAM
We appreciate the voices of justice and fairness at the UN. We believe justice instead of prejudice will prevail in the end. <a href="https://t.co/LILDh87cII">https://t.co/LILDh87cII</a>	NinetyNineShake, ExChinesePak1, ronyeap, SINOPAKDREAM, wuwhtay
Welcome to Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, China. <a href="https://t.co/PZ05fmLROG">https://t.co/PZ05fmLROG</a>	AliHumdani, ExChinesePak1, SINOPAKDREAM, William02540246, wuwhtay
#China will continue to work together with #COVAX partners and contribute its share to the global fight against the pandemic to safeguard all human beings' safety and health.	fchaumac_chau, ronyeap, SINOPAKDREAM, wuwhtay

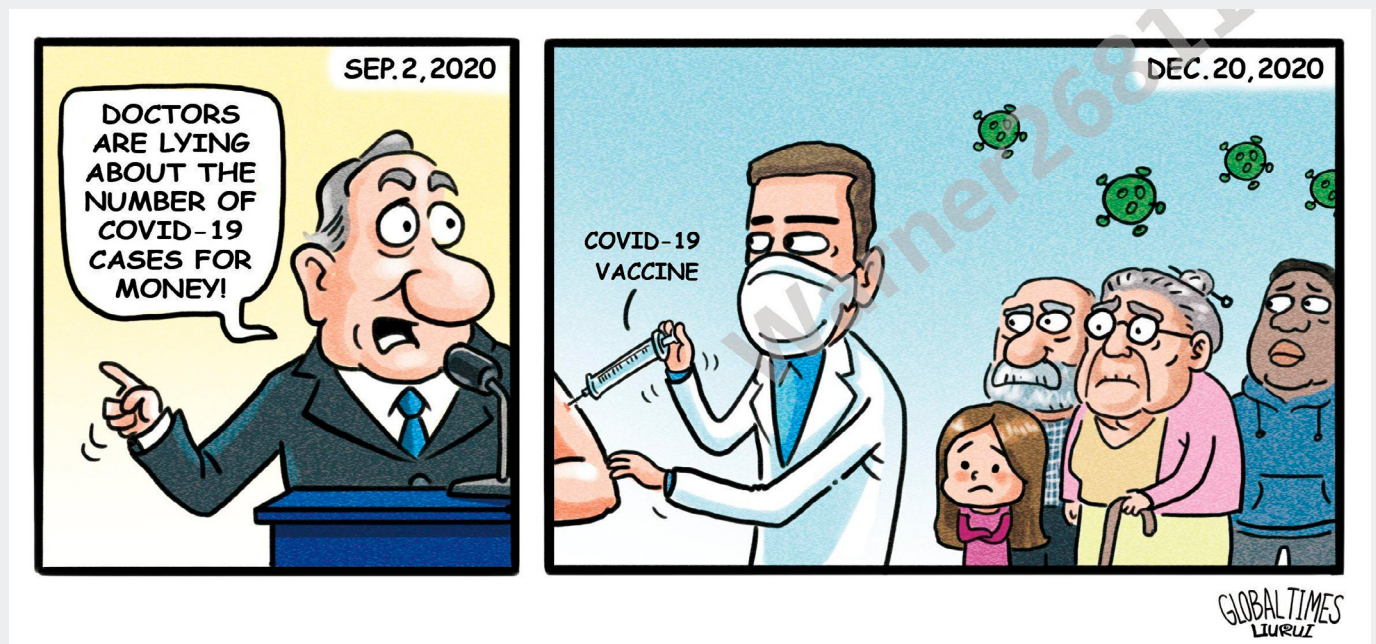
Table A2.2: Links tweeted by accounts

Link	Number of retweets among subset
<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ut57tqrwdq">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ut57tqrwdq</a>	19
<a href="https://www.truth-hk.com">https://www.truth-hk.com</a>	17
<a href="https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/u-s-targets-chinese-uyghur-militants-well-taliban-fighters-afghanistan-n845876">https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/u-s-targets-chinese-uyghur-militants-well-taliban-fighters-afghanistan-n845876</a>	11
<a href="https://twitter.com/rodericday/status/1287411708374454273">https://twitter.com/rodericday/status/1287411708374454273</a>	10
<a href="https://twitter.com/undoubtedlyabot/status/1285765210675052544?s=19">https://twitter.com/undoubtedlyabot/status/1285765210675052544?s=19</a>	10
<a href="https://thegrayzone.com/2019/12/21/china-detaining-millions-uyghurs-problems-claims-us-ngo-researcher/">https://thegrayzone.com/2019/12/21/china-detaining-millions-uyghurs-problems-claims-us-ngo-researcher/</a>	9
<a href="https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/08/us-us-police-floyd-protests-country-comparisons-intl/index.html">https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/08/us-us-police-floyd-protests-country-comparisons-intl/index.html</a>	7
<a href="https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/05/asia/india-modi-open-defecation-free-intl-hnk-scli/index.html">https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/05/asia/india-modi-open-defecation-free-intl-hnk-scli/index.html</a>	5
<a href="http://sptnkne.ws/duuz">http://sptnkne.ws/duuz</a>	4
<a href="http://xhne.ws/zanxe">http://xhne.ws/zanxe</a>	4
<a href="https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-08-25/lies-and-truth-vocational-education-and-training-in-xinjiang-tesmtjq2gu/index.html">https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-08-25/lies-and-truth-vocational-education-and-training-in-xinjiang-tesmtjq2gu/index.html</a>	4
<a href="https://theintercept.com/2020/02/02/fbi-chinese-scientists-surveillance/">https://theintercept.com/2020/02/02/fbi-chinese-scientists-surveillance/</a>	4
<a href="https://twitter.com/wang_taitai/status/1293529596017532935?s=19">https://twitter.com/wang_taitai/status/1293529596017532935?s=19</a>	4

## Appendix 3

Suspicious Twitter accounts identified in the coordinated inauthentic network posted images with grey watermarks. In Figure A3.1, the text 'Warner26811' is clearly visible, and we were able to find a Twitter handle associated with that text. This suggests the watermarks in these images are references to Twitter handles in the network, which may link multiple accounts to the one operator distributing the images and posts.

Figure A3.1: Image posted by accounts in the network with the 'Warner26811' watermark



In addition, the profile picture of 'Warner26811' (Figure A3.2) also contains a watermark that begins with 'Wa...', which suggests that the watermark is most likely its handle. Each of the 44 accounts sharing the *Global Times* article mentioned above had profile pictures that contained a watermark of its own Twitter handle.

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.



Figure A3.2: Screenshot of ‘Warner2681’ account posting a Global Times article with a watermark (left) with the profile picture containing watermark (right)



Figure A3.3: Profile photos of ‘liuhaizhu607’, ‘Arno23051’ and ‘virginia8971’ (left to right); note watermarks of their Twitter handles



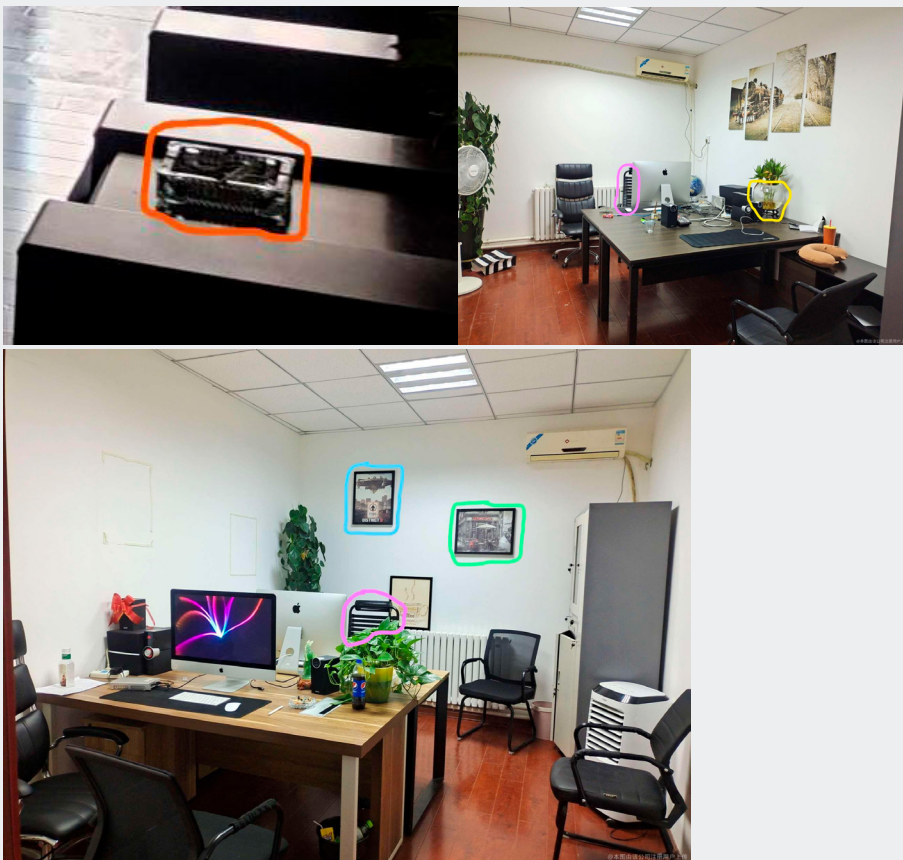
## Appendix 4

The cover photo of Changyu Culture's Twitter [account](#) (Figure A4.1) was taken in the same office as the photos displayed on Changyu Culture's company listing on *BOSS Zhipin* (Figure A4.2). The cover photo is also not currently present on any publicly accessible websites and so was most likely uploaded by people working at Changyu Culture.

Figure A4.1: 'Changyu Culture' Twitter cover photo



Figure A4.2: Changyu Culture company photos on *Zhipin.com*



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