

China is Using Ethnic-Minority Influencers to Spread Its Xinjiang Narrative on Social Media

By ASPI, 2022-10-20



The Chinese party-state is obscuring human rights abuses and oppression in border provinces such as Xinjiang through an increasingly sophisticated propaganda and disinformation campaign. Our research—published today in a new ASPI report, *Frontier influencers: the new face of China's propaganda*—found that China uses popular Uyghur, Kazakh and other minority influencers on YouTube to promote a whitewashed image of the regions.

We examined 1,741 videos published on 18 increasingly popular YouTube accounts featuring influencers from the troubled frontier regions of Xinjiang, Tibet and

Inner Mongolia. For the mostly young and female ethnic-minority influencers, having such an active presence on a Western social media platform is highly unusual, and ordinarily would be fraught with danger in China.

But, as we reveal in our report, these 'frontier influencers' are carefully vetted and considered politically reliable. The content they create is tightly circumscribed via self-censorship and oversight from the private agencies they work for and the domestic video platforms they publish their videos on before they are republished on YouTube.

In one key case study, we show how

frontier influencers' content was directly commissioned by the Chinese party-state. The videos show a standardised, secular and pristine image of these regions, with women who are modern, sinicised and show loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party. This subtle propaganda shows a vision of President Xi Jinping's 'beautiful China', one that is scrubbed of politics and religion and instead shows an idyllic natural environment and innocuous elements of culture such as cooking or dancing.

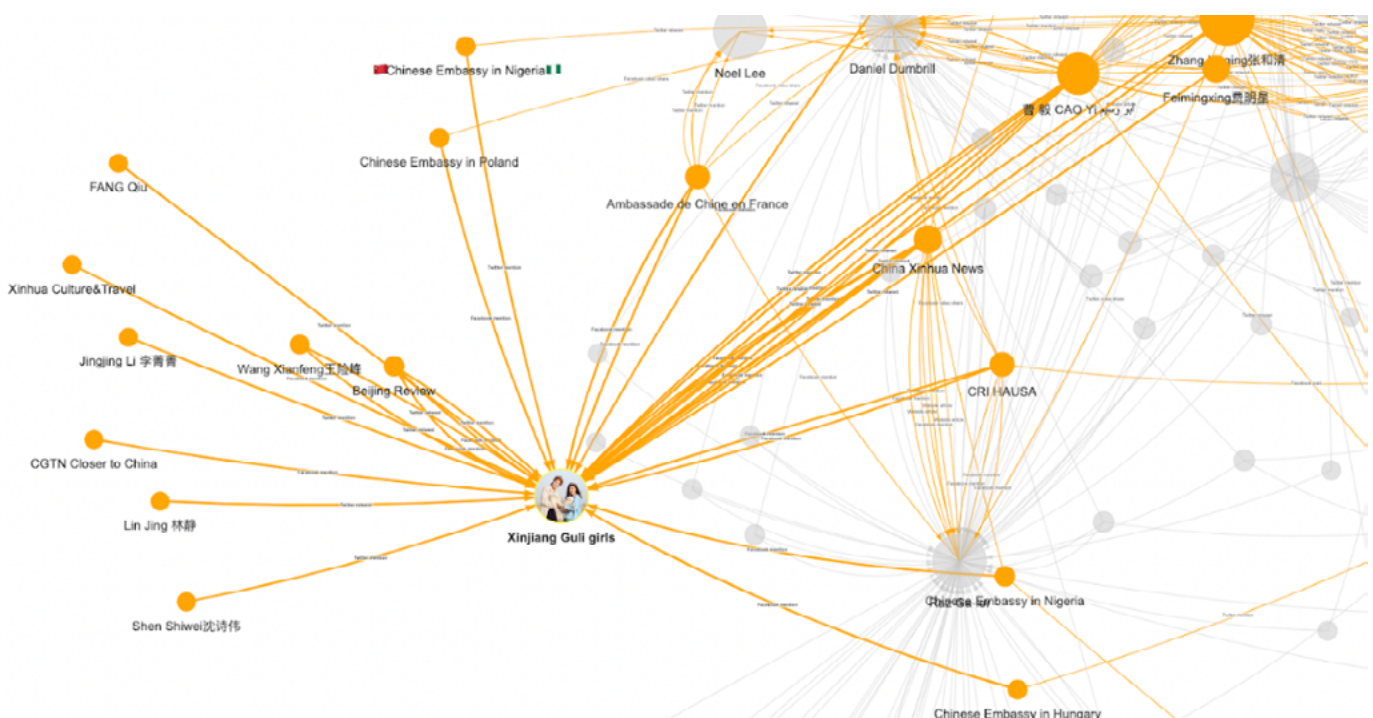
In some of the videos, however, the influencers also explicitly push back on established international human rights abuse concerns. As one of the influencers puts it, 'People are happy and all ethnics are living together harmoniously.'

For viewers, the video content appears to be the creation of these individual influencers, but is in fact what's referred to in China as 'professional user-generated content', or content that's produced with

the help of special influencer-management agencies known as multi-channel networks (MCNs).

The channels are carefully produced to appear authentic, giving them more credibility than traditional party-state media, which can often be rigid and didactic. Yet the channels are produced by the MCNs, which, as businesses, are enmeshed with the CCP. Some of the MCNs have internal CCP committees inside them. All MCNs are required by Chinese law to ensure that their talent adheres to the values of the CCP and promotes its agenda.

By providing capital and resources, MCNs are able to ensure the continuous production and output of content from the creators' channels, helping them to grow into viable online brands. It also means that they are able to churn out 'positive' content about these regions in order to shape online political discourse beyond



China's borders, particularly on those topics that have the potential to disrupt the CCP's strategic objectives.

As previous research by the Brookings Institution has shown, search-engine algorithms tend to prioritise fresh content and channels that post regularly. That gives Chinese party-state media, CCP-friendly foreign vloggers and the ethnic-minority vloggers we examine in our report a distinct advantage over, for example, one-off, thoroughly researched and highly credible video reports about human rights abuses in Xinjiang by the New York Times. Because YouTube is blocked in China, creators based in the country are not normally allowed to monetise their

content on the platform. But concerning, the MCNs have agreements with YouTube that allow them to monetise their content, resulting in a situation where the video-sharing site is effectively subsidising Chinese state-backed propaganda and disinformation efforts.

The frontier influencers represent, in the words of one Chinese propaganda expert, 'guerrillas or militia' fighting on the flanks in 'the international arena of public opinion', while party-state media or the 'regular army' 'charge, kill and advance on the frontlines'. Platforms like YouTube should not be providing this militia with their ammunition.

World Cup Stadium Firm Built Chinese 'Internment Camp'

By Phil Robinson, The Times, 2022-10-20



The company that built the venue for the Qatar 2022 World Cup final also constructed a prison used in China's mass detention of Uyghurs in Xinjiang province, The Times can reveal.

Documents show that China Railway Construction Corporation (CRCC), the joint venture partner with Qatar in building the showpiece Lusail stadium, previously worked for the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps.

The Corps is a Chinese government body, linked to the People's Liberation Army, which has been widely sanctioned for human rights abuses in the western Chinese region.

The golden, 80,000-capacity Lusail stadium in Doha, designed by a team including Sir Norman Foster's firm Foster + Partners, was built especially for the tournament and will host the final match in December.

CRCC, owned by the Chinese state but with some shares listed on the Hong Kong stock exchange, is also responsible for key infrastructure for this year's Winter Olympics in Beijing and has built railway stations for the Moscow Metro.

The revelation that the company built "internment camps" in Xinjiang will raise further questions for Fifa, world football's governing body, after previous criticism of Qatar's own record of human rights and the treatment of migrant workers employed to build its World Cup venues.

The US State Department estimates that between 2017 and 2018 at least two million

Uyghur and Turkic Muslim minority people were sent for political indoctrination in prisons in Xinjiang, a programme widely condemned by western governments and human rights groups.

The prisons are said to have been used for enforced disappearances, incarceration without trial, torture and forced labour. There is no evidence to confirm CRCC had knowledge of the exact purpose to which the buildings it constructed would be put by the authorities in Xinjiang.

Laura Murphy, professor of human rights and contemporary slavery at Sheffield Hallam University, said: "Despite its role in constructing the infrastructure of repression in the Uyghur region, it remains one of the world's top contractors and wins contracts for projects funded by international development finance institutions."

The documents uncovered by The Times, which are publicly available on websites owned by the Chinese government, show CRCC purchased a large quantity of cement for the construction of a prison in Onsu county, Xinjiang, in March 2019.

Images from Google Earth after the purchase show a vast amount of concrete being added to a prison construction project south of Aksu City. It has been identified by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute as the site of detention centres used to hold Uyghur Muslims. Radio Free Asia reports that, as of 2018, one in six of ethnic Uyghurs in Onsu were held in the camps.

The Corps is derived from units of the People's Liberation Army that first established central government development projects in Xinjiang in the 1950s. In March 2021 the EU joined the US in sanctioning leading members of the Corps, citing "atrocious human rights violations".

Zhuang commended the Corps for "uniting and stabilising Xinjiang" and "culturally replenishing Xinjiang".

Xinjiang is historically closer to central Asia than to the rest of China and its original inhabitants were mainly Uyghurs, who speak a Turkic language, and other largely Muslim ethnic groups such as Kazakhs.



While it is not possible to know precisely which organisation funded the prison built by CRCC, the company has a long-standing and public business relationship with the Corps's first division, which is based in Aral City.

In October 2020, CRCC's chairman, Zhuang Jidong, met Lu Yuedong, head of the Corps's first division and signed an agreement to "deepen co-operation".

It briefly broke away from Chinese rule after the Second World War but was reconquered.

It was hit by sporadic unrest from the 1990s, with particularly brutal clashes in 2009, before the central government in Beijing decided on a wholesale programme of "re-education" into the "modern" values of the Chinese Communist Party.

Fifa and ambassadors for the World Cup such as David Beckham have already faced criticism over the human rights implications of awarding the World Cup to Qatar, a largely conservative Islamic state ruled by an absolute monarchy.

In 2020, prosecutors from the US Department of Justice alleged that representatives of Qatar bribed three South American Fifa officials to secure their support ahead of the 2010 vote, which awarded the competition to the Gulf state. Qatar has repeatedly denied accusations that it bribed its way into hosting the competition.

Qatar faced further allegations relating to the rights of migrant workers brought into the country to build the stadiums and associated infrastructure. No figures have been released on the number of workers who died while working on the stadiums, but one study estimated it as being in the hundreds.

Neither CRCC nor Qatar's World Cup organising committee responded to requests for comment.

Behind the story

Thousands of migrant workers in Qatar are still being exploited and abused despite promises by the authorities to reform labour practices, Amnesty International says today (Richard Spencer writes).

A survey of progress in workers' rights a month before the World Cup is due to start found some "important strides" had been made since 2017.

The authorities have improved laws protecting domestic workers, established a minimum wage and set up a fund to compensate workers whose employers failed to pay them.

However, the survey also found implementation was patchy and significant abuses remained, including unpaid wages and domestic staff being forced to work up to 18 hours a day.

"Despite the positive evolution of Qatar's labour system, which has improved the living and working conditions for hundreds of thousands of migrant workers and has the potential to transform the lives of many more, substantial work remains," the report says. "Ultimately, human rights abuses persist on a significant scale."

Qatar is not alone in causing concern in the West over the conditions to which it has subjected migrant workers in recent years. As with many countries in the Middle East it traditionally practised the "kafala" labour system, under which employers "sponsor" residence rights for their migrant employees, a system they can abuse to effectively hold them prisoner.

As elsewhere in the Gulf, most manual workers live in dormitories in labour camps where conditions are often grim. After repeated complaints as work began on World Cup stadiums a decade ago, Qatar agreed to a three-year co-operation deal with the International Labour Organisation to improve standards and abolish kafala.

Amnesty, though, found some employers

still delayed or denied salaries and put up barriers to workers changing jobs. Thousands of workers have been registered as having died in Qatar over the past decade and, while many of those deaths are due to natural causes, there has been little investigation of how many are linked to unsafe working practices, particularly in the Gulf's boiling hot summers.

"At a minimum, hundreds of these fatalities were likely a consequence of working in Qatar's extreme heat," Amnesty says. "New heat legislation is an improvement but must be strengthened to meet international standards."

Amnesty says more pressure should have been brought on the football authorities to ensure they took responsibility for working practices.

"We've long thought the FA (Football Association) should have spoken out far more clearly and honestly about the serious human rights abuses that threaten to completely overshadow this World Cup," Sacha Deshmukh, chief executive of Amnesty International UK, says. "With kick-off almost upon us, the FA has a responsibility to say loudly and clearly that Qatar's labour reforms urgently need reinforcing."

Norway Must Strengthen Support for the Uyghurs and Other Turkic Minorities in Xinjiang, China

By United Nations Association of Norway, 2022-10-17

This statement by a group of organizations in the Norwegian NGO Forum for Human Rights points to the precarious situation in Xinjiang, China, where Uyghurs and other Turkic minorities are victims of widespread and systematic human rights violations.

Statement

(Oslo 17 October 2022) - Norway should condemn the ongoing systematic and widespread human rights violations against Uyghurs and other Turkic minorities in Xinjiang, concluded that they may constitute crimes against humanity. Norway must ensure that China does not succeed in taking the situation in Xinjiang off the international human rights agenda.

On 17 October 2022, a hearing on the

situation of the Uyghurs takes place in the Norwegian Parliament. The Norwegian government should use this as an opportunity to strengthen support and make use of available tools to address the serious human rights situation in Xinjiang.

Similar to other Chinese groups of Turkic descent, the Uyghur people of Xinjiang have long faced prejudice and persecution. Following the fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, Beijing launched policies of assimilation and strict police control on the pretext of fighting terrorism and secession. Chinese authorities suppressed Uyghur calls for autonomy and their religious expressions.

These policies have in recent years



developed into a program of ethnic and religious persecution. More than one million Uyghurs and other Turkic minorities are held in more than 300 detention facilities, while twice as many are reportedly receiving “re-education”. Many people have experienced torture and forced labour in detention. Outside the detention facilities, Chinese authorities have imposed a pervasive system of mass surveillance, controls on movement, arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearance, cultural and religious erasure, and family separation on Turkic Muslims.

Evidence suggests that these actions of Chinese authorities constitute crimes

against humanity. According to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), crimes against humanity are serious specified offences that are knowingly committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack against any civilian population, being targeted against a large number of victims and according to a methodical plan. Crimes against humanity are considered among the gravest crimes under international law.

Many countries are reluctant to raise concerns about human rights violations in Xinjiang because of their economic ties with China. China’s “debt trap diplomacy” explains how the Chinese government uses loans to smaller nations for its geopolitical

purposes, and put pressure on states not to criticise human rights violations. Therefore, the role of rich democratic countries in stepping up support for the Uyghurs is crucial.

Recently, the UN Human Rights Council rejected a draft decision (A/HRC/51/L.6) on the “debate on the situation of human rights in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China”, by a vote of 17 in favour, 19 against and 11 abstentions.

Recommendations

Norway should, together with like-minded states:

- Condemn the ongoing systematic and widespread human rights violations against Uyghurs and other Turkic minorities in Xinjiang, and urge Chinese authorities to release those who have been unjustly detained or imprisoned
- Call on Chinese authorities to comply with their obligations under international human rights treaties
- Impose targeted sanctions together with like-minded states against Chinese officials, responsible for the most serious human rights violations
- Ensure that Norwegian companies are

not engaged in trade or transportation of mass surveillance tools (malware, cameras, software, etc.) with China

- Ensure that imported products from China do not include goods, produced by the use of forced labour in Xinjiang
- State that Uyghurs, residing in third countries (especially in Arab States) should not be returned to China, where they risk detention, torture, and other serious human rights violations
- Provide asylum to those who are fleeing from repression in Xinjiang

The following organisations support the statement

- Amnesty International Norway
- Norwegian Students’ and Academics’ International Assistance Fund (SAIH)
- The Human Rights House Foundation (HRHF)
- The Norwegian Helsinki Committee (NHC)
- The Norwegian Human Rights Fund (NHRF)
- The Rafto Foundation for Human Rights
- United Nations Association of Norway



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