

Frontier influencers

The new face of China's propaganda

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Executive summary

This report explores how the Chinese party-state's globally focused propaganda and disinformation capabilities are evolving and increasing in sophistication. Concerningly, this emerging approach by the Chinese party-state to influence international discourse on China, including obfuscating its record of human rights violations, is largely flying under the radar of US social media platforms and western policymakers.

In the broader context of attempts by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to censor speech, promote disinformation and seed the internet with its preferred narratives, we focus on a small but increasingly popular set of YouTube accounts that feature mainly female China-based ethnic-minority influencers from the troubled frontier regions of Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia, hereafter referred to as 'frontier influencers' or 'frontier accounts'.

Despite being blocked in China, YouTube is seen by the CCP as a key battlefield in its ideological contestation with the outside world, and YouTube's use in foreign-facing propaganda efforts has intensified in recent years. Originally deployed on domestic video-sharing platforms to meet an internal propaganda need, frontier-influencer content has since been redirected towards global audiences on YouTube as part of the CCP's evolving efforts to counter criticisms of China's human rights problems and burnish the country's image.

Alongside party-state media and foreign vloggers, these carefully vetted domestic vloggers are increasingly seen as another key part of Beijing's external propaganda arsenal. Their use of a more personal style of communication and softer presentation is expected to be more convincing than traditional party-state media content, which is often inclined towards the more rigid and didactic. For the CCP, 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'.

The frontier accounts we examine in this report were predominantly created in 2020–21 and feature content that closely hews to CCP narratives, but their less polished presentation has a more authentic feel that conveys a false sense of legitimacy and transparency about China's frontier regions that party-state media struggle to achieve. For viewers, the video content appears to be the creation of the 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).

For the mostly young and female Uyghur, Tibetan and other ethnic-minority influencers we examine in this report, having such an active presence on a Western social media platform is highly unusual, and ordinarily would be fraught with danger. But, as we reveal, frontier influencers are carefully vetted and considered politically reliable. The content they create is tightly circumscribed via self-censorship and oversight from their MCNs and domestic video platforms before being published on YouTube. In one key case study, we show how frontier influencers' content was directly commissioned by the Chinese party-state.

Because YouTube is blocked in China, individual influencers based in the country aren't able to receive advertising revenue through the platform's Partner Program, which isn't available there. But, through their arrangements with YouTube, MCNs have been able to monetise content for frontier influencers, as well as for hundreds of other China-based influencers on the platform. Given that many of the MCNs have publicly committed to promote CCP propaganda, this arrangement results in a troubling situation in which MCNs are able to monetise their activities, including the promotion of disinformation, via their access to YouTube's platform.

The use of professionally supported frontier influencers also appears to be aimed at ensuring that state-backed content ranks well in search results because search-engine algorithms tend to prioritise fresh content and channels that post regularly. From the CCP's perspective, the continuous flooding of content by party-state media, foreign influencers and professionally supported frontier influencers onto YouTube is aimed at outperforming other more critical but stale content.

This new phenomenon reflects a continued willingness, identified in previous ASPI ICPC reports,¹ by the Chinese party-state to experiment in its approach to shaping online political discourse, particularly on those topics that have the potential to disrupt its strategic objectives. By targeting online audiences on YouTube through intermediary accounts managed by MCNs, the CCP can hide its affiliation with those influencers and create the appearance of 'independent' and 'authoritative' voices supporting its narratives, including disinformation that it's seeking to propagate globally.

This report (on page 42) makes a series of policy recommendations, including that social media platforms shouldn't allow MCNs who are conducting propaganda and disinformation work on behalf of the Chinese party-state to monetise their activities or be recognised by the platforms as, for example, official partners or award winners. This report also recommends that social media platforms broaden their practice of labelling the accounts of state media, agencies and officials to include state-linked influencers from the People's Republic of China.

Methodology

Our report includes a content analysis of the frontier influencers' latest output, which reveals a mix of messages to promote frontier regions that often include overt propaganda themes aimed at obscuring the CCP's colonial policies and their harmful effects. The content analysis sheds light on the unique ecosystem in which these influencers operate, as highly curated content is created via a process that navigates political and financial incentives, direction from MCNs and strict domestic filtering and censorship before being published on YouTube.

We identify 18 YouTube accounts featuring ethnic-minority influencers from China's frontier regions with follower numbers ranging from 2,000 to 205,000. The channels produce content for global audiences that was originally posted domestically to Chinese video platforms. Our selection was based on accounts with more than 2,000 followers while screening out vloggers who belonged to the Han ethnic majority. The 100 latest videos posted by each of those accounts on YouTube as of 20 May 2022 were scraped and a content analysis was conducted, for a total of 1,741 videos.

To classify the videos, we generated a list of common topics and grouped the videos into broad themes, such as ‘tourism’, ‘business’ or ‘culture’. We then coded the videos into three different categories (‘quasi-lifestyle’, ‘implicit propaganda’ and ‘explicit propaganda’) based on how closely the videos and topics aligned with party-led policies or government initiatives in the regions. While mainly diving in on a set of YouTube accounts, we also describe how such content is further promoted on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook by official state-backed accounts.

1. Introduction: Redirecting domestic propaganda to global audiences

Inside a Kazakh family’s yurt in Xinjiang in late 2018, a young Uyghur woman named Guli Abdushukur (古丽·阿布都许库) flattens a large, tender pasta sheet with a rolling pin. With a large knife, she cuts thick flat strips of the fresh, hand-rolled noodles before dropping them into the fatty lamb meat broth of a *naryn* (a traditional Central Asian dish). The young woman places the meal in front of the patriarch of the house, an elderly Kazakh grandfather wearing a black trilby hat and sitting cross-legged on a colourful *dastarkhwān*—a tablecloth where food is placed to eat (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Guli Abdushukur of the ‘Annie Guli’ (安妮古丽) YouTube channel introduces a traditional Kazakh dish to her viewers



Source: YouTube.

The video, posted to YouTube on 6 April 2019, has since been viewed 604,574 times as of 29 August 2022. Abdushukur’s videos have garnered 154,000 subscribers on a platform that’s been blocked in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) since March 2009 (see box).

Jumping the Great Firewall

The blocking of platforms such as YouTube, Twitter and Facebook in China has been inextricably linked with frontier issues and ethnic clashes since 2008. Before then, those websites were still accessible from China, although with some restrictions, but around the 2008 Beijing Olympics internal censorship increased steeply, and many websites were fully blocked. In March 2009, Google reported that its video-sharing site YouTube had been blocked. Local media attributed the issue to the publication of a video depicting police brutality against Tibetans in Lhasa during the 2008 uprisings.² The site had already been blocked a year earlier during the riots.³ The 2009 Xinjiang riots caused an additional tightening of internet controls, and in July that year Twitter and Facebook were also blocked in the country.⁴ For months after the riots, the internet was completely shut across the entire region of Xinjiang, denying access to approximately 7 million internet users at the time.⁵

Despite being beyond the Great Firewall, foreign social media platforms are monitored by Chinese authorities, who use them to clamp down on dissent and hunt down critics even outside of China's borders, especially if they hold Chinese citizenship.⁶ In the past decade, there have been many reports of people being harassed, interrogated, arrested and detained for posting about issues sensitive to the CCP on Chinese and foreign social media.⁷ One of the most well-known cases is that of Zhang Zhan (张展), a citizen journalist who became famous for her early reporting of the Covid-19 outbreak in the city of Wuhan. In May 2020, after broadcasting about the impact of the lockdown on YouTube, Zhang was detained and tortured before being sentenced to four years in prison for 'picking quarrels and provoking trouble'.⁸

For minorities in Xinjiang, state control over online activities is even tighter. Former detainees have reported that having a virtual private network (VPN) and/or having a foreign messaging app such as WhatsApp installed on their phones had been used as a pretext for detention.⁹ Watching a video filmed abroad also raises red flags, as well as simply speaking with someone overseas. Forms of religious expression such as wearing a hijab or wearing a scarf in the presence of the Chinese flag have been reported as reasons for arbitrary detention.¹⁰

In his 2021 book on Xinjiang's camps' high-tech surveillance system, Darren Byler tells the story of Vera Zhou, a young Muslim woman from Xinjiang who studied in the US and who, upon her return to China in 2017, was immediately detained and taken to one of the Chinese Government's infamous re-education camps, where she was held for several months with other Muslim Uyghurs and Kazakhs. Many of them were found guilty of so-called 'cyber pre-crimes'—which included installing a VPN or a foreign app on one's phone. Once released, because she was aware that she was being surveilled, Vera soon adapted her online behaviour and, like others around her, started actively promoting state ideology.¹¹

Because of the government's discriminatory crackdown targeting Turkic Muslims and other ethnic and religious groups, most people don't feel safe to express their faith online or to have a presence on foreign platforms. And, while the closely vetted vloggers featured in this report seem to have special permission to post content on YouTube, they still avoid making any direct reference to their faith or specific religious practices.

Guli Abdushukur's videos, which she started off making with Annie Zurge (安妮·孜热), a classmate at the Xinjiang Arts Institute Affiliated Secondary Art School, in July 2018, purport to capture various aspects of life in Xinjiang.¹² The videos, first uploaded to domestic platforms such as Douyin, Bilibili and Xigua, are part of a trend of rustic videos showing pastoral family lives that have found purchase in China with a generation of burnt-out professionals in first- and second-tier cities who are seeking online escapism and a taste of the 'exotic'.

The appetite for the videos published under the name 'Annie Guli' (安妮古丽), which is a portmanteau of the two classmates' names, has been obvious. The classmates' first video presenting Xinjiang's delicacies at Ürümqi's biggest dried-fruit market and published on 12 July 2018 attracted 186,000 views and more than 8,000 comments on the content creation, aggregation and distribution platform Toutiao in under four minutes, according to the *City Consumption Morning Post* (都市消费晨报), which is a newspaper affiliated with the Xinjiang Government.¹³ From the bucolic to the exotic, videos from small towns and villages or distant cities on China's western frontier are being promoted in both official discourse and popular media as new lands of opportunity for China's youth.¹⁴

Homespun videos like those posted to the 'Annie Guli' account also mesh well with the CCP's domestic political agenda, in particular Xi Jinping's grand strategy of 'rural revitalisation' (乡村振兴) that aims to reverse the brain drain from the countryside to urban centres, promote tourism in rural areas, boost e-commerce and modernise agriculture. Uyghur influencer Abdushukur's videos, like those of other ethnic-minority influencers covered in this report, mainly promote messages that support CCP propaganda themes such as the importance of ethnic intermarriage, patriotic loyalty to the Chinese nation and the CCP, and the attractiveness and development of frontier regions. But even the least political of the videos, such as those about local delicacies and recipes, serve a political purpose: to distract from the very aspects of ethnic culture that the CCP is attempting to erase.¹⁵

In addition to their domestic appeal and use, the same videos, when posted to YouTube, also find a global audience, helping to portray these regions in a favourable light amid the party-state's oppression and exploitation of minorities, especially in Xinjiang.¹⁶

Some videos posted on the 'Annie Guli' YouTube account are aimed at pushing back on reports of human rights abuses in Xinjiang from foreign media and governments. In a video posted on 17 October 2021, titled 'Xinjiang Guli defends the beauty of her homeland! Questioned by foreign journalists, don't be blinded by prejudice', Abdushukur posts footage of a Zoom conference with party-state media workers and foreign journalists that she participated in to discuss what she refers to as reports of 'dishonest foreign media outlets' on human rights abuses in Xinjiang.¹⁷

Abdushukur tells the foreign journalists attending the online discussion that she'll defend Xinjiang from the untrue reports of foreign journalists and showcases the beauty of her homeland: the cotton fields, the fresh fruits, the food markets, and adults and children from all ethnic groups who love to dance. Those are all themes that have featured in videos of foreign vloggers who visited Xinjiang on state-sponsored tours, as we previously covered in our report, *Borrowing mouths to speak on Xinjiang*.¹⁸ They also appear to strictly conform to usual representations of Xinjiang as depicted by PRC party-state media (Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2: Screenshots of an October 2021 video on the ‘Annie Guli’ YouTube channel



Source: ‘Annie Guli’ [安妮古丽], YouTube, 17 October 2021, online.

Figure 3: Images of Xinjiang as shared by PRC state media



Sources: top left, *People's Daily*, online; top right, *Global Times*, online; bottom left, *China Daily*, online; bottom right, *Global Times*, online.

While the messages present as closely aligned with CCP narratives, the individual perspective offered by accounts such as ‘Annie Guli’ tends towards a softer presentation of similar subject matter than traditional state media content of that subject matter, which is often inclined towards the more rigid and didactic. As the case of ‘Annie Guli’ demonstrates, the CCP is experimenting with redirecting its domestic propaganda efforts towards global audiences and deploying seemingly authentic voices as

influencers to increase the legitimacy of the content. In the next section, we further explore the role of frontier accounts as active and growing parts of Beijing’s international propaganda machine that are aiming to spread politically charged messages that address central government priorities.

2. Background: The CCP’s ‘lovable’ external propaganda strategy

The CCP has long deployed covert¹⁹ and overt²⁰ online information campaigns to portray positive narratives about its domestic policies, while also flooding the global public discourse with disinformation and propaganda.²¹ But the potentially greater impact that influencers can have compared to party-state media or inauthentic social media activity is a point not lost on the CCP’s leadership, as well as on propaganda experts and scholars working inside the PRC.

Accounts such as ‘Annie Guli’, which present the lives of ethnic minorities in China in a CCP-approved way,²² can be particularly useful in combating criticism from foreign governments, media and civil society. For example, the ‘Annie Guli’ account’s videos about cotton production in Xinjiang, which feature English-language subtitles, have been among its best performing on YouTube—something Chinese propaganda experts have made note of.

One scholar at the Institute of Journalism and Communication at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences noted that views of ‘Annie Guli’s’ Xinjiang cotton videos outranked Chinese state media outlet, the China Global Television Network (*CGTN*), on YouTube on the same topic. Similar videos by foreign vloggers in China, however, outranked them both. As the scholar notes: ‘Obviously, in terms of information propagation, foreign internet influencers > Chinese influencers > Chinese media.’²³

Based on our analysis of the selected vlogger accounts, it’s clear that, alongside foreign vloggers,²⁴ carefully vetted domestic vloggers are increasingly seen as another key part of Beijing’s external propaganda arsenal. The analysis from the Institute of Journalism and Communication suggested that the increased use of a combination of these two types of vloggers should be encouraged in order to further buttress the propaganda work of party-state media:

In the international arena of public opinion, if the professional media are the regular army, then the self-media and vloggers are the guerrillas or militia. In order to fight for international discourse and enhance our international broadcasting capacity, we need both regular troops to charge, kill and advance on the frontline, and guerrillas and militias to cooperate and fight on the flanks.²⁵

As some Chinese scholars have noted, these types of accounts are a fitting answer to Xi Jinping’s persistent call for external propaganda to ‘tell China’s stories well, present a true, multidimensional, and panoramic view of China, and enhance our country’s cultural soft power.’²⁶

It’s a message Xi has continued to reiterate. During his latest visit to Xinjiang in July 2022, Xi emphasised the need to ‘launch multi-level, omni-directional, three-dimensional propaganda about Xinjiang directed abroad, perfect the work of “inviting in” [bringing selected groups on Xinjiang propaganda tours], and tell China’s Xinjiang story well.’²⁷

Earlier, at a May 2021 collective study session of China's Politburo on external propaganda, Xi reiterated that China has 'actively promoted Chinese culture to go out' into the world. For the future, Xi stressed the need to 'build a strategic communication system with distinctive Chinese characteristics, and strive to improve the influence of international communication, the appeal of Chinese culture, the affinity of China's image, the persuasiveness of Chinese discourse and the guidance of international public opinion.'²⁸

Central to achieving that 'guidance', according to Xi, are approaches that are new and innovative and that strike the right tone—one that is, as Xi put it, 'open and confident as well as humble and modest', and that 'strives to create a credible, lovable, and respectable image of China'. Xi spelled out that people should seek to use 'vivid and touching examples' that showcase China's contributions to the world and its experiences in solving 'human problems'.

Frontier regions, in particular, have long been at the core of this strategy. In a 2013 essay that runs through many of the earliest points highlighted by Xi, Cai Mingzhao (蔡名照), then Deputy Minister of the CCP Central Propaganda Department and director of the now defunct External Propaganda Office, said that, to further strengthen China's foreign propaganda efforts, it's fundamental to 'pay special attention to the geographical advantages of frontier provinces, and combine the international communication capacity building at the national level with the international communication work in frontier provinces.'²⁹

Writing in the *People's Daily* overseas edition in August 2021, Wang Xiaohui (王筱卉) and Ma Xufeng (马绪峰), who are media and technology scholars at the Development Research Center, which is an advisory body that recommends policies for the Central Committee of the State Council, drew an explicit connection between Xi's call for new, 'lovable' approaches to external propaganda and rural vloggers. Wang and Ma called for this type of external propaganda and the platforms that this content is hosted on to become the 'megaphone' for 'telling China's stories and spreading China's voices.'³⁰

Among rural vloggers, the two authors single out 'grassroots internet celebrities' such as Li Ziqi (李子柒) and Grandpa Amu (阿木爷爷) as key examples of online video-content creators who already 'proved the great attraction of China's colourful culture to global internet users' on YouTube. Wang and Ma explain that those vloggers depict Chinese people as 'hard-working, brave, self-improving and self-reliant' individuals—a perception that helps foreign audiences to 'develop an affinity for Chinese people and their country'.

According to the authors, by harnessing this type of 'audience-oriented' content and diversifying the communication channels through which the vloggers' content is disseminated, China's ability to communicate on the world stage will improve, which in turn will increase the country's influence in the world, its 'right to speak' in the world and its ability to take the initiative.

3. Guiding international public opinion: frontier accounts on YouTube

According to a 2022 report by a research unit attached to China’s National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA), which is an executive agency under the CCP’s Central Propaganda Department, YouTube is ‘the main new media platform for the distribution of Chinese short videos overseas’.³¹ The report found that the cumulative fan number of the top 100 Chinese YouTube video accounts was 169 million. The accounts represent roughly four different types of entities: traditional state media outlets such as broadcasters and TV stations; online streaming services such as Tencent video and Youku; corporations and brands such as Huawei and Alibaba; and individuals and the agencies that represent them.

The top three channels are individual influencers: Li Ziqi (李子柒), a woman from rural Sichuan (17.1 million subscribers), ‘Ms Yeah’ or Zhou Xiaohui (周晓慧), another young woman who runs a cooking show (11.7 million), and ‘Dianxi Xiaoge’ (滇西小哥) or Dong Meihua (董梅华), a woman from rural Yunnan (9.18 million) (Figure 4). According to the NRTA Development Research Center, the top 30 Chinese individual influencers’ YouTube channels had by January 2022 a total of 74 million subscribers, accounting for 44.88% of the total number of fans of the top 100 Chinese channels and reflecting the impact that individual influencer accounts have compared to other formats.

Figure 4: Li Ziqi (top left), Miss Yeah (top right) and Dianxi Xiaoge (bottom)



Source: YouTube.

This report focuses on a sample of 18 YouTube accounts producing content for global audiences that was originally posted domestically to Chinese video platforms. For the purposes of this report, we focus on PRC-based frontier-region ethnic influencers with more than 2,000 followers on YouTube. Of the total 18 accounts, 11 come from Xinjiang, 4 from Inner Mongolia, 2 from Hunan and 1 from Tibet. Seventeen of them feature women; the exception is ‘Fatt’s family life’, which features a Uyghur family but is mainly centred around their son, Erpat Alimjan (阿热帕提·阿里木江).

Most, but not all, of the influencers we examine fit the mould of the CCP’s ideal minority youth (secular, fluent in Mandarin and ‘politically reliable’), and some are card-carrying members of the CCP.

Adile Abdukerim (阿迪莱·阿布都克热木) of the ‘Guli takes you to see Xinjiang’ (古丽带你去看新疆) channel, for example, studied as a law student at Xinjiang Normal University’s School of Political Science and Law and is now completing a traineeship at a local procuratorate.³² In her 2021 wrap-up video, Abdukerim says that the most memorable moment of the year was becoming a CCP member.³³ In June 2021, as part of a group of students considered ‘outstanding youth representatives’, Abdukerim was invited to attend a propaganda event held in honour of the party’s 100-year anniversary at her university (Figure 5).³⁴ Unusually for a young, Uyghur graduate, Abdukerim also writes a column for *Guancha Syndicate* (观察者网), which is a nationalist media outlet co-founded by venture capitalist Eric Xun Li (李世默).³⁵

Figure 5: Adile Abdukerim (right) at a propaganda event at Xinjiang Normal University



Source: Xinjiang Normal University, 4 June 2021, online.

Unsurprisingly, politically reliable frontier influencers such as Abdukerim present China’s border regions in a favourable light. The frontier regions are depicted as exotic locales and sites of development and progress where grateful ethnic-minority people are being lifted out of poverty by the efforts of the Han-dominated CCP, while evidence of mass abuse is overlooked or denied. In the following section, we dive deeper into this content through a case-study analysis of a key frontier account.

3.1 The ‘Story of Xinjiang by Guli’ case

The short-lived ‘Story of Xinjiang by Guli (古丽讲新疆)’ set of accounts, which operated in April and May 2021 on platforms blocked in China, provides a clear example of China’s propaganda apparatus attempting to use ethnic-minority influencers to directly target global English-speaking audiences and push back against allegations of human rights abuses in Xinjiang (Figure 6). It’s also the most overt case we found of frontier influencers producing content directly commissioned by a party-state organ.

Figure 6: Screenshot from a video of the ‘Story of Xinjiang by Guli’ channel featuring Hurshidem Ablikim



Source: YouTube.

Despite being presented by party-state media workers, Chinese diplomats and pro-CCP vloggers as an ordinary account with no government connections, ‘Story of Xinjiang by Guli’ featured content that was commissioned by party-state authorities (see Figure 7), presented by two women who have taken part in previous propaganda campaigns, and was run by an agency, or MCN, that works to transform Xinjiang government officials into online influencers.³⁶ (For more on the role of MCNs, see page 36.)

Before the ‘Story of Xinjiang by Guli’ account launched on social media platforms including YouTube, Twitter,³⁷ Instagram³⁸ and TikTok,³⁹ its original Chinese social media accounts on domestic platforms such as Douyin and Kuaishou featured only one young Uyghur woman named Hurshidem Ablikim (胡尔西代姆·阿不力克木).

On 16 March 2021, China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) spokesperson Zhao Lijian (赵立坚) tweeted a video sourced from Douyin account @xinjiang2030 featuring Ablikim travelling throughout Xinjiang.⁴⁰ Neither the video nor Zhao’s tweet acknowledged that the content had been commissioned by a government agency, but unedited versions of the video published in domestic party-state media outlets reveal that it was co-presented by the Information Office of the International Department of the CCP Central Committee and the Xinjiang office of the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), which is China’s chief internet regulator and censor.⁴¹ The video was part of a series of short videos called ‘Real stories from Xinjiang, China’ (来自中国新疆的真实故事). The videos were also shared by MOFA officials Wang Wenbin (汪文斌) on Facebook⁴² and Hua Chunying (华春莹) on Twitter.⁴³ (For more on Twitter amplification, see the ‘Frontier accounts on Twitter’ section of this report on page 34).

Figure 7: The final frame of the full version of Ablikim’s ‘Real stories from Xinjiang, China’ video reveals that it was ‘co-presented’ by the Information Office of the International Department of the CCP Central Committee and the Xinjiang Cyberspace Administration



Source: China.org.cn, 21 February 2021, online.

The propaganda videos were mainly used domestically, but English-language versions of some of the videos or versions with added English subtitles were also created in order to target global audiences. A propaganda video featuring the same images of Ablikim travelling through Xinjiang and narrated in English by Ablikim cited economic growth figures for the region, and Ablikim’s claim that ‘people are happy and all ethnics [sic] are living together harmoniously’ (Figure 8).⁴⁴

Figure 8: Screenshot from a video featuring Hurshidem Ablikim with English subtitles



Source: ‘Human rights’, [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...), 23 April 2020, online.

Ablikim was the sole influencer behind the ‘Story of Xinjiang by Guli’ accounts from 2019 to 2021, when she was joined by and eventually replaced by another young woman who referred to herself as a ‘Uyghur influencer’ called Sabira Samat (赛比热·赛买提). Samat and party-state media workers presented the two women as ‘sisters’, but they were both actually employed by a Chengdu-based MCN, the name of which translates to ‘Chengdu Grey Man Culture Communications’ (成都灰灰侠文化传播有限公司)—a company heavily involved in Xinjiang-related propaganda work (see the ‘Multi-channel networks’ section of this report on page 36).⁴⁵

‘Grey Man Culture’ focuses on ‘cultural tourism’ and managing ethnic-minority influencers, particularly women.⁴⁶ According to the LinkedIn profile of the company’s founder, Heng Chenhui (恒陈辉), the company is ‘focussed on the incubation of influencers in [different] verticals’. ‘Grey Man Culture’ promotional material explains the company’s strategy of incubating influencers who can then be used in campaigns to attract audiences.

‘Grey Man Culture’ worked directly with authorities in Xinjiang to turn a local official there into an online influencer. In November 2021, the company won a ¥996,000 (A\$209,884) bid from Shayar County’s Culture, Sports, Radio, Television and Tourism Bureau (沙雅县文化体育广播电视和旅游局) to turn Renagul Rahman (热娜古丽·热合曼), an official from the bureau, into an influencer on Douyin and other video platforms.⁴⁷ A video featuring Rahman was tweeted by MOFA spokesperson Hua Chunying on 28 June 2022.⁴⁸

Before Sabira Samat effectively took over the ‘Story of Xinjiang by Guli’ channels, Ablikim’s online success had already led to interviews with *Xinjiang Daily* and *China Nation* magazine and had featured in *Cosmo* and the *People’s Daily*. Ablikim had also been praised by Chinese diplomats Hua Chunying, Zhao Lijian and Wang Wenbin, according to local media reports.⁴⁹

In September 2019, Ablikim won the ‘Me and my Motherland—Voice of Xinjiang’ (我和我的祖国·新疆心声) competition run by the Xinjiang Cyberspace Administration Office (Figure 9). Her channel won the best communication award and she herself won the most popular award. In 2019, each award was worth ¥15,000 (A\$3,155)—paid for by the Xinjiang Cyberspace Administration. By the end of 2019, Ablikim’s total number of followers across various platforms in China exceeded 1.5 million.

Figure 9: Hurshidem Ablikim being awarded at the ‘Me and my Motherland—Voice of Xinjiang’ competition



Source: Cyberspace Administration of China, 16 September 2019, [online](#).

On 1 April 2021, just over two weeks after Zhao Lijian’s tweet promoting Ablikim’s propaganda video co-presented by two CCP organs, new ‘Story of Xinjiang by Guli’ accounts were opened on Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and TikTok.⁵⁰ The Twitter account’s first tweet on 1 April 2021 introduced Ablikim, who, after being the sole influencer behind the ‘Story of Xinjiang’ brand for two years, was now joined by Samat.

The ‘Story of Xinjiang by Guli’ account’s first tweet tagged both MOFA spokesperson Zhao Lijian and CGTN media worker Li Jingjing (李菁菁) (Figure 10). Li promoted the tweet and welcomed the ‘sisters’ to Twitter in a tweet that was further amplified by Zhang Heqing (张和清), a cultural attaché at the Chinese Embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan.⁵¹ In a later tweet on 28 April 2021, Zhang referred to the account as presenting ‘the true daily life of the people of #Xinjiang’.⁵²

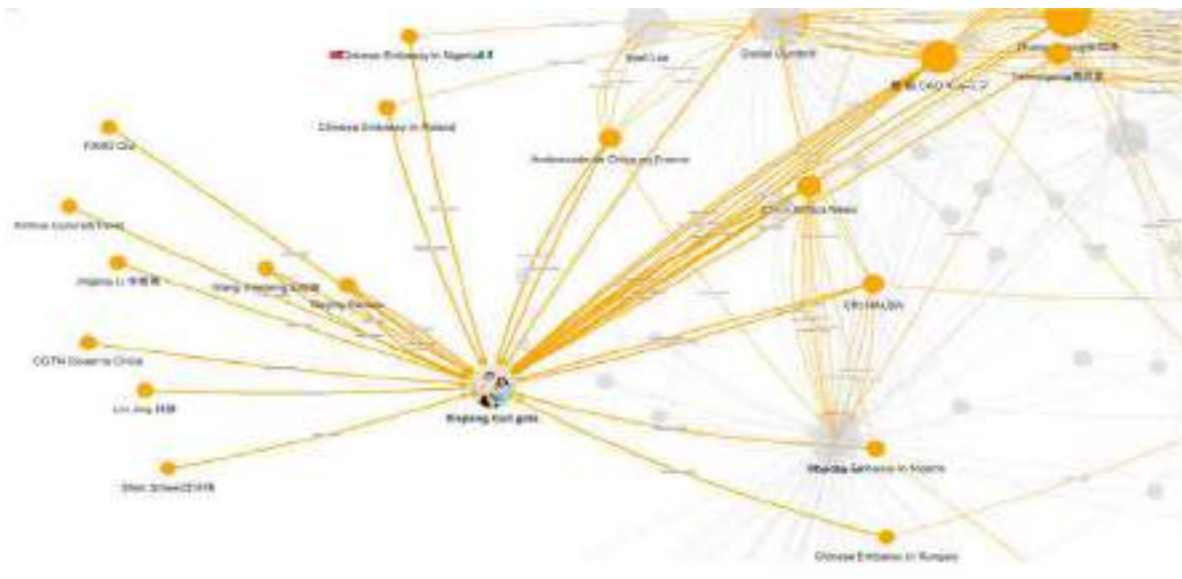
Figure 10: Screenshot from a video on the 'Li Jingjing' YouTube channel featuring Hurshidem Ablikim and Sabira Samat (left); first post by the 'Story of Xinjiang by Guli' Twitter account (right)



Source: left, 'Li Jingjing 李菁菁', YouTube, 7 June 2021, [online](#); right, 'Li Jingjing 李菁菁', Twitter, 21 May 2021, [online](#).

Previous ASPI data collection found that, between January 2020 and August 2021, 20 Chinese state-controlled accounts had published at least 32 Twitter or Facebook posts amplifying content from the 'Story of Xinjiang by Guli' YouTube channel (Figure 11). An interactive network diagram of the Chinese state-controlled accounts promoting 'Story of Xinjiang by Guli' can be found [online](#).⁵³

Figure 11: A subset of a network diagram showing Chinese state media and diplomatic accounts that shared and promoted content from the 'Story of Xinjiang by Guli' YouTube channel



Source: ASPI, [online](#).

The videos that followed Samat's introduction took a turn from Ablikim's travelogue-style content to videos of Samat using English to directly challenge foreign media reports about human rights abuses in Xinjiang. In an interview with Li Jingjing and Shenzhen-based pro-CCP Canadian vlogger Daniel Dumbrill, Samat said that she decided to make videos about what 'real Xinjiang' looks like because some 'foreign media' and 'foreign people' 'slander' and 'smear' the region.⁵⁴

Figure 12: Screenshots from the ‘Story of Xinjiang by Guli’ social media accounts featuring Sabira Samat



Source: ‘GuliXinjiang’, Instagram, online.

Apart from a few introductory videos featuring both women, the content of the ‘Story of Xinjiang’ brand mainly featured videos of Samat; Ablikim reappeared only occasionally in videos that featured her alone. Samat claimed in one video that Ablikim was looking after the Chinese market while Samat looked after the international market.⁵⁵ That both influencers could be used interchangeably underlines the strategic use of this frontier account and suggests that, far from being an authentic account, it was part of a concerted propaganda campaign.

After Ablikim was replaced by Samat on the ‘Story of Xinjiang’ brand, she featured in a series of videos for another ‘Grey Man Culture’ brand called ‘Three treasures of the west’ (西部三宝) that were regularly posted to the brand’s Facebook page from 22 January 2021 to 2 August 2021—the same time period that Samat took over the ‘Story of Xinjiang by Guli’ accounts.⁵⁶ As we showed in our previous report, *Borrowing mouths to speak on Xinjiang*, by November 2021, the YouTube and Instagram ‘Story of Xinjiang by Guli’ accounts had been rebranded as ‘疆藏姐妹花 Xinjiang and Tibet sisters’.⁵⁷

Unlike in most of Ablikim’s videos, Samat spoke more directly to an overseas audience in English. Topics her videos covered included cotton production at what she referred to as her family farm, China’s Covid-19 containment measures and criticism of ‘smears’ from foreign media. Given that Samat’s videos hewed so closely to CCP talking points, it’s highly likely that her content was being sponsored by part of the Chinese party-state, just as Ablikim’s videos were.

Samat also took part in propaganda campaigns, including the ‘A Date with China’ (中国有约) media tour of Xinjiang in April 2021, which was hosted by the CAC.⁵⁸ During the tour, Samat interviewed Patrick Köllmer, a German influencer, about what she referred to as ‘the foreign media and some people’ who she says ‘smear’ and ‘slander’ Xinjiang.⁵⁹ An edited version of the interview was later promoted on Twitter by Chinese diplomats Li Bijian (李碧建) and Zhang Heqing (张和清).⁶⁰

The ‘Story of Xinjiang by Guli’ Twitter account was combative and pushed back against critiques from, for example, anti-CCP YouTube influencers Winston Sterzel and Matthew Tye, who questioned the authenticity of the account.⁶¹ Twitter suspended the @XinjiangGuli Twitter account in late May 2021.⁶²

The ‘Story of Xinjiang by Guli’ case study demonstrates that, in addition to running unconvincing ‘spammy’ campaigns, the CCP is experimenting with comparatively more sophisticated bespoke campaigns that use ethnic-minority influencers as seemingly ‘authentic’ personas to spread misinformation and engage in discourse warfare with foreign critics of Beijing’s oppressive policies in Xinjiang.

3.2 Content analysis

Figure 13: The top three PRC frontier regions' minority influencers on YouTube: Duoduo Qimuge, Annie Guli and Naqulamu (from top to bottom)



Source: YouTube.

For the purposes of our research, we collected 18 accounts featuring ethnic-minority influencers from China's frontier regions (Table 1), mainly based on YouTube recommendations and related search terms such as 'Xinjiang' or 'Guli' (a common Uyghur nickname that many of the, mainly female, influencers go by). This is by no means a comprehensive list, as we selected only those with more than 2,000 followers to focus on accounts with a more significant audience. We also screened out vloggers who belonged to China's Han ethnic majority. We then scraped the latest 100 videos posted by each of these accounts on YouTube as of 20 May 2022 and ran a content analysis.

Table 1: Frontier accounts on YouTube with more than 2,000 followers

	YouTube account	Ethnic group	Region	Subscribers	MCN	Listed location	Creation date
1	Duoduo Qimuge (多多其木格)	Manchu	Inner Mongolia	205,000	Muyun	Singapore	28/10/2019
2	Annie Guli (安妮古丽)	Uyghur	Xinjiang	154,000	Muyun & WebTVAsia	China	30/11/2018
3	Naqulamu (那曲拉姆)	Tibetan	Tibet	80,200	Muyun	Hong Kong	31/05/2021
4	Ayituna (阿依图娜)	Uyghur	Xinjiang	41,800	Muyun	Hong Kong	28/10/2019
5	Xiangxi Shisanmei (湘西石三妹)	Dong	Hunan	39,900	Muyun & Xiaowu Brothers	Hong Kong	25/07/2019
6	Mongolian girl Ximo (蒙古姑娘希莫)	Mongol	Inner Mongolia	24,300	Muyun	China	19/10/2020
7	Chinar girl on horseback (马背少女驰娜尔)	Kazakh	Xinjiang	23,100	Muyun	Hong Kong	14/05/2021
8	Fatt's family life	Uyghur	Xinjiang	17,700	Xiaowu brothers	Hong Kong	27/05/2020
9	Inner Mongolia Mumu (内蒙牧牧)	Mongol	Inner Mongolia	15,900	Muyun	Hong Kong	28/06/2021
10	Xinjiang girl Mumu	Uyghur	Xinjiang	13,300	Unclear	Hong Kong	29/03/2021
11	Xinjiang mukbanger Guli (新疆美食主播古丽)	Uyghur	Xinjiang	12,200	Unclear	Taiwan	04/10/2020
12	Aliya at the border (边境阿莉娅)	Russian	Inner Mongolia	10,700	Muyun	China	17/12/2020
13	Meng Bao Xiaona	Dong	Hainan/Hunan	9,900	Unclear	Hong Kong	04/09/2020
14	Hello Dina	Uyghur	Xinjiang	8,820	Muyun	Hong Kong	04/02/2021
15	GuLi XinJiang	Uyghur	Xinjiang	8,070	Unclear	China	25/10/2020
16	Guli takes you to see Xinjiang (古丽带你去看新疆)	Uyghur	Xinjiang	7,160	Unclear	Unlisted	22/12/2021
17	Xinjiang model ·FIA	Uyghur	Xinjiang	2,440	Unclear	Hong Kong	23/02/2021
18	艾丽丝Xinjiang Alice	Uyghur	Xinjiang	2,150	Unclear	United States	02/11/2020

Typically, these videos focus on ethnic minorities' life in China's border regions. In their videos, the vloggers from Xinjiang we examined embody the central government's ideal of Uyghur women with 'modern' and 'sinicised' habits and a passionate loyalty to the party. The videos cover topics from dating to travelling, from national holidays to food and beverages, and unveil several aspects of the government's crackdown in the region, including persistent pushes to force ethnically Turkic people to observe Han holidays and lifestyle (Figure 14).⁶³

Figure 14: A video about puppies (left) and a video with overt propaganda lines (right), from the GuLi XinJiang channel



Source: YouTube.

Many of the vloggers are contracted with the same influencer-management agencies, or MCNs, and we found instances of collaborations between different channels registered with the same MCN.⁶⁴ While the focus of the video content slightly differs among these accounts, some of them often feature in each other's videos. The two influencers behind the 'Duoduo Qimuge' and 'Annie Guli' accounts, for example, frequently appear together during activities and sponsored trips organised by their agency, Haokan Video, which is a video platform owned by tech giant Baidu (Figure 15).⁶⁵ Similarly, Duoduo Qimuge features in videos on other accounts, including the Tibet-based 'Naqulamu' account.⁶⁶

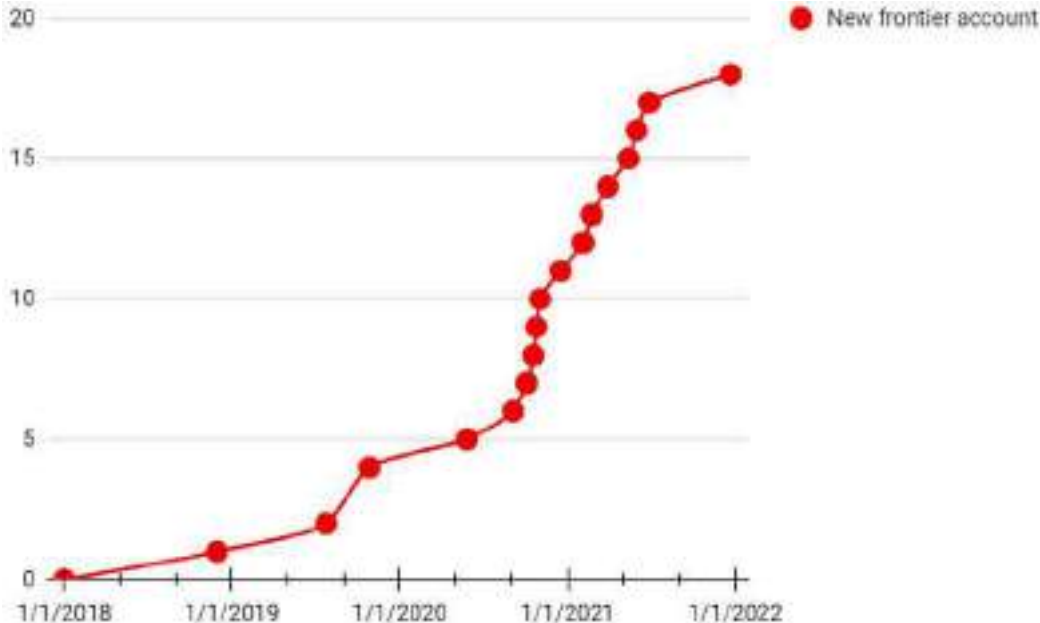
Figure 15: Influencers from the top two frontier accounts, 'Duoduo Qimuge' and 'Annie Guli', featuring together in a video



Source: 'Annie Guli' (安妮古丽), YouTube, 12 July 2021, [online](#).

Some of the earlier accounts, such as ‘Annie Guli’, which was created in November 2018, feature more pro-CCP content around 2019, and increasingly so in 2020, coinciding with increased international attention on human rights violations perpetrated by the Chinese Government, the Covid-19 pandemic, and souring relations between the US and China. The vast majority of the accounts we collected were created from mid-2020 onwards (Figure 16).

Figure 16: Timeline of frontier accounts’ creation

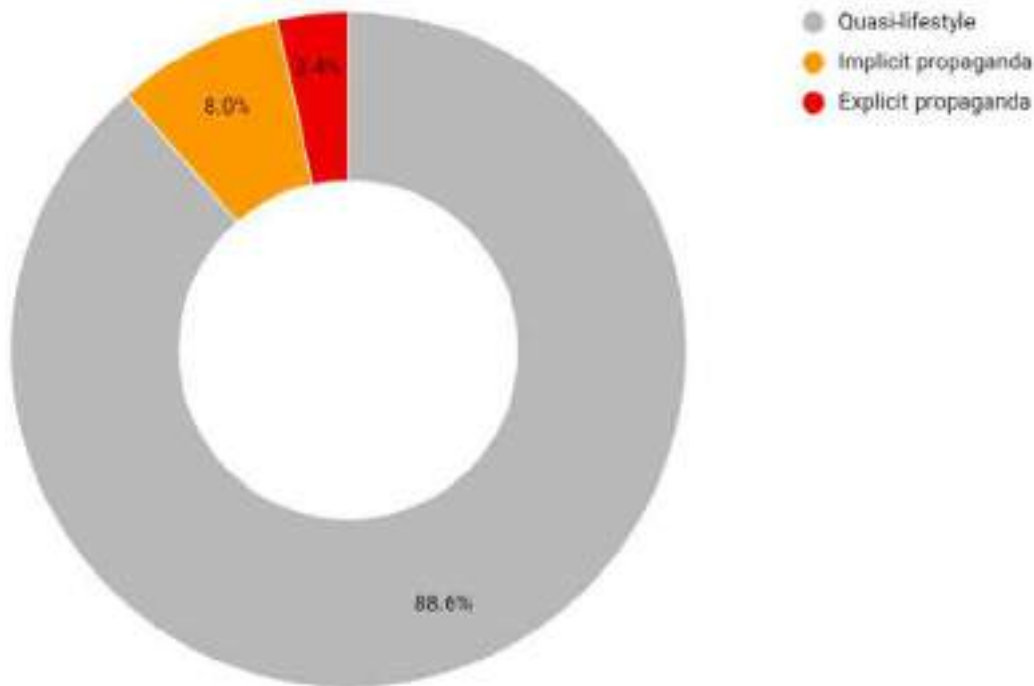


Source: ASPI.

To classify the videos, we extrapolated a list of common topics, grouped them into broader themes, and then coded them based on three different categories (‘quasi-lifestyle’, ‘implicit propaganda’ and ‘explicit propaganda’) according to how closely the videos and topics aligned with party-led policies or government initiatives in the region. Under the general theme of ‘business’, for example, videos about sponsored content, conferences, business events and so on were coded as ‘quasi-lifestyle’; those highlighting the economic development of frontier regions or minority ethnic groups as ‘implicit propaganda’; and those directly denying Uyghur forced-labour allegations as ‘explicit propaganda’. (See the appendix to this report for the full list of topics and themes.)

Of the 1,741 videos we analysed, 1,543 (or about 89%) were classified as quasi-lifestyle, 139 (or about 8%) were classified as implicit propaganda, and 59 (or about 3%) were classified as explicit propaganda (Figure 17).

Figure 17: Video content analysis



Source: ASPI.

Category 1: Behind the scenes of quasi-lifestyle content

By far the most common category—quasi-lifestyle videos—consist of lifestyle content that offers a standardised, secular and pristine image of China’s frontier regions. While the content may to some extent appear to be ‘authentic’ and representative of the views of the creators, the circumstances and driving factors behind its production strongly influence what can and can’t be said on these channels. Usually, the videos are first published on government-approved and closely monitored Chinese streaming sites inside the Great Firewall, effectively ensuring that the content adheres to CCP narratives.⁶⁷

Short lifestyle videos play a unique role in the CCP’s propaganda. A January 2022 article from China Press Publication Radio Film and Television Journal stated that short videos can ‘largely avoid the vigilance of the cross-cultural and cross-ideological audience and break the mental barriers that government propaganda encounters’. It also emphasised the importance these products have in crafting a pristine image of China abroad, as ‘Chinese symbols’ carried in them can ‘infiltrate foreign audiences’ perceptions of China, make them construct a perfect China image, and thus objectively play a more positive role in enhancing China’s national soft power’.⁶⁸

As highlighted by Professor Björn Alpermann in his 2020 paper on Chinese state media’s international strategy on Xinjiang messaging, the political relevance of videos on themes such as ethnic unity or good governance is more straightforward. However, he introduces the classification of nature-related and other subtler propaganda videos as ‘alter-political’ because they provide ‘a deliberately de-politicized vision of Xinjiang and [are] strictly in keeping with Xi Jinping’s call to display a “beautiful China” to the world’.⁶⁹ In our analysis, the set of quasi-lifestyle videos should also be regarded as alter-political because it ultimately serves the same purpose.

Both Alpermann and Professor Ann-Marie Brady⁷⁰ refer back to a key quote by Xi Jinping at a 2013 Politburo meeting discussing the country's cultural soft power:

China should be portrayed as a civilized country featuring a rich history, ethnic unity, and cultural diversity, and as an Eastern power with good government, a developed economy, cultural prosperity, national unity, and beautiful scenery.⁷¹

Alpermann adds that all themes and topics covered in Xinjiang-related videos, including those about nature, travel or tourism, prove how seriously and diligently the propaganda apparatus takes central party directives.⁷² In our analysis, this overarching directive trickles down to individual influencers' work, as all the features discussed are widely reflected in the video samples that we've analysed, which we delve into more in this and the following two sections of the report.

Beyond the videos' content, much of the significance of frontier accounts rests in the identity of the influencers themselves. First, having young women as frontrunners has become a regular feature of China's global propaganda efforts. For example, another network of female YouTube vloggers who work for Chinese party-state media was identified in a 2020 EU DisinfoLab report on French-language Chinese party-state media. 'The subjects they deal with are often light (culture, tradition, cooking, lifestyle), but they also produce more political content, praising the attractiveness of the country or lauding the management of the pandemic by the Chinese government,' the report concluded.⁷³

In our study, the vloggers' ethnicity also plays a big role in their messaging and forms a key feature of the brand that frontier accounts encapsulate—becoming model minority women who speak on behalf of their entire ethnic groups and regions of origin. In one of her videos, Inner Mongolia's top vlogger, Duoduo Qimuge (多多其木格), cites being too Han-like as a problem for her social-media career.⁷⁴ This indicates a conviction that what the audience will reward is women who closely conform to their ideal of an exotic otherness, as often propelled by official media.⁷⁵

Especially when picturing Uyghur women, parallels with common state-media discourse become apparent. The women featured in the videos are exoticised and made appealing to the Han gaze, with repetitive emphasis on their beauty, dancing skills and features that are seen as typical of their ethnicity (Figure 18).⁷⁶ This characterisation is widespread across Chinese party-state media.⁷⁷

Figure 18: A video on the Ayituna (阿依图娜) channel describing the beautiful hair of the women in the vlogger's family



Source: YouTube.

Some of the women have complained about experiencing cyberbullying due to their ethnic background.⁷⁸ In one of her videos, Guli Adilijiang (古丽·阿迪力江) of the 'GuLi XinJiang' channel says, 'hundreds of people put unwarranted and unheard labels on me ... I hid under the quilt at night and cried until my throat was hoarse.' Trying to appeal to her viewers, she adds, 'I am a Uyghur, I am from Xinjiang, but above that, I am Chinese. I am also your compatriot. Don't put malicious labels on me simply because I am from a certain ethnic group, because I am from Xinjiang,'⁷⁹ clearly showcasing the level of discrimination and abuse that these populations still suffer, even in a strictly controlled online space.

Category 2: A Han-centric *Zhonghua* culture/identity—implicit propaganda

Quasi-lifestyle videos are at times punctuated with scenes with either implicit or explicit party-approved propaganda themes. Inserting both overt and subtle propaganda among what's mostly seemingly unrelated and authentic content is, in our assessment, an effective way of reaching international audiences. That's particularly true if we compare it to previous clumsier attempts by Chinese authorities to flood online platforms by co-opting local populations into filming themselves reciting party lines *ad nauseam*, for instance by attacking former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo after his genocide allegations against the CCP.⁸⁰ When content so obviously showcases coordination, it's more likely to fall on deaf ears.

In contrast, frontier influencers are more successful in integrating propaganda into their content, thus making it more credible. We now unpack some of the ways in which frontier accounts convey the most common implicit propaganda themes.

Despite the content creators belonging to non-Han ethnic groups, many of the videos present a Han-centric version of *Zhonghua* (中华, 'Chinese') culture, identity and history rather than a 'multi-ethnic' vision of Chineseness. For videos discussing the history of the frontier regions, for example, different ethnic groups' past is exhibited exclusively through their interactions with Han people or in the function of the unity and development of the Chinese nation. The emphasis on a display of Xinjiang's historical ethnic unity and multiculturalism contributes, as previously noted by Alpermann, to the rejection of Uyghurs' claims of indigeneity to Xinjiang, as well as to the legitimisation of Chinese Government colonial policies there.⁸¹

Those interpretations of *Zhonghua* culture and identity also align with Xi Jinping's vision of a Han-centred China. During his visit to Xinjiang in July this year, as a most recent instance, Xi pointed out that, with the goal of enhancing identity, 'it is necessary to build a discourse system and an effective carrier that shows the commonality of Chinese culture from multiple perspectives.' With implicit reference to Uyghurs, he stated the importance that in this discourse system 'Xinjiang communicates with various ethnic groups in the inland and integrates historical facts.'⁸² The integration of such historical facts implies a 'correct' version of Xinjiang's own history as an undeniable and indivisible part of the PRC.

Ultimately, as highlighted by China historian James A Millard:

[T]his Zhonghua-centric historical catechism undergirds Xi's central ideological program for non-Han peoples, namely, the 'five identifications' (五个认同): identification with the great homeland (伟大祖国), with the Zhonghua *minzu* (中华民族), with Zhonghua culture (中华文化), with the Chinese Communist Party (中国共产党), and with socialism with Chinese characteristics (中国特色社会主义).⁸³

Examples of this abound in our database. In a video titled 'Anyone who offends the mighty Han will be killed no matter how far the target is! The 200-year history of Qapqal County, the history of Xinjiang should not be forgotten', Guli Adilijiang of the 'GuLi XinJiang' channel introduces the history of the Xibe people's⁸⁴ westward migration after the 18th-century Dzungar genocide⁸⁵ to talk about the importance of unity and the patriotic sacrifice of ethnic groups to China's national stability, all narrated in accordance with historical accounts often stated by the party. '[The Xibe people's] bravery and loyalty can be proven by the sun and the moon', says Adilijiang, emphasising the role of ethnic minorities in guarding the frontier for the motherland. 'As a Uyghur girl native of Xinjiang,' she adds, 'I deeply understand how important the stability of the frontier is, and people can live and work in peace and contentment only when the motherland is strong and stable.'⁸⁶

In another video, Adile Abdukerim of the 'Guli takes you to see Xinjiang' (古丽带你去看新疆) channel explains that the meaning of 'Uyghur' (维吾尔) in the original language is 'joint and united'.⁸⁷ The word 'Uyghur', she says, 'not only represents the harmonious relationship of our big ethnic family, but also symbolises the unity of all ethnic groups to jointly build and defend Xinjiang'. The content strongly reflects official CCP propagandistic versions of Xinjiang's history, which associate the meaning of the single characters contained in the word *Weiwu'er* (safeguard, us, you) as implicitly meaning 'protect you and me, protect your family and the country', with the ultimate goal of portraying the Uyghur people as being somewhat destined or naturally inclined to protect China.⁸⁸ Those lines are often repeated

by party-state officials, such as China's Ambassador to Barbados, Yan Xiusheng (延秀生).⁸⁹ However, official PRC Government accounts of Xinjiang's history have been widely refuted by historians and experts across the world.⁹⁰

Another noticeable feature of the implicit propaganda videos is the almost total absence of religious themes. Islamic faith, which is a crucial part of the vast majority of Uyghurs' cultural identity, is rarely mentioned in the videos we analysed. 'Excessive display and promotion of religious teachings, canons, and rituals' is one of the 100 types of inappropriate content banned by the China Netcasting Services Association,⁹¹ which is the top national industry organisation in the online audiovisual field and is supervised by the State Administration of Radio and Television (for more on this, see page 37). With the lack of a clear definition of what constitutes an 'excessive display', many opt to avoid any religious themes altogether. Moreover, as a direct consequence of the government's crackdown, most Uyghurs remain hesitant to show online any religious acts that aren't explicitly directed by the government, as they could be interpreted as 'signs of extremism' and lead to arbitrary detention.

For example, *Corban* (Eid al-Adha), *Ruzi* (Eid al-Fitr) and *Nowruz* are recognised by the Chinese state as the three main festivals of the Uyghur people, and the first two are acknowledged as Islamic festivals.⁹² However, in all the videos we examined that mentioned either *Corban* or *Ruzi*, religious practices are never mentioned. The videos centre instead on food, family reunions and visiting relatives and friends. In one of the videos on the 'Xinjiang Alice' channel, the vlogger describes the *Corban* festival as 'a meat-themed festival' when 'people put on new clothes and clean up their houses', while she says that the *Ruzi* festival is almost the same as *Corban*.⁹³ In reality, *Corban* celebrates the beginning of the holy fasting month, while *Ruzi* celebrates the end. Even in official Chinese state media, it's acknowledged that both holidays entail several religious rituals and prayers.⁹⁴

Abstention from eating certain foods or drinking (customs that are strictly related to Uyghurs' Islamic faith) are redefined by the vloggers to exclude any mention of religion. On the 'Annie Guli' channel, for example, the vlogger explains that Kazakh, Uyghur and Hui people in Xinjiang don't eat pork because of their customs, living habits and traditions, without mentioning that the Qur'an prohibits the consumption of pork.⁹⁵

Additionally, a conspicuous feature of the videos we collected is the extensive use of pinyin acronyms in the subtitles. Keyword-based filtering is one of the tools adopted by major Chinese platforms to censor undesirable content. To skirt restrictions, Chinese internet users often type in acronyms for sensitive words. For example, Abdukerim uses the acronym YSL instead of spelling out the three characters for Islam, or Yisilan (伊斯兰).⁹⁶

Category 3: Ethnic unity, patriotism and 'debunking foreign lies'—explicit propaganda

Explicit propaganda videos contain lines that copy-paste party-state propaganda. Beginning in early 2021, videos 'debunking' foreign reports about human rights abuses in Xinjiang became more visible among the YouTube accounts we examine in this report. In many instances, the influencers were quick to echo official state-media narratives—denying accusations of forced labour in their communities and rebuking foreign journalists, officials and global organisations for questioning the CCP's human rights violations in Xinjiang.

Ethnic intermarriage is a recurring theme in the videos. In the past decade, there have been several initiatives by the government to encourage,⁹⁷ and at times coerce,⁹⁸ Uyghur women into marrying Han men. In quiet support of government policies, the vloggers often assert that there are no major obstacles to ethnic intermarriage. In one of Abdushukur’s 2019 videos, for example, she says that ‘it is absolutely okay for ethnic minorities to marry Han people, because we are family,’ then mentions the government’s support for such marriages.⁹⁹ Of the 1,741 videos we examined, 20 discussed ethnic intermarriage, and 18 of those referred to Han men marrying ethnic-minority women. Vastly absent are mentions of Uyghur men marrying Han women. This is significant because of widespread cultural perceptions in China that it’s women who marry into their husbands’ ethnic identities.¹⁰⁰

Most importantly, as reported by Human Rights Watch, ‘those who refuse or speak ill of these marriages ... risk being sent to political education camps or having family members sent to the camps.’¹⁰¹ In this context, the persistent objectification and fetishisation of ethnic-minority women in the national discourse can have direct, real and violent repercussions. In its report on human rights violations in Xinjiang, most recently, the UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner corroborated accusations collected over years by victims and human rights groups of sexual violence against Uyghur and other minority women both in the context of party-led surveillance programs and within detention centres.¹⁰²

The vloggers show loyalty to the party on many other occasions, often overtly stating how much they love their motherland, or how much they’re grateful to the party for the economic development of their region (Figure 19).

Figure 19: Two of the vloggers showcasing patriotism in their videos



Source: YouTube.

On 18 March 2021, China’s foreign policy chief Yang Jiechi (杨洁篪) said at the US–China Alaska summit that ‘the United States is not qualified to be condescending in its tone when speaking to China. We Chinese people don’t buy it.’¹⁰³ Yang’s quote quickly became a meme on the Chinese internet and was promptly picked up by frontier accounts on YouTube. The ‘Xinjiang girl Mumu’ channel uploaded two videos on 30 March 2021, quoting Yang’s comment in the titles: ‘Our cotton doesn’t buy it’ and ‘My hometown doesn’t buy it’.¹⁰⁴ In one of the videos, the channel’s influencer, Muyesser, was dressed in a red T-shirt featuring Yang’s comment. Muyesser praised Xinjiang’s economic development and repeated Yang’s comment three times (Figure 20).

Figure 20: Muyeesser from the 'Xinjiang girl Mumu' channel repeating Yang Jiechi's quote



Source: YouTube.

Yang's quote also appeared on the 'Chinar girl on horseback' (马背少女驰娜尔) channel in May.¹⁰⁵ In a video titled 'Kazakh girl interviews 91-year-old grandfather, talking about Xinjiang cotton to get the adrenalin flowing, Chinese people don't buy it', the influencer's grandfather claimed there was no forced labour at all due to the mechanisation of cotton harvesting—a narrative that China's external propaganda promotes to shape global opinion.¹⁰⁶

A regular feature of Chinese mainstream propaganda is organised tours across Xinjiang, which often involve interviews with the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC, also known as Bingtuan [兵团]) in videos to deny forced-labour allegations. The paramilitary organisation runs a large corporate enterprise on behalf of the Chinese Government and administers parts of Xinjiang's territory. Since 2020, the XPCC has been sanctioned by the US Government for its involvement in detention facilities, coercive labour-transfer programs and other serious human rights abuses targeting Uyghurs.¹⁰⁷

Many of the frontier accounts post videos describing the role of the XPCC in Xinjiang as extremely positive. In March 2021, for example, Guli Adilijiang of the 'GuLi XinJiang' channel interviewed two cotton growers in camouflage uniforms who are part of the 63rd Regiment of the XPCC's 4th Division.¹⁰⁸ The two described forced-labour allegations related to Xinjiang cotton as 'truly bullshit' (简直是扯蛋), emphasising that they treat their fellow cotton pickers as brothers. In March 2019, Guli Abdushukur of the 'Annie Guli' channel filmed her trip to the First Company of the Army Reclamation of the XPCC, a 'red tourist' attraction. In one of the videos, she concluded by saying, 'Our Xinjiang started from nothing. Without them [Bingtuan], we wouldn't have our current Xinjiang nor our current China ... We must thank them because they have sacrificed so much for us.'¹⁰⁹

While seemingly uncoordinated on the surface, some of the explicit propaganda videos might be a part of a broader campaign that's directly linked to state activity. On 4 February 2021, the 'Xinjiang Alice' channel uploaded a video titled 'Xinjiang Guli is angry with Pompeo, you are simply nonsense!'¹¹⁰

In the video, Alice claimed that she had seen false statements by the then US Secretary of State slandering Xinjiang and felt both outraged and amused by them. As a Uyghur born and raised in Xinjiang, Alice said Uyghurs live freely and happily together. Her comments closely mirrored those of other Uyghurs, who used identical phrases in thousands of videos uploaded to both Chinese and international platforms in 2021. After analysing the content and dissemination of these videos, the *New York Times* and *ProPublica* concluded that they were plausibly connected to the Chinese Government, as evinced by interviews conducted by the publications via phone.¹¹¹

3.3 An MCN-led strategy to boost engagement: politicising titles

MCNs' efforts to 'tell China's stories well' and conform with CCP directives are reflected during the post-production of the videos. One strategy the agencies behind frontier accounts have used is to give extremely politicised titles to unrelated videos. We identified several videos that we categorised as quasi-lifestyle but that were given explicit propagandistic titles, despite their content not reflecting the theme of the title.

Since the publication of data about coercive birth-control measures in Xinjiang, including anthropologist Adrian Zenz's revelation in 2020 of a government campaign to suppress Uyghur birth rates by using sterilisations, IUDs and mandatory birth control,¹¹² birth control has become a fraught topic, and one that MCNs have attempted to exploit. In one of the videos on the 'Hello Dina' channel, for example, the vlogger gave the audience an insight into her relationship with her younger sister (Figure 21). As apolitical as the video seems, its title includes the question, 'Do Xinjiang families have birth control?'—a non-sequitur response to international criticism of Xinjiang's birth control policies.¹¹³

Figure 21: Screenshot from a video on the 'Hello Dina' channel demonstrating a discrepancy between the content and the title: the content is about the relationship between two sisters, while the title contains the words 'birth control'



Source: YouTube.

Fluency in Mandarin has also long been on the popularisation agenda for both the central and local governments. Despite protests and boycotts, the Chinese Government has continued to enforce the use of Mandarin in ethnic-minority regions. At the opening ceremony of the 23rd National Publicity Week for the Promotion of Mandarin, Xinjiang Vice Chairman Gilla Isamuddin (吉尔拉·衣沙木丁) said that Xinjiang regards the popularisation of Mandarin as a ‘foundation project to achieve the general goal of long-term security and stability’.¹¹⁴ In another video on the ‘Hello Dina’ channel, for example, the vlogger presented an ordinary family gathering with her mother and friends. The video was titled ‘How do Xinjiang people sing in Chinese? Uyghur beauties dance in the karaoke hall. Can the elders speak Chinese?’¹¹⁵

Politicising titles is probably aimed at ensuring that the videos show up in searches related to sensitive topics, not only to dilute the content within those searches, but also to increase the reach and popularity of these accounts. The effectiveness of this tactic, at this stage, is difficult to assess and warrants further research.

3.4 Online reach, audiences and algorithms

User comments left under most of the videos we examined are in Chinese, which would indicate that many, if not most, of the audience for the videos are members of the global Chinese diaspora. However, seven of the accounts have more than 50 videos with subtitles in English and other languages other than Chinese, in an apparent attempt to reach audiences beyond the diaspora.

As outlined above, these accounts are often used to push back on foreign critiques of Beijing’s policies in China’s frontier regions, and effort is invested in reaching a global audience. Among the videos we collected in our dataset, seven of the 18 accounts have produced more than 50 videos with subtitles in English. Four out of 18 accounts (‘Annie Guli’, ‘Aytuna’, ‘GuLi XinJiang’ and ‘Xinjiang Alice’) feature explicit propaganda videos with English subtitles.

Almost without exception, comments under the videos of all the accounts are mainly in Mandarin, suggesting that those more likely to actively engage with the accounts are members of the global Chinese diaspora. For example, under the ‘Chinar girl on horseback’ channel’s 17 May 2021 video titled ‘The Kazakh girl interviewed her 91-year-old grandfather about cotton in Xinjiang’, viewers left 72 comments using simplified Chinese characters (which are mainly used in the PRC), 76 comments in traditional Chinese characters (which are mainly used outside of the PRC), 3 comments in English and 3 comments in other languages, as of 12 August 2022 (Figures 22 and 23).¹¹⁶

Figure 22: Comment section of a video without subtitles on the 'Chinar girl on horseback' channel



Source: YouTube, 17 May 2021, [online](#).

Figure 23: Comment section of a video on the Xinjiang Alice channel with subtitles in 12 languages



Source: YouTube, 4 February 2021, [online](#).

Our research picked up several attempts by party-state media, PRC diplomats and others to amplify ethnic-minority video content to wider audiences. Some of the influencers have taken part in events to translate and explain their experiences to foreign journalists and writers. As outlined on page 7, the 'Annie Guli' channel's Guli Abdushukur took part in a Zoom conference with party-state media workers and foreign journalists on 24 September 2021 to push back against foreign media coverage of human rights abuses in Xinjiang.

In early March 2021, Aytunam Ablikim of the ‘Aytuna’ channel and Hurshidem Ablikim of the ‘Story of Xinjiang by Guli’ channel joined other influencers, including Maiulanjiang Tursun (麦吾兰江·图尔荪), who’s known as ‘Thick-eyebrowed brother from Kashgar’ (喀什浓眉哥), in an online discussion with Maxime Vivas, the French author of *Ouighours, pour en finir avec les fake news* (*The end of Uyghur fake news*), facilitated by *Xinhua* news agency’s GLOBALink wire service.¹¹⁷ Vivas is a French writer who frequently appears in Chinese party-state media to denounce critical Western media coverage of Xinjiang.

Ablikim also published a video on 11 September 2021 in which she speaks fluently in American-accented English about the 2007 drama film *The Kite Runner*. The film, which is set in Afghanistan, had to be filmed in Xinjiang, Ablikim tells her audience, because the US’s invasion of the country made filming on location too dangerous. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian tweeted Ablikim’s ‘Kite Runner’ video on 21 October 2021.¹¹⁸

A 9 April 2021 video uploaded to the CCTV YouTube channel featured Ablikim complaining that *Radio Free Asia* had described her as a propagandist.¹¹⁹ As anthropologist Rune Steenberg notes in his analysis of frontier influencers, ‘this confluence of activities—discussing politically-charged subject matter, referencing censored foreign media reports, posting to an online platform technically unavailable within China, all in a region where Uyghurs have been locked up for far less—strongly suggests government involvement in the creation of her videos.’¹²⁰

The constant, professionally produced stream of ethnic-minority video content that’s featured on YouTube joins a steady stream of party-state media content and content created by CCP-aligned foreign influencers. Research published by Brookings in May 2022 found that party-state media have considerable success in search results for their propaganda on various platforms, including YouTube. Its *Winning the web* report found that state media appeared among the top 10 results in searches for ‘Xinjiang’ in 98% of searches on YouTube over a 120-day period.¹²¹

When the Brookings authors included the names of foreign influencers who had been identified in ASPI’s December 2021 *Borrowing mouths to speak on Xinjiang* report, they found that they increased the total number of CCP propaganda videos across YouTube’s top search results by 27%. Crucially, they note that this number could be higher still if other Beijing-backed influencers could be identified.

Part of the reason why Beijing-backed content ranks so well in search results on YouTube and other search engines is because a number of search-engine algorithms prioritise fresh content and channels that post regularly. The continuous publication of content by party-state media, foreign influencers and ethnic-minority influencers ensures that other more credible but stale content may be outperformed.

On behalf of ASPI, Brookings conducted a search of its dataset for the ethnic-minority influencers identified in this report but didn’t find their videos showing up in English. Further research is required to determine the extent that these frontier accounts are showing up in searches for ‘Xinjiang’ in Mandarin (新疆) and other related terms.

4. Frontier accounts on Twitter

As outlined in ASPI's 2021 policy brief *#StopXinjiangRumors*, scores of accounts that presented as locals from Xinjiang and that were repeatedly boosted by official CCP accounts on Twitter have been suspended from the platform; however, many dubious accounts remain.¹²²

The @Maryamugul Twitter account, which posts content sourced from the Douyin account (玛丽)¹²³ featuring the 26-year-old Uyghur dancer and online influencer Meryemgul Semet (玛尔亚木古丽·赛买提), is one such example (Figure 24). Whether the account is in fact operated by that person is unclear. The account has been used to push other politically charged frontier-account content. On 27 May 2021, it posted a video featuring Hurshidem Ablikim of the 'Story of Xinjiang by Guli' account. In Mandarin, she says, 'I heard her twitter account was suspended, very sad. All we're doing is telling our own stories, what's wrong with that?'¹²⁴ On 9 October 2021, she posted the Guli Abdushukur's ('Annie Guli') cotton video,¹²⁵ which, in turn, was further amplified by Zhang Heqing (张和清), a cultural attaché at the Chinese Embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan, and the Chinese Embassy in France.¹²⁶

Figure 24: Screenshots of posts from the @Maryamugul Twitter account featuring frontier influencer videos



Source: 'Xinjiang Mali' [新疆玛丽], *Twitter*, 9 October 2021, [online](#); 'Xinjiang Mali' [新疆玛丽], *Twitter*, 27 May 2021, [online](#).

Content sourced from Meryemgul Semet's Douyin account first appeared on Twitter under the account name @LeonaBenjamin18, which featured the same display name and accompanying headshot as the @Maryamugul account (Figure 25). The account was one of a few dubious accounts that Cao Yi (曹毅), a CCP diplomat posted in Lebanon, recommended to his followers and that were later suspended on the platform.¹²⁷

Figure 25: The now-suspended @LeonaBenjamin18 Twitter account shares the same name and profile picture as the currently active @Maryamugul Twitter account



Source: Twitter.

Soon after the @LeonaBenjamin18 account was suspended by Twitter, @Maryamugul posted its first tweet, which read in Chinese ‘I’m Mary from Xinjiang, I used to be called “BBQ Beauty” by my friends. Unfortunately my [Twitter] account was blocked for unknown reasons. I still enjoy sharing my life with my Twitter friends, so I’m back again! @olalakl1@Tursunali_7.’¹²⁸ The two accounts tagged in that tweet, @olalakl1 and @Tursunali_7, have since been suspended by Twitter.¹²⁹

Despite Twitter’s efforts to suspend dubious accounts, some of them inevitably manage to stay active on the platform. It’s difficult for platforms such as Twitter to police accounts like these because they appear to be run by genuine influencers. It’s likely that the CPP will continue to exploit this ambiguity to its own advantage. Further research on other platforms, including Twitter, will be necessary to shed light on the impact of what appears to be a widening and intensifying issue, as well as to give a more complete picture of the outreach of the CCP’s international propaganda effort and its consequences.

5. Multi-channel networks

MCNs help their contracted influencers and other talent monetise themselves online. By providing capital and resources, the agencies are able to ensure the continuous production and output of content from the creators' channels, helping them to grow into viable online brands. Some of the accounts we examine in this report have a local MCN that operates their domestic social media accounts and a separate MCN in charge of their overseas operations, including YouTube. The situation for some other accounts is less clear. It's possible that some of the frontier-influencer content on YouTube has been pirated from domestic Chinese platforms.

A key service that MCNs offer their clients is a legal way for them to disseminate their content on foreign platforms such as YouTube. In a presentation to the 'Weibo Starlight Forum' in May 2021, Zhu Danjun (朱丹俊), the CEO of MCN Xiaowu Brothers, one of the MCNs we have identified that run PRC-based YouTube channels, pitched his company's services, emphasising the risks of using VPNs and suggesting that overseas accounts should be operated legally and properly—a service that MCNs can provide.¹³⁰ Zhu also touts his company's ability to monetise accounts for influencers and ensure that they get paid for the content they put on the platform. (See page 39 for more on Xiaowu Brothers and page 41 for more on YouTube monetisation.)

MCNs are behind much of the viral content that proliferates on the Chinese internet. Around 40% of the top-performing accounts with more than 10 million followers on Chinese social media platforms are managed by MCN agencies, according to the CAC.¹³¹ The industry is booming. There were more than 34,000 MCN agencies in 2021, and that number was estimated to surpass 40,000 in 2022, according to research consultancy iiMedia Research.¹³²

A good example of how MCNs operate—and how they leverage YouTube—can be seen by examining China's most prominent local vlogger on YouTube, Li Ziqi (李子柒), who has built a subscriber base of 17.1 million. The now 32-year-old's slickly produced videos depict her leading an idyllic and rustic lifestyle and capture the cooking, handcraft and agricultural practices of her native Sichuan Province. As of 22 August 2022, her YouTube videos had been viewed 2.8 billion times. One video, in which Li collects chestnuts, fresh fruits, melon seeds, meat and other ingredients to make snacks for the Spring Festival, has been watched 114.5 million times.¹³³ Li is undoubtedly a global phenomenon and remains the most popular Chinese-language YouTuber in the world, despite being in hiatus since July 2021 due to a dispute with her MCN.

The understated style of Li's videos and their outsized success hasn't gone unnoticed by party propagandists. 'In Li Ziqi's video, there is not a single word that praises China, but she promotes the Chinese culture and the Chinese story well,' a CCTV article noted in late 2019.¹³⁴ Li's videos have been so effective that the Communist Youth League of China named her an 'ambassador' to a league-sponsored campaign promoting the economic empowerment of rural youth in 2019.¹³⁵ In the same year, the *People's Daily* highlighted her as an example of a member of the young generation who's 'seriously telling the most moving of China's stories'.¹³⁶

Li is able to publish her videos on YouTube because in 2017 she signed over her international publishing rights to *WebTVAsia* (葡萄子传媒),¹³⁷ a Beijing-based YouTube-certified MCN owned by Malaysian entertainment company Prodigee Media. *WebTVAsia* operates more than 600 YouTube channels for

PRC-based talent, including the ‘Annie Guli’ account first introduced on page 5, and the *People’s Daily*, the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the CCP.¹³⁸

According to *WebTVAsia*’s head of overseas operations, Zhu Li (茱莉), the ‘Annie Guli’ account is ‘one of the representatives of ethnic content’ that her company operates. The channel’s ‘authentic and simple way to record life and record all the interesting things in Xinjiang’ will help YouTube viewers ‘learn about the great beauty of China from this reality, inspiring the desire and love of beautiful China’, Zhu told the ‘Weibo Starlight Forum’ in May 2021.¹³⁹

5.1 MCNs’ regulatory environment and party influence

MCNs were lightly regulated until late 2021. In July 2021, China’s Ministry of Culture and Tourism released draft legislation aimed at ‘strengthening the management of the online cultural market’ and ‘regulating the order of online performances’. The key to the draft regulation is a requirement that talent ‘adhere to the correct values orientation’, meaning that talent must adhere to the values held by the party.¹⁴⁰

The rules, according to the ministry, are aimed at ‘governing the chaos in the entertainment industry’.¹⁴¹ Officials have been concerned that certain topics, including history, culture and international relations (some of the topics touched on by the accounts we examine in this report), haven’t been consistent with official party narratives.¹⁴² Under the new regime, MCNs are overseen by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and are required to provide records of their activities. The regulation came into effect on 30 August 2021.

MCN executives speak publicly about their commitment to the values of the CCP and how it informs their businesses. In November 2019, Zhou Xinni (周歆倪), the International Business and Marketing Director of *WebTVAsia*, took part in a panel with other industry representatives in which they discussed the importance of ‘firmly practising core socialist values, starting from ourselves, to help the healthy development of the industry’.¹⁴³

The requirement for MCNs to ensure that their talent adheres to the values of the CCP is in addition to existing rules that require the online content platforms to ‘adhere to correct guidance of public opinion’ and maintain a correct ‘value orientation’. The platforms, like all other organisations in the PRC’s party-centred media culture, are required to ‘promote socialist core values’.¹⁴⁴

In addition to these regulations, party organisations are encouraged to register and operate accounts on online platforms. Those platforms are required in turn to help promote and mainstream those accounts. The strategy is for the CCP to enmesh itself into a part of the information space—‘self-media’ (自媒体)—that’s supposed to be highly personalised, in order to guide the conversation along prescribed, party-approved paths.¹⁴⁵

In March 2022, the State Council Information Office announced that the rectification of MCNs and the ‘information chaos’ they bring as well as the regulation of short video and live-streaming would be part of its 2022 plans for Operation Qinglang (清朗行动), which is an annual campaign run by the CAC to ‘clean up’ the internet. The agency noted that it ‘would soon release detailed rules for governing content production once more research is done’.¹⁴⁶

The total effect of these layers of regulation at the level of the platforms and the MCNs is the creation of an information ecosystem that heavily favours content that toes the party line. Creators are broadly free to decide what content categories they work in, as long as they stay within the red lines of party-approved discourse. Creators are also aware that certain favoured topics and talking points are geared towards additional support and amplification on domestic platforms, providing them with added incentives to create propaganda.

MCN marketing material such as a 30 December 2021 Facebook post from Xiaowu Brothers in Figure 26 shows how these companies signal to clients that they have a detailed understanding of China’s growing set of rules, regulations and laws concerning online influencers and the limits to their freedom of speech.¹⁴⁷

Figure 26: Xiaowu Brothers’ post outlining ‘detailed rules for the review of online short video content’



Source: ‘Xiaowu Brothers’ [杭州小五和她的兄弟们科技有限公司], Facebook, 30 December 2021, [online](#).

The post outlines the relevant regulations that influencers are required to abide by, including guidelines from the China Netcasting Services Association—an industry group that, at the government’s direction, banned 100 types of inappropriate content in a directive released on 15 December 2021. Those types include ‘content that endangers the socialist system with Chinese characteristics’, ‘divides the country’, ‘damages the image of the country’, ‘damages the image of revolutionary leaders, heroes and martyrs’, ‘leaks state secrets’ or ‘destroys social stability’.

They also specifically direct influencers to avoid content that ‘embodies’ independence for Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet and Xinjiang, and also any ‘excessive display and promotion’ of religious teachings, canon and rituals, or any content that ‘arbitrarily misinterprets history’.¹⁴⁸

The granularity of the rules is such that every minute aspect of video production, including emojis and sound effects, is regulated. The rules even specifically prohibit ‘encouraging the use of magic to change people’s fates’ or ‘promoting feudal superstition and content that goes against the spirit of science’. Of particular importance for ethnic-minority influencers, content that undermines national and regional unity, including content that’s contrary to the national religious policy, is prohibited.

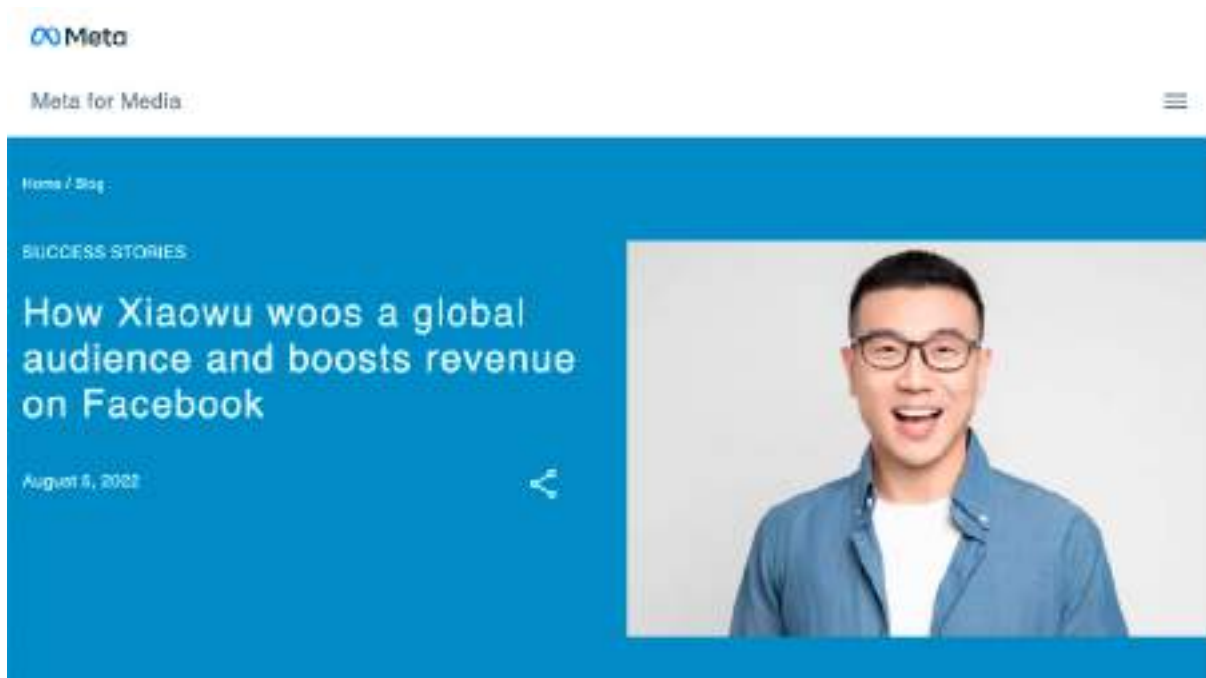
MCNs also serve to filter out any talent that might cause them political problems in their recruitment process. In a lecture delivered in November 2019, Nie Yangde (聂阳德), the co-founder of Onion Global (洋葱集团), which operates the MCN ‘Ocean Media’ that operates accounts on YouTube, said that his company took into account the law, moral values, world view and any hidden, negative material of candidates before they’re recruited.¹⁴⁹ For creators who are members of ethnic-minority groups in China, their allegiance to the world view of the party appears to be even more essential.

Yet another layer of ideological oversight at MCNs comes via internal party committees. It’s likely that all of the MCNs identified in this report host internal party committees. The CCP constitution requires that any enterprise with three or more full party members must host internal party committees.¹⁵⁰ Additionally, the enterprises comply with a clause in the Company Law that requires companies to provide for party activities.¹⁵¹

Xiaowu Brothers, the MCN that manages ‘*Xiangxi Shisanmei*’ (湘西石三妹) and ‘Fatt’s family life’—two of the 18 frontier YouTube channels featured in this report—has regular internal party meetings and receives visits from party officials to inspect its work. The company’s aim, according to its website and marketing materials, combines a commercial mission with a national political one. ‘To answer the country’s call, our team is committed to telling China’s stories well and conducting international communication well,’ the website reads.¹⁵²

The company was established in Hangzhou in December 2017. In April 2018, Xiaowu Brothers claims it became an officially recognised MCN by YouTube—a designation that allows the company to monetise the content it publishes on the platform. The following year, in June 2019, it also claims to have become an official partner of Facebook. The details of that partnership are unclear, but, in August 2022, Meta published a blog post praising the outstanding global-engagement performance and revenue-earning abilities of Xiaowu Brothers (Figure 27), and Xiaowu’s CEO Zhu Danjun was quoted saying that ‘Facebook is the anchor for our international business and is the platform that holds the most potential for investment.’¹⁵³ In 2020, the company became the first Chinese MCN to be listed in the YouTube Services Directory¹⁵⁴ and, in November, the company claims that it received an ‘MCN partner’ award from YouTube for the greater China region.¹⁵⁵

Figure 27: Meta's blog post on Xiaowu Brothers' success story



Source: *Meta for Media*, 5 August 2022, [online](#).

The company's internal party committee was launched on 26 November 2021.¹⁵⁶ Articles and photographs posted to the Xiaowu Brothers WeChat account feature regular internal party committee meetings. The photographs in Figure 28 show an internal party committee meeting held on 30 March 2022, in which Xiaowu Brothers CCP members conducted a criticism and self-criticism session overseen by party branch secretary Zhang Chunhe (张春贺) and with guidance from Zhang Huifang (张慧芳), Deputy Secretary of the Party Committee of the Jincheng Development Zone in Shanxi Province. Through the meeting, 'the majority of party members in the criticism and self-criticism received a profound party spirit and ideological education,' the WeChat article read.¹⁵⁷

Figure 28: Xiaowu Technology joint party branch held an organisational life meeting and carried out a criticism and self-criticism session of party members



Source: 'Jincheng Xiaowu Technology' [晋城小五科技], *Weixin*, 1 April 2022, [online](#).

The company also undergoes inspections from CCP officials who regularly check in on the party-building activities taking place in the company. In mid-November 2020, Xiaowu Brothers was one of several enterprises to be inspected by Zhou Qindi (周勤第), the Secretary of the Changshu (常熟市) Municipal Party Committee in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province.¹⁵⁸

The inspections are also to ensure that the company is embedding CCP propaganda into the content that it creates with its influencers. On 13 October 2021, Li Huawen (李华文), the Deputy Head of the Hangzhou Municipal Party Committee Propaganda Department and Director of the Cyberspace Affairs Commission of the Jincheng Municipal Party Committee, inspected Xiaowu Brothers' offices, including the company's 'party-building area', during National Cyber Security Awareness Week.¹⁵⁹

During a seminar with company employees, Li stressed the need for the company to study and strictly comply with cybersecurity laws and regulations such as the Regulations on Ecological Governance of Network Information Content (网络信息内容生态治理规定). Those regulations bolster restrictions on 'negative' content and encourage posts that focus on 'Xi Jinping Thought' and 'core socialist values', as well as posts that 'increase the global influence of Chinese culture'.¹⁶⁰

Li emphasised the need to 'enhance the sense of mission and responsibility of the enterprise, carefully build the enterprise brand, spread excellent Chinese traditional culture, promote true goodness and beauty, spread positive energy, and contribute the power of Jincheng Internet enterprises to create a clear cyberspace'.¹⁶¹ 'Positive energy' (正能量) is a key phrase used by Xi Jinping since 2013, referring to the need for an emphasis on uplifting messages over criticism in China's information space.¹⁶²

In general, only state-media workers, diplomats and members of the PRC's political and economic elite are permitted to post to foreign social media and video platforms. As this report shows, other 'politically reliable' citizens are also getting this opportunity, but only after their content is filtered through a series of layers of censorship—at the individual level, via their MCNs and internal party committees, and at the platform level.

5.2 MCN cooperation with YouTube

When advertisements run on YouTube videos, the creators of those videos typically receive a portion of the revenue through their role in YouTube's Partner Program, but, as the platform is blocked in China, the program isn't available there.¹⁶³

Some accounts may be circumventing this restriction, but that's difficult to confirm. For example, out of 18 YouTube ethnic-minority channels examined, only four listed their location as China on the channel's 'About' page. Ten indicated that they were located in Hong Kong, and one in each of Taiwan, the US and Singapore—all YouTube Partner Program regions. To be eligible for the Partner Program, channels must also have more than 1,000 subscribers and have no active Community Guidelines strikes, among other requirements.¹⁶⁴ In addition, two of the 18 accounts also had verification badges as of September 2022, which means they've reached 100,000 subscribers and have each been deemed to 'represent the real creator, brand, or entity it claims to be'.¹⁶⁵

Alternatively, PRC-based content creators are able to receive revenue from YouTube via their MCNs. This arrangement allows YouTube to run ads against and profit from content on accounts based in mainland China that aren't part of the Partner Program. We discovered eight Chinese companies

that operate PRC-based YouTube channels: Muyun Culture, WebTVAsia, Xiaowu Brothers, Youbridge, OceanMedia (蓝海传媒), YoyWow (深圳雅文信息传播有限公司), Century UU (世纪优优) and Huashi TV (捷成华视). All of those companies have agreements in place with YouTube that allow them to monetise their content on the platform.¹⁶⁶

Many of the accounts we examined displayed pre-roll video advertisements for brands including Squarespace and Norwegian Cruise Line. On videos specifically about Xinjiang cotton, we saw pre-roll and pop-up advertisements for KFC Australia and Vimeo, among other brands (Figure 29).

Figure 29: Pre-roll advertisements on videos about Xinjiang cotton, appearing on the ‘Annie Guli’ and ‘Chinar girl on horseback’ YouTube accounts, and a pop-up ad on the ‘GuLi XinJiang’ account



Sources: 安妮古丽 (Annie Guli), [online](#); 马芮少女驰娜尔 (Chinar girl on horseback), [online](#); GuLi XinJiang, [online](#).

MCNs such as Xiaowu Brothers appear to work with YouTube. The company’s CEO, Zhu Danjun (朱丹俊), told Chinese media that, since 2018, his operations staff and the influencers they represent have been having meetings with ‘YouTube’s strategists’ every one to two months.¹⁶⁷

6. Conclusion and policy recommendations

The Chinese party-state has invested heavily into building a global network of news agencies, websites and social media accounts to promote its world view outside of China. In recent years, that effort has increasingly involved a high degree of experimentation with resources devoted to digital influence operations on foreign social media platforms that are blocked in China, as well as foreign influencers who are used to promote CCP narratives back to a domestic audience.

Despite this huge amount of investment, the CCP believes that China’s ability to tell the party’s political story is still not commensurate with the country’s rise and its current place in the world. Xi Jinping has long stressed that the PRC needs to develop a global voice proportional to its ‘comprehensive national strength and international status’. Doing so will help guide the international community to understand ‘why the Communist Party of China is capable [of success], why Marxism works, and why socialism with Chinese characteristics is good’, according to Xi.¹⁶⁸

From Xi’s point of view, the image of China and its frontier regions is distorted by negative portrayals from ‘foreign forces’ used to contain the country’s rise. Creating a ‘credible, lovable, and respectable image’ of China’s frontier regions is meant to cultivate a favourable domestic and external environment for the PRC that will, in turn, facilitate the country’s stability, development and global power. The emergence of ethnic-frontier accounts on platforms blocked in China is another sign of Beijing’s willingness to experiment in building its global voice.

The party-state is concerned that opening up access to social media platforms and other interactive channels to regular Chinese people will expose them to the risk that they'll be influenced by the West's superior 'discourse power' and undermine the CCP's political project. Far from encouraging widespread participation of Chinese internet users on foreign platforms, the CCP has continued to restrict them from engaging in dialogue across the firewall, indicating that the party-state doesn't trust Chinese citizens to 'tell China's story well' unless they're led and guided through designated channels.

Frontier-influencer accounts are increasingly used as an emerging part of Beijing's growing propaganda arsenal. They're seen as a resource to be drawn on, but only if they're harnessed properly. At present, their effectiveness appears to be mostly limited to the global Chinese diaspora. But, as Beijing continues to ramp up political control over social media content production and bring official discourse and self-expression further into line, more of these seemingly authentic accounts are likely to be unleashed onto the world.

This report recommends as follows:

- Social media platforms should broaden the practice of labelling the accounts of state media, agencies, and officials to state-linked, PRC-based influencers, in order to give users context and awareness about more insidious forms of state-backed content that lack independence and transparency.
- US social media platforms should stop partnering with, promoting and giving awards to MCNs that are conducting propaganda and disinformation work on behalf of the Chinese party-state.
- Until the Chinese government allows their services to operate in China, US social media platforms should stop their practice of allowing MCNs to monetise content from creators based in the PRC. MCN's will still be able to post content on these platforms, but they should not be earning money for content as that effectively subsidises state-backed propaganda and disinformation efforts.
- Governments, social media platforms and civil society organisations which rely heavily on the research and insights produced by expert research groups, should increase their support to and funding of such groups. Research topics such as disinformation, information operations and propaganda are complicated, multi-language, data-heavy and rapidly evolving areas of study. More resourcing is required for researchers who undertake rigorous analysis in these crucial areas.

Appendix

Table 2: List of themes detected through qualitative content analysis of frontier channels

Quasi-lifestyle: videos meant to look like lifestyle content, which contribute to a party-approved depiction of frontier regions.¹⁶⁹

Implicit propaganda: videos about popular themes that closely replicate those pushed by official state propaganda.¹⁷⁰

Explicit propaganda: videos that directly cite core state propaganda messaging.¹⁷¹

Theme	Topic	Category
Food	Recipes, collecting ingredients, cooking etc.	Quasi-lifestyle
	Ethnic groups' traditional foods, local food etc.	Quasi-lifestyle
	Ethnic groups' eating habits (e.g. eating pork, drinking alcohol etc.)	Implicit propaganda
Animals	Animal husbandry	Quasi-lifestyle
	Horse riding	Quasi-lifestyle
Tourism	Landscapes, drone shots, natural wonders, infrastructure etc.	Implicit propaganda
	Local flora and fauna	Quasi-lifestyle
	Touristic areas/cities	Implicit propaganda
	Shops, food markets, travel logistics, transport	Implicit propaganda
Government	Government benefits	Implicit propaganda
	Administrative divisions, policies, population, history, political/historical figures	Implicit propaganda
Culture	Showcasing of Han culture, Han-style clothing	Implicit propaganda
	Local customs, habits, languages, traits, history etc.	Quasi-lifestyle
	Ethnic groups' exotic looks, traditional clothes and housing	Quasi-lifestyle
	Coping with racial stereotypes	Quasi-lifestyle
	Family, dating, gender dynamics, marriage	Quasi-lifestyle
	Interracial dating, ethnic intermarriage	Explicit propaganda
	Traditional music, traditional dancing	Quasi-lifestyle
	Interviews, street interviews about economic development, living standards	Implicit propaganda
	Ethnic groups' love for dancing and singing	Implicit propaganda
	Ethnic unity	Explicit propaganda

Theme	Topic	Category
Business	Sponsored content, conferences, business events, agricultural products, self-media experience etc.	Quasi-lifestyle
	Funny, inspirational content	Quasi-lifestyle
	Business traditions, bazaars, business conduct, work, charity etc.	Quasi-lifestyle
	Economic development, local business	Implicit propaganda
	Ethnic group's business people, usually with a lot of money or land	Implicit propaganda
	Xinjiang cotton production, fields, quality of cotton	Implicit propaganda
	Belt and Road Initiative, overseas business investment	Explicit propaganda
	Xinjiang cotton forced-labour denial	Explicit propaganda
Holidays / celebrations / political events	How different ethnic groups spend the Spring Festival and other national holidays	Quasi-lifestyle
	Youth Day	Explicit propaganda
	CCP anniversary	Explicit propaganda
	Beijing Winter Olympics 2022	Explicit propaganda
	Religious holidays and celebrations bare of religious elements	Implicit propaganda
Education	University life, exams, studying, competitions etc.	Quasi-lifestyle
	Quality education for ethnic groups' children	Implicit propaganda
	Ethnic groups' Mandarin proficiency	Explicit propaganda
	Patriotic lessons, learning Han poems, PRC history, PRC heroes	Explicit propaganda
Health care	Healthcare measures, improvement	Implicit propaganda
Covid-19	Containment measures	Implicit propaganda
	Trip to Wuhan	Explicit propaganda
	Boasting of China's success compared to other countries	Explicit propaganda
Other sensitive issues	Henan floods, Meng Wanzhou etc.	Explicit propaganda
	'Debunking' foreign reports	Explicit propaganda
Daily life	Popular entertainment, daily consumption, make-up	Quasi-lifestyle
	Safety in Xinjiang, rural life, prosperity	Implicit propaganda
	Motivational speeches	Quasi-lifestyle
	Hobbies, fashion, trips etc.	Quasi-lifestyle

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Acronyms and abbreviations

CAC	Cyberspace Administration of China	中华人民共和国国家互联网信息办公室
CCP	Chinese Communist Party	中国共产党
CCTV	China Central Television	中国中央电视台
CGTN	China Global Television Network	中国环球电视网
CNSA	China Netcasting Services Association	中国网络视听节目服务协会
EU	European Union	
ICPC	International Cyber Policy Centre (ASPI)	
IUD	intra-uterine device	
MCN	multi-channel network	
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	外交部
NRTA	National Radio and Television Administration	国家广播电视总局
PRC	People's Republic of China	中华人民共和国
UN	United Nations	
VPN	virtual private network	
XPCC	Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps	新疆生产建设兵团

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