

Borrowing mouths to speak on Xinjiang

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Executive summary

This report explores how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) uses foreign social media influencers to shape and push messages domestically and internationally about Xinjiang that are aligned with its own preferred narratives.

Our research has found key instances in which Chinese state entities have supported influencers in the creation of social media content in Xinjiang, as well as amplified influencer content that supports pro-CCP narratives. That content broadly seeks to debunk Western media reporting and academic research, refute statements by foreign governments and counter allegations of widespread human rights abuses in Xinjiang. Often, such content is then promoted by party-state media¹ and diplomatic accounts across major international social media networks and in Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) briefings.² This trend is particularly notable given the difficulty faced by journalists reporting in Xinjiang.³

Our research also examines how the CCP's use of foreign influencers presents a growing challenge to global social media platforms, and in particular their efforts to identify and label state-affiliated accounts.

This report focuses on the promotion of foreign influencers who disseminate content about Xinjiang on US-based social media and content networks, including YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, as well as on Chinese platforms such as Bilibili. The report analyses this unique online influencer ecosystem and examines three in-depth case studies with a focus on Xinjiang-focused foreign influencer content and the amplification of that content by Chinese state entities.

The Chinese party-state continues to deny allegations of human rights abuses in Xinjiang, including forced labour,⁴ mass detention⁵ and cultural erasure.⁶ Previous work by ASPI's International Cyber Policy Centre (ICPC) has found Chinese party-state entities using US social media networks in an effort to create greater ambiguity about the situation in Xinjiang, push a counter-narrative and amplify disinformation.⁷ It has also found that the CCP uses tactics, including leveraging US social media platforms, to criticise and smear Uyghur victims, journalists and researchers who work on this topic, as well as their organisations.⁸ Other tactics have included temporal and narrative alignment between pro-CCP social media influencers and state entities (for example, targeting the *BBC* over its reporting on allegations of systematic rape in Xinjiang's internment camps, among other stories)⁹ as well as the amplification of content that depicts Uyghurs as broadly supportive of the Chinese Government's policies in Xinjiang.¹⁰



Key findings

- Foreign social media influencers are creating content about Xinjiang that's being used as part of a wider, global propaganda push by the Chinese state to counter critical reporting about human rights abuses in the region, often via amplification on US-based social media platforms.
- Some foreign influencers who are promoting CCP propaganda operate outside traditional journalistic professional standards and aren't disclosing key conflicts of interest (such as their participation in state-backed and funded tours of Xinjiang).
- Our data collection has found that, between January 2020 and August 2021, 156 Chinese state-controlled accounts on US-based social media platforms have published at least 546 Facebook posts, Twitter posts and shared articles from *CGTN*, *Global Times*, *Xinhua* or *China Daily* websites that have amplified Xinjiang-related social media content from 13 influencer accounts. More than 50% of that activity occurred on Facebook.
- As a part of our data collection, ASPI ICPC created a network diagram to help illustrate this unique and burgeoning ecosystem (Figure 2, page 10). This diagram includes Chinese state media and diplomatic accounts that share and promote content by foreign social media influencers. An interactive version of this diagram is available [online here](#).
- Video plays a key role in this ecosystem. Videos featuring foreign social media influencers are often the preferred content that Chinese state entities repackage and boost online.
- ASPI analysed hundreds of YouTube videos depicting trips to Xinjiang made by foreign influencers. Just as many tours of Xinjiang are largely directed by state-controlled institutions and government bodies, our research suggests that some of the locations shown in the foreign influencers' videos are chosen by state entities. When the locations weren't chosen by the Chinese state, our analysis found that detention centres were sometimes accidentally filmed. Our analysis of one video, filmed by a 'vlogger' from Singapore, found that he unintentionally filmed seven separate detention facilities in a 15-minute YouTube video showing his airliner's descent into Ürümqi International Airport.
- Our research has found that labelling schemes adopted by some video-sharing and social media platforms to identify state-affiliated accounts are inconsistently applied to media outlets and journalists working for those outlets. In addition, few platforms appear to have clear policies on content from online influencers or vloggers whose content may be facilitated by state-affiliated media, through sponsored trips, for example.
- The type of manipulation of the information environment described in this report can be harder to detect and can circumvent efforts by social media companies to identify and categorise the online activity of government and government-funded entities.
- This report argues that social media platforms should better craft and implement policies to identify accounts with state links, or content that has been directly facilitated by states— policies that should apply globally.

Research methodology

This research project used both quantitative and qualitative research methods, and it involved in-depth and original data collection that spanned multiple languages. This included:

- cross-platform data analysis and collection that comprised US- and Chinese-based social media networks and included text, imagery and video (social media collection tools included CrowdTangle and Twint)
- programming tools such as RStudio to analyse data and create network graphs showing interactions (packages used included tidyverse, ggplot and visNetwork)
- the collection, translation and analysis of Chinese-language material, including government documents, state media reports, official speeches and other sources
- satellite imagery collection and analysis, including geo-coding locations based on our analysis of published videos and social media content.



Introduction: ‘Borrowing mouths to speak’

We have always attached great importance to ‘borrowing a mouth to speak’ and used international friends to carry out foreign propaganda.

—Zhu Ling, editor-in-chief, *China Daily*, 2016¹¹

This was how Zhu Ling (朱灵), then *China Daily* editor-in-chief, emphasised the importance of utilising foreigners for Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda in a speech celebrating the 30th anniversary of his newspaper. Zhu was referring to a strategy of using ‘friendly’ or noncritical content created by foreigners for both internal and external propaganda—a method the CCP has employed since the Mao era.¹² The strategy, sometimes referred to as ‘using foreign strength to propagandise China’ (利用外力为我宣传), is based on the idea that propaganda can be particularly potent if it’s created by foreigners.¹³

In Zhu’s speech, which was published in August 2016 in *Qiushi*, the CCP’s most authoritative journal, he said that China’s propaganda should mix ‘what we want to tell’ with what foreign audiences ‘want to hear’. The messaging should have emotional valence as well as making a reasoned point, Zhu said. Consider, for example, the ‘Chinese Dream’, which is Xi Jinping’s signature soft-power campaign designed to market globally the idea of a strong, successful, happy China. This should be explained and disseminated, Zhu argued, through a combination of ‘speaking by yourself’ and ‘speaking by others’.

The general principles of the strategy are endorsed by Chinese President and CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping. At a June 2021 collective study session of China’s Politburo on external propaganda, Xi stressed the need to ‘never stop expanding our circle of friends that understand China and befriend China in the arena of international public opinion’, instructing that China must improve its capacity to make its voice heard in the global ‘public opinion struggle’.¹⁴ Xi also reiterated a point he made in a February 2016 Politburo work meeting on news and public opinion that more work should be done on converging Chinese and foreign perspectives (融通中外). As Xi described in 2016, that convergence isn’t meant to take place in equal measure, but to elevate and proselytise the CCP’s world view:

Bringing together the Chinese and foreign is more than just simply catering [to the tastes] of foreigners. Rather, it is improving our ability to disseminate the Chinese way [of doing things], to disseminate the Chinese system, Chinese concepts, and Chinese culture in ways ... such that foreign audiences will be happy to accept it, in language that is easy for them to understand, so that Chinese concepts become a global *lingua franca*, and an international consensus.¹⁵

In response to Xi Jinping’s June 2021 instructions, Shen Haixiong (慎海雄), deputy head of the Propaganda Department of the CCP and head of China Media Group (the official media conglomerate directly under the Propaganda Department of the CCP) outlined how he intended to create ‘a studio for influencers in multiple languages’ (多语种网红工作室) to better reach younger media consumers globally.¹⁶ These state-supported training programs for online influencers would help the People’s Republic of China ‘break through and enhance the ‘spread of a positive attitude’ (好感传播), according to Shen.¹⁷

Xi Jinping has long called for Chinese media workers and academics to do a better job of ‘telling China’s stories to the world’ in order to help redress what the CCP sees as a deep global imbalance in what it refers to as its ‘discourse power’ (话语权), which is considered a core part of the country’s ‘comprehensive national power’ (综合国力).¹⁸ In a 2013 address to propaganda ministers from across the country, Xi specifically instructed that there should be a ‘focus on building a discourse system with new concepts, new categories and new narratives that integrate the Chinese and the foreign’.¹⁹

The strategy is hoped to help break what’s referred to within the CCP as the West’s ‘discourse hegemony’ (话语霸权) over China.²⁰ In the view of senior propaganda officials, Western media encirclement of China is having a deleterious effect on how the country is viewed around the world. A Pew Research Center survey released in June 2021 reflected the dire state of China’s international standing, showing that majorities in 15 of the 17 advanced economies surveyed hold an unfavourable opinion of the country.²¹

This reputational hit follows China’s early cover-up of the coronavirus outbreak, economic and diplomatic coercion targeting foreign governments and companies²² and the continued exposure of the CCP’s human rights abuses in Xinjiang by foreign academics,²³ think tanks,²⁴ international NGOs²⁵ and journalists.²⁶ China’s internal and external propaganda push has ramped up in response to this, and also aims to burnish the CCP’s credentials as it celebrates its centenary in 2021.²⁷ Propaganda messaging on China’s handling of the pandemic and treatment of ethnic minorities has been deployed to counterbalance critical reporting of those issues.²⁸

Over the same period, China has stepped up pointed criticism of foreign media coverage of its activities in Xinjiang and sought to hobble critical reporting on the issue by expelling foreign journalists from the country. At least 18 foreign reporters from the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Post* were expelled from China in the first half of 2020, according to the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China,²⁹ which is itself an organisation that China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) has long described as illegal.³⁰ MOFA says the expulsions were in response to curbs that the US placed on Chinese reporters.³¹

Since their expulsion from China, coordinated attacks on the remaining corps of foreign journalists have intensified.³² At the same time, MOFA spokespeople have repeatedly held up the American journalist Edgar Snow, best known for his 1937 book *Red star over China*, as the exemplar of objective foreign reporting on China.³³ In reality, some historians argue that Snow’s reporting trips were carefully choreographed and that his interviews with key figures, including Chairman Mao Zedong, were controlled and censored.³⁴

In the past, the CCP has ‘borrowed the mouths’ of friendly foreigners such as Snow to create approved articles, books, photography, documentaries and movies. As this report shows, that same approach has now been extended to foreign vloggers and online influencers.

The online influencer ecosystem

The social media influencer ecosystem is a global phenomenon in which people grow an audience for their online accounts by creating particular types of content (travel videos, for example), typically based on a specific personality, style, topic or message. The use of digital platforms to make money is not unusual, and typical monetisation pathways include advertising revenue, paid product placement and content deals. Endorsement arrangements between government institutions and social media influencers are also common. For example, fitness influencers were paid by local governments to urge Americans to stay at home during the Covid-19 pandemic.³⁵ It's worth noting that advertising disclosure requirements vary by country and by platform.

China has a sophisticated social media influencer ecosystem across multiple platforms, including Douyin (the domestic precursor to TikTok), the video-sharing site Bilibili and social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu. There's a popular niche for non-Chinese influencers or vloggers who, typically but not always, speak Mandarin and share their content on domestic platforms.³⁶ Some also operate from China on US platforms, including YouTube and Instagram, and create content tailored to markets in different countries. This is despite access to those services being blocked in China. This suggests that the activities of the China-based international-facing influencers are tacitly condoned, even if not necessarily directly endorsed, by the propaganda apparatus of the party-state.

Virtual private networks

Accessing banned foreign platforms in China is possible by using virtual private networks (VPNs), which are strictly monitored in the country as they allow users to breach the 'Great Firewall', or 'climb over the wall' (翻墙).³⁷ Only VPN services authorised by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology are allowed, while selling or accessing other non-authorised VPN services is illegal.³⁸ The law is applied selectively, and penalties are more often imposed when individuals use VPNs to access controversial pieces of information or publish political content that opposes CCP lines.³⁹ In Xinjiang, for example, since a harsh internet crackdown that began in 2009,⁴⁰ the use of VPNs has been listed as one of the red flags authorities have used to detain Uyghurs and other minorities.⁴¹

By leveraging the popularity of foreign media influencers in China, the Chinese state propaganda apparatus can package their messages through potentially more persuasive voices in an attempt to neutralise critical reporting about human rights abuses in Xinjiang and depict a more positive image of the region. In turn, those foreign social media influencers may have their Xinjiang-related content promoted at MOFA conferences,⁴² cross-shared on US-based social media platforms and referenced in English-language party-state media articles, growing their profile and potentially offering new opportunities for monetisation and audience building (Figure 1). While ASPI cannot confirm whether foreign social media influencers are commissioned (and provided monetary compensation up front) to create Xinjiang-related content, the *BBC* has reported that state media outlet *CGTN* has set up a department tasked with contacting foreign social media influencers to cooperate or use their videos (see case study 2).⁴³ Likewise, this report will examine how influencers are invited to take part in state-sponsored tours.

Figure 1: Chinese Consulate-General in Sydney's Twitter account sharing a CGTN video of British vlogger Jason Lightfoot



Source: Twitter, 8 April 2021, [online](#).

Our data collection has found that, since the beginning of 2020, 156 Chinese state-controlled accounts on US-based social media platforms have published at least 556 Facebook posts, Twitter posts and articles on *CGTN*, *Global Times*, *Xinhua* or *China Daily* websites amplifying Xinjiang-related social media content from 14 influencer accounts. More than 50% of that activity occurred on Facebook. This data includes foreign social media influencers in China and Chinese social media influencers who have interacted with the foreign influencers in Xinjiang.

To illustrate how this ecosystem operates, ASPI ICPC built a network diagram (Figure 2) of Chinese state media and diplomatic accounts that share or post content by foreign social media influencers; reference foreign social media influencers; or promote China-based influencers who have interacted with foreign social media influencers in Xinjiang. An interactive version of this diagram is available [online](#).⁴⁴ Nodes are sized by the number of posts shared.

Figure 2: Network diagram of Chinese state media and diplomatic accounts that have engaged with foreign influencer content



Source: Created by ASPI ICPC, available to explore [online](#).

The most active state media accounts in our dataset were China Media Group’s subsidiaries *CGTN* and *CCTV*, which are under the control of the CCP’s Central Propaganda Department,⁴⁵ as well as the *People’s Daily*, which is the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the CCP, and its ‘We Are China’ branded social media accounts.⁴⁶

Videos play a key role in this influencer ecosystem. Videos featuring foreign media influencers are the prime content that Chinese state entities work to repackage and boost online. Our analysis of these videos suggests that they fit into two broad categories with sub-themes targeted at different international and domestic audiences.

The first category of videos seeks to reframe international narratives by displaying a wholly positive image of life in Xinjiang. These videos tend to emphasise ‘exotic’ Uyghur culture, taking a marketing approach to the content by depicting the region’s hospitality, food, dancing and happy men and women. Infrastructure was also a popular theme, especially projects relating to agriculture, roads and high-speed rail and direct references to China’s ‘rural revitalisation’.

The most active MOFA accounts on Facebook and Twitter promoting this style of content in our dataset belonged to Zhang Heqing (张和清), who’s a cultural attaché at the Chinese Embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan. He promoted foreign-influencer-related content at least 56 times. For example, Zhang shared a video featuring Stuart Wiggin (Figure 3). A British national, Wiggin posted videos on YouTube and a number of Chinese platforms as ‘The China Traveller’ (司徒建国) from the Xinjiang leg of the ‘A Date with China’ media tour (see Case study 1) about the ‘wonders’ of Xinjiang.

Figure 3: Chinese diplomat in Pakistan, Zhang Heqing (left), sharing content featuring foreign media influencers; Barrie Jones's video (right) criticising foreign media coverage of Xinjiang was shown in a MOFA briefing



Sources: left, Zhang Heqing, *Twitter*, 20 May 2021, [online](#); right, Kerry Allen & Sophie Williams, 'The foreigners in China's disinformation drive', *BBC News*, 11 July 2021, [online](#).

The second category of videos is more overtly political and seeks to directly counter allegations of forced labour and detention centres, among other issues. These videos at times pointedly used positive depictions of local Xinjiang life to directly contradict allegations of human rights abuses—for example, by creating content in Xinjiang cotton fields to counter allegations of forced labour (Figure 4).⁴⁷ Some videos in this category didn't use footage from the region, but instead included a speech to camera or an interview contradicting allegations of human rights abuses.

The most mentioned influencers in this category in our dataset were Canadian Daniel Dumbrill,⁴⁸ the Barretts (Lee and Oli Barrett, a British father–son vlogging duo),⁴⁹ and Barrie Jones of Best China Info (also British).⁵⁰ All of these influencers have been directly referenced by MOFA officials on social media or in party-state media articles, and both Daniel Dumbrill and Barrie Jones have had their videos shown at MOFA press conferences.⁵¹

Cao Yi (曹毅), a consul at the Embassy of China in Lebanon, shared foreign influencers' content in this category at least 31 times, including content from Daniel Dumbrill (a Canadian vlogger reportedly based in Shenzhen)⁵² and Barrie Jones from the YouTube channel Best China Info (a British expatriate potentially based in Guilin, China).⁵³

Figure 4: Chinese state media posts featuring Raz Gal-Or visiting a cotton field (left) and Lee Barrett's comments on cotton picking in Xinjiang (right)



Source: left, China Xinhua News, *New China*, 16 April 2021, online; right, CCTV, Facebook, 29 March 2021, online.

The Twitter account of Li Bijian (李碧建), the Consul-General of China in Karachi, Pakistan, was also an active actor in this category. He tweeted and retweeted at least eight posts, including a retweet of Cyrus Janssen, who describes himself as a former golf professional now turned vlogger who posts about China from his native Canada (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Li Bijian sharing content featuring foreign media influencers



Source: Li Bijian, Twitter, 6 August 2020, online.

This report now focuses on three in-depth case studies that analyse Xinjiang-focused foreign influencer content and the amplification of that content by Chinese state entities. They include:

1. content created by social media influencers as part of the 'A Date with China' (中国有约) media tour of Xinjiang in April 2021, which was hosted by the Cyberspace Administration of China
2. the online video brand 'YChina', created in part by Israeli Raz Gal-Or, and YouTube content created by the company about Xinjiang
3. satellite mapping and analysis of the strategic geography of foreign social media influencers' trips to Xinjiang.

Case study 1: The ‘A Date with China’ propaganda campaign

Social media influencers from Canada, Germany, the UK and Ghana took part in the ‘A Date with China’ (中国有约) media tour of Xinjiang in May 2021, which was held under the auspices of the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), which is the country’s chief internet regulator and censor. The tour was co-organised by the *China Daily*, which is the newspaper published by the Information Office of China’s State Council (the administrative office in charge of the CCP’s external propaganda) and by 11 of China’s provincial-level cyberspace administrations, including the Xinjiang CAC.⁵⁴

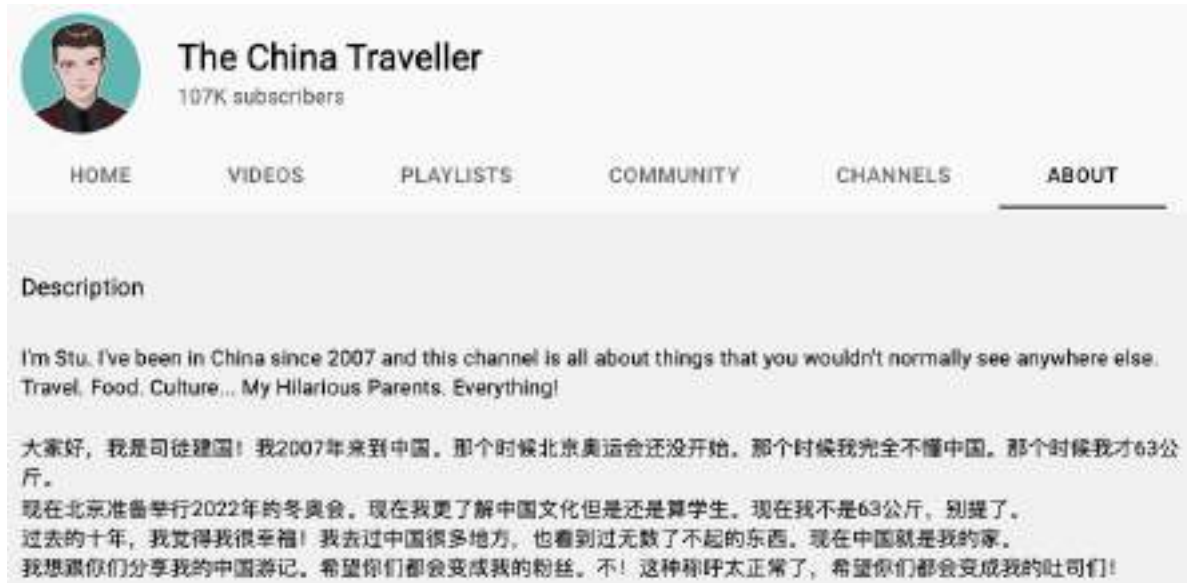
The campaign was launched on 19 April 2021 with an opening ceremony in Shaanxi Province.⁵⁵ According to a CAC press release, the deputy director of CAC’s news and communications bureau, Zhang Yong (张勇), said at the event ‘the campaign seeks to understand the Communist Party of China’s initial intention to serve the people in making great achievements over the past century, and to enhance the international community’s understanding and recognition of China’s development.’⁵⁶

An official contract award announcement for part of the campaign states that the tour would visit 14 places in China where Xi Jinping has travelled to since the 18th National Congress of the CCP in 2012. There are six ‘stations’ on the campaign journey: Shaanxi, Hubei, Guizhou, Guangxi, Xinjiang and Fujian.⁵⁷ The campaign is made up of a three-leg media tour to be held from April to September 2021. The first leg took participants to Shaanxi, Hubei and Guizhou provinces as well as the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. The second leg took participants to Xinjiang for a week-long tour before going on to Fujian Province in China’s east. At the time of writing, details about the third leg haven’t been announced.

The official themes of the tour are a set of key CCP political slogans, including ‘Poverty alleviation’ (脱贫攻坚) ‘Rural revitalisation’ (乡村振兴) and ‘Reform and opening up brings a better life’ (改革开放美好生活).⁵⁸ Achieving a ‘moderately well-off society’ and eliminating poverty have been a centenary goal of the CCP since at least 2012.⁵⁹ In February 2021, Xi Jinping declared the end of extreme poverty in China. With these and other centenary goals hitting their deadlines in 2021, China’s propaganda apparatus has increased its efforts to publicise the party’s achievements, which is reflected in the themes of the ‘A Date With China’ campaign.⁶⁰

The foreign influencers who took part in the Xinjiang leg of the tour from 17 to 24 May were embedded in a group of approximately 45 participants including foreign journalists, reporters for Chinese party-state media outlets and journalists from domestic online and commercial media outlets (Figure 6).⁶¹ According to media reports about the tour by the *China Daily*, the foreign influencers included vloggers Kirk Apesland (a Canadian who goes by the online pseudonym ‘Gweilo 60’), Patrick Köllmer (a German national with a sizeable following on Chinese social media), Robert Nani (a Ghanaian influencer in China) and British national Stuart Wiggin, who is identified as a *People’s Daily* online reporter in *China Daily* ‘A Date With China’ content⁶² and as a ‘foreign expert’ working for the *People’s Daily* subsidiary ‘People’s Daily Media Innovation’ (人民日报媒体技术股份有限公司) on their website,⁶³ but who also posts videos on YouTube and a number of Chinese platforms as ‘The China Traveller’ (司徒建国). He does not describe himself as a party-state media employee on his Youtube ‘About’ section (see also ‘Platforms’ inconsistencies in labelling state accounts’ section on page 30).⁶⁴

Figure 6: 'The China Traveller' YouTube 'About' page



Source: 'About', *YouTube*, 7 October 2021, [online](#).

Joining them on the tour were two Chinese nationals: 'Rachel' Zhou Yiqiu (周忆秋), known online as 'Miss Wow' or 'Techy Rachel', who has been a *CGTN* reporter and vlogger (see also 'Platforms' inconsistencies in labelling state accounts' section on page 29).⁶⁵ There was also a woman whom state media journalists have named as Sabira Samat, who is also called a 'Uyghur influencer'.⁶⁶ Along with another influencer known as Hurshidem Ablikim,⁶⁷ she appears on 'Guli Talks Xinjiang' accounts on the domestic platforms Douyin, Xigua and Weibo. Videos with the two women also appeared on YouTube under the account name 'Story of Xinjiang by Guli 古丽讲新疆' as well as on Instagram,⁶⁸ and used to appear on Twitter until the account was suspended in May 2021.⁶⁹ The Youtube account has been rebranded '疆藏姐妹花 Xinjiang and Tibet sisters' as of November, 2021. This brand shares content about life in Xinjiang and sometimes directly addresses allegations of human rights abuses in the region on YouTube⁷⁰ and Instagram.⁷¹

Figure 7: Participants in the 'A Date with China' (中国有约) campaign pose for a group photo at an observation deck along the C255 Highway in Ürümqi County in May 2021



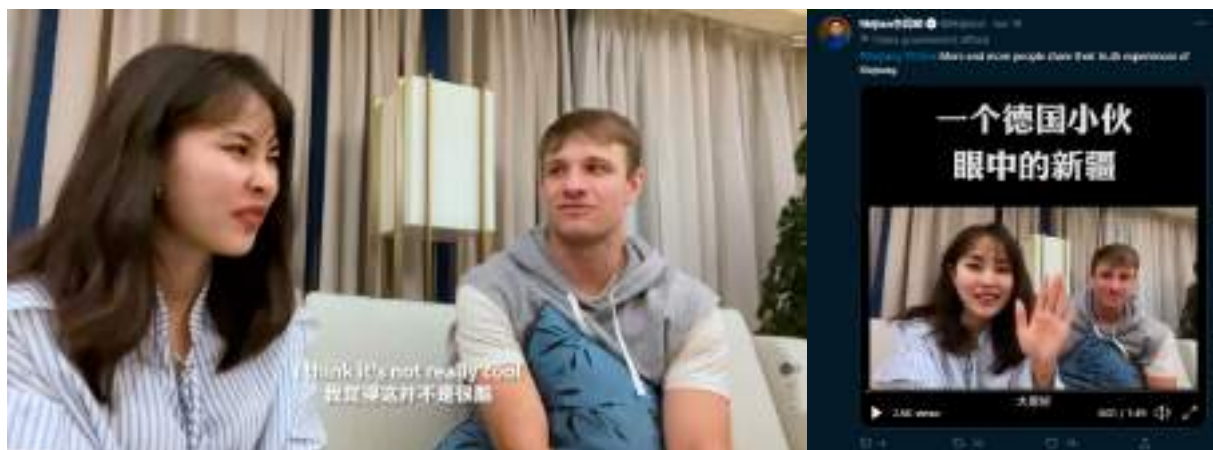
Source: "A Date with China": From farming and pastoral village to farmhouse, rural industry is upgrading' ['中国有约 A Date with China' |从农牧村到农家乐 乡村产业在升级], *China Daily*, 19 May 2021, [online](#).

The influencers

Patrick Köllmer, a German influencer, model, TV host and long-term guest on Jiangsu Television's 'A Bright World' (世界青年说) TV program,⁷² was one foreigner who joined the Xinjiang leg of the 'A Date With China' media tour. Köllmer posted at least one video to his YouTube channel and three videos to his Bilibili channel. In one video that was posted to his Bilibili account but not on YouTube, Köllmer recounts his experiences on the media tour and what he noted about the 'real Xinjiang'. In the itinerary outlined by Köllmer, he says that he attended variety performances at each of the locations they went to: Ürümqi, Kashgar and Hotan. In a separate video, Köllmer says that they also went to Kashgar surrounds and Shache.⁷³ 'I went to many places in Xinjiang this week. I saw a lot of people, ate a lot of delicious Xinjiang food, saw a lot of enthusiastic people, and saw many of their new industries. I was also very happy to see all of that,' Köllmer says in Mandarin. At another point, Köllmer says of Xinjiang people: 'It's almost like [you can] grab any Xinjiang person off the street and they're all able to dance.'⁷⁴

Köllmer also featured in videos shared by other 'A Date With China' participants that took a far more political tone. In an interview with Köllmer conducted by Sabira Samat (whom we introduced on page 14) and published on YouTube on 1 June 2021, Samat asks Köllmer about 'the foreign media and some people' who she says 'smear' and 'slander' Xinjiang.⁷⁵ Köllmer replies that he doesn't watch foreign media because he thinks it's wrong and 'it doesn't feel right.' Köllmer goes on to describe their trip to the variety show, buying coffee and joining other 'A Date With China' participants at the markets as evidence that Xinjiang is as safe as other parts of China that he has visited. Köllmer says that his experience doesn't match that depicted by foreign media: 'When foreign media say something bad, I don't know, I think it's not really cool.' A shortened version of the interview titled 'Xinjiang in the eyes of a German boy' (一个德国小伙眼中的新疆) featuring this quote was disseminated by Chinese officials and state media on Twitter (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Sabira Samat interviews Patrick Köllmer (left); an edited down version of the interview was later promoted on Twitter by Chinese diplomats Li Bijian (李碧建) (right) and Zhang Heqing (张和清)



Source: left, 'Within German guy's vision of Xinjiang', YouTube, 1 June 2021, online; right, Li Bijian, Twitter, 18 June 2021, online.

Köllmer also appears in a separate interview conducted by CGTN employee Zhou Yiqiu ('Miss Wow') at 'Hotan Jade City' (和田玉都城) in Hotan that was uploaded to her YouTube channel on 10 June 2021. In the clip, Zhou repeatedly attempts to elicit the German vlogger's opinions on the political situation in Xinjiang, but he demurs.⁷⁶

Köllmer's videos tend to get more engagement on Chinese domestic platforms compared to content that appears on his YouTube channel. For example, on 27 July 2021, Köllmer's YouTube account⁷⁷ had only 3,510 subscribers, whereas his Bilibili account had more than 150,000 fans.⁷⁸ One video about visiting a Xinjiang night market published on his YouTube account on 7 June 2021 reached 6,146 views and 786 likes.⁷⁹ On Bilibili, the exact same video received more than 52,000 views and 4,241 likes.⁸⁰

Many of the videos apparently created as part of 'A Date with China' are presented as travel blogs. However, content analysis of the comment sections on YouTube suggests that they're often received as political material. In a video titled 'Xinjiang 2021—Back alleys, orchards, cotton fields and the desert / 新疆VLOG4 麦盖提县',⁸¹ for example, vlogger Stuart Wiggin shared footage ostensibly from Makit County in Kashgar, Xinjiang.

In this video, Wiggin visits a date plantation and later a cotton field, where he talks to the same apparent cotton farmer as fellow 'A Date With China' participant and *CGTN* journalist 'Rachel' Zhou Yiqiu⁸² and Patrick Köllmer.⁸³ The video makes no explicit mention of Wiggin being part of a trip organised by the Chinese Government. Wiggin talks to the farm workers about how much they earn, but he makes no mention of the widely reported allegations of forced labour in cotton production in Xinjiang.⁸⁴ Yet despite the fact that forced labour isn't raised in the video itself, of the 339 comments made on the YouTube video as of 10 August 2021, many make explicit mention of such allegations and discuss how the video 'disproves' them. For example, the word 'forced' appears almost 30 times, typically referring to forced labour: 'I WANT TO GO TO THE CONCENTRATION CAMP and BE A FORCED LABOR' WORKER so that I can earn 250,000 rmb', 'I mean I'm "forced" to work from Monday to Friday every week to earn my salary ... that counts as forced labor right 🤖', 'Where's the "forced labor" that the west is screaming about?' and 'The only forced labour seems to be the machines!'

Interviews with local cotton farmers in Xinjiang posted by social media influencers to YouTube often focus on themes of prosperity, including asking how much they earn (Figure 9). Examples include Miss Wow China's 'Xinjiang cotton demystified: I interviewed two Uygur owners of a cotton field', YChina's 'What I saw in Xinjiang working as a cotton farmer' and The China Traveller's 'Xinjiang 2021—Back alleys, orchards, cotton fields and the desert / 新疆VLOG4 麦盖提县'.⁸⁵ The same man appears in the Miss Wow China,⁸⁶ Patrick Köllmer⁸⁷ and Stuart Wiggin's The China Traveller videos.⁸⁸

Figure 9: Vloggers' accounts of cotton farming in Xinjiang



Source: top left, The China Traveller, 'Xinjiang 2021—Back alleys, orchards, cotton fields and the desert / 新疆VLOG4 麦盖提县', *YouTube*, 6 June 2021, [online](#); top right, YChina, 'What I saw in Xinjiang working as a cotton farmer', *YouTube*, 8 April 2021, [online](#); bottom left, Miss Wow China, 'Xinjiang cotton demystified: I interviewed two Uyur owners of cotton field', *YouTube*, 17 June 2021, [online](#); bottom right, 'It turns out that Xinjiang is like this? The German guy played all over Xinjiang and really loved it!', [原来新疆竟是这样? 德国小伙玩遍新疆·真的爱上了!], *Bilibili*, 28 May 2021, [online](#).

Many of the 'A Date With China' videos from YouTube vloggers feature an event with local dancers in Kashgar. Examples include Miss Wow's 'Talking about Kashgar with Gweilo 60' video,⁸⁹ Gweilo 60's 'Ancient City of Kashgar Xinjiang China'⁹⁰ and The China Traveller's 'Xinjiang 2021: I Explore the Ancient City of Kashgar / 新疆VLOG2 喀什古城开逛!' (Figure 10).⁹¹

Figure 10: Vloggers dance with locals



Source: top left, The China Traveller, 'Xinjiang 2021: I explore the ancient city of Kashgar / 新疆VLOG2 喀什古城开逛!', *YouTube*, 31 May 2021, [online](#); top right, Gweilo 60, 'Ancient city of Kashgar Xinjiang China', *YouTube*, 6 June 2021, [online](#); bottom left, Miss Wow, 'Talking about Kashgar with Gweilo 60', *YouTube*, 16 June 2021, [online](#).

In contrast with Wiggin, Canadian vlogger Kirk Apesland appears more overtly political in his videos from the trip. For example, in a YouTube video posted on 26 June 2021 and titled ‘Oppressed in Xinjiang once again!’, Apesland walks and films at the Hotan Night Market, pointing to the renowned tourist location as evidence that no human rights violations are taking place in the region. ‘This is in Xinjiang province. This is not what you would expect from people that are oppressed and suppressed like, seriously, look at this! Do these people look like they’re having a rough time?’ Apesland says (Figure 11).⁹²

Figure 11: China International Publishing Group’s ‘China Focus’ Twitter account reaching out to Kirk Apesland’s Twitter account on 19 July 2021



Source: Twitter, 19 July 2021, online.

Content created as part of the Xinjiang leg of the ‘A Date with China’ tour received significant online amplification across US-based social media platforms. *China Daily* articles and videos,⁹³ in addition to other related material, have been promoted at least 150 times by Chinese state media and MOFA accounts on Facebook alone. The most active Facebook pages sharing ‘A Date with China’ content were the *People’s Daily*’s ‘We are China’ account, which has more than 14 million followers, and the Japanese version of the *People’s Daily* account, which has nearly 150,000 followers (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Chinese MOFA spokesperson Hua Chunying sharing a link to a *China Daily* article about the 'A Date with China' media tour (left) and MOFA deputy spokesperson Wang Wenbin sharing a *China Daily* video featuring the tour (right)



Sources: left, Hua Chunying, *Twitter*, 18 June 2021, online; right, Wang Wenbin, *Facebook*, 27 May 2021, online.

Case study 2: The ‘YChina’ media tour

A number of other foreign social media influencers have created Xinjiang content in 2021 that’s then been heavily promoted, and sometimes repackaged, by Chinese party-state media and diplomatic accounts. For example, Raz Gal-Or is the co-founder of the Y-Platform, which is a multichannel online video network in China. He features in three videos from Xinjiang shared on the company’s YChina YouTube channel in April 2021, in which he visits a local home among other activities.⁹⁴ A video titled ‘What I saw in Xinjiang working as a Cotton Farmer’⁹⁵ received significant amplification on social media from diplomatic and party-state media accounts amid an international stand-off over Xinjiang cotton and its alleged links to forced labour⁹⁶ (see Figure 13). While the YChina YouTube video doesn’t show it, *CGTN* reporter Huang Yue was also at the cotton field and filmed an interview with Gal-Or.⁹⁷ Subsequent party-state media coverage claimed that this was a chance encounter.⁹⁸ Gal-Or also appears to have given a live interview from the field with *CGTN* anchor Liu Xin.⁹⁹

The promotion of YChina content by *CGTN*, which is supervised by the CCP’s Propaganda Department,¹⁰⁰ may be part of the outlet’s editorial strategy. The *BBC*, citing multiple anonymous sources at *CGTN*, reported in July 2021 that the media organisation is focused on making use of ‘internet celebrities and influencers’ in a ‘fightback’ against foreign media reporting. The sources told the *BBC* that a new ‘internet celebrities’ department has been set up at *CGTN* and tasked with contacting ‘foreigners to either use their videos or to co-operate to make videos together and that some departments have also been instructed to ‘find foreigners to send to Xinjiang to represent us.’¹⁰¹ In an interview with French newspaper *Le Monde*, Gal-Or disclosed ‘that it was the government that had told him which farmers to meet in Xinjiang’.¹⁰² In a video posted to YChina’s *YouTube* channel on 2 December 2021, Gal-Or said ‘no state media directed me in any part of my trip. It was my own personal decision to go to Xinjiang.’¹⁰³ YChina is listed as a “global stringer” on *CGTN*’s website.¹⁰⁴ *CGTN* describes “global stringer” as an “international video platform of *CGTN*, aiming to gather and reward the world’s outstanding creators while displaying their content worldwide.” Bonuses are rewarded to creators who submit high-quality work to the website, according to *CGTN*.¹⁰⁵

Footage from Gal-Or’s visit to Xinjiang was widely promoted across US-based social media platforms via the accounts of both state media and MOFA. For example, it was shared by *YouTube* channels associated with *CGTN*¹⁰⁶ as well as Shanghai Media Group’s *Shanghai Eye*,¹⁰⁷ *CCTV*¹⁰⁸ and *Xinhua*.¹⁰⁹ On Facebook, state media and diplomatic accounts promoted content that mentioned Raz Gal-Or and Xinjiang more than 50 times and in multiple languages up to 10 August 2021. Those included at least 18 posts from accounts labelled as Chinese embassies and consulates (Figure 13), as well as profiles associated with the *Global Times*,¹¹⁰ *CGTN*,¹¹¹ *Xinhua*¹¹² and *China Radio International* on various pages, including its Spanish¹¹³ and German¹¹⁴ accounts, among others.

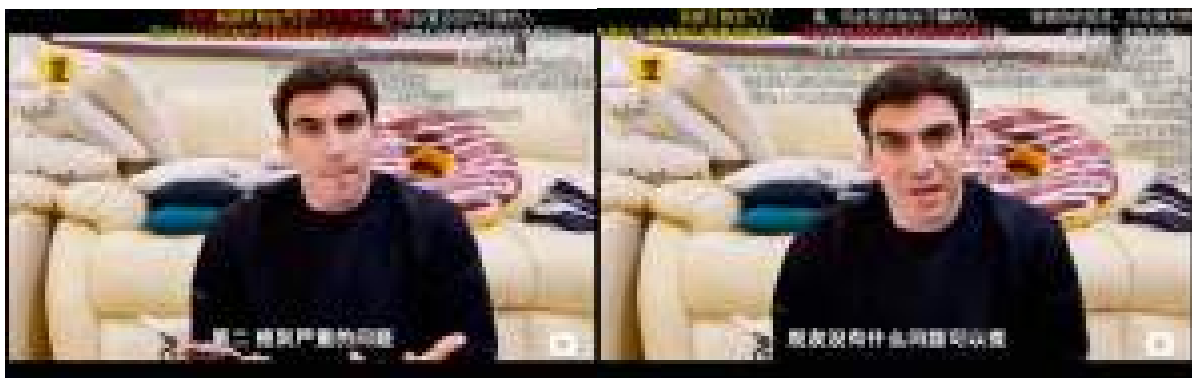
Figure 13: The Facebook account of the Chinese Embassy in Turkey featuring Raz Gal-Or's trip to a cotton farm in Xinjiang



Source: 'Chinese Embassy in Turkey', Facebook, archived 29 July 2021, online.

In a video posted to the YChina Bilibili account, that wasn't cross-posted to the company's YouTube account, Raz Gal-Or addressed some YouTube comments left on his Xinjiang tour series of videos (Figure 14). In answering one comment that said that he didn't address any serious problems in Xinjiang, Gal-Or says 'friend, there aren't any problems to mention.' He also commented on questions he could have asked the Uyghurs he interviewed in Xinjiang. For example, 'What else can I ask? Take me to your secret hiding spot where everyone controls your mind?'¹¹⁵

Figure 14: Raz Gal-Or addresses criticisms of his Xinjiang videos in a video posted to Chinese platform Bilibili but not posted to YouTube



Source: 'Three issues of Xinjiang videos were posted overseas, and I was sprayed', [在海外发了三期新疆视频·我被喷了?], Bilibili, 17 April 2021, online.

Y-Platform business structure

Gal-Or founded YChina, or the ‘Foreigner Research Institute’ (歪果仁研究协会), with his Peking University classmate Fang Yedun (方晔顿) in late 2016 and began making videos about sport and interviews with foreigners in China.¹¹⁶ In January 2017, Gal-Or and Fang appear to have started a new media company called Beijing weWOWwe Technology Limited Company (北京唯喔科技有限公司) with a reported ¥10 million (US\$1.5 million) in seed funding from Gal-Or’s father’s company Infinity Group and Will Hunting Capital (唯猎资本).¹¹⁷ In March 2020, the Nasdaq-listed Chinese social media company Weibo Corporation joined a US\$3.5 million series A funding round in Y-Platform.¹¹⁸

Fang Yedun is listed as CEO of weWOWwe according to information listed on Qichacha, a Chinese corporate records database.¹¹⁹ A philosophy graduate from Peking University, Fang joined the CCP in his senior year in 2012 or 2013.¹²⁰ On 12 May 2021, Fang joined four other young CCP members in a group interview about ‘youth’s responsibilities in the new era’ at a press conference organised by the Central Propaganda Department of the CCP (Figure 15).¹²¹ At the press conference, Fang claimed that his organisation had interviewed more than 5,000 foreigners in China in the four years since 2017.¹²²

Figure 15: YChina co-founder Fang Yedun (second from left) joins Shou Xiaoli (寿小丽, far left), the deputy director of the Bureau of External News Communication, Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the CCP and four other young CCP members at a Propaganda Department press conference about ‘youth’s responsibilities in the new era’ on 12 May 2021



Source: “‘This is our time, everyone has a chance to shine’”, [“这是我们的时代, 谁都有机会出彩”], *The Paper*, 13 May 2021, [online](#). The Central Propaganda Department officially changed its English-language title to the Central Publicity Department in 1998, although the Chinese name was not changed.

On-the-street interviews with China-based foreigners and funny, generally apolitical videos featuring Mandarin-speaking expats discussing daily life inside China are the mainstays of YChina’s content output. The company claims to have worked with brands such as General Electric, Google, Huawei, Jeep, KFC, McDonald’s and Pizza Hut, according to the website of INNONATION, a company owned by Amir Gal-Or, Raz Gal-Or’s father (Figure 16).¹²³

Figure 16: Brands listed as having worked with YChina, according to the INNONATION website



Source: ‘Crooked Nuts Research Association and YCHINA’ [歪果仁研究协会和 YCHINA], INNONATION, online.

YChina has cooperated with party-state media since its inception. In May 2017, YChina teamed up with CCTV News Center to create the ‘Silk Road Youth Talk’ (丝路青年说) series of videos that were broadcast on CCTV1, CCTV13 and CCTV online.¹²⁴ In 2019, YChina released a video featuring Gal-Or helping a 90-year-old military doctor fulfil his wish to witness a flag-raising ceremony in Tiananmen Square (Figure 17).¹²⁵ That and other video interviews Gal-Or conducted with grassroots CCP members were featured in the People’s Daily production ‘CPC at 100: Views from Expats’ (他们眼中的中国共产党), which was also published on the People’s Daily domestic social media channels as well as its ‘We Are China’ YouTube channel.¹²⁶

Figure 17: Raz Gal-Or in the People’s Daily production ‘CPC at 100: Views from Expats’ (他们眼中的中国共产党) and at a flag-raising ceremony in Tiananmen Square



Source: left, People’s Daily, ‘The real China as I see it : Raz Galor’, YouTube, 2 June 2021, online; right, Wang Wenbin, Facebook, 27 May 2021, online.



In an interview with the *South China Morning Post* in 2017, Raz Gal-Or said that the company's 'vision' was to 'create so-called positive energy, and let our fans learn something from us, you know not just laugh.'¹²⁷ '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.¹²⁸

In September 2019, YChina published a series of videos featuring Raz Gal-Or touring Hong Kong and commenting on the protests taking place there.¹²⁹ His content was also used as part of efforts to criticise the *BBC* following a 2 February 2021 report into allegations of systematic rape in Xinjiang's internment camps and the decision by Ofcom (the British broadcasting regulator) on 4 February 2021 to withdraw *CGTN's* UK broadcast licence.¹³⁰ In February 2021, YChina published a video of Gal-Or parodying the supposedly negative way the *BBC* depicts China,¹³¹ and the video was picked up by *CGTN* on its own website and YouTube channel.¹³²

Case study 3: Mapping the strategic geography of influencers' trips to Xinjiang

Just as some media tours of Xinjiang appear largely directed by state-controlled institutions and government bodies, the locations shown in foreign influencers' videos may be chosen by state entities to further particular narratives about the region. For this report, ASPI analysed hundreds of YouTube videos depicting trips to Xinjiang made and posted by foreign influencers. Some of the videos seem to have gone to considerable length to avoid featuring evidence of the CCP's human rights abuses in the region, such as detention infrastructure (although, ironically, such infrastructure was inadvertently captured in some videos).

The Chinese Government has organised special media trips, such as 'A Date With China', to showcase Xinjiang as a travel destination and an economic success story. Articles produced by journalists on those trips often accuse the Western media of propagating 'fake stories' about Xinjiang, according to the International Federation of Journalists.¹³³

In contrast to many people (including journalists) who have independently visited Xinjiang, the routes of these influencers, as shown in their videos, and particularly by participants in the 'A Date with China' campaign, don't always reflect a representative view of Xinjiang. Instead, many present videos showing only the same predetermined locations visited as part of organised tours.

One example of this is a video by Stuart Wiggin, a vlogger who *China Daily* has referred to as a *People's Daily* online reporter who took part in the 'A Date with China' campaign. In his YouTube video titled 'Cherries and Camel Milk in Kashgar'¹³⁴ Wiggin posits that he is filming in Shache (also known as Yarkant), a town of around 120,000 people. However, our analysis of the video has found that no part of the video appears to show the town of Yarkant. The first half of the video shows Wiggin in the Yarkant County Na'an Industrial Park (莎车县馕产业园), which is a government-planned 'poverty-alleviation' and resettlement project that's located in Odanliq Municipality (乌达力克镇), roughly half an hour outside the town of Yarkant.¹³⁵ The road to this location also passes the large detention complex in Odanliq (Figure 18).¹³⁶

Figure 18: The route from Yarkant to the Na'an Industrial Park (blue), the Odanliq Detention Complex (red outlines) and Wiggin photographed within the Na'an Industrial Park



Source: Maxar via Google Earth, imagery collected and analysed by ASPI.

The second half of the video is also filmed within a government-organised ‘poverty-alleviation’ project in Misha municipality (米夏镇).¹³⁷ Misha is also a rural township outside of Yarkant. Videos mainly featuring ‘model’ ‘poverty-alleviation’ projects are common products of the participants in the ‘A Date with China’ campaign and several other bloggers who are supportive of government policy in Xinjiang. Another example of this is several participants, including Wiggin¹³⁸ and Apesland,¹³⁹ making videos about the same date farm in a rural township north of Mekit County. This same farm has also been visited by CGTN foreign reporters¹⁴⁰ and was profiled by the *China Daily* newspaper.¹⁴¹

Among the videos uploaded by social media influencers visiting Xinjiang that we analysed, many show only small and limited sections of the cities being visited. For example, in a video of YChina’s Raz Gal-Or titled ‘I interviewed 10 random Xinjiang locals, this is what they told me’, the initial shots are within 150 metres of Aksu International Hotel, and the most prominent shot is from a brief taxi drive back to the hotel (Figure 19). This is in stark contrast to the work of many foreign journalists in Xinjiang who go to considerable lengths to try to see large parts of the region.¹⁴²

Figure 19: The approximate route taken by Raz Gal-Or, as presented in his published YouTube video, in which he reportedly interviewed ‘ten random Xinjiang locals’, on foot (blue) and via taxi (yellow)



Source: Maxar via Google Earth.

There are more than 385 different detention facilities that have been constructed or expanded since 2017 across Xinjiang.¹⁴³ Because this number is so high, many driving trips taken in Xinjiang will travel past a number of those facilities. The trips taken by many vloggers and influencers are no different. A number of vloggers and influencers featured in this report visited several locations that would have required driving directly past a number of large-scale detention facilities. This fact directly contradicts the narrative of ‘normality’ many of them are pursuing and presenting about Xinjiang. For example, one location visited by a number of members of the ‘A Date with China’ campaign was a Mekit County forestation project. This project is roughly 20 kilometres out of Mekit town, and the main route requires visitors to drive directly past four large detention facilities, including one high-security prison (Figure 20).¹⁴⁴

Figure 20: The potential route from Meket to the forestation project, with inserts showing details of the detention facilities along the route



Source: Maxar via Google Earth; imagery collected and analysed by ASPI.

The strategic geography of influencers' guided tours of Xinjiang demonstrates that the tours don't present a representative sample of Xinjiang, but instead often show only highly specific locations that are regularly part of government-organised visits to labour programs. Additionally, the proximity of some of these locations to large-scale detention facilities shows that, for many of those influencers, it would be difficult to avoid seeing many of the detention facilities across the landscape (see box).

Detention infrastructure is hard to avoid in Xinjiang

Foreign influencers Fernando Munoz Bernal from Colombia and Noel Lee from Singapore also travelled together to Xinjiang in early April this year.¹⁴⁵ While both men were interviewed by local media, their trips don't appear to have been as highly choreographed as the previously described case studies, and Bernal specifically denies travelling with *China Daily*.¹⁴⁶ Both men used their trip to claim that Western governments' and media's allegations of repression, forced labour and genocide in Xinjiang are false.¹⁴⁷

However, among the usual depictions of food markets and dancing shows set in tourist locations such as the ancient city of Kashgar¹⁴⁸ and the Hotan Night Market,¹⁴⁹ one of the two influencers inadvertently recorded evidence of re-education facilities. Noel Lee released a video shot from a plane, showing his descent into Ürümqi International Airport.¹⁵⁰ Over the course of this 15-minute video, seven separate and active detention facilities listed in multiple databases of detention facilities across Xinjiang are visible from the plane window, and an additional 10 facilities are in the vicinity of the flight path but not visible through the window (Figure 21).¹⁵¹

Continued on next page

Figure 21: The approximate flight path (in blue) filmed by Noel Lee and the outline of 17 detention facilities in the vicinity, including seven filmed through the window of the plane; the inset shows a collection of seven detention facilities (including Midong Women’s Prison) in Ürümqi



The video includes a highly detailed view of Midong Women’s Prison, which is roughly 15 kilometres away from Ürümqi International Airport (Figure 22). The prison is a high-profile detention facility where several prominent detainees are held, including the relatives of overseas Uyghurs, who had been detained as a part of the 2017 crackdown.¹⁵² One detainee who is currently detained there was sentenced to seven years imprisonment for, according to her husband, having studied in Egypt.

Figure 22: Midong Women’s Prison in Ürümqi, seen in a video filmed by Noel Lee (left); satellite image of the prison (right)



Sources: Noel Lee, ‘Urumqi Air flight UQ2616 final approach—Shenzhen to Xinjiang 2nd April 2021 Boeing 737-800 B-205U’, *YouTube*, 6 April 2021, [online](#); Google Earth via Maxar, imagery collected and analysed by ASPI.

Platforms' inconsistencies in labelling state accounts

YouTube, Facebook and Twitter began providing contextual labels for state-funded media accounts between 2018 and 2020, largely as part of efforts to reduce the impact of foreign influence operations on US elections,¹⁵³ but subsequent reports have found that some of these policies remain inconsistently applied and problematic.¹⁵⁴ This issue continues for China's party-state media: ASPI examined instances in which content about Xinjiang made by foreign vloggers was shared or reposted on apparent party-state affiliated YouTube channels that weren't labelled with YouTube's 'funded in whole or in part by the Chinese government' tag. There are also discrepancies between how the accounts of individual journalists working for party-state media are labelled.

For example, a YouTube channel called 'Frontline' shared content from YChina's Raz Gal-Or in Xinjiang in which he was accompanied to cotton fields by a *CGTN* reporter.¹⁵⁵ The YouTube channel links to a Twitter account with the same name, which is labelled 'China state-affiliated media' and states 'Proud to work for China's national broadcaster (CGTN)'.¹⁵⁶ It also links to a Facebook page¹⁵⁷ labelled with the 'China state-controlled media tag', and which changed its name from 'CGTN Frontline' to 'Frontline' on 4 September 2020. The same footage appears there with the state media tag (Figure 23).¹⁵⁸

Figure 23: A video shared on the Frontline YouTube channel with no state media tag, in contrast with a Facebook video under the same channel name and branding with a 'China state-controlled media' tag



Sources: left, Frontline, 'Xinjiang from an Israeli's eyes: "Everything is extremely normal here"', YouTube, 4 April 2021, [online](#); right, Frontline, Facebook, 4 April 2021, [online](#).

There are also discrepancies among the major US social media platforms as to how journalists apparently employed by state media are labelled. For example, 'Rachel' Zhou Yiqiu is labelled as a *CGTN* reporter in *CGTN* news clips (it is unclear if she is currently employed by the outlet),¹⁵⁹ but videos on a YouTube channel associated with the name 'Miss Wow China' are unlabelled.¹⁶⁰ The channel links to Twitter¹⁶¹ and Instagram accounts,¹⁶² which are also unlabelled. Posts on the linked Techy Rachel Facebook account,¹⁶³ however, are labelled 'China state-controlled media'. Her content from the 'A Date With China' trip on YouTube, including a video with German vlogger Patrick Köllmer¹⁶⁴ in which they discuss Xinjiang issues, does not indicate it was created as part of a state-sponsored trip or that she is affiliated with *CGTN*. On Facebook, the same video is tagged with a state media label (Figure 24).¹⁶⁵

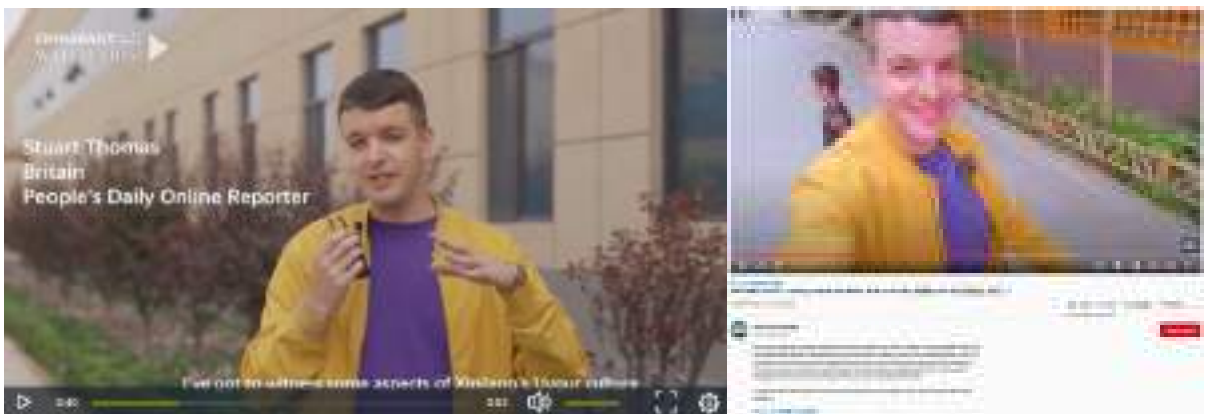
Figure 24: The ‘The TRUTH OF XINJIANG—in a German vlogger’s eyes’ video on the Miss Wow China YouTube account with no state media label, and the same video on the Techy Rachel Facebook page with a China state-controlled media label



Sources: left, Miss Wow China, ‘The TRUTH OF XINJIANG—in a German vlogger’s eyes’, *YouTube*, 9 June 2021, online; right, Techy Rachel, *Facebook*, June 2021, online.

Likewise, Stuart Wiggin is labelled as a *People’s Daily* online reporter in *China Daily* videos about the ‘A Date With China’ tour to Xinjiang.¹⁶⁶ It is unclear whether he is currently employed by the outlet. However, his personal YouTube channel, ‘The China Traveller’, where he has shared at least seven videos that appear to have been filmed as part of the tour, has no state media label (Figure 25). Nor does Wiggin indicate that he has links with state media on his YouTube ‘About’ page¹⁶⁷ or in the Xinjiang video captions as of 20 July 2021, or that he took part in an arranged trip.

Figure 25: Stuart Wiggin, with the name Stuart Thomas, referred to as a *People’s Daily* online reporter in a *China Daily* video published on 27 May 2021 (left); a video published on his YouTube channel on 12 June 2021 with no mention of any media affiliation or disclosure about the ‘A Date With China’ trip (right)



Sources: left, ‘Foreigners share impressions of Xinjiang (I)’, *China Daily*, 27 May 2021, online; right, The China Traveller, ‘XINJIANG VLOG6 - Finding Friends and White Jade in HOTAN / 新疆VLOG6 和田捡到玉 发财了!’, *YouTube*, 12 June 2021, online.

To date, social media companies largely don’t have clear policies on content from vloggers who aren’t employed by state media full time but whose content may be facilitated in part by party-state media, such as through sponsored trips. YouTube does require content creators to inform the company about ‘paid product placements, endorsements, sponsorships’, for example.¹⁶⁸ However, it also says ‘Different jurisdictions have various requirements for creators and brands involved in paid promotion’. The same issue exists for vloggers and influencers globally, and, in some cases, local laws require the disclosure of advertising partnerships.

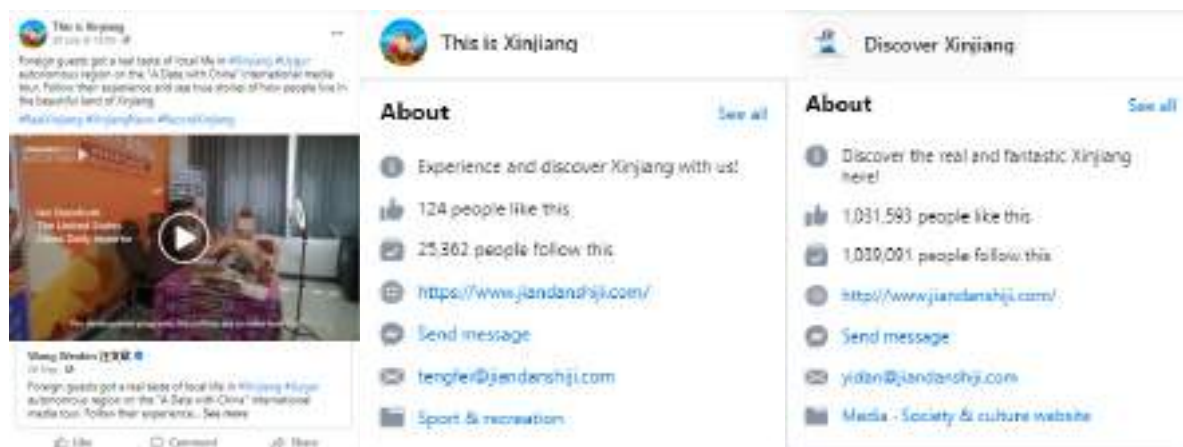
The state media labels applied by Twitter, Instagram and YouTube have also been criticised for failing to distinguish between state media outlets and how they’re owned and operated, even if they receive some level of state funding or are under a level of state control.¹⁶⁹ In China, for example, news outlets aren’t monolithic in the type of reporting they do. YouTube, in particular, has stated that it makes no

distinction between the editorial policies of state-funded media.¹⁷⁰ YouTube says that its labels are based on information about the news publisher made available by Wikipedia and other independent third-party sources: ‘It is not a comment by YouTube on the publisher’s or video’s editorial direction, or on a government’s editorial influence.’¹⁷¹ Another issue is that, as other reports have noted, state media labels aren’t included in search results or YouTube’s recommendation panel.¹⁷²

The issue of providing contextual labels to state-affiliated accounts also fails to capture accounts that may be operated by independent organisations that share state media or government propaganda and messages. One example is the Facebook page titled ‘This is Xinjiang’,¹⁷³ which has promoted ‘A Date with China’ content and other Chinese state media or MOFA posts. The description of its Facebook pages appears to show that the page is run by a company called Beijing Jiandanshiji Culture Media Co. Ltd (北京简单世纪文化传媒有限公司) based in Chaoyang District, Beijing.¹⁷⁴ A contact email address with the ‘jiandanshiji.com’ domain and a link to the company’s website is provided in the ‘About’ section. On its website, Beijing Jiandanshiji Culture Media Co. Ltd says that it was first established in June 2021, but it’s had a social media presence since at least April 2020.

The ‘Discover Xinjiang’ Facebook page¹⁷⁵ also appears to be associated with this company, alongside Twitter accounts Tianshan Fairyland,¹⁷⁶ Discover Xinjiang¹⁷⁷ and possibly another blank Facebook page named Tianshan Fairyland (Figure 26).¹⁷⁸

Figure 26: Screenshots of promotions of ‘A Date with China’ content and Facebook page ‘About’ sections



Sources: left, ‘This is Xinjiang’, Facebook, 19 July 2021, online; middle, This is Xinjiang, ‘Amazing Xinjiang’, Facebook, online; right, ‘Discover Xinjiang’, Facebook, online.

On Twitter, the ‘Discover Xinjiang’ account has a ‘China state-affiliated media’ label. A Google cached version of the ‘Discover Xinjiang’ pages shows that the operators of the account removed a link to the company’s website some time between 17 and 22 July 2021 and after it received the state-affiliated label (Figure 27). The current Google cache of this account has now been updated with the link removed. However, searching ‘dxinjiang jiandanshiji.com’ returns one search result of a previously cached version of the account with the link still in its bio.

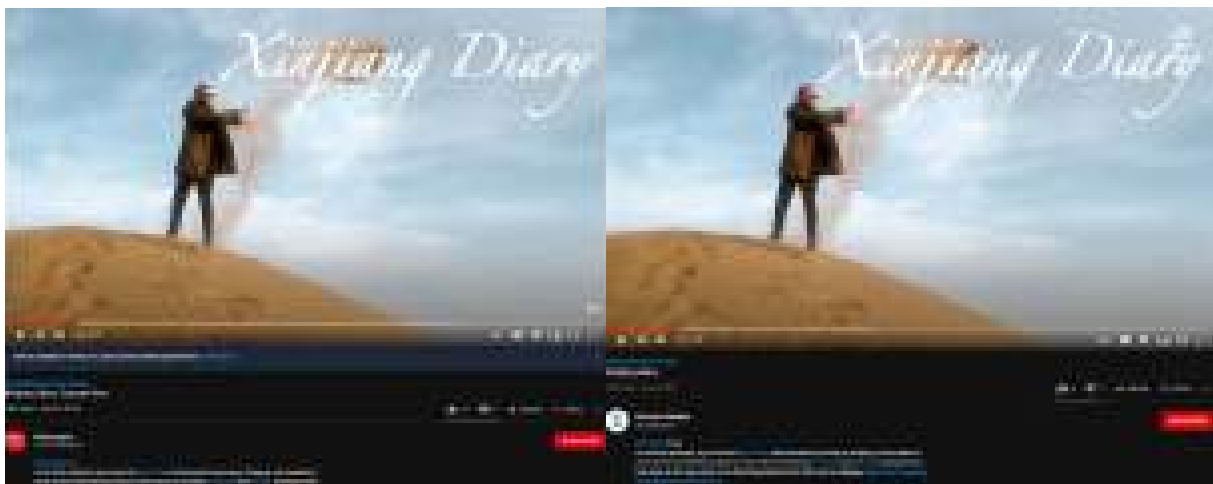
Figure 27: Screenshots of Discover Xinjiang Twitter profiles taken on 23 July 2021 (left) and 17 July 2021 (right)



Source: Discover Xinjiang, Google cache, online.

On YouTube, the 'Discover Xinjiang' account posts similar videos published by Chinese state media videos but uses its own watermark. It's unclear whether these videos were originally created by state media then shared with the 'Discover Xinjiang' operators or vice versa. One video published by China Internet Information Center's China.org.cn account titled 'Xinjiang Diary' follows Jay, a foreigner who explores Xinjiang. This video has a label disclosing ownership or funding by the Chinese Government. The exact same video, however, was published by Discover China's YouTube account, which has no clear affiliation to Chinese state media in its description on its account or on the video (Figure 28).

Figure 28: YouTube videos of Xinjiang Diary from *China.org.cn* (left) and Discover Xinjiang (right)

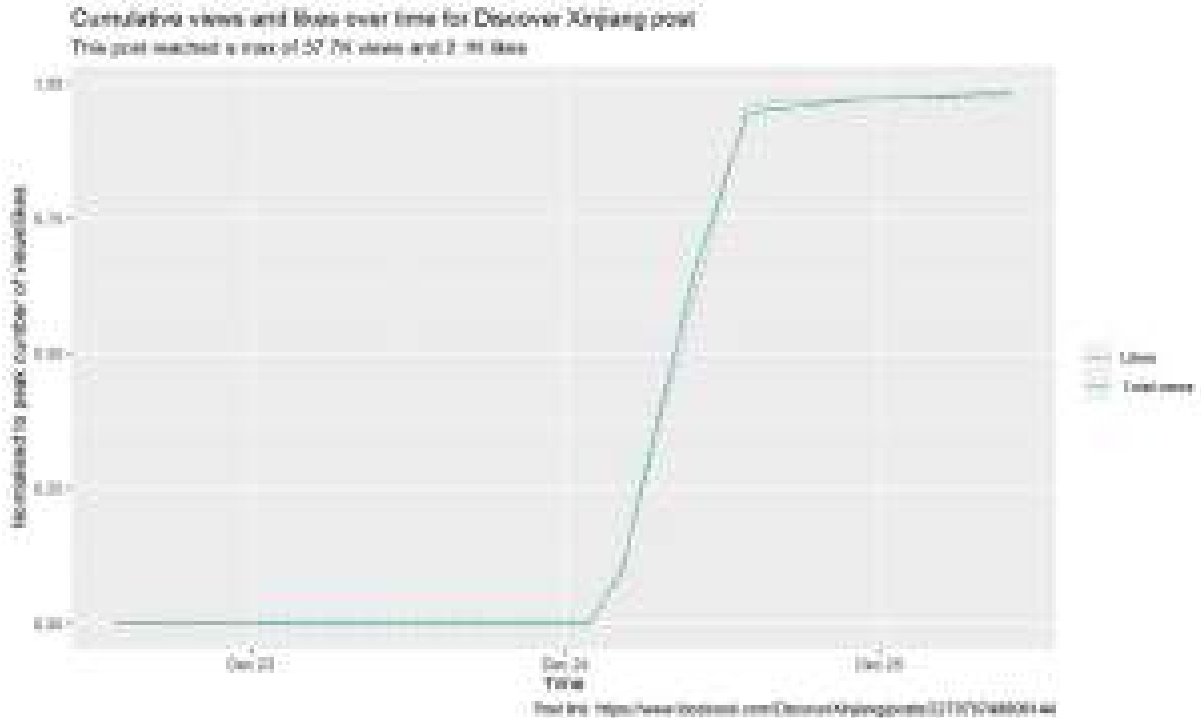


Source: left, China.org.cn, 'Xinjiang Diary: Episode One', Facebook, 22 December 2020, online; right, Discover Xinjiang, 'Xinjiang Diary', Facebook, 4 January 2021, online.

There’s also some evidence that the Facebook pages of Discover Xinjiang may have been inauthentically amplified and breached Facebook’s community standards.¹⁷⁹ According to CrowdTangle, a Facebook post by Discover Xinjiang sharing episode 2 of the ‘Xinjiang Diary’ featuring a foreigner, Jay, received more than 37,000 views and 2,100 likes but only 14 shares and zero comments (Figure 29).¹⁸⁰ Jay doesn’t appear to be affiliated with the other foreign influencers we have identified in this report or with the ‘A Date with China’ tour. Over a period of eight hours, this post accrued more than 24,700 thousand likes, which is equivalent to roughly one view per second. The number of views increased steadily over time, suggesting automation rather than organic engagement, which is generally more varied.

In addition, normalising the number of views and likes to the total likes/views that the post received showed that the rate of which the post received likes matched very closely with the rate at which the post received views. Our analysis finds that, for every 20 views, the post received on average one like, and that behaviour occurred for at least eight hours continuously. Similar potential coordinated behaviour was also observed on other Discover Xinjiang posts, including a post featuring episode 1 of the Xinjiang Diary.¹⁸¹

Figure 29: Views and likes over time for Discover Xinjiang post since publication on 22 December 2020



Source: CrowdTangle, ‘Discover Xinjiang’, Facebook, 22 December 2020, online.



Conclusion

China has long been among the most restrictive countries for journalists to operate in, and Tibet and Xinjiang are particularly difficult reporting environments. For years, foreign journalists have faced surveillance, physical abuse, restrictive visa procedures and harassment of sources and news assistants.¹⁸² Harassment of journalists in China in 2020 was particularly intense in Xinjiang, according to the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China.¹⁸³ Correspondents were 'visibly followed by police or state security agents, asked to delete data from their devices, and prevented from talking to people'.

Rather than allowing critical reporting in Xinjiang, China has at times used orchestrated tours of the region to counteract the growing body of witness accounts, satellite imagery, official government documents and policies, general scholarship and local media reports that have contributed to a growing understanding of the human rights abuses taking place there. The addition of online foreign social media influencers into government-organised tours that have traditionally been made up of party-state media, amenable diplomats and friendly foreign journalists reflects a willingness among Chinese officials to innovate in the CCP's external communication strategy. Likewise, the amplification of influencer content about Xinjiang on social media by party-state media and diplomatic accounts is used as part of campaigns to distract from and obfuscate allegations of human rights abuses in Xinjiang, while reframing the discussion of issues about which the CCP is particularly sensitive.

Leveraging the global reach of US social media networks is a central part of this international communication strategy. Our research has shown how the Chinese Government and party-state media are using US social media networks to seek to create greater ambiguity about the situation in Xinjiang, push a counter-narrative and amplify disinformation.¹⁸⁴ This is occurring in an online environment in which state accounts are often inconsistently labelled, or not labelled at all. US social media platforms must better craft and better implement policies to identify accounts with state links or content that has been directly facilitated by states, and those policies should apply globally. As some of them have with Covid-19 and vaccine information, platforms could explore the introduction of specific policies about misleading information regarding human rights abuses.¹⁸⁵ Such policies could include enforcement measures against violations similar to those that Twitter has implemented for sharing false or misleading information about Covid-19.¹⁸⁶

The use of foreign influencers also creates a degree of plausible deniability for the CCP's international-facing propaganda—a strategy adopted in the knowledge that foreign voices are more likely than official CCP spokespeople to penetrate and relate to target overseas populations. At the same time, the ability of foreign governments to conduct legitimate online public diplomacy within China—such as posting on Weibo—is being curtailed and at times censored.¹⁸⁷ In combination, this creates a potent one-way vehicle for the extraterritorial projection of the CCP's political power.

Notes

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Acronyms and abbreviations

CAC	Cyberspace Administration of China
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CEO	chief executive officer
ICPC	International Cyber Policy Centre
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (China)
NGO	non-government organisation
UK	United Kingdom
VPN	virtual private network



