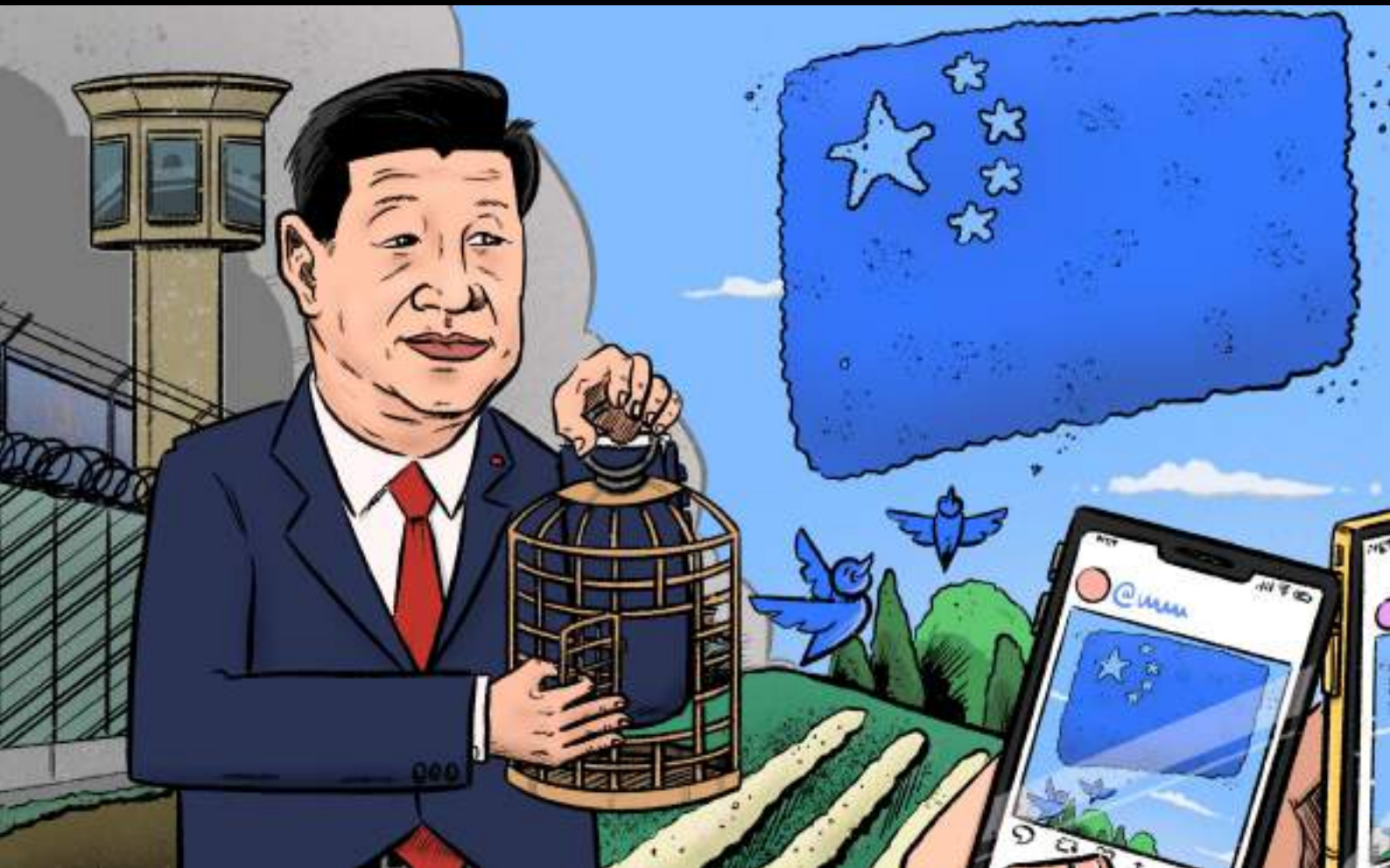


#StopXinjiang Rumors

The CCP's decentralised disinformation campaign

Fergus Ryan, Ariel Bogle, Albert Zhang and Dr Jacob Wallis



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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the team at Twitter for advanced access to the two data sets analysed in this report, Fergus Hanson and Michael Shoebridge for review comments, and [AddAxis](#) for assistance applying AI in the analysis.

ASPI's International Cyber Policy Centre receives funding from a variety of sources, including sponsorship, research and project support from governments, industry and civil society. No specific funding was received to fund the production of this report.

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First published December 2021. ISSN 2209-9689 (online). ISSN 2209-9670 (print).

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Policy Brief
Report No. 54/2021



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Introduction

This report analyses two Chinese state-linked networks seeking to influence discourse about Xinjiang across platforms including Twitter and YouTube. This activity targeted the Chinese-speaking diaspora as well as international audiences, sharing content in a variety of languages.

Both networks attempted to shape international perceptions about Xinjiang, among other themes. Despite evidence to the contrary, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) denies committing human rights abuses in the region and has mounted multifaceted and multiplatform information campaigns to deny accusations of [forced labour](#), [mass detention](#), [surveillance](#), [sterilisation](#), [cultural erasure](#) and alleged [genocide](#) in the region. Those efforts have included using Western social media platforms to both [push back against](#) and [undermine](#) media reports, research and Uyghurs' testimony about Xinjiang, as well as to promote alternative narratives.

In the datasets we examined, inauthentic and potentially automated accounts using a variety of image and video content shared content aimed at rebutting the evidence of human rights violations against the Uyghur population. Likewise, content was shared using fake Uyghur accounts and other shell accounts promoting video 'testimonials' from Uyghurs talking about their happy lives in China.

Our analysis includes two datasets removed by Twitter:

- Dataset 1: 'Xinjiang Online' (CNHU) consisted of 2,046 accounts and 31,269 tweets.
- Dataset 2: 'Changyu Culture' (CNCC) consisted of 112 accounts and 35,924 tweets.

The networks showed indications of being linked by theme and tactics; however, neither achieved significant organic engagement on Twitter overall—although there was notable interaction with the accounts of CCP diplomats. There were signs of old accounts being repurposed, whether purchased or stolen, and little attempt to craft authentic personas.

Twitter has attributed both datasets to the Chinese government, the latter dataset is specifically linked to a company called Changyu Culture, which is connected to the Xinjiang provincial government. This attribution was uncovered by ASPI ICPC in the report [Strange bedfellows on Xinjiang: the CCP, fringe media and US social media platforms](#).



Key takeaways

- Different strands of CCP online and offline information operations now interweave to create an increasingly coordinated propaganda ecosystem made up of CCP officials, state and regional media assets, outsourced influence-for-hire operators, social media influencers and covert information operations.
- The involvement of the CCP's regional government in Xinjiang in international-facing disinformation suggests that internal party incentive structures are driving devolved strands of information operations activity.
- The CCP deploys online disinformation campaigns to distract from international criticisms of its policies and to attempt to reframe concepts such as human rights. It aligns the timing of those campaigns to take advantage of moments of strategic opportunity in the information domain.

Notable features of these datasets include:

- *Flooding the zone*: While the networks didn't attract significant organic engagement, the volume of material shared could potentially aim to 'bury' critical content on platforms such as YouTube.
- *Multiple languages*: There was use of English and other non-Chinese languages to target audiences in other countries, beyond the Chinese diaspora.
- *Promotion of 'testimonials' from Uyghurs*: Both datasets, but particularly CNCC, shared video of Uyghurs discussing their 'happy' lives in Xinjiang and rebutting allegations of human rights abuses. Some of those videos have been linked to a production company connected to the Xinjiang provincial government.
- *Promotion of Western social media influencer content*: The CNHU network retweeted and shared content from social media influencers that favoured CCP narratives on Xinjiang, including interviews between influencers and state media journalists.
- *Interaction between network accounts and the accounts of CCP officials*: While the networks didn't attract much organic engagement overall, there were some notable interactions with diplomats and state officials. For example, 48% of all retweets by the CNHU network were of CCP state media and diplomatic accounts.
- *Cross-platform activity*: Both networks shared video from YouTube and Douyin (the Chinese mainland version of TikTok), including tourism content about Xinjiang, as well as links to state media articles.
- *Self-referential content creation*: The networks promoted state media articles, tweets and other content featuring material created as part of influence operations, including Uyghur 'testimonial' videos. Similarly, tweets and content featuring foreign journalists and officials discussing Xinjiang were promoted as 'organic', but in some cases were likely to have been created as part of curated state-backed tours of the region.

- *Repurposed spam accounts:* Accounts in the CNCC dataset tweeted about Korean television dramas as well as sharing spam and porn material before tweeting Xinjiang content.
- *Potential use of automation:* Accounts in both datasets showed signs of automation, including coordinated posting activity, the use of four letter codes (in the CNHU dataset) and misused hashtag symbols (in the CNCC dataset).
- *Persistent account building:* ASPI ICPC independently identified additional accounts on Twitter and YouTube that exhibited similar behaviours to those in the two datasets, suggesting that accounts continue to be built across platforms as others are suspended.



The Chinese party-state and influence campaigns

The Chinese party-state continues to experiment with approaches to shape online political discourse, particularly on those topics that have the potential to disrupt its strategic objectives. International criticism of systematic abuses of human rights in the Xinjiang region is a topic about which the CCP is acutely sensitive.

In the first half of 2020, ASPI ICPC analysis of large-scale [information operations linked to the Chinese state](#) found a shift of focus towards US domestic issues, including the Black Lives Matter movement and the death of George Floyd (predominantly targeting Chinese-language audiences). This was the first marker of a shift in tactics since Twitter's [initial attribution](#) of on-platform information operations to the Chinese state in 2019. The party-state's online information operations were moving on from predominantly internal concerns and transitioning to assert the perception of moral equivalence between the CCP's domestic policies in Xinjiang and human rights issues in democratic states, particularly the US. We see that effort to reframe international debate about human rights continuing in these most recent datasets. This shift also highlighted that CCP information operations deployed on US social media platforms could be increasingly entrepreneurial and agile in shifting focus to take advantage of strategic opportunities in the information domain.

The previous datasets that Twitter has released publicly through its [information operations archive](#) focused on a range of topics of broad interest to the CCP: the Hong Kong protests; the Taiwanese presidential election; the party-state's Covid-19 recovery and vaccine diplomacy; and exiled Chinese businessman Guo Wengui and his relationship with former Trump White House chief strategist Steve Bannon. The datasets that we examine in this report are more specifically focused on the situation in Xinjiang and on attempts to showcase health and economic benefits of CCP policies to the Uyghur population and other minority groups in the region while overlooking and denying evidence of mass abuse. In both datasets, the emblematic #StopXinjiangRumors hashtag features prominently.

Traits in the data suggest that this operation may have been run at a more local level, including:

- the amplification of regional news media, as well as Chinese state media outlets
- the involvement of the Xinjiang-based company Changyu Culture and its relationship with the provincial government, which ASPI previously identified in [Strange bedfellows on Xinjiang: the CCP, fringe media and US social media platforms](#) by linking social media channels to the company, and the company to a Xinjiang regional government contract
- an ongoing attempt to communicate through the appropriation of Uyghur voices
- the use of ready-made porn and Korean soap opera fan account networks on Twitter that were likely to have been compromised, purchased or otherwise acquired, and then repurposed.

The CCP is a [complex system](#), and directives from its elite set the direction for the party organs and underlings to follow. Propaganda serves to mobilise and steer elements within the party structure, as well as to calibrate the tone of domestic and international messaging. The party's own incentive structures may be a factor that helps us understand the potential regional origins of the propaganda effort that we analyse in this report, and have identified [previously](#). The China Media Project [notes](#), for example, that local party officials are assessed on the basis of their contribution to this international communication work. It's a contribution to building Beijing's '[discourse power](#)' as well as showing obedience to Xi Jinping's directions.

The data displays features of the online ecosystem that the party has been building to expand its international influence. The networks that we analysed engaged consistently with Chinese state media as well as with a number of stalwart pro-CCP influencers. One strand of activity within the data continues attempts to discredit the *BBC* that [ASPI](#) and [Recorded Future](#) have previously reported on, but the real focus of this campaign is an effort to reframe political discourse about the concept of human rights in Xinjiang.

The CNHU dataset, in particular, offers a series of rebuttals to international critiques of CCP policy in Xinjiang. As we've noted, the network was active on issues related to health, such as life expectancy and population growth. CCP policies in the region are framed as counterterrorism responses as a way of attempting to legitimise actions, while negative information and testimonies of abuse are simply denied or not reported. The accounts also seek to promote benefits from CCP policies in Xinjiang, such as offering education and vocational training. The *BBC* and former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo—the former having published reports about human rights abuses in the region, and the latter having criticised the party's policies in the region—feature in the data in negative terms. This external focus on the *BBC* and Pompeo serves to reframe online discussion of Xinjiang and distract from the evidence of systematic abuse. For the CCP, both entities are sources of external threat, against which the party must mobilise.



Methodology

This analysis uses a quantitative analysis of Twitter data as well as qualitative analysis of tweet content. In addition, it examines independently identified accounts and content on Twitter, YouTube and Douyin, among other platforms, that appear likely to be related to the network.

Both datasets include video media. That content was processed using [SightGraph from AddAxis](#). SightGraph is a suite of artificial-intelligence and machine-learning capabilities for analysing inauthentic networks that disseminate disinformation. For this project, we used SightGraph to extract and autotranslate multilingual transcripts from video content. This facilitated extended phases of machine-learning-driven analysis to draw out ranked, meaningful linguistic data.

Likewise, images were processed using Yale Digital Humanities Laboratory's [PixPlot](#). PixPlot visualises a large image collection within an interactive WebGL scene. Each image was processed with an Inception convolutional neural network, trained on ImageNet 2012, and projected into a two-dimensional manifold with the UMAP algorithm such that similar images appear proximate to one another. The combination of image and video analysis provided an overview of the narrative themes emerging from the media content related to the two Twitter datasets.

Twitter has identified the two datasets for quantitative analysis as being interlinked and associated via a combination of technical and behavioural signals. ICPC doesn't have direct access to that non-public technical data. Twitter hasn't released the methodology by which this dataset was selected, and the dataset may not represent a complete picture of Chinese state-linked information operations on Twitter.

The Twitter takedown data

This report analyses the content summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Twitter dataset summaries

	Dataset 1: CNHU	Dataset 2: CNCC
Accounts	2,046	112
Accounts with at least one tweet in dataset	88%	93%
Tweets	31,269	35,924
% of retweets	9%	14%
% of tweets with links	35%	20%
% of tweets with media	41%	12%
% of tweets with hashtags	43%	23%
Images	12,400	1,640
Videos	422	734

In both datasets, most of the tweeting activity seeking to deny human rights abuses in Xinjiang appears to have started around 2020. In the CNHU dataset, accounts appear to have been created for the purpose of disseminating Xinjiang-related material and began tweeting in April 2019 before ramping up activity in January 2021. That spike in activity aligns with the coordinated targeting of efforts to discredit the *BBC* that [ASPI has previously identified](#). While some accounts in the CNCC dataset may have originally had a commercial utility, they were probably repurposed some time before 19 June 2020 (the date of the first tweet mentioning Xinjiang and Uyghurs in the dataset) and shifted to posting Xinjiang-related content. Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [gave his attention-grabbing anti-CCP speech](#) in July 2020, and criticism of him features significantly in both datasets.

Previous [ASPI analysis](#) identified Twitter spambot network activity in December 2019 to amplify articles published by the CCP's *People's Daily* tabloid, the *Global Times* (figures 1 and 2). The articles that were boosted denied the repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang and attacked the credibility of individuals such as Mike Pompeo and media organisations such as the *New York Times*. It isn't clear whether that network was connected to the CNHU and CNCC datasets, but similar behaviours were identified.



Figure 1: Tweets per month, coloured by tweet language, in CNHU dataset

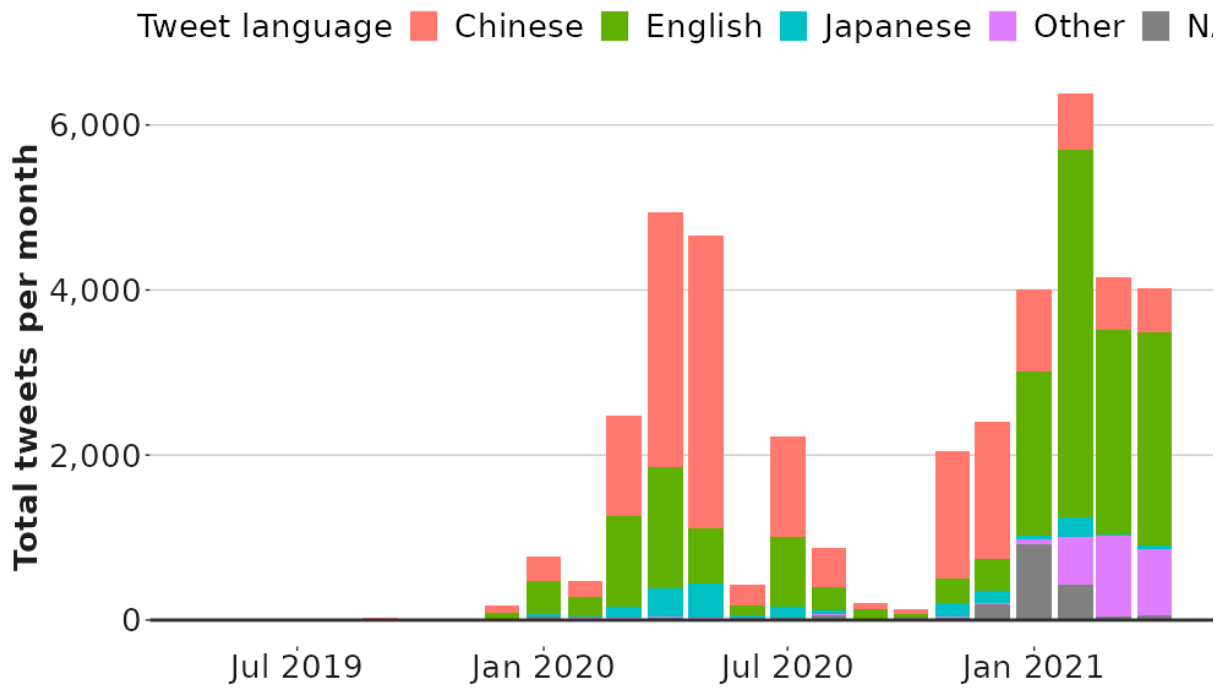
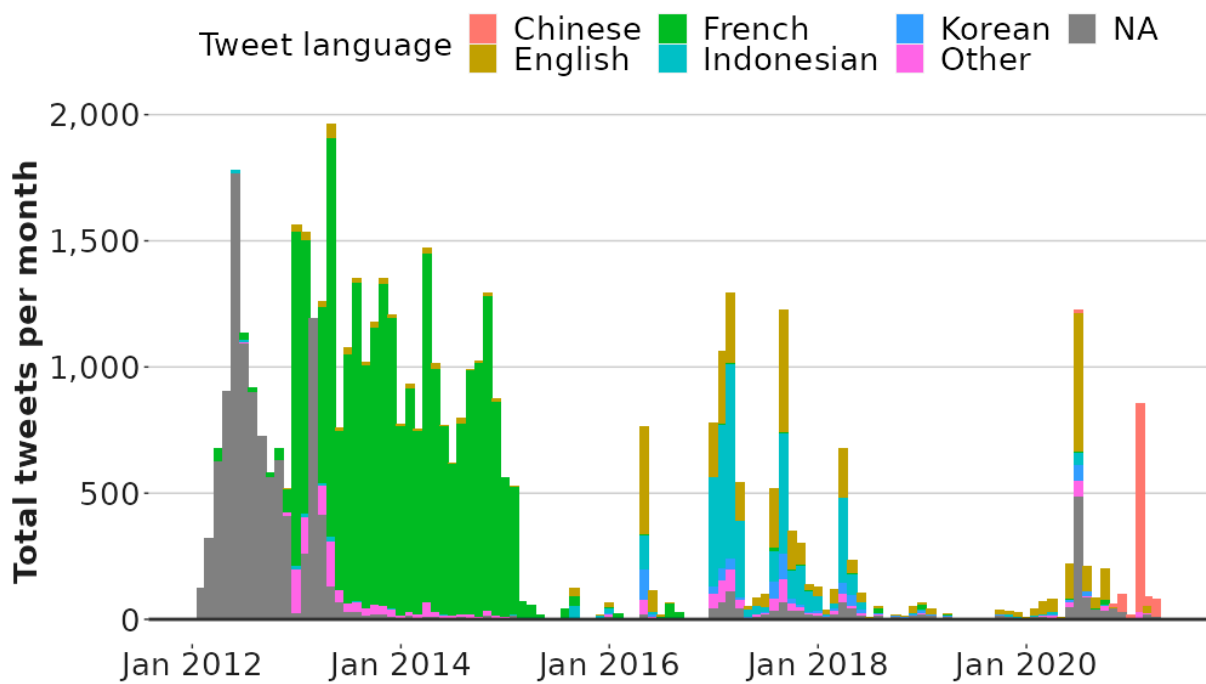
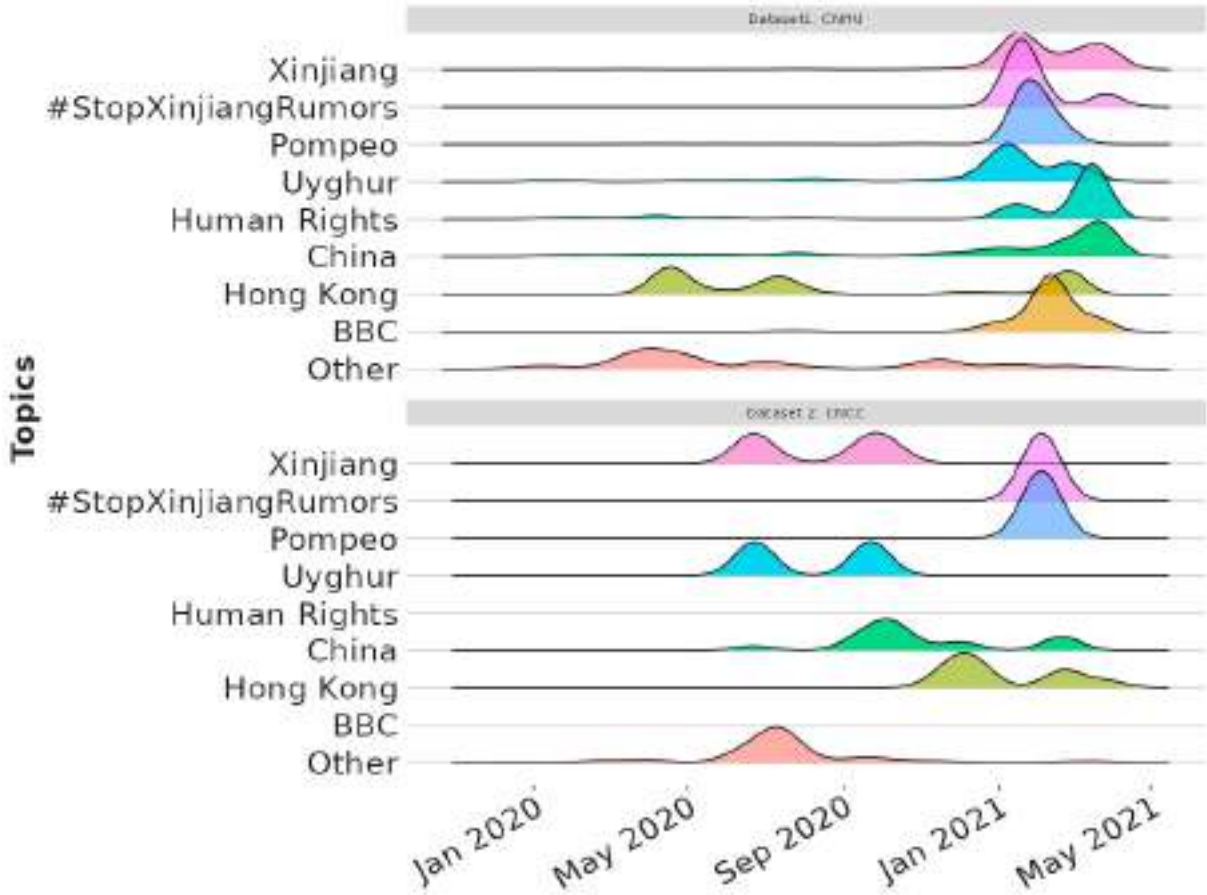


Figure 2: Tweets per month, coloured by tweet language, in CNCC dataset



An overview of the tweet text in both datasets shows that topics such as ‘Xinjiang’, ‘BBC’, ‘Pompeo’ and ‘Uyghur’ were common to both campaigns (Figure 3). While there were some tweets mentioning ‘Hong Kong’, specifically about the Covid-19 response in that region, this report focuses on content targeting Xinjiang-related issues.

Figure 3: Topic summary of tweet text posted between December 2019 and May 2021



In early 2021, the #StopXinjiangRumors hashtag was boosted by both networks. Accounts in the CNHU dataset were the first to use the hashtag, and many accounts potentially mistakenly used double hashtags (‘##StopXinjiangRumors’). Accounts in the CNCC dataset that were batch created in February 2021 appear to have posted tweets using the hashtag and tagged ‘Pompeo’ following the tweets posted by accounts in the CNHU dataset. The use of the hashtags may be coincidental, but the similarity of timing and narratives suggests some degree of coordination. #StopXinjiangRumors continues to be a hashtag on Twitter (as well as YouTube and Facebook).

The rest of this report presents the key insights from the two datasets in detail.



Dataset 1: CNHU

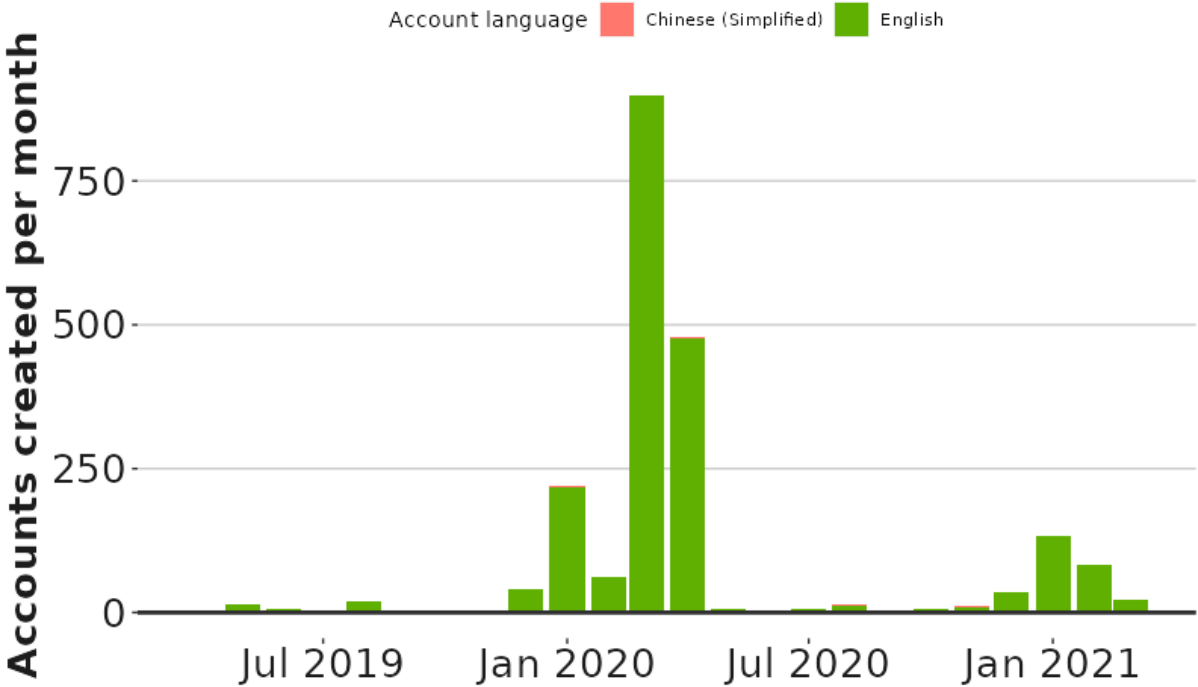
Key points

- Nearly one in every two tweets (41%) contained either an image or a video. There were in total 12,400 images and 466 videos in the CNHU dataset.
- This video and image content was aimed broadly at pushing back against allegations of human rights abuses in Xinjiang, particularly by presenting video footage of ‘happy’ Uyghurs participating in vocational training in Xinjiang, as well as screenshots of state media and government events promoting this content.
- The network promoted phrases commonly used in CCP propaganda about Xinjiang, such as ‘Xinjiang is a wonderful land’ (新疆是个好地方)—the eighth most retweeted hashtag in the CNHU dataset.
- In total, 48% (1,308) of all retweets by the network were of CCP state media and diplomatic accounts. The Global Times News account was the most retweeted (287), followed by the account of Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) spokesperson Hua Chunying (华春莹) (108).
- While the network shared links to state media, YouTube and Facebook, many videos shared in the CNHU dataset appeared to have originated from Douyin.
- The network worked to promote state media. Of all the tweets, 35% had links to external websites—mostly to Chinese state media outlets such as the *China Daily*, the China Global Television Network (CGTN) and the *Global Times*.
- The network showed potential indicators of automation, including coordinated posting, the appearance of randomised four-letter digit codes in some tweets, and watermarked images.
- The network tweeted and shared content in a variety of languages, including using Arabic and French hashtags, suggesting that it was targeting a broad audience.

Account creation

Most accounts in the network were created in 2020, and there was evidence of bulk account creation. On 11 March, 12 March and 31 March 2020, for example, 193, 433 and 249 accounts were created, respectively (Figure 4). Only four accounts had the account language set to simplified Chinese, as is used in mainland China. The rest (2,042 accounts) had their account language set to English.

Figure 4: CNHU account creation dates



Overall, there appears to be little attempt at authentic persona creation by accounts in the network. In the dataset, no users had a self-reported location, and only 26 accounts had profile descriptions. Three hundred and seventy-seven users had user display names with largely Chinese characters, and at least 847 users had user display names with whole or partial Western names with an uppercase first letter, such as ‘Anna’, ‘Vincent’ or ‘Jonathan’.

Engagement

Overall, the network had low engagement: of all the accounts, 97% had fewer than five followers, and 73% of accounts had zero followers. Likewise, 98% of tweets had both zero likes and zero retweets.

However, accounts that had tweets with the most likes in this dataset were boosted by CCP diplomats. The verified account of Cao Yi (曹毅), a CCP diplomat posted in Lebanon, [posted a tweet](#) on 17 January 2021 recommending that users interested in Xinjiang follow a list of Twitter accounts (Figure 5). That included @fred_zona, which is an account included in the CNHU Twitter dataset. (Note that Cao Yi’s Twitter account doesn’t have a state-affiliated label). Looking for mentions of @fred_zona using the Twitter search function shows that Cao Yi boosted this account at least 10 times. According to the archives in the [Hamilton 2.0 dashboard](#), Zhang Heqing (张和清), the Cultural Counsellor at the Chinese embassy in Pakistan, also retweeted content from @fred_zona’s account.



Figure 5: Cao Yi (曹毅), a CCP diplomat posted in Lebanon, tagging @fred_zona, which is an account in dataset 1 (CNHU)



Source: [Twitter](#).

State officials recommending such accounts may aim to provide legitimacy and a wider audience for those accounts. In addition to the @fred_zona account, three of the 10 accounts [recommended by Cao Yi](#) on 17 January have since been suspended by Twitter: @XinjiangLiuXM2, @LeonaBenjamin18 and @Whitfie54169831. Those three accounts don't appear in either of the datasets we examined. However, screenshots of the accounts provide an indication of some of the personas being used to boost positive content about Xinjiang as well as engagement with those accounts by CCP officials. Overall, these accounts presented as locals from Xinjiang and were repeatedly boosted by official CCP accounts on Twitter.

Key themes and narratives

The CNHU network shared a range of content aimed broadly at pushing back against allegations and evidence of human rights abuses in Xinjiang, often in three overarching categories:

- content that aimed to *reframe the conversation* by presenting video footage of 'happy' Uyghurs participating in vocational training in Xinjiang, as well as state media and government events promoting that content
- content that aimed to *counter specific allegations* made by foreign media, researchers and governments about Xinjiang, focusing on the foreign individuals or entities, not the abuses in Xinjiang
- content created by *third parties*—including foreign diplomats, journalists and visitors—that was presented as organic but that may have been created as part of curated state-sponsored events or tours.

Thematic content

‘Peaceful and happy lives’ in Xinjiang

Content shared by the network promoted stories about Uyghurs living ‘peaceful and happy lives’. In total, more than 1,000 screenshots of *China Daily* articles on this theme were shared. For example, one screenshot was of [a China Daily article](#) about a video series depicting ‘graduates’ from what Chinese officials describe as ‘vocational education and training centres’ in the region. According to the article, at least 100 trainees were part of the video series, and it identifies the company that made the videos: ‘Damei Xinjiang’ and its founding partner, Meng Chao. [Another China Daily article](#) screenshot, potentially about the same video series, was framed instead as a story about how China’s counterterrorism measures ‘protect human rights’ in Xinjiang (Figure 6). The network also shared imagery depicting people from the Xinjiang region dancing and in traditional dress.

Figure 6: Two tweets in the CNHU dataset



‘Testimonials’ and Xinjiang press conferences

Video ‘testimonials’ from Uyghurs talking about their happy lives in China were a key feature of [more than 55 press conferences](#) on ‘Xinjiang-related matters’ that have been held in Ürümqi and Beijing since 3 January 2020. This suggests that this style of content is seen as integral to challenging critical narratives about the treatment of people in the region. The press conferences, which are organised by the Information Office of the People’s Government of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (新疆维吾尔自治区人民政府新闻办公室), regularly feature Uyghurs who talk about their happy lives, as well as senior officials such as Chen Quanguo (陈全国), who is the CCP chief of Xinjiang, and Xu Guixiang (徐贵相), who is the deputy director of the Xinjiang Propaganda Department (Figure 7).

Figure 7: A video testimonial playing at a press conference



Source: ChinaXinjiang.cn.

Senior CCP officials such as Chen and Xu have made frequent use of the press conferences as a platform to push back on any scrutiny from foreign governments or media about the human rights situation in Xinjiang. At [one such press conference](#) on 10 February 2021, Xu Guixiang took aim at the *BBC* for what he called ‘falsifying and deliberately creating troubles on Xinjiang-related issues’. The press conferences have also been used by the Xinjiang Propaganda Department to deny [claims by overseas Uyghur advocacy groups](#) that certain individual Uyghurs are incarcerated in the region.

Similar press conferences have been held by China’s Foreign Ministry in a number of countries during 2021. On 7 April 2021, the Chinese embassy in Canberra [held a press conference](#) at which journalists were shown a series of five propaganda videos titled ‘Xinjiang is a Wonderful Land’. ‘Xinjiang is a Wonderful Land’ (新疆是个好地方) is the eighth most retweeted hashtag in the CNHU dataset and is a frequently used phrase in CCP propaganda about the region.

Promotion of state media documentary content about Xinjiang

The network promoted specific media about Xinjiang created by state media outlets, including on how the region handled the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, one image titled 'Urumqi's Battle Against the Epidemic' was shared more than 400 times. This was a screenshot from a documentary with a *CGTN* watermark, which was promoted by state media and government organisations, about how the city of Ürumqi dealt with the pandemic. Accounts promoted the documentary by linking to [CGTN's YouTube account](#) and [the outlet's website](#). Accounts also boosted [a tweet promoting the clip](#) from the Twitter account of the State Council Information Office of China at least 187 times (Figure 8).

Figure 8: China State Council Information Office tweet (left) and image shared in the CNHU dataset



Source: [@chinascio, Twitter](#).

Content countering specific allegations made by foreign media and governments about Xinjiang

The network was responsive to global developments about Xinjiang, sharing content aimed at countering news reports about human rights abuses and sanctions against CCP officials. To illustrate this trend, we've chosen a number of case studies.

Targeting of the BBC

A small amount of content targeted the BBC over its reporting on Xinjiang. An image claiming that the BBC reports on China with a 'biased lens' (with variations of the four-letter code; see 'Key tactics' on page 22) was shared at least 20 times (Figure 9). In early 2021, [ASPI ICPC identified an information campaign](#) targeting the BBC following its report on 2 February 2021 of allegations of systematic rape in Xinjiang's internment camps and the decision by Ofcom (the British broadcasting regulator) on 4 February 2021 to withdraw the UK broadcast licence of CGTN.

Figure 9: Tweet in the CNHU dataset targeting the BBC



Reacting to Xinjiang-related government sanctions

The network reacted to sanctions and action taken by foreign governments related to Xinjiang. On 22 March 2021, for example, the Canadian Government [imposed sanctions](#) against four officials and one entity 'based on their participation in gross and systematic human rights violations in the Xinjiang

Uyghur Autonomous Region’, alongside the US and the UK. On 25 March 2021, the network [tweeted links](#) to and screenshots of Tianshannet’s ‘Solemn Statement by the People’s Government of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region on Unreasonable Sanctions from the US, the UK and Canada’ (Figure 10). Tianshannet (天山网) is the official state news website in Xinjiang. Two of the top 10 most shared URLs in this dataset were articles containing statements from the Xinjiang Government and its top officials who were sanctioned by the US, Europe, the UK and Canada on 22 March 2021. Both of those articles were published in Tianshannet (see box). Similarly, screenshots and links to [a China News Service article](#), ‘China announces sanctions on British individuals, entities’, were shared 39 times on 26 March 2021.

Figure 10: Screenshot shared by the network



Solemn Statement by the People's Government of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region on Unreasonable Sanctions from the US, the UK and Canada

2021-03-25 14:27

On March 22, the US, the UK and Canada imposed unilateral sanctions on relevant individuals and entity of Xinjiang, China, citing the so-called human rights issues in Xinjiang. This brutal move, flagrantly breaches international law and basic norms governing international relations, grossly interferes in China's internal affairs, which fully expose their despicable action and malicious intention on disturbing the stability and development of Xinjiang. Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region expresses its firm opposition and strong condemnation to that!

China announces sanctions on British individuals, entities

Xinhua, March 26, 2021 0 Comment(s) Print E-mail

Adjust font size: ● ●

BEIJING, March 26 (Xinhua) -- China on Friday announced sanctions on relevant British individuals and entities, saying Britain's recent moves of imposing unilateral sanctions on relevant Chinese individuals and entity concerning so-called Xinjiang issue grossly interfered in China's internal affairs. Enditem

Tianshannet

Tianshannet (天山网) is sponsored by the Propaganda Department of the Party Committee of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (新疆维吾尔自治区党委宣传部), supervised by the Information Office of the People’s Government of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (新疆维吾尔自治区人民政府新闻办公室) and hosted by the Internet News Centre of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (新疆维吾尔自治区互联网新闻中心), [according to its website](#). It publishes Xinjiang news from various outlets in the region, such as *Xinjiang Daily* and *Xinjiang Economic News*, in Chinese, Russian, Uyghur, English, Kazakh and other languages.

The portal describes itself as a ‘key news and propaganda website’ that ‘plays an active role as the ‘gateway to Xinjiang and China’s external propaganda’. Since 3 January 2020, the Information Office of the People’s Government of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region has held a series of press conferences on ‘Xinjiang-related issues’ in Ürümqi and Beijing. Coverage of the press conferences (of which there have been 55 at the time of publication) includes articles, photos and transcripts that have been produced by Tianshannet.



Content by ‘friendly’ foreign diplomats, journalists and influencers

The network promoted social media posts and state media content that sought to highlight visits to and positive commentary about Xinjiang by foreign officials and journalists. While that content was often presented as ‘organic’, the presence of these third parties may have been facilitated by trips to Xinjiang run by state media. We’ve chosen a number of examples below to illustrate this tactic.

Content by Pakistani officials and journalists

Some accounts in the network boosted content that presented positive depictions of Xinjiang from a Pakistani perspective. The verified Twitter account of Pakistan’s ambassador to China, Moin ul Haque, was retweeted at least 30 times when [the account posted about visiting Xinjiang](#) (Figure 11).

The ambassador visited Xinjiang in March, [according to CGTN](#), and appeared a number of times on Chinese state media talking about his experience, including [as part of a roundtable](#) on Xinjiang with CGTN anchor Liu Xin, who is also tagged in the tweet.

Figure 11: Tweets retweeted by the network



Source: @PakAmbChina, [Twitter](#); @ePakistanToday, [Twitter](#).

The network also shared [an interview](#) on the *People’s Daily* website with Pakistani journalist Muhammad Asghar almost 40 times. In the interview, Asghar said he visited ‘training centres’, denying they were ‘re-education camps’:

The training centre has helped people integrate into society, making them useful citizens, offering them a promising future and better lives. What is wrong with that? The idea is marvellous, and it’s truly to the benefit of the Uyghurs.

A [China Daily article](#), describing a trip to Xinjiang organised by the state media outlet, included an image of Asghar as a participant. It’s unclear whether the comments were made as part of that trip. A [Global Times article](#) claimed that Asghar ‘visited the training centers in Xinjiang’ in January 2021.

Notably, accounts also shared articles from news outlet *Pakistan Today*, including [one that claimed](#) allegations of human rights abuses in Xinjiang were part of a ‘propaganda campaign’. Accounts also retweeted the @ePakistanToday account [when it shared](#) an article titled ‘China’s role in development of Xinjiang Muslims’.

Content by Western influencers

A range of social media influencers from countries including the UK and Australia, some of whom live in China, had their content promoted by the network. For example, [a YouTube video](#) by a British man (‘Barrie’) pushing back on *BBC* reporting about Xinjiang was among the network’s top 20 most shared URLs. Similarly, the Twitter account of a British-Australian man, Jerry Grey, was retweeted and tagged more than 40 times. A clip of his interview with *CGTN* reporter Li Jingjing, in which he discusses seeing mosques in Xinjiang, was also shared by the network (Figure 12). Likewise, the Twitter account of influencer Carl Zha, who has made content denying the existence of forced labour in Xinjiang, among other claims, was mentioned almost 60 times (Figure 13).

Figure 12: A video of Jerry Grey and CGTN reporter Li Jingjing



Figure 13: A Carl Zha tweet retweeted by the network



Key tactics

Overall, the tactics deployed by the network in the CNHU dataset attempted to support the CCP's online propaganda ecosystem by artificially amplifying the reach of CCP state media content via links, retweets and sharing of media. The CNHU network was probably seeking to direct audiences off Twitter and onto Chinese state media websites and official YouTube channels. Evidence of coordination in this dataset indicates that automation tools may have been used.

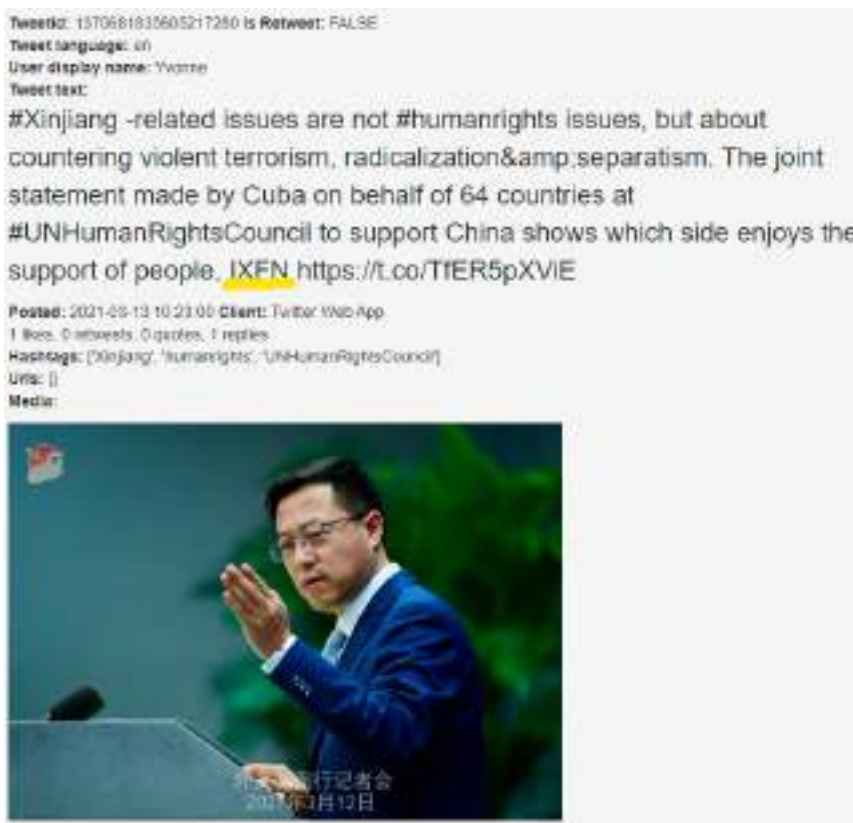
The following tactics used by the network in the CNHU dataset are discussed in this report:

- potential use of automation
- repeated sharing of images
- sharing of images with grey watermarks
- the sharing of videos, including links to YouTube or directly uploaded to Twitter
- retweeting of CCP state media, diplomats and pro-CCP influencers
- linking to CCP state media content on other platforms
- use of hashtags in multiple languages.

Potential use of automation

Prior to around January 2020, when this network began sharing Xinjiang-related content, network activity largely included tweets with aphorisms such as ‘Experience is the mother of wisdom’. They also included a variety of pictures such as anime characters and landscapes, often including a watermark (which we discuss in more detail on page 25). This could be an indication of testing automation systems or an attempt to build follower numbers. For example, around 700 tweets in the CNHU dataset ended with randomised four-letter digit codes (see Figure 14). In another example of unusual activity, more than 300 tweets tagged the account @fuck_next. This could also indicate a testing method for automation tools. The account @fuck_next is still live and shows no activity at the time of writing.

Figure 14: Tweet with randomised four-letter digit code at the end of the tweet; the link at the end of the tweet is a URL for the image displayed



Accounts that were created on the same date tended to have similar posting patterns and behaviours. For example, accounts that were created before 3 April 2020 tended to tweet on the same dates and in the same language. Days of activity that displayed indications of coordination included 14 April 2020, 26 June 2020, 30 July 2020, 20 October 2020 and 19 November 2020.

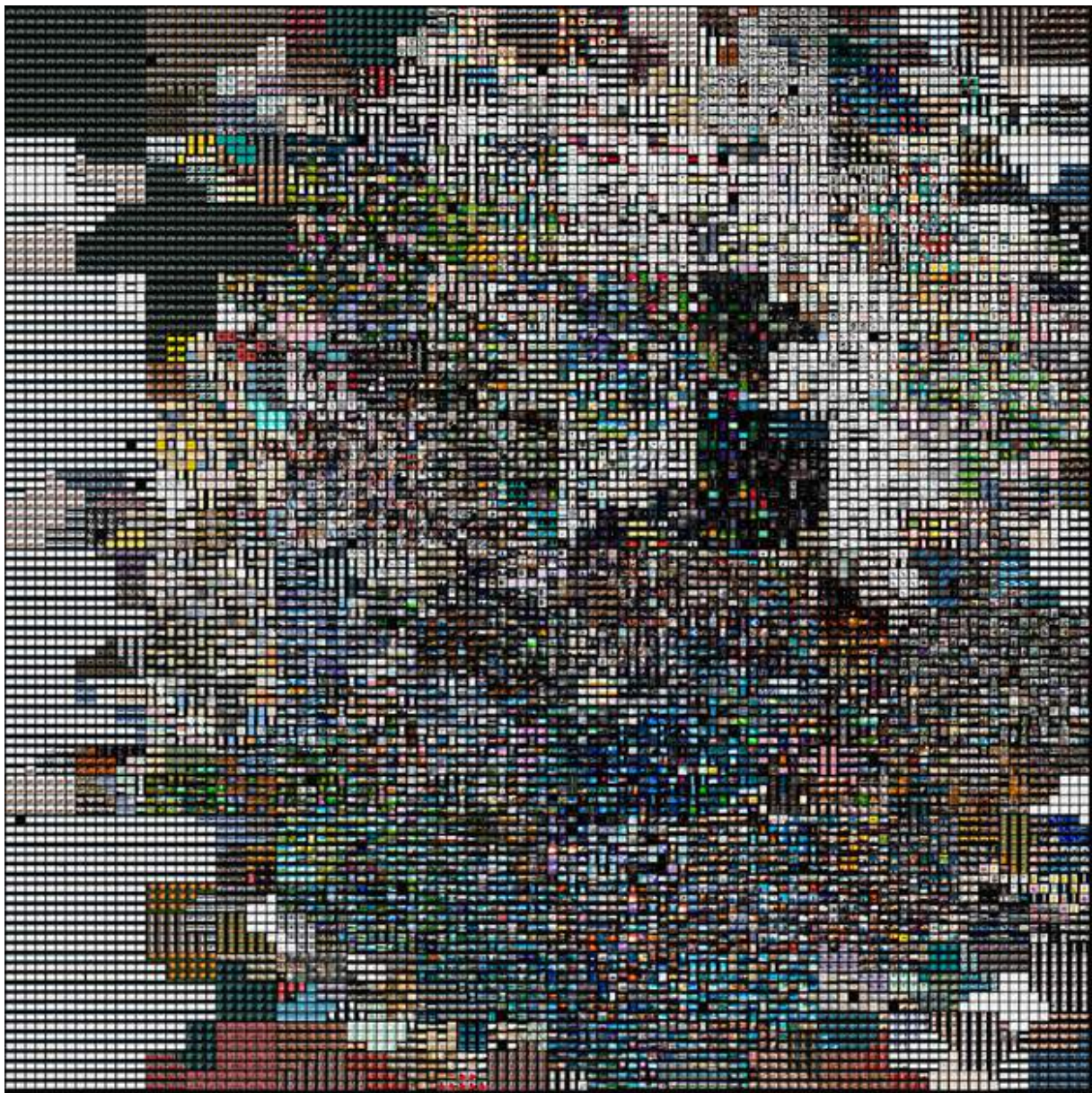
Tweets posted on those days usually had images with grey watermarks (see discussion of watermarks on page 25) or posted aphorisms in both English and simplified Chinese. These collections of tweets were usually posted in batches within hours of one another.

Coordinated image sharing

As in previous [CCP state-linked information operations](#) on Twitter, coordinated posting and reposting of images was a key tactic found in this dataset. Of all the tweets in CNHU the dataset, nearly one in two (41%) tweets contained either an image or a video, and there were in total 12,400 images and 466 videos in the dataset. Previous ASPI [analysis](#) and [academic research](#) have highlighted the necessity of analysing media content in the study of Chinese state-led propaganda (see the Appendix to this report for our novel approach to automated image analysis).

Using Yale Digital Humanities Laboratory's PixPlot, Figure 15 displays all images in the CNHU dataset, including profile pictures, profile banners and media associated with tweets.

Figure 15: All 12,400 images in the CNHU dataset, processed by PixPlot

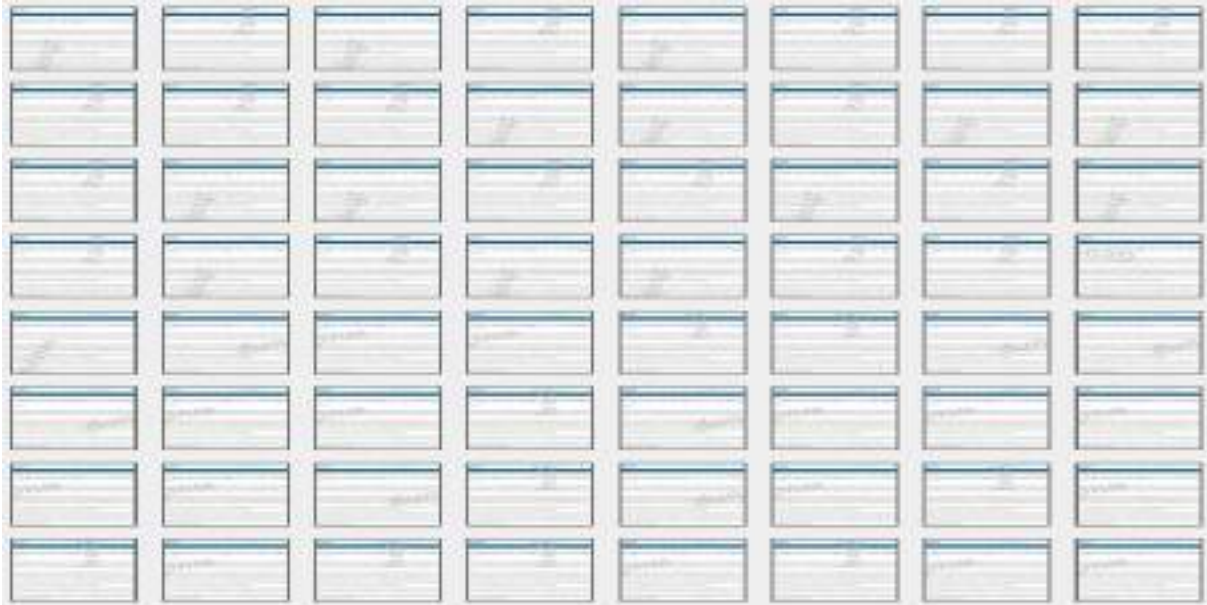


Along the left-hand side of the figure, screenshots of *China Daily* articles (white squares) and screenshots of a clip from the Twitter account of China’s State Council Information Office (green squares in top left-hand corner) can be seen. See ‘Key themes and narratives’ on page 14 for content analysis of these images.

Use of watermarks

Further investigation of repeatedly shared images revealed that those images tended to have visible grey watermarks composed of letters and numbers (Figure 16). The reason for these watermarks remains unclear, but, given that they often appeared to be the handle of the account sharing the graphic, there are a number of possibilities: the images could be watermarked by the operators of this network to aid in asset distribution; similarly, they could be potential markers of automation.

Figure 16: Screenshots of a sample of China Daily articles in the CNHU dataset; these articles were shared at least 1,046 times with different variations of watermarks



Similar watermarks were also observed in the network identified in ASPI’s [Strange bedfellows on Xinjiang report](#). Further examples of this tactic can be found in Appendix 3 of that report.

Videos

Videos weren’t as prevalent as images in the CNHU network, but some videos were repeatedly shared. For example, one video (Figure 17) featuring a blue ‘带你到新疆去’ (Take you to Xinjiang) banner and following a male supposedly travelling through Xinjiang was shared 47 times with the hashtags #Xinjiang, #新疆是个好地方 (Xinjiang is a wonderful land) and # شىنجاڭ (Xinjiang) in the CNHU dataset.



Figure 17: Video featuring a blue ‘带你到新疆去’ (Take you to Xinjiang) banner (left) and all videos in CNHU dataset (right)



Many videos shared in the CNHU dataset appeared to have originated from Douyin (the Chinese mainland version of TikTok) and have the Douyin/TikTok logo in the top left corner of the video (Figure 18). Those videos feature mostly Uyghur women and were posted with the hashtags #新疆是个好地方 (Xinjiang is a wonderful place), #新疆 (Xinjiang) and #شېنجاڭ (Xinjiang). Taking domestically produced content such as Douyin videos and disseminating it to foreign audiences is a common tactic used in CCP propaganda efforts. CCP diplomats on Twitter have previously [shared other Douyin videos](#) to achieve similar goals and to deny human rights abuses in Xinjiang.

Figure 18: Sample of Douyin videos in CNHU dataset



There were 163 videos from which AddAxis’s SightGraph could extract and autotranslate multilingual transcripts. This provided a sample of linguistic textual data that could be analysed quantitatively and provide leads for further qualitative analysis.

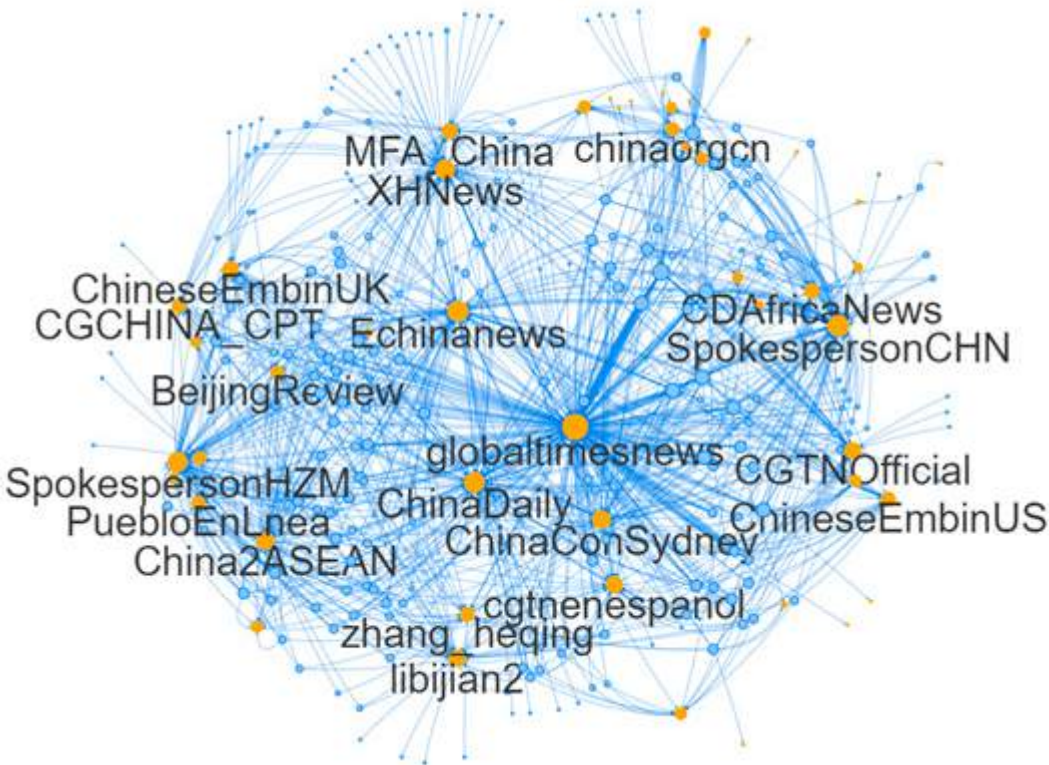
The most frequently used words and phrases in the transcripts were associated with content about Xinjiang and the CCP’s Covid-19 response. Common words included ‘Wuhan’, ‘China’ and ‘people’. Analysis was conducted on multiple combinations of words, but the most interesting phrase found was ‘they don’t appear to’, which was the most frequently used phrase composed of four words. This phrase and other phrases in the top 15 most frequent four-word phrases appeared to be extracts from an interview with Jerry Grey and CGTN reporter Li Jingjing (see page 21), suggesting that this video was frequently shared.

Since transcripts were provided for only a sample of videos in the CNHU dataset, the frequencies of translated phrases provided below don’t necessarily reflect the content distribution of all the videos. However, the figures support the hypothesis that one aspect of the network was seeking to shape perceptions of CCP policies and Uyghur livelihoods in Xinjiang.

Retweets of CCP state media and diplomats

In total, 48% (1,308) of all retweets by the network were of CCP state media and diplomatic accounts (the top 20 retweeted CCP accounts are labelled in the retweet diagram in Figure 19). The Global Times News account was the most retweeted (287), followed by the account of MOFA spokesperson Hua Chunying (华春莹) (108). The plot shows a subset of a retweet network; orange circles represent Chinese state media and diplomats, and blue circles represent accounts in the CNHU dataset. Circles are sized by the number of times the account was retweeted by another account. Accounts closer together tended to retweet the same accounts.

Figure 19: Retweet subnetwork of accounts amplifying CCP state media and diplomats’ tweets



Another two accounts, with the handles @MwebUyhn and @MpuKoy, displayed similar retweeting behaviour. Those two accounts tended to retweet Twitter personalities, YouTube influencers and writers for fringe media outlets that have published views that support the Chinese Government. The retweeted accounts include those of a variety of journalists and pundits who have shared content that aligns with the CCP’s position on Xinjiang: ChinaBazzar, Tom Fowdy, Qiao Collective, Carl Zha, Jerry Grey, Daniel Dumbriil, Ajit Singh and Benjamin Norton. In turn, the two accounts were also amplified by Chinese state diplomats (see ‘Engagement’ on page 13).

Links to Chinese state media websites and accounts

In addition to boosting CCP and state media Twitter posts, accounts in the CNHU network probably sought to direct audiences off Twitter and onto Chinese state media websites and official YouTube channels. Of all the tweets, 35% had links to external websites, mostly to Chinese state media outlets such as the *China Daily*, *CGTN* and the *Global Times* (Figure 20). YouTube was the third most shared domain in the dataset, and those links were mostly to videos posted by official Chinese state media YouTube channels.

Figure 20: Wordcloud of the domains shared by tweets in the CNHU dataset, sized in proportion to the frequency of the domain shared



Hashtags

Hashtags used by the network were in a variety of languages, indicating an attempt to target international audiences. For example, the hashtag #MonCarnetDeRouteAuXinjiang was used almost 80 times by the network. It appears to refer to a show about Xinjiang featuring journalist Olivier Grandjean, whom *CGTN* describes as ‘Special Advisor and Host, CGTN French Department’. Likewise, content was promoted in Arabic: the hashtag شينجيانغ (Xinjiang) was used 190 times. See the Appendix to this report for the top 20 most used hashtags in the CNHU dataset.

Dataset 2: CNCC

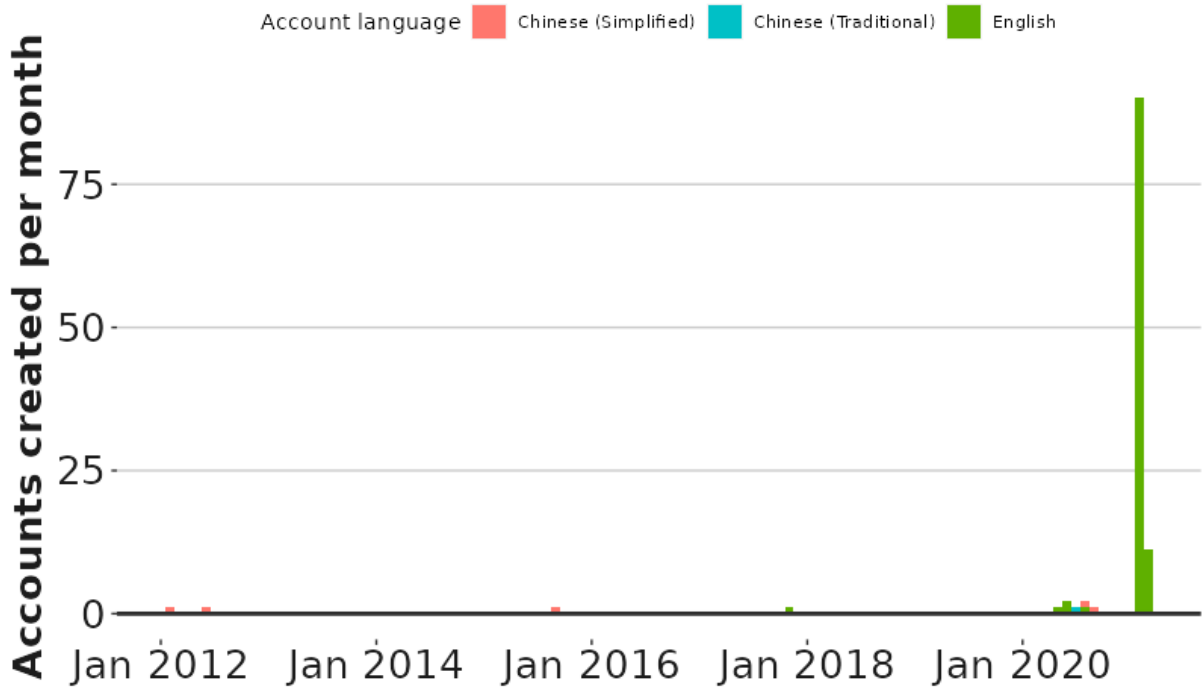
Key points

- The CNCC dataset contained a considerable amount of repurposed spam and porn accounts, as well as content linked to Korean music and television.
- While there was a small amount of content about Hong Kong and other issues, most of the non-spam content related to Xinjiang. Much of that content sought to present ‘testimonials’ from Uyghurs talking about their happy lives in China.
- Some of this content may be linked to a company called Changyu Culture, which is connected to the Xinjiang provincial government and was funded to create videos depicting Uyghurs as supportive of the Chinese Government’s policies in Xinjiang.
- The network had a particular focus on former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo: @蓬佩奥 or @‘Pompeo’ appears 438 times in the dataset. Likewise, video content shared by the network referenced Pompeo 386 times.

Account creation

Most accounts in the CNCC network were created in 2021, and there was evidence of bulk account creation in batches (Figure 21). Some accounts were created earlier than 2020, and the content of their tweets during that period suggested that they had a commercial or spamming purpose.

Figure 21: CNCC account creation dates



In general, the accounts didn't appear to attempt to create authentic personas. Only 10 of the 112 users in Twitter's dataset had any profile description, and only four users had reported locations. Likewise, 84 accounts had a username with Chinese characters, and some were repeated twice. For example, 通过后 (after passing through), 而非 (instead of) and 而奋斗 (fight for something) appear twice. For usernames in the Latin alphabet, many used seemingly random strings of letters.

The following analysis is completed with tweets before 19 June 2020 filtered out. That date was chosen as it's believed to be the starting date of the campaign: the first mention of 'Xinjiang' occurred in a retweet and a reply by the user @VisualsGallery on 19 June 2020 (Figure 22).

Figure 22: Reply by @VisualsGallery on 19 June 2020; note the use in the reply of double-byte font, which is typical of fonts used in Asia



After filtering out tweets before 19 June 2020, only 2,884 tweets (8% of the total dataset) remained, of which 1,126 (39%) were retweets. Of those tweets:

- 7% had links
- 78% had media
- 36% had hashtags.

Simplified Chinese was now the most used language, accounting for 37% of all filtered tweets, followed by English (29%).

Engagement

Compared to the CNHU dataset, the CNCC dataset received far less overall engagement (this may be due to it being a much smaller network of 112 accounts). Of all the tweets (both filtered and unfiltered) in the CNCC dataset, 83% received zero likes and zero retweets. The most engagements any tweet received was a total of 2,224 likes and retweets, but that tweet was part of a spam account distributing porn.

Except for 12 accounts, all users had zero followers. The 12 accounts with large followings (Table 2) had mostly posted spam content and had probably developed their follower bases before being repurposed to disseminate content on Xinjiang-related matters (see 'Key tactics' on page 36).

Table 2: Accounts with non-zero followers in the CNCC dataset

Account	Followers	Account	Followers
VisualsGallery	112,829	Loveflowers_0	7,684
chaoticeveel	74,572	Naturephoto17	6,232
ericaasenn	58,602	marsh_pure	6,179
Piritikumari2	11,862	dishapa65190266	5,379
QuiteBabu	8,973	seo_yea_ji	5,379
MinBoxRadio	7,902	rVLo6kArqgRx9Qx	11

Key themes and narratives

The CNCC dataset contained a considerable amount of spam and porn, as well as content linked to Korean music and television. Thirteen of the top 20 hashtags referred to Korean television shows, and in particular a drama series titled ‘It’s Okay to Not Be Okay’ (사이코지만 괜찮아). While there was a small amount of content regarding Hong Kong and other issues, most of the non-spam content related to Xinjiang. Much of it sought to present ‘testimonials’ from Uyghurs talking about their happy lives in China and about Covid-19 responses in Xinjiang.

‘Happy Uyghurs’ and the benefits of ‘vocational’ training

According to Twitter, the accounts are linked to a company called Changyu Culture, which is connected to the Xinjiang provincial government. This entity [was identified by ASPI ICPC](#) in March 2021. The Xinjiang Audio-Video Publishing House, a publishing organisation [owned](#) by a regional government bureau and connected to the CCP’s United Front Work Department, [funded](#) Changyu Culture to create videos depicting Uyghurs as supportive of the Chinese Government’s policies in Xinjiang. Those videos were then amplified on Twitter and YouTube by a network of inauthentic accounts.

At least two accounts in the CNCC dataset had ‘昶宇文化’ (Changyu Culture) as Twitter display names: @dishapa65190266 and @seo_yea_ji (Figure 23). The @dishapa65190266 account had a profile picture of Changyu Culture’s logo and a banner image that possibly shows the organisation’s office (Figure 24; see the [Strange bedfellows report](#)). Another account with the handle @seo_yea_ji at some point changed its display name to ‘昶宇文化’. That account was created on 7 September 2015, stopped posting in 2018 and then re-emerged to tweet in simplified Chinese in December 2020, sharing links to the Changyu Culture YouTube channel.

Figure 23: Tweet by @dishapa65190266 in CNCC dataset (left) and accompanying video (right)

Tweetid: 1308293977808936960 **Is Retweet:** FALSE
Tweet language: en
User display name: 昶宇文化 (Changyu Culture)
Tweet text:
We noticed that many western countries have accused China of oppressing #Uyghurs Uyghurs and other Muslims in Xinjiang,so we've been to Xinjiang and recored some Uyghurs.A series of videos will be released for truth.#UYGHURLIVESMATTER
<https://t.co/DnlgKKhkKa>
Posted: 2020-09-22 06:36:00 **Client:** Twitter Web App
1 likes, 0 retweets, 1 quotes, 0 replies
Hashtags: ['Uyghurs', 'UYGHURLIVESMATTER']
Urls: []
Media:



Figure 24: Screenshot of Changyu Culture Twitter account before it was removed by Twitter



The videos from the original ‘昶宇文化’ Changyu Culture YouTube channel (now removed) were produced with subtitles in different languages to target international audiences. They also often have high subscriber-to-views ratios, which suggests but doesn’t confirm inauthentic audience activity. Typically, global YouTube channels have many more views than subscribers, since only a small proportion of viewers subsequently subscribe to the channel. The [الجميلة شينجيانغ](#) (Beautiful Xinjiang) YouTube channel, for example, has videos found on the original ‘昶宇文化’ Changyu Culture YouTube channel but with Arabic subtitles (Figure 25), while another YouTube channel, ‘[Güzel Sincan](#)’ (Beautiful Xinjiang) has those videos with Turkish titles and subtitles (Figure 26).

Figure 25: 'القناة الجميلة' (Beautiful Xinjiang) Arabic YouTube channel

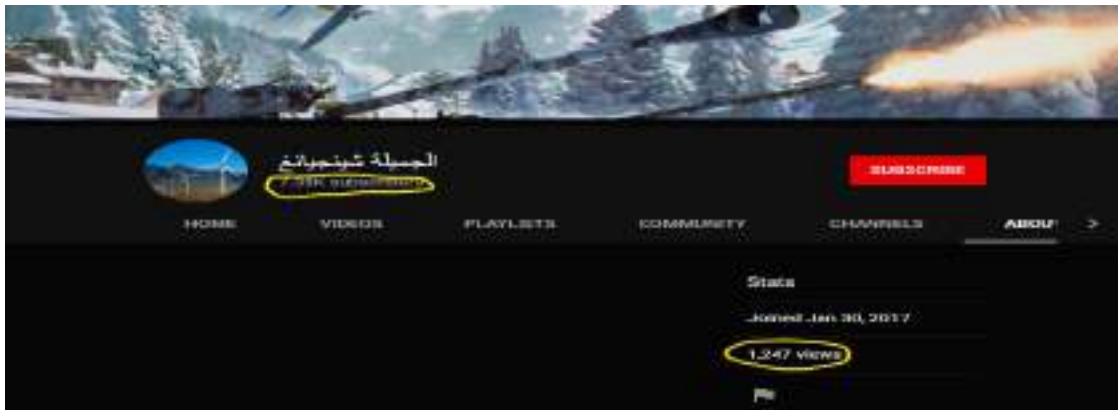
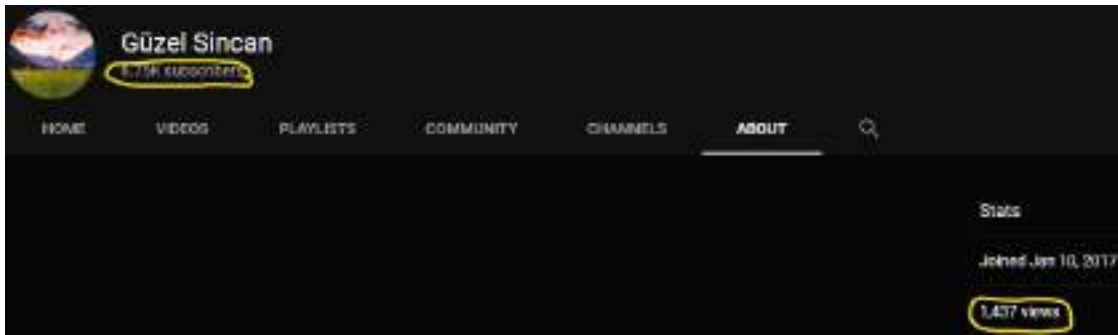


Figure 26: 'Güzel Sincan' (Beautiful Xinjiang) Turkish YouTube channel



Content targeting Mike Pompeo

The network had a particular focus on former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, [who declared in January 2021](#) that the CCP has 'committed crimes against humanity against the predominantly Muslim Uyghurs and other members of ethnic and religious minority groups in Xinjiang'. @蓬佩奥 or @'Pompeo' appears 438 times in the dataset (Figure 27). It's unclear why the network used that handle instead of @SecPompeo, which was Pompeo's Twitter handle at the time. In the CNCC videos dataset, Pompeo was mentioned in 386 videos; there are at least 36 other videos of the same format that didn't mention Pompeo specifically but implied that his statements were false.

Figure 27: First frame of video shared by an account named ‘肉桂粉’ on 4 February 2021 with the #StopXinjiangRumors hashtag and tagging @蓬佩奥 (Pompeo)



Content targeting Covid-19 efforts in Xinjiang

Videos shared by one account, @MinBoxRadio, tended to promote the Chinese Government’s Covid-19 responses. Most of those videos had English subtitles and followed individuals assisting pandemic efforts in Xinjiang. Of the videos, 16 featured police, 15 featured medical workers and at least 17 featured civil society workers. One video follows a police officer based at the Ürümqi Public Security Bureau who was responsible for managing a ‘medical observation point’ during the outbreak (Figure 28). The subtitles in this video were poorly translated and had grammatically incorrect sentences, such as ‘I am responsible for 110 alarm receiving and disposing.’

Figure 28: Screenshot of CNCC video featuring a Xinjiang police officer involved in pandemic efforts



Content targeting Central Asian countries

The network notably shared material that focused on statements by Central Asian officials regarding Xinjiang, as well as video material targeting people in Central Asian countries. Like the small but notable focus on Pakistan in the CNHU dataset, this may reflect strategic priorities for the CCP vis-a-vis countries with significant Islamic populations. For example, the network shared a YouTube video about life in Xinjiang recorded in Mandarin and Uyghur. The video's subtitles [are translated into Turkish](#), although most of the video comments are in English (Figure 29). Some Twitter accounts not in the takedown dataset, but which display similar characteristics, also shared this clip.

Figure 29: A video with Turkish subtitles shared by the network



Source: YouTube, Güzel Sincan.

On 25 February 2021, 10 accounts in this network created on 23 February 2021 posted 20 tweets over a period of two hours with the text, 'Upholding Ethnic Equality and Unity', and tagging @Tulyakov, the official account of [Eldor Tulyakov](#), who is a former member of the Parliament of Uzbekistan. This targeting of @Tulyakov appears to be an ongoing campaign on Twitter. Figure 30 shows an account (now suspended by Twitter) that isn't in this dataset but is targeting @Tulyakov and also posting tweets using randomised four-letter codes (a feature of the CNHU dataset analysed in this report). This account claims to be that of a cotton farmer in Xinjiang.

Figure 30: Screenshots of ‘吳寶琴’ tweets before suspension



Source: [Twitter \(archived user timeline\)](#).

Key tactics

The tactics and techniques used in the CNCC network have a number of similarities with and differences from the CNHU dataset. Evidence of coordination and automation was also found in this dataset, for example. The overall operation of the network was probably intended to promote the videos produced by Changyu Culture and other videos of Uyghur ‘testimonials’ to increase their reach. Some images were shared, but they tended to be of Asian women, porn, landscapes or Korean celebrities.

The key tactics found in the CNCC dataset and analysed in this report include:

- repurposed accounts
- batch account creations and coordinated posting
- sharing of videos, including links to YouTube (specifically, the Changyu Culture YouTube channel) and video content uploaded to Twitter
- retweets.

Repurposed accounts

Most tweets in the CNCC dataset shared various spam material before 19 June 2020 and probably belonged to commercial networks before being repurposed in the most recent campaign. For example, the account with the second highest follower count, @chaoticeveel, tweeted largely in Indonesian until 2015. In this dataset, no other tweets from the account appeared until June 2020, when it retweeted a now-removed tweet about the ‘truth’ of life in Xinjiang. That, in turn, was a retweet from the now suspended ‘@ValeriaZombies’ account that purported to be ‘Mahmut Tohniyaz’, whose account bio described him as ‘A hardworking Uyghur young man’ and his location as ‘Xinjiang, China’ (Figure 31).

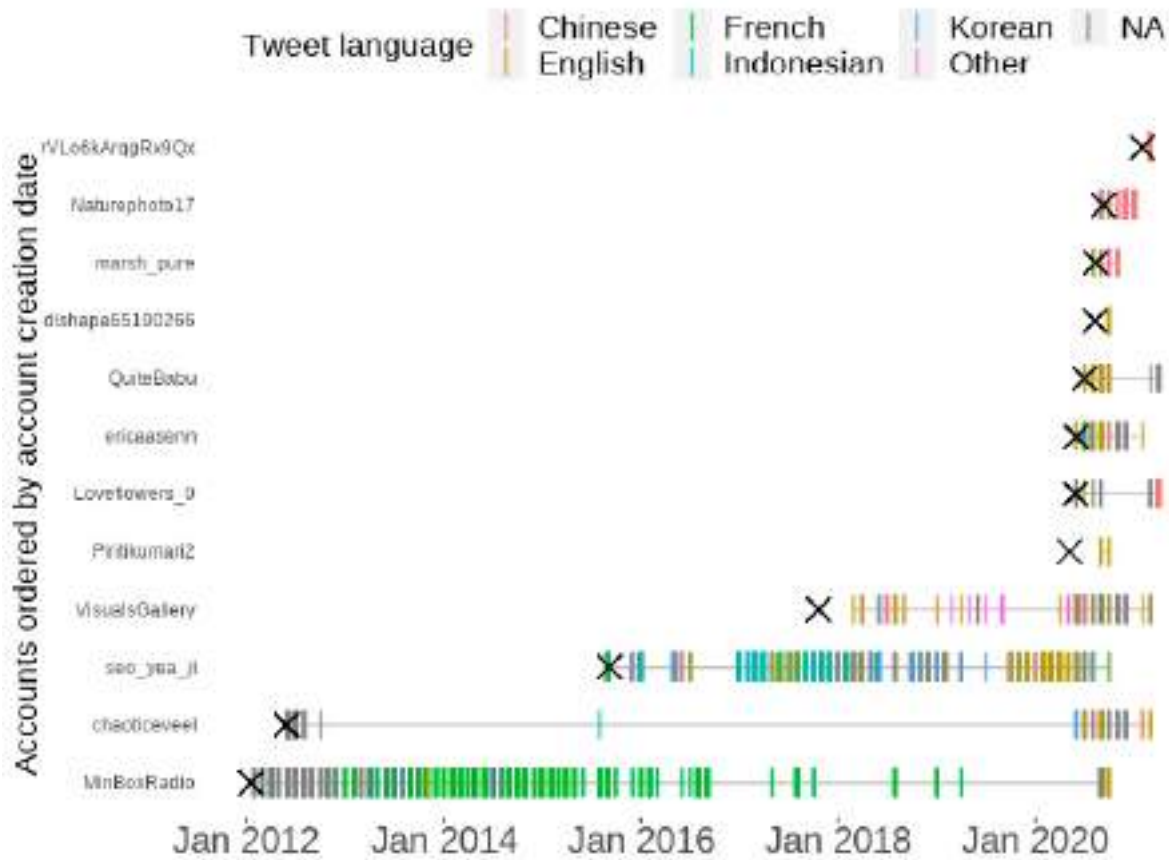
Figure 31: Screenshot of @ValeriaZombies Twitter account before Twitter removal



Source: [Twitter](#).

Another user, @MinBoxRadio, had more than 22,728 tweets in the CNCC dataset, most of which were posted in French before 2016. @MinBoxRadio’s last non-Xinjiang-related French tweet was posted on 4 April 2019. The account then remained dormant for a year before tweeting a variety of content about Xinjiang as well as retweeting @CGTNFrancais on 11 September 2020. Four other accounts were created prior to January 2020 and tweeted in languages such as French, Indonesian and Korean before tweeting mostly in English and simplified Chinese in 2020 (Figure 32).

Figure 32: Tweeting timelines of accounts with non-zero followers in the CNCC dataset



Notes: Black crosses indicate account creation dates. Vertical lines indicate times of tweets and are coloured by tweet language. Grey lines denote the period of activity between first and last tweets.

Before being repurposed to share content in relation to Xinjiang and Uyghurs, the 12 accounts with non-zero followers attempted to develop follower bases by requesting other Twitter users outside the CNCC dataset to follow them back. Variations of the phrase ‘follow back’ or ‘follow me back’ appeared in 310 tweets.

Batch account creations and coordinated posting

The other 100 accounts in the dataset with zero followers were created more recently in 2021 and showed clear signs of coordination, which may have been achieved by automation tools or by a persistent group of operators. Those accounts were created in batches and tweeted on the same days (Figure 33). All of the tweets posted in English on 25 February 2021 were tagged @Tulyakov (see page 35).

Figure 33: Tweeting timelines of CNCC accounts created in batches



Notes: Each row represents the timeline of one account. Black crosses indicate account creation dates. Vertical lines indicate times of tweets and are coloured by tweet language. Grey lines denote the period of activity between the first and last tweet.

In the period between 30 January 2021 and 7 February 2021, accounts in the CNCC dataset used the same hashtags—#StopXinjiangRumors and #蓬佩奥(Pompeo)—438 times and tended to share videos featuring Uyghur testimonials. Tweet text was repeated by different accounts and appeared to be the titles of the videos shared by the accounts. For example, one of the most repeated tweet text was:

‘#蓬佩奥 热阳古丽·阿不都热西提 协比乃尔布呼镇 我们现在过得挺好. #StopXinjiangRumors @蓬佩奥’ (#Pompeo Reyang Guli Abdurishit, Xiebinerbuhu Township. We are doing well now. #StopXinjiangRumors @Pompeo).

Sharing of videos

Videos were the most significant form of content shared in the CNCC dataset. That included 102 links to YouTube and 734 videos directly uploaded to Twitter. All of the links to YouTube videos led to either the now suspended Changyu Culture YouTube channel or similar channels with replicated videos. Plotting the first frame of all 734 videos in the CNCC dataset with PixPlot showed that many were repeatedly shared (Figure 34).

Figure 34: First frames of all videos in the CNCC dataset, processed by PixPlot



Of the videos repeatedly shared in the CNCC dataset, most were of Uyghurs providing ‘testimonials’ of their situation in Xinjiang or were denying human rights abuses in the region (see page 31). Those videos appear to be of a similar format and used similar phrases to those found in the videos [analysed by ProPublica](#) and [the New York Times](#) in June 2021 (Figure 35).

Figure 35: First frames of a sample of 20 videos in the CNCC dataset



Retweets

Retweeting other accounts was a less significant tactic employed in the CNCC dataset. Although retweets made up 39% of all the tweets, after filtering to the period after 19 June 2020, 79% of the remaining retweets were due to one account, @ericcasenn, which mostly continued to retweet commercial or spam material in 2020 and 2021.

The purpose of retweeting appeared to be for building personas and follower bases. One user account, @seo_yea_ji, which at one point changed its display name to 昶宇文化 (Changyu Culture), mostly retweeted K-pop/K-drama related accounts and built a follower base by replicating Seo Yea-ji, a [South Korean actress](#). Most of the [replies to the account](#) appear to assume that the account was operated by the actress.

There was some amplification of Chinese state media and diplomatic accounts. Two accounts (@MinBoxRadio and @NaturePhoto17) retweeted MOFA deputy spokesperson Zhao Lijian's account and the official Twitter accounts of Chinese state media such as *CGTN Africa* and *CGTN Francais* (Figure 36).

Conclusion

The two datasets that we analyse in this report demonstrate that international criticism of CCP policy in Xinjiang continues to be acutely sensitive for the party-state. Within the data we see overlaps that reflect different strands of pro-CCP online and offline influence activity. There are multiple intersections in the data that suggest coordination across the party-state's propaganda assets. Some of this is clearly directly coordinated, for example where we see this covert information operation's interactions with, and reciprocal amplification of, the party's state and local media. Other interactions with the party's propaganda assets, however, may be more opportunistic (for example, the engagement with prominent pro-CCP social media influencers and diplomats). Yet, cumulatively, they point to ecosystem building that creates a propaganda system for projecting the party's discourse power into international audiences. This creates challenges for the information operations research community, as well as the security teams at the social media platforms, because of the importance of being able to disambiguate distinct sets of inauthentic activity from one another in order to provide nuanced analysis and effective countermeasures.

The datasets offer insights into how propaganda directives from the top of the CCP structure are operationalised and suggest that there are likely to be multiple strands of CCP online information operations underway at any given time, each directed by different elements from within the party structure. The campaign is also reflective of what's likely to be the future direction of the CCP's online information operations. Following a Politburo collective study session in late May 2021, President Xi [urged](#) the CCP to expand its 'circle of friends in international public opinion'. The CCP's recent propaganda efforts have adapted to incorporate and appropriate a more expansive circle of friends that includes [influencers](#) and other [proxies](#) that align in projecting the party-state's preferred narratives into international political discourse. The party is [clear](#) that this effort is an important part of its public opinion struggle to 'shape a more just and equitable international order and forge a new type of international relations'.

This doctrinal element adds a valuable layer to how we understand the scale, persistence and diversity of pro-CCP online influence activity. The party's [incentive structures](#) may be driving at-scale online information operations that have performance metrics based on their ideological value on the party's own terms—rather than on their capacity to deliver effects—as leaders of various party organs compete to demonstrate allegiance to contemporary party doctrine.

While the capacity of these online information operations to deliver effects may currently be limited, we expect their sophistication to increase. It's therefore necessary that our understanding of CCP online information operations continues to evolve—across industry, government and civil society—in order to appropriately calibrate responses. Statements emerging from the Politburo continue to suggest that there's a long-term communications strategy for public opinion struggle that will mobilise devolved online disinformation campaigns from diverse elements within the party's propaganda apparatus. The effects of those operations may be cumulative and accrue over time as the campaigns flood the international information environment, potentially shaping the algorithms that [distribute online content](#) in ways that are conducive to the party-state's strategic objectives.



In relation to countermeasures, these datasets highlight that state-linked and state-mobilised information operations occur around the geostrategic interests of particular actors, and that an understanding of those interests can enhance threat detection and disruption activity on platforms (at both the algorithmic and analytic levels). Previous disinformation campaigns targeting Western entities (such as [the BBC](#)) have emerged from Chinese-language social media platforms and rippled across onto the US platforms. Fused, publicly accessible, cross-platform datasets could be used to develop early-warning and predictive systems built from threat-detection indicators (combinations of geostrategic intelligence, technical signals, language, sentiment and cross-platform mobilisation).

The coordination between covert information operations and other CCP propaganda assets that we identify in this report indicates the emergence of an increasingly complex system of international-facing propaganda distribution that comprises overlapping strands of activity by diverse elements of the party-state. The CCP is leveraging asymmetric advantage in the information domain as its officials, state media and their proxies exploit the open access to international audiences that US social media platforms provide. That access isn't reciprocal, as the CCP exercises an [extensive system](#) of control, manipulation and censorship over its domestic internet.

Twitter has [already implemented](#) on-platform measures to mitigate the reach of Chinese Government propaganda. The ongoing covert manipulation of online political discourse by significant state actors raises complex policy questions for government and industry about how to deter those actions and impose costs on their perpetrators. The analysis provided by this report suggests that proactive risk mitigation (for example, mitigation based on sensitive topics, keywords and hashtags) could be introduced to deter state-backed information operations. The approach that Twitter takes to the [labelling of Covid misinformation and warnings to prevent harm](#) could be expanded. Similar content-moderation practices could focus on hashtags and keywords related to geopolitical topics of sensitivity to states that have a history of platform manipulation (such as countries like China that currently feature in Twitter's [information operations archive](#)).

Appendix

Dataset 1 (CNHU) topline stats

Top 20 most used hashtags

Hashtag	Frequency
Xinjiang	7,526
xinjiang	1,510
XinjiangOnline	1,397
新疆	737
StopXinjiangRumors	637
Urumqi	557
China	479
新疆是个好地方	331
Uygur	305
Uyghur	291
Pompeo	258
شىنجاڭ	190
south	158
Chine	155
الصين	152
humanrights	140
维吾尔族	134
UNHumanRightsCouncil	93
MonCarnetDeRouteAuXinjiang	78
Xinjiangonline	70

Top 10 most shared domains

Domain	Frequency
news.cgtn.com	1,576
regional.chinadaily.com.cn	1,546
youtube.com	935
twitter.com	862
t.m.china.org.cn	659
globaltimes.cn	635
english.ts.cn	632
china.org.cn	550
ecns.cn	513
chinadaily.com.cn	265

Top 20 most shared URLs

URLs	Frequency
http://regional.chinadaily.com.cn/en/2021-01/19/c_583671.htm	867
http://t.m.china.org.cn/convert/c_x8BDSHzU.html	435
http://regional.chinadaily.com.cn/en/2021-01/19/c_583673.htm	281
http://t.m.china.org.cn/convert/c_XWWIAWDD.html	216
http://english.ts.cn/system/2021/03/25/036601632.shtml	204
http://www.china.org.cn/china/2021-03/18/content_77322034.htm	195
https://regional.chinadaily.com.cn/en/2021-01/19/c_583671.htm	192
https://regional.chinadaily.com.cn/en/2021-01/19/c_583673.htm	188
https://twitter.com/chinascio/status/1349947391038787584	187
http://english.ts.cn/system/2021/03/25/036601633.shtml	180
http://www.ecns.cn/news/politics/2021-03-10/detail-ihaihrwe3354530.shtml	159
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cso5gsS6bYY	119
http://china.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202101/14/WS60013a08a3101e7ce973afcd.html	106
https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-04-02/The-war-in-the-shadows-Challenges-of-fighting-terrorism-in-Xinjiang-Z7AhMWRPy0/index.html	102
http://www.ecns.cn/news/politics/2021-03-11/detail-ihaihrwe3355805.shtml	101
https://francais.cgtn.com/n/BfJEA-IA-GEA/DJJBIA/index.html	100
https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202103/1218020.shtml	99
https://tribune.com.pk/story/2287774/countering-terror-in-xinjiang-to-promote-peace-and-development	98
http://spanish.xinhuanet.com/2021-03/13/c_139806484.htm	94
http://www.ecns.cn/news/society/2021-03-12/detail-ihainwmv2679984.shtml	92

Top 10 most retweeted accounts in CNHU dataset

Account	Number of retweets
globaltimesnews	287
SpokespersonCHN	108
Echinanews	96
ChinaDaily	85
SpokespersonHZM	74
XHNews	72
H6RCNAyfgMh2Xk	58
ChinaConSydney	52
Antonia57224374	48
China2ASEAN	47

Twitter clients used in CNHU dataset

Client name	Frequency
Twitter web app	30,797
Twitter for Android	460
Twitter web client	12

Dataset 2 (CNCC) topline stats

Filtered to tweets posted after 19 June 2020.

Top 20 most used hashtags

Hashtag	Frequency
StopXinjiangRumors	438
蓬佩奧	438
사이코지만괜찮아	80
tvN	71
서예지	71
김수현	69
토일드라마	68
박규영	67
오정세	67
ItsOkayToNotBeOkay	45
SeoYeJi	34
KimSooHyun	30
Xinjiang	8
香港	7
방영예정	6
NSFW	5
PsychoButItsOkay	5
BackstreetRookie	4
ItsOkayNotTobeOkay	4
PACKS	4



Top 10 most shared domains

Domain	Frequency
www.youtube.com	94
twitter.com	32
www.soompi.com	30
www.ecns.cn	20
lustyage.com	8
youtu.be	8
bit.ly	6
onlyfans.com	6
reddit.com	6
Onlyfans.com	4

Top 20 most shared URLs

URLs	Frequency
http://www.ecns.cn/news/society/2021-02-23/detail-ihahvyux8633359.shtml	10
http://www.ecns.cn/news/society/2021-02-23/detail-ihahvyux8633376.shtml	10
http://bit.ly/38yihNH	3
http://reddit.com/user/yeasure1234/	3
http://onlyfans.com/angelaroux	2
https://onlyfans.com/natashalaikk	2
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k7zMKkzCodo	2
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luwNjkBasDE&feature=youtu.be	2
http://33xb.best/?_c=zwa2054	1
http://allmylinks.com/tiny-joh1	1
http://bit.ly/3uh2ygH	1
http://ellemag.co/162wF0M	1
http://instagram.com/sensualz	1
http://m.chaturbate.com/kristy_bennet/	1
http://onlyfans.com/AvatarAkyia	1
http://onlyfans.com/elouisejade	1
http://onlyfans.com/martynlon	1
http://onlyfans.com/pandoranyxie	1
http://onlyfans.com/samlayre	1
http://onlyfans.com/thisisnahir	1

Top 20 most retweeted accounts

Account	Number of retweets
CJnDrama	73
soompi	37
LundBoy2	29
pornside2	23
DreamBimbo	21
FUCKENGI	21
Alexanderjon12	20
lezza012	18
TemAltair	18
Arfana1234	16
cutecouple001	15
Porn_hub00	15
Sexeducation000	15
sexvideok	15
AmateurBigtits	14
pornporntu	14
shifu53613393	14
sex_tube_01	13
TopSex95539968	13
Fast_love_story	12

Twitter clients used (for entire CNCC dataset)

Client name	Frequency
Twitter for Android	2,110
Twitter web app	581
TweetDeck	70
Twitter for iPhone	54
Twitter for Mac	3
Hootsuite Inc.	1
Twitter for iPad	1

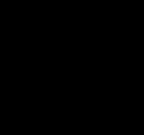


Acronyms and abbreviations

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CGTN	China Global Television Network
CNHU	Xinjiang Online (dataset)
CNCC	Changyu Culture (dataset)
ICPC	International Cyber Policy Centre
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (China)
URL	uniform resource locator

Some previous ICPC publications





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