



# “The Happiest Muslims in the World”

Disinformation, Propaganda, and the Uyghur Crisis

Uyghur Human Rights Project | July 2020



UYGHUR HUMAN RIGHTS PROJECT

## About the Uyghur Human Rights Project

The Uyghur Human Rights Project promotes the rights of the Uyghur people through research-based advocacy. It publishes reports and analysis in English and Chinese to defend Uyghurs' civil, political, social, cultural, and economic rights according to international human rights standards.

## About the Authors

This report was written by UHRP staff members with input from a researcher who wishes to remain anonymous.

## Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank all those who contributed to this report, including Henryk Szadziwski and other members of the UHRP team.

## Cover Design

Illustration by [Yettesu](#).

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- As increasing evidence of the scale and nature of the extrajudicial detention campaign has emerged, the Chinese government has shifted the narrative on the camps, first from silence, to denial, to attempts to frame them as “vocational training centers,” a tool in a legitimate counter-terrorist struggle. Framing the mass detention of Uyghurs as a potential model for other countries’ counter-terrorism campaigns has dangerous implications for human rights worldwide.
- The Chinese government has deployed a multi-pronged information control strategy to prevent access to accurate information on what is occurring in East Turkistan, to portray the success of government policies through an aggressive propaganda campaign, and to attack individual activists, journalists and institutions reporting on the issue.
- The propaganda campaign takes the form of state-sponsored news articles and public statements by officials that paint a false image of the purpose of the camps, Chinese government orchestrated tours of the camps for foreign journalists and diplomats, and efforts to garner statements of support at the state level to legitimize the Chinese government’s policies.
- Social media platforms play an increasingly prominent role in the CCP’s public opinion struggle, including in the form of aggressive disinformation campaigns.
- Chinese state media is producing and disseminating videos featuring coerced statements by the family members of diaspora Uyghurs. These videos amount to a type of “hostage propaganda” in which Uyghurs deny that they have been mistreated in any way, and go on to denounce their overseas relatives for spreading “lies.” These propaganda videos add to the trauma that Uyghurs overseas are already suffering due to their relatives being disappeared into camps or given long prison sentences.

## INTRODUCTION

Uyghurs have endured persistent assimilation efforts by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) despite the rights to religious freedom and ethnic equality inscribed in the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) Constitution (1982).<sup>1</sup> The CCP claims that its Strike Hard Campaign Against Violent Terrorism, launched in 2014, seeks to combat the “three evils” of terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), or East Turkistan. The Chinese government views countering these three influences to be essential to the country’s “national unity.” Despite Beijing’s claims of widespread terrorism and religious extremism in China, there is little evidence to confirm the validity of the government’s claims. Rather, the crackdown is clearly aimed at erasing a unique Uyghur ethnoreligious identity. Nevertheless, PRC authorities have attempted to justify the curtailment of rights, the securitization of society, and the establishment of internment camps in the Uyghur region on the basis of a domestic equivalent of a “war on terror.”<sup>2</sup>

**Investigative reporting and testimony from witnesses and survivors have revealed that grave human rights abuses are taking place inside the camps, resulting in physical torture, psychological trauma, and death.**

In 2017 increasing evidence emerged that the XUAR government was arbitrarily detaining large numbers of Turkic and/or Muslim peoples, including Uyghurs and Kazakhs, in a rapidly expanded system of internment camps. Investigative reporting and testimony from witnesses and survivors have revealed that grave human rights abuses are taking place inside the camps, resulting in physical torture, psychological trauma, and death. References to this internment campaign appeared on official Chinese government websites, including the now infamous photo of detainees in Lop county, Hotan, posted on the XUAR Ministry of Justice’s website in April 2017. This evidence began to be scrubbed as the re-education campaign garnered

<sup>1</sup> The National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China, “Constitution of the People’s Republic of China” (China, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), or simply Xinjiang, is the given Mandarin Chinese name for the historic area of East Turkistan. Xinjiang is a colonial name and literally translates to “new frontier.”

international attention. A classified document, later published by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, was issued in November 2017. It instructed camp staff to “strengthen their awareness of staying secret, serious political discipline and secrecy discipline. It is strictly forbidden to bring video and video equipment such as mobile phones and cameras into the teaching and management areas and uploading pictures onto the internet at will. Relevant important data should not be aggregated, not be disseminated, and not be open to the outside.”<sup>3</sup>

The Chinese government has deployed a multi-pronged and aggressive information control strategy to prevent access to accurate information on what is occurring in East Turkistan, to portray the success of government policies through a global propaganda campaign, and to attack individual activists, journalists and institutions reporting on the issue. Elements of the campaign include state media reports and public statements by officials that portray the camps in a positive light; reports and statements by international media outlets, foreign government officials, and international experts that highlight the “positive effects” of the camp system; and social-media posts that disseminate false stories on a variety of platforms inside and outside of China. The world beyond China’s borders is an increasingly important target of the Party’s public opinion work.

The overseas media apparatus has been centralized under the direct supervision of the Propaganda Department, with radio and television as the “mouthpiece” of the Party, “[i]n order to strengthen the Party’s unified leadership of news and public opinion work, and strengthen the management of important propaganda positions (宣传阵地), firmly grasping the right of leadership over ideological work.”<sup>4</sup> Other institutions working inside and outside of China to develop and spread disinformation about Uyghur internment camps include the United Front Work Department (UFWD), which was recently

**The Chinese government has deployed a multi-pronged and aggressive information control strategy to prevent access to accurate information on what is occurring in East Turkistan.**

<sup>3</sup> Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, “Exposed: China’s Operating Manuals for Mass Internment and Arrest by Algorithm,” The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, November 24, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> David Bandurski, “When Reforms Mean Tighter Controls,” Chinese Media Project, March 22, 2018.

consolidated with state institutions that oversee religious and ethnic affairs.<sup>5</sup>

The CCP seeks to mislead the public by creating the narrative that the party-state is a victim of religious extremism and separatism and that the camps are not “camps” but rather humane institutions that promote vocational education. These portrayals of the camps as institutions that exist solely to teach “vocational skills” are highly disingenuous. Party Secretary Zhang Chunxian’s slogan from the beginning of the crackdown in 2014, that “the striking hand needs to be hard, and the educating hand needs to be hard as well,” communicates the true purpose of camps in East Turkistan: physically intimidating and politically indoctrinating Uyghurs whom the state has labeled “separatists.”<sup>6</sup>

This report analyses English language Chinese media sources aimed at foreign audiences to examine CCP messaging strategies on the Uyghur human rights crisis. The government’s domestic messaging on its policies in Uyghur region are beyond the scope of this report. The report concludes by laying out recommendations for governmental and non-governmental institutions. A multilateral effort is needed to hold the Chinese government accountable for its actions in East Turkistan.

## BACKGROUND

Since 2017, an estimated one to two million Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples in the XUAR have been detained in reeducation camps.<sup>7</sup> The expansion of these camps has occurred under the leadership of hardliner XUAR Communist Party Secretary Chen Quanguo. The reasons people are being sent to the camps are arbitrary and do not rise to the level of a crime; instead, many experts see them

<sup>5</sup> Alex Joske, “Reorganizing the United Front Work Department: New Structures for a New Era of Diaspora and Religious Affairs Work” *China Brief* 19, no. 9 (2019): 6-13, Accessed June 17, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Feng Jin and Yao Tong, “新疆自治区党委召开稳定工作会议 [Xinjiang Autonomous Region Party Committee Held a Work Meeting],” *新疆日报 [Xinjiang Daily]*, January 1, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Joshua Lipse, “Expert Says 1.8 Million Uyghurs, Muslim Minorities Held in Xinjiang’s Internment Camps,” *Radio Free Asia*, November 24, 2019.

as part of the CCP’s efforts to curb the influence of Uyghur culture and Islam in the PRC. Satellite imagery and photographs obtained by various international media outlets have highlighted the size and rapid expansion of these camps.

In testimonies former internees have described squalid physical conditions in the camps.<sup>8</sup> Their experiences provide evidence that the camps are ideological reform centers aimed at forcefully “reeducating” non-Han ethnic groups, eradicating their identities and Sinicizing them. The CCP has employed a number of methods to indoctrinate internees: hours of political and legal “education” and singing “red songs,” torture, deprivation of food and medical care, and intense psychological pressure.<sup>9</sup> The conditions have led to numerous deaths in East Turkistan, ranging from teenagers to elderly individuals.<sup>10</sup>

Uyghur culture is being suppressed outside of the camps as well, with authorities limiting the use of the Uyghur language, censoring Uyghur history, prohibiting fasting during Ramadan, demolishing numerous mosques, severely restricting religious classes, and forbidding Islamic clothing and names.<sup>11</sup> The authorities have built a draconian surveillance state, implementing facial recognition systems, tracking technology, surveillance applications, and police checkpoints throughout cities in the region.<sup>12</sup>

The PRC response to reports about the internment camps has evolved over time. The CCP’s initial response was one of total denial when confronted with allegations of the mass internment of Uyghurs and others in East Turkistan. The Chinese Consul General in Kazakhstan denied the existence of “political education camps” in February 2018, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs “stated they ‘had

**The authorities have built a draconian surveillance state, implementing facial recognition systems, tracking technology, surveillance applications, and police checkpoints throughout cities in the region.**

<sup>8</sup> Congressional-Executive Commission on China. “Congressional-Executive Commission on China Annual Report 2018” (United States, 2018), 1-19; Gulchehra Hoja, “Interview: ‘I Lost All Hope of Surviving,’” Radio Free Asia, January 30, 2018; David Stavrou, “A Million People Are Jailed at China’s Gulags. I Managed to Escape. Here’s What Really Goes on Inside,” Haaretz, October 17, 2019; Maya Wang, “‘Eradicating Ideological Viruses,’” Human Rights Watch, September 9, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Buckley, “China is Detaining Muslims in Vast Numbers. The Goal: Transformation” The New York Times, September 8, 2018; Maya Wang, “‘Eradicating Ideological Viruses’: China’s Campaign of Repression Against Xinjiang’s Muslims,” Human Rights Watch, September 9, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Shohret Hoshur, Joshua Lipes, and Alim Seytoff, “Uyghur Teenager Dies in Custody at Political Re-Education Camp,” Radio Free Asia, March 14, 2018; Shohret Hoshur and Joshua Lipes, “Elderly Uyghur Woman Dies in Detention in Xinjiang ‘Political Re-Education Camp,’” Radio Free Asia, May 24, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Rachel Harris, “Bulldozing Mosques: The Latest Tactic in China’s War Against Uighur Culture,” The Guardian, April 7, 2019; Joyce Huang, “Rights Groups Decry China’s Ban on Fasting During Ramadan,” Voice of America, May 8, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Darren Byler, “The Global Implications of ‘Re-education’ Technologies in Northwest China,” Center for Global Policy, June 8, 2020.

not heard of’ the situation” in May 2018.<sup>13</sup> At the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) Review in August 2018, senior XUAR policymaker Hu Lianhe said, “[t]he argument that 1 million Uyghurs are detained in re-education centers is completely untrue . . . There is no such thing as re-education centers.”<sup>14</sup> No government white paper published prior to October 2018 acknowledged that any type of facility detaining ethnic Uyghurs existed.<sup>15</sup>

After being called to account for its policies at the August 2018 UN CERD Review, the PRC began to make greater efforts to justify those policies. In an October 2018 interview with Xinhua, XUAR Chairman Shohrat Zakir referred to the camps as voluntary, harmless “professional vocational training institutions.”<sup>16</sup> An August 2019 State Council Information Office white paper asserts that the centers are humane and that their main purpose is to “effectively eradicate the conditions that enable terrorism and religious extremism to breed and spread.”<sup>17</sup> The government in Beijing uses the “three evils” — terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism—as justification for the internment of Uyghur individuals, although there is no significant evidence of widespread religious radicalism among the Uyghur population. After admitting to the existence of “training centers” for “de-radicalization,” the Chinese government began to compare its camp system to de-radicalization programs in the West, with a Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman saying in October 2018 that “[t]he relevant practices in China are no different from those in the UK, France and the US.”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>13</sup> AKIPress, “Consul General of China denies reports on ‘political education camps for Uyghurs’ in China’s Xinjiang,” AKIPress, February 7, 2018; Gerry Shih, “China’s mass indoctrination camps evoke Cultural Revolution,” Associated Press, May 17, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), “Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination reviews the report of China,” United Nations OHCHR, August 13, 2018; Stephanie Nebehay, “China Rejects Allegations of Detaining Million Uyghurs in Camps in Xinjiang,” Reuters, August 13, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “Full Text: Human Rights in Xinjiang - Development and Progress” (China, 2017); The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “Full Text: Freedom of Religious Belief in Xinjiang” (China, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Nectar Gan, “Xinjiang Camps: Top Chinese Official in First Detailed Admission of ‘Training and Boarding’ Centres,” South China Morning Post, October 16, 2018; Xiang Bo, “Full Transcript: Interview with Xinjiang Government Chief on Counterterrorism, Vocational Education and Training in Xinjiang,” Xinhua, October 16, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “Vocational Education and Training in Xinjiang” (China, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on October 24, 2018,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, October 24, 2018.

Since admitting that facilities holding large numbers of Uyghurs exist, the PRC’s international disinformation campaign has solidified around the term “vocational education and training centers.” The disinformation campaign attempts to justify the existence of these camps and convince the public that these facilities are “humane,” “voluntary,” and beneficial to Uyghur culture. CCP op-eds, government-guided tours (including camp facilities) for foreign media and government officials, influencing foreign journalists to repeat CCP talking points, and increasing use of social media have all been utilized in an attempt to create a benevolent image of the internment camps in East Turkistan.

The following sections in this report detail the CCP’s disinformation tactics. The section below describes the work of the main organs spreading the official narrative, the United Front Work Department and the Propaganda Ministry; analyzes the CCP’s disinformation campaign, including tours of internment camps for foreign media and diplomats; and analyzes the international dimension of disinformation through CCP’s utilization of foreign scholars and international news outlets for their messaging. The next section addresses the virtual disinformation campaign and the party-state’s efforts to use social media as a means to promulgate their state-sponsored narratives, followed by a section which highlights the CCP’s propaganda blitz following the “China Cables” leaks in November 2019. The final section describes the use of the family members of Uyghurs abroad by the Chinese media.

## INTERNMENT CAMPS

**A**n overview of the information-control and -dissemination system within the XUAR and the PRC is crucial to understanding the government’s disinformation on the Uyghur human rights crisis. The creation, dissemination, and restriction of information are centrally controlled by the Party to serve political ends. The CCP treats the minds of its citizens as a battlefield and pours enormous resources into “ideological security” (意识形态安全), which refers to maintaining the correct ideological line and preventing the spread and influence of

political views not approved by the authorities.<sup>19</sup> The Party sees East Turkistan as a particularly important ideological battlefield, and the ongoing crackdown has increased the amount of “political study” Uyghurs must undergo in their everyday life.<sup>20</sup> Its efforts to bolster ideological security parallel its buildup of police, paramilitary, and technological surveillance. In 2018 Chen Quanguo gave a speech to the regional Propaganda and Ideological Leading Group reaffirming the need for Party committees at all levels to maintain Party authority and ensure that “propaganda and thought work always follow the correct political direction.”<sup>21</sup>

## The Propaganda Bureau and the United Front Work Department

The main organs carrying out public opinion struggle (舆论斗争) and ideological work include the Propaganda Department, which has consolidated control over the news media, and the United Front Work Department (UFWD). Both of these departments were reorganized in 2018 in order to increase the CCP’s direct control. China’s media apparatus was placed under direct control of the Propaganda Department, increasing its oversight of news production.<sup>22</sup> The UFWD’s control of ethnic and religious affairs was increased by the absorption of the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), and the State Ethnic Affairs Commission was directly placed under UFWD supervision.<sup>23</sup> In 2017, the central government established the Xinjiang Bureau of the UFWD; it is likely not coincidental that the UFWD’s Xinjiang Bureau was established concurrent to mass

<sup>19</sup> “Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation: How Much Is a Hardline Party Directive Shaping China’s Current Political Climate?” ChinaFile, November 8, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Shohret Hoshur and Alim Seytoff, “Mandatory Indoctrination Classes For Unemployed Uyghurs in Xinjiang,” Radio Free Asia, February 7, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> “陈全国主持召开自治区党委宣传思想工作领导小组会议,” 新疆维一战线, December 20, 2018.

<sup>22</sup> David Bandurski, “When Reform Means Tighter Controls,” Chinese Media Project, March 22, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Samantha Hoffman, “The United Front and the CCP’s ‘People’s War’ Against Religion,” Congressional-Executive Commission on China, November 28, 2018.

detentions in the region.<sup>24</sup> Both the regional government and the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), a paramilitary organization under the direct control of Beijing, have their own Propaganda Departments and United Front Work Departments.

In 2014, Secretary of the XUAR Propaganda Bureau Li Xuejun wrote that protecting ideological security was not only the duty of the Propaganda Department, but the responsibility of all departments and parts of society. He called on Party cadres at all levels to enhance their understanding of the ideological struggle and “establish a sense of being in a long-term war,” asserting that “news and public opinion is the front line of ideology.”<sup>25</sup> In 2019, Propaganda Bureau Secretary Tian Wen continued the martial theme, saying “Xinjiang’s ideological territory is the main battlefield of the anti-succession struggle,” emphasizing the role of “positive energy” and “preventing the spread of wrong ideas” to protect ideological security.<sup>26</sup> The work of the Propaganda Bureau and the UFWD are closely intertwined; media reports on cadres’ “grassroots united front work” are organized and overseen by the regional UFWD. The regional UFWD has called for “effectively incorporating united front work into the propaganda work plan,” and increasing the importance placed on united front work in the Propaganda Bureau and news media.<sup>27</sup>

The battle is not waged solely through spreading “positive energy” but also relies on suppression of any negative news or dissenting opinion. The Party allows no space for Uyghurs and others to air legitimate grievances, firmly insisting that all issues in the region can be blamed on what it sees as the across-the-board negative influences of Islamic and Western foreign forces.

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<sup>24</sup> Jessica Batke, “Surveillance, Suppression, and Mass Detention: Xinjiang’s Human Rights Crisis,” Congressional-Executive Commission on China, July 26, 2018.

<sup>25</sup> 李学军, “新疆宣传部长谈反分裂斗争: 意识形态工作要前移关口,” 光明日报, January 23, 2014.

<sup>26</sup> 时事报告“新疆维吾尔自治区党委常委、宣传部部长田文: 坚决落实好新形势下宣传思想工作重点任务,” February 21, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> 统战部, “自治区党委统战部组织自治区主要媒体赴和田、巴州、伊犁实地采访基层统战工作,” 新疆维一线, May 24, 2016.

The CCP not only fears the “infiltration” of Islam but is also convinced that the West seeks to provoke violence in the Uyghur region. Scholar Julia Famularo states that analysts in XUAR seek to “draw a direct link between extremism and Western liberalism,” citing an academic who wrote in the *Journal of the Xinjiang Police Officers’ Academy* that Western nations “actively cultivate ‘three evil forces’ organizations both within and outside [Chinese] borders, supply support and funding, and make abundant use of the Internet to permeate Xinjiang’s cultural sphere and create serious violent terrorist movements.”<sup>28</sup> The state regards Uyghurs as potential accomplices of these foreign forces, and Uyghurs must prove that they are not “two-faced people,” or individuals, particularly officials, secretly disloyal to the CCP.<sup>29</sup> Efforts to indoctrinate the population take place outside of the camps as well, including in the form of Party organs mobilizing the population for loyalty oaths.

The official who made the Chinese government’s first major response to questions about the crackdown was Hu Lianhe, the Deputy Director of the United Front Work Department’s Xinjiang Bureau. Hu gave China’s response at the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination Review, where he asserted that “[t]here is no such thing as re-education centres in Xinjiang.”<sup>30</sup> Instead, “criminals involved in minor offenses” were “assigned to vocational education and employment training centres.”<sup>31</sup> Notably, Hu has held several other positions in the central government apparatuses directing Xinjiang work, including as Deputy Head of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Committee Secretariat for Coordinating Xinjiang Work and as one of the deputy heads of the Secretariat for the Central Party Leading Small Group on Xinjiang Work.<sup>32</sup> James Liebold,

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<sup>28</sup> Julia Famularo, “‘Fighting the Enemy with Fists and Daggers’: the Chinese Communist Party’s Counter-Terrorism Policy in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region,” *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in China: Domestic and Foreign Policy Dimensions*, 2018, Oxford University Press.

<sup>29</sup> 新疆日报 “评论：深刻认识“两面人”的危害,” April 12, 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Lily Kuo, “China denies violating minority rights amid detention claims,” *The Guardian*, August 13, 2018.

<sup>31</sup> United Nations OHCHR, “Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination reviews the report of China,” United Nations OHCHR, August 13, 2018.

<sup>32</sup> James Liebold, “Hu the Uniter: Hu Lianhe and the Radical Turn in China’s Xinjiang Policy,” *China Brief* 18, no. 16 (2018): Accessed June 17, 2020.

an expert on China’s ethnic policies, believes Hu to be one of the primary theorists behind the forcible assimilation of the Uyghurs. Hu claims to have developed a “scientific” theory of stability which “requires the ‘standardizing of human behaviour’ (规范人的行为) in order to achieve the perfect state of harmony.”<sup>33</sup>

The regional Propaganda Bureau and UFWD also contribute to the international “public opinion struggle.” Former Propaganda Bureau Secretary Li Xuejun stated in 2014 that with “the help of the central external news units, Chinese-language foreign media outlets, and major media resources in key neighboring countries,” the Propaganda Bureau would “carry out targeted propaganda activities to display and raise Xinjiang’s good image.”<sup>34</sup> The XPCC’s Propaganda Bureau also has a Foreign Propaganda Office whose duties include contacting and receiving foreign journalists and managing their interview activities.<sup>35</sup>

## Developing the Narrative in Chinese Media & Other Official Efforts

China is increasingly asserting itself in the international media, aiming to make its “discourse power” match its national stature, and taking its “public opinion struggle” global. The CCP seeks to promote approved viewpoints and repress opposing ones. The Uyghur human rights crisis has been a major test of its ability to shape discourse and control information on a subject that seriously jeopardizes its reputation. Spreading “positive energy” is a priority in its response to the public relations crisis caused by its treatment of Uyghurs.

Since launching its narrative about its mass detentions in the XUAR in 2018, CCP officials and media have deployed accusations of “fake news” while defending the camp system both domestically and internationally, dismissing criticism as an

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> 李学军“新疆宣传部长谈反分裂斗争：意识形态工作要前移关口,” January 23, 2014.

<sup>35</sup> “兵团精神文明建设指导委员会办公室” 兵团党委宣传部, June 13, 2018

anti-China conspiracy. Additionally, the Chinese government has invited diplomats, journalists, and scholars to visit East Turkistan, staging a select few internment camps to appear to be voluntary education centers. The Chinese government claims that its methods have eradicated separatism and religious extremism in the region, despite the lack of credible evidence to prove that there was ever substantial extremism in the XUAR.<sup>36</sup>

In deflecting criticism of its human rights abuses, the Chinese government and media has frequently accused Western countries of a “double standard” when assessing cases of “terrorism” in the People’s Republic of China.<sup>37</sup> The supposed widespread existence of religious extremism and terrorism serves as the key justification for the government’s policies in the region, including the establishment of the camp system. A 2018 *Global Times* editorial titled “Protecting Peace, Stability is Top of Human Rights Agenda in Xinjiang” is a typical example of this rhetoric, claiming that the government’s actions had countered terrorist organizations’ efforts to brainwash its population, preventing the region from becoming “China’s Syria or China’s Libya,” and that in the pursuit of stability “all measures can be tried.”<sup>38</sup>

In an August 2018 article published by *China Daily*, the official government media outlet accused Western governments of distorting facts about the XUAR, writing:

As outsiders, they do not appreciate that tight security measures are badly needed to prevent the country’s far-west from being turned into an abyss of chaos. The terrorist attacks that have taken place there in recent years, and the ones committed elsewhere in the country by terrorists from that region, portends such a possibility.<sup>39</sup>

**The Chinese government claims that its methods have eradicated separatism and religious extremism in the region, despite the lack of credible evidence to prove that there was ever substantial extremism**

<sup>36</sup> Sean Roberts, “Imaginary Terrorism? The Global War on Terror and the Narrative of the Uyghur Terrorist Threat,” PONARS Eurasia, March 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Xinhua, “West’s Coverage of Kunming Reveals Double Standard,” *China Daily*, March 3, 2014.

<sup>38</sup> “Protecting Peace, Stability is Top of Human Rights Agenda for Xinjiang,” *Global Times*, August 12, 2018.; Michael Clarke, “China’s Application of the ‘Three Warfares’ in the South China Sea and Xinjiang,” *Orbis* 63, no. 2 (2019): 187-208, Accessed June 17, 2020.

<sup>39</sup> “What China is Doing in Xinjiang is Being Deliberately Distorted: China Daily Editorial,” *China Daily*, August 14, 2018.

The piece goes on to accuse Western media sources of being under the influence of Uyghur “extremists.”<sup>40</sup> The article concludes by dismissing the “far-fetched” idea that the government could detain a million people and reiterating the CCP’s dedication to eradicating extremism.

By August 2018, following the admission at the UN that there are facilities holding Uyghurs in the XUAR, the official media began publishing stories laying out the official narrative on the internment camps, referring to them as “vocational training and education centers.” The first major Chinese media report on the camps was an October 2018 video released by China Central Television (CCTV) claiming that the centers are teaching trainees necessary skills to reintegrate them into society (i.e., Mandarin, “vocational skills,” and legal codes) in order to eliminate the roots of terrorism.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, an August 2019 *China Daily* editorial cites the total absence of terrorism in the region for two years and an increase in regional tourism as evidence of the efficacy of re-training “simple, uneducated . . . easily brainwashed” rural Uyghurs in once underdeveloped areas.<sup>42</sup>

The PRC attempts to portray its policies as successful in comparison to the counter-terrorism efforts of Western countries such as the US, the UK, France, and Belgium.<sup>43</sup> Official media sources tie separatism to poverty, underdevelopment, and lack of skills rather than to oppressive conditions caused by intrusive governmental policies. A *Global Times* article published in November 2018 contends that China is employing humane methods to transform “extremists” into “normal people,” concluding by saying that its experience would be useful for other provinces to learn from, including the Ningxia Hui

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> “焦点访谈》20181016 筑牢根基 源头治理 [Focus Interview: Building the Roots of Governance],” CCTV-13, October 16, 2018.

<sup>42</sup> “West Has to Discard Prejudice to See Real Xinjiang: China Daily Editorial,” *China Daily*, August 16, 2019.

<sup>43</sup> Ben Blanchard and Tom Miles, “China Mounts Publicity Campaign to Counter Criticism on Xinjiang,” Reuters, October 2, 2018.

Autonomous Region, another region with a large Muslim population.<sup>44</sup>

In other words, the official Chinese narrative has pivoted from denying the existence of the camps to upholding them as the “China model” for counter-terrorism, with dangerous implications for human rights around the world. The China Society for Human Rights Studies, a Chinese GONGO (government organized non-governmental organization), held a conference in Ürümqi in September 2019 titled the International Seminar on Counterterrorism, De-Radicalization, and Human Rights Protection, attempting to create some appearance of international approval for its “counter-terrorism” methods.<sup>45</sup> The *Global Times* quoted a participating French professor as stating that “[w]e have many issues concerning the treatment of terrorism and the fight against terrorists. And I think there are some answers given by the Xinjiang government for education and avoiding the strengthening of terrorism . . . I hope that France and other European countries [haunted by terrorism] could take the answers given by Xinjiang.”<sup>46</sup>

Qian Jinyu, director of the Human Rights Institution of the Northwest University of Political Science and Law in Xi’an, described the “vocational centers” as operating fully within the PRC’s legal framework in a July 2019 article.<sup>47</sup> However, scholars of China’s legal system have pointed out that the legal basis for the camps is flimsy, and “[t]he idea that these camps are voluntary is not credible.”<sup>48</sup> The XUAR Regulation on De-extremification and the XUAR Implementing Measures for the PRC Counter-terrorism Law were revised in October 2018 after the Chinese government acknowledged the existence of the camps, but even these revisions do not provide a legal basis for indefinite detention without charge. The revisions to the law add

**The official Chinese narrative has pivoted from denying the existence of the camps to upholding them as the “China model” for counter-terrorism, with dangerous implications for human rights around the world.**

<sup>44</sup> Ai Jun, “Why Xinjiang Governance is Worthy of Copying,” *Global Times*, November 29, 2018.

<sup>45</sup> “International Seminar on Counterterrorism, De-Radicalization, and Human Rights Protection,” China Society for Human Rights Studies, September 3, 2019.

<sup>46</sup> Xie Wenting and Bai Yunyi, “French Professor praises de-radicalization measures in Xinjiang,” *Global Times*, September 10, 2019.

<sup>47</sup> Liu Xin, “Double Standards Hinder Counter-Terrorism Work,” *Global Times*, July 11, 2019.

<sup>48</sup> Jeremy Daum, “Explainer on Xinjiang Regulations,” *China Law Translate*, October 11, 2018.

language echoing official justifications for the camps, including allowing for the establishment of “education centers” under names such as “occupation skills education and training centers or education and transformation establishments” in order to “provide language, cultural, ideological, vocational, legal, and psychological education” to people involved in extremism and terrorism that did not rise to the level of a crime.<sup>49</sup> However, as legal scholar Donald Clarke points out, the law still “says nothing about those facilities being places of mandatory detention and prescribes no procedures for identifying who should be sent there.”<sup>50</sup>

Two State Council Information Office (SCIO) white papers published in 2019, one in March titled “the Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang” and one in August titled “Vocational Education and Training in Xinjiang,” present a misleading picture of government policies in the region. The SCIO, also known as the External Propaganda Office, is the organ leading the Chinese government’s foreign facing propaganda effort, and is overseen by the CCP’s External Propaganda Leading Group.<sup>51</sup> The papers describe the PRC’s humane treatment of ethnic and religious groups in a propagandistic fashion, writing that the CCP policies “remove the malignant tumor of terrorism and extremism that threatens people’s lives and security” and “have prevent[ed] any violation of human rights caused by counterterrorist measures.”<sup>52</sup>

The papers both try to present an explanation of the legal basis for detaining people in the camps, but Jeremy Daum, an expert on the Chinese legal system, states that the white papers’ explanation of the legal basis for holding people in the camps falls short.<sup>53</sup> He notes that there was a change between the two papers,

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Donald Clarke, “No, New Xinjiang Legislation Does not Legalize Detention Centers,” *Lawfare*, October 11, 2018.

<sup>51</sup> David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (United States: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>52</sup> “The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang,” The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, March 2019.

“Vocational Education and Training in Xinjiang,” *China Daily*, August 17, 2019.

<sup>53</sup> Jeremy Daum, “White Papering Over Detention,” *China Law Translate*, August 20, 2019.

not reflected in their official English translations, regarding the legal basis for detaining people. In the first paper’s description it was “possible that either the courts or the prosecution would make a determination to waive criminal punishment, but the latest white paper clarified that it must be the prosecution that makes a decision to not pursue the charges.”<sup>54</sup> However, Chinese criminal procedure law requires that “[f]ollowing a non-prosecution decision, all compulsory measures invoked against the accused are to be removed.”<sup>55</sup>

The Chinese government also seeks to undermine the image of the international media as impartial. Gheyret Saliyup (aka Ailiti Saliyev), the Deputy Director of the XUAR Party Committee Foreign Propaganda Bureau, claimed that the “the happiest Muslims in the world live in Xinjiang,” going on to say information to the contrary is a product of Uyghur extremists “coordinat[ing] with hostile Western forces to wantonly spread rumors, misrepresent, vilify and besmirch Xinjiang in the overseas media.”<sup>56</sup> At a 2019 UN Human Rights Council side event titled “Human Rights Progress in Xinjiang, China,” Ambassador Chen Xu accused critics of China’s human rights record in the region as having a “hidden political agenda.”<sup>57</sup> UN side events like these are organized by Chinese GONGOs like the China Society for Human Rights Studies (CSHRS), whose secretary general also serves as the Director of the Propaganda

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ben Blanchard and Nick Macfie, “China Official Says Xinjiang’s Muslims Are ‘Happiest in World,’” Reuters, August 25, 2017; “艾力提·沙力也夫：新疆的形象不容歪曲,” 人民网, August 25, 2017.

<sup>57</sup> “Remarks by H.E. Ambassador CHEN Xu at Side Event ‘Human Rights Progress in Xinjiang, China,’” Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland, September 18, 2019.





Left: Diplomats from countries including Malaysia tour a camp in Kashgar, December 2018. Right: Diplomats from African nations and the African Union in Ürümqi, on a tour which included a trip to a camp in Turpan, September 2019 (Photos: Xinhua).

officials, and dignitaries on state-sponsored visits to “vocational educational and training centers,” up to 1,000 guests in total in 2019 according to a speech by Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi.<sup>61</sup> In 2019, the government invited waves of diplomats for tours of the camps, including from Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Afghanistan, Thailand, Kuwait,<sup>62</sup> Pakistan, Venezuela, Cuba, Egypt, Cambodia, Senegal, Belarus,<sup>63</sup> Laos, Cambodia, the Philippines, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bahrain, Nigeria,<sup>64</sup> Yemen, Equatorial Guinea, Mozambique, Zambia, Cote d'Ivoire, South Africa, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe,<sup>65</sup> Myanmar, Algeria, Morocco, Vietnam, Hungary, Greece, Singapore, and the mission of the League of Arab States.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>61</sup> “Wang Yi talks about 2019 China’s Diplomacy: Firmly defend our core national interests, Provide a strong support for achieving the two centenary goals,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Ireland, December 13, 2019.

<sup>62</sup> “Diplomatic envoys from 12 countries visit Xinjiang,” Xinhua, January 8, 2019.

<sup>63</sup> “China Focus: Senior diplomats from 8 countries to UN Geneva office visit Xinjiang” Xinhua, February 25, 2019.

<sup>64</sup> “China Focus: Diplomats from 7 countries visit Xinjiang,” Xinhuanet, August 23 2019.

<sup>65</sup> “UN envoys from 8 countries visit Xinjiang,” Xinhuanet, September 3, 2019.

<sup>66</sup> “China Focus: Foreign diplomats visit Xinjiang,” Xinhuanet, March 11, 2019.



Camp visited by BBC reporters in 2019; arrows show where tall fences and possible guard towers have been removed (Google Earth).

Visitors have been taken to a select few camps that have been refitted to appear less like prisons than previously. In several instances, watchtowers and razor wire fences were removed from the exterior of designated buildings to make camps appear less menacing months prior to scheduled international visits.<sup>67</sup> For example, at one facility in Kashgar which has been used for tours and appeared in a number of propaganda videos, temporary mats for basketball courts were placed on concrete areas normally inaccessible to detainees in October 2018 before a visit by *Global Times* editor Hu Xijin later that month.<sup>68</sup> Videos taken by the *BBC* and *Al Jazeera* show Uyghur “trainees” engaging in vocational training and cultural activities such as Uyghur dance and music.<sup>69</sup> Using images of smiling internees and footage of Uyghurs confessing that they have turned away from extremist habits due to “vocational training,” the authorities have created misleading visual images of the true conditions inside these camps.

<sup>67</sup> Danielle Cave, Nathan Ruser, and Fergus Ryan, “Mapping Xinjiang’s Re-education Camps,” Australian Strategic Policy Institute, November 1, 2018.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> BBC News, “走進中國新疆的「思想轉化營」 [Entering Xinjiang, China’s “Ideological Transformation Camps]. BBC News 中文,” YouTube, June 18, 2019, video, 11:57; Al Jazeera English, “How China Spins the Xinjiang Story to the Chinese,” YouTube, September 8, 2019, video, 8:50.

**Journalists who took these tours described them as highly controlled, noting that they were only allowed to speak to detainees with minders present. Many detainees repeated the same phases verbatim, including “I want to say that I am here voluntarily.”**

Journalists who took these tours described them as highly controlled, noting that they were only allowed to speak to detainees with minders present.<sup>70</sup> Many detainees repeated the same phases verbatim, including “I want to say that I am here voluntarily.”<sup>71</sup> One former detainee testified that while in the camp he was told “that journalists might come to visit soon, and that we needed to tell them that we had come there voluntarily.”<sup>72</sup> Despite the choreographed nature of the visits, some reporters were able to confirm that the detainees were not there willingly. When Bloomberg reporter Peter Martin asked Mamat Ali, the head of a camp in Yéngisheher (Ch. Shule) county, what would happen if the detainees refused to go, he replied, “If they don’t want to come, they will have to go through judicial procedures.”<sup>73</sup>

After visiting East Turkistan on a state-sponsored trip in 2019, Albanian-Canadian university lecturer Olsi Jazexhi described a place where Uyghurs are forcefully Sinicized, saying that the teaching of Mandarin Chinese, internees’ self-criticism, and government minders’ constant presence all signaled to him a highly securitized, repressive environment.<sup>74</sup> The regional government subsequently denounced Jazexhi’s reporting.<sup>75</sup> Jordanian journalist Nihad Jariri also described the oppressive environment in the region, noting that most mosques were closed, people were prevented from praying, security checkpoints were ubiquitous, and that her meeting with a Uyghur translator was disrupted by police. The police searched the translator’s phone and then forced Jariri to return to her hotel.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Joshua Lipas and Alim Seytoff, “Skeptical Scholar Says Visit to Xinjiang Internment Camps Confirms Western Media Reports,” Radio Free Asia, August 29, 2019.

<sup>71</sup> Peter Martin, “How China is defending its detention of Muslims to the world,” Bloomberg, April 20, 2019.

<sup>72</sup> Gene A. Bunin, “‘99 bad things: A man’s 2-year journey through Xinjiang’s complex detention network,” *The Art of Life in Chinese Central Asia*, June 30, 2020.

<sup>73</sup> Peter Martin, “How China is defending its detention of Muslims to the world,” Bloomberg, April 20, 2019.

<sup>74</sup> Olsi Jazexhi, “The situation in Xinjiang: report on my latest visit to China: Part 1,” YouTube, August 25, 2019, video, 30:29. Olsi Jazexhi, “The situation in Xinjiang: report on my latest visit to China: Part 2,” YouTube, August 25, 2019, video, 32:51.

<sup>75</sup> “Albanian reporter’s fake news about Xinjiang against professional ethics: regional govt,” Global Times, December 3, 2019.

<sup>76</sup> Adile Ablet and Joshua Lipas, “Reports of China’s Repression in Xinjiang ‘100 Percent True’: Jordanian Journalist,” Radio Free Asia, September 12, 2019.

At the 41<sup>st</sup> session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in June of 2019, a senior XUAR official claimed that “many trainees have graduated from the centers and lived a happy life.”<sup>77</sup> In December 2019, XUAR Chairman Shorat Zakir announced that “[a]t present the trainees who have participated . . . have all graduated” and that “training” would continue “based on ‘independent will’ and ‘the freedom to come and go.’”<sup>78</sup> A Foreign Ministry spokeswoman said she could not give an exact number of people “participating” since it was “dynamic, there’s coming and going.”<sup>79</sup> Given the opacity of the situation on the ground it is difficult to know whether there has been a substantial number of people released, and if so, whether they have been replaced with new detainees. However, increasing evidence is emerging that large numbers of people are being transferred into forced labor or the prison system.<sup>80</sup>

In the face of overwhelming evidence about the nature of the camps system, the Chinese government has escalated its disinformation campaign, going so far as to declare victory in 2019, with Foreign Minister Wang Yi announcing that China’s “just position has won overwhelming support from the international community.”<sup>81</sup> The CCP employs a multi-pronged approach to deflect criticism of the PRC’s human rights violations. Beijing promotes the idea that the camps in the Uyghur region are a humane and voluntary method for “de-radicalizing” entire populations, despite overwhelming evidence that they are extrajudicial detention centers aimed at forcible assimilation. The next section will analyze the international aspects of Beijing’s disinformation campaign—using international media as public

**Beijing promotes the idea that the camps in the Uyghur region are a humane and voluntary method for “de-radicalizing” entire populations, despite overwhelming evidence that they are extrajudicial detention centers aimed at forcible assimilation.**

<sup>77</sup> “Senior official addresses UN session on human rights protection achievements in Xinjiang” Xinhua, June 26, 2019.

<sup>78</sup> Cate Cadell “China says some held in Xinjiang camps have graduated, condemns US bill,” Reuters, December 8, 2019.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Naomi Conrad, Julia Bayer, Cherie Chen, “China convicts Uyghurs in sham trials at Xinjiang camps,” Deutsche Welle, June 8, 2020.

<sup>81</sup> “Wang Yi talks about 2019 China’s Diplomacy: Firmly defend our core national interests, Provide a strong support for achieving the two centenary goals,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Ireland, December 13, 2019.

relations platforms for the party-state as well as coopting foreign officials and scholars.

### The CCP’s Public Opinion Struggle in the International Arena

The CCP has extended its public opinion struggle beyond its own borders. The efforts of the Chinese government to ensure that the international community accepts its narrative about its actions in East Turkistan are an example of its efforts to increase its discourse power, meaning “the ability to voice ideas, concepts, propositions, and claims that are ‘respected and recognized by others.’”<sup>82</sup> Increasing the Chinese government’s influence over overseas media is major part of this effort. In addition to the expansion of Chinese official media overseas and creation of new China-owned foreign media outlets, the CCP seeks to place its official viewpoint in foreign media outlets and cultivate China-friendly foreign reporters, terming these efforts “borrowing a boat to go out to sea.”<sup>83</sup>

The UN remains a major focus for the Chinese government as it attempts to garner official support for its policies. As of June 2020, the only senior UN official to visit XUAR is Under-Secretary-General for the UN Counter-Terrorism Office Vladimir Voronkov, who traveled to Ürümqi and Beijing in June 2019. The UN office did not issue detailed information about the visit, saying only that he met local authorities in Ürümqi, and gave a briefing on the implementation of the UN Global Counter-terrorism Strategy.<sup>84</sup> The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs took the opportunity to use the visit as a sign of approval for China’s policies, saying that the Under-Secretary “got to know Xinjiang’s

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<sup>82</sup> Nadège Rolland, “China’s Vision for a New World Order,” National Bureau of Asian Research, January 2020.

<sup>83</sup> Sarah Cook, “Beijing’s Global Megaphone: the Expansion of Chinese Communist Party Media Influence Since 2017,” Freedom House, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2020/beijings-global-megaphone>.

<sup>84</sup> “Mr. Voronkov Visit to China,” UN Office of Counterterrorism, June 15, 2019.

counterterrorism and deradicalization efforts on the ground through first-hand visits” and that the UN spoke highly of it.<sup>85</sup>

Following the condemnation of internment camps in the Uyghur region by 22 UN member-states at the 41<sup>st</sup> session of the UNHRC in 2019, China organized a letter applauding Beijing’s human rights record ultimately signed by 50 members, including a large number of authoritarian states and members of the “Like-Minded Group,” a block which seeks to “deflect criticism of its members, and to promote a view of human rights as centered in state sovereignty and economic development.”<sup>86</sup> The letter repeated the Chinese narrative, stating that “[f]aced with the grave challenge of terrorism and extremism, China has undertaken a series of counter-terrorism and de-radicalization measures in the Uyghur region, including setting up vocational education and training centers.”<sup>87</sup>

Government officials from various states have made public statements praising the PRC’s policies. Vadim Pisarevich, deputy permanent representative of Belarus to the UN Office at Geneva, told *Xinhua* that these policies have “contributed to ‘regional and global stability’ by uprooting terrorists’ influence on the young people.”<sup>88</sup> The Chinese official media has claimed that officials from the Philippines, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bahrain, and Nigeria said it is worth learning from the “successful experience” of Xinjiang.<sup>89</sup> Despite the persecution of ethnic Kazakhs in East Turkistan, including Kazakhstani citizens, Kazakhstan Foreign Minister Beibut Atamkulov said in March 2019 that his country “understands and supports the measures” being taken in Xinjiang in order to eradicate terrorism.<sup>90</sup> Kazakhstan has taken

<sup>85</sup> Foreign Ministry of the People’s Republic of China “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang’s Regular Press Conference on June 17, 2019,” *China Daily*, June 24, 2019.

<sup>86</sup> Elizabeth Chen and Roie Yellinek, “The ‘22 vs. 50’ Diplomatic Split Between the West and China Over Xinjiang and Human Rights” *China Brief* 19, no. 22 (2019): Accessed June 17, 2020.

<sup>87</sup> Michelle Nichols, “Saudi Arabia Defends Letter Backing China’s Xinjiang Policy,” *Reuters*, July 18, 2019.

<sup>88</sup> Yang Yi, “Interview: Vocational Education and Training Centers in Xinjiang Impact Positively on Youth: Belarusian Diplomat,” *Xinhua*, June 27, 2019.

<sup>89</sup> Hua Xia, “China Focus: Diplomats from 7 Countries Visit Xinjiang,” *Xinhua*, August 23, 2019.

<sup>90</sup> RFE/RL’s Kazakh Service, “China’s Kazakh Ambassador Angrily Rejects Xinjiang Crackdown Allegations,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 28, 2019.

actions to silence activists campaigning against the crackdown in East Turkistan.<sup>91</sup>

Pakistan, a key ally to the PRC in South Asia and the Muslim world, has consistently dismissed reports of repression in the Uyghur region.<sup>92</sup> Mohammad Faisal, a spokesperson for Pakistan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has echoed China’s rhetoric that “some section [*sic*] of foreign media are trying to sensationalise the matter by spreading false information.”<sup>93</sup> Mumtaz Zahra Baloch, Minister at the Embassy of Pakistan in China, after a state-sponsored trip to the region in December 2019, said, “[d]uring this visit, I did not find any instance of forced labour or cultural and religious repression.”<sup>94</sup> She went on to state that students and imams whom she had met expressed that they had freedom of religion in the region. One Pakistani politician suggested China’s methods there could be emulated in Balochistan.<sup>95</sup>

China has been successful in gathering support in the Muslim world. Chinese state media quoted Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia as saying during a February 2019 meeting with Xi Jinping that the Chinese government had the “right to carry out anti-terrorism” work.<sup>96</sup> President Xi Jinping called for the strengthening of joint “counter-terrorism” efforts at the same meeting.<sup>97</sup> Even the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the multilateral body mandated to protect the interests of Muslims, issued a resolution in 2019 commending

**The Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the multilateral body mandated to protect the interests of Muslims, issued a resolution in 2019 commending China’s treatment of its Muslim citizens and “look[ing] forward to further cooperation.”**

<sup>91</sup> Agence France-Presse, “Xinjiang Activist Freed in Kazakh Court After Agreeing to Stop Campaigning,” *The Guardian*, August 16, 2019.

<sup>92</sup> Alexandra Ma, “China Abruptly stopped calling out China’s mass oppression of Muslims. Critics say Beijing bought its silence,” *Business Insider*, January 13, 2019.

<sup>93</sup> Agence France-Presse, “Muslim Pakistan Says Outcry Over China’s Xinjiang Detention Camps Has Been ‘Sensationalised,’” *South China Morning Post*, December 20, 2018.

<sup>94</sup> Press Trust of India, “No Cultural, Religious Repression of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang: Pak Diplomat,” *Business Standard*, January 24, 2019.

<sup>95</sup> Jan Achakzai, “Balochistan Can Copy Xinjiang as Uplift Model,” *The News International*, December 7, 2019.

<sup>96</sup> Josie Ensor, “Saudi Crown Prince Defends China’s Right to Put Uighur Muslims in Concentration Camps,” *The Telegraph*, February 22, 2019.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

China’s treatment of its Muslim citizens and “look[ing] forward to further cooperation.”<sup>98</sup>

China has successfully used journalists from many countries, including Muslim-majority nations, to spread its messaging as well. Journalists and senior editors from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Kyrgyzstan, Iran, Yemen, Indonesia, Malaysia, and other Muslim countries were taken on official tours of the Uyghur region, with many quoted by official Chinese media praising XUAR policies. Tours did not feature trips to the “vocational education and training centers” until late 2018. Guests on one tour for senior editors hosted by the SCIO in July 2018 focused on the development of the region and not on the crackdown, featuring a tour of a logistics center for Europe-bound freight trains.<sup>99</sup> By 2019 tours of the camps became the centerpieces of these visits. Abdulaziz Raddad A. Alrabie, editor for the Saudi newspaper *Okaz*, said that the “vocational education and training centers” were in no way comparable to “concentration camps,” but were transforming religious extremists.<sup>100</sup> Meanwhile, some Malaysian and Indonesian journalists compared terrorism threats in their countries to that in China.<sup>101</sup> Hashemi Seyedeh Sepideh Seyed Hashem of the *Iranian Students’ New Agency* said that it was refreshing to see that people were “free to choose their religious beliefs.”<sup>102</sup>

The CCP uses the international media as a platform for its officials to make statements, and has frequently done so to defend its policies. For example, in September 2018, a Chinese official placed an op-ed in the *Jakarta Post* broadly dismissing criticisms of human rights abuses.<sup>103</sup> In February 2019, the Chinese embassy in Kuala Lumpur took out a full-page advertisement in the Malaysian English-language outlet *The Star*

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<sup>98</sup> Council of Foreign Ministers, “Resolutions on Muslim Minorities in the Non-OIC Member States,” Organization of Islamic Cooperation, March 1, 2019.

<sup>99</sup> Yu Rou, “Xinjiang Impresses Senior Editors of Foreign Media,” Xinhua, July 29, 2018.

<sup>100</sup> Yu Rou, “China Focus: Journalists From 24 Countries Visit Xinjiang,” Xinhua, July 23, 2019.

<sup>101</sup> China Daily, “Indonesian, Malaysian Journalists Visit Xinjiang,” China Daily, March 2, 2019.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> FMT Reporters, “Chinese Embassy Takes Up Full-Page Ad to Show It ‘Cares’ for Uighurs,” Free Malaysia Today News, February 1, 2019.

stating that ethno-religious rights are protected in the region and claiming that reports of human rights abuses are the result of “certain people [who] have started a smear campaign.”<sup>104</sup> In December 2019 an op-ed by Ambassador to Malaysia Bai Tian was published in English, Malaysian, and Chinese-language newspapers.<sup>105</sup> In a letter published in August 2018 by the *Financial Times*, Ambassador of the PRC to the UK Liu Xiaoming stated China’s actions were based on three principles: equality of ethnic minorities, freedom of religion, and combating religious extremism.<sup>106</sup>

In October 2019, Liu also stated in an interview for *Sky News* that the measures China is taking “are part of the UN early prevention action to prevent terrorism,” possibly referring to the policies recommended in the 2015 Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism.<sup>107</sup> Statements made by Cheng Xueyuan, PRC ambassador to Sri Lanka, and published in a July 2019 article in Sri Lanka’s *Colombo Gazette* are an example of a Chinese official opportunistically presenting a narrative of an international shared terrorist threat and calling for security and law enforcement cooperation.<sup>108</sup> Chinese Ambassador to Australia Cheng Jingye stated policies in the XUAR were “not targeted at any religious group,” and compared them to Western nations’ counter-terrorism measures in an October 2019 interview published on the front page of *The Weekend Australian*.<sup>109</sup> China’s Ambassador to the US Cui Tiankai used the same talking points

<sup>104</sup> Xiao Qian, “Xinjiang, What a Wonderful Place,” *The Jakarta Post*, September 25, 2018.

<sup>105</sup> Amy Chew, “In Malaysia, China’s PR Blitz on Uyghurs in Xinjiang Sparks Anger,” *South China Morning Post*, December 20, 2019.

<sup>106</sup> Liu Xiaoming, “Harmony in Xinjiang is Based on Three Principles,” *Financial Times*, August 20, 2018.

<sup>107</sup> “Alleged Uighur Detention Camps Are ‘Not True’ Says Chinese Ambassador to UK,” *Sky News*, October 1, 2019; “Ambassador Liu Xiaoming Gives Exclusive Live Interview on Sky News Tonight,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, October 2, 2019; “Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism: Report of the Secretary-General,” United Nations General Assembly, December 24, 2015.

<sup>108</sup> Colombo Gazette Staff, “China Seeks Sri Lanka’s Support as Allegations Mount on Xinjiang Issue,” *Colombo Gazette*, July 20, 2019.

<sup>109</sup> Ben Packham, “Our Economic Miracle Delivers Aussie Dream, Says Chinese Ambassador,” *The Weekend Australian*, October 1, 2019; Sophie McNeill (@Sophiemcneill), “Shameful. Chinese ambassador on front page of the @australian claiming the detention of up to 2 million...” *Twitter*, September 30, 2019, 8:04PM.

in interviews with US media outlets such as *NPR* and *Axios on HBO* in 2019 and 2020.<sup>110</sup>

Visits to universities present another platform for the PRC’s official narrative of its policies, including presenting them as a poverty alleviation strategy. In 2019, the University of British Columbia hosted Yu Jiantuo, assistant secretary of the China Development Research Foundation, a State Council think tank. Yu defended the internment camps in the region, saying that they were aimed at eliminating the “lack of social and economic opportunities” among Uyghurs in the area.<sup>111</sup> Also in 2019, the Institute of Asian Research at the UBC School of Public Policy and Global Affairs hosted controversial Tsinghua economics professor Hu Angang, whose work on China’s ethnic policies has been associated with the ongoing forcible assimilation campaign by analysts like James Liebold.<sup>112</sup>

Beyond placing officials’ statements in foreign media, the PRC also seeks to cultivate pro-Chinese voices among foreign journalists and commentators in order to gain more credibility with local audiences around the globe, and have already had some success. For example, in July 2019, Ravi Velloor, writing for the Singaporean *Straits Times*, referred to the CCP’s “re-education centers” as “rehabilitative.”<sup>113</sup> Ikenna Emewu, a Nigerian journalist and executive director of the Afri-China Media Centre, sought to justify the Chinese party-state’s actions in East Turkistan as “counter-terrorism” efforts in an October 2019 article, drawing parallels to threats of terrorism in various African countries, such as Nigeria, Algeria, Egypt, Mali, and Somalia.<sup>114</sup> An article titled “Trainees or detainees?” in Thai outlet *The Nation* struck a neutral tone but uncritically described

**The PRC also seeks to cultivate pro-Chinese voices among foreign journalists and commentators in order to gain more credibility with local audiences around the globe.**

<sup>110</sup> “Transcript: NPR’s Interview With China’s Ambassador To The U.S.,” NPR, October 1, 2019; Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian and Jonathan Swan, “Top Chinese official disowns U.S. military lab coronavirus conspiracy,” *Axios*, March 22, 2020;

<sup>111</sup> Joanna Chiu, “Chinese Official Defends Xinjiang Detention Camps for Muslims at UBC Vancouver Campus Talk,” *The Toronto Star*, October 11, 2019.

<sup>112</sup> Jeremy Nuttall, “UBC Defends Decision to Host Chinese Academic Accused of Promoting Ideas That Led to Internment of Muslims,” *The Toronto Star*, May 28, 2019; James Liebold, “The Spectre of Insecurity: The CCP’s Mass Internment Strategy in Xinjiang,” *China Leadership Monitor*, March 1, 2019.

<sup>113</sup> Ravi Velloor, “Speaking of Asia: Inside Those Uighur Re-Education Camps,” *The Straits Times*, July 5, 2019.

<sup>114</sup> Ikenna Emewu, “China, UN, Xinjiang Terrorism Challenge and the World,” *E-Nigeria*, October 16, 2019.

individual cases of Uyghur “trainees” and how they had been “de-radicalized” through “voluntary courses” at “centers” with minimal security.<sup>115</sup>

The CCP recognizes that local voices are more credible to audiences in their countries and is making increasing efforts to cultivate those voices through journalist trainings and exchanges, as well as through establishing Chinese-owned local media platforms around the globe. In so doing, the CCP seeks not only to promote its own line on issues such as human rights but also to suppress opposing voices. A columnist for South Africa’s second largest media company, Independent Media, refused to publish a column on the Uyghur crisis and subsequently canceled author Azad Essa’s column.<sup>116</sup> Chinese state firms own 20% of the outlet, and the incident suggests that those state firms exercise control over what is published directly or through self-censorship.<sup>117</sup>

**The Chinese government’s public opinion campaign is already proving somewhat effective, at least at providing states that wish to continue business as usual with China a narrative to serve as a pretext for doing so.**

The Chinese government’s public opinion campaign is already proving somewhat effective, at least at providing states that wish to continue business as usual with China a narrative to serve as a pretext for doing so. Not only have foreign diplomats and scholars made statements in favor of the CCP’s actions in the region, the international media and universities have become platforms for CCP propaganda. Scholars from across the Muslim world, Africa, and Europe have reiterated false claims that China is using internment camps solely to combat religious extremism among members of its Muslim-majority ethnic groups. This international disinformation campaign is furthered by the use of social media as a means of disseminating false narratives, as analyzed in the next section.

<sup>115</sup> Jintana Panyaarvudh, “Trainees or Detainees?,” *The Nation Thailand*, July 8, 2019.

<sup>116</sup> Azad Essa, “China Is Buying the African Media’s Silence,” *Foreign Policy*, September 14 2018.

<sup>117</sup> *ibid.*

## SOCIAL MEDIA

Numerous analysts have concluded that the CCP is becoming increasingly savvy about the use of new media platforms.<sup>118</sup> In the wake of the coronavirus crisis, China has become more aggressive in utilizing social media, including through bot networks and other disinformation techniques. Platforms blocked in China such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as domestic platforms including WeChat and Douyin, have become an important new front in the “public opinion struggle” vis-à-vis the Uyghur human rights crisis.

*Global Times* and other media outlets have used paid promotion of their stories on foreign social media platforms as one technique to increase views of Chinese official narrative. Between June and August of 2019, *Global Times* promoted more than 50 English tweets on the social media platform, including stories obscuring the reality of the internment camps.<sup>119</sup> Stories promoted on Twitter manufactured an image of a benevolent China seeking to develop “less advanced” regions, such as one story featuring a video of Chinese government officials delivering medical supplies to elderly Uyghur individuals.<sup>120</sup> Increasing numbers of bots on Twitter that promote the narrative of “fighting terrorism” and spread state-commissioned videos, such as a short documentary by CGTN titled “The Black Hand – ETIM and Terrorism in Xinjiang” (2019), have also been noted by users.<sup>121</sup> Twitter and Facebook suspended numerous fake

**Platforms blocked in China such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as domestic platforms including WeChat and Douyin, have become an important new front in the “public opinion struggle” vis-à-vis the Uyghur human rights crisis.**

<sup>118</sup> Karina Barbesino and Kristine Lee, “Challenging China’s Bid for App Dominance,” Center for a New American Security, January 22, 2020; Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, “China takes a page from Russia’s disinformation playbook,” *Axios*, March 25, 2020.

<sup>119</sup> Ryan Gallagher, “Twitter Helped Chinese Government Promote Disinformation on Repression of Uighurs,” *The Intercept*, August 19, 2019.

<sup>120</sup> The Global Times (@globaltimesnews), “Why the elders in burst into tears? Since China has implemented poverty alleviation through medical service...,” Twitter, July 4, 2019, 10:36PM.

<sup>121</sup> Elise Thomas (@elisethoma5), “Bots bots bots bots bots bots bots bots... Inauthentic accounts are continuing to push...,” Twitter, December 8, 2019, 9:50PM; Josh Russell (@josh\_emerson), “Overall I ended up collecting 690 bots;,” Twitter, August 19, 2019, 7:49AM.



Some European politicians and media workers have tried to defend terrorist activities in [#Xinjiang](#). Their hands are in a way soiled with the blood of the Chinese people who died in violent attacks: [@HuXijin\\_GT](#) [#VideoFromChina](#)



Why the elders in burst into tears? Since China has implemented poverty alleviation through medical service in NW China's [#Xinjiang](#), local residents have access to high-quality medical care and affordable medicines. [bit.ly/32bQQGa](https://bit.ly/32bQQGa)



Examples of rhetoric on Uyghurs from the Global Times on Twitter (July 2019, @globaltimesnews).

accounts linked to attacks on Hong Kong protestors in August 2019.<sup>122</sup> In June 2020 Twitter deleted 23,750 core accounts and approximately 150,000 amplifier accounts “involved in a range of manipulative and coordinated activities” and “Tweeting predominantly in Chinese languages and spreading geopolitical narratives favorable to the Communist Party of China (CCP).”<sup>123</sup>

Official Chinese media outlets also promote articles on Facebook, including targeting users in India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Central Asian states.<sup>124</sup> Promoted stories include attempts to soften the image of the

<sup>122</sup> Zak Doffman, “China Backlash: Facebook And Twitter Warned ‘You Could Lose Billions in Revenue’: Report,” *Forbes*, August 21, 2019; Emily Feng, “How China Uses Twitter and Facebook To Share Disinformation About Hong Kong,” *NPR*, August 20, 2019.

<sup>123</sup> Twitter Safety, “Disclosing networks of state-linked information operations we’ve removed,” *Twitter Blog*, June 12, 2020.

<sup>124</sup> “White Paper: Xinjiang’s Vocational Education and Training Centers Never Interfere in the Freedom of Religious Belief.” Published on Facebook, *CGTN*. August 16, 2019 [inactive]. “‘What We Saw During the Visit Was Opposite to Some Western Media Reports, and Xinjiang is Seeking an Effective Way to Counter Extremism and Terrorism,’ said the Malaysian Diplomat.” Published on Facebook, *CGTN*. January 9, 2019 [inactive].

camps,<sup>125</sup> such as assertions that the camps do not interfere with religious freedom in any way.<sup>126</sup> They originally appeared without a disclaimer but were eventually disabled due to Facebook’s new policies on political content.

It is not only through promoting its own narratives that the Chinese authorities seek to win the public opinion struggle; silencing critics and suppressing damaging information are central parts of its disinformation campaign. With few exceptions, Chinese social media platforms remain the only platforms accessible inside China. Douyin, the Chinese market version of TikTok, is used as a platform by the Propaganda Bureau, and like all Chinese media is strictly monitored. Uyghurs in the diaspora have been using videos circulated by Douyin users located in East Turkistan as a way to glean information about the on-the-ground situation. In the summer of 2019, short videos of Uyghurs crying or looking mournful in front of photos of their presumably disappeared family members were posted on the platform, which Uyghur activists in the diaspora interpreted as a silent protest of the mass detention, in stark contrast to the “positive energy” portrayed in the Chinese media.<sup>127</sup> Many of the videos were later deleted, or the accounts that posted them disabled.<sup>128</sup>

<sup>125</sup> Sigal Samuel, “China Paid Facebook and Twitter to Help Spread Anti-Muslim Propaganda,” Vox, August 22, 2019.

<sup>126</sup> Ryan Mac, “These New Facebook Ads from Chinese State Media Want You to Believe Xinjiang’s Muslim Internment Camps Are Just Great,” BuzzFeed News, August 20, 2019.

<sup>127</sup> Arslan Hidayat, (@arslan\_hidayat), “This brave #Uyghur #Muslim girl, still resides in #Xinjiang aka #EastTurkestan is indicating that four of her relatives are in #China’s #ConcentrationCamps...,” Twitter, August 18, 2019, 7:06AM.

<sup>128</sup> Eva Dou and Philip Wen, “Uighurs Use Videos to Draw Attention to Missing Family Members,” Wall Street Journal, August 19, 2019.



Screenshots of videos posted to Douyin in the summer of 2019, interpreted by the Uyghur diaspora as a silent protest.

**The CCP is attempting to use its closed internet ecosystem to create an information vacuum that its propaganda can fill.**

The CCP is attempting to use its closed internet ecosystem to create an information vacuum that its propaganda can fill. Uyghurs outside of China have found numerous Douyin videos that reveal aspects of some of the major issues that dominate news headlines about the Uyghur crisis, including securitization, forced assimilation, and orphanages, but the process of systematically searching those videos is made difficult by the fact that keywords related to Xinjiang are often censored.<sup>129</sup> Users report being unable to use the Uyghur language on the platform; all languages other than Mandarin are discouraged in order to ensure an easier environment for censors to operate in.<sup>130</sup>

In addition to preventing users within China from posting any information that might undermine “positive energy,” there are concerns that this might affect overseas users as well,

<sup>129</sup> Isobel Cockerell, “How TikTok opened a window into the Chinese police state,” CodaStory, September 25, 2019.

<sup>130</sup> Isobel Cockerell, “Xinjiang’s TikTok Wipes Away Evidence of Uyghur Persecution- Coda Follows Up,” CodaStory, January 24, 2020.; Markus Sherman, “Is China’s TikTok Equivalent Banning People from Speaking Cantonese?,” Radium, April 3, 2020.

although the company claims that there is no overlap in content management between the Chinese and overseas versions of the app. In November 2019, Feroza Aziz, an American high school student, was banned from TikTok shortly after she posted a video highlighting the Uyghur human rights crisis under the guise of a makeup tutorial.<sup>131</sup> A TikTok spokesperson denied that Aziz had been censored over her video on the Uyghurs, asserting she was banned for an earlier video in which she had satirically mentioned Osama bin Laden.<sup>132</sup> While TikTok eventually apologized for the incident, analysts remain concerned about the platform’s content guidelines.<sup>133</sup>

The Chinese government also uses indirect pressure to prevent the spread of unapproved narratives on social media. On December 13, 2019, soccer star Mesut Özil posted a tweet condemning treatment of the Uyghurs, drawing a large amount of attention to the issue.<sup>134</sup> Chinese authorities retaliated by not broadcasting his team’s matches inside China.<sup>135</sup> NetEase deleted him from a Chinese version of a soccer video game and released a statement that read, “The speech hurt the feelings of Chinese fans and violated the sports spirit of love and peace. We do not understand, accept or forgive this!”<sup>136</sup> Özil’s team, Arsenal, released a statement on Weibo saying it “has always adhered to the principle of not involving itself in politics.”<sup>137</sup>

<sup>131</sup> Leo Kelion, “Teen’s TikTok video about China’s Muslim camps goes viral,” BBC News, November 26, 2019.

<sup>132</sup> Lily Kuo, “TikTok ‘Makeup Tutorial’ Goes Viral with Call to Action on China’s Treatment of Uighurs,” The Guardian, November 26, 2019; Tanya Basu, “This Girl’s TikTok ‘Makeup’ Video Went Viral for Discussing the Uighur Crisis,” MIT Technology Review, November 27, 2019.

<sup>133</sup> Lily Kuo, “TikTok sorry for blocking teenager who disguised Xinjiang video as make-up tutorial,” The Guardian, November 28, 2019; Sam Biddle, Tatiana Dias, and Paulo Victor Ribeiro, “Invisible Censorship: TikTok Told Moderators to Suppress Posts by ‘Ugly’ People and the Poor to Attract New Users,” The Intercept, March 16, 2020.

<sup>134</sup> Mesut Özil (@MesutOzil1088), “#HayırlıCumalarDoğuTürkistan,” Twitter, December 13, 2019, 5:50AM.

<sup>135</sup> John Sinnott, “Chinese state media pulls TV coverage of Arsenal game after Mesut Ozil shows Uyghur support,” CNN, December 16, 2019.

<sup>136</sup> Lawrence Ostlere, “Mesut Ozil deleted from Chinese version of PES 2020 after comments on treatment of Uighur Muslims,” The Independent, December 18, 2019.

<sup>137</sup> Nick Ames, “Arsenal distance themselves from Mesut Özil comments on Uighurs’ plight,” The Guardian, December 13, 2019.

## PROPAGANDA BLITZ

In November 2019, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) published classified CCP materials that had been obtained by Uyghur exiles. These documents, dubbed the “China Cables,” include a memo on how to maintain the camps, daily bulletins from a regional party committee, and a court judgment about a Uyghur individual who had been sentenced on vague charges of inciting separatism and violence.<sup>138</sup> The telegram laid out protocols on how to keep the facilities a secret, when internees are permitted to use the toilets, propaganda methods, methods to prevent escapes, and how to control disease outbreaks within the camps.<sup>139</sup> They were originally leaked by an anonymous government official.<sup>140</sup> China Cables leak was followed by another official document leaked by the same whistleblower in February 2020, a list of detainees in Qaraqash County, referred to by UHRP as the Qaraqash Document and by the media as the “Karakax List.”<sup>141</sup> It is highly unusual for confidential documents to leak from the Chinese government; the actions of the whistleblower may suggest frustration among some officials with what is taking place in East Turkistan.

The leak of these documents constituted a major blow to Chinese government efforts to keep the existence and nature of the camps system secret. In response, government mouthpieces immediately launched a propaganda blitz, reverting to the tactic of outright denial. When publicly asked about the documents in London, PRC Ambassador to the UK Liu Xiaoming stated: “I can categorically deny there is such a document. It is sheer, pure

**In response [to the leaked documents], government mouthpieces immediately launched a propaganda blitz, reverting to the tactic of outright denial.**

<sup>138</sup> Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, “Exposed: China’s Operating Manuals for Mass Internment and Arrest by Algorithm,” *The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists*, November 24, 2019.

<sup>139</sup> Nik Martin, “China: Extreme Brainwashing at Uighur Prison Camps Exposed in New Leak,” *Deutsche Welle*, November 24, 2019;

<sup>140</sup> Gabriel Crossley and John Ruwitch, “More Secrets of China’s Xinjiang Camps Leaked to Foreign Media,” *Reuters*, November 25, 2019.

<sup>141</sup> Uyghur Human Rights Project, “Ideological Transformation: Records of Mass Detention from Qaraqash, Hotan,” Uyghur Human Rights Project, February 2020; Adrian Zenz, “The Karakax List: Dissecting the Anatomy of Beijing’s Internment Drive in Xinjiang,” *Journal of Political Risk* 8, No. 2 (2020): Accessed June 18, 2020,

fabrication.”<sup>142</sup> The PRC Embassy in London, in a statement published by *The Guardian*, asserted, “[t]he so-called leaked documents are pure fabrication and fake news. There are many authoritative documents in China for the reference of Chinese and foreign media want to know more about the vocational education and training centres.”<sup>143</sup> By way of “documents,” the statement only mentioned white papers published by the State Council Information Office.

Official Chinese media likewise promoted assertions that the Qaraqash Document was a “hoax,” and “fabricated by East Turkistan terrorist forces.”<sup>144</sup> While the list remained confidential, with only a small redacted portion appearing in media reports and analysis, officials claimed that the individuals listed in it were “living normally,” other than a few who had been sent to “training.”<sup>145</sup> A video published by *China Daily* showed individuals whose names and details had not been made public, suggesting that the government had access to the document, lending further credibility to its authenticity.<sup>146</sup> Another video quotes an individual listed in the document as saying they speak with their family abroad regularly. Overseas Uyghurs whose family members’ names appear on the list gave a different story, saying they had been unable to speak to their relatives for years.<sup>147</sup>

One *Global Times* article somewhat paradoxically maintains doubts over the Qaraqash Document’s authenticity but tries to justify the policies laid out in it, quoting an “expert” saying that the Western media “wrongly interpret the documents,” and that “collecting its citizens’ basic information is legal for national

**Overseas Uyghurs whose family members’ names appear on the list gave a different story, saying they had been unable to speak to their relatives for years.**

<sup>142</sup> “China Attacks Western Reporting on Xinjiang as ‘Pure Fabrication,’” *The Straits Times*, November 18, 2019.

<sup>143</sup> Embassy of China, London, “China’s Response to the Leaked Xinjiang Camp Cables,” *The Guardian*, November 24, 2019.

<sup>144</sup> “Officials: Xinjiang ‘name list’ terrorist hoax,” *China Daily*, February 24, 2020.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> China Daily (@ChinaDaily), “‘Don’t ruin my good life and willfully interfere in anything of us...’,” Twitter, February 23, 2020, 2:30AM; Adrian Zenz (@adrianzenz), “Breaking: Beijing shows that it has the #KarakaxList - independently from us...,” Twitter, February 23, 2020, 5:32AM.

<sup>147</sup> Nicole Bozorgmir and Isobel Yueng, “LEAK: Secret Documents Show How China Targets Muslims for ‘Re-Education’ Camps — and Spies on Their Families,” *VICE*, February 17, 2020.

governance around the world,” as are banning religious garments and restricting travel to certain countries.<sup>148</sup> The *Global Times* article even confirms some of the document’s details, claiming that to have found an individual who matched an entry in the document who told them he had “volunteered to study” because “he was infected with extremist ideas because of watching terrorism videos and he also violated the national family planning policy.”<sup>149</sup>

Some Chinese media reports attempt to undermine the credibility of Asiye Abdulaheb, a Uyghur living in the Netherlands who first received the leaked documents. In a story published on December 7, 2019, Asiye reported that she received death threats through messaging apps after receiving the documents and as journalists were preparing to report on them.<sup>150</sup> Her ex-husband reported that an old friend who worked for the courts contacted him and offered to pay for him to travel to Dubai so they could meet. Upon his arrival he was met with a delegation of Chinese state security agents who likewise threatened him, attempting to recruit him as a spy and showing him threatening footage of his family members back home.<sup>151</sup> A *Global Times* article published on December 9, 2019 suggested that by coming forward as the transmitter of the documents (not the ultimate whistleblower as the article suggests), Asiye has tempted “some dark forces” to “threaten her personal safety and frame the Chinese government.” Those who had “incentive to harm her” are U.S. intelligence agencies, “Xinjiang secessionist forces” and the Western media, it added.<sup>152</sup> Media reports have likewise attacked scholars engaged in analysis of the situation, for instance quoting an unnamed “Xinjiang spokesman” as saying that

<sup>148</sup> “Leaked’ Xinjiang files likely cooked up by foreign intel agencies,” *Global Times*, February 18, 2020.

<sup>149</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> Marije Vlaskamp, “Beijing’s Big Secret Was on Her Laptop,” *de Volkskrant*, December 18, 2019.

<sup>151</sup> Claire Moses, Elian Peltier, and Edward Wong, “I Have Told Everything,’ Says Whistle-Blower in China Crackdown,” *New York Times*, December 7, 2019; Marije Vlaskamp, “Beijing’s Big Secret Was on Her Laptop,” *de Volkskrant*, December 18, 2019.

<sup>152</sup> “Abdulaheb should be wary of risks from the West,” *Global Times*, December 9, 2019.

Adrian Zenz and Darren Byler “work for the U.S. intelligence agency.”<sup>153</sup>

The examples of Chinese state response to document leaks in the Western press are part of a noticeable increase in stories on XUAR in the official Chinese media aimed at foreigners. Short documentaries and video news reports released after the leak of the China Cables appear to have been a direct response to the negative news. The *China Global Television Network* (CGTN), the primary state-owned broadcast network aimed at foreign audiences, released multiple videos on YouTube, another site blocked within China, to make the situation in the XUAR synonymous with separatism and religious extremism.<sup>154</sup> CGTN also released two documentaries, “Fighting Terrorism in Xinjiang,” on December 5, 2019 and “The Black Hand – ETIM and Terrorism in Xinjiang” on December 7, to bolster the terrorism narrative.<sup>155</sup> An editorial released by CGTN on December 9 complained that no mainstream Western media had covered the documentaries even though they led “many internet users” to wonder, “are these blood-tinted terrorist acts the ‘human rights’ that the United States government is working so hard to protect?”<sup>156</sup> The documentaries may also be intended in part as a response to the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act, saying they “helped to clear the facts about the situation in Xinjiang,” after the bill’s passage in the House that same month.

Despite the authorities’ efforts, important developments in the Uyghur human rights crisis continue to come to light. In turn, foreign-facing Chinese media continue an attempt to refute the irrefutable. An April 30, 2020 *China Daily* article quotes a XUAR official accusing the April 2020 *PBS* documentary “China Undercover” of hiring actors and distorting interviews “in order

**Despite the authorities’ efforts, important developments in the Uyghur human rights crisis continue to come to light. In turn, foreign-facing Chinese media continue an attempt to refute the irrefutable.**

<sup>153</sup> “Scholars spreading rumors about Uyghur detention work for US intel agency: spokesperson,” *Global Times*, December 3, 2019.

<sup>154</sup> AFP and Online Reporters, “China Launches Propaganda Blitz Over Xinjiang Camps,” *Bangkok Post*, December 9, 2019.

<sup>155</sup> Erin Handley, “Safe and Sound? China Launches Propaganda Blitz to Discredit Uyghur #StillNoInfo Campaign,” *ABC*, January 17, 2020.

<sup>156</sup> “Why are western media silent on China’s documentaries on Xinjiang?,” *CGTN*, December 10, 2019.

to catch eyes and blacken Xinjiang.”<sup>157</sup> The same article attempted to refute UHRP’s April 2020 report on the issue of the Chinese government refusing to renew the passports of Uyghurs living overseas.<sup>158</sup>

## HOSTAGE PROPAGANDA

Since the escalation of the human rights crisis in 2017, large numbers of Uyghurs residing overseas have come forward to testify about their missing relatives. In some prominent cases, the Chinese authorities have responded, releasing what are in essence proof-of-life videos. In other cases, Uyghurs featured in these videos denounce their overseas relatives who have spoken out. Like other facets of the recent propaganda campaign, the number of videos has increased in 2020.

One of the earliest proof-of-life videos was of popular folk singer Abdurehim Heyit, who had been detained in March 2017 on unknown charges.<sup>159</sup> He was reported dead in the Turkish media in February 2019, causing an outcry and response from the Turkish government as well as from people around the world.<sup>160</sup> *China Radio International’s* Turkish-language service released a 25-second video on February 10, 2019 in which Mr. Heyit says that he had not been abused and is “being investigated for allegedly violating the national laws.”<sup>161</sup> No details of his “crime” are revealed in the video, though a Foreign Ministry spokeswoman said he was accused of endangering state security.<sup>162</sup>

The video led to the #MeTooUyghur campaign, in which Uyghurs demanded the Chinese government release proof that

<sup>157</sup> Aybek Ashkar and Jia Cui, “Xinjiang denies report about passports for Uyghurs,” *China Daily*, April 3, 2020.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> Kurban Niyaz, “Prominent Uyghur Musician Arrested Amid Ideological Purge in Xinjiang,” *RFA*, November 2, 2017.

<sup>160</sup> “Statement of the Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Hami Aksoy, in response to a question regarding serious human rights violations perpetrated against Uighur Turks and the passing away of folk poet Abdurehim Heyit,” Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, February 9, 2019.

<sup>161</sup> Lily Kuo, “China releases video of Uighur poet said to have died in custody,” *The Guardian*, February 11, 2019.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

their loved ones were still alive as well. In several prominent cases, the authorities have responded by using family members in their propaganda campaign. The family members of Uyghurs who have testified about their experience in the camps have been brought out to attack the characters of their relatives. In other cases, Uyghurs who have had relatives testify to their disappearance have appeared in videos posted by state media telling their family members to cease speaking out.

A video published by the *Global Times* in January 2020 features two granddaughters and one son of prominent Uyghur rights advocate and former President of the World Uyghur Congress Rebiya Kadeer. The relatives praise the government’s actions in the region, condemning Ms. Kadeer’s “misdeeds” and urging her to stop defaming the CCP.<sup>163</sup> The granddaughters appear in the video praising Ürümchi’s infrastructure and luxury malls, while the son appears in a mosque claiming worshippers can go to it freely and praising its heating and air-conditioning system. Ms. Kadeer has stated that over 30 of her relatives have disappeared, and she remains concerned for their wellbeing.<sup>164</sup>

Camp survivors’ relatives have been used to smear their family members overseas. Mirighul Tursun’s mother appeared in a March 2019 *CGTN* video claiming that Mihrigul’s deceased son was alive in Egypt.<sup>165</sup> The report asserted that Mirighul was in fear for her safety in the United States; her brother appears in the report showing a text message he allegedly received from her, written in Chinese, which the report suggested showed she was being threatened. This is similar to the report suggesting that Asiye Abdulaheb might have released the Qaraqash Document due to “threats” in the Netherlands.

Shortly after Sayragul Sauytbay received the Women of Courage Award in March 2020, her sisters appeared in a *Global*

**Uyghurs who have had relatives testify to their disappearance have appeared in videos posted by state media telling their family members to cease speaking out.**

<sup>163</sup> Liu Xin, “Xinjiang Busts Secessionist Rumors, Shows Transparency,” *Global Times*, January 11, 2020.

<sup>164</sup> “Urgent Action Update: Uyghur Activist’s 30 Relatives Still Detained,” Amnesty International, July 15, 2019; Rebiya Kadeer, “Rebiya Kadeer To Global Times: Why can’t you show all of my relatives that I am looking for?,” International Uyghur Human Rights and Democracy Foundation, January 11, 2020.

<sup>165</sup> Hui’ao Cui and Siyuan You, “Xinjiang Update: CGTN finds Mihrigul Tursun’s claims false,” *CGTN*, March 14, 2019.

*Times* video attacking her character, with one of them saying that she hated Sayragul because she had cheated her out of money. The video goes on to show a man who stating that he had “been told she had many lovers, followed by a local Women’s Federation official stating she was “a degenerate member of all women. She is a real scumbag!”<sup>166</sup>

This type of character attack on Uyghurs who have spoken out has been going on for some time, and is often used against Uyghurs after they appear with US government officials or institutions. In November 2019, several articles appeared in the *Global Times* attacking Ferhat Jawdat, Zumrat Dawut, and Alapat Erkin, Uyghurs who had met with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, stating that their relatives “were ashamed of the scum among their families.”<sup>167</sup> While a video appeared showing Alapat Erkin’s mother and uncle, it did not show his father, whom he fears is in a camp.<sup>168</sup>



Screenshots from videos published by the *Global Times*. Left: Alapat Erkin’s uncle condemns his nephew for posting “rumors” on social media. Right: Rebiya Kadeer’s son praises government’s religion policy.

<sup>166</sup> *Global Times* (@globaltimesnews), “Sayragul Sauytbay, winner of US ‘Women of Courage Award’ is on the wanted list...” Twitter, March 12, 2020, 2:50AM.

<sup>167</sup> Fan Lingzhi and Liu Xin, “Relatives of so-called Uyghur activists slam Pompeo’s detention claim,” *Global Times*, November 11, 2019.

<sup>168</sup> Alfred\_Uyghur (@Alfred\_Uyghur), “And they still didn’t show my father, even his picture!! China, if you want to discredit me so much...” Twitter, November 16, 2019, 11:16PM.

The case of Ferhat Jawdat’s mother was a rare instance in which outside sources were able to verify the situation of a relative in East Turkistan. In late 2019, New York Times journalist Paul Mozur visited Mr. Jawdat’s mother in her home, where she confirmed she had been sent to a camp due to her relatives in the U.S., corroborating the reports of other survivors about the terrible conditions inside them. She told the reporter that after her son had spoken out, she was sent to a worse facility where she was tortured. The police broke up the interview, and Mr. Jawdat was later told that his mother would be killed if he released the recordings.<sup>169</sup>

Another case confirming that the Chinese government is issuing false statements on behalf of the relatives of Uyghurs living abroad is that of Australian citizen Saddam Abdusalam and his wife Nadila Wumaier, who is trapped in East Turkistan with their young son. On the Australian talk show *Q+A* in February 2020, Mr. Abdusalam asked the deputy chief of mission of the Chinese embassy why his wife and son were not allowed to join him in Australia. The official replied that China recognized neither their marriage nor their son’s Australian citizenship, and that regional officials said Nadila Wumaier had stated she did not wish to join her husband.<sup>170</sup> Following this, Nadila held up a sign during a video call with Mr. Abdusalam saying “I want to leave and be with my husband.”<sup>171</sup>

Several more cases of the Chinese government attempting to silence Uyghurs abroad by releasing videos of their relatives appeared in May 2020. On May 4, 2020, *China Daily* released a video of Uyghur historian Iminjan Seydin, appearing with his head shaved and having lost considerable weight. He had been arrested in 2017, and his daughter had obtained a document showing he had been secretly tried and sentenced to 15 years in

<sup>169</sup>Michael Babaro and Paul Mozour, “A Woman’s Journey Through China’s Detention Camps,” New York Times, December 9, 2019.

<sup>170</sup>Paul Johnson, “Fake news, censorship, coronavirus and racism: the testy relationship between China and Australia fires up Q+A,” Australian Broadcasting Corporation, February 24, 2020.

<sup>171</sup>Alan Weedon, “Uyghur mother of Australian son responds to Chinese diplomat’s Q+A comments,” ABC, February 25, 2020.

prison; his daughter was campaigning for his release.<sup>172</sup> In the video he says that his daughter was deceived by “anti-China forces,” and that he is living free.<sup>173</sup> Samira Imin was able to call him afterwards, and he told her he had not been in contact because he had been away for work and had not been using his phone.<sup>174</sup> She remains concerned for his wellbeing.<sup>175</sup> A video of Gulgine Tashmehmet, who disappeared after returning from her studies in Malaysia, was released on May 5, 2020 in response to her case being raised in a *PBS* documentary, showing her teaching English from home and buying beauty supplies.<sup>176</sup> Her sister Gulzira, who has been campaigning for her from her home in Germany, had received the first call from her family since 2017 a few days before. She believes her sister continues to be monitored.<sup>177</sup>

The exploitation of the relatives of Uyghurs for propaganda is yet another human rights abuse perpetrated by the Chinese government. These videos are an attempt to undermine Uyghur advocates in the diaspora, but only serve to raise further suspicions about the wellbeing of disappeared Uyghurs and the conditions on the ground in East Turkistan. The videos appear scripted and resemble China’s ongoing practice of airing forced confessions in the media. It remains to be seen whether this rapid pace of video releases will continue as the crisis in East Turkistan develops.

<sup>172</sup>Samira Imin (@SamiraImin), “This is a testimony for my father. Please help me rescue my father...,” Twitter, January 4, 2020, 2:41PM.

<sup>173</sup>China Daily (@ChinaDaily), “Recently, overseas anti-China forces deceived the daughter of Yiminjan Sedul...,” Twitter, May 4, 2020, 6:03AM.

<sup>174</sup>“Urgent Action: Uyghur Intellectual Reappears on State-Broadcast,” Amnesty International, May 11, 2020.

<sup>175</sup>Aysha Khan, “After advocating for his release, Uighur woman hears from father via Chinese media,” Religion News Service, May 6, 2020.

<sup>176</sup>China Daily (@ChinaDaily), “In a recent PBS documentary, Gulziyan Taxmamat, a member of “World Uyghur Congress”, claimed that...” Twitter, May 5, 2020, 2:30 AM.

<sup>177</sup>Gulchehre Hoja, “‘She Might be Out, But She’s Under Surveillance’: Sister of Uyghur Former Camp Detainee,” Radio Free Asia, May 5, 2020.



In a recent PBS documentary, Gulziyan Taxmamat, a member of “World Uyghur Congress”, claimed that her sister was detained after returning to China. In fact, her sister, Gulgina Taxmamat, now teaches English at a training institution and lives with her family. #Xinjiang



Recently, overseas anti-China forces deceived the daughter of Yiminjan Sedul, a retired teacher in #Xinjiang, into alleging that her father had been “illegally detained”. Here is what he wants to say to his daughter about the rumor.



Tweets posted by China Daily featuring videos of missing Uyghurs. Left: Gulgine Tashmemet addresses her sister. Right: Iminjan Seydin addresses his daughter (China Daily).

## CONCLUSION

The Chinese Communist Party has taken its “public opinion struggle” global, attempting to control the narrative on the human rights crisis in East Turkistan and frame the internment camps as “vocational training and education centers.” The campaign of disinformation has been orchestrated by institutions such as the United Front Work Department (UFWD), which has a leading role in matters of ethnicity and religion within the country’s borders, as well as the Propaganda Department and the media organs it controls. The Chinese government is increasing efforts to promote its official narrative inside and outside of China.

Reports aimed at foreign audiences by state-owned or controlled media frame the detention camps as “vocational

centers” which serve a legitimate purpose in a counter-terrorism campaign. Official media cites bias and double standards when countering concerns about human rights abuses. State-media reports and documentaries justifying the camps are based on a supposed widespread terrorist threat. Through 2019, the Chinese government sought to create an impression of international approval of its policies by inviting foreign government officials and journalists to visit the “vocational education and training centers” and promoting the visits through reports by state-owned news agencies such as *Xinhua* and *China Daily*. International critics have described these state-sponsored visits as highly choreographed, with access to sections of the camps as well as areas outside of them restricted. The goal of these staged visits is to fabricate an image of a government that respects human rights, in line with the image presented in State Council Information Office white papers.

Knowing that foreign interlocutors are more convincing to foreign audiences, the Chinese government has worked to partner with foreign government officials, journalists, and scholars to make statements and publish stories that parallel Chinese state media reports. Chinese officials seek platforms in the foreign media, particularly in countries where information on the Uyghurs may be lacking, in order to promote China’s narrative. The CCP has become increasingly confident in its use of new media, perhaps the most effective terrain to spread disinformation. This includes foreign social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter which are themselves banned in China, and Chinese platforms such as Douyin/TikTok.

China’s attempts to justify human rights abuses by promoting falsehoods constitute an issue international institutions must work to combat. Promoting its system of detention camps as a potential model for counter-terrorism poses a threat to human rights around the world. Concerned states, intergovernmental organizations, and civil society groups should press for access and transparency in East Turkistan, and make efforts to counter the spread and influence of false information.

**China’s attempts to justify human rights abuses by promoting falsehoods constitute an issue that international institutions must work to combat. Promoting its system of detention camps as a potential model for counter-terrorism poses a threat to human rights around the world.**

Media and civil society organizations should make efforts to ensure that factual information on the Uyghur crisis is available in a variety of languages. Inaction is one of the gravest threats to interned Uyghurs and other Turkic ethnic minorities in the PRC.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **To the Chinese government:**

- Formally close the internment camp system and release prisoners without repercussions.
- Allow the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to conduct transparent investigations in East Turkistan to determine facts on the ground.
- Allow unfettered access to journalists to East Turkistan without the presence of government minders.

### **To the US government:**

- Establish a U.S. commission to combat disinformation and propaganda campaigns.
- Urge the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to investigate intimidation, disinformation, and infiltration of the CCP in domestic affairs, particularly actions taken against the Uyghur diaspora population residing in the United States.
- Facilitate Uyghur testimony at the Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC), and schedule hearings on CCP disinformation campaigns.
- Urge social media companies to take further steps to counter domestic interference and disinformation on their platforms.
- Encourage universities to immediately cut ties with the Confucius Institute.

### **To other concerned governments:**

- Investigate the Chinese government’s intimidation of Uyghur diaspora communities and invoke domestic law where appropriate.

- Do not forcibly return Uyghurs, Kazakhs, or other Turkic Muslims to China, and take steps, where appropriate, to ensure migration agencies are fully aware of the conditions on the ground in East Turkistan.
- Urge the Chinese government to cooperate with the UN Human Rights Council and accept requested visits from UN Special Procedures.

**To social media companies:**

- Educate the general public on disinformation campaigns to better identify and report individual cases across their platforms.
- Increase the number third-party fact-checkers and establish a consider establishing a counter-disinformation department.
- Immediately cut ties with social media platforms and companies closely associated with the Chinese government.

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