

Singing from the CCP's songsheet

The role of foreign influencers in China's propaganda system

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Executive summary

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has always viewed contact with foreigners and the outside world as a double-edged sword, presenting both threats and opportunities. While the CCP and its nationalist supporters harbour fears of foreigners infiltrating China's information space and subtly 'setting the tempo' (带节奏) of discussions, the CCP also actively cultivates a rising group of foreign influencers with millions of fans, which endorses pro-CCP narratives on Chinese and global social-media platforms.

In the People's Republic of China (PRC), the information ecosystem is geared towards eliminating rival narratives and promoting the party's 'main melody' (主旋律)—the party's term for themes or narratives that promote its values, policies and ideology.¹ Foreign influencers who are amenable to being 'guided' towards voicing that main melody are increasingly considered to be valuable assets. They're seen as building the CCP's legitimacy for audiences at home, as well as supporting propaganda efforts abroad.

This report examines how a growing subset of foreign influencers, aware of the highly nationalistic online environment and strict censorship rules in China, is increasingly choosing to create content that aligns more explicitly with the CCP's 'main melody'.² In addition to highlighting the country's achievements in a positive light, these influencers are promoting or defending China's position on sensitive political issues, such as territorial disputes or human rights concerns.

As we outline in this report, foreign influencers are involved in a wave of experimentation and innovation in domestic (and external) propaganda production that's taking place at different levels around the PRC as officials heed Xi Jinping's call to actively participate in 'international communication'. That experimentation includes their use in the Propaganda Department's efforts to control global narratives about Covid-19 in China and the cultivation of Russian influencers in China to counter Western narratives.³ This research also reveals that the CCP is effectively co-opting a widespread network of international students at Chinese universities, cultivating them as a talent pool of young, multilingual, social-media-friendly influencers.

Foreign influencers are guided via rules, regulations and laws, as well as via platforms that direct traffic towards user-generated propaganda. Video competitions organised by propaganda organs and the amplification of party-state media and government spokespeople further encourage this trend. The resulting party-aligned content foreign influencers produce, coupled with that of party-state media workers masquerading as influencers and state-approved ethnic-minority influencers⁴ are part of a coordinated tactic referred to as 'polyphonous communication' (复调传播).⁵

By coordinating foreign influencers and other communicators, Beijing aspires to create a unified choir of voices capable of promoting party narratives more effectively than traditional official PRC media. The ultimate goal is to shield CCP-controlled culture, discourse and ideology from the dangers of foreign and free political speech, thereby safeguarding the party's legitimacy.

As this report outlines, that strategy reveals the CCP's determination to defend itself against foreign influence and shape global narratives in its favour, including through covert means. As one party-state media worker put it, the aim is to 'help cultivate a group of "foreign mouths", "foreign pens", and "foreign brains" who can stand up and speak for China at critical moments'.⁶

The CCP's growing use of foreign influencers reinforces China's internal and external narratives in ways that make it increasingly difficult for social-media platforms, foreign governments and individuals to distinguish between genuine and/or factual content and propaganda. It further complicates efforts to counter disinformation and protect the integrity of public discourse and blurs the line between independent voices and those influenced by the party's narratives.

This report makes key recommendations for media and social-media platforms, governments and civil society aimed at building awareness and accountability. They include broadening social-media platforms' content labelling practices to include state-linked, PRC-based influencers; preventing PRC-based creators from monetising their content on platforms outside China to diminish the commercial incentives to produce party-aligned content; and, in countries with established foreign interference taskforces, such as Australia, developing appropriate briefing materials for students planning to travel overseas.

Key findings

- Foreign influencers are reaching increasingly larger and more international audiences. Some of them have tens of millions of followers in China and millions more on overseas platforms (see Appendix 1 on page 65), particularly on TikTok, YouTube and X (formerly Twitter).
- The CCP is creating competitions that offer significant prize money and other incentives as part of an expanding toolkit to co-opt influencers in the production of pro-CCP and party-state-aligned content (see Section 2.3: 'State-sponsored competitions' on page 20).
- Beijing is establishing multilingual influencer studios to incubate both domestic and foreign influencers in order to reach younger media consumers globally (see Section 2.5: 'The influencer studio system' on page 33).
- The CCP is effectively using a widespread network of international students at Chinese universities, cultivating them as a latent talent pool of young, multilingual, social-media-friendly influencers (see breakout box: 'PRC universities' propaganda activities' on page 32).
- Russian influencers in China are cultivated as part of the CCP's strategic goal of strengthening bilateral relations with Russia to counter Western countries (see Section 3.4: 'Russian influencers' on page 53).
- The CCP is using foreign influencers to enable its propaganda to surreptitiously penetrate mainstream overseas media, including into major US cable TV outlets (see Section 3.3: 'Rachele Longhi' on page 44). Chinese authorities use vlogger, influencer and journalist identities interchangeably, in keeping with efforts aimed at influencing audiences, rather than offering professional or objective news coverage.
- CCP-aligned influencer content has helped boost the prevalence of party-approved narratives on YouTube, outperforming more credible sources on issues such as Xinjiang due to search-engine algorithms that prioritise fresh content and regular posting (see Section 2.2 'Turning a foreign threat into a propaganda opportunity' on page 15).
- Foreign influencers played a key part in the Propaganda Department's drive to control international narratives about Covid-19 in China and have, in some instances, attempted to push the CCP's narrative overseas as well (see Section 1.1: 'Case study' on page 7).

- Efforts to deal with CCP propaganda have taken a step backwards on X, which under Elon Musk has dispensed with state-affiliation labels and is allowing verification for party-state media workers, including foreigners (see Section 2.5 ‘The influencer studio system’ on page 33).

Research methodology

In this study, we analysed the metadiscourse about foreign vloggers in China, including scholarly papers, conferences and video competitions. That involved the collection, translation and analysis of Chinese-language material, including government documents, state-media reports, official speeches and other sources that referred to China’s influencer ecosystem, the role that foreigners play in it and the broader propaganda system of the CCP, as well as views from the public, academia and senior party propaganda officials and the directions given at the top leadership levels.

Our two previous research reports (*Borrowing mouths to speak on Xinjiang* and *Frontier influencers: the new face of China’s propaganda*), which form part of this program of work, focused mainly on the CCP’s external propaganda work.⁷ This report instead centres on foreign individuals who are key contributors to the party’s internal, domestic propaganda efforts.

This report includes data analysis but takes a more qualitative look into the context and significance of this phenomenon. Our research spans various countries of origin and connections to the party-state in an attempt to better describe the multilayered nature of the foreign influencer ecosystem. It also expands from a previous focus on Xinjiang-related propaganda to showcase the CCP’s growing propaganda agenda across a range of topics, including Covid-19, Tibet and Sino-Russian relations.

We collected a list of more than 120 foreign influencers, whom we identified through key-term searches across all the major Chinese video-streaming platforms such as Bilibili, Douyin, Xigua and Toutiao, and who have currently active accounts. Given the volume of videos produced by the 120 influencers identified, we selected two individuals for our main case studies and pursued two in-depth analyses of thematic case studies: the Covid-19 pandemic and cooperation with Russian influencers. The influencers were selected both because of their large followings on Chinese platforms and their growing presence on global platforms, and because their cases offer valuable insights into the evolution of the foreign-influencer ecosystem in China, with all its economic, political and social incentives. The case studies allow us to examine their diverse approaches, as well as different ways in which the Chinese party-state appropriates foreign nationals to become integral parts of both its internal and its external propaganda apparatus.

Throughout the report, we make use of additional video material to add visual examples and corroborate our analysis. In total, we cite 25 influencers from Australia, Israel, Italy, Mexico, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Russia, Spain, Taiwan, the UK and the US (see Appendix 1 for a full list of the influencers cited in this paper and their follower numbers across the different platforms). Foreign influencers have been around since at least 2013, but this report focuses on the period following 2017, which saw the rise of commercialised nationalism (see Section 3.2 ‘Commercialised nationalist propaganda’ on page 39).

This methodology carries limitations, as it does not offer a comprehensive quantitative assessment of the cumulative impact such content has had thus far. Instead, it offers a snapshot of an emerging but rapidly growing phenomenon. We note that the selection of the case studies may be limited by search term selection, and the possibility that some influencers did not appear in our searches.

1. Introduction and background

Use the past to serve the present, make the foreign serve China.

—Mao Zedong (毛泽东)⁸

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has long seen increased contact with foreigners and the outside world as both a threat and an opportunity.⁹ The party's control and management of foreigners goes back to at least the Yan'an period, between 1935 and 1947, when foreign writers were used to serve the interests of the CCP's revolutionary efforts. In those early days of the party's existence, party leaders welcomed selected friendly foreigners, even as the majority of them were dismissed as imperialists.¹⁰

Direct control over what foreigners wrote about the party wasn't necessary—instead, as Chinese politics specialist Professor Anne-Marie Brady has noted, they were given 'guidance'. 'Guidance consisted of showing them the good things, treating them well, and paying polite attention to their opinions and suggestions. In any case, those who were openly hostile to the CCP were not welcome,' she wrote.¹¹ That model of guidance, set in the Yan'an period for foreign writers, extends to today's online world of foreign influencers and content creators who make up a growing and influential niche in the country's fast-growing online-influencer economy.

As we showed in our previous report, *Borrowing mouths to speak on Xinjiang*, in the past, the CCP has 'borrowed the mouths' (借嘴说话) of friendly foreigners such as American journalist Edgar Snow (1905–1972) to create party-approved articles, books, photography, documentaries and movies.¹² Under Chinese President and CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping (习近平), the CCP now explicitly harks back to that model as a way of strengthening the party's domestic control and international image. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespeople have in recent years consistently held up Snow as the ideal foreign reporter who told China's story well and whose efforts should be emulated by today's foreign correspondents.¹³

To be clear: many foreign influencers who post dedicated content about China avoid political topics in their videos altogether. But those who do choose to delve into political subjects are rewarded for doing so in a way that toes the party line (see Section 2: 'Giving and following guidance' on page 12) or punished if they criticise it (see breakout box: 'Cancelled' on page 13). While some influencers may be unaware of the political implications of their content, many of them understand the party's requirements and consciously exploit the system for social and financial gains.

Like the foreign writers of the Yan'an period, foreign influencers who are critical of the party and its policies are simply not welcome. Foreign social-media platforms and video-sharing sites such as YouTube are blocked inside the People's Republic of China (PRC) because the party can't sufficiently control them.¹⁴ Foreign influencers who are active on domestic—and therefore heavily monitored—social media or video-sharing platforms and who post content deemed hostile towards the CCP are quickly censored and banned.

However, foreign influencers who can be 'guided' are increasingly seen as useful in building party legitimacy for domestic audiences as well as supporting Beijing's external propaganda efforts.¹⁵ As we explain throughout Section 2 of this report, that guidance comes in the form of PRC rules, regulations and laws, as well as Chinese and international social-media platforms that direct traffic towards user-generated propaganda, video competitions and media tours organised by propaganda organs,

influencer studios, university activities, and the amplification and promotion of party-state media and government spokespeople. These methods of guidance are part of the party's efforts to encourage more foreigners to vocalise the 'main melody' (主旋律)—the party's term for themes or narratives that promote its values, policies and ideology.¹⁶ In fact, the PRC's internet regulations encourage users to actively promote party propaganda, so more and more influencers adapt to the system. Additionally, as we will see throughout the report, the PRC's online censorship regime creates an information environment that's isolated from the rest of the world and primed with a nationalistic ideology.

In Section 3, we expand on how the role of foreign influencers in China's propaganda system reflects the CCP's strategic adaptation to the digital age. By leveraging the power of foreign voices to convey the party's messages through the internet, and especially through online video platforms, the CCP is attempting to both burnish its image at home and influence international audiences to shape the international discourse in support of CCP agendas. As with the Yan'an period's 'guidance' model, in which the party effectively used foreigners to support its cause, in today's digital landscape, the party strives to guide foreign influencers to sing from the party's songsheet.

The role of foreign influencers in China's propaganda system is a key strand in the party's multifaceted efforts to control domestic narratives and shape its international image.

1.1 Case study: Foreign influencers and pandemic propaganda

In 2020, as the Covid-19 pandemic raged worldwide, the PRC was the focus of intense international pressure. With the eyes of the world firmly trained on it, the PRC grappled with unprecedented scrutiny, stemming not just from the pandemic's origins, but also due to the strict quarantine measures the country implemented in a bid to curb the virus's spread. In the face of mounting criticism and an impending challenge to its global standing, the PRC sought to assert control over the narrative.

For the most part, the party-state apparatus followed a familiar playbook. Party-state media campaigns emphasised the effectiveness of the CCP's leadership in navigating through the crisis. On global platforms such as X and Facebook, PRC party-state media workers and 'wolf warrior' diplomats highlighted the 'advantages' of China's unique political and social system in an effort to present a picture of resilience, capability, and control amid chaos.¹⁷

Joining those more traditional methods was a resource that the PRC's propaganda apparatus had been methodically cultivating in the years leading up to the crisis—foreign influencers. Those influencers, who enjoy substantial followings across both domestic and global social-media platforms, joined messaging from more traditional channels as part of an effort to humanise the PRC's stringent pandemic policies, dispel negative perceptions and enhance China's international image.

During the original Wuhan outbreak, when few foreign media could access the city, foreign residents at times became the eyes through which international audiences and media could understand events as they unfolded. As seen in the examples below, party-state media often used foreign influencers' personal video narratives to promote an impression of international support for China's anti-Covid measures, bolster recognition of its vaccines, attack unfavourable foreign media coverage and present a mood of confidence and safety. Often, those narratives directly or indirectly countered unfavourable depictions of life published not only on international media, but also by regular Chinese people on social media,¹⁸ detailing their experiences during lockdowns, the overwhelming situation in hospitals,

supply shortages, and stringent security measures. Domestic Chinese media, citizen-journalists and victims were often blocked, harassed and detained by the state or vocal nationalists when they expressed such views. Chinese writer Fang Fang (方方), for example, who chronicled the 2020 lockdown in Wuhan on her blog, said her ‘Wuhan Diary’ was effectively banned from domestic publication because publishers shied away from it amid fierce nationalist attacks against her.¹⁹ At the same time, party-state media and diplomats were promoting foreign voices that aligned with official narratives on the epidemic.

In early April 2022, for example, while local Shanghai residents were enduring another harsh lockdown,²⁰ party-state media worker and New Zealand national Andy Boreham (see Section 2.5: ‘The influencer studio system’) was interviewed live on *ABC Australia* TV.²¹ In the interview, Boreham explained how the Shanghai lockdown was going ‘quite smoothly’. Later that month, a video titled ‘Voices of April’ (四月之声), which showed footage of an empty Shanghai and audio recordings of some of the most desperate moments of that month of lockdown, went viral in China (Figure 1).²² The swiftly censored video included audio of stranded delivery drivers, community workers, a mother seeking help for her child, and a shocked bystander watching a dog being beaten to death by a quarantine worker.²³ During a live program with his American *Shanghai Daily* colleague Alexander Bushroe that was streamed on the *Shanghai Daily* website, WeChat and via his Twitter and YouTube accounts, Boreham read out loud a question from a viewer about the video. The pair appeared to gloss over the incident, with Boreham describing the video in vague terms before asking his colleague, ‘What’s more to say?’ Bushroe responded in equally vague terms, ‘I think a lot of people did see that. It made a lot of people feel a certain way.’²⁴

Figure 1: Screenshot from the ‘Voices of April’ video.



Translation: March 15—Shanghai press conference on the prevention and control of the Covid-19 outbreak. New local confirmed cases of the day, 5. New local asymptomatic cases of the day, 95. Accumulated total local confirmed cases, 197. Accumulated total local asymptomatic cases, 959. ‘At present, we are not under lockdown in Shanghai.’

Source: ‘404 archive’ [404资料馆], *YouTube*, 22 April 2022, [online](#).

Some foreign influencers' popularity strongly benefited from the PRC's Covid-19 push. One notable example is Jerry Kowal, a US citizen, whose pandemic videos saw him gain the approval of CCTV (China Central Television), the predominant state television broadcaster in China.

In his university years at the College of Charleston, South Carolina, Alex Farley never imagined that the shared passion for Mandarin he had with his close friend Jerry Kowal would eventually lead them down such divergent paths. As classmates and friends, they dedicated hours to their studies, forming a close bond. Little did he know that a decade later they would become polar opposites—Farley, a satirist of the CCP known for performing skits and mocking the party, was banished from the Chinese internet, while Kowal, a prominent booster of the party's policies, became one of the most followed foreign influencers inside the Great Firewall.

Prior to his banishment, Farley pursued acting at the prestigious Central Academy of Drama in Beijing (中央戏剧学院) and amassed a fan base of 60,000 followers on Chinese social-media platforms. His rising influence caught the notice of government authorities, who proposed a partnership and support in promoting his content.²⁵ Meanwhile, Kowal was making videos about food, interviewing passers-by on the streets of the US or China and exploring other curiosities about American and Chinese cultures. The turning point for both the former classmates came with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, when Farley's videos that poked fun at the party saw him kicked off the Chinese internet, while Kowal's critiques of US Covid policies earned him the praise of China's propaganda authorities.

From very early on in the pandemic, when the virus was yet to hit the US, Kowal started posting videos from New York City, attempting to compare the two countries' responses to the virus. From showcasing mask shortages to conducting street interviews, Kowal several times expressed his disappointment in the US Government's lack of preparedness.²⁶ In his second video about Covid-19, Kowal said that there had been 'a lot of reporting done in the West about China, some of it right but a lot also wrong. I wanted to share with all of you what is really going on in China with this current coronavirus.'²⁷

Kowal caught the attention of Western media, which reported on his videos, and he was consequently invited to speak about his experience by official Chinese media. In an interview with Beijing-backed Hong Kong broadcaster *Phoenix TV*, Kowal presented himself as an objective observer untainted by the foreign media's bias against China. Kowal reiterated that, while he used to trust Western media outlets such as the *New York Times*, after their reporting on his own videos, he now believes that they're 'fake news'. 'I just hope that I could be more and more objective ... When I shoot videos, I want people to see what I have seen. I don't usually give my opinions,' he told *Phoenix TV*.²⁸

Kowal's subsequent videos about the difference between the US's and China's handling of the pandemic saw him assume the role of a uniquely placed objective observer, untarnished by the bias of Western media. As outlined in the next section, this reflects a now established trend in which party-state media channels present influencers as journalists or media representatives, creating the impression of journalistic objectivity. Kowal's videos, which had long mined the cultural and societal differences between the US and China, took on a harder edged tone after the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak. He now placed a strong emphasis on the mistakes of the US Government and what he described as the great successes of the Chinese Government in containing the virus (Figure 2). This mirrored growing anti-Western coverage of international issues by party-state media since the outset of the pandemic.²⁹



Figure 2: Jerry Kowal talking about differences between the US's and China's epidemic prevention; when he arrives in China, he says: 'I'm happy, I feel a sense of freedom! There's no virus and no anti-maskers ... This is the most organised Covid prevention in the world.'



Source: 'Jerry Kowal 我是郭杰瑞', *YouTube*, 15 March 2021, [online](#).

Kowal's videos landed him a rare opportunity to live stream for *CCTV News* on the Youku video-hosting platform directly from New York City—a privilege rarely, if ever, extended to foreigners. *CCTV* is the predominant state television broadcaster in China and is directly under the supervision of the Central Propaganda Department.³⁰ During his live stream, Kowal identified himself as 'press' to a security guard,³¹ despite not being an official member of any news organisation.

Kowal's Covid-19 videos also exemplify a pattern among some foreign influencers in China who act as intermediaries in shaping Chinese citizens' view of the outside world. Presenting themselves as objective observers of both Western societies and China, they play a vital role in maintaining the credibility of the PRC's narrative within the confines of the Great Firewall. Kowal's sympathetic perspective on Chinese policies and his criticisms of Western ones align perfectly with the state's narrative, thereby providing an international endorsement of the PRC's stance without citizens needing to seek foreign viewpoints.

Individuals such as Kowal, who echo propaganda talking points,³² can find unprecedented success in China's cyberspace, while those like Farley, who deviate from it, find themselves swiftly ostracised.³³ This dynamic is a potent reminder of the subtle power that foreign influencers can wield within China's information-control regime, shaping perceptions and potentially obviating the need for citizens to circumvent the Great Firewall in search of alternative viewpoints.

1.2 Filling content gaps for party-state media

The value to the CCP of a carefully managed foreign-influencer ecosystem—one that offers high-quality, well-presented and readily available content—became clear during the Covid-19 pandemic. Party-state media drew heavily on foreign influencers to promote CCP messaging as part

of the Covid-crisis response strategy. For example, China Global Television Network (*CGTN*) frequently drew on vlog-style videos featuring foreigners, often using a pseudo-citizen-journalism ‘global stringer’ label, to highlight favourable perspectives and combat unfavourable media coverage.

Wuhan-based American teacher Marissa Lindsay appeared as a ‘global stringer’ in *CGTN* videos from Wuhan from the start of the pandemic through to the end of the PRC’s ‘dynamic zero-Covid’ strategy. According to *CGTN*, Lindsay and her partner were creating videos to ‘reflect an accurate picture of what is happening in Wuhan.’³⁴ In 2022, after the PRC abruptly reversed its ‘dynamic zero-Covid’ strategy and infections and deaths in the country soared, *CGTN* published a series of videos titled ‘True China’ featuring Lindsay and other foreigners talking positively about the situation in China and affirming China’s anti-Covid measures.³⁵

CGTN rapidly published a series of state-aligned commentary from foreigners after the pandemic began. Official PRC diplomatic Twitter accounts³⁶ promoted a number of those videos, which were produced in multiple languages and possibly targeted at specific audiences. For example, bilingual Arabic- and Mandarin-speaking ‘global stringer’ Mohamed Jihad accused foreign media in Arabic of bias against China and praised China for sending vaccines to his home country, Egypt.³⁷ Several ‘True China’ videos were explicitly framed to discredit Western media. For example, Spanish vlogger Noel Sirerol González ‘refuted false views on the coronavirus outbreak, denouncing malicious actions taken by internet users abroad’, according to *China Daily*, which published one of his vlogs in early February 2020.³⁸ At the same time, Sirerol González, who has a history of close collaboration with party-state media, including work in Tibet with *CGTN*, registered a Twitter account in February 2020 and began sharing his own videos, promoting content from CCP propaganda accounts and defending the PRC Government against criticism.³⁹

CGTN’s ‘global stringers’ also included foreigners who appeared to have little history of vlogging but who were known to party-state media via previous interviews they’d given or propaganda activities they’d joined. For example, a long-term Shanghai resident from Hungary, Steven Back, appeared in a number of positive *CGTN* videos about China’s epidemic response, including several in which Back was presented as a ‘stringer’.⁴⁰ Other foreign influencers and vloggers who have been presented as ‘global stringers’ in Covid-related *CGTN* videos have included British nationals Lee and Oli Barrett and Jason Richard Lightfoot, Colombian Fernando Munoz Bernal, South Korean Jeong Ji-eun and Pole Piotr Polska.⁴¹ In addition, the China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration (also known as the China International Communications Group, CICG) deployed its own foreign staff at the start of the epidemic to produce reports and influencer-style vlogs.⁴²

Beyond its creation of pseudo-citizen-journalist ‘global stringers’, Chinese party-state media also made use of overseas content redistributors, including commercial wire services, to promote positive views of lockdowns in China. In one case, a *Global Times* article that quoted Steven Back and other foreigners praising China’s epidemic response and vaccines was amplified by international media, including paid-for PR wire service *PR Newswire*,⁴³ *Yahoo news*⁴⁴ and overseas media targeting the Chinese diaspora.⁴⁵

2. Giving and following guidance: rhetoric, tools and strategies

2.1 Party paranoia: defending against foreign influence/rs

Despite the great potential the party-state sees in foreign influencers, and their efforts to maximise that potential, the idea of freewheeling foreigners exercising their freedom of speech on matters of political, historical and cultural importance to China creates a tense contradiction for the CCP, which has had a longstanding paranoia towards foreign voices. That aversion to the pernicious nature of foreign influence is reflected in China's National Security Law, which specifically focuses on defending 'advanced socialist culture' against negative cultural influences.⁴⁶

That paranoia is couched in a sense of cultural crisis that's been present in Chinese society since it came into contact with the technologically superior Western world during the 19th century.⁴⁷ It manifests today on the Chinese internet as the CCP and its nationalist supporters claiming that foreigners are infiltrating their information space and surreptitiously 'setting the tempo' (带节奏) of online discussions. Abstract 'foreign forces' (境外势力) are often blamed for instances of unrest in the country.⁴⁸ Discussion about the threat of foreign forces fluctuates depending on China's geopolitical situation. As Stella Chen has observed, the official *People's Daily* newspaper seldom mentioned 'foreign forces' in 2018 and 2019, when there were only four and three instances, respectively. However, there was a significant increase in the use of the term in 2020, when it appeared in 65 articles throughout the year. That surge coincided with rising political tensions and the CCP's desire to justify the introduction of the National Security Law in Hong Kong in July 2020.⁴⁹

Those fears, while ever-present in the party, grew more pronounced during the 1990s, as the rise of globalisation and marketisation prompted many Chinese intellectuals to express anxiety that core Chinese historical and cultural values of Chineseness were under threat. The market, while useful for helping China to become powerful, was and continues to be seen by many Chinese scholars as a corrosive force that could threaten the fabric of Chinese culture and undermine the Chinese nation by stealth. The 1990s saw a shift in 'intellectual persuasion' towards fears of being colonised. Those mixed feelings of contempt for the West and a heightened sense of anti-Chinese conspiracy could be found in texts such as *China can say No* (中国可以说不) and *Behind the demonisation of China* (妖魔化中国的背后).⁵⁰

Current Politburo Standing Committee member Wang Huning (王沪宁), who's been a top ideological theorist for the party for three decades and was head of the Central Leading Group for Propaganda and Ideological Work (中央宣传思想领导小组) until 2018, captured that sentiment in his book, *America against America* (美国反对美国), in which he argued that national cultural sovereignty and cultural order are rendered insecure by globalisation.⁵¹

Since the 1990s, those fears have fed into the development of a conception of national security that includes cultural security (文化安全). Under Xi Jinping, cultural security joins ideological security and economic security as concepts on the same plane as traditional military threats, and together those themes make up a holistic approach to national security known as the 'overall national security concept' (总体国家安全观). Non-traditional security factors such as culture have come to be seen

as critical to the CCP's survival, and 'inoculating information networks against foreign influence' is the key to the party's cultural security framework.⁵² Any unwanted influence from abroad is likely to come via technology, according to party theorists. Zhao Zhouxian (赵周贤) and Xu Zhidong (徐志栋), of the National Defense University's Research Center for the Theoretical System of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, argued in 2016 that 'taking advantage of information technology and its latest developments to infiltrate ideology into our country is a long-term strategy of the Western countries led by the US.'⁵³

The party has long been deeply ambivalent about the potential promises and threats of the internet. A 2014 report on national security by the University of International Relations Strategy and Security Research Center (国际关系学院国际战略与安全研究中心), which is linked to the Ministry of State Security,⁵⁴ emphasised the ideological threats to the country's national security caused by the internet. The report stated that 'the cultural hegemony of Western countries' and the 'pluralistic spread of internet information and opinion', among other factors, were 'posing a serious threat to China's ideological security.' It noted that Western cultural hegemony has caused some Chinese people to blindly worship all things foreign and 'affected and changed the value orientation of the Chinese public, causing some Chinese nationals to become confused and shaken in their beliefs about socialist and communist ideals, and interfering with the dominant and radiating power of China's mainstream ideology.' Ultimately, according to the report, the spread of heterodox ideas via the internet is a direct threat to China's national security:

From an international perspective, the internet has broken through spatial boundaries and ideological blockades. Political ideas, systems, and various trends that do not align with China's national conditions are being disseminated through the internet, impacting the thoughts of the Chinese populace. This dilutes the dominant role and function of China's mainstream ideology in society, weakens its control over society, reduces the cohesiveness of the mainstream ideology, harms social stability and national unity, and in turn, threatens China's national security.⁵⁵

A key component of achieving 'ideological security' (意识形态安全) is the use of censorship to eliminate undesirable discourses. Competing narratives about Chinese politics, culture and history are seen as a threat to regime stability. Banishing discordant foreign voices from the Chinese internet (see breakout box: 'Cancelled: Censoring discordant voices')—and harnessing those who are sympathetic to the PRC system—is part and parcel of maintaining firm control over China's domestic information ecology.

Cancelled: Censoring discordant voices

The status of foreign influencers in China's vlogging economy heavily depends on their personal reputations. Therefore, their careers can be precarious.⁵⁶ Some influencers, such as the account 'Fulinfang' (拂霖坊), have had their influencer careers derailed by inadvertently crossing red lines and being 'cancelled' by nationalist viewers.

In a 2018 US Securities and Exchange Commission filing, Bilibili described Fulinfang, whose real name is William August, as one of 'the most popular and influential content creators on our platform'. His videos about 'Sino-British cultural differences' and 'fun anecdotes of foreigners living in China' had, at the time, attracted 1.6 million followers, according to the platform.⁵⁷

By 2020, however, August had stopped publishing videos after he was accused by nationalist viewers of being ‘two-faced’ (两面人), hypocritical and insensitive to Chinese culture.⁵⁸ On 20 April 2020, August posted a message to his Bilibili account explaining that he had received ‘tens of thousands of hate messages’ and hadn’t published any new videos for a long time, ‘not because I don’t want to, but because my newest content doesn’t seem to fit the consensus around here.’⁵⁹ After a long hiatus, August has returned to occasionally posting videos on his Bilibili account and runs a marketing company out of London and Shanghai.⁶⁰

But, in the few instances in which foreign influencers have attacked the CCP itself, their cancellations have been more permanent. The party-state’s information-control regime strictly polices what it considers acceptable speech by foreign influencers online. Those who have ever sung their own tunes have been censored, or, in Chinese online parlance, ‘harmonised’.⁶¹

At his peak, German writer Christoph Rehage boasted more than 800,000 followers on the microblogging platform Weibo, where he had established himself as one of the most influential foreign commentators.⁶² Rehage originally opened his Weibo account in 2011 to promote his travel writing to a Chinese audience but was soon drawn into social and political discussions. He even received recognition from official media, including being invited by the CCP’s official mouthpiece, the *People’s Daily*, to write a column about Germany and appearing on several Chinese TV programs. Curious Weibo users peppered Rehage with questions about his native Germany. ‘It was when I decided to publicly respond to these questions that I started becoming popular on Weibo,’ Rehage wrote in an account of his rise and fall on Chinese social media. ‘People liked the idea of having me as a sort of first-hand foreign guy to talk to.’⁶³

Throughout Rehage’s internet career in China, he consciously tested the red lines of censorship. Concerned that a rise in censorship would hamper his ability to speak out, he started making his political points via satire. In 2014, he began making satirical videos, using the parody identity of the ‘German *Ziganwu*’ (自干五)⁶⁴ to criticise current events. A *ziganwu* is an internet troll who spreads party propaganda without any expectation of being paid to do so. The parody brought Rehage attention as well as controversy and even abuse. In July 2015, he participated in a trending topic about the legendary folk heroine Mulan (木兰), suggesting that a model soldier from Mao Zedong’s era, Lei Feng (雷锋), should impregnate her.⁶⁵ As a result, he was inundated with hate mail, and the *People’s Daily* deleted all of his column articles as if he had never existed. Rehage was then banished from China’s online platforms.

Despite that, Rehage didn’t stop his political commentary. In December 2015, while in Germany, he posted a video on YouTube comparing Mao to Adolf Hitler.⁶⁶ In a sharply worded article on the Communist Youth League’s *China Youth Network* (中国青年网), Zhu Jidong (朱继东), deputy director and secretary-general of the National Center for Cultural Security and Ideological Construction at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, said that Lao Lei (老雷, the name by which Rehage is known in China) ‘represents a group force with the ultimate goal of misleading people’s understanding of many things with an outsider’s tone, undermining the history and values of the Chinese people, and ultimately disrupting the consciousness of the Chinese people.’⁶⁷

Zhu’s views echoed Xi Jinping’s speech at the opening ceremony of the second World Internet Conference in 2015. In the speech, Xi emphasised that cyberspace isn’t a ‘lawless place’.⁶⁸ Zhu Wei

(朱巍), another academic consulted at the time by *China Youth Net* (中国青年网) about the incident, argued that the fact that Rehage wasn't in China at the time was immaterial. Zhu, who was deputy director of the Centre for Communication Law Research at the China University of Political Science and Law, said that China's cyber sovereignty meant that the country has jurisdiction over the internet, regardless of where the person is located, and that, as long as their expression is China-related, they're subject to China's law.⁶⁹

Zhu Jidong's article alleged that Rehage's videos violated the 'WeChat Ten Articles' issued by the State Internet Information Office in August 2014,⁷⁰ and that he was suspected of violating Article 246 of the Criminal Law of the PRC, which prohibits insult and defamation; violations are punishable by up to three years in prison.⁷¹ Although he hasn't received an official summons, Rehage has felt the threat and is reluctant to travel to China.⁷²

2.2 Turning a foreign threat into a propaganda opportunity

While there has always been concern about foreign influence, the desire and need to harness positive foreign views has played out differently over time. Foreigners have featured on Chinese television screens since the 1980s, where they've often been depicted taking part in Chinese cultural activities, such as reciting poetry and practising calligraphy. Foreign performances of Chineseness serve to 'present to domestic audiences the image of a powerful, modern, and unified Chinese nation, firmly at the centre of world civilization'.⁷³ Foreigners on these programs typically 'express a sense of fondness for China and Chinese PRC culture, helping to solidify in viewers a Chinese national identity under the CCP's rule'.⁷⁴

The transition to the digital age hasn't dampened the role that foreigners can play in reaffirming China's national identity to Chinese people; rather, it has evolved and magnified that role. Audience attention has shifted from television screens to the online space, where foreign influencers now create content about Chinese food, travel, expat life, and cultural differences between China and their home countries.

Du Guodong (杜国东), the deputy chief editor of the English edition of *China Newsweek* and the author of a treatise on foreign influencers, sees them as 'builders of China's national image'.⁷⁵ Du and others argue that foreign influencers contribute to the party-state's goal of constructing 'cultural soft power'—a notion that's gained substantial emphasis over the past decade as a component of the country's 'comprehensive national power' (综合国力) and 'national cultural security' (国家文化安全). Foreign influencers' affectionate rhetoric about China and its culture plays a crucial part in fostering domestic cohesion, unity and strength among the Chinese populace, as well as enhancing 'cultural confidence' (文化自信).⁷⁶

The 'confidence doctrine' championed by Xi Jinping emphasises that the Chinese people need to have great confidence in their country's path, theory, system and culture. Among those 'four matters of confidence' (四个自信), Xi assigns the greatest significance to cultural confidence. That focus on 'cultural confidence' also shapes Xi's international priorities. In his view, 'cultural soft power' represents the apex and most crucial reflection of a nation's comprehensive strength.⁷⁷ In this context, the CCP increasingly recognises foreign influencers as valuable assets to bolster Xi's 'cultural soft power' strategy, serving as a counterforce against perceived Western dominance in global discourse.

Part of enhancing China's cultural soft power consists in building its international communication ability—a 'systematic, long-term, strategic project' for the CCP.⁷⁸ The party believes that China's global image is to a large degree shaped by others, rather than itself. This project aims to counter the CCP's perception of China's weak position in international public opinion vis-à-vis the strong position still held by 'the West'. In this imbalance, the CCP believes that there's a discrepancy between 'the real China' and the West's subjective impression of it, and a gap between China's hard and soft power.⁷⁹

To close that gap, Xi Jinping has emphasised the need to adapt to new trends in foreign communications and for clear, engaging discourse that's easy for foreign audiences to understand, with the goal of enhancing the effect of external propaganda. In a speech delivered at the 12th collective study session of the 19th Politburo on 25 January 2019, Xi instructed:

We should grasp the mobile, social and visual trends in the field of international communication, work on building a foreign communication discourse system, work on being receptive and easy to understand so that more foreign audiences can understand, listen to and comprehend, and continuously improve the results of foreign communication.⁸⁰

In their thesis on foreign influencers, Zhao Hong (赵泓) and Wan Yuqing (万雨晴), who are journalism and communication scholars from the South China University of Technology, argued that foreign-influencer videos serve to 'enhance the cultural self-confidence of Chinese youth'. Viewers can see the reaction of other viewers to foreign influencers, as their comments appear as scrolling text overlaid on the videos rather than only in a comments section below the videos. Based on the authors' observations, whenever foreign influencers praise China, the reaction from the audience is to post comments such as 'The Chinese nation has a long history, I am so proud! Our history is a source of pride.'⁸¹

This process, whereby foreigners praise China and boost the cultural self-confidence of the Chinese viewers, is particularly important in the context of the West's 'strong cultural output', which 'poses a serious challenge to China's cultural confidence' (see Section 3.1: 'The influencer ecosystem').⁸²

Recently, in addition to boosting 'cultural confidence' at home, foreign influencers have become another vector by which the party can project its messages to the outside world. Tsinghua scholars Shi Anbin (史安斌) and Tong Tong (童桐) argued in *International Communications* (对外传播), that this is particularly important because traditional conduits for China's external propaganda such as party-state media and Confucius institutes have encountered 'systematic suppression and institutional barriers in their external communication'.⁸³ They consider that those barriers have made 'the transformation of the role and positioning of external communication institutions, which academia has long called for, an urgent problem to be solved'. Their solution is to move away from traditional party-state media methods of communication towards one that emphasises 'key opinion leaders' (关键意见领袖), who are more likely to 'adapt to the new situation', avoid being branded as state-affiliated media on foreign social-media platforms, and tailor messages that will resonate with foreign audiences.

For *China Newsweek's* Du Guodong, foreign influencers or, as he refers to them, 'overseas communication officers' are more effective in persuading foreign audiences. 'In recent years, China has continued to increase its international communication capabilities and increase the number of external media and programs in various languages, but the effectiveness and investment

in external publicity have always been disproportionate,’ he wrote. The goal, in Du’s view, is to ‘make foreign influencers truly work for us and gradually become an important force in China’s international communication’ and ‘enhance the credibility and persuasiveness of China’s international communication.’ That approach would help cultivate a group of ‘foreign mouths’, ‘foreign pens’ and ‘foreign brains’ who can stand up and speak for China at critical moments.⁸⁴ These directives come directly from the CCP’s leadership.

China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration and Xufang International Media

The China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration is a state organisation that engages in a broad range of external propaganda work. It’s directly under the CCP Central Committee and has been managed by the CCP Central Office of Foreign Propaganda (中共中央对外宣传办公室) since 1995.⁸⁵ The Central Office of Foreign Propaganda is more commonly known as the State Council Information Office (国务院新闻办公室).⁸⁶ With origins dating back to the PRC’s founding in 1949, the administration is the country’s oldest outbound-propaganda organ and specialises in ‘international communication that serves the party and the state’, according to its home page.⁸⁷ In 2019, Xi Jinping told the organisation to ‘develop itself into a world-class, comprehensive international communication institution’.⁸⁸ At the start of 2022, the group rebranded its foreign-facing name from China International Publishing Group to China International Communications Group (CICG, 中国外文局) as part of its efforts to implement Xi’s 2021 speech on strengthening and advancing international communications work.⁸⁹

Despite its impartial-sounding external name, the CICG’s work is highly ideological. CICG president Du Zhanyuan (杜占元) stated in a May 2022 article that developing a ‘foreigners telling Chinese stories’ brand would be a focus of its work, along with its ‘number one project’ of promoting Xi Jinping’s ideology and propaganda texts.⁹⁰ This followed former head of the Central Propaganda Department Huang Kunming’s (黄坤明) instruction to CICG in 2019 to spread Xi Jinping’s ideology ‘wider, deeper and further’.⁹¹ CICG unveiled a ‘Communications Centre for the Americas’ in February 2022 to promote Xi Jinping ideology and ‘international communication’ in fields including technology, politics, diplomacy and economics.⁹² A focus of the centre’s work that year was using China-based foreigners to ‘tell Chinese stories to the world’.⁹³

The My China Story short-video competitions are managed by Beijing Xufang International Digital Culture Media Co. Ltd (煦方国际传媒), which is a subsidiary of CICG.⁹⁴ Founded in 2011, Xufang is a key player in cultivating high-quality foreign-influencer content. The competitions are part of the Central Propaganda Department’s ‘International Communications Project’, according to a government procurement document.⁹⁵ Xufang, along with four other outbound-propaganda companies under CICG, is located within the same compound, which resembles an industrial park for international propaganda.⁹⁶ CICG appoints Xufang’s leadership, headed by two CCP cadres, and CICG chief Du Zhanyuan instructed Xufang to become a signature enterprise in China’s external propaganda services domain.⁹⁷ New media products produced by Xufang won the China News Award, the country’s highest award for outstanding news works, for three consecutive years (2018 to 2020), as well as awards given out by the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission (中央网信办).

A *Xinhua* report on the 2021 My China Story awards highlighted that, that year, the competition had gathered more than 10,000 short videos from around the world, of which more than 3,500 met the themes of the competition, and 60 ‘excellent’ works were selected for the awards.⁹⁸ By 2022, the My China Story competition had gathered more than 800,000 submissions since its founding in 2018, a state-media report noted.⁹⁹ The 2022 edition of the competition had a budget of ¥2 million (A\$422,000), according to a government procurement document, and specified that no fewer than 60,000 short videos should be gathered from at least 15 countries and covering a minimum of 10 languages.¹⁰⁰ The fact that the competition offers tens of thousands of yuan in prize money to foreigners has drawn criticism from Chinese social-media users.¹⁰¹

Xufang’s website states that Associated Press, Deutsche Presse-Agentur, Indo-Asian News Service, Ghana News Agency and Australian Associated Press are ‘international media partners’ of the My China Story competition; however, we haven’t seen evidence of their involvement beyond Xufang using paid-for PR content services to spread news releases through foreign news agencies.

Figure 3: Xufang International Media’s deputy general manager and CCP cadre Wang Xinling (王新玲) speaks at the launch ceremony for Xufang’s 2021 My China Story short-video competition, in Beijing, 11 May 2021.

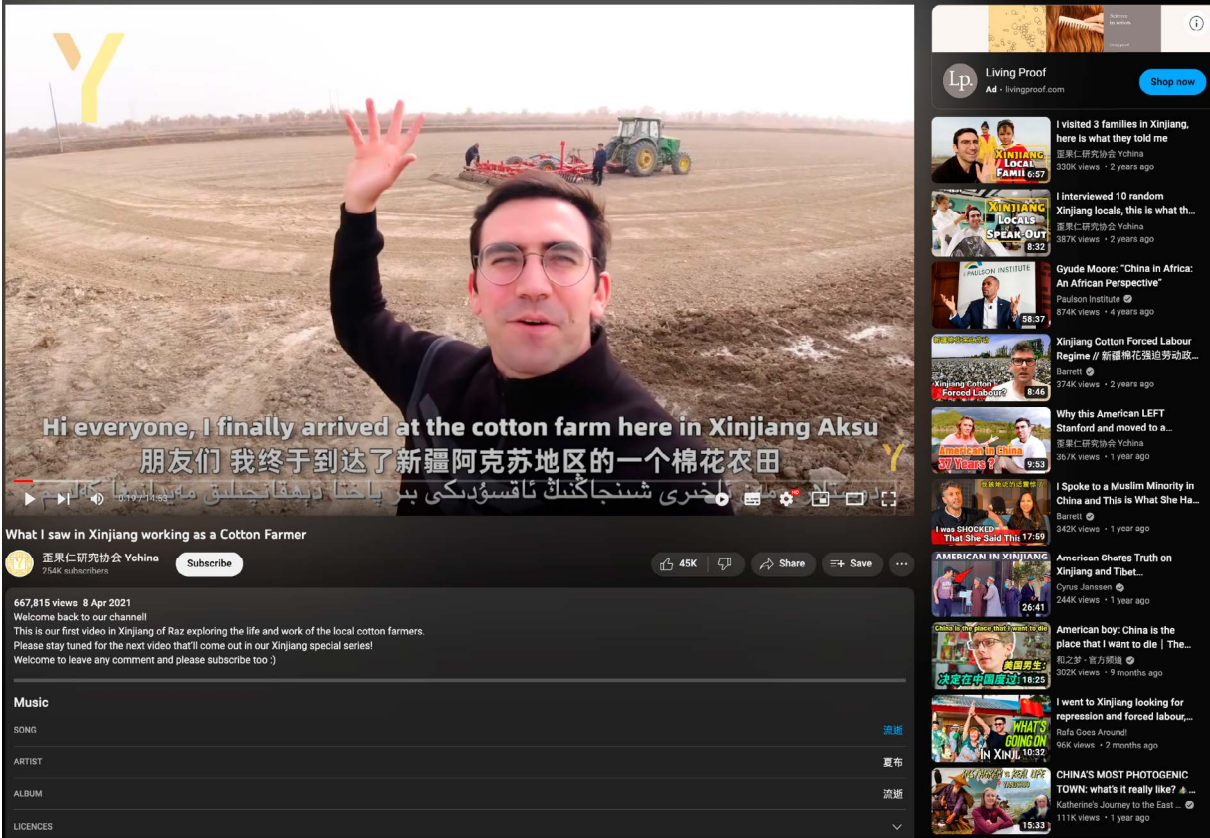


Source: Official magazine of the Cyberspace Administration of China [中国网信], 21 September 2022, [online](#).

Xufang has also created a ‘China Matters’ (视界中国) content brand. By February 2021, the two brands claimed more than 5 billion followers both domestically and internationally.¹⁰² Foreign influencers such as Jack Klumpp, Oli Barrett and Rachele Longhi (see Section 3.3: ‘Rachele Longhi’) are among the many who have appeared in China Matters content. China Matters is also active on YouTube, with more than 84,100 subscribers. Its channel describes itself as an ‘online news source that strives to deliver pertinent analysis on economics, politics, and military related to China, alongside irreverent stories of interest.’¹⁰³ Some of the foreigners in China Matters videos are presented as independent travellers, journalists or simple ‘residents’, but in fact work for different PRC state organisations.

Several foreign influencers are producing effective pro-party content on both Chinese and American social media, targeted at both domestic and international audiences. The Brookings Institution’s 2022 paper *Winning the web* showed that CCP-aligned influencer content has already helped boost the prevalence of party-approved narratives about Xinjiang on YouTube by 27%, outperforming more credible sources because search-engine algorithms prioritise fresh content and regular posts.¹⁰⁴ The YouTube algorithm also tends to aggregate together many of the videos produced by state-influenced vloggers, contributing to the creation of a ‘rabbit hole’ into PRC propaganda (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Screenshot from YouTube shows Israeli vlogger Raz Gal-Or in a ‘YChina’ vlog about cotton farming in Xinjiang. On the right, YouTube recommends further state-aligned vlogs on Xinjiang from foreign influencers, including those who have participated in PRC state-run short-video competitions. The screenshot was taken while accessing YouTube via a Washington DC VPN server, on 22 May 2023, with the US selected as ‘country’ in YouTube settings.



Source: YouTube.

The efficacy of this digital strategy is demonstrated by the significant international traction some foreign influencers have gained. A key example is the Mexican couple, Maximiliano J Carrera Camacho and Noelia Rodriguez Pascual, who manage the ‘Mexicans in China’ (Mexicanos en China) YouTube account. As of 24 May 2023, they commanded a substantial following of nearly 7 million (see Appendix 1), thus positioning their channel as the sixth top YouTube channel in Mexico, according to *Forbes Mexico*.¹⁰⁵

Their success on YouTube underscores the reach and resonance of their content with international audiences. Their content is primarily delivered in Spanish; it aligns with CCP narratives and features their involvement in various propaganda activities, such as official media tours with other prominent foreign influencers (see Section 2.4: ‘Media tours’),¹⁰⁶ collaborations with local propaganda organisations such as iChongqing (see breakout box: ‘Propaganda push at the local level’),¹⁰⁷ and large



events organised by party organs.¹⁰⁸ Those include a video on the CCP's origins, which the Chinese Embassy in Mexico shared,¹⁰⁹ and an interview with the Chinese Ambassador to Mexico, Zhang Run [张润].¹¹⁰ In an interview published by the Shenzhen Government, Carrera Camacho is quoted saying that 'a phenomenon that deeply impressed me is that the Chinese people are with the Party. It doesn't matter who I asked, everyone supports the Party and loves the government, including the young people.'¹¹¹

The extensive audience of the 'Mexicans in China' YouTube account demonstrates the CCP's ability to infiltrate international viewership and influence foreign perspectives. That success is a testament to the potential of foreign influencers as a tool in the CCP's international communication strategy. It illustrates how the CCP can, through cultivating and amplifying the voices of sympathetic foreign influencers, disseminate the party's narratives and propaganda overseas, thereby overcoming traditional challenges faced by official PRC media outlets. The popularity of such accounts significantly contributes to the 'cultural soft power' agenda, reflecting the directives of the CCP leadership.

Party-aligned content produced by foreign influencers joins that of party-state media workers masquerading as influencers, as well as that of state-approved ethnic-minority influencers, as part of a coordinated tactic referred to as 'polyphonous communication' (复调传播).¹¹² By coordinating these various communicators, Beijing aspires to create a unified choir of voices capable of promoting party narratives more effectively than official PRC media has traditionally been able to. Harmonising a diverse array of voices into a unified, global choir echoing China's narratives and objectives requires guidance from the party-state, as the following sections detail.

2.3 State-sponsored competitions and cash prizes

Xi Jinping continues to stress the importance of 'telling China's story well'. Officials responsible for propaganda work have turned to short-video competitions as a means of conducting external propaganda and other objectives. With prizes worth tens of thousands of yuan up for grabs, the competitions highlight the unique and, at times, lucrative role for foreigners in the rapidly developing PRC propaganda ecosystem. It's a trend that sees public and private partnerships being formed to develop new, more effective means of 'telling China's story', adding financial and career incentives for influencers, and forging new contexts for foreigners to participate in the creation of propaganda. The competitions, which often run for months at a time and solicit entries worldwide, are frequently attended by local and central propaganda chiefs, underscoring their significance to the CCP. By examining how competitions are organised and are evolving, we can establish a clearer picture of how the CCP leadership's propaganda directives are being concretely implemented.

Competitions are a common form of publicity in China, as elsewhere, and are seen as an effective way to reach wide audiences. According to the *People's Daily*, content from one of its 2021 competitions achieved almost 2 billion views across websites and social-media platforms.¹¹³ While organisers are very likely to have an interest in inflating such figures, the practice of running video competitions appears to be increasingly common, adopted by leading propaganda organs in their external propaganda duties. We have also observed state organisations running cartoon, photography and essay competitions specifically for foreigners. However, in line with social-media trends, the party appears to place more importance on short-video competitions.¹¹⁴

Competition organisers, who have ranged from universities to local government authorities, and from party-state media to key propaganda organs, all use a variety of incentives to encourage participation and guide the content of participants' work. Prize money can go from ¥1,000 (A\$208) or less to as high as ¥100,000 (A\$20,800).¹¹⁵ Based on the competitions we analysed, guidance on content creation can range from setting very broad, positive themes for video topics to more hands-on cooperation on content production between organisers. The latter type appears to be less common, perhaps as it's more resource intensive.

Some state-run competitions are held under specific themes, which are probably chosen to support key objectives of the CCP. They've ranged from Xi Jinping's broad call to promote 'traditional Chinese culture' to more narrowly defined themes, such as the development of the 'Greater Bay Area', a personal project of Xi Jinping aimed at increasing the economic and social integration of Hong Kong with mainland China.¹¹⁶ In a speech at the launch event for the 'My China Story: Guangdong – Hong Kong – Macao Greater Bay Area' video competition, the deputy head of the China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration, Gao Anming (高岸明), said that 'telling stories of the Greater Bay Area's construction and development well' was needed to deepen the area's development and was 'important content' of China's 'international communications work in the new era'.¹¹⁷

The Greater Bay Area competition entry guidelines instructed content creators to publish their videos on various Chinese social-media sites along with a set hashtag—a widely used publicity strategy. This suggests that the competition was an inexpensive means to generate a potentially large quantity of state-aligned content. The 'China and I' (我与中国) competition, which was also organised by the State Council Information Office, claimed to have gathered more than 430,000 short videos globally.¹¹⁸ Organisers of 2022's My China Story competition, meanwhile, said that the months-long event had collected 65,000 short videos from more than 70 countries.¹¹⁹

Competition organisers don't focus only on gathering large numbers of videos. We've observed that the events support networking for both organisers and participants. They bring together different groups of influencers—from emerging content creators to experts—and increase their visibility to Chinese officials, social-media platforms and industry figures, both domestic and foreign. This probably supports influencers to grow their audiences, in turn helping them become more valued by potential sponsors or other commercial partners.

Organisers have presented competitions differently to domestic and foreign audiences. The entry guidelines for a short-video contest run by the *People's Daily* stated, in English, that it was being held 'to allow more of the world to get to know about China'.¹²⁰ In Chinese, on the other hand, it was 'to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the founding of New China'. This is typical of how the party deploys different or even contradictory discourses to domestic and foreign audiences, reflecting the party's longstanding catchphrase that encapsulates the ways in which it attempts to control foreigners: 'treat insiders and outsiders differently' (内外有别).¹²¹

When it comes to propaganda, the foreign-facing discourses commonly dilute nationalistic language and the prominence of the party while emphasising dovish calls for understanding and cooperation. In doing so, the party can lead people into participating in politicised activities, but it can also offer plausible deniability to those who may want to defend themselves against accusations of being propagandists, of ignoring human-rights issues or other frequent criticisms.

Rewarding foreign influencers through competitions

Propaganda organs are regularising video competitions open to the public as a format. In 2022, authorities in Shandong Province set up the first of an initial batch of ‘practice bases’ for the “‘Telling Chinese Stories Well’ creative communication competition’. The Shandong base would aim to consolidate the results of the competitions and ‘serve China’s overall external propaganda efforts’, according to a local state-media report. With the self-described mission of getting ‘all people participating in telling stories of China in the New Era well’, the base’s work would include supporting the narration and communication of ‘Chinese stories’ with local characteristics and organising and mobilising broad participation by the public in ‘telling Chinese stories well’ activities, the report stated.¹²² This is consistent with other calls for mass participation¹²³ and may be aimed at further saturating social-media platforms with state-aligned content. The competition’s secretary-general, Yu Yunquan (于运全), dean of the Academy of Contemporary China and World Studies, said that he hoped to see multilingual editions of the competition held in the future to further its internationalisation.¹²⁴

The recognition given to foreign influencers by the state-run competitions appears to have been successful in some cases as a form of guidance. ‘I thought my video was just for fun, but after winning the award, I found out that our video can actually gain recognition,’ Italian vlogger Rachele Longhi was quoted by party-state media in a report on her speech at the 2021 World Internet Conference in Wuzhen—an annual event promoting the CCP’s cyberspace agenda: ‘This makes me more confident to stick to this path’¹²⁵ (see Section 3.3: ‘Rachele Longhi’).

Finally, the competitions appear to serve internal party purposes of incentivising and rewarding officials for gathering appropriate short videos. Party-state organs, most typically local or provincial propaganda departments, but also foreign affairs offices and PRC consulates-general, have received ‘outstanding organisation awards’ for having submitted 30 or more videos to the My China Story competition, according to a list of winners published by organisers.¹²⁶

A review of award-winning videos reveals that organisers have at times highly favoured content featuring foreigners defending CCP governance or sensitive policies against overseas criticism. The 2021 My China Story (第三只眼看中国) competition, for instance, awarded two prizes, including a ‘Best Live Streamer Award’ to US vlogger Jerry Kowal for a video comparing the epidemic situation in China favourably with that in his home nation (see Section 1.1 for a case study on Covid-19). Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying (华春莹) tweeted a link to Kowal’s YouTube video shortly after it was uploaded, adding that ‘while gloomy filters can barely hide bias and prejudice, truthful, objective and fair stories always shine’¹²⁷ in a likely reference to a long-running PRC foreign Ministry-led campaign against the *BBC*’s China coverage (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Hua Chunying's tweets of Jerry Kowal's video.



Source: 'Hua Chunying 华春莹', X, 22 March 2021, [online](#).

The video has had more than 449,000 views on YouTube and has also proven very popular on Kowal's Chinese social media, where it had more than 5 million views on Bilibili, 1.7 million on Xigua, and nearly 1 million likes on Douyin as of 24 May 2023.¹²⁸ The video was also shared by 'Beautiful Places in China', a Facebook page boasting 180,000 followers that frequently posts CCP propaganda videos and features playlists with videos of Xinjiang propaganda downplaying or denying Uyghur repression, as well as foreigners praising China and criticising Western countries.¹²⁹ Kowal's video has received around 35,000 views on his Facebook page and more than 2,000 likes.

The 2021 My China Story competition also rewarded Xinjiang-focused vlogs, including the grand jury prize for a vlog on 'ordinary life' in Xinjiang produced by Israeli influencer Raz Gal-Or's company, YChina (Figure 6), who has regularly posted party-aligned content from the region.¹³⁰ A *Xinhua* report on the awards noted that YChina had produced more than 1,000 works over the previous five years.¹³¹ This was the second consecutive year that YChina received the grand jury prize, following the group's ¥30,000 (A\$6,240) prize win in the 2020 edition of the competition.¹³²

Figure 6: Raz Gal-Or receiving multiple prizes during the 2021 My China Story awards.



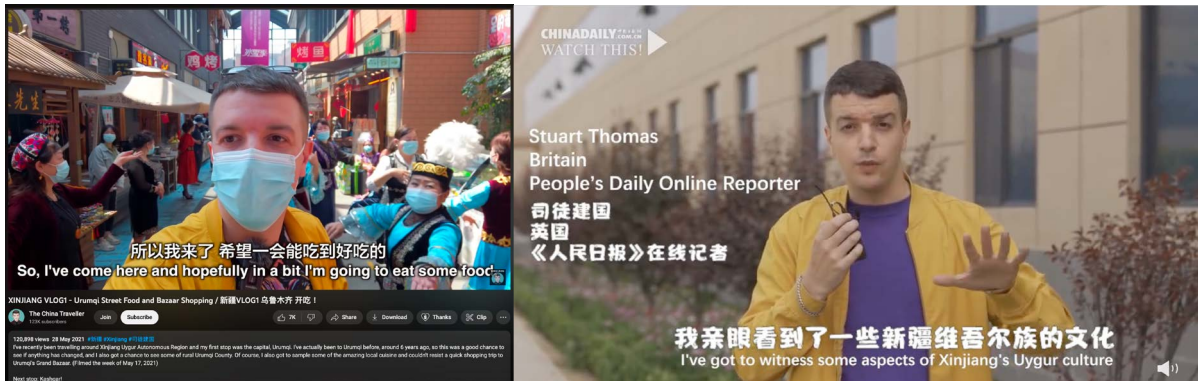
Source: C/CG, 15 September 2021, online.

Both Kowal's and YChina's videos were highlighted as positive case studies in a state-media commentary.¹³³ The commentary, in a paper under the propaganda department of the municipal CCP committee of Zhongshan City, praised the videos as examples of foreigners presenting a real, three-dimensional and comprehensive China to the world. 'If you haven't come here, don't pretend you understand China,' the commentary quoted the words of Gal-Or from a vlog in which he visited a mechanised cotton plantation in Xinjiang.¹³⁴ The mechanisation of cotton production in Xinjiang became a strong focus of CCP external propaganda following international criticism of forced labour in the industry.¹³⁵ While, in the introductory video, Gal-Or says it would be just him and his camera on the trip, previous ASPI research found evidence of close government and state-media cooperation (see Section 3.2: 'Commercialised nationalist propaganda').¹³⁶ Two years on, the series of four Xinjiang vlogs have more than 1.5 million cumulative views on YouTube.¹³⁷

Participants in competitions can also receive awards for vlogs they produced during state-led propaganda tours (see Section 2.4: 'Media tours'). 'I'm here because a lot of people right now outside of China want to know what Xinjiang is like,' British national Stuart Wiggin said in the introduction to

his 2021 Xinjiang vlog, ‘Urumqi street food and bazaar shopping’, which won an award in the 2021 My China Story competition.¹³⁸ Wiggin’s vlog didn’t state that he was in Xinjiang as part of a state-led propaganda tour, or that he worked for party-state media.¹³⁹ By early 2023, his vlog had more than 120,000 views on YouTube, where it didn’t carry any state-media labels (Figure 7). Similarly, Adam McIlmoyle won a prize in February 2023 for a vlog titled ‘Hello, Xinjiang’, shot during a different edition of the same state-led ‘A Date with China’ media tour.¹⁴⁰

Figure 7: British vlogger Stuart Wiggin appears to be an independent traveller in a video from Xinjiang posted on his YouTube channel (left), while party-state media present him as a People’s Daily Online reporter in another video filmed on the same trip (right).



Source: YouTube, 28 May 2021, online (left); YouTube, 26 May 2021, online (right).

Videos that receive awards in these competitions often portray heartwarming stories or showcase appealing landscapes. While explicitly political videos have sometimes been favoured, including on occasion with the top prizes, lifestyle themes make up most of the videos selected by the competitions. At the same time, popular apolitical videos covering topics such as food and travel can help to grow an influencer’s following and increase their potential value as ‘borrowed mouths’ for the state. YChina videos, for example, have regularly mixed bubbly entertainment with vlogs that echo state propaganda talking points.¹⁴¹

Additionally, the CCP sees competitions as a talent-scouting function. Competitions offer would-be participants financial and career incentives and encourage content aligned with themes and guidelines set by the organisers. For content deemed high quality, the ‘My China Story: Greater Bay Area’ competition promised ¥10,000 (A\$2,080) for first prize winners and the possibility of joining a ‘China Storytelling Alliance’ (中国故事联盟) or collaborating with the organiser on short videos and ‘new media international communication projects’.¹⁴² The alliance was brought together by Xufang International Media in 2021 to jointly plan, produce and globally broadcast high-quality China-themed short videos (see breakout box: ‘China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration and Xufang International Media’). Members include the Academy for International Communication of Chinese Culture at Beijing Normal University, Chinese social-media platforms Bilibili and Sina Weibo, YChina, and others.¹⁴³ In 2022, the alliance produced more than 20 videos in multiple languages with nearly 10 foreign vloggers. The videos were spread on domestic and foreign social media, including Facebook and YouTube.¹⁴⁴

After the YChina team won the ¥30,000 (A\$6,240) grand jury prize in the 2020 My China Story competition, Raz Gal-Or was invited to speak at the launch ceremony of the 2021 edition of the competition. In his speech, he explained the creative thinking behind his team’s award-winning work

to an audience that included officials from various local propaganda departments.¹⁴⁵ Winning the 2020 competition spurred his team's creative passion, and he hoped, through the competition, to attract more people from all countries to come to China and join creative teams telling China's story to let the world understand a 'truer, more comprehensive China', he reportedly told the audience. Later that same year, his team would go on to win the ¥20,000 (A\$4,220) top prize for a video on Xinjiang in the 2021 My China Story competition.¹⁴⁶

The day of the awards ceremony for the 2020 competition included a 'seminar on how to tell China's story well with short videos' in which participants were addressed by senior Xufang staff and discussed how best to produce and share their stories about China with the world (Figure 8).¹⁴⁷ Foreign vloggers at the seminar included British father-and-son duo, Lee and Oli Barrett, Americans Katherine Olson and YChina's Lila Kidson, along with others. Yolanda Wang (王雁), the Director for Branded Content and Channels at Disney-owned National Geographic, representatives from the China International Communication Center (CICC) and city representatives also took part in the seminar.¹⁴⁸ The Barretts, Olson and YChina are all listed as 'cooperation partners' of My China Story on its official website.¹⁴⁹ Other 'cooperation partners' listed include American Jerry Kowal and British nationals Stuart Wiggin and Max Burns.

Figure 8: Israeli vlogger Raz Gal-Or speaks to an audience including officials from various local propaganda departments at the launch event for the 2021 edition of the My China Story short video competition, in Beijing, 11 May 2021.



Source: China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration [中国外文出版发行事业局], [online](#).

In his address to the same forum, Luo Jun (罗军), vice dean of the Academy for International Communication of Chinese Culture, stressed the need for local Chinese teams to work with foreign influencers to ensure that their content is in line with party orthodoxy (Figure 9). 'The greatest challenge in telling China's story to the world lies in the need for foreigners to internalise an external perspective and externalise internal content,' Luo said, adding that 'this requires Chinese people to be involved, collaborating with foreign teams to convey a deeper understanding of Chinese society to the world.'¹⁵⁰

Figure 9: A party-state media photograph shows Luo Jun (罗军), vice dean of the Academy for International Communication of Chinese Culture, speaking next to Xufang's deputy general manager and CCP cadre Wang Xinling (王新玲) during a seminar on 'telling China's story well', which was part of the 2020 My China Story competition awards held in Yantai, Shandong Province.



Notes: Affiliated with the Beijing Normal University, the Academy for International Communication of Chinese Culture is a think tank and focuses on outbound propaganda. See 'Academy for International Communication of Chinese Culture', archived on 12 May 2023, [online](#). A Xufang leadership appointment notice from CICG noted that Wang Xinling was a CCP member in what appeared to be a rare mention of her party affiliation in relation to Xufang's work. See 'China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration appoints key executives of Xufang International Media' [中国外文局任命煦方公司主要负责人], *CICG*, 4 June 2020, [online](#).

Source: *China News Service*, 18 December 2020, [online](#).

Foreigners can play different roles in the competition processes, and that may support the efforts of organisers to spread the content internationally through different channels. For example, a video introducing the 2020 My China Story awards ceremony was presented by US national Jack Klumpp and distributed via overseas paid PR newswire services, including that of the Associated Press (Figure 10).¹⁵¹ A presentation at the 2022 My China Story awards stated that Klumpp was both an English-language host for the competition and a 'foreign producer' with Xufang. Klumpp was previously a top 5 winner in the state-run 'Chinese Bridge' Mandarin-language competition in 2018,¹⁵² and has also appeared (as John Gardner Klumpp Jr) in videos promoting it.¹⁵³

Figure 10: American Jack Klumpp presents a video about the My China Story competition for China Matters, a media brand under China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration; Klumpp has also hosted the awards ceremony.



Source: Associated Press Content Services, 4 January 2021, online.

The networking and sharing practices aspect of the competitions can benefit the PRC's external propaganda work in multiple ways. Input from industry or academia regarding how to 'tell Chinese stories' and who should tell them can support the development of a more professional content ecosystem and, with it, more effective communication of state-aligned narratives and personalities.

2.4 Media tours: 'A Date with China'

The examples in this section are only a sample of propaganda campaigns that 'borrowed mouths' of foreigners in the summer of 2022 as the PRC's human-rights abuses in Xinjiang came under unprecedented scrutiny in the international community. Since at least 2019, amid international pressure and tensions over the long-delayed visit to the region by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the CCP has launched waves of Xinjiang propaganda campaigns, which have included sending foreign social-media influencers along with party-state media on tours of Xinjiang. The practice is indicative of a trend in which the role of the party-state becomes increasingly and deliberately concealed amid a web of different actors and platforms, and in which state-backed narratives are designed to emerge more 'spontaneously'. This diversification of propaganda styles masks an underlying rigid ideology and purposes.

The 2022 edition of a large-scale propaganda event series titled 'Everyone Talks About Xinjiang' (万人说新疆) kicked off in July 2022. The events included government-led media tours for more than 50 PRC reporters, foreign media and domestic and foreign social-media influencers.¹⁵⁴ The content that foreign influencers filmed during this and other trips to the region would later show up among the top YouTube search results for Xinjiang-related keywords across multiple countries and languages (see Appendix 2). Our review of results found that this was particularly the case when searching from the US: state-aligned foreign-influencer content even dominated the top YouTube search results.

In Australia, the search results were equally striking. When looking up ‘Xinjiang’ on YouTube, for example, five out of 10 results were videos produced by some of the foreign influencers described in this report, while two out of 10 were by Chinese party-state media. Only three out of the 10 videos were produced by other sources. The top video in the same search was published by UK vlogger Jason Lightfoot (see Appendix 2). The two Chinese state-media videos reached a total of 335,000 views, while the foreign-influencer videos reached a total of 855,000 views as of 16 May 2023, showing the great value-add that this type of content gives to PRC propaganda organs.

At the propaganda event’s launch ceremony in Ürümqi, deputy directors of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission and Cyberspace Administration of China (国家网信办) as well as the deputy party secretary of Xinjiang, He Zhongyou (何忠友), addressed an audience that included foreign influencers (Figure 11). He said that he looked forward to the reporters and domestic and foreign internet celebrities using their pens and camera lenses to show an ‘authentic, objective and beautiful’ Xinjiang to the world.¹⁵⁵ Since the propaganda campaign began in 2021, related events had produced more than 1.2 million videos by mid-2022.¹⁵⁶

Figure 11: Screenshots from Xinjiang state television’s main evening news bulletin: participants from Britain, Latvia and Singapore were among the foreign influencers and reporters present at an ‘Everyone Talks About Xinjiang’ launch ceremony.



Source: CCTV, 25 July 2022, [online](#).

‘A Date with China’ (中国有约), which is one of the propaganda tours under the umbrella of the ‘Everyone Talks About Xinjiang’ campaign, was held across China in June and July 2022, including in Xinjiang. The program was directed by the Cyberspace Administration of China’s Online Communications Office (国家互联网信息办公室网络传播局), and dozens of China-based foreign influencers were invited to film and produce videos in locations around the region.¹⁵⁷ State-media workers, including the deputy editor-in-chief of *China Daily*’s website, accompanied influencers on the trip.¹⁵⁸

The content of the tour took cues from Xi Jinping’s freshly completed inspection of the region in July 2022. A deputy director of the Cyberspace Administration, Niu Yibing (牛冰夷), told influencers and others present to ‘tell the story of Xinjiang’s ethnic unity well’, publicise the spirit of Xi Jinping’s speech given during his inspection of Xinjiang, and explain and interpret the party’s strategy for governing Xinjiang ‘in the new era’.¹⁵⁹ The short videos subsequently produced by foreign influencers presented rosy images of ethnic harmony and economic development, glossing over the party-state’s coercive policies of ethnic assimilation of Uyghurs and other non-Muslim people in Xinjiang.¹⁶⁰

The participants were led on a week-long tour with stops in Mongolkure (昭苏), Künes (新源), Tekes (特克斯), Nalati (那拉提), Ghulja (伊宁), Tacheng (塔城), Karamay (克拉玛依) and other locations in

order to ‘show the world a true, three-dimensional and comprehensive Xinjiang’ through witnessing stories unfolding in ‘Xinjiang in the New Era’. One foreign participant, Anzelika Smirnova, presented by party-state media as a Latvian blogger, likened herself and the other foreign participants to ‘beams of light, coming together in a long river of spreading China’s story domestically and abroad’. Although presented by *China Daily* as a blogger, Smirnova had previously worked for CCTV and had joined PRC diplomats on a visit in Latvia, according to the Chinese Embassy in Riga.¹⁶¹ In the same *China Daily* report, British vlogger Adam McIlmoyle (Figure 12; see also Section 3.5: ‘Adam McIlmoyle’) said that the Xinjiang he saw with his own eyes was completely different from the one depicted in ‘biased’ foreign media reports.¹⁶²

Beijing-based Russian influencer and Tsinghua University journalism graduate Sabina Makarova said that every stop of the ‘A Date with China’ itinerary had arranged ‘the most authoritative teachers’ to introduce the activities and answer questions, ensuring that the content of what the influencers produced was accurate, according to a state-media report. Makarova described this as preferable to exploring alone, which she said could lead to some misunderstandings, the report stated.¹⁶³

Figure 12: Screenshots of British vlogger Adam McIlmoyle seen trying on ethnic clothing: (left) in a video posted on his own Bilibili account and (right) the same scene captured simultaneously in a state-media video.



Source: Bilibili, 27 July 2022, [online](#); Douyin, 26 July 2022, [online](#).

China Daily and other PRC media also directly collaborated with the foreign influencers to produce live streams and short videos during the tour, according to *China Daily* website deputy editor-in-chief Li Xin (李欣). Li explained that the intention of the tour was to use the perspectives of foreign influencers to draw foreign audiences in closer, while encouraging interaction between participants so that each would become the other’s interview subject, using forms of speech that are easier for overseas audiences to accept. This strategy highlights the increasing importance placed by propaganda outlets on how interactions with foreigners ought to be structured in order to produce more convincing, foreign-audience-friendly content.¹⁶⁴

The strength of that approach could be seen in a *China Daily* video¹⁶⁵ of an ostensibly spontaneous interaction between the Russian influencer Makarova and a young girl performer she met during a ‘Date with China’ event in Xinjiang.¹⁶⁶ The video begins with musicians of different ethnicities on a stage in Ghulja stating in unison, ‘We are all one family.’ The young girl in traditional dress starts dancing before inviting Makarova on stage to dance with her. After their performance, the video shows the two bonding, with Makarova even in tears. At the end of the short clip, clutching the girl’s cap, which

she was given as a gift, Makarova says that she feels all ethnicities in Xinjiang are living and working together like one family. The video illustrates how, by smoothly weaving party lines together with more natural, relatable content, foreigners can be used to help deliver stark propaganda messages, in this case about ethnic unity—a concept that’s long been at the centre of CCP propaganda, especially Xinjiang-related propaganda.¹⁶⁷

The party and PRC media do give influencers some free rein as to which aspects of the tour they wish to engage with or emphasise in their social-media output, which may make the process more appealing to foreigners who might otherwise have misgivings or concerns about their public image. However, the intentions of the foreign influencers ultimately matter less than those of the party-state, which has the authority to use their content as it wishes.

At the same time that foreign influencers were being led around Xinjiang, foreign students from different PRC universities were also drafted to participate in propaganda tours of the region, in which they filmed vlogs and were interviewed by party-state media (see breakout box: ‘PRC universities’ propaganda activities’). Promoting a positive image of cotton farming in Xinjiang was one prominent theme. In a video published by *China Daily*, Peking University PhD student from Cameroon Joseph Olivier Mendo’o repeated CCP talking points on Xinjiang’s cotton industry and claimed that people in Xinjiang believed the government took care of them (Figure 13). ‘So I saw some villagers, they’re happy, they are very fine with it, it works for them,’ he said. ‘The feedback that we get is that they’re pretty happy.’¹⁶⁸

Figure 13: Screenshots of Joseph Olivier Mendo’o in a *China Daily* video about his experiences in Xinjiang.



Source: *China Daily*, 22 July 2022, online.

One foreign-student tour group from Zhejiang Normal University involved 20 students from 19 countries including Yemen and Somalia visiting sites in Xinjiang.¹⁶⁹ The group’s Xinjiang trip, ‘Entering Xinjiang, feeling China’, was co-organised by their university’s Border Research Institute and its International Department. It led them to visit CRCC Heavy Industry Xinjiang Co. Ltd (铁建重工新疆有限公司), a manufacturer of cotton-picking vehicles that aims to play a strategic role in the Belt and Road Initiative. It’s a wholly owned subsidiary of China Railway Construction Heavy Industry Group, part of China Railway Construction Corporation Limited (中国铁建), which was sanctioned by the US in June 2021.¹⁷⁰

PRC universities' propaganda activities: creating new overseas voices

In this broad surge of international communication efforts, PRC universities are providing both theoretical and practical support. That has involved initiatives such as cultivating their own foreign students as vloggers to produce content aimed at foreign audiences.

Huaqiao University—an institution jointly established by and directly under the United Front Work Department¹⁷¹—established an ‘Overseas New Voice Generation’ new media studio (“海外新声代”新媒体工作室) in January 2021.¹⁷² The media studio aims to use students from Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan as well as other international students in China to ‘tell China’s story well, communicate China’s voice well, and give full play to their “others’ perspective” and “youth discourse” advantage in cross-cultural communication.’¹⁷³ In 2021, the party secretary of Huaqiao University’s College of Chinese Language, Yuan Yuan (袁媛), organised more than 200 international students from 16 countries, including the US and Ireland to take part in related video shoots (Figure 14).¹⁷⁴

Figure 14: Screenshot showing Yuan Yuan, party secretary of Huaqiao University’s College of Chinese Language (centre left, in orange), posing for a photo with foreign students.



Source: Cyberspace Administration of Xiamen, 6 September 2022, [online](#).

The Cyberspace Administration of the Xiamen Municipal CCP Committee and the Xiamen Women’s Federation awarded Yuan for this work in September 2022, highlighting her efforts in ‘mobilising international students in China to tell stories about Fujian and China online in order to enhance the effectiveness, coverage and influence of international dissemination of Chinese stories’ and shoot bilingual short videos on themes including ‘The CCP in the eyes of foreign youth’, according to an official report on the awards.¹⁷⁵ The awards were organised to study and implement Xi Jinping’s thinking on ‘strong internet power’, according to the report—an indication of how the CCP sees cooperation with foreign vloggers to benefit its cyberspace agenda.

Multiple videos produced from the Huaqiao University project were distributed overseas by party-state media, including the *People's Daily* and *China Radio International*, as well as on US social media (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube).¹⁷⁶ Huaqiao University's project won the support of the 'Overseas Cultural Influence' key project of the Cyberspace Administration of China and the All China Youth Federation.¹⁷⁷

Tsinghua University also organised international students to produce short videos destined for US social media as part of a competition titled '100 reasons to love Beijing', which attracted entries from nearly 100 countries, according to a university report on the event.¹⁷⁸ In a sign of the importance placed on such work by the party, the university's Global Communications Office, a group under the propaganda department of the university's CCP committee, received an award for its work. The university report said that the prizegiving ceremony was attended by municipal and central propaganda leaders, including Jiang Jianguo (蒋建国), deputy head of the Central Propaganda Department and director of the State Council Information Office.

In support of a 'Tell China's Story' competition, Huazhong University of Science and Technology and the China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration jointly established a 'Creative Communication of Chinese Stories Research Institute'. Their 'Telling Chinese Stories Well' research team worked on innovating mechanisms, building teams and platforms.¹⁷⁹ In late 2022, leading PRC universities and research centres including Fudan, Nanjing and Sun Yat-sen universities were among the 'first batch' of 14 'external discourse innovation research centres' of CICG. The establishment of the research centres was described as an 'important move' in the implementation of the Central Propaganda Department's work plan on strengthening the external discourse system in the new era. The research centres intended to speed up the construction of Chinese discourse and Chinese narrative systems and contribute to building international communications capabilities.¹⁸⁰

The above cases are a strong illustration of the PRC's increasing practice of involving more domestic groups in producing favourable external social media content. 'China has introduced the concept of "international communication for all", because only when everyone is involved in international communication can the new challenges facing international communication be solved,' explained Guo Ke (郭可), the director of the China International Public Opinion Research Centre at Shanghai International Studies University, during an episode of top propagandist Zhang Weiwei's (张维为) TV show. 'It is only in this way that we can confidently shape our discourse system with Chinese characteristics,' he said.¹⁸¹

2.5 The influencer studio system

Xi Jinping has stressed the significance of innovative foreign propaganda, calling for new concepts that blend Chinese and foreign elements and the use of emerging media.¹⁸² Answering his call in 2021, Shen Haixiong (慎海雄), deputy head of the Propaganda Department of the CCP and head of China Media Group (the official media conglomerate directly under the Propaganda Department) called on his colleagues to 'improve the influencer studio incubation mechanism' in operation at China Media Group's 'studios for influencers in multiple languages' (多语种网红工作室).¹⁸³

In his treatise on foreign influencers, *China Newsweek's* Du Guodong indicated that the multilingual influencer studios would involve collaboration with foreign influencers. 'China's international

communications have long been propagandistic', Du wrote, adding that foreign influencers can be more effective at reaching foreign audiences because they're 'closer to foreign audiences' cultural traditions, thinking habits and language expressions'.¹⁸⁴

Party-state media have also been experimenting with the creation of 'studios' based on the 'personal brands' (个人IP) of their media workers that are designed to push pro-Beijing content out onto foreign social-media platforms such as X, Facebook and YouTube. The strategy is partly in response to increasingly varying attempts by some US social-media platforms to label and even downrank content from state-affiliated sources. By using personal accounts, the same party-state talking points can be amplified via more relatable personas without facing restrictions.¹⁸⁵ 'Covert' content designed to influence the information environment makes it difficult for social media platforms to attribute it to state-affiliated actors, and to respond. Social media platforms often lack sufficient visibility to prompt investigations. This is in addition to a lack of financial incentives for platforms to effectively tackle the issue, and a tendency to push content likely to go viral irrespective of the trustworthiness of the source.¹⁸⁶

Among the influencer-like accounts operating in this way are those helmed by party-state media workers at state-run international TV channel *CGTN*, including Serena Dong (董雪), Li Jingjing (李菁菁), Wang Guan (王冠), Jessica Zang and Rachael Zhou (周忆秋) aka 'Miss Wow', who was featured in *Borrowing mouths to speak on Xinjiang*. This phenomenon was clearly identified as an explicit strategy in a July 2020 paper published in *China Journalist* (中国记者), under the auspices of Xinhua News Agency, that analysed the Xu Zeyu Studio (徐泽宇工作室), a personal brand studio under *Xinhua*.¹⁸⁷

Xu Zeyu Studio is meant to capitalise on Xu's position as an 'international influencer' (国际网红), enabling more effective dissemination of party-state propaganda, including more viral forms of soft, or less explicit, propaganda. This is needed in order to face what Mao Wei [毛伟] and Fang Mingxuan [方明轩] call an 'increasingly severe form of public opinion struggle on overseas media platforms'.¹⁸⁸ One of their recommendations is for this model of foreign propaganda, which leverages the personal brands of individuals to push the party's agenda on global social-media platforms, to be scaled up. Those efforts should also include influencers 'who are deeply engaged in certain fields or even represent certain political tendencies overseas'.¹⁸⁹

The 'Green-Eyed Andy Studio' (绿眼睛Andy工作室), set up by party-state media organisation Shanghai United Media Group (SUMG) in January 2021, is the first example of this model being used with a foreigner as the focus of the personal brand—in this case, New Zealander Andy Boreham.¹⁹⁰

Boreham has worked for the *Shanghai Daily* for years, but also creates content for the Green-Eyed Andy Studio using a softer, influencer-style approach to content creation, focusing primarily on lifestyle and cultural narratives. Series such as 'Home in Shanghai', 'One day one job', 'Andy's pet moments', and 'Andy's Shanghai life' exhibited this approach, presenting an appealing and easy-to-digest view of life in China.¹⁹¹ However, over time, Boreham transitioned towards more hard-edged content in his 'Reports on China' (外媒看中国) series, which explicitly counters supposedly inaccurate Western media narratives about China.

Boreham adopts an adversarial stance towards foreign media's coverage of China. The tagline for his 'Reports on China' YouTube account, which as of 18 April 2023 had 46,400 subscribers, is 'Countering the Western anti-China narrative'.¹⁹² Boreham appears to embrace a role as a defender of the CCP.¹⁹³ In

a YouTube video posted on 21 April 2023, he explained that he's 'proudly biased' in his China reporting (Figure 15).¹⁹⁴ On X, he has admitted that his use of the platform, which is blocked in China, to target an international audience is acceptable because of Xi Jinping's emphasis on 'telling China's story well' (讲好中国故事) and 'external propaganda' (外宣).¹⁹⁵

Figure 15: Screenshot from Andy Boreham's video about his China reporting, which he describes as 'proudly biased'.



Source: YouTube, 21 April 2023, [online](#).

In an interview with *China Daily*, Boreham explained why he was drawn to working for China's party-state media, effectively choosing the path of a propagandist rather than a traditional journalist. Boreham drew a distinction between the media of the 'Anglo-West', which he described as 'completely separate from government' and used 'to criticise and attack governance or bad governance', and Chinese media, which 'is more part of the government' and is 'for disseminating useful information'.¹⁹⁶ In 2022, Boreham's video titled 'How to be a friend of China?'¹⁹⁷ received the Award for International Communication in the state-run My China Story short-video competition.¹⁹⁸ That endorsement from the party-state reflects the official approval of the content he produces with his Green-Eyed Andy Studio colleagues within China's propaganda framework.

An article by Whale Platform (鲸平台),¹⁹⁹ based on interviews with Boreham and Wang Haoling (王昊灵), a managing editor at the *Shanghai Daily* and the head of the Green-Eyed Andy Studio, shed some light on how the studio operates. According to Whale Platform, the style and social-media accounts that Boreham's studio creates were decided on after discussions with the newspaper's leadership. But part of the model involves allowing a degree of flexibility over topic selection, as that helps them be most effective in communicating the 'Chinese story'. Ultimately, all Boreham's video content has to pass through three levels of approvals at the *Shanghai Daily*, the article notes.²⁰⁰

Importantly, the article notes that Wang still maintains control over Boreham's content in order to protect the influencer and the content itself. 'Although Boreham is already a semi-expert on China, on many issues, including homosexuality, epidemic prevention and control policies, etc., he still has to

go through Wang Haoling’s explanations to fully understand China’s national conditions,’ the article reads. Wang describes Boreham’s Twitter account as a ‘secondary account’ that the *Shanghai Daily* ‘developed’. The strategy suggested an intention to effectively circumvent Twitter’s now-defunct policy of downranking content from state-controlled media. Because it’s a ‘personal account’, it would have more visibility and influence on the platform.²⁰¹ Boreham claims that his tweets have ‘no influence whatsoever from the Chinese [Government], or anyone else.’²⁰²

In February 2022, soon after he received a verification label on Twitter,²⁰³ Boreham became the first foreigner to be labelled by the platform as ‘China state-affiliated media’.²⁰⁴ Twitter’s policy on state-affiliated media accounts states that accounts labelled that way won’t be recommended or amplified to other users. Following Elon Musk’s purchase of X, the policy hasn’t been removed or updated, but restrictions attached to those accounts were removed in March 2022,²⁰⁵ and all state-affiliation media labels were removed the following month.²⁰⁶ Boreham’s account is now verified on X, which ensures that his tweets receive prioritised rankings in conversations and searches.

On 16 June 2022, Green-Eyed Andy Studio received a further boost from the CCP when it was among 20 groups selected to be part of the SUMG ‘Integrated Media Studio Empowerment Plan’ (融媒工作室赋能计划).²⁰⁷ Li Yun (李芸), secretary of the party committee and president of SUMG, said that selected ‘seed players’ would be provided with ‘support in terms of operation, technology, training and incentive mechanisms’.

The training would also include cooperation with leading Chinese tech companies, which would share cutting-edge work methods to ‘enable the first batch of high-quality “seeds” to grow quickly and become benchmarks’, with the aim that studios would become self-sustaining. Also present at the launch of the project were representatives from Douyin Group (抖音集团), a subsidiary of ByteDance and Tencent’s WeChat Strategic Research Institute (微信战略研究院), who committed to cooperating with the ‘incubation’ of the studios.

As the Chinese Government continues to leverage the power of emerging media, the personal branding of its propagandists and influencers represents a significant evolution in its foreign propaganda strategy. From the Green-Eyed Andy Studio to the high-profile media personas at *CGTN*, those initiatives are designed to amplify Beijing’s narrative globally while circumventing restrictions on state-affiliated content. Shanghai party-state media’s development of Boreham as a staunch defender of the CCP offers a clear illustration of this strategy in action.

2.6 The role of party-state media

On 25 January 2019, in his speech at the 12th collective study session of the 19th Central Political Bureau held at the *People’s Daily*, Xi Jinping instructed party-state media to take a more proactive role in leveraging what he sees as growing international praise of China. ‘We must bolster our confidence, boost morale, and persistently tell China’s story well, thereby establishing an international discourse power that aligns with our country’s comprehensive national strength,’ Xi instructed, adding that achieving that relies on properly targeting global audiences: ‘I’ve said it many times, wherever people are, that’s where the focus of propaganda and ideological work should be.’²⁰⁸

Xi’s call for a more proactive role for party-state media is indeed being translated into practical measures. Party-state media are taking significant steps in providing a platform for influencers to

promote narratives that favour China. According to Du Guodong, ‘international communication agencies’ including CCTV and his own *China Newsweek* are working on initiatives to ‘cooperate with foreign influencers to tell China’s story and spread China’s voice’.²⁰⁹

In 2021, for instance, the *People’s Daily* Overseas Propaganda Department worked with more than 20 foreign influencers from almost 10 countries and made almost 30 videos, which reportedly attracted 100 million accumulated views.²¹⁰ Meanwhile, CGTN ran a global ‘Media Challengers’ campaign in 2021 to find and train English-speaking presenters and influencers to become the ‘next face and voice of CGTN’.²¹¹ In the campaign, which was described in a CGTN press release as ‘a three-month global talent hunt that reached 130 countries and regions’,²¹² the party-state media offered ‘up to US\$10,000’ to participants.²¹³ Shortlisted participants would have the chance ‘to receive professional multimedia training and resources and become part of CGTN’s official talent database’ or even ‘become full-time or part-time journalists who tell stories directly from the front lines’, the press release stated. In response to criticism that this was a propaganda scheme targeting UK students, the broadcaster said ‘that is definitely not the case’,²¹⁴ despite a Media Challengers X account filled with videos of students at British universities promoting the campaign, as well as students from Australia, Canada, the US and many other countries.²¹⁵

While they’re typically presented as unaffiliated, independent voices, it should be noted that some foreigners who appear in state-media videos have also included the staff of PRC party-state media, as well as purported ‘influencers’ with little following in or outside China. In a similar vein, party-state media have attempted to repackage their own staff as unaffiliated influencers and vloggers for foreign audiences (see Section 2.5: ‘The influencer studio system’).

These state-created influencers have also been used to interview and guide foreigners in state-media productions. For a CGTN live stream from Wuhan featuring foreign US vloggers, for example, CGTN staff reporter Jessica Zang was presented as an independent ‘video blogger’.²¹⁶ CGTN has also created a ‘Global Stringer’ brand and often used that journalistic label on content presented by foreigners. By spring 2023, there were 744 ‘global stringers’, according to CGTN’s website.²¹⁷ A CGTN recruitment notice stated that the initiative aimed to show ‘positive, high-quality content to the world in an objective and neutral manner’ and promised ‘global stringers’ ‘bonuses’ according to the quality of the work they uploaded.²¹⁸ At the time of review, four out of five of the featured videos on the Global Stringers home page were negative stories about the US, and all had the same byline.²¹⁹ A review of a ‘Global Stringer’ page on CGTN also found the featured content heavily slanted towards pro-China narratives and with a strong focus on social problems in the US.²²⁰

Whether foreigners or Chinese state-media workers, these pseudo or entirely fictitious identities work to paint state narratives with a veneer of independence and spontaneity. The practice is probably an attempt to drive greater audience engagement while avoiding pushback against their state affiliations, including related labels on foreign social media. That Chinese authorities use vlogger, influencer and journalist identities interchangeably also underscores that their efforts are aimed at influencing audiences, rather than offering professionalised news coverage. Foreigners, nonetheless, open up new, sometimes concealed, avenues for party-state content to reach foreign audiences. When that practice is combined with overseas media cooperation agreements or other forms of bilateral exchange, state-media editorial content can enjoy even greater and more silent penetration of foreign countries’ media while remaining incognito when desired.

This is well illustrated by Xinhua News Agency's cooperation agreement with ANSA, Italy's largest news agency. Since the two agencies signed a cooperation accord in 2016,²²¹ followed by a further agreement in 2019 during Xi Jinping's visit to Rome,²²² *Xinhua* has been able to seamlessly insert its own content on ANSA's official website, at times even without *Xinhua* logos or editorial disclaimers. In response to criticism over its links to *Xinhua*, ANSA has defended the independence of its journalism.²²³ In one ostensibly ANSA-produced video, former state-media *China Radio International* worker Gabriella Bonino²²⁴ was presented as an Italian sinologist.²²⁵ The *Xinhua* video appeared on a regular, ANSA-branded page and included an ANSA watermark. Only a 'GLOBALink' logo (a *Xinhua* brand)²²⁶ at the end of the video confirmed its PRC state-media origins. These methods effectively mean that there's no distinction between PRC external propaganda and the editorial output of an authoritative European news agency, and the use of an Italian face plays a key role.

The video featuring Bonino as well as other ANSA-branded *Xinhua* videos were still appearing on ANSA's official site at the end of 2022, despite media reports that the Italian agency's agreement with *Xinhua* had been annulled earlier the same year.²²⁷ That may hint at a certain durability of PRC state-media content's penetration into foreign media, even after publicised ruptures. Whether for technical, managerial, contractual or other reasons that allowed PRC content on ANSA to persist, as the CCP calls for more PRC actors to engage in external propaganda work, and as media platforms aim to diversify, there are likely to be increasing numbers of workarounds for PRC media to reach foreign audiences regardless of formal content-sharing agreements.

3. Deep dives: foreign-influencer case studies

3.1 The influencer ecosystem

This section explores the reasons why the Chinese party-state sees so much value in foreign influencers and has been pouring resources into that space, as well as the individual experiences of some of the influencers themselves.

The social-media-influencer ecosystem is a global phenomenon in which individuals build audiences by creating content with specific styles, topics or messages. Monetisation through advertising, product placements and content deals is common, as are endorsements from government institutions. However, advertising disclosure requirements differ by country and platform.

Foreign influencers of the sort we examine in this paper are distinct from other foreigners who have an online presence in China. The foreign influencers we examine typically weren't well known before they started publishing content online. Instead, they've largely built their fame and followings through video content and seek to monetise viewer traffic through small direct payments or 'tips' from viewers, platform rewards and advertising,²²⁸ mostly on Chinese platforms.

Foreign influencers of this kind have been present on China's internet since at least 2013, when one of the most well-known foreign influencers on video-sharing platform Bilibili, Japanese national Yamashita Tomohiro ('山下智博'), released his first video. In subsequent years, the foreign-influencer niche has steadily grown as part of China's broader short-video influencer economy, which was estimated to be worth ¥5.7 trillion (AS1.254 trillion) in 2022 and is expected to exceed ¥7 trillion

(AS1.54 trillion) in 2024.²²⁹ In the early days, most of the influencers created content about their own cultures and home countries and not a great deal about China itself.²³⁰ But, from 2016 onwards, significant numbers of foreigners began posting on Bilibili. Most of them were foreign students who had studied Chinese in their home countries, according to Zheng.

Zheng also noted that foreign influencers on Bilibili started attracting significant attention in 2017 with videos that largely focused on their experiences while studying in China. That year, their videos got tens of thousands of views, attracting tens of thousands of followers. By the end of 2018, there were around 46 foreign vloggers on Bilibili who were posting about China and had more than 1 million accumulated views. Twenty-four of them had over 50 million views, and four had more than 100 million.²³¹ By December 2020, there were more than 200 foreign vloggers on Bilibili from 18 different countries. More than 53 of them were active and had more than 60,000 followers.²³² Eleven had more than a million followers.²³³ The foreign influencers aren't just present on Bilibili but on most of the other major Chinese video-based platforms, including the ByteDance-owned platforms Douyin and Xigua.

Over that period, foreign influencers managed to build up large followings without producing content that closely aligned with CCP narratives and talking points. In fact, there remains a sizable proportion of foreign influencers on Chinese online platforms who don't actively contribute to pushing the party line or promoting party policies.

3.2 Commercialised nationalist propaganda

On the other hand, many foreign influencers have found that appealing to Chinese audiences' sense of nationalism can provide a fast track to gain popularity, increase their online presence and, ultimately, generate more revenue. Indeed, China's internet regulations encourage users to actively promote party propaganda – so many influencers have adapted to thrive in that system. The Regulations on Ecological Governance of Network Information Content (网络信息内容生态治理规定), introduced in 2019, bolster restrictions on 'negative' content and encourage posts that focus on 'Xi Jinping thought' and 'core socialist values', as well as posts that 'increase the global influence of Chinese culture'.²³⁴

For example, Russian national Vladislav Yuryevich Kokolevskiy, or 'Fulafu' (伏拉夫), has become a household name through his ostentatious displays of affection for China (Figure 16). Kokolevskiy boasts a total of 29 million followers across all main Chinese video-streaming platforms (see Appendix 1). Since 2018, he has made hundreds of videos in which he conveys unstinting fondness for China, its cuisine and its technology, such as Huawei phones, electronic payment systems and unmanned supermarkets. Kokolevskiy's videos have attracted the interest of Chinese brands. Chinese media estimates of his earnings suggest that his influencer activity is lucrative. According to one outlet, in January 2021, Kokolevskiy made three ads for tech brands and companies Netease, Pinduoduo and Tmall for what they estimated to be a total of ¥240,000 (A\$52,263).²³⁵

Figure 16: Vladislav Kokolevskiy in a series of videos on his Xigua account, depicted saying 'I love life in China so much' (left), 'Today I'm going to raise the Chinese flag in my own house' (centre), and 'Living in China: so reassuring, so safe.'



Source: 'Fulafu' [伏拉夫], Xigua, online.

But the effusiveness of his praise for China has left many viewers sceptical about his intentions (Figure 17), and he's had to repeatedly defend himself in domestic media when questioned about the authenticity of his feelings for the country.²³⁶

Figure 17: Kokolevskiy in one of his early videos, wearing traditional Han Chinese clothing and yelling, 'I love China!'; most comments by viewers shown throughout the video are mocking the influencer's over-the-top flattery with phrases like 'I love China's money!', 'The wealth password is correct!', or 'Ding! You just received a hundred million yuan on your Alipay account.'



Source: 'Fulafu' [伏拉夫], Xigua, 4 September 2020, online.

The pull of the growing influencer market in China has attracted other foreigners, such as Bart Baker, who's a popular US YouTuber known for creating parody videos of famous songs. He left YouTube and the more than 10 million subscribers he had amassed there in 2019 to operate exclusively on Chinese video-sharing platforms.²³⁷ Baker's move into China's influencer economy marked a significant change in his content style towards an over-the-top enthusiasm for Chinese brands such as Huawei and a penchant for singing patriotic songs. Baker commemorated his switch from YouTube to the Chinese market by destroying his YouTube 10-million followers award.²³⁸ In another video, after purchasing a Huawei phone, Baker smashed his Apple iPhone on the ground. Baker amassed a following of more than 20 million across Chinese video-streaming platforms (see Appendix 1) before his videos suddenly disappeared from Douyin and Bilibili in April 2023.

In May 2020, Baker released a video in which he defended himself against criticism that his professed enthusiasm for Huawei wasn't genuine and that he was cynically pandering to Chinese audiences with his 'foreigner-loves-China' schtick. 'Why do you think my affection for China isn't genuine?' Baker asked in a heavily edited video using poorly pronounced Mandarin. 'Do you believe that China doesn't have the ability to make me fall in love with it? But my friends all tell me that they are very confident about their country. They believe that China has a beauty that anyone can fall in love with, and China's mobile payments [system] is leading the world. I have enjoyed the convenience it brings in China. Everyone is also friendly to me. It's very safe to go out at night, and the high-speed rail is very convenient.'²³⁹

Baker's defence hinges on an understanding that there's an expectation among a segment of the domestic audience that foreigners have a positive attitude towards the country. A 2021 survey conducted by Chinese academic He Qing (何清) involving 508 respondents found that 69.5% of the participants reported following foreign influencers online. When asked about the most attractive attributes of an influencer, 58.3% of them emphasised the importance of 'being friendly to China, loving China'.²⁴⁰ At the same time, as noted above, Chinese audiences have grown wary of foreign influencers like Kokolevskiy and Baker, whom they believe are cynically pandering to nationalist sentiment for views.

In Chinese internet slang, those who are seen to be praising China to attract views are said to be using a type of 'wealth password' (财富密码)—a formula or shortcut to internet fame and fortune. The approach hasn't been welcomed by the CCP. A 2021 commentary by the Chinese Communist Youth League railed against vloggers manufacturing fake patriotic content for clicks. 'It is shameful to turn patriotism into a cheap transaction and consume people's patriotic feelings,' the piece noted.²⁴¹ In a paper on the foreign-influencer phenomenon, Du Guodong wrote that 'the repetitive content and pandering compliments can quickly cause audiences to lose interest and experience aesthetic fatigue after the novelty wears off,' adding that 'although China is developing rapidly, it still faces many problems, and objective and balanced reporting is key.'²⁴²

Kokolevskiy and Baker are representative of an exaggerated and performative style, but more and more foreign influencers are increasingly adopting a comparatively subtle approach that leverages their 'foreignness' in relation to 'Chineseness' to appeal to their Chinese audience.²⁴³ By focusing on topics such as Chinese-language learning, their everyday life experiences in China and the cultural differences between China and their home countries, these vloggers create content that highlights their unique perspective as foreigners in China, which in turn attracts Chinese viewers who are interested in learning about and understanding those differences.²⁴⁴

Criticism of ‘wealth password’ content has driven some foreign influencers to emphasise a sense of authenticity in their videos, while still praising aspects of China’s rise and development. In one video, Katherine Olson, an American vlogger who has taken part in state-run propaganda events and competitions, criticised other foreign vloggers’ use of ‘wealth password’ content and explained that positive narratives about China can be made more subtly (Figure 18).²⁴⁵ She gave the example of her own videos, in which she travels in remote parts of China by herself, encouraging foreign viewers on YouTube to marvel at how safe China is.²⁴⁶

Figure 18: Influencer Katherine Olson tells her audience: ‘I don’t need to intentionally cry out: “China is safe!”, I just need to show these things here, and people will realise themselves. I personally think that this way is more authentic.’



Source: ‘Yanglizi’ [阳离子], *Xigua*, 10 July 2021, online.

In their own video examining the ‘wealth password’ phenomenon, Italian influencer Rachele Longhi and her Chinese partner He Junjie (何俊杰) (see Section 3.3: ‘Rachele Longhi’) pointed out that this style of video wasn’t created just by foreigners, but originally started with Chinese creators. The fundamental reason why both groups make these videos is, according to He, due to ‘the censorship mechanism of the various platforms’. ‘Praise will gain traffic, professing love [for China] will trend,’ he said, ‘so it’s not that foreigners found a wealth password, they found a loophole in the censorship [system].’²⁴⁷

Indeed, China’s internet regulations encourage users to actively promote party propaganda – so many influencers have adapted to thrive in that system. The Regulations on Ecological Governance of Network Information Content (网络信息内容生态治理规定), introduced in 2019, bolster restrictions on ‘negative’ content and encourage posts that focus on ‘Xi Jinping thought’ and ‘core socialist values’, as well as posts that ‘increase the global influence of Chinese culture.’²⁴⁸

The PRC’s online censorship regime cloisters its netizens in an information environment that’s isolated from the rest of the world and primed with a nationalistic ideology. Under Xi Jinping, party propagandists have declared social-media platforms to be ‘the main battlefield’ (主战场) to conduct ‘public opinion struggle’ (舆论斗争).²⁴⁹ Heeding that call, online nationalists have, in recent years,

called for boycotts of celebrities and foreign brands such as Dolce & Gabbana, H&M and Nike²⁵⁰ when they perceived them as undermining China's positive image or insulting China.

Foreign influencers have also sought to shore up their reputations by going beyond simple appeals to their audiences' patriotism and into stridently nationalistic content as a fast track to viral fame.²⁵¹ As pointed out by Stella Chen on the *China Media Project*, 'topics related to nationalism and the defence of China's dignity can often prove popular on social media, and are a safe and surefire way to generate traffic in an environment where other current affairs issues can be highly risky.'²⁵²

A growing subset of foreign influencers, aware of the highly nationalistic online environment and strict censorship rules in China, are increasingly choosing to create content that aligns more explicitly with the party-state's narrative, or its 'main melody'.²⁵³ In addition to highlighting the country's achievements in a positive light, these influencers promote or defend China's position on sensitive political issues, such as territorial disputes or human-rights concerns. As Ke Ma notes, 'like foreigners who are active in China's TV programs, foreign vloggers who wish to stay visible and popular in Chinese social media need to perform in a way that coalesces with China's top-down state-led ideological work.'²⁵⁴

American influencer Nathan Rich, who goes by the nickname 'Hotpot King' (火锅大王) online and currently has 15.8 million followers across Chinese platforms and more than 500,000 on YouTube (see Appendix 1), first had a viral hit in 2018 that satirised an advert from Italian fashion house Dolce & Gabbana which was slammed as racist by the Chinese public.²⁵⁵ After that first viral success, Rich went on to create more viral videos that sought to counter criticism of China. The titles of his most popular videos on Bilibili include, 'Did the COVID-19 virus originate from Fort Detrick in the US? Is it a conspiracy theory or reasonable suspicion?' (7.5 million views as of 25 May 2023), 'COVID originated in Fort Detrick? New evidence is here!' (5.4 million views), 'How does YouTube suppress the voice of China?' (2.7 million views) and 'The truth behind Dr Li Wenliang's death in the COVID-19 epidemic' (2.1 million views).²⁵⁶

Figure 19: Nathan Rich's most viral videos on Bilibili, as of 25 May 2023.

TA的视频 139 最新发布 最多播放 最多收藏

▶ 播放全部 更多 >

Video Title (Chinese)	Views	Date
新冠病毒发源于美国? 是病毒? 还是真相? DID COVID-19 COME FROM 18:32	754.3万	2020-3-17
新冠病毒来源于美国德特里克堡? 是阴谋论还是合理怀疑?	545.5万	2021-1-21
油管如何屏蔽中国的声音 Nathan Rich 火锅大王	275.4万	2019-9-6
新冠肺炎疫情: 李文亮医生之死的真相 Nathan Rich 火锅	215.2万	2020-2-10
为什么不该让谷歌进入中国 Nathan Rich 火锅大王	191.3万	2019-11-7
从美国FOX主持人要求中国道歉看“有毒的美国主义”	189.9万	2020-3-6
如何反击纽约时报无脑黑中国? 揭露外媒的谎言 Nathan	188.7万	2019-1-26
作为《流浪地球》特效公司 CTO, 我怎么看这部电影?	157.1万	2019-2-10
油管删除了我95%的订阅数/ 粉丝 Nathan Rich 火锅大王	155万	2019-2-4
后会有期	150.1万	2022-3-26

Source: 'NathanRich火锅大王', Bilibili, online.

While the Chinese Communist Youth League has criticised the use of ‘wealth password’ content that effusively praises China, as noted above, it has nonetheless welcomed Rich’s style of videos. In January 2019, the Youth League’s official WeChat account published screenshots from one of his videos and summarised his argument about ‘why foreign media always likes to criticise China’.²⁵⁷ Other leading propaganda organs, including *CCTV*²⁵⁸ and the *People’s Daily* (the official newspaper of the CCP Central Committee), have also covered Rich’s videos positively.²⁵⁹ Rich’s more combative style of videos parallels that of China’s ‘wolf warrior’ diplomats, who have in recent years shifted towards a more assertive stance in their international messaging.

Chinese influencer-management agencies, known as multichannel networks (MCNs),²⁶⁰ which operate in China strictly aligning to party priorities and directives, have even suggested the nationalist strategy to foreign influencers.²⁶¹ In 2016, when thousands of China-based trolls attacked Australian Olympic swimmer Mack Horton and his supporters after Horton called his Chinese rival Sun Yang (孙杨) a ‘drug cheat’, Australian influencer David Gulasi joined in on the microblogging service Sina Weibo. According to *Jiemian News* (界面新闻), an MCN called Shock Culture (震惊文化) advised Gulasi to pick the public online fight with Horton.²⁶² Gulasi also directed his anger at fellow expats. In one of his videos titled ‘Hey, foreigner, show respect’, Gulasi said that he was fed up with foreigners going to China, earning a salary there, enjoying so much freedom and still complaining so much. ‘I want to tell you, get out, OK?’ he said in the video.²⁶³

Similarly, Israeli citizen Raz Gal-Or, co-founder of multichannel online video network Y-Platform and YChina and creator of pro-CCP narrative videos on Xinjiang and, in an interview with French newspaper *Le Monde*, admitted to receiving guidance from the government on whom to meet in the region.²⁶⁴

Gal-Or and his Peking University classmate Fang Yedun (方晔顿), a member of the CCP, founded YChina, or the ‘Foreigner Research Institute’, which has worked closely with party-state media since its inception.²⁶⁵ In a 2017 interview, Gal-Or stated that YChina’s ‘vision’ was to ‘create so-called positive energy’, aligning with Xi Jinping’s emphasis on uplifting messages over criticism.²⁶⁶ YChina’s content has taken clear political stances, such as Gal-Or’s pro-Beijing videos made in Hong Kong during the 2019–2020 protests and a video parodying the supposedly negative way that the *BBC* depicts China, which *CGTN* later picked up.²⁶⁷

Videos that closely align with party-approved narratives have become increasingly popular among other foreign influencers in China, as we outline in the rest of this paper. Although there’s a variety of styles in videos created by foreigners in China, the foreign-influencer ecosystem lacks a plurality of voices on politically significant matters. Instead, it consists of a party-approved monoculture.

3.3 Rachele Longhi: a ‘credible, lovable image of China’

At a boarding school in Lhasa, Tibet, hordes of smiling children run towards the camera. Rachele Longhi, an Italian vlogger based in China, asks them to speak some Tibetan words. ‘I’m Han Chinese!’, ‘I’m Tibetan!’, the children scream. Longhi goes on to showcase some writing in Tibetan at the entrance of the student dorms, lauding the cleanliness and comfort of the place. ‘They finish classes at 8:50 pm. After classes, they have a shower and they go to sleep at 9:30 pm. They can’t bring their phones to school. Sanitation and cleanliness are maintained by the students in the dormitories,’ says a school representative taking Longhi on a tour (Figure 20).

Figure 20: Rachele Longhi interviews children at a government boarding school in Lhasa, Tibet.



Source: YouTube, 19 November 2021, online.

Jumping between classes and showing students reciting Tibetan words in slow motion, Longhi is on a mission to show the world the ‘real Tibet’. While seemingly unprompted, the video addresses many of the accusations levelled against the Chinese Government in relation to the mandatory assimilation and sinicisation of Tibetan culture, especially through institutions that remove children from their families.

Since 2010, the UN has published communications with concerns about ‘the Tibetan language, culture and education and the situation of those who defend them’.²⁶⁸ It reported that, since 2011, China has accelerated the establishment of Mandarin-based preschools and residential schools in rural Tibet, particularly in areas with nomadic and farming communities. Residential schooling is more common in Tibetan areas, where 78% of Tibetan children aged 6–18 years attend such schools.²⁶⁹ This year, the UN reiterated concerns about the ‘assimilation’ of 1 million Tibetan children in boarding schools, reflected in policies that emphasise Mandarin over Tibetan language instruction.²⁷⁰ Inadvertently, Longhi’s video reveals that most classes at the school she visited are indeed taught in Chinese, while students are only taught ‘beginner-level Tibetan’, according to Longhi’s guide.

The video was watched more than 60,000 times on YouTube and received over 600 comments—an outpouring of praise and thanks, mainly in Chinese, for showing the ‘real Tibet’ and debunking erroneous coverage of the region by foreign media. On Xigua, the video reached 473,000 views as of May 2023,²⁷¹ and an additional 81,000 views on Bilibili.²⁷² A notable distinction between the videos that Longhi posts on her Chinese channels and those she posts on YouTube is the choice in titles: while on YouTube the video seems to take a slightly less political tone, on Chinese platforms the words are more openly anti-Western. In fact, while on YouTube Longhi titled the video ‘A day in a school in Tibet: foreigner spends a day in primary school in Lhasa and experiences how Tibetan students spend their day’, on her Chinese channels she titled it ‘Foreigner spends a day in a primary school in Lhasa. Is this the place the BBC talked about? How is it different?’ (Figure 21).

Figure 21: Different titles for the same video on Tibet published by Longhi on YouTube (top), Xigua (centre) and Bilibili (bottom).



Sources: [YouTube, online](#); [Xigua, online](#); [Bilibili, online](#).

Longhi’s video, shared on the channels she runs with her husband, He Junjie, was covered by China News Service, which interviewed the vlogger and reported her saying: ‘We just walked around on the street and talked to people, there is no script at all. We also posted our videos on YouTube and Facebook ... Some people have doubted the authenticity of our videos, but they simply relate what we saw and heard in Tibet. We just did what we thought was right and focused on presenting a real China to the world.’ This video was also shared by the Chinese Embassy in Australia.²⁷³

Rachele Longhi (known as *Ruili* 瑞丽 in China) is one of the most popular foreign influencers in the social-media campaigns covered in this report. The social-media channels she runs with her partner He Junjie, or ‘Luca’ (路卡), both in and outside China have gathered hundreds of thousands of followers and millions of views under the name ‘Luca&Rachele’ (路卡和瑞丽). On Bilibili, for example, she has more than 422,000 fans,²⁷⁴ more than 1.6 million on Douyin,²⁷⁵ 1.6 million on Xigua,²⁷⁶ over 51,900 on TikTok,²⁷⁷ and more than 110,000 on YouTube,²⁷⁸ for a total of just under 3.7 million. Longhi primarily speaks Chinese in her videos, but most of them are translated into English and Italian.

Longhi is an Italian national who moved to China for university. She graduated from Northwestern Polytechnical University (西北工业大学) in Xi’an in April 2019. At her graduation ceremony, she gave a speech as a representative of international students, reflecting her proficiency in Mandarin.²⁷⁹ Since 2020, Longhi has become very popular on Chinese social media and a darling of Chinese party-state media and government officials.²⁸⁰ In a March 2022 interview with the China Centre for International Communication Development, Longhi said she was ‘honoured that my recent video was shared by Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Hua Chunying.’²⁸¹

In 2021, Longhi was invited to speak at the World Internet Conference, which is an annual event organised by the Cyberspace Administration of China. In her speech, Longhi said that she’s ‘determined to tell the story of China,’ and ‘present a credible, lovable and respectable real China.’²⁸² As we wrote in our previous report, *Frontier influencers: the new face of China’s propaganda*, that sentence echoes a clear directive laid out by Xi Jinping earlier that year, in May, at a collective study session of China’s Politburo on external propaganda, where he stressed the need to seek approaches that are new and innovative and that strike the right tone—one that’s ‘open and confident as well as

humble and modest’, and that ‘strives to create a credible, lovable, and respectable image of China’.²⁸³ Longhi’s speech included references to other Xi-endorsed CCP slogans, including a reference to the world sharing a ‘community of common destiny for mankind’ (人类命运共同体) and a final promise to her audience that she’ll ‘roll up her sleeves and get to work’ (撸起袖子加油干)—a phrase from a New Year’s message from Xi Jinping.²⁸⁴

Longhi’s meticulous adherence to party slogans in the production of her videos hasn’t gone unnoticed by PRC propaganda organs. For instance, she was mentioned in a *CCTV* report that praised her for her video showcasing Beijing’s flag-raising ceremony in Tiananmen Square,²⁸⁵ which ‘exceeded 4.7 million views on domestic and overseas platforms’, according to *CCTV*. Using Longhi and other foreign influencers as models, *CCTV* recommended that other vloggers take part in its media activity and ‘cleverly use the identity of foreign video bloggers, bring their own traffic, and tell Beijing stories with “foreign mouths” and “foreign eyes”’:

Through 19 languages, both domestic and foreign internet celebrities and influencers, in conjunction with domestic and international social platforms, are promoting the specialised content for secondary dissemination, forming a multi-level, multi-channel, and multi-platform precise communication pattern. This has highlighted the demeanour of a major capital city, and is a successful realisation of telling China’s story well and collectively shaping China’s image.²⁸⁶

Longhi has also been awarded several prizes. The *People’s Daily* reported that ‘Ruili found that many foreigners were still unfamiliar with and misunderstood the China she knew and loved, which also strengthened her determination to tell Chinese stories well,’ after Longhi won the first prize in the second ‘Daily Life of Global Chinese’ short-video competition sponsored by the *People’s Daily* Overseas Network in 2020²⁸⁷ (for more on the use of competitions as incentives, see Section 2.3: ‘State-sponsored competitions’). Her video series on Tibet also won a prize at the second China Tibet Online Video Festival, co-produced by the Cyberspace Administration of the Tibet Autonomous Region Party Committee (西藏自治区党委网信办), the Tibet Autonomous Region’s Department of Culture (西藏自治区文化厅) and *Xinhua* (Figure 22).²⁸⁸

Figure 22: Rachele Longhi and He Junjie receive a prize in a 2020 video contest sponsored by the People's Daily Overseas Network.



Source: Facebook, 5 February 2021, online.

One of the most high-profile prizes Longhi won was in the 2021 My China Story short-video competition, in which she was awarded the second spot in the 'Expats experiences' category in conjunction with the Shaanxi branch of China News Development Co. Ltd (中国新闻发展有限责任公司陕西分公司). This event's ceremony was attended by several senior CCP propaganda officials (Figure 23). The competition is run by China International Communications Group, which in its own description on the website says that it's an 'organization affiliated with the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), specializing in international communication that serves the Party and the state.'²⁸⁹

Figure 23: Longhi on the stage of the 2021 My China Story video competition with senior CCP propaganda officials such as Wu Xin (吴新), director of the foreign exchanges department of Hangzhou's municipal propaganda department of the CCP.



Source: Xufang International Media, 15 September 2021, online.

This state-run competition has also built relationships with American cable channel, Discovery. Wilson Lee, deputy director of the Asia–Pacific Television Network at Discovery Channel (探索频道亚太电视网副总监), was a judge in the state-run 2022 My China Story short-video competition, and Vikram Channa (魏克然), vice president and content manager, East and Southeast Asia at Discovery Channel, was a judge in the 2021 and 2020 competitions. National Geographic is My China Story's 'Global Strategic Partner'.²⁹⁰

In February 2022, Longhi was featured in a documentary by Discovery Channel as a 'Discovery explorer' and presented a whole episode. Discovery reached 22 million global direct-to-consumer subscribers at the end of 2021, with a three-month growth of 2 million subscribers.²⁹¹ In the episode, co-sponsored by Chinese dairy giant Junlebao (君乐宝乳业集团有限公司; Figure 24), Longhi spoke highly about China's infant formula production and its wonders.²⁹² The Chinese baby formula industry still suffers from a bad reputation after a scandal in 2008, when 300,000 children were poisoned by a chemical substance contained in the milk.²⁹³

Figure 24: Screenshot from Rachele Longhi's documentary for Discovery Channel and Junlebao.



Source: YouTube, 22 February 2022, online.

The success of Longhi and He in taking advantage of both this profitable business model and party incentives led them to set up their own consulting company, called Hangzhou YouToo Information Consulting Co. Ltd (杭州优兔信息咨询有限公司),²⁹⁴ having transformed their social-media channels into a video-production enterprise. Longhi and He are careful in tailoring their content differently for domestic and external audiences.

China-based Taiwanese influencer Li Qiaoxin (李乔昕) is another entrepreneurial foreign influencer producing state-aligned content for commercial gain. Li promotes state-aligned videos to her nearly 2 million Douyin followers, including in a bubbly presentation about Xinjiang cotton, and has even taken part in an online-influencer panel at an official PRC cross-straits forum.²⁹⁵ 'I went on stage to call on more Taiwanese youth to influence their friends around them so that more young Taiwanese can really come to the motherland and take a look around,' Li said at the event.²⁹⁶ In July 2022, two months after the cross-straits forum, Li posted that she had co-founded a media company in Hangzhou.²⁹⁷ In the company's first week of operation, Li said she had already got her first work trip—to Weifang.²⁹⁸ Shortly after, videos featuring Li exploring Weifang appeared on social-media accounts of local party-state media.²⁹⁹ 'I don't know where the money is,' Li said in response to earlier criticism that she had taken money for her activities.³⁰⁰ One of her Taiwanese critics pointed out that in previous years Li appeared to have had a different professional identity,³⁰¹ having introduced herself as an 'actor' in a 2020 Sichuan state-media video.³⁰²

Foreign influencers in Western media

PRC cooperation with foreign media firms opened up commercial opportunities for foreign influencers such as Italian vlogger Rachele Longhi, who was hired to present a Discovery Channel documentary. British vlogger Stuart Wiggin, meanwhile, had his proposal for a short video selected in late 2022 for a ‘New Era, New Image’ joint Sino-foreign program. The program, titled ‘IP Plan’ in English, aimed to tell positive stories about China through documentary videos. Jointly hosted by various organisations, including CICC and Discovery Channel, it was also guided by the State Council Information Office, the Cyberspace Administration of China and the National Radio and Television Administration. Wiggin’s proposal was selected as one of the best proposals in the short-video category. The program planned to hold a ‘creation workshop’ during which famous Chinese and foreign directors and industry experts would offer ‘systematic training’ to those selected for the program.³⁰³

By deepening the involvement of foreign influencers and experts in content production through participative events such as competitions, the PRC can further tap into established international media practices and networks, thereby gathering more tools to produce content with greater reach while also shaping and developing those tools to suit the idiosyncrasies of the party-state. This aspect is well illustrated by one competition’s close cooperation with US media.

‘The best way to tell China’s story well to the world is through cooperation,’ Vikram Channa, a senior manager in Asia for Warner Bros. Discovery told attendees at the launch ceremony of a ‘My China Story: Greater Bay Area’ competition in December 2022. Channa, vice president and content manager, East and Southeast Asia at Discovery Channel, participated in the competition’s panel of expert judges. Other senior Discovery staff have also worked as judges in other editions of My China Story competitions.³⁰⁴

But Discovery isn’t the only US media to support Xufang International Media’s work. Disney-owned National Geographic is listed as a ‘Global Strategic Partner’ of a Xufang ‘My China story’ competition.³⁰⁵ This cooperation illustrates how the CCP’s propaganda priorities directly create and shape commercial opportunities for foreigners and foreign businesses in China. In the case of Discovery, cooperation with the PRC propaganda apparatus appears to be exceptionally longstanding, prolific and tightly aligned with the CCP’s external propaganda objectives.³⁰⁶

‘We need to spend a lot of time thinking about how we can capture overseas audiences with Chinese stories on the Discovery Channel,’ the head of CICC’s production centre told party-state media.³⁰⁷ Experts have described CICC as a ‘CCP-run production outfit’.³⁰⁸ Its productions have included the three-part series ‘China: Time of Xi’, which was fronted by foreign presenters and promoted Xi Jinping’s governance. Vikram Channa (Figure 25) was head of production on the series and told *Xinhua* that it was ‘incredible that China . . . offers an alternative way of continuing globalisation at a time when many countries are questioning it’ in a report that noted that the series was broadcast to 200 million viewers in 37 countries and regions.³⁰⁹ The series was also shown on PRC party-state media³¹⁰ and promoted by the State Council Information Office.³¹¹ According to a report on the event, the China Institute for Innovation and Development Strategy would work with Discovery on a six-part large-scale documentary series titled ‘What makes China China?’, which was to be co-directed by Channa and broadcast in the US. The series promised to ‘eliminate misunderstandings’ between China and the West, with one episode covering the CCP.³¹²

In 2021, Channa told the *People's Daily* that Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative and 'shared common destiny' were 'innovative and bold initiatives'.³¹³ That same year, Channa met the deputy party secretary of China's top film school and discussed future cooperation and how to tell 'Chinese stories'.³¹⁴

Figure 25: Vikram Channa giving a talk titled 'Branding China on the world stage the Discovery way' at a CICC event (left); Channa on stage with Jing Shuiqing (井水清), CICC deputy director and deputy editor-in-chief (right).



Source: CICC.org.cn, 22 September 2018, [online](https://www.cicc.org.cn).

These organisations have made ample use of foreign influencers. National Geographic co-produced a 2020 documentary film presented and co-directed by Hangzhou-based Japanese director and influencer Takeuchi Ryo. In 2021, the Central Propaganda Department and the National Radio and Television Administration announced the documentary, which presented a warm portrait of China's national *Gaokao* (高考) examinations, as one of a series of 'excellent external communications documentary films'.³¹⁵ The notice stated that all organisations producing and broadcasting documentary films should study these examples and produce more such films suitable for overseas communication and 'telling Chinese stories'. Released by China Review Studio (解读中国工作室), which is a production studio of CICC's journal *China Reports*, the film was executive produced by the State Council Information Office, also known as the CCP Central Office of Foreign Propaganda.³¹⁶ The English-language version of the film appears to have been broadcast on the US National Geographic channel.³¹⁷ It includes scenes of Takeuchi marvelling at the Nanjing Public Security Bureau's 'big data command and service centre', where officers are shown supporting the smooth management of the exams (Figure 26).³¹⁸ China Review Studio doesn't carry a state-media label on YouTube, and the film's credits don't mention the State Council Information Office.

Figure 26: Japanese director and influencer Takeuchi Ryo appears in a China Review Studio documentary co-produced by US National Geographic.



Source: [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...), [online](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...).

3.4 Russian influencers: reflecting PRC–Russia ties

Content from prominent Russian influencers in China reflects and promotes work to overcome the longstanding challenge of building broader public enthusiasm for the bilateral relationship. Online videos are identified as an important avenue to achieve that; it's a strategically significant challenge for both countries' media, which seek 'a bigger say in the international arena through practical cooperation in the internet era,' according to *China Daily* editor-in-chief Zhou Shuchun (周树春).³¹⁹

On PRC social-media platforms, the most typical themes from popular Russian users include promoting closer bonds between people of both countries, Russia as a strong military power, and Russian women as marriage partners for Chinese men. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, some Russian vloggers have emphasised China's loyalty to Russia in the face of economic sanctions.

As Chinese communications experts have observed, an often-cited 'official enthusiasm, public coolness' or 'hot above, cold below' characteristic of Sino-Russian relations exists too in the sphere of media cooperation, and, despite progressive warming in both bilateral media cooperation and public opinion between the neighbours, until recently, media cooperation had almost exclusively featured state-owned media.³²⁰ However, increasing youth participation in online videos may help both countries translate high-level bilateral agreements and initiatives into popular grassroots engagement. This is now playing out both spontaneously, as Russian influencers capitalise on online Chinese nationalism, and at the direction of both countries' governments.

To support Russian and Chinese online media in joint content creation, personnel and technology exchanges, and other areas, the *China Daily* website has organised multiple editions of the 'China–Russia Internet Media Forum' with support from PRC and Russian authorities. The forums promise to promote the development of China–Russia relations with 'powerful online positive energy'.³²¹ The bilateral events are directed by the Cyberspace Administration of China and the Russian Ministry of Digital Development, Communication and Mass Media.

'We are currently witnessing the ever-increasing interest in alternative sources of news. The fact that the largest English-language website in China is granting us the rights helps us satisfy our viewers' demand and ensure the geographic expansion of our new Chinese partner,' *China Daily* quoted Kirill Filippov, CEO of Russia's *SPB TV*, as the two sides signed a content-sharing agreement at the forum. 'Enhancing cooperation with Chinese media is one of the most important strategic development strategies for us,' Filippov added.³²²

As part of the second annual forum held in Rostov-on-Don in 2017, both sides organised a 'China–Russia Youth Media Innovation Camp'. This was in line with the *China Daily* website's editor-in-chief's call at the forum for Chinese and Russian online media to 'promote interaction and communication' between internet users of both countries.³²³ The camp saw a Chinese student delegation sent for a week of activities in Rostov-on-Don, where they discussed topics including online development trends and online media technology and jointly filmed a short video.³²⁴ During the camp, the Russian and Chinese students were instructed by the head of the media department of Don State Technical University, which jointly organised the forum.³²⁵ *China Daily* website deputy editor-in-chief Li Xin (李欣), whose work also includes accompanying foreign vloggers around China to produce short videos

from propaganda tours in Xinjiang and elsewhere (see Section 2.4: 'Media tours'), led the students throughout the camp.

The governments of Russia and China also jointly sponsored an annual short-video competition for youth of both nations in 2022 and 2023.³²⁶ At the November 2021 China–Russia Online Media Forum, the director of external relations at *SPB TV*, Denis Perepelitsyn, said that this form of competition was chosen to better reach young people via their favoured form of media and bring the two countries closer together, according to a *China Daily* report on the event.³²⁷

Russian influencers and officials have capitalised on PRC e-commerce as a way to build audiences and profits. In the PRC, where e-commerce is often a focus of nationalist sentiment, Russian influencers stand to benefit from an online culture that often amplifies calls to support or boycott products based on the country of origin. Russian vloggers such as '混血兄弟姐妹雅斯顿' (mixed-race siblings *Yasidun*)³²⁸ appear to exploit this online culture by mixing pro-China patriotic rallying cries with blunt sales pitches for Russian snacks. One of their melodramatic videos won more than 1 million Douyin 'likes' by appealing to users of the platform to be friends with their mother. A Douyin video showed a woman said to be their mother falling to her knees in the snow and burying her head in the PRC flag in a show of deep gratitude for the positive response to the appeal.³²⁹

The trend of Russian commerce benefiting from PRC nationalism was particularly clear after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022. Chinese media covered PRC internet users showing their support for Russia by purchasing Russian goods on e-commerce platforms. 'Thank you, everyone,' the commercial ambassador of the Russian Chamber of Commerce in China said in Mandarin in a video message to those who had caused Russian products to sell out. A Weibo comment under one media report of the video summed up the mood: 'Maybe every product we purchase could become a bullet in the body of hegemony.'³³⁰

The PRC propaganda apparatus has also independently developed its own Russian voices that can speak for the party. Alexandra Pozhidaeva from Siberia studied Mandarin at a Confucius Institute in Russia, later winning the PRC-run 'Chinese Bridge' (汉语桥) language competition and going on to complete undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in China, including at Peking University's School of Journalism and Communications, where she was a 'national strategic communication researcher'.³³¹ Pozhidaeva now works at the Eurasian Communication Center of the China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration (also known as China International Communications Group, CICG, in English),³³² which is an external propaganda agency under the State Council Information Office.³³³

Pozhidaeva registered a Twitter account in May 2022 and began posting pro-Kremlin and pro-CCP propaganda, often tagging and occasionally interacting with prominent official PRC diplomatic accounts.³³⁴ Her account repeatedly shared content from an autumn 2021 Peking University–led tour in Xinjiang, with photos and videos showing Pozhidaeva posing with Uyghur children. Around September 2022, it appears that her account was suspended by Twitter, after which she opened another account, which again was suspended, according to archived web pages and a Chinese media interview.³³⁵

'I want to speak for Xinjiang because I have personally seen Xinjiang and it was totally not the same as the West says. What I saw was an open, inclusive, developed Xinjiang,' Pozhidaeva told *Guancha* (观察者网) in an interview about her accounts being banned. 'I am just a normal foreign student but no

matter what I want to keep speaking up for the truth in China,' she told the publication. 'It is necessary to use the force of us ordinary people to spread a true Chinese story.'³³⁶

On Chinese social media, Pozhidaeva's videos include more explicitly pro-Kremlin content targeted at Chinese audiences.³³⁷ She has posted videos to elicit viewers' sympathy for sanctions faced by Russian athletes; explained what she sees as the reasons why Russia 'was driven' to take 'concrete action' against Ukraine, which had become a 'tool' for the US to 'oppress' Russia; shared purported footage of Russian troops delivering aid to grateful residents of a Kyiv suburb; and celebrated the pro-Russian Army 'Z' symbol.³³⁸ Pozhidaeva doesn't appear to have posted videos from Xinjiang on her Bilibili account, in contrast to her now suspended Twitter accounts.

Despite her being presented as a Russian voice, videos featuring Pozhidaeva have more closely represented Beijing's own positions rather than the Kremlin's. In a TED-style talk published by Peking University on YouTube, Pozhidaeva gave a glowing account of China's epidemic response, which, she said, made it 'the safest place in the world', and declared that 'mankind is a community with a shared future'³³⁹—a key slogan of Xi Jinping.³⁴⁰ Following the sudden reversal of China's 'dynamic zero-Covid' policy, Pozhidaeva took to YouTube in early 2023 in an apparent attempt to counter foreign media reporting on the changing situation. 'Beijing is back to normal life,' she shared in English while walking through a Beijing park in a selfie-style video, the description of which read, 'While some media abroad are reporting about chaos on the streets of Beijing, that's what I found out in the park nearby.'³⁴¹ Pozhidaeva's account was unlabelled, and her state-media affiliation wasn't mentioned. Despite her multilingual talents and training, the video had received just a few views in the month it was posted.

On Instagram, Pozhidaeva posted a photograph of herself smiling in a cotton field in Xinjiang in 2021, with a group organised by Peking University. 'There were no harassed Uyghur farmers, but we saw about 20 autopilot tractors picking cotton,' she wrote in the photo caption. 'Not a day passed without dancing and singing,' another caption read.³⁴² In an article in the state-linked tabloid *Global Times* celebrating growing Russia-China ties, Pozhidaeva noted that Vladimir Putin 'represented a point of consensus among Russian people' in his comments on Russia-China ties 'as a model for inter-state cooperation in the 21st century'.³⁴³ The article presented Pozhidaeva as a news editor without revealing her PRC state-media affiliation.

Aside from videos, Pozhidaeva has participated in multilateral forums in China, commercial TV shows, a 2021 PRC Ministry of Education campaign to attract international students to study in China, and a series of *Xinhua* programs about the football World Cup in Russia.³⁴⁴ In 2021, she was one of a group of Peking University students who received a reply from Xi Jinping to a letter they had written to him as part of the CCP's centenary events.³⁴⁵

Pozhidaeva isn't the only Russian voice to advocate PRC positions or policies. 'Anna in Hainan', whose real name we couldn't identify, an ethnically Russian citizen of Kazakhstan in the southern island province of Hainan, has spoken out to her more than 3 million Douyin followers on topics such as Taiwan's international participation. 'Isn't Taiwan a province of China? So how can it join the UN?' she said in one Weibo video.³⁴⁶ On Russia's war against Ukraine, 'Anna in Hainan' videos defended the Russian invasion and sought to respond to Chinese internet users' concerns and questions about the welfare of mobilised Russian troops. 'Everyone is bound by duty to defend the country,' she said in one video that received nearly 40,000 comments and more than 180,000 likes.

'Anna in Hainan' demonstrates how the party-state increasingly seeks a symbiotic relationship with foreign influencers. This was clear when the Russian took part in a state-led tour in the province's Wenchang City organised by provincial and local cyberspace administrations and Sina Hainan, according to a Sina Hainan report on the events.³⁴⁷ The tour appeared to be aimed at co-opting influencers to support the government's propaganda work. During the tour, the provincial cyberspace administration hosted an informal seminar discussion with the influencers about the best ways to 'spread good voices of the [Hainan] free trade port', the report noted (Figure 27). The head of the propaganda department of Wenchang City's CCP committee told the influencers at the discussion that in future the city would offer 'more effective communication channels' and 'richer publicity resources' to new media platforms, 'forming a joint force with the influencers' to show off Wenchang (see breakout box: 'Propaganda push at the local level').

Figure 27: CCP propaganda and cyberspace administration officials with influencers at a seminar discussion during a tour in Wenchang City, Hainan Province, 23 March 2022; 'Anna in Hainan' is front-row, centre-right in a group photo with CCP officials.



Source: *Sina Hainan*, 24 March 2022, [online](#).

Sina Hainan's report detailed how the influencers in turn gave 'advice and suggestions' on how to best put into play the 'unique advantages of we-media'. 'Anna in Hainan' told the seminar that she hoped to be a window for more people to understand and visit Hainan, and for more content creators to join 'the team' publicising the province, according to the report. The deputy head of the provincial cyberspace administration told attendees that the influencers' sharing of their experiences would allow authorities and the influencers to more closely unite their 'propaganda positions' (宣传阵地) and also asked them to become 'builders of bridges between China and foreign countries, talking about real conditions, speaking true words, spreading Chinese voices well and telling Chinese stories,' according to Sina Hainan's report.³⁴⁸

While posting ostensibly spontaneous content, 'Anna' appeared to be one of the top 'talents' on the roster of Hainan Juxing Media, which is a local MCN based in Hainan.³⁴⁹ A profile of Hainan Juxing Media's chief business officer, published on the official WeChat account of the Hainan Youth Literature and Arts Talent Association, highlighted the officer's work in 'incubating' Anna and other influencers as a 'professional achievement'. The profile also noted that the officer was a CCP member.³⁵⁰

Hainan Youth Literature and Arts Talent Association was established in 2020 and is under the supervision of the Hainan Provincial Committee of the CCP Youth League. Part of the association's mission was to support the development of the Hainan Free Trade Zone and Free Trade Port, according to a state-media report on the organisation's establishment.³⁵¹ A caption on photos of 'Anna in Hainan' attending an e-commerce gala in Haikou read, 'I hope I can make my own contribution to the construction of the Free Trade Port. I love Hainan. I love China even more.'³⁵²

Propaganda push at the local level: sprawling international communication centres

Party-state departments around the country have responded enthusiastically to demands from the party's 'core' to strengthen research and participation in international communication work. In November 2021, senior PRC propaganda workers gathered at the first China Online Civilization Conference in Beijing—a forum directed by the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission and Central United Front Work Department (中央统战部)—where they discussed 'telling Chinese stories well' and solutions to overcoming perceived Western hegemony in international communication. The editor-in-chief of *Xinhua Net*, Qian Tong (钱彤), told the forum that the PRC needed to 'break Western media's discourse monopoly and hegemony' and 'break through the double barriers of ideology and information dissemination set up by the West'. In the face of that perceived challenge, Qian said that the PRC should deploy 'unique perspectives, objective facts and penetrating expressions' to win over the international community by eliciting 'empathy and resonance'.³⁵³

At the local level, we've found rapidly growing efforts to develop diverse forms of cooperation with foreign influencers in response to Xi's call to boost China's outbound propaganda. Wenzhou City, in Zhejiang Province, appears to be particularly active when it comes to cultivating foreign influencers. That may be due to the city's status as an important nexus in the PRC for emigration and overseas ties. Wenzhou's 'Overseas Communications Officer' team reportedly has more than 700 members.³⁵⁴ A propaganda department of one Wenzhou district launched its own 'Overseas Communications Officer Training Project' in December 2016 and by autumn 2017 had already hired 60 officers spread globally in 18 countries, including the US, Spain, Italy, France, Czechia, Turkey and Japan. The district would 'actively strengthen training of overseas communication officers and organise and carry out policy doctrine study and local Wenzhou cultural knowledge accumulation so as to increase their influence and be good communications ambassadors in the internet era'.³⁵⁵ In 2022, another Wenzhou district 'international communication centre' was organising locally based foreign students to take part in short videos and live broadcasts.³⁵⁶ The propaganda department of Wenzhou's municipal CCP committee explained that, in recent years, the department, together with Wenzhou's municipal information office, had invited more than 80 foreigners in Wenzhou to film short videos and post them on domestic and foreign social-media sites, including platforms blocked in China such as TikTok and Facebook.³⁵⁷

Local governments are incorporating foreign influencers into new external-propaganda groups from day one of their creation. Wenzhou's own international communication centre, founded in 2018, launched a 'Wenzhou International Communication Influencer Incubation Base' ('温州国际传播网红孵化基地') in 2020.³⁵⁸ The incubation base would be responsible for running a group titled 'Seagull Circle' (海鸥圈), launched in 2021, that included 21 influencers from more than 10 countries, including British national Adam McIlmoyle (see Section 3.5: 'Adam McIlmoyle') and that would ultimately be guided by the Zhejiang provincial cyberspace administration and Wenzhou municipal propaganda department, a report from the centre noted. It described how Wenzhou brought the influencers to the city for an April 2021 oath-swearing-style launch ceremony in the presence of local officials. During the ceremony, a foreigner from Mauritius took to the stage to read the group's 'declaration', which appeared to include Xi Jinping's call to 'spread good voices from China'. The group would form part of an 'international communication matrix' to 'convey the voice of Wenzhou to the world and tell Chinese stories', the report added.³⁵⁹

The city had also previously organised seven foreigners from the UK, Italy, Pakistan, Ukraine, Mauritius and other countries to take part in a 2020 training program for ‘foreign exchange ambassadors’ run by the Wenzhou People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (温州市人民对外友好协会).³⁶⁰ The association is a local branch of the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (中国人民对外友好协会) and currently headed by Wenzhou’s deputy party secretary.³⁶¹ Its charter states that it aims to win ‘broad international sympathy for the cause of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics’, with its ‘main scope of work’ including external propaganda work and its office located within the Wenzhou Government Foreign Affairs Office.³⁶² As part of this program, the foreigners participated in the production of a six-part vlog series that aimed to ‘create a better external environment for the high-quality development of Wenzhou’. The Wenzhou Foreign Affairs Office guided the series, and local party-state media were responsible for planning, production and publicity.

Wenzhou’s local authorities have used foreigners not only for their individual value as presenters or content creators but also to build the city’s international communication capacity by training local groups to participate in related activities. At least one of the seven foreigners who took part in the vlog series, a former PRC state-media worker from Italy, along with other foreigners from the US, the UK and Japan, were announced as ‘international mentors’ in 2022 for a newly formed team of ‘Little Overseas Communications Officers’ (小小海外传播官) in Wenzhou.³⁶³ Also referred to officially as ‘Little Diplomats’ (小外交官) and the ‘Starfish Agency’ (海星社), the group of at least 20 local primary-school students was to take part in a project to promote positive stories of the city as well as exchange activities with overseas second- and third-generation Chinese emigrants and other foreigners, with the goal of adding new force to and expanding the scope of the city’s overseas communications work. According to the Lucheng District Government, the children would take part in weekly activities including multilingual live broadcasts.³⁶⁴ These moves highlight how foreign vloggers are valued by multiple local actors who are increasingly tasked with international communications and external propaganda responsibilities. The developments in Wenzhou also draw attention to the rapid growth in capacity building at the local level and the flexible and creative ways in which the authorities use foreigners.

As in Wenzhou, there’s been a surge in ‘international communications centres’ established at the municipal and provincial levels around the country in recent years. International communication used to be mostly done by central-level media, but, with the rapid development of social media and the general trend of globalisation, local-level international communication work can also be useful, noted the deputy director of the Center for Global Public Opinion during a tour of Hainan’s international communication centre. The centre is based within local state-media offices, and the tour group included more than 200 propaganda workers, including from Xufang International Media, who praised the facilities and discussed how to best work with foreigners to tell Chinese stories.³⁶⁵

We found several examples of international communication centres that had foreign staff members. Two years after its founding in late 2019, for example, Hainan’s international communications centre claimed to have ‘developed’ more than 80 overseas communications officers from more than 30 countries.³⁶⁶ Foreigners from the US, France, Germany, Canada and Austria were present at the May 2022 establishment of Jinan’s international communications centre, according to a local state-media report, which noted that the foreigners would work as ‘overseas recommendation officers’ for the city.³⁶⁷ In Chongqing, local party-state media and the local government established an external

propaganda agency called iChongqing in 2018.³⁶⁸ The agency has hired English-speaking foreigners as full-time staff to post influencer-style content on overseas social media. iChongqing is also involved in organising foreign influencers to travel to the large municipality. Four years after its founding, it claimed to have 55 staff.³⁶⁹

In one video published from an iChongqing tour, British father-and-son vloggers Lee and Oli Barrett showed at least two iChongqing staff travelling with them in the same vehicle, as Lee Barrett asked the staff what the next stop on the trip would be (Figure 28).³⁷⁰ The state-media report highlighted that the Barretts had more than 120,000 YouTube subscribers at the time and noted that the pair were there as part of a ‘first batch’ of foreign vloggers invited to take part in a ‘Relaxing China Travel—Overseas Top YouTube Influencers Shoot Chongqing’ event. Their participation was organised by two of the abovementioned Chongqing communications centres, the report added. In comparison with other foreign vloggers, the Barretts appear to be relatively more open about their cooperation with the state, perhaps reflecting influencers’ different individual politics, vlogging identities, or perceptions of media norms. Their participation in the trip was promoted by multiple party-state media and at least one official PRC diplomatic account on Twitter.³⁷¹ iChongqing published at least two sit-down interviews with the pair during the trip. Later that year, they returned and produced more videos with iChongqing at a tech expo.

Figure 28: Videos published on the Barrett YouTube channel show vloggers Lee and Oli Barrett accompanied by an iChongqing team during a tour of scenic spots.



Source: YouTube, 23 October 2020, online.

The Barretts appeared to be well aware of the value that their content can offer their hosts. At a seminar on using short videos to ‘tell Chinese stories well’, attended by influencers and propaganda workers, the Barretts explained that content such as travel vlogs could help foreigners see China objectively and was also a means to respond to negative international views on China.³⁷²

On YouTube, iChongqing’s branding suggests that it’s a tourism and travel channel, yet many of its most popular videos have little to do with the municipality and are instead talk-radio-style discussions led by iChongqing foreign staff about the war in Ukraine and potential China–US conflict.³⁷³ The mix of political and travel content fronted by iChongqing’s foreign faces is in line with the activity of its editor-in-chief, Catherine Chen. On X, where Chen describes herself as a ‘media personality’, she has spread conspiracy theories and hashtags such as #HillaryForPrison, #HunterBidensLaptop and other rhetoric targeting the US.³⁷⁴ No longer labelled ‘China state-affiliated media’, Chen now appears to

be a paid ‘blue check’ subscriber on X and has repeatedly championed Elon Musk’s takeover of the social-media firm. Prior to its suspension, Chen frequently shared content from the ‘Spicy Panda’ account, which *ProPublica* and the *New York Times* identified as a focal point for more than 3,000 apparently inauthentic Twitter accounts.³⁷⁵

In March 2022, Sichuan provincial party-state media unveiled their own international communications centre, described as a professional international communication organisation of Sichuan Daily Newspaper Group, with a stated focus on visual, mobile and social-media communications.³⁷⁶ Like similar organisations, the centre has multiple overseas accounts on Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube and Instagram.³⁷⁷ One high-quality video posted by the centre on Facebook showed influencers, including foreigners, experiencing a day in the life of a grassroots CCP cadre.³⁷⁸ None of those accounts carries a ‘party-state media’ label, and in one case possibly created an alternative account after previously being labelled by Twitter.³⁷⁹ One account from the centre, ‘Panda Daily Show’, labels itself on Facebook as an NGO.³⁸⁰

Also in 2022, ‘international communication centres’ were established in Hebei, Gansu and Zhejiang provinces, and state-media China News Service launched its own CNS International Communication Group.³⁸¹ The international communications centre in Hebei would offer ‘24 hour international communications services’ via branch centres set up in New York City and Brussels, according to *Xinhua*.³⁸² Similarly, ‘overseas relay stations’ were unveiled alongside the launch of the centre in Zhejiang.³⁸³ Gansu’s centre, set up by party-state media with the approval of the propaganda department of the provincial CCP committee, played up its use of foreign students to present positive images of the province and said it would explore ways for local mainstream media to participate in international discourse in order to contribute to China’s overall external-propaganda work.³⁸⁴

3.5 Adam McIlmoyle: ‘a foreign vlogger with positive energy’

‘I think it’s astonishing and absolutely great how the government has helped them,’ British national Adam James McIlmoyle remarks in a YouTube video depicting him visiting Guizhou villagers.³⁸⁵ In another scene, he stands below a giant sign proclaiming Xi Jinping’s key rural revitalisation policy and quips that it’s ‘very nice’. The video was published by *China Matters*, a video content brand of Xufang International Media (see breakout box: China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration and Xufang International Media) and posted on the official account of the provincial Guizhou government press office as well as McIlmoyle’s own accounts.³⁸⁶ The video description introduces him as a ‘British video journalist’; however, we’ve found no evidence of McIlmoyle describing himself as such or ever having worked in the media.

The case of McIlmoyle demonstrates the combination of tools that the CCP and private businesses can deploy to guide and profit from foreign influencers: cash rewards, attention and publicity, commercial opportunities, and possibly employment or cooperation opportunities with Chinese party-state media.

Originally from Northern Ireland,³⁸⁷ McIlmoyle enjoys a following of roughly 100,000 on Douyin and more than 40,000 on Bilibili. His videos typically depict his travels in China, including multiple videos from Xinjiang, or offer commentary in line with PRC nationalism, such as criticism of Western media bias against China. His content has been regularly amplified by Chinese party-state media

such as *Xinhua*³⁸⁸ and the *Shanghai Daily*³⁸⁹ as well as officials, including the former Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying (华春莹).³⁹⁰

According to McIlmoyle, while living in China and working as a schoolteacher,³⁹¹ he began creating content as a hobby out of his love for China, Chinese culture and videography.³⁹² His social-media presence was, at least for a certain period, managed by an MCN called Papitube.³⁹³ In 2019, the company invited McIlmoyle and other influencers on a three-day cruise to Hong Kong, which included a company presentation about trends in short-video content.³⁹⁴

McIlmoyle has participated and won top cash prizes in multiple state-run short-video competitions in recent years. That coincided with state-media cooperation, a propaganda tour in Xinjiang, the promotion of his content by PRC Government and Foreign Ministry accounts, and at least one anti-BBC vlog, all of which aligned with CCP propaganda objectives but also contrasted markedly with his earlier, purely travel-focused, content posted on his Instagram account.

In 2019, he was one of three winners in the *People's Daily's* 'China and I' (我与中国) short-video competition (Figure 29).³⁹⁵ According to party-state media, the *People's Daily* received more than 430,000 entries from over 60 countries,³⁹⁶ and McIlmoyle was one of three people who won the first prize, which offered a cash award of ¥100,000 (A\$21,820). It's unclear whether that amount was shared by the three winners or offered to each of them. In the video, McIlmoyle is seen travelling home to Northern Ireland to show his video of China to his mother, who's seen dressed in *hanfu* clothing brought home by her son, who then concluded that people have the 'wrong outlook' about China.³⁹⁷ The video was posted on the official YouTube account of state-media China News Service (中国新闻社).

Figure 29: Adam McIlmoyle, second from right, stands on stage with State Council Information Office deputy director Guo Weimin (郭卫民), first from left, and *People's Daily* deputy editor-in-chief Xu Zhengzhong (许正中), first from right, after receiving a first prize in the 2019 *People's Daily* 'China and I' (我与中国) short-video competition.



Source: Sendelta International Academy [新哲书院], 19 October 2019, online.

In 2021, McIlmoyle took a tour to Guizhou, a border province in southwest China. His video from there, 'A different China' (不一样的中国), featuring Miao ethnic-minority people, came first in the *People's Daily's* 'My China Style' (我爱中国风) short-video competition out of 190,000 entries.³⁹⁸ His prize was worth ¥50,000 (A\$10,400), according to the competition's entry guidelines.³⁹⁹ Both prizewinning videos portrayed typical state-media narratives about happy minorities, convenient tech-enabled lifestyles and beautiful scenery. The *People's Daily* also used McIlmoyle in a promotional video inviting people to take part in the My China Style competition. The video, published on a *People's Daily* YouTube account, also featured Chinese pianist Lang Lang (郎郎) and foreign vloggers Jerry Kowal, Stuart Wiggin and Noel Sirerol González.⁴⁰⁰ Other McIlmoyle vlogs from Guizhou, including an uncritical look at the CCP's poverty alleviation and relocation of villagers, were also shared on various government accounts, including by Foreign Ministry Twitter and YouTube accounts as well as the Guizhou Government's Chinese social-media accounts.⁴⁰¹

At times, McIlmoyle's words in one of the vlogs appeared to have been translated awkwardly into English directly from the language of PRC officialdom and carried strong echoes of Xi Jinping's 'ecological civilisation' discourse. McIlmoyle called on viewers to 'work together to build a beautiful, harmonious home for all living things' and even repeated verbatim phrases from the CCP leadership. 'We should respect nature, comply with nature, protect nature,' McIlmoyle said in English. This was rendered more naturally in the Chinese subtitles ('尊重自然、顺应自然、保护自然') and mirrored an identical set of phrases spoken by Xi Jinping at high-level international climate events.⁴⁰² The same set phrase has been prominently highlighted by party-state media, and local government or propaganda workers responsible for environmental work would probably be familiar with it. At different points in the video, an unidentified woman can also be seen travelling with McIlmoyle while he speaks to the camera. This particular vlog was uploaded to the PRC Foreign Ministry Spokespersons Office official YouTube account and then shared on Twitter by spokesperson Hua Chunying, where it was retweeted by the Spokespersons Office account.⁴⁰³

In 2022, McIlmoyle entered a competition overseen by the Zhejiang provincial propaganda department⁴⁰⁴ and took part in the '2022 Date with China' propaganda tour of Xinjiang⁴⁰⁵ (see Section 4.2: 'Media tours'). That year, he was also praised by the Cyberspace Administration of Xinjiang as 'a foreign vlogger with positive energy' ('一位具有正能量的外籍博主').⁴⁰⁶ In the same year, he won third prize in the My China Story competition organised by Xufang International Media.⁴⁰⁷

During the pandemic, McIlmoyle dressed up as a pandemic worker in protective gear and went around a residential area with a loudspeaker, asking residents to come out to take Covid tests⁴⁰⁸ (see Section 1.1 for a case study on Covid-19). During the pandemic, being a pandemic worker was an unpopular job as it was closely associated with the state's harsh and arbitrary Covid-control policies. Not all of McIlmoyle's videos stick closely to official narratives, however, and that may reflect the different incentives, content trends or personal inclinations in play as influencers decide what kind of videos to produce. In a June 2022 vlog on Shanghai reopening, for instance, he offered mild criticism of virus-testing measures.⁴⁰⁹

In February 2022, following a long-running, state-led anti-BBC propaganda campaign, McIlmoyle posted a vlog attacking the broadcaster: 'It's just drumming up hate about China for no reason and that's the problem with these rubbish news articles,' he said in the video in which he also criticised a BBC story about US athletes being advised to use burner phones at the Winter Olympics. 'For me who's

seen both sides I can tell so quickly that this is total rubbish and there's no worry about data safety and data protection in China,' he said, adding that 'the only thing China should be getting is plaudits. Everyone should be congratulating them for trying so hard to keep everyone safe.'⁴¹⁰

Conclusion

Much of the coverage of China's foreign-influencer phenomenon has sought to establish a direct link between the CCP and individual influencers. However, that approach ignores the reality that *all* foreign influencers in China are operating in an ecosystem over which the party has total control. That doesn't mean that all foreign influencers have become tools of the CCP. Many of them avoid political topics altogether, but the temptation to garner traffic, profits and plaudits by aligning their content to party-approved narratives is proving tempting for a growing cadre of foreign influencers.

This process of market-enabled propaganda production provides obvious benefits both to the influencers and to the party, which is able to leverage them in order to boost its credibility at home and more effectively penetrate audiences overseas. The use of foreign influencers also creates a degree of plausible deniability for the CCP's international-facing propaganda. Party-aligned content that's produced as the result of video competitions or junkets is being used to bolster party narratives about sensitive topics such as Xinjiang, Tibet, Covid-19 and more on global platforms such as YouTube.

By leveraging the total control that the party-state has over the information environment in China, the CCP is able to eliminate discordant foreign voices and establish a monoculture of foreigners who, when talking about matters of political importance to the party, adhere to the 'main melody'.⁴¹¹ Instead of a cacophony of competing views and voices, the party hopes to achieve 'polyphonous communication'⁴¹² by corralling foreign influencers with party-state media workers masquerading as influencers as well as state-approved ethnic-minority influencers into a harmonious choir.

As this strategy of market-enabled propaganda production continues to evolve, it's likely to have significant implications for the global information landscape. The growing use of foreign influencers will make it increasingly difficult for social-media platforms, foreign governments and individuals to distinguish between genuine and/or factual content and propaganda. That, in turn, could complicate efforts to counter disinformation and protect the integrity of public discourse. Moreover, as more influencers are drawn into this ecosystem, the line between independent voices and those influenced by the party's narratives may become increasingly blurred, further challenging the ability of audiences to discern reportage from manipulation.

Recommendations

For social media

- Social-media platforms should seek to strengthen the practice of labelling the accounts of party-state media agencies and officials and broaden that to include state-linked, PRC-based influencers. Doing so would give users context and raise awareness of the more insidious forms of state-backed content that lack independence and transparency. Social-media platforms should explore emerging AI tools to assist in the identification and labelling of individuals and content.
- Social-media platforms could rapidly improve the efficiency and transparency of state-backed content moderation by committing to regular information-sharing on which PRC-based influencers they label and why. This would enable platforms to collectively track and respond to PRC influence operations, rather than each platform fighting its own isolated battle, as well as to develop agreed standards.
- Until the Chinese Government allows their services to operate in China, US social-media platforms should not allow PRC-based creators to monetise their content on platforms outside China, diminishing current commercial incentives to produce party-aligned content. While not a total solution, that will limit the number of viewers that foreign influencers' accounts can reach overseas.

For traditional media

- International media organisations should actively seek to improve their understanding of the ways in which autocratic countries deploy propaganda. They should seek to support responsible journalism and prevent inadvertent collaboration with, or 'boosting' of, propaganda outlets or material. Many organisations, including ASPI, regularly monitor influencer activity: that information could become the basis for regular staff training sessions.
- International media organisations should proactively investigate the possibility that individuals reporting from inside the PRC have links to party-state media or propaganda entities. Where those linkages are identified, best practice suggests that media organisations should disclose those individuals' affiliations and explain how that might affect the information they provide.

For government and academia

- Universities should aim to proactively brief students planning to study abroad on potential security threats and challenges in the countries to which they are relocating, including the risks of espionage, interference and being unintentionally co-opted into producing propaganda material. In countries with established foreign interference taskforces, such as Australia, those bodies should offer universities appropriate briefing materials.
- More resources should be allocated to research and analysis that attempts to measure the impact of foreign influencer campaigns aimed at a global audience. While difficult to assess on a global scale, sentiment analysis—paired with in-depth qualitative assessments—could deliver insights in smaller, local or specific country contexts.
- Research topics such as disinformation, information operations and propaganda are complicated, multi-language, data-heavy and rapidly evolving areas of study. Governments, social-media platforms and civil-society organisations that rely heavily on expert research groups' insights and analysis should consider increased support and funding for such groups.

Appendix 1: List of foreign vloggers covered in this paper

The influencers are ordered based on their total followers across Chinese platforms (yellow column) as of 25 May 2023. The red boxes indicate the platform on which each influencer has accumulated the highest number of followers so far.

Foreign vlogger	Account name (CH)	Nationality	Bilibili account	Bilibili followers	Douyin account ^a	Douyin followers	Xigua account	Xigua followers	Toutiao account	Toutiao followers	Total followers	YouTube account	YouTube followers	Last updated
Vladislav Y Kokolevskiy	伏拉夫	Russia	Archive	91,000	Link	13,631,000	Archive	13,630,000	Archive	1,738,000	29,090,000	nil.	nil.	24/05/23
Jerry Kowal	我是郭杰瑞	US	Archive	6,834,000	Link	7,366,000	Archive	7,360,000	Archive	4,890,000	26,450,000	Archive	676,000	24/05/23
Raz Gal-Or	歪果仁研究协会	Israel	Archive	4,270,000	Link	8,149,000	Archive	8,140,000	Archive	1,196,000	21,755,000	Archive	254,000	24/05/23
Bart Baker ^b	巴哥Bart	US	Link	63,000	Link	10,418,000	Link	10,410,000	Link	52,000	20,943,000	Archive	9,870,000	24/05/23
Nathan Rich	NathanRich 火锅大王	US	Archive	14,920,000	Link	410,000	Archive	230,000	Archive	198,000	15,758,000	Archive	501,000	24/05/23
Anna	安娜在海南	Russia	Archive	902	Link	3,869,000	Archive	3,860,000	Archive	533,000	8,262,902	nil.	nil.	24/05/23
Jason Lightfoot	Mir有意思	UK	Archive	626,000	Link	2,027,000	Archive	2,020,000	Archive	505,000	5,178,000	Archive	329,000	24/05/23
Mixed-race siblings Yasi ^{dun}	混血兄弟姐妹雅斯顿	Russia	nil	nil	Link	1,834,000	Archive	2,490,000	Archive	280,000	4,604,000	nil.	nil.	24/05/23
Rachele Longhi	路卡和瑞丽	Italy	Archive	434,000	Link	1,704,000	Archive	1,700,000	Archive	709,000	4,547,000	Archive	116,000	24/05/23
Li Qiaoxin	台湾表妹面面	Taiwan	nil	nil	Link	1,976,000	Archive	1,970,000	Archive	183,000	4,129,000	Archive	600	24/05/23
David Gulasi	萌叔大卫老师	Australia	Archive	174,000	Link	1,689,000	Archive	1,680,000	Archive	117,000	3,660,000	Archive	208	24/05/23
Teacher Mike	Real麦克老师	US	Archive	917,000	Link	761,000	Archive	760,000	Archive	624,000	3,062,000	Archive	955,000	24/05/23
Lee and Oli Barrett	Barrett看中国	UK	Archive	480,000	Link	967,000	Archive	960,000	Archive	452,000	2,859,000	Archive	357,000	24/05/23
Sabina Makarova	环环去旅行	Russia	Archive	73,000	Link	1,268,000	Archive	1,260,000	Archive	208,000	2,809,000	Archive	1,060	24/05/23
Noel S González	Noe苏诺伊	Spain	Archive	414,000	Link	1,112,000	Archive	1,110,000	Archive	103,000	2,739,000	Archive	32,000	24/05/23
Katherine Olson	我是阳离子	US	Archive	279,000	Link	619,000	Archive	1,170,000	Archive	559,000	2,627,000	Archive	103,000	24/05/23
Stuart Wiggan	司徒建国秀	UK	Archive	259,000	Link	830,000	Archive	820,000	Archive	248,000	2,157,000	Archive	123,000	24/05/23
Andy Boreham	安柏然Andy	NZ	Archive	629,000	Link	354,000	Archive	570,000	Archive	224,000	1,777,000	Archive	47,400	24/05/23
William August	拂蒜坊	UK	Archive	1,001,000	Link	254,000	Archive	250,000	Archive	152,000	1,657,000	Archive	322,000	24/05/23
Michael Oldfield	纽卡斯尔老田	UK	Archive	68,000	Link	133,000	Archive	130,000	Archive	115,000	446,000	nil.	nil.	24/05/23
Adam James McIlmoyle	亚比亚呀当	Northern Ireland	Archive	44,000	Link	104,000	Archive	100,000	Archive	6139	254,139	Archive	1,280	24/05/23
Maximiliano (Max) J Carrera Camacho & Noelia Rodriguez Pascual	墨西哥老外	Mexico & Spain	Archive	14,000	Link	5404	Archive	5404	Archive	5048	29,856	Archive	6,990,000	24/05/23

^a We weren't able to adequately archive Douyin accounts due to technical impediments from internet archives.

^b While we were conducting our research, the content formerly published on Baker's Chinese accounts was removed, and we weren't able to retrieve any archived page.



Appendix 2: YouTube Xinjiang-related term searches

The accounts highlighted in red belong to foreign influencers, while those in yellow are PRC state-media accounts.

Search term	Top 10 videos—YouTube Australia	Account	Views
Xinjiang	The Xinjiang THEY don't want YOU to see ...	Living in China	427,000
	China's secret lands: Xinjiang—a modern oasis—full documentary (a CICC co-production)	Get.factual	324,000
	China's vanishing Muslims: undercover in the most dystopian place in the world	VICE	10,000,000
	I went to Xinjiang looking for repression and forced labour, but instead found this	Rafa Goes Around!	88,000
	What's going on in Urumqi Xinjiang (Surreal Experience)	JERRY GOODE	89,000
	I saw Xinjiang with my own eyes ...	Living in China	130,000
	Explainer: Why Xinjiang is so important to China	South China Morning Post	610,000
	The truth about Xinjiang: Why Australian scholar Maureen Huebel wants to learn more	CGTN	11,000
	Inside Xinjiang: What it's really like to report on China's treatment of the Uyghurs	The Telegraph	90,000
	The town in Xinjiang, China where everyone speaks Russian	Rafa Goes Around!	121,000
Xinjiang cotton	New evidence of Uighur forced labour in China's cotton industry—BBC News	BBC News	439,000
	Why China's Xinjiang cotton is hard to boycott—CNBC Reports	CNBC International	68,000
	Xinjiang cotton forced labour regime // 新疆棉花强迫劳动政权	Barrett	374,000
	What I saw in Xinjiang working as a cotton farmer	歪果仁研究协会 Ychina	666,000
	Xinjiang cotton exports to America skyrocket after Biden's Forced Labor Act	Cyrus Janssen	154,000
	I am from Xinjiang and I have to say that 'forced labor' really exists ...	Alex From Xinjiang	200,000
	China's Xinjiang cotton drama explained	laowhy86	178,000
	Quick facts about Xinjiang's cotton industry	CGTN	8100
	The power of China's cancel culture on foreign brands over Xinjiang cotton—Gen 跟 China	VICE Asia	79,000
	I went to Xinjiang looking for repression and forced labour, but instead found this	Rafa Goes Around!	88,000
Uyghur	Sura e Fatiha opening chapter of the Quran	Quran For Humanity	3800
	What's happening with China's Uighurs?	Al Jazeera English	712,000
	Leaked data offers significant new insights into China's Uyghur detention camps—BBC News	BBC News	540,000
	China's vanishing Muslims: undercover in the most dystopian place in the world	VICE News	10,000,000
	Chinese whistleblower exposes torture of Uyghur prisoners in CNN interview	CNN	236,000
	Inside China's 'thought transformation' camps—BBC News	BBC News	3,400,000
	Uyghur folk song—Gulyarxan (English subtitles)	Uyghur Beauty	3,100,000
	How China is crushing the Uyghurs	The Economist	2,200,000
	Who are the Uyghurs?	OnePath Network	73,000
	TikTok CEO dodges questions on whether he believes China is persecuting Uyghurs—#Shorts	CNBC Television	252,000

Search term	Top 10 videos—YouTube US ^a	Account	Views
Xinjiang	Inside Xinjiang—The cultural erasure of the Uyghurs	The Telegraph	123,000
	The Xinjiang THEY don't want YOU to see ...	Living in China	427,000
	China's vanishing Muslims: undercover in the most dystopian place in the world	VICE	10,000,000
	China's secret lands: Xinjiang—a modern oasis—full documentary (a CICC co-production)	Get.factual	324,000
	American media: American stories vs Xinjiang stories	Fermube	1,200
	What's going on in Urumqi Xinjiang (Surreal Experience)	JERRY GOODE	89,000
	UNSEEN XINJIANG what happen with Muslims in China CN real talk about Xinjiang 新疆	Mr. Laowai—Younus Ghazali	32,000
	The town in Xinjiang, China where everyone speaks Russian	Rafa Goes Around!	119,000
	What's happening with China's Uighurs?	Al Jazeera English	710,000
	Explainer: Why Xinjiang is so important to China	South China Morning Post	610,000
Xinjiang cotton	New evidence of Uighur forced labour in China's cotton industry—BBC News	BBC News	439,000
	Why China's Xinjiang cotton is hard to boycott—CNBC Report	CNBC International	67,000
	Xinjiang cotton exports to America skyrocket after Biden's Forced Labor Act	Cyrus Janssen	153,000
	I am from Xinjiang and I have to say that 'forced labor' really exists ...	Alex From Xinjiang	200,000
	Xinjiang cotton forced labour regime // 新疆棉花强迫劳动政权	Barrett	374,000
	American shares truth on Xinjiang and Tibet controversies in China	Cyrus Janssen	240,000
	Quick facts about Xinjiang's cotton industry	CGTN	8,100
	What I saw in Xinjiang working as a cotton farmer	歪果仁研究协会 Ychina	665,000
	The power of China's cancel culture on foreign brands over Xinjiang cotton—Gen 跟 China	VICE Asia	79,000
	Harvesting organs in Xinjiang Enver Tohti The InnerView	TRT World	1,500
Uyghur	Who are the Uyghurs?	OnePath Network	68,000
	Leaked data offers significant new insights into China's Uyghur detention camps—BBC News	BBC News	537,000
	What's happening with China's Uighurs?	Al Jazeera English	710,000
	Hack reveals evidence of Chinese treatment of Uyghur Muslims	CBS News	148,000
	China's vanishing Muslims: undercover in the most dystopian place in the world	VICE	10,000,000
	'Bare-armed woman dancing in mosque': how China mocked Uyghur Muslims during Ramadan?—Times Now	TIMES NOW	175,000
	My culture is being erased': an American Uighur votes for change—NBC News	NBC News	40,000
	How China is crushing the Uyghurs	The Economist	2,200,000
	TikTok CEO dodges questions on whether he believes China is persecuting Uyghurs—#Shorts	CNBC Television	244,000
	Who are the Uyghurs? History of China's unwanted Muslims (552-1884)	Hikma History	184,000

a The searches were conducted on 5 April 2023 through a VPN connection out of the US, with all history and cookies cleared.

Search term	Top 10 videos—YouTube Germany ^a	Account	Views
Xinjiang	The Xinjiang THEY don't want YOU to see ...	Living in China	420,000
	China's vanishing Muslims: undercover in the most dystopian place in the world	VICE	10,000,000
	Reise in die verbotene Provinz Xinjiang—Auslandsjournal (Journey to the forbidden province of Xinjiang—Foreign Journal)	ZDFheute Nachrichten	132,128
	There's a lot to talk about Xinjiang Uyгур	Sebastian ioan	763
	China's secret lands: Xinjiang—a modern oasis—full documentary (a CICC co-production)	Get.factual	309,367
	UNSEEN XINJIANG what happen with Muslims in China CN real talk about Xinjiang 新疆	Mr.Laowai—Younus Ghazali	32,494
	What's going on in Urumqi Xinjiang (Surreal Experience)	Jerry Goode	88,568
	Inside Xinjiang—The cultural erasure of the Uyghurs	The Telegraph	123,932
	Inside China's 'thought transformation' camps—BBC News	BBC News	3,400,000
	I went to Xinjiang looking for repression and forced labour, but ...	Rafa Goes Around!	84,072
Xinjiang Baumwolle (Xinjiang cotton)	Adidas, Puma, Boss & Co: Baumwolle aus China-Zwangsarbeit? STRG_F (Adidas, Puma, Boss & Co: Cotton from forced labour in China?)	STRG_F	605,702
	Exklusive Recherche zu Chinas Umgang mit den Uiguren (Exclusive research on China's treatment of the Uyghurs)	tagesschau	77,960
	US ban on cotton from China's Xinjiang region takes effect—FRANCE 24 English	France 24 English	5671
	Inside Xinjiang—The cultural erasure of the Uyghurs	The Telegraph	123,932
	Inside Xinjiang: What it's really like to report on China's treatment of the Uyghurs	The Telegraph	89,834
	Forced labour in China's Xinjiang—FRANCE 24 English	France 24 English	3207
	Inside China's 'thought transformation' camps—BBC News	BBC News	3,400,000
	New evidence of Uighur forced labour in China's cotton industry—BBC News	BBC News	439,356
	Xinjiang—Uiguren: Wer stoppt Xi Jinping? Mit offenen Karten—Im Fokus ARTE (Xinjiang—Uyghurs: Who will stop Xi Jinping?)	ARTEde	52,011
	Documentary about China, documentary about Xinjiang: Xinjiang is a wonderful land (video from a state-led tour of Xinjiang, carrying a 'Xinjiang is a beautiful place' logo)	Ulusal Kanal	1270
Uigure (Uyghur)	China: Das Drama der Uiguren Doku HD Reupload ARTE (China: The Drama of the Uyghurs Docu HD reupload ARTE)	ARTEde	666,465
	Exklusive Recherche zu Chinas Umgang mit den Uiguren (Exclusive research on China's treatment of the Uyghurs)	tagesschau	77,962
	Reise in die verbotene Provinz Xinjiang Auslandsjournal (Journey to the forbidden province of Xinjiang Foreign Journal)	ZDFheute Nachrichten	132,129
	So brutal unterdrückt China die Uiguren #shorts #china #tagesschau (This is how brutally China oppresses the Uyghurs #shorts #china #tagesschau)	tagesschau	155,194
	Neue Belege für Chinas brutale Unterdrückung der Uiguren DW Nachrichten (New evidence of China's brutal repression of the Uyghurs DW Nachrichten)	DW Deutsch	34,942
	Moderne Konzentrationslager? Die Uiguren in China (Modern concentration camps? The Uyghurs in China)	MrWissen2go	1,300,000
	Warum unterdrückt China die Uiguren? (Why is China oppressing the Uyghurs?)	Stuttgarter Zeitung & Stuttgarter Nachrichten	21,211
	Menschenrechtsverletzungen in Xinjiang: Uigur*innen erzählen ihre Geschichte Auslandsjournal (Human rights violations in Xinjiang: Uyghurs tell their story Foreign Journal)	ZDFheute Nachrichten	24,580
	China: Scheinprozesse in Uiguren-Straflagern DW Nachrichten (China: Mock trials in Uyghur penal camps DW Nachrichten)	DW Deutsch	34,629
	Das Foltern muslimischer Minderheiten in China—und der Westen schaut zu Auslandsjournal (Torture of Muslim minorities in China—and the West watches Foreign Journal)	ZDFheute Nachrichten	118,880

a The searches were conducted on 9 May 2023 through a VPN connection out of Germany, with all history and cookies cleared, location set to Germany and language set to German in *YouTube* settings.

Search term	Top 10 videos—YouTube France ^a	Account	Views
Xinjiang	Ce que je vois au Xinjiang est totalement différent de ce que j'entends (What I see in Xinjiang is totally different from what I hear)	CGTN Français	5,500
	Xinjiang-Ouïghours: qui freinera Xi Jinping ?—Le Dessous des cartes—L'Essentiel ARTE (Xinjiang-Uyghurs: who will Xi Jinping back?)	Le Dessous des Cartes—ARTE	68,000
	Comment la Chine persécute les musulmans du Xinjiang (How China persecutes Xinjiang's Muslims)	AmnestyFrance	12,000
	Au-delà des montagnes: La vie au Xinjiang (Beyond the mountains: Life in Xinjiang)	CGTN Français	605
	I went to Xinjiang looking for repression and forced labour, but ...	Rafa Goes Around!	84,000
	Chine: crimes contre l'humanité au Xinjiang ? France 24 (China: Crimes against humanity in Xinjiang? France 24)	France 24	10,000
	The truth about Xinjiang: Why Australian scholar Maureen Huebel wants to learn ...	CGTN	10,000
	Michelle Bachelet en visite dans le Xinjiang: la situation des ouïghours au cœur du déplacement (Michelle Bachelet on visit to Xinjiang: Uyghur situation centre of the trip)	France 24	4,800
	En direct: le mont Tianshan et le lac Tianchi au Xinjiang (Live: Mount Tianshan and Lake Tianchi in Xinjiang)	CGTN Français	980
	Lac reflétant le ciel dans le Xinjiang en Chine (Lake reflecting the sky in Xinjiang, China)	CGTN Français	44(
Coton Xinjiang	#Ouïghours: la polémique du coton de Xinjiang (#Uyghurs: the Xinjiang cotton controversy)	France 24	6000
	Chine: le coton du Xinjiang pointé du doigt (China: Xinjiang cotton singled out)	France 24	5,300
	Coton Xinjiang: la production au Xinjiang se mécanise de plus en plus (Xinjiang cotton: Production in Xinjiang increasingly mechanised)	CGTN Français	730
	Boycott du coton du Xinjiang: Nike et H&M sous la 'pression' du régime chinois (Xinjiang cotton boycott: Nike and H&M under 'pressure' from the Chinese regime)	Le Parisien	237,000
	Xinjiang: De la fibre de coton au vêtement—aperçu sur la production en Chine (Xinjiang: From cotton fibre to clothing—an overview of production in China)	CGTN Français	665
	Xinjiang: esclavage dans les champs de coton (Xinjiang: slavery in the cotton field)	TV5MONDE Info	868
	Coton du Xinjiang: aucun travail forcé trouvé au Xinjiang (Xinjiang cotton: no forced labour found in Xinjiang)	CGTN Français	616
	Coton du Xinjiang: L'Alliance de l'industrie cotonnière chinoise exprime son soutien (Xinjiang cotton: China Cotton Industry Alliance expresses support)	CGTN Français	299
	Le géant chinois du textile s'exprime sur le coton du Xinjiang (Chinese textile giant on Xinjiang cotton)	CGTN Français	952
	Xinjiang: Des responsables et des producteurs de coton rejettent les allégations de travail forcé (Xinjiang: Officials and cotton producers reject forced labour allegations)	CGTN Français	1,300
Ouïghours (Uyghur)	Chine: le drame ouïghour ARTE (China: the drama of the Uyghurs ARTE)	ARTE	84,000
	Comment les Ouïghours sont persécutés par l'État chinois (How the Uyghurs are persecuted by the Chinese state)	Brut	1,300,000
	Esclavage, viols, stérilisation massive ... Voici ce que subissent les Ouïghours (Slavery, rapes, mass sterilisation ... Here is what the Uyghurs suffer)	Brut	65,000
	Camps pour Ouïghours en Chine: une rescapée témoigne (Camps for Uyghurs in China: a survivor testifies)	Brut	179,000
	Ouïghours: mécanique d'un génocide annoncé—Documentaire ... (Uyghurs: mechanics of a genocide foretold—documentary ...)	LCP—Assemblée nationale	50,000
	Ouïghours, à la force des camps (Surviving China's Uyghur camps)	France 24	187,000
	Torture, przymusowe sterylizacje, obozy pracy. Dramat Ujgurów (Torture, forced sterilisations, labour camps. The drama of the Uighurs)	ARTE.tv Dokumenty	55,000
	Gulhumar Haitiwaji dénonce la persécution des Ouïghours (Gulhumar Haitiwaji denounces Uyghur persecution)	Konbini	218,000
	Chine: fuites de documents sur la détention des Ouïghours—FRANCE 24 (China: leaked documents on Uyghur detentions—France 24)	France 24	70,000
	Ouïghours: nos preuves en images de la répression en Chine (exclusif) (Uyghurs: our visual evidence of the repression in China (exclusive))	Le Monde	414,000

^a The searches were conducted on 9 May 2023 through a VPN connection out of France, with all history and cookies cleared, location set to France and language set to French in *YouTube* settings.

Search term	Top 10 videos—YouTube UK ^a	Account	Views
Xinjiang	The Xinjiang THEY don't want YOU to see ...	Living in China	421,000
	China's vanishing Muslims: undercover in the most dystopian place in the world	VICE News	10,000,000
	China's secret lands: Xinjiang—a modern oasis—full documentary (a CICC co-production)	Get.factual	309,000
	UNSEEN XINJIANG what happen with Muslims in China CN real talk about Xinjiang 新疆	Mr.Laowai—Younus Ghazali	32,000
	China's secret internment camps	Vox	4,700,000
	I went to Xinjiang looking for repression and forced labour, but ...	Rafa Goes Around!	84,000
	Explainer: Why Xinjiang is so important to China	South China Morning Post	610,000
	Inside China's 'thought transformation' camps—BBC News	BBC News	3,400,000
	Inside Xinjiang—The cultural erasure of the Uyghurs	The Telegraph	123,000
	Inside Xinjiang: What it's really like to report on China's treatment of the ...	The Telegraph	89,000
Xinjiang cotton	New evidence of Uighur forced labour in China's cotton industry—BBC News	BBC News	439,000
	Why China's Xinjiang cotton is hard to boycott—CNBC Reports	CNBC International	67,000
	US ban on cotton from China's Xinjiang region takes effect—FRANCE 24 English	France 24 English	5,600
	Nike and H&M face China fury over Xinjiang cotton 'concerns'—BBC News	BBC News	269,000
	Quick facts about Xinjiang's cotton industry	CGTN	8,100
	The power of China's cancel culture on foreign brands over Xinjiang cotton—Gen 跟 China	VICE Asia	79,000
	China's Xinjiang cotton drama explained	laowhy86	178,000
	Nearly 90 percent of Xinjiang cotton sowing completed	CGTN	3,800
	Xinjiang cotton forced labour regime // 新疆棉花强迫劳动政权	Barrett	374,000
	What I saw in Xinjiang working as a cotton farmer	歪果仁研究协会 Ychina	666,000
Uyghur	Leaked data offers significant new insights into China's Uyghur detention camps—BBC News	BBC News	538,000
	This is what they're doing to the Uyghurs 😞	OnePath Network	47,000
	Who are the Uyghurs?	OnePath Network	70,000
	Chinese whistleblower exposes torture of Uyghur prisoners in CNN interview	CNN	236,000
	Hack reveals evidence of Chinese treatment of Uyghur Muslims	CBS News	148,000
	What's happening with China's Uighurs?	Al Jazeera English	711,000
	TURKIC: TURKISH & UYGHUR	ILoveLanguages!	5000
	China's vanishing Muslims: undercover in the most dystopian place in the world	VICE News	10,000,000
	How China is crushing the Uyghurs	The Economist	2,200,000
	Inside China's 'thought transformation' camps—BBC News	BBC News	3,400,000

a The searches were conducted on 9 May 2023 through a VPN connection out of the UK, with all history and cookies cleared, location set to UK and language set to British English in *YouTube* settings.

Notes

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Acronyms and abbreviations

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCTV	China Central Television
CGTN	China Global Television Network
CICC	China International Communication Center
CICG	China International Communications Group
IP	personal brands
MCN	multi-channel network
NGO	non-government organisation
PRC	People's Republic of China
SUMG	Shanghai United Media Group
UN	United Nations

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