PERSONALIZED PROPAGANDA: THE POLITICS AND ECONOMY OF YOUNG, PRO-GOVERNMENT MINORITY VLOGGERS FROM THE XUAR

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This paper introduces a new genre of Chinese online propaganda about the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) that we call personalized propaganda. It takes the shape of personal vlogs and short videos by young minority people showing their lives and debating political topics in line with the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The paper describes and contextualizes this phenomenon and argues that, unlike what the videos seek to portray, these political influencers are supported and coordinated by the government while also deriving much incentive from the private market of media platforms that help turn such videos into business opportunities. We see the phenomenon of personalized propaganda as a synthesis of state propaganda, social media, the gig economy, and the commercialization of personal space. The videos analyzed for this paper are similar to those of other young vloggers and influencers using social media platforms to earn money in China and elsewhere. What is special about them is their explicit political content and close alignment with CCP narratives and that they are produced by young minority people in Xinjiang at a time when the region is under massive pressure from the government and security apparatus. Based on an analysis of seven ethnic minority vlogger accounts with a total of over 2,000 videos, their videos and the personal interconnectedness of the vloggers in question, we argue that these schemes of personalized propaganda are likely to have been started by state-sponsored programs that subsequently help facilitate commercial success on social media platforms. We also hope to make a contribution to the establishment of an epistemological frame and an analytical set of tools for the online ethnography of places with limited access, high surveillance and securitization.

Keywords: XUAR, Uyghurs, state propaganda, personalized propaganda, social media

1. Introduction

"Hello everybody, welcome! You are watching Anniguli's channel, and so on, hahaha." A young Uyghur woman addresses the camera placed on a table in front of her in what looks like a hotel room. She is in her early twenties, impeccably, fashionably, and quite expensively dressed. She smiles and laughs while speaking into the camera in an animated fashion in Mandarin. Her adding of "and so on" to the initial greeting betrays her routine and provides a hint of refreshing self-irony. This is her 746th video on YouTube, a platform blocked and forbidden in China, having posted there first from her native Ürümchi, but more lately from Shanghai where she has gone to study at a private university for media and the arts. The video is short, a mere 3:33 minutes. She speaks about dating during college and about how she was approached and courted by a high-school student four years her junior. She laughs and assures the viewer that she is more interested in learning and in earning money than dating.

The Anniguli account initially looks like that of a regular fashion vlogger based in China talking about regular topics of interest for people in their early 20s, but the video carries a number of sub-texts. These only become fully understandable when read within the larger context of minority, mainly female, vloggers from Xinjiang uploading videos with political content onto both YouTube and Chinese media platforms like Weibo (新浪微博), Haokan Shiping (好看视频) and Xigua Shiping (西瓜视频). This young Uyghur woman is not promoting fashion, nor any other products, life-hacks or techniques; she is promoting the narratives and policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in her native region, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Anniguli is the most prominent of a number of young minority profiles uploading videos of their daily lives and issues of concern to them. The narratives they present as their personal views align suspiciously well with those of the CCP. Such 'personalized propaganda,' as we choose to call this phenomenon, is but one element in a broad 'united front'-type media offensive by the Chinese authorities, which started in 2018 (see Alpermann 2020; Byler 2019; Moghazy 2021) to shape the representation of Xinjiang in China and the world in reaction to negative publicity and attention resulting from excessive violence by the Chinese state, including the mass incarceration and torture of minority people in the region since 2017.

While Anniguli's camera is placed in a seemingly careless way on the table in front of her, on closer inspection, the picture looks thoughtfully designed. A clean white plate with Western cutlery between her and the camera defines her lifestyle as decidedly modern while a continuously visible bottle of red wine and a wine glass in the background underscores the high-end flair indicated by her clothing. A shopping bag at the far left of the picture nods to luxury consumption as a status symbol and to the CCP narrative that it is helping minority people become wealthy.

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Figure 1: Screenshot from one of Anniguli's videos

(Source: Anniguli 2021b)

In the very front of the picture, to the left side, just before the shopping bag, we see the characteristic red color and contour of a Coca-Cola can and part of a similarly red cardboard take-away carton. On the carton, right in the foreground of the image, linger the five Olympic rings and the symbol for the Winter Olympics 2022, due to take place in Beijing eight months later.

This is hardly a coincidence. Grave concerns about China's human rights record in Xinjiang and elsewhere, including accusations of possible genocide against the Uyghurs, had prompted international calls for a boycott of the Winter Olympics (Kidd 2021). Her subtle promotion of these Olympics is merely one of a long series of political messages in what are by now thousands of personalized propaganda videos across the net. They address the situation of minorities in the XUAR, reiterating government narratives of ethnic harmony and prosperity thanks to the party. They refrain from any religious references and promote inter-ethnic dating and marriage, food, and the beauty of landscapes and minority women in ways that carry self-exoticizing and eroticizing elements. More recently they have also begun to comment more directly on political issues such as whether cotton from Xinjiang is being produced ethically, ethnic tensions and prejudices, the economic development of the XUAR, and accusations of human rights abuses. Even the seemingly apolitical story of Anniguli's dismissal of her young admirer carries subtle support for government narratives on inter-ethnic dating and mar-

riage: she does not explicitly mention the ethnicity of the youngster, but as she is now living in Shanghai, she mentions that he is from a wealthy family, and from the way she recounts their conversation, it is tacitly implied that he is Han. Yet she dismisses him on the grounds of his youth and her lack of interest in dating, not – as many Uyghurs would have – on the grounds of his ethnicity. The underlying assumption is that she would not think twice about dating a Han Chinese, something she expresses explicitly in other videos.

In this article we introduce the phenomenon of Chinese-language personalized propaganda about the XUAR at the intersection of government propaganda and commercial social media and suggest that they present unintended insights into the systems of propaganda production and commercial vlogging in China. The first two chapters outline the context of Chinese state violence in Xinjiang and the war of information and representation that has evolved over it. The fourth chapter presents the characteristics of personalized propaganda and our rationale for using this term, zooming in on Anniguli's account. The fifth chapter elaborates on other channels or accounts, common themes, and the connections between them, while the sixth and final section addresses the commercial incentives for engaging in this type of propaganda.

2. Securitization, surveillance, and mass incarceration in Xinjiang

It was the declared hope of the Chinese government that the XUAR would develop into conditions of prosperity and peacefulness as a result of state-induced economic growth in the 2000s following turbulent periods of social struggle and resistance by the local minority populations throughout the 1990s. This hope was heavily dented in 2009 when protests and demonstrations in the provincial capital Ürümchi erupted into violence. The years 2010–2013 saw an intensified attempt to ensure economic growth and thereby stabilize the region (Klimeš 2018, 417), but, as in the 2000s, the benefits of these policies were not evenly distributed, with corruption and ethnonationalism becoming rampant including in the highest echelons of the party. Many minority people experienced discrimination, loss of land, underemployment, disenfranchisement, alienation, and dissatisfaction. As in many other colonial contexts, local Uyghur reactions to these experiences included identity building, network construction, piety movements and various forms of symbolic and physical (mainly non-violent, but also some violent) resistance (Rodriguez 2013, 136). The government did not find any adequate means to deal with these reactions but instead initiated a radical and violent shift in policy (Klimeš 2018, 418). In 2014, the government introduced a "People's War on Terror" (Byler and Zolin 2017; Roberts 2020, 161) clamping down on religious and political practices of minority populations.

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Starting in 2014, thousands of minority people suspected of facilitating, aiding, or covering for subversive views, of radical Islamic activities or of spreading its ideologies were rounded up, in many cases during nightly house raids. Restrictions were introduced on religious practice, marriage customs, and the mobility of minority people in southern Xinjiang. An assumption of guilt by association led to extensive arrests of family members and those in their social networks. This seemed to develop into a form of paranoia for some government officials, and some personal accounts report it being used as a tool by some to rid themselves of personal rivals or to further their careers.[1] Ilham Toxti, Professor of Economics at the Minorities University in Beijing, became the first prominent minority intellectual to be targeted for his political views. His moderate criticism of the CCP's economic policies in Xinjiang earned him a life sentence for separatism (Wong 2014). In 2016, under newly appointed first Party Secretary of XUAR, Chen Quanguo, the clamp-down on minority populations expanded immensely. Between 2016 and 2019, hundreds of thousands, possibly even millions, of minority people were detained within a large network of camps and prisons of different types, mostly without trial. Survivors from these camps have reported abhorrent conditions as well as widespread violence, torture and abuse.[2] Internment could be based on such banal activities as praying at home, having contacts or sending money abroad, or using a VPN to circumvent Chinese internet censorship. As a result, many Uyghurs across the world lost touch with their relatives in the XUAR and some have remained without contact till today. After a year or more of not being able to speak with their parents or siblings, many Uyghurs not previously politically engaged entered into the field of activism. This created a new generation of young, well-educated, and well-informed Uyghur activists active on social media and with close ties to Western researchers and journalists. They were instrumental in directing the world's attention to the Uyghur situation and to the issue of human rights abuses in the XUAR (UHRP 2021). This, in turn, prompted a massive media and public relations response by the Chinese state.

3. The propaganda battle

The Chinese government initially denied the existence of detention centers and re-education camps in Xinjiang. Then they insisted that they were voluntary and benevolent vocational training centers built as a part of necessary anti-radicalization and poverty-alleviation measures. As early as summer 2018, the Xinjiang

1 Interviews conducted by the authors in Turkey and Europe, 2018–2022.

2 Interviews with camp survivors conducted by the authors between 2018–2021 (see Amnesty International 2021 and Human Rights Watch 2021a).

government invited foreign journalists and diplomats to selected camps for curated visits. Subsequently, several well-produced documentaries have been aired presenting the CCP's narrative of radicalism and terror rampant in Xinjiang, but brought to a halt by the authorities (CCTV 2021). In the years that followed, the Chinese state broadened its propaganda offensive concerning Xinjiang and developed a strong presence in social media both domestically and abroad. It aimed to dispute negative reports about the camps, securitization, and surveillance. Instead, it argued that the Party had led the region to peace, harmony, prosperity, and happiness (Alpermann 2020). In summer 2019, then governor of the XUAR, Shöhret Zakir,[3] proclaimed that all "students" of what he called the vocational training centers and voluntary de-radicalization programs had successfully graduated. A year later, in September 2020, the Chinese government issued an official White Paper, "Employment and Labor Rights in Xinjiang" (SCIO 2020), in which it announced its victory against extremism and security threats in Xinjiang. This did not reduce the propaganda efforts of the Chinese government.

The English-language arm of China's public television channel, CGTN, has devoted many hours of its programming to discussing economic development, ethnic harmony, and poverty alleviation in Xinjiang. It has also produced several documentaries drawing up, dramatizing and exaggerating the threat of terrorism in the region (Alpermann 2020), together with more personal content. This included so called "proof-of-life" videos and assurances that minorities are living a happy life in Xinjiang. These are often in the style of forced confessions and aim to dispute Western media reports of abuse and misconduct. The first and most prominent example of this involved the Uyghur folk musician, Abdurehim Heyit. In spring 2019 rumors circulated that he had died in a camp, sparking outrage not least in Turkey, where his music is extremely popular (Ghoja 2019). To calm these sentiments, the Chinese authorities released a video in which Abdurehim Heyit assures the viewers that he is alive and has not been mistreated. This led to a campaign, started by the Uyghur activist Halmurat Uyghur, calling for proof of life for disappeared Uyghurs with whom their relatives abroad had lost contact. While such proof was never provided by the authorities, they did produce a number of videos featuring the relatives of Uyghur activists and camp survivors. Many of these videos included smears and personal attacks meant to discredit critical

[3] Shöhret Zakir is the son and grandson of high-ranking Party officials who had, exceptionally, been ordered back to Ürümchi in 2016 after having been moved to Beijing in what was seen as a common step towards retirement. Then in 2017, in a similarly untypical move for the CCP, he replaced Nur Bekri, who, although six years younger, had fallen from grace within the Party as governor of the region (Eset Sulayman 2020). Nur Bekri was later to be tried and sentenced to life in prison for being "two-faced" along with scores of other Uyghur officials, intellectuals, and businesspeople. They have been given very long sentences on various nebulous charges.

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voices (UHRP 2021). Meanwhile, in 2020, for the first time since 2016, several Uyghur-language TV series and shows were launched on Xinjiang TV and quickly shared on international social media platforms that provided a veneer of normalcy aimed at Uyghurs and observers both inside and outside China. On April 13, 2021, a government report was published entitled "Xinjiang migrant workers debunk 'forced labor' claims with personal experiences" (SCIO 2021), which aimed to show the people of Xinjiang living happily in the region. Vlogs by Han-Chinese travelers to Xinjiang have similarly described their easy and joyful travels in the region.

In addition, a number of Westerners living in China, together with some political commentators outside China, often coming from leftist, anti-imperialist stands, have criticized what they have seen as Western propaganda about Xinjiang. These critical contributions present relevant arguments about instances of biased or selective media reporting and about Western double-standards in regards to human rights, but have been mostly ill-informed about the actual situation in Xinjiang. They have thus become in effect channels for CCP objectives,[4] with some directly utilized by propaganda outlets such as CGTN.[5]

4. Personalized propaganda

A particularly interesting genre in this cacophony of different propaganda output are the personalized vlogs of young minority women (and a few men) based in Xinjiang and publishing content supportive of Chinese government narratives. Starting in 2018, a growing number of accounts began to upload considerable volumes of well-produced content about their own personal lives and about selected places in Xinjiang. They first appeared on the Chinese web, but were soon

[4] The Western counter-critique has mainly come from a left, anti-imperial perspective critical of the US hegemony and of the weaponization of Western media to vilify those countries that do not follow its lead or dictation (see, e.g., those of The Greyzone and The Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research). Much of it has to our best knowledge and estimate not been initiated by the Chinese government but expresses genuine distaste for political bias in Western reporting on Xinjiang. These accounts have been particularly critical of what they have described as unsubstantiated accusations of genocide, often paired with a more or less explicit lauding of the US and its allies as the protectors of freedom and human rights (Flathery 2021). They point out that necessary fact-checking and careful research have been increasingly neglected in Western reporting on Xinjiang and that the Western media have given disproportionate attention to a limited group of researchers and institutions financed by or closely associated with the US government, conservative circles known for opposition to China, or linked to the military-industrial complex. Media reporting on Xinjiang on all sides has largely replaced study of actual developments on the ground with political and ideological narratives – none more so than the reporting sponsored by the Chinese state.

[5] Examples of this include Raz Galor, Daniel Dumbrill, Cyrus Jansen, Ajit Singh, The Grey Zone, and others on YouTube, Twitter, and other platforms. For many of those living in the PRC, the connection to the Chinese government is not clear.

also uploaded to Western social media platforms like YouTube. During 2020, we discovered dozens of such political influencers posting content on the Chinese social media sites, Weibo, Haokan Shiping, and Xigua Shiping. At first sight the videos seemed very similar to those of vloggers, YouTubers, etc. across the globe, sharing their lives and commenting on topics that move or interest them. Early videos countered Han stereotyping of minority people, addressing their cleanliness and "level of civilization." Others discussed inter-ethnic dating. These are both topics of high relevance to young minority people in Xinjiang. Yet, on closer examination, these videos had both titles and dialogue that aligned neatly with Party recommendations and with the narratives promoted by the Chinese government and carried suspiciously similar content and wording.

It is possible that some such videos could be self-motivated initiatives to publicly display full loyalty to the Party in the hope of gaining protection for the producer and their family, or to profit from it politically or economically. Yet, several of the most popular ones have their own YouTube accounts. As YouTube is blocked in China and its use is forbidden – minority people in Xinjiang have even been detained and imprisoned for using blocked Western apps and media there – this strongly suggests government involvement.[6] Further, the vloggers were traveling across the region on a scale that did not match the level of income of their families as portrayed in the videos at a time when minority people's mobility was severely restricted. In addition, they were filming places of production such as cotton fields during harvesting that would usually require special government permission. These videos are partly recorded unprofessionally, but they have professional subtitles in Chinese, have apparently been edited professionally, and carry titles often in the same format. In early videos some of the influencers are accompanied by camera teams, while in the later ones they hold their cameras themselves, pointing to a possible sophistication of the strategy.

Some videos address very political topics, such as accusations of forced labor or accusations by the then US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo of genocide against the minorities in Xinjiang. It is hardly imaginable that a young minority person would address such topics without having assurances from government officials that she would not get into trouble over it. In addition, as we will discuss further below, many of these influencers seem to know each other and have figured in each other's videos, and at least one channel changed presenter while retaining its

6 Among the multiple cases of people in Xinjiang reportedly detained for having installed WhatsApp on their devices, two examples can be found in the Xinjiang Victims Database at https://shahit.biz/eng/viewentry.php?entryno=8 and https://shahit.biz/eng/viewentry.php?entryno=59. Further examples can be found on the "Tools/filters" page of the database (https://www.shahit.biz/eng/#filter) by selecting "contact with outside world" under the option "detention reason."

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name. Paired with the high quantity and quality of output, this strongly indicates government involvement and most likely even government coordination. The personal motivation of the vloggers themselves may involve any mix of coercion, fear, economic opportunity, and even genuine conviction, but the execution certainly seems centrally organized and approved by the Party.

The presenters of the videos call themselves "personal media influencers" (自媒体人 *zi meiti ren*), while we prefer to call them "political influencers" and term their videos "personalized propaganda."[7] We have collected and analyzed the videos of seven screen names (they are not all single individuals, though they are presented as such) that have official accounts both on Weibo, Xigua Shiping, or Haokan Shiping and on YouTube. By June 2021 we had found a total of 2,672 videos on these platforms including duplicates that have been uploaded onto more than one platform. Of these we scanned the general content of around 500 videos and did in-depth analysis of about 30. Most videos are between two and ten minutes long.

4.1 Anniguli (安妮古丽)

One of the earliest and most active characters producing personalized propaganda about Xinjiang calls herself Anniguli. The account shows a young Uyghur girl in Ürümchi filming herself as she takes the viewer on tours to the countryside and to tourist sites as well as around the bazaar, to her mother's clothing store, and to her grandparents' house. She speaks Mandarin directly addressing the camera as well as with her siblings and even with her mother, who clearly does not speak it very well. In a few videos she says some Uyghur sentences when she talks to her grandfather or other old people, probably out of respect and because of their lack of Mandarin skills.

Anniguli's first videos were uploaded onto Weibo in July 2018. From July 13, 2018, she uploaded videos to Xigua Shiping, but stopped on December 24, 2020. She has been uploading her Haokan Shiping videos to YouTube since late 2018. On YouTube, her account is called "Anniguli", while on Haokan Shiping, it is called "Guli walks in Xinjiang" (古丽走新疆). After three years of activity, a total of 777 videos had been uploaded onto YouTube and garnered 23 million views.

The name Anniguli sounds like the Chinese rendering of a Uyghur name. The suffix *-guli* is the Mandarin transliteration of the Uyghur *-gül*, which is a part of

[7] The epithet "personalized" is often used to refer to targeted advertising which utilizes personal user profiles for the consumers, but we use it here to refer to producers rather than the target audience. This dichotomy, in our view, is false when looking at social media, since social media often personalizes both the output and the targeting. Indeed, personalized targeting is often achieved through the personalization of the output; the two thus go hand in hand. Personalized propaganda is thus personalized both in the sense of being made to look like individually motivated content, and by targeting specific demographics and viewers' personal preferences through the personages of the influencers.

many Uyghur female names, and the two syllables *an* and *ni* are typical in Uyghur. However, no existing Uyghur name seems to really match. This would not be an issue for Chinese audiences (not to speak of international ones), but to someone familiar with Uyghur names it sounds odd. When looking at the earliest videos on this account, we realized its origin. The account had initially been used by two girls that called themselves Anni and Guli. Anni was a Kazak girl who only appeared in a few early videos. Guli stayed with the account and continued to upload videos. Yet not even her initial screen name, Guli, tells us much about her actual Uyghur name. *Gül* in Uyghur means rose or flower, but while it is a common suffix, it does not exist as a name in its own right. Instead, its ubiquity has, to Han Chinese, made it a stereotypical designation in Chinese for any young Uyghur woman. This name thus presents her as *the* generic Modern Uyghur Girl, which indeed seems to be what she is intended to represent on screen: The Modern Uyghur Girl as the authorities want her to be seen. Guli thus speaks fluent Mandarin and wears fashionable clothes and make-up. She drinks alcohol in public and speaks openly and positively about marriage between Uyghurs and Han Chinese. She is beautiful and accommodating, smiling, and fond of music, dance, and food. She thus fulfills most Han-Chinese stereotypes about minority women.

The videos are of a high-definition quality. They are well edited and subtitled and, early uploads had background music. Her first videos were filmed by her early collaborator Anni or by a Han-Chinese man whom she calls Elder Brother Wang (王大哥, Wang *dage*). The steadiness and quality of his shots suggest professional equipment and knowledge. Later she makes her own recordings with a small, high-quality camera attached to a selfie-stick, which does not seem like the kind of equipment a young Uyghur woman like Anniguli would own. The apartment she lives in with her parents and siblings does not display wealth, but rather shows simple conditions with little equipment or luxury goods; before 2021 we do not get the impression that she is from a particularly wealthy environment. The number of videos, their quality, her equipment, the regularity with which they are uploaded, the platforms that she is using, her mobility, access, anonymity, and pitch-perfect representation of a generic model minority girl as seen from the perspective of the Party-State, as well as the fact that she used to share the account with someone else, all suggest that this is not entirely the self-motivated labor of love of a twenty-year-old woman.

4.2 Inter-ethnic dating and marriage

In one of Anniguli's videos, she talks to her two girlfriends about interethnic dating and marriage between Uyghurs and Han Chinese (Anniguli 2020a). They all express very liberal views on this and are generally in favor. These have long been sensitive topics among Uyghurs. The experience of discrimination and a fear of

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being assimilated and "bred out" has contributed to fairly strict ethnically endogamous practices and a low acceptance of marriage with Han, especially for women in Uyghur communities. During the 1990s and 2000s, ethnic endogamy became a kind of resistance and technique of cultural preservation. Even in the cases where actual love marriages took place inter-ethnically, it was not advertised widely but rather happened quietly, almost secretly, and stayed mainly confined to the larger cities in the north. These inward-looking strategies are more than political or identitarian. They are based in Uyghur kinship and social structure more generally, as marriage is the central way of defining close relatives for mutual economic dependency and labor cooperation. The family has a say in marriages and is impacted by marriage choice. Marriages are preferably undertaken within circles in which one feels close, whom one can trust and on whom one can depend. The strong ethnic discrimination experienced by most Uyghurs and the fairly strong segregation of the social and economic lives of the two groups make Han unlikely candidates for this category, including from a household strategy perspective, unless a stronger economic or political motivation is provided. According to official statistics, in 2010 only 0.2 percent of Uyghur marriages were with Han (Xiao 2019).

Inter-ethnic marriage is an area that the Chinese government has long seen as a potential path to closer integration and ethnic harmony. In 2014, some counties in Hotan advertised an award of 10,000 RMB (US$1,450) per year for Han-Uyghur interethnic families during the first five years of their marriage. In case of a divorce within those first five years, the money would have to be returned (Xiao 2019). Since the beginning of the recent campaign of the mass incarceration of minority people in the region, rumors have circulated of coerced interethnic marriages. Several videos appeared on Chinese social media in 2017 allegedly showing Uyghur women forced to marry Han Chinese men in order to protect themselves and their family members from political persecution. In May 2017, one such video on Douyin quickly spread to several Western social media, such as Facebook and YouTube, attracting much attention in the Uyghur diaspora. In the video, the guest of a wedding party appears to ask the Chinese groom what his job is and how long he has known the bride, and he replies, "I am a soldier and we have known each other for two months," while his Uyghur wife has a very unhappy look on her face (see Figure 2).

Anniguli depicts inter-ethnic marriage as being purely about freedom of love. This is the government's narrative. It ignores the political and economic realities that surround this sensitive issue and places her not only on the side of the government in these questions, but also in violation of local sensitivities and risks community outrage and condemnation. She has also made several videos on "how to win a Uyghur girl's heart," most likely for the considerable part of her target

audience that are Han-Chinese men. In her discussion of inter-ethnic marriage, while she does refer to difficulties arising from cultural and linguistic differences, she does not mention religion at all, in spite of Islam being often mentioned as one of the main obstacles for Uyghurs to marrying Han.

Figure 2: Screenshot from a video circulated on Uyghur social media accounts in May 2017 showing a newly married Han-Uyghur couple

(Source: Muslim 2018)

4.3 Drinking in public

Ayituna is another young female Uyghur influencer. Her account was the second one we came across. Unlike Anniguli, Ayituna seemingly uses her real name, Ayituna Abulikemu (Uyghur: Aytune Ablikim), and shows her family members and her parents' restaurant in her videos. She started to upload videos in July 2019. In the beginning, she was working for a company in the regional capital Ürümchi, but in June 2020, she moved back to her hometown of Hotan and continued to record videos there. In her videos, she also uses the name "Guli of Southern Xinjiang" (南疆古丽). She stresses her ties to Southern Xinjiang, but her dressing style, her make-up and her accent align her more closely with Ürümchi. When on rare occasions she speaks Uyghur to her parents, she does not use the Hotan dialect and mostly addresses them as well as the camera and all others in Mandarin,

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even though her parents clearly struggle. From the videos we learn that she has studied chemistry and has no other job in Hotan but recording videos. She is from Qaraqash county, which is one of the most conservative and religious regions in Xinjiang, with a population of 99 percent Uyghurs.

In one of her videos, she visits a liquor factory in Hotan. The video is provocatively entitled "Can Xinjiang people drink [alcohol]?" (Ayituna 2020). She tastes the factory's liquor, finds it too strong and mentions several times during the video that she does not drink very often. The Han-Chinese bystanders laugh at her sensitivity to alcohol. Even in the more liberal areas of Xinjiang, it is untypical for Uyghur women to drink alcohol in public. For a young, unmarried woman from Qaraqash, openly drinking alcohol and broadcasting it on social media for all to see is in complete breach with local Uyghur etiquette. It relates to highly emotive discourses prevalent in the area for at least two decades. In Hotan, local Uyghur opinion has swung against alcohol consumption since the 2000s, while the government has promoted it and portrayed such sensibilities as indicating an extremist or fundamentalist mindset. In 2013, the Xinjiang government classified 75 types of behavior, including refusing to drink alcohol or smoke cigarettes for religious reasons, as expressions of religious extremism.[8] Being branded an extremist has landed many Uyghurs in camp and prison since 2014 and most especially since 2017. It is not unlikely that a young Uyghur woman, raised in a traditional, southern Uyghur family would drink alcohol. Many do, especially in educated, urban circles, and doing it at government events or publicly showing acceptance of it can be ways for Uyghurs to protect themselves politically. What seems unlikely is for her to deliberately choose it as a topic of her vlog, to drink in public, film herself doing it, and then upload the video of it for thousands to watch, including her parents, relatives, and teachers. This must have been damaging for her personal reputation and hurtful to her relatives. It therefore seems more than likely that the topic and content of this video had been suggested to her or even decided for her. Interestingly, Ayituna has been receiving thousands of views and likes from the very outset of her accounts being established, starting with her very first videos. This also suggests that she did not have to start from scratch to build up her own following over months and years, but that her accounts were from the outset promoted by powerful entities such as government organs.

8 One of the 75 points mentioned as an indicator of religious extremism is to "deliberately expand the category of "*halal*"; use religion to promote smoking and alcohol prohibitions; use the notion of "non-*halal*" or "*haram*" as an excuse to resist the circulation of normal commodities" (故意扩大 "清真" 范畴，以宗教为由，宣扬禁烟禁酒；以 "非清真" 为由，抵制正常商品的流通). Alcohol falls under the category of normal commodities here. See Ifeng.com (2014).

Figure 3: Screenshot from Anniguli's account, featuring four minority influencers on a beach in Qinhuangdao (from left to right: Duoduo Qimuge, a Han-Chinese friend, Ayituna, and Anniguli)[9]

(Source: Anniguli 2021a)

4.4 A network of accounts

Besides Anniguli and Ayituna a number of other popular accounts produce personalized propaganda on Xinjiang. Kaidiyaya (凯迪娅娅) and Nihao Dina (你好, 迪娜) are two such accounts based in the Kashgar region. Just like Anni and Guli, the two started out on a common account known as Kaidiyaya. They began uploading videos onto the Chinese web platforms Weibo, Xigua Shiping, and Haokan Shiping in July 2020. From November 2020 only Kaidiyaya remained on this account, while Dina started her own. By April 2021, Kaidiyaya's account had 172 uploaded videos. In them she is very open about her biography. From the videos we learn that her real name is Qedirye. She graduated from a medical university in inner China and returned to her hometown after graduation, when she got married. In spite of her medical education, she does not seem to have other work than producing videos. Most of her videos concern her daily life as a married woman in Kashgar, praising the Chinese government's good policies in the city, including improvements in the educational system of rural Kashgar and the increased happiness of its population. Kaidiyaya speaks fluent Mandarin in her videos. Sometimes she speaks Uyghur (with a strong Kashgar accent) with some of her friends or family members. Dina,

[9] The subtitle reads: "If you like the four of us, you've got really good taste."

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who works at an unspecified company besides making videos, started to upload her own videos onto Weibo, YouTube, and Xigua Shiping from November 19, 2020. She addresses many of the same topics and narratives as Kaidiyaya.

Several accounts are associated with other ethnic minorities. Hanikesiya (哈尼克斯呀) is an account managed by a young Tajik woman from Ghulja (Hanikesiya 2021) and the account Duoduo Qimuge (多多其木格) features a young Mongolian woman from Inner Mongolia (Duoduo Qimuge 2019). Both make much of their minority identity, but speak almost exclusively Mandarin in their videos. Vloggers of Hui and Mongol ethnicity produce similar content. There are far fewer male representatives in the world of ethnic-minority personalized propaganda, but an account named Fa-te Yi Jiaqin (法特一家亲, Fa-te's United Family) is among the most productive. It is managed by Arafat (Fa-te), a young Uyghur man living in Chöchek, Xinjiang. Fa-te does not address political topics but mainly displays his cooking skills and his happy life. A younger Han Chinese man often appears in his clips whom he addresses as his younger brother (弟弟 *didi*). He and his parents are also close with a number of Han Chinese in their town whom they talk of as godparents (干爸干妈 *gan ba gan ma*) or godchildren (干女儿 *gan nü'er*). His videos thus perfectly illustrate the Chinese government's vision of the "harmonious society of ethnic unity" in Xinjiang. Another popular account is run by a Uyghur man in Kashgar called Mewlan. He uploads his videos onto Weibo under the name of Kashi nongmei ge (喀什浓眉哥, Bushy-eyebrowed brother in Kashgar). He focusses on food, business, and tourism in the region.

Anniguli, Ayituna, and several of the others move around in the region a great deal, visiting different tourist sights, villages, and even agricultural production facilities. Such mobility is not easy for ordinary Uyghurs, and especially not for young Uyghur women, whether in the sense of passing checkpoints or meeting cultural and economic norms. In one of her videos, the Mongolian influencer travels to Xinjiang to meet Anniguli. They also mention Ayituna in the video. Anniguli and Ayituna appear together in several videos and in one clip from 2021 meet with two other minority influencers on a beach in Qinhuangdao on China's east coast not far from Beijing (see Figure 3), where they also meet Duoduo Qimuge. These connections likewise point to the videos being coordinated and maybe initiated by the same organization, most likely one that is government related.

5. Modes of representation

The accounts frequently discuss the stereotypical minority topics promoted by the government, such as food, dance, and music, but fail to mention religion, minority history, identity, or traditions. Important Uyghur holidays like Nowruz, the Feast of Sacrifice (*Qurban héyit*), or the End of Ramadan (*Roza héyit*), are not

marked or celebrated in these videos, while typically Han-Chinese holidays like the Chinese Lunar New Year and the Mid-Autumn Festival are noted. Also, we did not find a single woman with headscarf in the videos. According to reports from the region by refugees and foreign observers, this partly reflects reality on the ground, as between 2017 and 2020 religious symbols were largely removed from the public sphere and minority traditions were coercively replaced by Han-Chinese ones. This seems to have been somewhat loosened or reversed since, but probably was never carried out to the degree shown in the videos. They do not merely depict reality but also consciously represent society in the image of Party ideology.

Up until late 2020, the videos mainly addressed government policy indirectly and never commented on international issues. They were generally fairly subtle in toeing the Party line and addressed mainly politically safe "cultural" topics. These fit the government-supported depiction of Xinjiang as "folklore-land," a term used about Kashgar in a government-sponsored booklet from 2014. Ayituna summarized this notion in one of her videos by listing what she sees as the "four charms" of Xinjiang: beautiful women, delicious food, dance, and music (Ayituna 2021b; see Figure 4). Two of the most-used terms in the videos are: "Uyghur girls" and "Xinjiang girls," essentially constituting a self-exoticizing and self-erotization process as these young women adapt and reiterate the Han male colonial gaze on ethnic minorities (Gladney 2004; Bovingdon 2010; Cliff 2016).

In one of her videos, Kadiyaya praises the beauty of a village outside Kashgar that she visits. Here the government has built standardized "Safe Living Houses" (安居房 *anjü fang*) for the Uyghur inhabitants (Kaidiyaya 2021b), as an element in the larger government policy of modernizing rural areas through centralization of settlement and infrastructure, called "Building a New Socialist Countryside" (社会主义新农村建设 *shehui zhuyi xin nongcun jianshe*) (Luo et al. 2007; Kreutzmann 2012). This policy has been heavily criticized for effectively depriving local populations of pasture and agricultural land and thereby destroying their established livelihoods. It makes them dependent on a money economy in which their only viable way to make a living was often reduced to Han-Chinese tourism or labor migration to industrial urban centers. But Kaidiyaya only mentions the settlement's modern flair. She talks to school children in the village and is impressed by a young girl reciting classical Chinese poetry and the children's general level of Mandarin. She thereby underscores the government's emphasis on Mandarin while suppressing Uyghur and other minority languages. The need for better Mandarin skills has also been one of the narratives that the government uses to defend its re-education camps in Xinjiang.

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Figure 4: Xinjiang's "four charms" listed by Ayituna[10]

(Source: Ayituna 2021b)

Starting in late 2020, the personalized propaganda videos have increasingly addressed government talking points and international political topics of importance for China's diplomacy. In March 2021, pressured by protests in the West over the alleged use of minority forced labor in the cotton industry, companies like H&M and Nike declared that they would stop using Xinjiang cotton. China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Hua Chunying, refuted claims of forced labor and was echoed by intellectuals in Xinjiang (Al'erti and Chen 2021). Chinese social media and consumers reacted with a strong backlash against these companies and calls to support Xinjiang cotton. From March to April, this topic became the top trending topic on Weibo with more than 1.8 billion views (Brant 2021). In one of the trending videos, two Kazak girls from Xinjiang danced in front of an H&M shop in Sichuan, Chengdu, to show-case their "happy life" in Xinjiang (Beijing Toutiao 2021).

In March 2021, Anniguli posted a video in which she directly discusses the Xinjiang cotton industry and the allegations of human rights abuses and forced labor (Anniguli 2021c). In her video, she denies any abuses and refers to one of her earliest videos from October 2018 (uploaded to YouTube in March 2019) where she visited a Xinjiang cotton plantation.[11] She revisited the same place in 2019

[10] The subtitle reads: "In Xinjiang we have four great things: beautiful women, delicious food, dance, and music."

[11] The exact location of the plantation is not disclosed, but given that those picking cotton are

(Anniguli, 2019). Her comments mark a shift toward more explicitly political topics. This aligns her more closely with other types of government propaganda. In May 2021, she relaunched her upbeat 2018 video from the Xinjiang cotton fields on YouTube with English subtitles and the English heading: "All you want to know about Xinjiang cotton over here" (Anniguli 2021d). Other vloggers similarly seem to have recently ventured into more explicitly political content and connected more closely to other Chinese propaganda outlets.

On April 9, 2021, a video produced by CGTN appeared on Ayituna's account, bearing the title: "The southern Xinjiang girl standing against Western media fake news, our homeland's happiness cannot be ruined" (Ayituna 2021a). In it, Ayituna is introduced as an internet influencer (网红 *wanghong*) who laments how Western media outlets are spreading lies about the current situation in Xinjiang. Hanikesiya also has a video about Xinjiang cotton, where she expresses shock and anger over what she calls H&M and Nike's "slanders against people in Xinjiang." In a wording similar to that of a government spokesperson, she contrasts the happiness and prosperity of the Xinjiang cotton farmers with that of black slaves on historical US cotton plantations. After only a few days, she deleted this video and posted a new one entitled "I protect Xinjiang cotton" (Hanikesiya 2021). In the new video, she visits a local cotton trader (Uyghur: *paxtichi*) and speaks to him about prices and quality. Kaidiyaya posted a video with the same content and very similar sentences (Kaidiyaya 2021b). It seems likely that both were following the same script.

On March 23, 2021, Radio Free Asia (RFA) reported that several web accounts such as that of Ayituna were using YouTube to spread China's propaganda (Qiao Long 2021). In a subsequent video addressing this directly, Ayituna expressed shock and indignation about these accusations and insisted that she and her videos aim to show the region's happy and harmonious life and distribute knowledge about the XUAR "in the right way." Once more, it is more than unlikely that a young Uyghur woman in Xinjiang will have, much less publicly address, knowledge from RFA, which is funded by the US Congress and is highly critical of China, without the support and approval of Chinese officials. Indeed, it is almost certain that she would only dare to mention this if she had been directly instructed to do so by the government.

6. The political economy of personalized propaganda

Most probably the government has also provided funds for the recording. Estimated expenses for travel and equipment to produce these videos are substantial

Han Chinese and that Anniguli lives in Ürümchi, it is likely to be around Shihezi, a mere hour's drive from the regional capital.

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when measured against the backgrounds and lives these influencers seem to come from. Much speaks for these influencers being to some extent on a state payroll, though it is unlikely to be a very significant amount. Besides money, this type of work can also provide political protection for the influencer and their family as they publicly display loyalty to the party. In some cases, there may even be an element of coercion involved – a type of forced political labor. Yet, the videos also provide good business opportunities. The media platforms onto which they upload their videos, Weibo, Xigua Shiping, YouTube, and Haokan Shiping, all pay a fixed amount per view and provide bonuses for landmark numbers of views or subscriptions. Anniguli has earned several awards on the different platforms. On October 16, 2018, she uploaded a video of herself attending a festival organized by the Shigua Shiping platform company to reward their top influencers of the year. On April 29, 2020, she received an award from YouTube for having more than 10,000 followers. In September 2021, the number of her YouTube subscribers reached 157,000.

In April 2021, a Han-Chinese YouTube vlogger, Wang Xiaolong (王小龙) uploaded an estimated analysis of Anniguli's earnings.[12] According to him, her account on Xigua Shiping then had 1.05 million followers and each of her videos had 19,000 views on average. The Xigua Shiping platform pays 800 yuan for each video with this amount of views. Anniguli is uploading at least 15 videos per month, which according to Wang's calculations equals about 12,000 yuan per month after tax from Xigua Shiping alone. She also has accounts on other platforms, including Weibo, YouTube, and Haokan Shiping. This means that her monthly income is likely well above 12,000 yuan, possibly more than twice that. In other words, she seems to have created a profitable business model in which she uses government incentives to produce propaganda content and government support to become established, to get followers and to be able to reach international platforms otherwise inaccessible. It is also likely that the government promotion of her account propels views and followers which in turn are monetarily awarded by the platforms. The commercial success of the personalized propaganda influencers follows established influencer models, yet government support increases the chances of earning a considerable profit.

Anniguli describes how her father did not support her work in the beginning, but was convinced when she started earning good money from it (Anniguli 2020). Anniguli's mother and siblings appeared regularly in her videos until she moved to Shanghai to study at a university for film and arts in October 2020. In Shanghai she continued to upload videos. In one of her recent clips, she says that she spends

12 Wang Xiaolong (2021) himself had 668 subscribers on YouTube and his video on Anniguli's earnings had been viewed 29 times as of May 31, 2021.

20,000 yuan (2,554 Euro) every month for her university life, not including tuition. Also her style of dressing has become much more fashionable and expensive than before. The living standard of her family in Ürümchi as shown in previous videos did not match such spending.

Anniguli seems to be among the most commercially successful minority influencers, but she is not the only one who has turned it into a viable business model. The Uyghur vlogger Mewlan has seemingly opened a restaurant in Kashgar named after his screen name, Bushy-eyebrowed brother (浓眉哥), that caters to Han-Chinese tourists who have been watching his videos. It is possible that influencers like Mewlan, who remain very low-key in their political stance and focus mainly on food and dance, have not received direct government incentives, but only ride the wave of this new genre to profit from it economically. Still, his range of topics is determined by the Party, reflecting the way in which political and commercial spheres and motivations reinforce each other.

7. Conclusion

In order to understand the phenomenon of personalized propaganda on Xinjiang and the situation in Xinjiang more generally, it is important to avoid thinking in dichotomies such as market versus state, private versus public, and forced versus voluntary. The vloggers discussed here all seem to be coordinated to a degree by the Chinese government. This is supported by a number of factors: they use government terminology and narratives; many of the videos seem to follow a standardized script; their equipment is also standardized and professional, as is the editing; in some cases they use professional camera personnel; some of them started in pairs only to later split up into individual accounts; they refer to each other, stay in touch and visit each other; they are much more mobile than expected of young Uyghur women from such backgrounds as those depicted in the videos; they display a surprising disregard of local minority sensitivities; they choose topics and reiterate narratives that strictly follow the Party line and government propaganda views; they increasingly react directly and supportively to Chinese Foreign Ministry talking points and state policies; they have access to platforms like YouTube that are blocked in China and highly sanctioned in Xinjiang; they gather large followings on the Chinese platforms suspiciously quickly; some of them cooperate closely with CGTN and other government propaganda outlets.

Yet the videos are not purely a state initiative. Instead, the influencers seem to be using the access and support provided by government promotion to develop their individual businesses on the commercial social media platforms and thereby make decent – in some cases substantial – earnings. Social media platform payment schemes for influencers have been used successfully by commercial brands

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for years. They are a highly efficient way of promoting products directly and target groups personally in emotionally charged ways, while obscuring sponsorship and money flows. In the cases presented here, they are being used to promote the policies of the CCP. The commercial social media platforms pay for online activity. Therefore, a company, government, or political organization can "pay" influencers indirectly by promoting their content and thereby boosting their views, likes, and subscriptions. Thus, media influencers spreading Chinese (or American or other) government propaganda can truthfully claim that they do not receive any direct payment from the government and thereby retain a veneer of independence and credibility.

Such earnings provide a powerful motivation to produce personalized propaganda for minority youths whose economic opportunities have shrunk over the past decade due to increased discrimination and the suffocation of Xinjiang's local economy by securitization and mass incarceration. Additionally, participating in this type of scheme provides a degree of political security to the influencers and their families. While many of these influencers seem to be uploading their videos voluntarily and some even look to have fun while doing it, the context within which they operate must be recognized. Over the past five years, hundreds of thousands of members of minorities have been detained and tens of thousands sentenced for minor political or religious issues. This has put an immense pressure on minority members to show their loyalty to the party. The exact intertwining of propaganda, business, opportunity, marginality, pressure, and fear are not yet fully understood. What is clear, though, is that we here witness the development of a sophisticated political and commercial practice that challenges many of our established categories.

Given the youthfulness and lack of experience of the vloggers, the informational worlds within which they live, and the pressures around them, their conduct is hard to judge. It is even difficult to gauge how conscious they are of their role or how they understand their own position. In a New Year video from December 31, 2019, Anniguli gives a rare insight into some of these pressures. In an emotional monologue following a family dinner and dance in the living room with her siblings, she admits to 2019 having been a really hard year with much suffering, but says that her mother has now returned (possibly from a re-education camp) and that she hopes and expects the new year to be different, better, and brighter (Anniguli 2020c). This provides us with some understanding of the circumstances behind the production of these videos. At the same time, it is an example of how these videos can be used to gain precious knowledge about Xinjiang at this time when access is limited and research ethically questionable because of the danger in which fieldwork may put local interlocutors. As demonstrated above, the videos provide ample insights into the workings of the PRC propaganda practices, but

also into other parts of daily life in Xinjiang when read critically and with sufficient epistemological care. This includes insights into cotton harvesting, the local bazaars, fluctuations of housing prices, dressing practice, code switching, language in signs, presence of religious and ethnic symbols, and many other local matters. More research is needed to develop this into a systematic methodological approach, but we hope to have here provided some of its groundwork. Given the current geo-political rivalry between China and the US and the role Xinjiang has been given as an element in their current propaganda warfare, and given the still rising importance of social media in the global battle for hearts and minds, the phenomenon of personalized propaganda is unlikely to cease anytime soon. On the contrary, it is bound to expand and develop in sophistication and importance.

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