

2023-12-01

The Role Of Media In Shaping Chinese Narratives On National Rights Images

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THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN SHAPING CHINESE NARRATIVES ON NATIONAL RIGHTS
IMAGES

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THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN SHAPING CHINESE NATIONAL NARRATIVES ON
NATIONAL RIGHTS IMAGES

by

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THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Political Science

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

December 2023

Acknowledgements

The completion of this thesis would have been possible without the dedication and assistance of my wonderful advisor Dr. Rebecca Reid. I am sincerely grateful for the patience and motivation Dr. Reid had as I fulfilled my thesis goal. I would also like to thank Professor Charles Boehmer and Professor Richard Pineda for their advice on the research project. Thanks to their huge contribution I was able to deliver a project I am very proud of.

Abstract

The research project below that provides a qualitative analysis of the Chinese Media's role in shaping national rights images. The research conducts an analysis on human rights abuse allegations against China that directly target the Uyghur population residing in the Xinjiang Providence. This paper conducts an analysis of seven white papers, which are government issued responses presented by the CCP, to interpret which types of the four narrative buildings strategies listed are utilized when responding to the accusations. The basis of this paper establishes that when the Chinese government address allegations of abuse towards the Uyghur population, they will respond by employing one or multiple of the strategies listed.

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THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN CHINESE NATIONAL RIGHTS IMAGES

Chinese media has increased its footprint domestically and internationally by establishing itself as a strong competitor in media markets, allowing the state to influence both Chinese public opinion and international politics. Originally, Chinese media served mainly as a domestic propaganda tool to foster loyalty and promote policies by the Chinese Communist Party after the 1949 establishment of the Peoples Republic of China. Over the years, Chinese media evolved and even adopted some features of western media. Mass media in China can be traced to the 1920s, when the CCP was founded. From the beginning, media played an important political role as its purpose was, and continues to be, communicating ideas and values to Chinese people that are crucial to their political objectives. In 1949, under the leadership of Mao Zedong, the CCP was declared the People's Republic of China. Media such as private newspapers, radio stations, and publishers were all state owned by the early 1950s (Lunn and Fisher, 2009). The dramatic change in China's economy can be attributed to the marketization of the media industry which has also impacted its globalization. Globalization increases China's interactions with other states to help the nation adapt to the rapid development of technical advances. Today, these technological advances have increased accessibility and diversity of information through traditional journalism and social media. Increased international integration and globalization has made ever more media platforms and news sources available to international audiences (Lunn and Fisher, 2009).

However, increased globalization and the plethora of media sources (as well as decentralization via social media platforms) has led to two consequences. First, there is now a significant international audience for Chinese news. As such, China must focus not only on domestic public opinion but also to important international audiences, which include general populations of interested individuals but also important trade partners, competitors, allies, and

others. Second, the increased number and type of international media sources reduces China's control over their narratives. In essence, international news sources are not under Chinese control and may portray China in unfavorable lights. Because China has less control over the images both domestic and international audiences may come across from these international sources, China must find ways to shape these narratives through their responses to these media messages and build counter-narratives. This thesis examines how China builds such narratives and counter-narratives on human rights issues. Specifically, I explore how Chinese state-owned media responds to international media revealing Uyghur rights violations. I argue that China strategically responds to negative rights narratives to regain control over their national rights image, both domestically and internationally. My primary contention is that the Chinese government attempts to control media information to uphold narratives that promote positive images of the state as a protector and promoter of human rights and advocate of democracy, especially in response to international accusations.

Chinese national rights image is crucial for Chinese political and economic power. Shared concerns over human rights and other violations threaten its alliances and partnerships on both strategic and tactical levels (Yan & Wuqing, 2020). For example, allegations of human rights abuses against the Uyghur Muslim populations threaten China's partnerships and alliances with other states. China's partnership and business operations overseas could be undermined by these allegations as they create uncertainty of rights abuses occurring in these operations. If China is employing abuse operations against native Uyghurs citizens in its own land, then how can other leaders or institutions internationally be certain abuse is not occurring in their overseas operations? Uncertainty of rights commitments may influence international perceptions of China's efforts and initiatives, thus damaging China's desired images as a responsible power. These allegations negatively affect China's ability to expand in global markets and extend its political influence because many corporations and states do not want to be associated with human rights abusers. Similarly, China's global contributions to peace operations and other commitments instill

reluctance in external states who are not willing to fill in China's shoes, should they choose to end their commitments because of the allegations (Gallagher, 2021).

Furthermore, the lack of transparency and accountability of Chinese companies and other government institutions accused of human rights abuses can result in reduced legitimacy, political protests, and uprisings which could affect China's national security. For example, China was elected to the UN Human Rights Council but gathered significantly fewer votes than its previous appointment (139 to 180) (Gallagher, 2021). This may indicate that states support for China is decreasing despite the nation's influence. Simultaneously, the condemnation of China by other states could also unintentionally affect people of Chinese origin because China is being portrayed as the enemy. The lack of safety and mistreatment of Chinese citizens in other countries could lead to criticism of western actors that could exacerbate tensions between China and other countries. The discrepancies between the international and domestic reporting of abuses can alienate Chinese citizens from their government as well as alienate those of Chinese descent from their other communities. As China's influence continues to grow through its 'strong voice' as a strong global leader to enhance its roles in political efforts across commercial, economic, and security areas. China positions itself as a key figure in political and social issues internationally. Therefore, it uses its status as a great power to have advantage over weaker countries and promote its objectives. For example, China holds major roles in key international organizations, including specialized agencies in the United Nations (UN) like the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), and United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO). These types of responsibilities have demonstrated China's growing interest in political work and catapulted its influence over existing structures such as the UN or other IGOs (Lunn & Fischer, 2009). As China becomes more involved in international organizations and roles, such as the ones mentioned above, their role as a global leader rises and their influence continues to grow (Yan & Wuqing, 2020). Yet, China's efforts to play a leading role internationally can be undermined through international narratives alleging rights abuses. This can be demonstrated by the Beijing 2022 Olympics, where in February 2021, 180 human rights

groups called “on governments to boycott the Olympics while criticizing the International Olympic Committee for failing to act despite the clear evidence of genocide and widespread and worsening human rights failures” (Davidson 2021). Thus, rights accusations and negative imaging have material and reputational effects on China domestically and internationally.

This thesis investigates the types and conditions of Chinese state-owned media responses to allegations of Uyghur rights violations, specifically through Chinese narrative-building geared towards international audiences published in English. While these narrative-building responses are not limited to international populations, as Chinese citizens also have access to this media and Chinese language versions of these news, examining these responses contributes to a better understanding of national image creation and maintenance. This thesis thereby examines the role of state-owned media in international dialogues regarding rights abuses and naming and shaming strategies. This thesis also offers insights to how state-owned media strategically responds to international political narratives. My thesis is organized as follows: the next section offers my theory of the role of media in national narrative-building and strategic response to international allegations. I offer a simple typology of strategic responses and hypothesized conditions under which each may occur. Chapter 2 offers a brief history of the relationship between China and Uyghur communities to provide context for the media coverage, allegations, and strategic state media responses. Chapter 3 discusses my methodology as I use a qualitative analysis to examine the response messaging content and framing. Chapter 4 offers the results of my analyses, and Chapter 5 provides some concluding remarks.

Chapter 1: The Role of Media for Government Narrative-Building

State-owned media is usually regarded as a pillar of autocratic regimes because it allows the state to monitor and control media coverage, issues, and tone of all events. States that own media outlets can easily determine which stories to cover (and how), what to ignore, what to conceal, and who to censor. The benefits of state-owned media are readily apparent in domestic political spheres, where the state maintains hegemony over citizen information, can elicit specific responses that are desirable for the government (such as generating nation-building narratives that enhance regime legitimacy and support), squash dissident views and voices, and so on. While the rapid growth of media has led to several independent stations and diversification of content, China maintains jurisdiction of its media industry, as media is owned by the Chinese government or affiliated institutions. Qin, Stromberg, and Wu (2018) demonstrate that “all Chinese newspapers are required to be completely or primarily owned by the state. They must be affiliated with a government supervisor who is responsible for licensing, appointing top personnel, and monitoring important editorial matters. Most importantly, only a CCPC is eligible to obtain a license for a general-interest newspaper” (Qin, Stromberg, and Wu, 2018, page, 2447). This is true for media beyond newspaper, including television, radio, and podcasts.

China consistently uses its state-owned media to generate and reinforce political narratives that promote the government, nationalism, and policy objectives. For example, China has repeatedly used the ‘historical narrative’ by drawing on China’s history—often reimagined. Through these new histories, China changes the facts to its favor, allowing it to claim and expand areas that are ‘historically Chinese,’ such as the Xinjiang province. Proclaiming historic control of such areas weakens opposition from neighboring states and helps China gain support for their domestic policies. More importantly, these narratives enable expansionism by giving China

political cover for expanding its territory. Much like Xinjiang, areas around the East China Sea, are in pivotal trading grounds for China. Thus, reinforcing control over favorable positions in territory strengthens China's position while simultaneously amassing Chinese patriotism in the country. The distortion of information through narratives allows China to gain favorable positions both internationally and domestically (Yan & Wuqing, 2020). The public's perception of issues in a country can be shaped by how the media portrays the content. Indeed, any information presented by state-owned media is carefully constructed to uphold Chinese autonomy, enhance its political goals, and increase state legitimacy (Feltman, 2020).

Despite the apparent benefits of state-owned media domestically, less attention has focused on how such media engages with international audiences, who have more options for media outlets, news sources, and perspectives. I argue that state-owned media functions in a similar narrative-building capacity for international audiences, despite the wider market for media internationally. Specifically, state-owned media engages with international media in a way that facilitates government-approved responses to international messages. Thus, state-owned media promotes narratives about the state to international audiences by deciding when and how to engage in news stories and responses.

In the context of human rights, international media narratives alleging Chinese abuses of human rights undermine Chinese political goals and narratives. These allegations are typically part of the 'naming and shaming' strategy, where publicly announcing and naming rights violator(s) and 'shaming' them through reputational (and potentially material) costs pressures the violator(s) to stop engaging in rights violations. The goal of naming and shaming strategies is to create scrutiny that will force actors to take a stand and affect the moral credibility of the offenders. The degree of the accusations and the actors playing a role in shaming could also determine the risks

of isolation for the offender. The hope is that the offending countries will change their plan of action. As Krain (2012) summarizes, naming and shaming:

“creates a common knowledge about the abused based on reliable reports; frames perpetrators as violating international norms and as untrustworthy partners in future interactions; publicly signals international disapproval to perpetrators, their allies, partners or donors and to domestic challengers; pressures states and IGOs to act upon the information rather than remaining as bystanders; and makes continuing the rights violations is question a more costly strategy, both domestically and internationally. Perpetrators will change their behavior if they cannot risk the loss of power, resources, allies, or legitimacy that inaction in the face of such condemnation would bring” (Krain, 2012, p.576).

These naming and shaming strategies undermine Chinese political goals, power, and legitimacy both domestically and internationally. As such, China does not take criticism of its human rights record lightly and must strategically respond to these allegations to regain control over the political imaging and reputation of China. Regaining control over the national image and reputation of China requires counter-narratives and other strategic responses to the international narratives being disseminated. Table 1.1 below identifies a typology of strategic response options available to China in the face of rights violation allegations.

Table 1.1 Response Strategies

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Strategy	Description
Ignore	China decides to ignore and issue response via media regarding allegations.
Deny	China outright denies the allegations via media outlets.
Blur	China attempts to create uncertainty surrounding the alleged events, such as introducing contradictory evidence, undermining the credibility of sources, shifting blame, playing the victim, arguments of false equivalence, deflecting, and shifting attentions to accuse sources of misdeeds.
Justify	China acknowledges the alleged events (in whole or in part) but justifies them within the realm of legitimate state power and national security goals,

The first option of strategic response is non-response: China ignores the negative press. Ignoring ensures that negative press, like allegations of rights violations, are not accidentally reinforced and highlighted by getting more attention than necessary. In essence, ignoring the circumstances helps deviate some of the attention away from the issues by refusing to acknowledge the allegations. Similarly, ignoring the allegations also implies that the sources and events are unimportant and made invisible. Ignoring is a relatively costless policy choice (at least logistically), enables China to take a ‘wait and see’ approach, and avoid committing to a particular response or make comments that may constrain it in the future. However, ignoring may not be possible or the best (perceived) strategic option. I hypothesize that the ignore response is most

likely to occur when: 1) allegations are isolated, coming from single/individual source(s); 2) sources of allegations are not salient (or politically important for China), and 3) there is weak, little, or no evidence offered to support the allegations. Isolated allegations are easier to ignore because the allegations have not yet gained the attention and support/traction by the international community. It is easier to ignore a single instance or news source of bad press than an entourage of dozens of media sources across media platforms. It is also easier to ignore bad press when the source is unimportant. If the negative press is coming from a politically or economically salient media source, then ignoring may not be feasible or ideal. Finally, it is easier to ignore allegations when they have little to no verified evidence. Therefore, I expect China to employ the ignore strategy when there is little to no evidence, there are no salient sources (multiple states), and the media sources are unimportant. I expect that all three of these conditions must be met for China to ignore allegations of rights violations.

H1: China will ignore the allegations when: a) the alleging source(s) are isolated, b) the alleging source(s) are not salient, and c) there is little or no evidence.

A second strategic response option is to deny. When there is more evidence and the sources are salient, China uses the deny strategy to imply that the accusations are limited and untrustworthy. Resorting to denial allows the government to gain time to deny or recreate narratives regarding the accusations. I expect that China will respond by employing the deny tactic when: 1) allegations are not isolated or 2) (some) sources of allegations are salient, but 3) there is weak, or little to no evidence offered to support the allegations. Denial works to counter salient or growing voices making allegations, where China no longer feels able to comfortably ignore the

allegations. Yet, denial only works if there is weak or no evidence to support the allegations. Denial in the face of credible evidence is ineffective and costly. Hence,

H2: China will deny the allegations when: a) the allegations are no longer isolated, b) one or more of the sources are salient, and b) there is little to no evidence.

The third option is to blur, distract, and create uncertainty around the alleged event(s) and the circumstances. This category encompasses a variety of tactics. For example, China can provide a counter narrative that promotes its own successful history of human rights. This narrative then serves as evidence that the allegations are inconsistent with Chinese history and practice and thus not credible. China may offer more information or misinformation about the allegations that creates uncertainty about the events themselves, who was involved, the level of government responsibility, intent of involvement, and so on. Creating uncertainty and confusion can reduce support for the allegations because more time and attention must be spent on identifying and clarifying the facts. Similarly, China may play the victim card and discredit the sources, such as criticizing western intervention and imperialism or naming and shaming the sources themselves as rights abusers (Gallagher, 2021). For instance, the United States, Australia, and the UK all have histories of human rights abuses that China could highlight to deflect attention from the allegations against them and undermine the legitimacy of these states' allegations. The Chinese government can also resort to intimidation and targeted disinformation campaigns to discredit the distribution of published media content fueling human rights allegations. Regardless of which blur tactic is used, I expect China to employ the blur strategy when: 1) allegations are not isolated (coming from

multiple sources), 2) sources of allegations are salient, and/or 3) evidence is offered to support the allegations.

H3: China will employ the blur tactic when: a) allegations are not isolated, b) one or more of the sources are salient, and c) evidence is offered.

Finally, the fourth strategic response is to justify, where China acknowledges the allegations and associated events but justifies them as necessary and/or beneficial. Most human rights justifications usually encompass national security or terrorism, where the alleged victims are criminalized and thus deserving or necessitating state monitoring and intervention/response. Justification under the premise of national security offers the state broad policy powers that requires legitimate state use of force to avoid national instability and unrest, ensure citizen safety, and protect resources. For example, China attempts to deceive the public by creating narratives in which it places itself as a victim of religious extremism and separatism (Zang, 2015). Extremism justifications requires state intervention to “de-radicalize” these communities and separatist assertions require state intervention to preserve the unity of the state itself. I expect the justification strategy to be employed when: 1) allegations are coming from multiple sources; 2) sources of allegations are salient, and 3) there is substantial credible evidence offered to support the allegations.

H4: China will employ the justify strategy when: a) the allegations are from multiple sources, b) these sources are salient, and b) offered evidence is reliable and significant.

These four strategies encompass a variety of associated tactics within each category, and these strategies are not exclusive. Rather, multiple strategies can be used concurrently, I summarize these strategies and hypothesized occurrence in Table 1.2 below.

Table 1.2 Response Strategies and Expected Occurrence

Strategy	Hypothesized Conditions of Occurrence
Ignore	H1: China will ignore the allegations: a) the alleging source(s) are isolated, b) the alleging source(s) are not salient, and c) there is little to no evidence.
Deny	H2: China will deny the allegations when: a) the allegations are no longer isolated, b) one or more of the sources are salient, and b) there is little to no evidence.
Blur	H3: China will employ the blur tactic when: a) allegations are not isolated, b) one or more of the sources are salient, and c) evidence is offered.
Justify	H4: China will employ the justify strategy when: a) the allegations are from multiple sources, b) these sources are salient, and b) offered evidence is reliable and significant.

Before turning to my methodology and qualitative analysis testing the above hypotheses, I offer a brief summary of the historical and political relationship between China and Uyghur communities.

Chapter 2: Background on Uyghurs in China

The Uyghurs are a Turkic-speaking minority located in the region of Xinjiang, China. Xinjiang is an area in China known for its linguistic, ethnic, and cultural diversity. Turkestan, an eastern region of Kazakhstan, was invaded by China's Manchu leaders in 1876. This area is now known as the Xinjiang province, the largest in China, and it is home to millions of Uyghurs, where their culture and civilization originated. Xinjiang is rich in natural resources like oil and gas. It is also located geographically in a critical zone bordering eight countries: Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan. Moreover, it is in what is now known as the old "Silk Road", where traders and travelers frequented and was also part of a Chinese province government by the Ching dynasty during the 19th century (Chen, 2018). As a result, this region is very important for China's security.

This ethnically diverse area is home to numerous ethnicities, languages, and religions. Non-Turkic people such as Russians, Manchurians, Indians, Han Chinese, as well as Turkic people, all reside in the Xinjiang province. Some of the languages spoken include Tajik, Uyghur, Kazakh, as well as Mandarin. Uyghurs are primarily Muslim, sharing their language and religion with other Turkic peoples of Asia. Islam is also a prominent religion, establishing itself in the region after the mid-17th century introduction by traders (Tursun, 2008). According to the most recent Chinese census conducted in 2020, about 11 million Uyghurs currently reside in the province (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

In 1911, a revolution saw the Ching dynasty deposed and led to a shift in the Turkic separatist movement initiated by Turkic nationalists to overthrow Chinese rule. These events led to the temporary establishment of the Turkish Islamic Republic of East Turkestan (TIRET) from 1912-1933; from 1944 to 1945, it was established as the East Turkestan Republic (Chen, 2018). The Chinese Communist Party took control of Xinjiang in 1949 and declared it an independent territory in 1955, now known as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) (Tursun, 2008). Throughout years, the Xinjiang region was described by China as a territory where different

nationalities united one, and the government has maintained that assimilation and integration is a natural yet necessary merger for nationalities to thrive in the region. The Chinese government has also recognized the presence of multiple ethnicities and has commended their participation in customs and patterns of society. For example, they have praised the presence of multiple languages and dialects in the Xinjiang region which have attributed to its 'expansion of culture' (Chen, 2018).

The 1990s showcased the implementation of policies such as the "strike hard" which authorized the use of abuse in the form of force (Tursun, 2008). The dissolution of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War had a drastic effect on China and placed them in a vulnerable position. The dissolution of the Soviet Union indicated that, despite holding untenable patriotism, a large military, and strong alliances, China could suffer a decline in its cultural and political rule (Tursun, 2008). Revolts and movements in China resulted in the government imposing restrictive policies against the Uyghurs to combat its weakening sovereignty over the region. The unrest due to the Soviet Union's downfall led to a buildup in movements and revolts that challenged China's stance on the importance of unity in the region. Because the Xinjiang region borders different countries, primarily those of Islamic or Muslim decent, the variability in religions and ethnicities subjects can make China susceptible to the influence of different powers. The region is more exposed to different beliefs and views which alarms China as the spread of different ideologies may be uncontrollable and could make China vulnerable to separatism and alienation within its own borders. As a result, because China was struggling to exert dominion over the ethnically diverse region, Uyghurs were subjected to punishment, violence, and lack of due process through the employment of repressive policies. China has maintained that their implementation of strict policies is only to monitor and suppress terrorist activity in the region. More generally, China has a distinct history with its attitude towards human rights. Even after the United Nations was established, China did not join the council until two decades later and remained a dormant figure in the association. Their ambiguity towards international laws lies in their perception that capitalist countries use this system to exploit other countries. The scrutiny of human rights puts the country at risk of international interference. As China sees it, western capitalist countries often use human

rights as an excuse to intervene in countries' internal affairs. China opposes foreign scrutiny on their human rights reputation because that would lead to intent to interfere and fulfill western capitalist agendas. As a result, China has managed to mitigate its participation in the international organization by avoiding and justifying its actions in domestic affairs.

Like most countries, China has been committed to demonstrate freedom of expression and safety in their homeland through their protection of human rights by enacting laws and procedures. Their interpretation of human rights, however, is vastly different than that in western liberal, capitalist democracies. The Peoples' Republic of China contend that freedom and liberty continue to grow in the country. But, since the 1980s, laws and regulations have been imposed that have repressed and abused minorities in China, including Uyghur Muslims. The recurring suspicion of terrorism and separatism in the Xinjiang province ultimately led to a coercive campaign against Uyghurs and other minority Muslims. In 2014, it was reported that more than one million ethnic Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Uyghur Muslims were detained and deported to extrajudicial internment camps intended to combat terrorism, separatism, and extremism (Duguri & Hassan, 2021). The camps are responsible for redesigning the religious and ethnic identities of minorities.

Serious crimes against the human rights of the Uyghur Muslim population have been committed, including forced disappearances, torture, arbitrary or political detention, arbitrary or unlawful killings, harsh and life-threatening conditions in prisons and detention centers (Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2020). There are also physical attacks and criminal prosecution of journalists, lawyers, writers, bloggers, family members, petitioners, and dissidents. Similarly, China engages in violations of privacy, restricts citizen movement and travel, restricts religious freedoms, and censors' speech. This includes the restriction of speech of Chinese citizens through censorship, limited news coverage, and banned criticism of the Chinese government and officials. This censorship limits the type of information accessible to Chinese citizens and affects their ability to freely promote and communicate information from non-Chinese sources. China has also faced accusations of forced sterilization and abortions, human trafficking, restrictions on labor rights and union organizations, and limitations to apply to foreign and domestic nongovernmental

organizations (Duguri & Hassan, 2021). Uyghur Muslims and other Chinese nationals are thus unable to migrate, seek asylum, leave their country, apply for refuge, and apply for displacement of persons. Domestically, writers, publishers, and other citizens have worked to mobilize efforts to report the abuses found in the region by publishing and promoting information online and through other forms of publications. In January of 2018, for example, the Uyghur Human Rights Project published a report detailing the disappearances of 338 Uyghur scholars and cultural figures (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Professors and political figures have also been disappeared, incarcerated, or tried and convicted in closed hearings.

Corruption amongst court officials has impacted rights rulings and treatment of detainees. According to China, the law prohibits physical abuse and mistreatment of detainees in the internment camps (Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2020). However, numerous detainees have reported beatings, rape, torture such as electric shock, and other forms of abuse, including inadequate care and poor/limited medical treatment. The law for detaining and incarcerating Uyghurs, other minorities, and protesters stipulates detention without formal arrest (Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2020). This has also subjected detainees to limited legal resources, harsh judicial proceedings, and unfair public trials. The amount of time detainees are held is unprecedented, and they lack communication to lawyers and their families. Some cases of pre-trial detention have been vocalized by human rights lawyers and other advocates who were once held and then released. The personal testimonies of Beijing-based lawyer Li Yuhan and her attorneys, for example, show the harsh conditions of detention centers and absence of resources. During detention, Li Yuhan was reported to have been denied parole on medical release, denied fair hearings, and her trial was postponed multiple times. Human rights advocate Lin Mingjie was also a victim of mistreatment and abuse of power. He was held on pre-trial for two years and consequently served six months in prison after being sentenced—and his whereabouts are now unknown (U.S. Mission China, 2020). Lawyers in China are required to pledge loyalty to the leadership of the CCP before practicing and when renewing their license (Irwin, 2021).

Regulations and other procedures prevent lawyers from communicating/accessing their clients before the trial and have limited review of evidence.

Lawyers advocating for and representing Uyghur Muslim minorities have been subjected to pressure, unlawful detention, harassment, disbarment, investigations, and intimidation (Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2020). The coercion of lawyers and activists representing Uyghurs is severe. While some have protested their mistreatment, others have declined to represent clients due the political sensitivity surrounding cases (U.S. Mission China, 2020). Although the imprisonment of political figures, lawyers, and activists is frequent and confirmed by multiple human rights organizations, government officials in China continue to deny the apprehension or detainment of different parties. Government officials confirm the incarceration or detention of a prisoner citing violation of law and other crimes but never due to political or religious offences (Irwin, 2021). Moreover, they do not respect the freedom and privacy of Uyghur citizens as they have exercised intimidation tactics against the families and friends of offenders. Forced entry, monitored emails, text messages, faxes, calls, and internet access are just some of the many ways China employs control and abuse on the Uyghur population. The government has cited ‘voluntary’ admission of personal information and resources as response to claims of arbitrary or unlawful interference with family or privacy. The lack of respect for Uyghurs’ freedom of religion and freedom of movement has been demonstrated by their inability to emigrate, travel, and access certain services. The abuses against Uyghurs unfortunately continue to grow, but coverage and information continues to spread internationally and reaches various audiences who seek to aid to the affected communities.

International parties’ ability to report or intervene on behalf of Uyghurs revolve around the facts being available. Parties cannot act on mere assumptions or unsubstantiated allegations, which is why credible evidence is necessary. While China is a member of the UN, international ability to intervene in matters over Uyghurs is highly limited. China is not a member of the International Criminal Court and thus remains outside its jurisdiction (Stern, 2021). China has also pressured countries to return and deport Uyghurs residing in their home countries. More importantly, China

has practiced harassment and scare tactics to target and suppress Uyghur citizens abroad. Notably, in 2015, and 2017, respectively, Thailand and Egyptian authorities rounded up Uyghur citizens including students and deported them back to China (Stern, 2021). Muslim countries with ties to China such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have remained silent over allegations involving China and have even signed letters complimenting Chinese counterterrorism and human rights achievements in Xinjiang. Uyghurs have been greatly impacted from prejudice and strict policies but have been able to find sanctuary and asylum notably in western countries. Uyghurs have tried to seek asylum in over fifty different countries, including Turkey, Burma, and Laos. Other states, like Sweden and Malaysia, have refused to deport Uyghur individuals to China and have allowed asylum claims and organized safe travels for Uyghurs. Additionally, Sweden and Germany have enacted politics to halt deportations of Uyghurs from their perspective countries.

Chapter 3: Methods

To examine Chinese narrative-building through state-owned media and assess the four different strategies of narratives responses, I examine the Chinese-owned the Global Times publications from 2018 to 2023. The Global Times was officially launched as a Chinese publication in 1993. The English language version of the newspaper was created in 2009. The Global Times has over one hundred million Chinese and international followers on social media, 2.5 million app users, 8 million daily page views, and 2.6 million daily print circulations in China¹. The website has a strong presence in English language media and delivers information in both English and Chinese. Overall, it reaches an audience of over 30 million individuals².

Indeed, the Global Times markets itself as “China’s most informative English-language newspaper”, a “far-reaching opinion leader in China”, and having “influential readership, both at home and abroad”.³ Thus, this English-language outlet, which promises to “not avoid sensitive topics” and “remain true to original articles”,⁴ is a broadly read state-owned media outlet that is employed by the Chinese government to generate narratives and build its national image. Its international reputation is that it serves as a mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party as their flagship newspaper and frequently promotes nationalist tones and propaganda. The 2009 launch of the English version was deliberately designed as part of the Chinese government campaign to compete with overseas media. The Global Times also serves as one of the main publications that has issued responses regarding accusations of rights violations (Tursun, 2018). Furthermore, in 2019, the *Global Times* was awarded a three-year contract with the Foreign Minister of the People’s Republic of China to monitor international social media and provide regular briefings and response plans⁵.

¹ <https://www.theseglobaltimes.cn/adv.html>

² It is unclear how aggregate number translate into Chinese audiences versus international audience rations. In other words, there is little data on how much of this readership is based in China (i.e., domestic) or overseas.

³ <https://globaltimes.cn/about-us/index.html>

⁴ https://www.globaltimes.cn/adv.html#digital_product

⁵ https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/china-harvests-masses-of-data-on-western-targets-documentsshow/2021/12/31/3981ce9c-538e-11ec-8927-c396fa861a71_story.html

Using their public online English website’s search engine, I used these keywords to search for responses regarding rights violations against Uyghurs: “white paper,” “Uyghur,” “human rights,” “terrorism,” “protection,” and “Xinjiang”. From the results of this search, I selected the relevant white papers only⁶. White papers are government-solicited or authored authoritative reports. I examine seven white papers published from 2018-2023,⁷ all written by China’s State Council Information Office. Hence, these white papers reflect the official Chinese government sponsored counter-narratives to international allegations of Uyghur rights violations to both Chinese and English-speaking audiences (as all white papers and articles published in the Global Times are published in both English and Chinese). Table 3.1 summarizes my data for analysis.

Table 3.1: Global Times' Published White Papers on Uyghur Rights Allegations

Title of White Paper	Date of Publication
Cultural Protection and Development in Xinjiang	November 2018
The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang	March 2019
Historical Matters Concerning Xinjiang	July 2019
Vocational Education and Training in Xinjiang	August 2019
Employment and Labor Rights in Xinjiang	September 2020
Respecting and Protecting the Rights of All Ethnic Groups in Xinjiang	July 2021
Xinjiang Population Dynamics	September 2021

⁶ While these seven white papers are the universe of relevant search results, it is possible that Chinese language searches results may differ (where English searches may be limited to results). It is also possible that there may be variation in English version and Chinese white paper reports, where I am unable to evaluate the accuracy or consistency of report translations.

⁷ My start date for the analysis is based upon the observation that international allegations of Uyghur rights violations initiated in 2018 (Feltman, 2020).

To evaluate China’s use of state-owned media to build and promote rights-adherent (counter)-narratives, I examine which narratives employed through each of these publications. I am specifically looking for explicit text that indicates each of the four strategies. The strategy of ignoring would involve zero text that acknowledges, refers, or denounces international allegations. International allegations would be complete absent from the substantive text of the report(s). Denial would involve text that denounces and denies the international allegation(s). Blur strategies involve explicit text that seeks to create uncertainty, deflect attention, undermine source credibility, and motive, and offer counter-narratives. Justification strategies are identified by explicit text that acknowledges the alleged events and rights violations but frames and justifies them through a lens of legitimate state power, such as being necessitated through national security interests and criminalization of rights victims.

I then examine the international sources of these rights allegations (who they are and how many) as well as the level of evidence provided in the allegation to test each of my four hypotheses associated with each response strategy. The strategies and my hypothesized occurrence for each is provided in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2: Summary of Strategic Responses and Occurrences

Strategy	Description	Hypothesized Conditions of Occurrence
Ignore	China decides to ignore and not issue response via media regarding the allegations.	H1: China will ignore the allegations when: a) the alleging source(s) are isolated, b) the alleging source(s) are not salient, and c) there is little or no evidence
Deny	China outright denies the allegations via media outlets.	H2: China will deny the allegations when: a) the allegations are no longer isolated, b) one or more of the sources are salient, and b) there is little to no evidence.

<p>Blur</p>	<p>China attempts to create uncertainty surrounding the alleged events, such as introducing contradictory evidence, undermining the credibility of sources, shifting blame, playing the victim, arguments of false equivalence, deflecting, and shifting attention to accuse sources of misdeeds.</p>	<p>H3: China will employ the blur tactic when: a) allegations are not isolated, b) one or more of the sources are salient, and c) evidence is offered.</p>
<p>Justify</p>	<p>China acknowledges the alleged events (in whole or in part) but justifies them within the realm of legitimate state power and national security goals.</p>	<p>H4: China will employ the justify strategy when: a) the allegations are from multiple sources, b) these sources are salient, and b) offered evidence is reliable and significant.</p>

Chapter 4: Analysis

Despite the many accusations China has received, and reports of former detainees confirming the brutality ethnic minorities are subjected to, China has vehemently denied allegations since they first arose in 2018 (Feltman, 2020). When the first reports of anti-extremist actions against Uyghurs were first presented, China employed the strategy of ignoring, where no government office or leader addressed the allegations.

When Western media first reports any charges of violations, Chinese media usually responds to accusations of rights violations against Uyghurs through media such as articles, journals, and online publications. Besides news outlets like the Global Times, documentaries and interviews with the Uyghurs have been showcased to address and dismiss any speculations of discriminations. For instance, in December 2019, there were multiple reports that detailed multiple missing Uyghurs (Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2020). After gaining global attention, the details revolving the missing people became more evident to the international public, which made it difficult for China to ignore. As a result, claims of discrimination and missing Uyghurs were refuted by the Global Times, who presented evidence demonstrating that the missing people were fine and not missing. The evidence was presented in the form of interviews and testimonies, in which the interviewees denied claims of terrorism and oppression. Consequently, a study on testimonials was conducted by the (Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2020) and published in 2021 prospectively, presented contradicted claims of abuse in which interviewees were shown advocating for ‘training’ being received in camps by emphasizing the necessity of the training and promoting it as cooperation. Testimonies from officials, scholars, professors, and ex-prisoners have confirmed the existence of camps but deny the presence of abuse in their facilities. When faced with allegations of abuse during an online press conference on December 29, 2021, Yang

Xiaoguang, Minister of the Chinese Embassy to the UK proclaimed the following statement condemning groundless accusations:

“There is no genocide in Xinjiang. There is no forced labor in the region” ([The Global Times: Testimonials](#), 2022).

Chinese media further refuted violations allegations by condemning western media for alleging violence was occurring in concentration camps. The responses of the targeted Uyghur population all follow a script in which the Muslim minorities explain the prosperity of their lives in contrast to the accusations of abuse. For example, on February 19, 2021, a Uyghur taxi driver responded to accusations made by Mike Pompeo, the former U.S. Secretary of State, who on multiple occasions accused China of committing human rights abuses. In response, the Uyghur individual proclaimed in his video testimony: “Pompeo said that we Uyghurs are locked up and have no freedom. We are very free”. These are examples of China’s strategy of denial to (multiple, salient) western allegations. Not only did China outright deny these allegations, but China also used individuals within the Uyghur community to deny the allegations for additional credibility in the face of multiple western-backed allegations.

In December of 2019, reports of forced labor inside and outside of Xinjiang vocational training centers began to rise, which rose concerns over systematic repression taking place. In a similar response to the example above, the Global Times conducted interviews on companies in the Xinjiang area that would refute claims of systematic repression and forced labor (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019c). This interview strategy is utilized to shift the existing narratives on Uyghurs repression to effectively deny allegations and

promote a rights-based image of China. Using testimonies allows China to respond to the allegations by countering it with presumably more credible, on-ground witnesses verifying that no violations have occurred.

Textual Analysis

White papers are known as informational documents authored by a company or ‘credible’ figures that address and educate audiences on issues or promote specific methodologies. I now turn to these white papers to evaluate China’s strategic responses to allegations of Uyghur rights violations. In the sections that follow, I offer the textual analysis of each white paper, in chronological order by publication date.

Cultural Protection and Development in Xinjiang

On November 15, 2018, the State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China published a white paper titled “Cultural Protection and Development in Xinjiang,” which was the first official response to the allegations of abuse against Uyghur Muslims (State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2018). The paper begins by acknowledging and praising China for its multicultural/multiethnic co-existence that has helped the nation prosper and grow religiously, culturally, historically, and economically. Employing the strategic response of ignoring, this paper never acknowledges any accusations of abuse; rather, the report ignores them and highlights the importance of preserving minority languages and preserving the standard Chinese languages to successfully progress and develop in the nation. It also does not acknowledge the Uyghur community directly. Instead, the report recognizes the presence of different multiethnic and cultural circles in the area and stresses that religious circles in the Xinjiang regions are encouraged and free to practice and promote social development with the help of Chinese aid and traditions (State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2018). For example,

“Folk cultures are respected and preserved. Xinjiang embraces cultural diversity and inclusiveness and upholds mutual learning among cultures. The region fully respects and protects folk cultures, thus realizing the harmonious coexistence of different cultures and enabling the effective protection and preservation of the best traditions of all ethnic groups” (State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2018).

This text emphasizes how the Chinese government promotes themselves as a protector of human rights. More importantly, it addresses China’s work to preserve and promote Xinjiang’s cultural heritage, such as by naming 109 sites that have been designated as major cultural sites.

The white paper also cites China's active engagement with cultures of other countries that have fostered their communication and learning. This white paper thus demonstrates how China's response to international allegations was initially to ignore them and offer only a counter-narrative that promotes China's desired image as a rights protector who prioritizes "harmonious coexistence" and cultural diversity. Uyghurs are never mentioned explicitly, thereby further avoiding, and ignoring the allegations specifically directed to this community, invisibilizing this group, and summarizing the experiences of all minorities as that of 'respected,' 'protected,' and 'preserved'.

The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protections in Xinjiang

Allegations of ongoing human rights abuses against Uyghurs and other ethnic religious minorities in the Xinjiang province began to arise more well into 2019 and became primarily vocalized by western states like the US, France, Italy, and the UK. China was accused of expanding security and surveillance policies targeting civilians and leading to unlawful mass detention, reeducation, and disappearances. It was reported that Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities were being mistreated, deprived of food and clothing, and denied of freedom. After allegations were presented by the United Nations, China opted for the strategy of blurring in their March 2019 white paper titled, "The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protections in Xinjiang" (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019c). The tone of the paper is defensive and accusatory. They condemn the presented evidence and accuse western media of stirring up trouble. China confirms the existence of camps in the Xinjiang region but explains their existence by citing concerns over security and extremism in the Xinjiang region. For example, China argues that:

“For a long time, terrorist and extremist forces have been beating the drum for separatist activities by distorting, fabricating and falsifying the history of Xinjiang, exaggerating the cultural differences between ethnic groups, instigating isolation and hatred, and advocating religious extremism (The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2019b).”

Reports by Chinese officials and media have shown that the objective of the camps is aimed at deradicalization, job training, and rehabilitation aimed towards those suspected of terrorism. They denounce claims that camps are targeting the whole population of Uyghurs and emphasize that these camps only admit individuals exposed to extremism and radicalization (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (2019c). Similarly, China uses the language of law to legitimate their right to use state power and highlights the benefits of their efforts to their citizens. For instance, they argue that:

“While preventing and combating terrorism and extremism in accordance with the law, Xinjiang has maintained social stability and promoted social progress in the region, meeting the people's aspirations for a safe and stable environment to live and work in, and ensuring the basic rights of all ethnic groups to the greatest extent” (The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2019b).

This strategy of acknowledging part of the allegation (i.e., the presence of camps) but providing a counter-narrative creates uncertainty around the purpose and ongoings of the camps. Rather than for a nefarious purpose, China explains that the purpose of the camps is within

legitimate state power and the educational and job training centers are essentially a commitment to its citizens. Thus, China denies the mistreatment of ethnic minorities and instead asserts that it offers them assistance to better incorporate them into the labor force and improve their livelihood to neutralize radicalization and poverty. International audiences (and likely domestic audience) are thus able to accept the available evidence provided in the allegations (of the existence of camps) but placated or unsure of whose narrative is accurate.

Historical Matters Concerning Xinjiang

In July 2019, China published a white paper titled “Historical Matters Concerning Xinjiang” offering readers a background overview the development of China in response to the distorted histories presumably propagated by domestic and international separatist groups seeking to separate the Xinjiang region from China. In essence, this report is intended to provide a counternarrative to the distorted, false histories used by separatist groups who assert that the Xinjiang region was once autonomous and independent. For example, the report asserts that:

“[...] in more recent times, hostile forces in and outside China, especially separatists, religious extremists, and terrorists, have tried to split China and break it apart by distorting history and facts. They deny the fact that Xinjiang has been a part of China’s territory where various ethnic groups have lived together, many cultures have communicated with each other, and different religions have coexisted since ancient times. They call Xinjiang “East Turkistan” and clamor for independence. They attempt to separate ethnic groups in Xinjiang from the Chinese nation and ethnic cultures in the region from the diverse but integrated Chinese culture” (The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2019c: 3).

The report also emphasizes the important, collaborative contributions of the ethnic minorities in this region to the development of China, its culture, and prosperity. While this is a repeated theme, the following example explicitly includes Uyghur contributions.

“Ethnic groups had grown, developed, and integrated with each other despite periods of isolations and conflict, and shared good fortune and hardship in a close relationship. All of them have made important contribution to exploring, developing, and protecting Xinjiang, and they are all masters of Xinjiang. Currently inhabited by 56 ethnic groups, Xinjiang is one of the provincial-level administrative regions with the most ethnic groups in China. The Uygur, Han, Kazak, and Hui have populations of one million and above, and the Kirgiz and Mongol have populations exceeding 100,000. Today, Xinjiang, home to various ethnic groups, is an integral part of the Chinese nation” (The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2019c: 9).

China continues that ethnic cultures are part of Chinese culture and outlines the mutual prosperity enjoyed by all until the introduction of Islamic influence in the region. Maintaining a tone of historical record or textbook, this is where the report inserts political messages for cultural assimilation and national security.

“Having a stronger sense of identity with Chinese culture is essential to the prosperity and development of ethnic cultures in Xinjiang. Throughout history, whenever the central government exercised effective governance over Xinjiang and the society of the region was

stable, exchanges and communication between ethnic cultures in Xinjiang and the culture of the Central Plains ran smoothly, and the economy and culture of Xinjiang flourished and grew prosperous. Whenever ethnic cultures in Xinjiang assimilated, integrated, and accommodated the diverse culture of the Central Plains, including the concepts of benevolence, people-orientation, integrity, sound reasoning, harmony and unity, diversity and integration of Xinjiang ethnic cultures were more apparent, and these cultures could make more progress. For the ethnic cultures in Xinjiang to prosper and develop they must keep pace with the times, be open and inclusive, engage in exchange and integration with other ethnic cultures in China and mutual learning with other ethnic cultures throughout the world, and play their role in fostering a shared spiritual home for all China's ethnic groups" (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019c: 13).

The framing of this language and report overall places an emphasis on the separatist threat created by Islamic forces. Indeed, the next section traces the religious diversity of the Xinjiang, thereby implying that Islam is not and has not been the primary or majority religion of the region. Further, the report explicitly states that:

"Xinjiang fully respects and protects freedom of religious belief as stipulated in the Constitution of the PRC. [...] Xinjiang always upholds equality for all religions, showing neither favoritism towards nor discrimination against any religion and allowing no religion to be superior to any other religion. Xinjiang always upholds equality for all individuals

before the law” (The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2019c: 14-15).

Immediately following these statements, the report offers a more explicit political message for cultural assimilation:

“The history of religions in China shows that only by adapting themselves to the Chinese context can they be accommodated within Chinese society. The 70-year history of the PRC also shows that only by adapting to socialist society can religions in China develop soundly. We must uphold the principle of independence and self-management of China’s religious affairs and prevent all religious tendency that seeks to divest itself of all Chinese elements. We must develop and encourage secular, modern, and civilized ways of life, and abandon backward and outdated conventions and customs. We must carry forward religious practices adapted to Chinese society, inspire various religions in China with core socialist values and Chinese culture, foster the fusion of religious doctrines with Chinese culture, and lead these religions, including Islam, onto the Chinese path of development” (The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2019c: 15).

Finally, the report makes two arguments. The first is that “many Uyghurs follow religions other than Islam” (The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2019c: 15) while the second discusses the threats of (Islamic) extremism and terrorism that has ‘surged’ across the world. These two points are intended to be taken together to justify Chinese actions to reduce (Islamic) terrorist threats and de-linking this issue with Uyghur (rights) concerns. Indeed,

it is in these final pages that the main argument is explicitly revealed and where China acknowledges international allegations of rights violations.

“It should be noted that since the late 1970s and early 1980s, and since the end of the Cold War, the surge in religious extremism around the world has caused a rise in religious extremism in Xinjiang. This has resulted in an increasing number of incidents of terror and violence that pose a serious danger to social stability and to the lives and property of people in the region. Under the guise of religion, religious extremism trumpets theocracy, religious supremacism, actions against “pagans”, and “holy wars”. It instigates terror and violence and incites hostility between different ethnic groups, running counter to the teachings concerning patriotism, peace, solidarity, the golden mean, tolerance, and good works advocated by Islam and many other religions. Religious extremism, which constitutes the ideological base of ethnic separatism and terrorism, is by nature anti-human, anti-society, anti-civilization, and anti-religion. It is a betrayal of religion and should never be confused with religious matters or be glossed over or excused through religious rhetoric. Drawing lessons from international experiences and in view of reality of the region, Xinjiang has taken resolute action to fight terrorism and extremism in accordance with the law, effectively clamp down on terrorism and violence and the spread of religious terrorism. Through these efforts Xinjiang has responded to the public’s expectation of security for all ethnic groups, protected human rights, and maintained social harmony and stability in the region. Xinjiang’s fight against terrorism and extremism is a battle for justice and civilization against evil and barbaric forces. As such it deserves support, respect and understanding. Some countries, organizations and individuals that apply double standards

to terrorism and human rights have issued unjustified criticism of Xinjiang's effort. This kind of criticism betrays the basic conscience and justice of humanity and will be repudiated by all genuine champions of justice and progress" (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019c:).

Hence, this report serves two purposes: a) correct the erroneous history disseminated to mobilize separatist groups and b) blur and justify events that have caused international criticism and allegations of human rights abuses. The document blurs the events through ignoring any specific allegations or events, offers a counter-narrative of unity and prosperity (until foreign threats intervene), and offers national security concerns as a legitimate use of state power. The fact that this report (as shown in the previous quote) acknowledges that Xinjiang has 'clamped down' and taken action to fight terrorism demonstrates justification where the actions themselves remain vague but these actions are justified and legitimate (i.e., in accordance with law). Thus, in addition to the blurring ('it's complicated') strategy, the justification ('we did it, but we had to') also emerges in the face of multiple, salient international allegations with significant evidence.

Vocational Education and Training in Xinjiang

"Vocational Education and Training in Xinjiang" was another white paper released in August of 2019 in response to reports of abuse in camps (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019d). In a similar response to the previous report, this paper uses strategies of blur and justify the presence camps on the Xinjiang region on the premise of national security. Again, we see that the report acknowledges the existence of these camps but offers a counter-narrative on the events occurring in these camps. The existence of the camps is

justified as means to end extremism and terrorism in Xinjiang while also blurring the narrative around the camps. Rather than human rights abuses and force labor, as alleged by international sources,

“Xinjiang draws on the experience of other countries, and provides people influenced by terrorist and religious extremist teachings with education in standard spoken and written Chinese, an understanding of the law, and training in vocational skills. These efforts have eradicated extremist thoughts, delivered widely recognized results, helped to safeguard social stability in the region, and protected the environment for the healthy development of religions” (The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2019c).

In addition to justifying the presence of these camps and creating uncertainty about what occurs in these camps, China also justifies its actions more generally—and again without specific actions identified (beyond the existence of camps)—as legitimate actions to quell terrorism in a law-abiding and humanitarian way. For example, the report acknowledges these general un-identified actions as:

“Faced with this severe and complex problem, Xinjiang has upheld the principle of addressing both the symptoms and root causes in its fight against terrorism and extremism, by striking hard at serious terrorist crimes, which are limited in number, and by educating and rehabilitating people influenced by religious extremism and involved in minor

violations of the law (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019d:).

Hence, China has maintained that the purpose of the camps was to focus on the individuals' job skills, and education by pushing programs targeting unemployment and poverty. In addition, the tone of the white paper is defensive and almost accusatory, as if they are in disbelief, they are met with allegations again. The report also includes blurring strategies by deflecting and accusing the international sources. The paper seeks to discredit the information provided in the international allegations by citing political bias. The paper also repeated the criticism (as in the previous report) of international sources using double standards and attacking China's character, in contrast to other Asian countries. Singling out other states faults and abuses deviates the attention from China and helps alleviate the pressure they face. Some of international voices condemning China's actions are the US, UK, and Turkey. During the 40th session of the Human Rights Council at the European headquarters of the United Nations in Geneva Switzerland, Turkish Foreign Prime Minister Mevlut Çavuşoğlu called for the protection of freedom of religion and cultural identity in Beijing (Stern, 2021). He derived criticism on the circumstances and reported that the allegations were of serious concern. China ignored and never addressed the criticism from Prime Minister Mevlut Çavuşoğlu, but in February 2021, the State Council Information Office asserted that:

“Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu said that the Turkish side is committed to the one-China principle and will not allow violent terrorist acts targeting China or anti-China activities that harm China's territorial integrity on Turkish soil. The Turkish side never uses

Xinjiang-related issues as a tool against China and has long designated the ETIM as a terrorist organization and banned its activities in Turkey” (Stern, 2021).

This implies that China has worked to promote transparency with other states, particularly its neighbors. The United States has also attempted to protect the rights of Uyghurs and other Muslims by imposing visa restrictions on Chinese officials complicit to crimes against Uyghurs in Xinjiang. It also boycotted dozens of Chinese businesses with ties to abuse and prevented them from buying US products. Additionally, in 2020, then President Donald Trump, signed a policy sanctioning individual for human rights abuses against Uyghurs. On September 22, 2020, the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act was passed and going into force on June 21, 2022 (Stern, 2021). This act requires companies that imported goods from China’s Xinjiang region to provide clear and convincing evidence that no element was produced with slave labor. Criticisms from global leaders have only extended to sanction impositions as means to put pressure on China to stop violations. Other than that, no movements or policies have been implemented to prevent further violations.

Employment and Labour Rights in Xinjiang

Additionally, a white paper titled “Employment and Labour Rights in Xinjiang” was published in September 2020 (The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2020). This publication was also translated and published through the Global Times. It confirmed that presence of camps restated previous claims of Chinas commitment to security through vocational training. Again, this paper utilized the strategy of justification, acknowledging the issue while concurrently contending the actions are necessary. It simultaneously uses the blur strategy as well by proving illustrations of their commitment to human rights policies to instill

uncertainty and offer counter-narratives of a rights-committed China. For example, we again see counter-narrative of Chinese assistance in Xinjiang to reduce threats of terrorism:

“Xinjiang focuses on areas of extreme poverty and key groups with difficulty finding work. It guides people of all ethnic groups to find work nearby, or to locate jobs or start their own businesses in cities and encourages the impoverished workforce to seek employment outside their hometowns goal (The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2020:).”

Yet, we also see repeated theme of blurring and deflecting even more explicitly than in previous reports. The report targets the international audience to discredit the international interest(s) in their affairs. For instance, this report explicitly calls out the “international forces” that are biased and prejudiced, and who have falsified claims and sought to tarnish China’s reputation.

“For years, certain international forces, guilty of ideological bias and prejudiced against China, have been applying double standards in Xinjiang, criticizing ‘breaches of human rights’ while ignoring the tremendous efforts Xinjiang has made to protect human rights. They have fabricated facts to support their false claims of ‘forced labor’ in Xinjiang and smeared the local government’s work on employment and job security. Their acts amount to a denial of the fact that the local people in Xinjiang enjoy the right to work, aspire to move out of poverty and backwardness and are working towards that goal (The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2020).

In addition, on two separate occasions in 2019, China addressed claims through political figures such as official Governor Shohrat Zakir, who denied allegations and provided evidence demonstrating the educational purposes of the camps. Press conferences, held in both 2019 and 2020, declared that students attending vocational centers across Xinjiang for deradicalization have finished their education and training and left to enter the job market. These press conferences were strategically employed after the nation suffered extreme political scrutiny over accusations on inhumanities such as sterilization and torture (Miao, 2020). These press conferences, like the white paper(s), engage in a strategy of blurring and creating uncertainty through offering counternarratives and evidence that contradicts the international allegations. These figures exert public trust and integrity, which makes it difficult for Chinese and other international audiences to be convinced of the allegations. China asserts that not only will these training/educations centers aid individuals in their economic educational development, but they also protect the sovereignty of the nation by preventing terrorism and protecting their rights from neighboring countries.

As of 2021, China has gone from responding to and justifying their allegations, to condemning the accusations made against them and ‘external forces’ trying to damage China. Chinese authorities have issued statements through newspapers, primarily white papers, denouncing claims. Chinese officials have condemned “anti-China forces” for spreading misinformation regarding claims of genocide against the nation, particularly US-based organizations (Miao, 2020). China has downplayed the allegations and, to a certain extent, victimized themselves by citing external forces are attempting to undermine its position and image by spreading deceptions. In 2022, the China Daily, an English-language based newspaper in China, accused the US government of arranging a disinformation campaign against China by funding research against them (Yan & Wuqing, 2020). In response to accusations made by democratic

countries, specifically the United States, China has drawn on the United States own history of colonial violence as a response when rebuking charges of abuse and genocide (Stern, 2021). By citing cases of oppression and discrimination in democratic countries, China weakens claims of rights abuse through arguments of (false) equivalence and questioning the intent and authority of these accusing states. These tactics of blurring help deflect any scrutiny away from China to focus on human rights violations in other countries.

Furthermore, Chinese officials went through extreme efforts to prevent a publication produced by the UN High Commissioner Michelle Bachelet that highlighted human rights violations in Xinjiang (Zahara, 2021). They opposed its publication by mobilizing lobbying efforts to shut down its publication, such as rallying signatures amongst diplomats against its publication and public denouncement of claims (Yan & Wuqing, 2020). While attempts to prevent the publication of China's crimes against humanity have been unsuccessful, journalists, broadcasters, and publishers in China have suffered harassment, imprisonment, and prosecution. Activists, critics, and religious leaders who have advocated and have spoken against the situation regarding the Uyghurs, have been subjected to arbitrary arrest and detention (Zahara, 2021). The government has exercised repression of the discussion and criticism of topics to tightly control attempts to report or document potential crimes.

Respecting and Protecting the Rights of All Ethnic Groups in Xinjiang

In July 2021, the State Council Information Office of the PPC released a white paper titled, “Respecting and Protecting the rights of All Ethnic Groups in Xinjiang” (Global Times, 2021a). In this report, the Chinese government offers their perspective on their resolution to assure the rights of Uyghurs and other ethnic groups in Xinjiang. It denies the allegations of abuse and instead attributes it to attempts of defamation by western states. Using an accusatory and defensive tone in their response:

“Currently, rumors, distortions, and complete fabrications are being spread by some foreign media and politicians. This is a calculated campaign to undermine the Chinese government’s enormous efforts to protect ethnic equality and misrepresent the historic progress that has been made on human rights in the region. Their goals are to discredit China, interfere in China’s internal affairs, restrict China’s development, and destroy stability and prosperity in Xinjiang (The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2021a).

To further blur the allegations, the report also provides information on existing policies and programs implemented to promote the prosperity and protection of the Uyghur population. It elaborates how the nation has been committed to the growth of the region and prosperity of the Uyghur by tackling poverty, education, and welfare. For example:

“Xinjiang has established an assistance and protection mechanism for urban and rural children in need, including mandatory reporting, emergency response, assessment and assistance, and guardianship intervention. It has improved the system of assistance, management, family reunion, and resettlement for street

children. Xinjiang has also fully implemented institutional care of orphans” (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2021a).

Their discussion of welfare programs and training dedicated to promoting growth and preserve the cultural rights of Uyghurs and other minorities creates uncertainty about the true nature of Chinese activities in the region.

Xinjiang Population Dynamics

After the report written by Chinese scholar Adrian Zenz detailing abuse and repression experienced by Uyghurs in China (Yan & Wuqing, 2020), allegations of Chinese tactics suppressing Uyghurs, through forced sterilization, childbearing, forced separation, cultural genocide, and other forces that deny the growth and safety of the community were published all over media—and continue to be published today. As a result, in September 2021, China issued a paper titled “Xinjiang Population Dynamics” to address population control claims against made by anti-China forces, i.e., western (capitalist) states (Global Times, 2021b). This white paper again accuses international sources of lying, where now these international accusations are attributed as the cause for ‘undermining’ Chinese economic participation and ‘suppressing’ the development of industries to thereby ‘deprive’ minority communities’ opportunities to escape poverty. For example:

“Through the lie of "forced labor", anti-China forces malign China's actions against terrorism and extremism, suppress the development of industries in Xinjiang such as cotton, tomatoes, and photovoltaic products, and undermine China's participation in global industrial chain cooperation. Their acts effectively deprive the local people in Xinjiang of

their rights to work and development and opportunities to move out of poverty and backwardness, with the intent of stirring up trouble in the region” (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2021b).

Hence, this report goes beyond accusing state of being biased and untrustworthy, now blaming these states for national and local economic damage that directly harm the very populations they claim to want to help. In effect, this counter-narrative switches villain identities where China is extricated because the accusing states are the villains because they lie and have sought to harm the very people they pretend to champion. Similarly, China accuses states of fraud and falsification to discredit the international allegation sources. Specifically, they state:

“By means of fabrication, unfounded conjecture, and data fraud, false reports have been concocted by anti-China forces, making accusations that Xinjiang is carrying out “demographic genocide” by forcing birth control on the Uyghurs and other ethnic minority groups to suppress their birth rates” (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2021b).

This counter-narrative again places China as the victim while discrediting accusing states and organizations. China’s white paper also provides population records, demographics charts, and lists factors contributing to urbanization, such as the Uyghurs and how their expansion in education and cultural wealth have contributed to China’s growth as counterevidence to the decreasing population allegations promoted by international sources. China argues that the Uyghur and other minority populations have successfully grown in urban areas in contrast to claims of decreased

birthrates. They have also added that changes in their 2017 Family Planning laws have increased the birth and growth rates for the minority populations. The use of this data and evidence is another example of blurring, where readers are now uncertain about who to believe since there is evidence and data that ‘objectively’ disproves the allegations.

Conclusions

In sum, each of these white papers reveals the strategic responses selected by Chinese official in the face of international allegations of human rights abuses. Table 4.1 summarizes the results from the qualitative analysis.

Table 4.1 Summary of White Paper Results

Title of White Paper	Publication Date	Strategy Employed
Cultural Protection and Development in Xinjiang	November 2018	Ignore
The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang	March 2019	Blur (and deny)
Historical Matters Concerning Xinjiang	July 2019	Blur and justify
Vocational Education and Training in Xinjiang	August 2019	Blur and justify

Employment and Labor Rights in Xinjiang	September 2020	Justify and blur
Respecting and Protecting the Rights of All Ethnic Groups in Xinjiang	July 2021	Blur
Xinjiang Population Dynamics	September 2021	Blur

The most frequently used strategy was to blur, creating uncertainty through counter-narratives and evidence, deflecting attention, and discrediting accusing sources. Justification was the second most frequently employed strategy. Ignoring and (explicit) denial were the least used. I find some support for my hypotheses on the conditions when each strategy is expected to occur. I found that China was most likely to ignore international allegations when the allegations were few/isolated, from non-salient sources, and with little to no evidence. The first white paper employed the ignore strategy. The lack of importance from the accusers, the lack of information, and the number of sources addressing the issues all made it easy for China to ignore the allegations, thereby supporting H1. The second white paper used blur and deny strategies, which aligns with the expectation that the allegations are from multiple salient sources. The denial was enabled because the evidence offered at the time of these allegations and white paper was not sufficient to preclude it. Because the UN report and drone footage provided evidence of camps, China acknowledged the presence of these internment camps (to not contradict the evidence in hand) but denied all the rest as there was little evidence beyond these pictures and they offered

counterevidence with their 2019 testimonials. This provides support for my hypotheses (H2 and H3).

Once more evidence surfaced regarding the rights violations, China was no longer able to deny outright and instead favored the blur and justify strategies. The major distinction in these hypothesized occurrences is the amount and strength of evidence in the allegations. My hypotheses (H3, H4) are thus mostly supported. The third, fourth, and fifth white papers blurred and justified through discussing efforts of economic development, poverty, education, religious freedoms, cultural diversity and unity, and threats of terrorism. However, one could also include the deny strategy if one coded it as implicit. My coding of the text required denial to be explicit; yet part of these blurring strategies implicitly denied the allegations of rights violations. Future work should consider alternative definitions or coding strategies in evaluating strategic responses. Nonetheless, my expectation that strategic justification would consist largely of national security frames was supported. China relied on global experiences and fears of Islamic terrorism and separatist movements to justify their concern and activity to monitor and ‘re-educate’ civilians. National security frames enable sweeping state use of power and makes it more difficult for international sources to adequately assert rights protections in the face of such threats. Furthermore, China relied on the language of the law by emphasizing that their actions were (always) in accordance with law, thereby legitimating their actions even further. Similarly, China consistently took a citizen first framing, frequently emphasizing how their efforts improve the lives of those interned and in the region through access to education, job training, protections, safety, respect, and harmonious unity.

The final two white papers also used the blur strategy, but these papers are characterized by much more explicit, aggressive accusations against the alleging sources. Rather than spend time

in the document to justify their actions, more effort was spent in blurring. This time, blurring went beyond creating counter-narratives of what was occurring in Xinjiang and its internment camps to explicitly accuse western states of malintent and political bias to discredit them. Not only does China create the narrative that it is the victim (of these wrongful accusations), but China blames and discredits (western) states for harming the very people they pretend to care about through these wrongful accusations that generate material damages for these communities who are further stuck in poverty and 'backwardness'.

It is important to also note the timeline in which these papers were published. In 2019, three papers were released consecutively only months apart (Yan & Wuqing, 2020). The first two papers were released within five months of each other, while the seventh white paper was published two months after the sixth white paper. The timeline of the published papers is not coincidental. A response never exceeds a period of more than 10 months. Further, China always issues their responses to allegations when there are multiple salient sources and within one to ten months of each other. The timeline of the response depends on the severity of the allegations. For example, when allegations of forced labor and sterilization came to light, employment and labor was addressed in July 2021, while sterilization concerns were addressed September 2021 (Stern, 2021). In essence, the more severe the allegations, the faster the response. As the allegations multiplied across sources and evidence mounted, they were more likely to hurt future partnerships and political goals as well as strain existing relationships with other institutions. As a result, China employed a response by quickly publishing multiple white papers to preserve its rapidly declining reputation and prevent its position from declining globally. Each response published from 2018-2023, issued a direct or indirect response to allegations of human rights abuses towards Uyghurs. The timeline and language in the papers were employed to establish China as a victim

of a disinformation campaign by anti-China forces, that have embarked on a journey to harm and tarnish China's leadership globally.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

China uses media to shape public narratives of national image and response to allegations human rights abuses. With increased globalization, there is now a significant international audience for Chinese news and increased international media reduces China's control over their narratives. As such, China has had to find ways to shape international narratives through their responses to media messages and build counter-narratives. This thesis has examined how China builds such narratives and counter-narratives on human rights issues, specifically regarding allegations of Uyghur rights violations. I argue that China strategically responds to negative rights narratives like these allegations to regain control over their national rights image, both domestically and internationally. My primary contention is that the Chinese government attempts to control media information to uphold narratives that promote positive images of the state as a protector and promoter of human rights and advocate of democracy, especially in response to international accusations.

Through qualitative textual analysis, I evaluated the strategic responses utilized by Chinese state-owned media via their white papers published in the Global Times, who targets international, English-speaking audiences. I find that China does strategically employ message frames and responses. China's most frequently used strategy was to blur, creating uncertainty through counternarratives and evidence, deflecting attention, and discrediting accusing sources. Justification was the second most frequently employed strategy, where China acknowledged the allegations of their actions but justified these actions as law-abiding and necessary for national security interests. Ignoring and (explicit) denial were the least used. The conditions for each strategy generally supported my hypotheses. I found that China was most likely to ignore international allegations when the allegations were few/isolated, from non-salient sources, and

with little to no evidence. I also found that denying strategies are enabled when the allegations include little, weak, or limited evidence but come multiple salient sources. Similarly, I found that the strategies of blurring and justification occur when evidence increases across the multiple, salient sources. I also found that national security is indeed a useful (perhaps most likely) frame with which the justification strategy is used. Finally, the timeline of strategic responses depends on the severity of the allegations.

However, there are some limitations to this study. First, there is little variation in the number and identity of sources. There may be a threshold effect to the number of sources, particularly as the trend is for the number to increase over time. Similarly, the identity of sources did not vary much, where most were western states across this timeframe. Indeed, China's responses focused on western (capitalist) states, so it remains unclear if other aspects matter, like economic competitors, trade partners, and other roles. Future studies should examine the relationships between strategic response and number and identities of (and China's relationships to) sources more directly. Relatedly, my hypotheses did not include severity of allegations, which I found to be predictive of the timing of response. Future work could investigate whether the severity and content of the allegations affects China's choice of response and counter-narratives.

While the Global Times has a large global audience reaching over 30 million users and a large Chinese base, it is unclear how much influence this news source had on international (or domestic) audiences. Since the available data does not break down its readership by Chinese versus international readers, it remains possible that a very small proportion of readership is actually abroad. If this is the case, then the white papers published by the Global Times likely are not influential in the international dialogue of rights-based naming and shaming and international responses. Similarly, it is unclear if the international readership is those in political office or

political elites or primarily regular citizens, such as Chinese individuals living overseas. Future research could investigate the readership and actual impact of these white papers on international responses and domestic public opinion.

Future research could also incorporate publications beyond the Global Times and include Chinese-language publications. This would reduce the potential bias in my results if English search engine results differed significantly from Chinese search results or if there are systematic issues in translations. Adding more publications would also better reflect the ecosystem of narratives surrounding Uyghurs and human rights issues, offering a better sense of the ongoing, cross-national dialogues, narrative choices, and development.

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Vita

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