

The Psychology of the PRC's Propaganda Campaign: The Global Disinformation War Waged on Uighurs

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Introduction

Even in the West, we are not safe; we have the ability to be influenced by the People Republic of China's propaganda machine. In fact, a lot of us have probably yielded – consciously or unconsciously, partially or wholly – to state-disseminated propaganda that spins their policies in Xinjiang in a more positive light.

The PRC's propaganda machine does not just seek to indoctrinate internal opinion. By using foreign media and running opinion pieces abroad, it is very much attempting to indoctrinate the global community, specifically Western countries such as the United States whose governments, activists, and scholars have criticized the PRC's policies, and that are looking at sanctions on Chinese officials and companies connected to outcries of human rights abuses. To avoid being manipulated by state propaganda, the West must learn to recognize propaganda. It is not enough to know about propaganda. We must recognize its deeply psychological driving forces, and the systematic and well-structured technique that the PRC consistently deploys over a long period of time to slowly and persuasively bend attitudes and imprint agendas. Only by analyzing the psychological strategy of propaganda can we as a democracy actively reject it, as well as take away lessons away about the nature of the party and effectively address the PRC.

If you don't consciously recognize or hear much about propaganda, that's what you're hearing.

The International Propaganda Campaign

Look no further than Twitter to see an extremely potent and successful method of spreading propaganda to the global community. Between June and August of this year, the Global Times, a Chinese state media company, paid Twitter to promote more than 50 English-language tweets to people across the globe. This meant that the tweets were displayed on active users' platforms, even without following the Global Times. These tweets all disguised the situation in Xinjiang and deliberately targeted critics of the PRC. As a result, during a time of worldwide denunciation of the human rights violations of Uighurs, Twitter promoted tweets claiming that people have “smeared the vocational education and training centers established to help people avoid extremism.” The same tweet cited “European politicians and media workers” as trying “to defend terrorist activities in Xinjiang,” adding, “their hands are in a way soiled with the blood of the Chinese people who died in violent attacks [by Uighurs].”

Clearly, these tweets were aimed at the global community. Given that Twitter is blocked in the country and cannot be accessed without a virtual private network, these tweets have a majority global audience. Twitter is also just one piece in a larger puzzle of Beijing's effort to actively cultivate international opinion; China is shaping the global information ecosystem by infusing astonishing sums of money towards paid-for advertising in international media outlets, as well as sponsored reporting and the training of hundreds of foreign journalists to ‘tell China's story well.’ While the press is strictly regulated within China, the government is leveraging the

free press abroad to further its own agenda. The PRC's propaganda campaign waged on the Uighurs is evidently a worldwide propaganda campaign of staggering reach and ambition.

In practice, the Chinese government's propaganda campaign, such as the promoted tweets by the Global Times, indeed 'tell China's story well'. In their own words, the party is "washing brains" and "cleansing hearts" through "vocational centers" in order to "cure" Uighurs afflicted with extremist beliefs. In the city of Kashgar, for example, a party document stresses the obligation to uproot the lineages and cultural connections of Uyghurs to annihilate the foundation of potential extremism. Thus, the propaganda campaign rebrands and defends the means to the supposed end of extremism in Xinjiang.

The reality is far from the propaganda. Governments, reporters, and activists have studied the religious persecution, mass ethnic cleansing, cultural engineering, brainwashing, and forced assimilation of Uighurs; any non-Han behaviors and beliefs are considered deviant. In August 2018, the vice chair of UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination Gay McDougall called Xinjiang a "no-rights zone".

The Psychology of Propaganda

Propaganda refers to the dissemination of ideas for the modification of attitudes and beliefs. Such ideas are in contrast with facts. As a result, propaganda is a form of persuasion and social influence; the repetition, personal stakes, and consistency of the content lead both to conscious and automatic processing. Automatic processing is when recipients willingly commit themselves to the propaganda without deep thought, in contrast to conscious processing which leads to intentional thought and deliberation. Propaganda that incites emotion, creating polarizing views, intolerance, and disrespect, are particularly effective psychological tools for mass influence. The power behind propaganda lies in the psychological tactic of convincing recipients to consciously or unconsciously commit themselves to the message with their own free wills.

In China, propaganda is a particularly powerful psychological weapon for social influence that the Communist Party uses to sway internal and external opinion in favor of its politics. Examples include tight regulation and censorship of the press and enhancement of views that glorify the government.

When viewed as a psychological machine, the propaganda waged on Uighurs is easy to break down and understand. The propaganda from Global Times' sponsored tweets are personally relevant to many people abroad who could identify as Chinese, for example. The message is also consistent with the idea that the government is justified in their efforts to maintain social order, and consistent with the government's rejection of accusations of human rights violations in the area. The propaganda is additionally trafficking mostly in emotion - in this case, it appeals to people's fears of the threat from Islamist militants and extremists in an area which has seen a lot of unrest between the ethnic Han Chinese majority and the Uighur minority. As a result, the relevance, emotion, repetition, and consistency of this message would automatically and consciously persuade an oblivious outsider or native about the situation in Xinjiang and the treatment of Uighurs.

Diving into the psychology of propaganda one layer deeper also reveals the driving forces behind it. In this narrative of the PRC's propaganda waged on Uighurs, the party is faultless. It plays the "victim" card to strengthen nationalism, deflect any blame, and inculcate internal and external opinion. By building support for the party and fostering social agreement, it

not only empowers the party and legitimizes its leaders and policies, but it tramples any social dissidents and weakens any protests. Propaganda, especially those confronting the cultural genocide of Uighurs, is therefore a psychological weapon that renders the PRC bulletproof.

Conclusion

Propaganda is much more sinister than black and white lies told about the Uighurs on global platforms, in this instance. If we in the West understand propaganda as an emotional, often fear-based logic, and as a persuasive and psychological tactic in which the propagandee commits himself/herself to the message largely without rational thought, we will better understand why the Beijing government is so effective in planting ideas in both their citizens and people abroad. Due to increasingly globalized social media, press, and reporting platforms, people outside China are nearly as susceptible to propaganda as those within. It is therefore imperative that we learn to understand and recognize propaganda to avoid accepting and yielding to the content. Further, if the West critically understands propaganda as a highly intelligent psychological weapon, the West can more effectively address the PRC's propaganda campaign against the Uighurs.

In the end, propaganda cannot disguise the secret goals and human rights violations of the PRC.