



VOLUME 21 • ISSUE 18 • SEPTEMBER 24, 2021

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Xi Facing Opposition on Different Fronts in Run-Up to Key Party Plenum

By Willy Wo-Lap Lam

Introduction

A controversy is raging among the upper echelons of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over General Secretary Xi Jinping's advocacy of "common prosperity," which has included forcing giant private enterprises to share their wealth with less privileged sectors ([China Brief](#), August 26). At the same time, a thorough purge within the political-legal apparatus (政法系统, *zhengfa xitong*), which includes the police, secret police, the procuratorates and the courts, has turned up supposedly disloyal personnel who were—according to unofficial reports by *NetEase* (网易, *wang yi*), an online media platform that is run by the internet company of the same name—planning to take "illegal and improper" (不轨, *bugui*) actions against the top leadership ([NetEase](#), September 14).



Image: CMC chairman Xi Jinping (center) poses for a group photo with five new general-rank military officials as well as other senior military personnel at a recent promotion ceremony in Beijing on September 6, 2021. The ceremony signaled the changeover of the leadership of the Western and Central Theater Commands at a time when Xi appears to doubt his control over the state security apparatus even as he doubles down on wide-ranging social and economic rectification campaigns that have affected the rest of the state. (Source: [Xinhua](#)).

Xi's retrogression to Maoism has sparked rare divergent views, as could be seen from how different sectors of the party reacted to a much-noted article by the ideologue blogger Li Guangman (李光满) entitled, "Each person can feel that a series of profound changes is happening" ([每个人都能感受到，一场深刻的变革正在进行！], *Mei ge ren dou neng ganshou dao, yi chang shenke de biange zhengzai jinxing*). First published on Li's WeChat page on August 29, the piece was then simultaneously run by Xinhua, *People's Daily*, the CCTV website, and various other prominent official media. Calling for a second Cultural Revolution, Li noted that recent instances of party authorities imposing discipline and fines on quasi-monopolistic private firms as well as social media bans on several "vulgar" and money-grabbing celebrities represented a prelude to "thorough transformations, which can also be called a series of profound revolutions." He also asserted that deep-seated changes were happening in the economic, financial, cultural and political realms: "The theme of the revolution is changing a society centered on capital to a people-based one, as well as a return to the 'original intentions' (初心, *chuxin*) and quintessence (本质, *benzhi*)" of the CCP and Chinese socialism ([Xinhua](#), August 29). Li claimed that strict measures against greedy capitalists and effeminate film

stars were necessary to fend off “infiltration” from the United States ([BBC Chinese Service](#), September 13; [Radio Free Asia](#), September 3).

Public Dissent and Backpedaling

Li's viewpoints seemed to echo statements made by Xi in recent months. At a meeting of the Central Finance and Economic Commission (CFEC) in August, Xi urged the rich to help the poor and pledged that the party would institute “a scientific public policy system that allows for fairer income distribution” ([Xinhua](#), August 18). It is believed that only an article that has the backing of the party core (and likely Xi himself) can simultaneously be placed in all national-level papers. Only well-established liberal scholars such as the Peking University economics professor Zhang Weiying (张维迎) have openly criticized the concept of “common prosperity” espoused by Li and Xi ([Freewechat.com](#), archived September 2). He asserted in a widely read article that “common prosperity” was not only against the basic laws of market economics, but that it might result in “common poverty” ([Radio French International](#), September 4; [Radio Free Asia](#), September 3). Apart from this public dissent, unarticulated opposition among senior cadres outside of Xi Jinping's faction seems to be sufficiently strong to force an apparent backpedaling, with the “party core” quickly taking steps to convince the public that Deng Xiaoping's reformist policies of economic liberalization and support for major market players will endure.

Take, for example, Beijing's efforts to reassure private and foreign entrepreneurs that China's four-decade-old reform and opening policy would not be diluted. In an early September commentary entitled “Insist on giving equal weight and strength to [the policies of] supervision and standardization and pushing ahead development,” ([坚持监管规范和促进发展两手并重、两手都要硬], *Jianchi jianguan guifan he cujin fazhan liangshou bingzhong, liangshou dou yao ying*) the CCP mouthpiece *People's Daily* reassured readers that “China will unswervingly push forward the opening [policy] at a high level,” adding that there would be “a new framework of multi-faceted, multi-level, and comprehensive opening up [of the economy]” ([People's Daily](#), September 7). Around the same time, Vice Premier Liu He, a key advisor to Xi on economic issues, gave a speech at the opening ceremony of the China International Digital Economy Expo 2021 (中国国际数字经济博览会, *Zhongguo guoji shuzi jingji bolanhui*) stating that the government would “uphold the economic reform direction of the socialist market economy and insist upon implementing a high-quality [liberalization] policy.” Liu stressed that the “policy of supporting the development of the non-state sector will not change,” and added that “there is no change at the present moment, nor will there be changes in the future” ([Xinhua](#), September 7).

Protests Raise Concerns About Social Stability

Various cities have been rocked by protests in the wake of the near bankruptcy of a number of high-profile real estate companies led by the Evergrande Group (恒大集团, *Hengda Jituan*). Evergrande, which also has substantial stakes in wealth creation products and electric vehicles, has run up debts of 1.9 trillion

renminbi (\$294.16 billion). Even as its management has denied speculation of bankruptcy, thousands of buyers of Evergrande properties and other products staged protests in Shenzhen, Zhengzhou and other cities over concerns that the group's imminent default could affect private citizens' housing investments. ([VOAChinese](#), August 19; [Radio Free Asia](#), September 15; [BBC Chinese](#), September 14). Experts fear that a domino effect involving other heavily indebted "too big to fail" real estate developers might prompt more defaults and protests. Demonstrations have also been held by workers from newly shut down factories of foreign companies such as Samsung and Toshiba that reportedly closed due to global concerns about decoupling and manufacturing re-onshoring ([163.com](#), September 12). Despite the state's assertion in June that China has triumphed over absolute poverty, there is little evidence to date to show that Xi's egalitarian policies have provided the middle and lower classes with enough material benefits to offset China's rapidly widening wealth gap. Consumer confidence as represented by retail sales was up by just 2.5 percent in August, significantly lower than projections of around 7 percent ([Finance.sina.com](#), September 16; [Cn.wsj.com](#), September 16).

Concerns About the Loyalty of Security and Military Personnel

President Xi, who is also chairman of the CCP's Central Military Commission, has relied on his solid grip on the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the political-legal apparatus to uphold social stability, as well as to shore up his preeminent position in the party ahead of the important Sixth Plenum Session of the 19th CCP Central Committee, which is due to be held in November ([Chinanews.com](#), August 31). Yet Xi apparently harbors deep distrust of the police forces. In 2020 he launched the aforementioned purge of the political-legal system. The Central Political and Legal Commission (CPLC, 中央政法委员会, *Zhongyang zheng fa weiyuanhui*), which is China's highest authority on police and judicial matters, is organizing several rectification exercises that are due to end next year. "Implementing the education and rectification of the national political-legal team is a major decision-making of the party center with comrade Xi Jinping as its core," said Chen Yixin (陈一新), director of the General Office of the CPLC. He added that these purges would amount to "making deep cuts into the bones to take out the poison." During the rectification drive from February to July this year, 178,431 personnel were subject to investigation and punishment. The campaign also encompassed 1,258 heads of departments including the Deputy Ministers of Public Security Meng Qingfeng (孟庆丰), Meng Hongwei (孟宏伟), and Sun Lijun (孙立军) ([Liaoning Daily](#), September 17; [SPP.gov.cn](#), August 30; [Court.gov.cn](#), August 30).

Even more stunning is authorities' disclosure in September that they had isolated a "conspiratorial clique" centered upon several senior police officers mostly from Jiangsu Province. This was exclusively reported by *NetEase* and picked up by the news portal *Sohu.com*. According to the unofficial media reports, the ring leader was Luo Wenjin (罗文进), head of the General Criminal Investigation Brigade of the Jiangsu Police Department. Luo's co-conspirators included the former secretary of the Jiangsu provincial Political-Legal Committee and head of the Jiangsu provincial police department, Wang Like (王立科), and the executive vice president of the Jiangsu People's Procuratorate Yan Ming (严明). They were aided by two more cadres

from outside of Jiangsu Province: Deng Huilin (邓恢林), a former Chongqing deputy mayor and police chief who also once served as director of the CPLC General Office, and the late billionaire entrepreneur Lai Xiaomin (赖小民) the former chairman of the mammoth Huarong Asset Management Company who was sentenced to death on charges of bribery, embezzlement and bigamy in January. Also related to this clique was the Shanghai deputy mayor and municipal police head Gong Dao'an (龚道安). The *NetEase* article asserted that Luo and Deng regularly “made ungrounded criticisms of central policies and cast aspersions on central leaders.” It also disclosed that the group was “planning something illegal and improper” when party leaders were due to take part in commemorative activities related to World War II in Nanjing, capital of Jiangsu ([NetEase](#), September 14). Their plotting was foiled by the Ministry of State Security ([Radio Free Asia](#), September 16; [Wenxuecity.com](#), September 16).

That Xi's hold on China's security forces including the PLA leadership is less than ironclad was recently demonstrated by the unexpected leadership changes of the pivotal Western Theatre Command (WTC)—China's largest military region that covers the strategic border regions of Xinjiang and Tibet as well as overseeing military relations with India and Afghanistan—four times in less than a year. In December 2020, WTC commander General Zhao Zongqi (赵宗岐) stepped down upon reaching the retirement age of 65. He was replaced by the Deputy Commander of the Central Theatre Command (CTC) General Zhang Xudong (张旭东, born 1962), who is considered a protégé of Xi. General Zhang only served for six months. His replacement was the former commander of the Central Theater Command (CTC) Land Forces General Xu Qiling (徐起零, born 1962), who was only four months younger than Zhang. General Xu served in this post for all of two months. In September, it was announced that the former Xinjiang District Commander General Wang Haijiang (王海江, born 1964) had been promoted to lead the WTC. There had been speculation that both Generals Zhang and Xu suffered from health problems. China's official media has not disclosed whether these former commanders have been given new jobs. More importantly, there is speculation that these extraordinary personnel changes may have involved issues of loyalty to the CMC chairman ([Ming Pao \[Hong Kong\]](#), September 8; [New Beijing Post](#), September 7; [SCMP](#), August 5; [The Hindu](#), July 6).

Despite these repeated reshuffles, Xi still appears to harbor doubts about the loyalty of the military leadership. This was evident in a recent article in Seeking Truth (求是, *Qiushi*), the CCP's leading theoretical journal. A piece written by the Army Political Work Institute of the Academy of Military Sciences, which was published on September 16, warned against ideological lapses such as “individualism, liberalism, centrifugalism... and cliquishness” among PLA officers. It also noted that the party leadership's success in crushing Marshal Lin Biao's coup d'état attempt against Chairman Mao in 1971 was due to “the entire army resolutely heeding the party's directives” ([Qiushi](#), September 16).

Conclusion

Notwithstanding these contretemps, Xi has continued his policy of forcing multinational giants such as Alibaba and Tencent to stop their monopolistic practices and to sell some of their lucrative divisions to the state sector. Moreover, in a concerning echo of the strict norms imposed on society and culture during the Cultural Revolution, official censors and commissars have come up with new rules strictly regulating the entertainment and media sectors—as well as the salaries of big stars (Chinanews.org, September 17; HK01.com, September 17). However, it is also clear that Xi is facing substantial if as yet unspoken opposition in the run up to the all-important Sixth Plenum in November as well as the 20th Party Congress next year.

Despite facing significant domestic and foreign challenges, Xi is focusing his energy on drafting a historical document examining the many achievements of the party over the past century, which will be unveiled at the Sixth Plenum. The document will heap eulogies on the successful rule of the CCP—in addition to likely emphasizing the larger-than-life contributions of Mao Zedong and his successor Xi Jinping. This will be the third seminal historical reassessment of the party since a similar document was drafted under Mao in 1945 and another one was orchestrated by Deng Xiaoping in 1981. The 1945 “Resolution on Certain Historical Questions” ([关于若干历史问题的决议], *Guanyu ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi*) justified Mao’s condemnation of early CCP leaders such as Zhang Guotao (张国涛) and Wang Ming (王明). The 1981 “Resolution on Certain Questions in Party History since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China” ([关于建国以来党的若干历史问题的决议], *Guanyu jianguo yilai dang de ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi*) condemned Mao’s “ultra-leftist” mistakes during the Cultural Revolution and gave the theoretical underpinning to Deng’s Reform and Opening Policy.

It is expected that the historical document to be released at this year’s Sixth Plenum will further bolster “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era” (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想, *Xi Jinping xin shidai Zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi sixiang*) Yet whether Xi can effectively use the document to bolster his power depends on the outcome of on-going controversies among senior party cadres regarding his revival of Maoist concepts including “common prosperity.” Also important is whether Xi can purge the PLA and the political-legal apparatus of untrustworthy cadres who might challenge his supremacy.

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Evidence of the Chinese Central Government's Knowledge of and Involvement in Xinjiang's Re-Education Internment Campaign

By Adrian Zenz

Introduction

Documents leaked to the New York Times (also known as the Xinjiang Papers) in November 2019 revealed how Chinese President Xi Jinping laid the groundwork for the Chinese government's draconian campaign of internment in the northwestern Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). In April 2014, while visiting the region, Xi demanded an all-out “struggle against terrorism, infiltration and separatism” that showed “absolutely no mercy.” He likened Islamic extremism to a virus, noting that its eradication would require “a period of painful, interventionary treatment” ([New York Times](#), November 16, 2019). But more direct links between Xinjiang's re-education internment campaign that began in 2017, and the central government—including Xi himself—have so far remained elusive.



Image: CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping (center) participates in a meeting of the Xinjiang delegation to the Fifth Session of the Twelfth National People's Congress on March 10, 2017, during the annual “Two Sessions” (Source: [Xinhua](#)).

In the absence of such evidence, western expert, media and political commentary on the atrocity has typically placed the responsibility for these policies on the XUAR Party Secretary Chen Quanguo (陈全国), who has been widely referred to as their “architect” (e.g., [Bloomberg](#), September 27, 2018; [Shareamerica.gov](#), July 27,

2020). In July 2020, Chen became the highest-ranking Chinese official to be sanctioned by the U.S. government in connection with “serious rights abuses against ethnic minorities” in the XUAR ([U.S. Treasury Department](#), July 9, 2020), but other central government figures have escaped such designations. Researchers have refrained from explicitly stating that Chen was implementing a central government blueprint, instead noting that “regional Party Secretary Chen Quanguo himself [may be] the progenitor of increasingly repressive measures now employed in Xinjiang”, or that he may “simply [be] the most ruthless tool by which to implement them” ([China Leadership Monitor](#), May 16, 2018).

Now, previously unanalyzed central government and state media commentary from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) surrounding the introduction of the crucial March 2017 “XUAR De-Extremification Regulation” ([新疆维吾尔自治区去极端化条例], *Xinjiang Weiwuer zizhiqu qu jiduanhua tiaoli*, hereafter ‘Regulation’) as well as its October 2018 revision show that several important central government institutions were closely and directly involved in the drafting and even approval of this key legislation. The March 2017 Regulation legalized Xinjiang’s re-education internment campaign in the eyes of the state and directly preceded the campaign’s inception.[1] The October 2018 revision contained blunt mandates for re-education in so-called Vocational Skills Education and Training Centers (VSETC, 职业技能教育培训中心, *Zhiye jineng jiaoyu peixun zhongxin*, a state euphemism for what are in effect high-security internment camps).

Two of the three central government institutions involved can be directly linked to some of the most powerful members of China’s top decision-making body, the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC, 中国共产党中央政治局常务委员会, *Zhongguo Gongchandang Zhongyang zhengzhi ju dangwu weiyuanhui*). Specifically, they are overseen by the Politburo Standing Committee’s third- and fourth-ranked members, who rank directly under General Secretary Xi Jinping (first-ranked) and Premier Li Keqiang (second-ranked).

Xinjiang officials have asserted that both the Regulation and the vocational “centers” implement central government policy for the region and the “important instructions” of Xi Jinping ([Humanrights.cn](#), November 23, 2018; [Chinaxinjiang.cn](#), March 31, 2017). Such statements contextualize Xi’s 2020 assertion that “ethnic work [in Xinjiang] has been a success” ([Xinhua News](#), September 26, 2020). Finally, there is substantial circumstantial evidence that when Xi personally addressed Xinjiang’s leadership in March 2017, he spoke in direct relation to the state’s mass interment campaign that would begin weeks later.

While it was always clear that an authoritarian figure such as Xi Jinping, who has presided over the growing centralization of the Chinese party-state since coming to power in 2012, must have at least tacitly approved the PRC’s Xinjiang policy, the extent to which Chen Quanguo may have acted independently—albeit presumably under a generalized central government mandate to bring the region under control—has been unverified. Given Chen’s extensive expertise in previously working to suppress a major restive ethnic group in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), researchers including this author previously speculated that Chen may have both authored and implemented the re-education internment drive ([China Brief](#), September 21, 2017).

Experts have rightly noted that despite the trend toward centralizing control under Xi, the “actual governance of China can be extremely decentralized,” with centrally appointed provincial leaders enjoying substantial degrees of autonomy as long as they align with Beijing’s will ([Council on Foreign Relations](#), June 23). Nevertheless, the new evidence for the more specific and immediate involvement of central government institutions, coupled with official commentary on linkages between regional policies and the will of the central government, may serve to reframe the discussion on the evolution of the Chinese state’s 2017-2019 internment campaign in Xinjiang.

Central Government Involvement in the Drafting of the March 2017 Regulation

The March 2017 De-Extremification Regulation laid the foundation for the “normalization, standardization, and legalization” (常态化、规范化、法治化, *changtaihua, guifanhua, fazhizhua*) of Xinjiang’s re-education (lit. “transformation through education”—教育转化, *jiaoyu zhuanhua*) through “centralized education” involving “behavioral correction” ([XUAR Government](#), March 30, 2017; [Legal Daily](#), April 11, 2017). Re-education camp construction bids and anecdotal accounts from the ground indicated that Xinjiang’s campaign of mass internment began right around when the Regulation came into effect.[2] The PRC has also stated that the Regulation constitutes the legal basis for the VSETC ([PRC Consulate-General in Brisbane](#), November 30, 2018). The Regulation was revised in October 2018 to fully legitimize the VSETC, referring to them as “re-education institutions” (教育转化机构, *jiaoyu zhuanhua jigou*) ([Standing Committee of the XUAR People’s Congress](#), October 9, 2018). Construction bids for such “centers” were already being published by the fall of 2017.[3]

An April 11, 2017 article published by Legal Daily (法制日报, *Fazhi Ribao*), a newspaper backed by the state’s Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission (CPLC, 中央政法委, *Zhongyang zheng fa wei*) that describes itself as “the party’s main mouthpiece on the political and legal front,” noted that the drafting of the Regulation took “over two years” ([Legal Daily](#), April 11, 2017; [Legal Daily](#), August 1, 2020; [China Court](#), April 6, 2017). The process involved extensive consultations (lit. “extensively solicited opinions”, 广泛征求意见, *guanfan zhengqiu yijian*) with three important central government organs: the Office of the Central Committee Xinjiang Work Coordination Small Group (中央新疆工作协调小组办公室, *Zhongyang Xinjiang gongzuo xietiao xiaozu bangongshi*, often shortened to 中央新疆办, *Zhongyang Xinjiang ban*); the Legislative Affairs Commission of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress (NPC) (全国人大法工委, *Quanguo renda fa gong wei*), and the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA, 国家宗教局, *Guojia zongjiao ju*) ([Legal Daily](#), April 11, 2017).

Legal Daily’s information came from Qin Wei (秦维), director of the Legislative Affairs Commission of the Standing Committee of the XUAR People’s Congress (自治区人大常委会法制工作委员会, *Zizhuqu renda chang wei hui fazhi gongzuo weiyuanhui*), who was closely involved in the drafting process ([Turpan City People’s Government](#), September 1, 2016). Qin added that besides these three central government institutions, more than 20 relevant departments and bureaus in Xinjiang were also involved. In May 2016,

when Qin discussed the review of a preliminary draft of the Regulations at the 22nd meeting of the Standing Committee of the XUAR People's Congress, he stated that both the national Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee (中国共产党中央委员会, *Zhongguo Gongchandang zhongyang weiyuanhui*, often shortened to 党中央, *dangzhongyang*) and the regional XUAR version of that body “attach great importance to the work of de-extremification,” and that both had proposed “a series of major deployments and decisions” ([XUAR People's Government](#), May 26, 2016).

The nature of the involvement of the Central Committee Xinjiang Work Coordination Small Group is further clarified in a Work Report of the Standing Committee of the XUAR People's Congress published in January 2017 by Tianshan Net:

During the deliberation process of implementing the Counter-terrorism Law and the De-radicalization Regulation, in accordance with the instructions of the [XUAR] Party Committee, it [the Standing Committee of the XUAR People's Congress] also specially reported to the Office of the Central Committee Xinjiang Work Coordination Small Group for guidance, [to] ensure that the legislative work transformed the party's propositions into legal norms that all people abide by ([Phoenix Information](#), January 13, 2017) (emphasis added).[4]

The 2018 revision of the Regulation involved an even more direct link with the central government. The revision process is described in a previously unexamined “Explanation” (说明, *shuoming*) of the Regulations, published only as an appendix to a related communique of the Standing Committee of the XUAR People's Congress (新疆维吾尔自治区人民代表大会常务委员会, *Xinjiang Weiwuer Zizhuqu renmin daibiao dahui changwu weiyuanhui*). The Explanation states that:

Relevant leaders of the Party Committee of the Autonomous Region, relevant leaders of the Standing Committee of the XUAR People's Congress and relevant comrades of the Legislative Affairs Commission made a special trip to the Legislative Work Commission of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress [in Beijing] to report on the revision. The Legislative Affairs Commission of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress expressed its full affirmation of the role of the autonomous region's local laws and regulations in counterterrorism and stability maintenance work, expressed approval for the amendments to the “Regulation”, and proposed specific amendments to form a draft amendment, which was reported [back] to the autonomous region's Standing Committee of the Party Committee for review and approval ([XUAR People's Congress](#), September 10, 2018).[5]

The deliberations of the revisions made by the NPC apparently took place during the 21st meeting of the directors of the Standing Committee of the XUAR People's Congress in August 2018 ([Xinjiang Daily](#), August 11, 2018).

The close involvement of these central government institutions in the drafting of the Regulation and its 2018 revision (in the case of the NPC) is of extreme significance.

The chairman of the NPC Standing Committee (currently Li Zhanshu, 栗战书) to whom the Legislative Affairs Commission reports, is the third-ranked member of the PSC, ([Congressional Research Service](#), March 20, 2013). Wang Yang (汪洋), head of the Central Committee Xinjiang Work Coordination Small Group, is the fourth-ranked member of the PSC, and also chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC; 中国人民政治协商会议全国委员会, *Zhongguo renmin ghengzhi xieshang huiyi quanguo weiyuanhui*), which represents a central part of the CCP's United Front system ([China Leadership Monitor](#), May 16, 2018).[6] The PSC consists of seven members and is China's supreme decision-making body, more powerful than the Politburo itself.

Practically speaking, the direct and close involvement of the NPC Standing Committee's Legislative Affairs Commission and the Central Committee Xinjiang Work Coordination Small Group in the drafting of the 2017 Regulation (and the Legislative Affairs Commission's further involvement in its 2018 revision) provides tangible evidence that the framing of Xinjiang's de-extremification through re-education campaign was undertaken with the direct knowledge of leading figures in China's most powerful policy, legislative and advisory bodies (see Figure 1). This effectively implicates Xi's inner circle of power in the atrocities committed in Xinjiang.

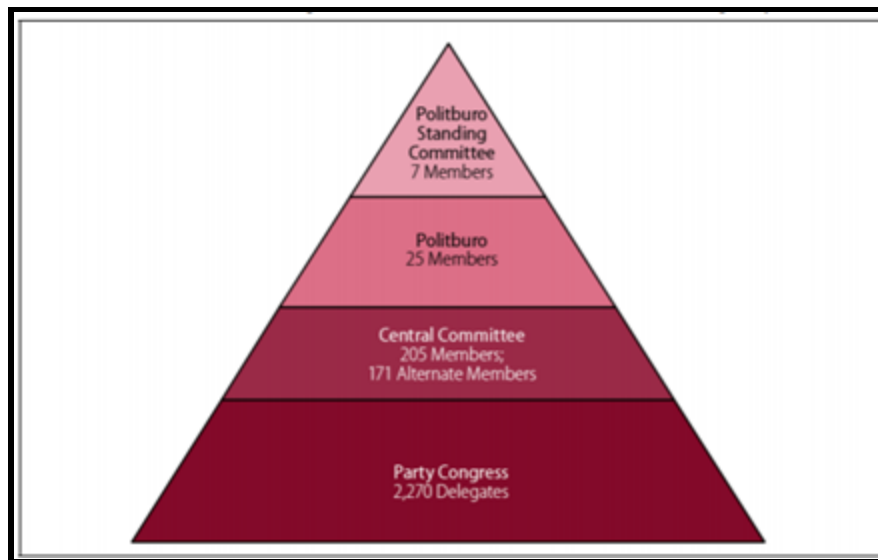


Figure 1: The Politburo Standing Committee is the most powerful decision-making body of the national-level Communist Party hierarchy. (Source: [Congressional Research Service](#)).

In addition, the new findings shed further light on the involvement of Hu Lianhe (胡联合), who defended Xinjiang's re-education campaign at the United Nations in Geneva in August 2018 following China's first

admission of the existence of vocational “centers.” Hu has been a deputy director of the Office of the Central Committee Xinjiang Work Coordination Small Group since 2012 ([China News](#), July 17, 2017; [China Brief](#), October 10, 2018). The close involvement of his institution means that Hu would have been involved in the entire two-year drafting of the Regulation. This strengthens the link between this pivotal figure in the central government and the Xinjiang re-education campaign.

In May 2017, it was revealed that the powerful and secretive United Front Work Department (UFWD) had created a “Ninth Bureau” (九局, *jiu ju*) to be responsible for implementing central government decisions regarding Xinjiang work ([Global Times](#), May 4, 2017; [China Brief](#), May 9, 2019). Media reports noted that the office’s leaders, including Hu Lianhe, then serving as one of the Ninth Bureau’s deputy directors, had *de facto* begun their work several months prior ([Creaders.net](#), July 14, 2017; [Hohai University](#), October 29, 2015).

Attributions to the Central Government During the Introduction of the March 2017 Regulation

On March 31, 2017, the day before the Regulation came into effect, the General Office of the Standing Committee of the XUAR People's Congress held a press conference:

[It was] emphasized that the Regulation ... constitutes the implementation of the central government’s policy decisions and deployments, especially to implement the important instructions and requirements of General Secretary Xi Jinping... ([Chinaxinjiang.cn](#), March 31, 2017).[7]

This important statement clarifies at the highest relevant official level in Xinjiang that the interactive drafting process of the Regulation and its revision between the legislative committees of the XUAR People's Congress and the National People’s Congress in Beijing had implemented the policies of the central government. The specific emphasis that the Regulation is “especially” related to implementing Xi’s own “instructions and requirements” is of high significance. The reference to the “important instructions and requirements of General Secretary Xi Jinping” likely refers to an important speech made by Xi to Xinjiang’s top leaders at the March 2017 Two Sessions in Beijing, just weeks prior to the onset of the internment campaign.

Such a direct link between the legal regulations underpinning and justifying the re-education campaign and the central government is uncommon and has until now escaped wider notice outside of China. It was likely designed to legitimize the unusual and extreme measure and was in fact followed by stern exhortations that “all regions, departments, and units in Xinjiang must ... earnestly study and publicize the Regulation, strictly implement the Regulation, and fully implement their duties and responsibilities” ([Chinaxinjiang.cn](#), March 31, 2017). It may also have been an attempt by the Xinjiang authorities to clarify that this measure was ordered by Beijing, and not merely a matter of local initiative.

The same pattern of first linking the Regulation to the central government and Xi Jinping and then issuing stern warnings regarding its unconditional implementation can be found in an April 2020 notice issued by the XUAR Discipline Inspection Commission (自治区纪委监委, *zizhiqu jiwei jianwei*). It states that “the Regulation is a major measure taken by the autonomous region to implement the CCP Central Committee's strategy of governing Xinjiang, with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core” ([XUAR Discipline Inspection Commission](#), April 6, 2020).[8] It then emphasizes:

It is necessary to earnestly shoulder the responsibilities, strengthen supervision and inspection of the implementation of the Regulation, increase the intensity of conducting thorough investigations, identify [problems] early, identify [problems when they are] minor, punish at every turn, discover problems, deal with them seriously, [in order to] create deterrents ([XUAR Discipline Inspection Commission](#), April 6, 2020).

The New York Times' Xinjiang Papers indicated that some leading officials initially refused to fully implement the internment drive, with one county even releasing some detainees. This new evidence indicates that the state anticipated such issues and issued preemptive warnings couched in language that justified the measure by emphasizing that it represented a crucial implementation of the will of the central government, even citing Xi himself.

Legitimizing the Internments: Links between the Vocational “Centers” and the Central Government

In August 2017, when the mass internment campaign was in full swing, Meng Jianzhu (孟建柱), then-secretary of the CPLC, inspected “prisons and detention centers [in the XUAR] many times to learn about the education and reform of criminals and the management of detainees,” according to a media report published by the PRC's top judicial body ([PRC Supreme People's Court](#), August 28, 2017). He probably also visited re-education camps, but China had not yet publicly admitted the existence of such camps when the abovementioned media report was published, and such details were therefore likely omitted. Meng “fully affirm[ed] Xinjiang's remarkable achievements in the fight against terrorism” and emphasized the necessity to “thoroughly implement the CCP Central Committee's Xinjiang Strategy and General Secretary Xi Jinping's important instructions on Xinjiang Work” ([PRC Supreme People's Court](#), August 28, 2017). Based on the evidence presented so far, Meng's statements can be understood as a central government affirmation that Xinjiang's re-education internment campaign was proceeding as planned.

Similar affirmations of the campaign's success in line with central government expectations can be found later on, when the internment drive and its socio-economic impact was likely close to a climax. In November 2018, one month after the revised Regulations were published, Nurlan Abdumanjin, chairman of the XUAR People's Political Consultative Conference (新疆维吾尔自治区政协主席, *Xinjiang Weiwuer Zizhiqu zhengxie zhuxi*) and also a member of the 19th CCP Central Committee, which consists of the nation's leading figures (中国共产党第十九届中央委员会, *Zhongguo Gongchandang di shijiu jie zhongyang*

weiyuanhui; see Figure 1), directly linked the re-education internment campaign with the central government and Xi himself ([Humanrights.cn](https://www.humanrights.cn/), November 23, 2018). With surprising bluntness, Abdumanjin stated:

[C]arrying out Vocational Skills Education and Training work [the camps] in accordance with the law [i.e. the revised Regulation] is an important measure to implement the CCP Central Committee's strategy of governing Xinjiang, with Comrade Xi Jinping at the core.[9]

At this time, the internment drive would have had a severe impact on the society and economy of the XUAR. It would have been important to legitimize the extreme policy as an “important measure” for implementing the central government’s Xinjiang work. Otherwise, the population may have wondered whether the internment drive was an excessive aberration perpetrated by regional authorities.

Another close link between the camps and the central government can be found in a November 2018 report on a discussion between lecturers and students at Xinjiang University, the region’s most prestigious academic institution, about the visit of eight lecturers to several Vocational Skills Education and Training Centers in southern Xinjiang ([Xinjiang University](https://www.xinjiang.gov.cn/), November 22, 2018). Written when international criticism of the camps was still muted, the report is exclusively for internal consumption. It wastes no time portraying the “centers” as benign and makes no effort to describe their conditions, instead focusing on their “urgent necessity” for achieving de-extremification work. Crucially, the participants’ response to the presentations is described as follows:

Everyone [all present lecturers and students] believes that the establishment of the Vocational Skills Education and Training Centers is a major measure taken by the Party Committee of the Autonomous Region to implement the CCP Central Committee’s strategy of governing Xinjiang...[10]

The wording of the section related to implementing the central government’s Xinjiang governance is almost identical to Nurlan Abdumanjin’s comments. It clearly indicates that the internment measures were a direct implementation of Beijing’s will (and therefore fully legitimate), and that this was actively communicated to society, which now fully “believes” in its necessity. With Beijing actively behind the campaign, it would have been clear to Xinjiang’s population that any resistance is futile.

A third article, published on the online portal of Guangming Daily, a propaganda outlet of the CCP Central Committee and re-posted on various private news websites, similarly argues that:

[T]his training [in the VSETC] ... embodies the CCP Central Committee’s strategy of governing Xinjiang with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core ([Chinaxinjiang.cn](https://www.chinaxinjiang.cn/), October 22, 2018). [11]

Its publication date, October 22, 2018, indicates that around the time of the revised Regulation—possibly near the peak of the internment campaign in terms of total detainee figures—there was a concerted effort to popularly legitimize this campaign by linking it with the will of Xi and the central government.

Final Affirmation: the “Success” of Xinjiang’s De-Extremification Work

In July 2019, when Xinjiang began to release growing numbers of vocational camp detainees, the success of the state’s Xinjiang work was affirmed by XUAR governor Shohrat Zakir. Zakir referred to a speech given by Xi Jinping in March 2017 to the Xinjiang delegates at the Two Sessions, which are China’s highest-level annual legislative sessions that took place only weeks before the start of the internment campaign. Zakir said:

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China [in 2012], the CCP Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at the core has attached great importance to Xinjiang Work ... and has devoted a lot of effort to Xinjiang Work. General Secretary Xi Jinping personally went to Xinjiang to inspect and guide the work, presided over many meetings to study Xinjiang Work, delivered a series of important speeches, and issued a series of important instructions...During the nation’s ‘Two Sessions’ in 2017, General Secretary Xi Jinping personally attended the Xinjiang delegation to participate in the deliberations and delivered an important speech, putting forward earnest expectations for Xinjiang Work, providing fundamental adherence to and injecting strong impetus into Xinjiang Work. *We have fully implemented the Party’s strategy for governing Xinjiang ... earth-shaking changes have taken place...* ([PRC Embassy in Canada](#), July 31, 2019) [12] (emphasis added)

A similar and even more direct link between Xi’s March 2017 speech and the successful implementation of the central government’s Xinjiang Work is found in a February 2019 China Daily article titled, “Xinjiang implements General Secretary Xi Jinping’s important speech at the nation’s Two Sessions”:

On March 10, 2017, when General Secretary Xi Jinping participated in the deliberations of the Xinjiang delegation of the nation’s Two Sessions [he] emphasized that it is necessary to tightly embrace the general goal of social stability and long-term peace and stability...

In the past two years, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Party Committee and government have resolutely implemented the important instructions of General Secretary Xi Jinping, focused on the overall goal, made ‘strings of efforts’, dared to be dauntless, fought tough battles, ... and created a new horizon in Xinjiang Work ([China Daily](#), February 26, 2019).[13]

In both Zakir’s speech and the China Daily report, this succession of statements is highly significant: it directly links Xi’s March 2017 speech to the successful implementation in Xinjiang of his instructions between 2017 and 2019.

More details of Xi’s speech are recorded in other state media articles. For example, Xi is quoted as saying that “we must insist on maintaining stability as a political responsibility, identify [problems] early, identify

[problems when they are] minor, grasp quickly, grasp well, seek long-term strategies, act to consolidate the foundation” ([XUAR People's Congress](#), September 28, 2020). State media photos show that both Xinjiang’s Party Secretary Chen Quanguo and governor Shohrat Zakir attended the March 2017 Xi speech ([Xinhua](#), March 11, 2017).

Xi’s emphasis on the long-term implementation and consolidation of de-extremification is in line with the essence of the 2017/2018 Regulation. Chinese scholars have also noted that the VSETC represent an institutionalization of de-extremification work.^[14] Xi’s exhortation that Xinjiang’s officials must grasp this work early, quickly, and well is echoed in the Xinjiang’s government’s public statements.

It was argued at the press conference introducing the Regulation in March 2017 that the Regulation constituted an implementation of the “important instructions and requirements of General Secretary Xi Jinping” ([Chinaxinjiang.cn](#), March 31, 2017). The abovementioned February 2019 China Daily article repeats some of this wording verbatim when it refers to the “important instructions of General Secretary Xi Jinping,” before stating that such instructions were implemented in Xinjiang between 2017 and 2019 ([China Daily](#), February 26, 2019). References to Xi’s unpublished speech on Xinjiang work at the March 2017 Two Sessions imply that it is possible—and even likely—that Xi himself endorsed the re-education campaign just weeks prior to its inception. In the author’s view, it is likely that Xi exhorted Xinjiang’s officials to unconditionally implement the new measures. In any case, according to Zakir, Xi closely aligned himself to the unconditional implementation of Xinjiang Work in the context of the imminent launch of the re-education campaign in March 2017.

Zakir’s positive assessment of Xinjiang’s faithful implementation of the central government’s strategy for the region was also affirmed by Xi Jinping himself in a September 2020 speech at the Third Xinjiang Central Work Forum. Xi said, “Xinjiang is enjoying a favorable setting of social stability... The facts have abundantly demonstrated that our national minority work has been a success” ([Xinhua](#), September 26, 2020).

Conclusion

The evidence presented above demonstrates that central government institutions were directly involved in the drafting of the legal foundation for Xinjiang’s re-education internment campaign, which included defining the specific role of the VSETC. Xinjiang’s population was told that the region’s policies on re-education and de-extremification, including the “vocational” camps, were undertaken in fulfillment of the central government’s policies and strategies, with “Xi Jinping at the core.” Given the additional and previously untranslated reports on Xi’s March 2017 speech, it is possible that Xi himself confirmed or ordered this draconian approach just weeks before its implementation.

The author has previously argued that Chen Quanguo’s rapid security build-up, which led to a campaign of mass internment just nine months after he became Xinjiang’s party secretary, was almost certainly based on

a premeditated plan ([Journal of Political Risk](#), February 17, 2020). The author surmised that Chen, his predecessor Zhang Chunxian (张春贤) and Xi Jinping could all have been present and laid the groundwork for this activity at the March 2016 Two Sessions. We now know that this would have taken place during the middle of the two-year drafting period of the Regulation, likely at a time when this enormous undertaking would have already been planned, ahead of its successful execution one year later.

Official commentary emphasizes that the 2017 Regulation and its 2018 revision—representing the legal framework for the internment camps—are “local regulations” (地方性法规, *difang xing faui*) that follow “local legislative procedures” (地方立法程序, *difang lifa chengxu*) ([Chinacourt.org](#), April 6, 2017). This is likely an attempt to divert attention away from the central government’s role in formulating Xinjiang Work, strengthening the argument that extremism is a regional problem that is being addressed through local solutions. Governor Zakir expressed this logic succinctly in an October 2018 interview with Xinhua, following the publication of the revised Regulation and the acknowledgement of the existence of the vocational “centers”:

While strictly following the Constitution, the law on regional ethnic autonomy and the legislation law, Xinjiang has taken its local conditions into consideration and [itself] formulated the region's enforcement measures of the ... de-extremization regulations... ([Xinhua](#), October 16, 2018).

Zakir’s carefully crafted framing of the internment camps as a local solution (omitting the close involvement of institutions such as the NPC) has helped to divert some of the blame from Beijing and has been so far successful in ensuring that international sanctions responding to the human rights violations associated with the camps have focused on Xinjiang officials.

Based on the new evidence, the author suggests a new understanding of the development and implementation of the internment campaign. Xinjiang’s previous party secretary Zhang Chunxian experimented with re-education practices that were administered first in villages and then, especially after Xi’s pertinent remarks and demands in 2014, implemented in dedicated “transformation through education” facilities ([China Brief](#), May 15, 2018). In 2015, the region began drafting what would become the 2017 Regulation on De-Extremification. It likely did so based on a specific central government mandate to develop a long-term solution to tackling local ethnic dissent. The Xinjiang government was formally in charge of drafting the Regulation—while also continuing to implement and experiment with actual re-education practices—but the new evidence shows that this drafting was done in close consultation with and contingent on the approval of central government institutions. This supports the author’s prior assessment that when Chen Quanguo replaced Zhang Chuxian in mid-2016, he essentially took charge of an ongoing and already premeditated process ([Journal of Political Risk](#), February 17, 2020). Rather than being the primary architect of the re-education internment campaign, Chen was most likely brought in to implement a plan that had largely been outlined and approved by the central government, based on prior experimentation with re-education in Xinjiang.

The central government has been able to claim that the re-education campaign constitutes a local solution to a local problem, of which it broadly approves. However, based on the information presented above, the most logical conclusion is that the responsibility and therefore culpability for this campaign rests primarily with the central government, most notably the Politburo Standing Committee. While Chen Quanguo may have substantially contributed to the precise implementation of the re-education internment drive, his role is probably best assessed as that of an executor—not originator—of central government policy decisions.

The new evidence outlined in this article could serve to determine a much greater level of Beijing's culpability for these atrocities.^[15] It enhances the potential to establish individual responsibility for involved officials under various modes of liability under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), such as ordering, indirect commission, co-perpetration, or complicity.^[16] Although China is not an ICC member state, other modes of liability under customary international law could also be applicable, such as the various forms of joint criminal enterprise applied at the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) or Rwanda (ICTR).

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Notes

[1] Legal experts have pointed out that Xinjiang's detentions for re-education can only be legalized through a formal statute passed by the NPC or its standing committee, meaning that Xinjiang's local legislation is by itself insufficient ([Lawfare](#), October 11, 2018).

[2] Adrian Zenz, "‘Thoroughly reforming them towards a healthy heart attitude’: China's political re-education campaign in Xinjiang," *Central Asian Survey*, 38:1, 2019, first published September 5, 2018, 102-128, doi: [10.1080/02634937.2018.1507997](https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2018.1507997).

[3] Ibid.

[4] Original Text: “实施反恐怖主义法办法、去极端化条例的审议过程中，还根据党委的指示专报中央新疆工作协调领导小组办公室请求指导，确保立法工作把党的主张转化为全民共同遵守的法律规范” ([Phoenix Information](#), January 13, 2017).

[5] Original Text: “自治区党委有关领导、自治区人大常委会有关领导和法工委有关同志，专程前往全国人大常委会法工委汇报修改情况。全国人大常委会法工委对自治区地方性法规在反恐维稳工作中发挥的作用表示充分肯定，对《条例》的修改表示赞同，同时提出了具体的修改意见，形成修正案草案，并报经自治区党委常委会研究同意” ([XUAR People's Congress](#), September 10, 2018).

[6] Wang Yang's predecessor was Yu Zhengsheng (俞正声) ([Gov.cn](#), April 3, 2014).

[7] Original Text: “乃依木·亚森强调，《条例》是新疆首部去极端化方面的地方性法规，也是依法治疆、建设法治新疆的一项重要立法。是贯彻落实中央的决策部署，特别是贯彻落实习近平总书记的重要指示和要求...” ([China Xinjiang](#), March 31, 2017). Compare a similar statement published by the WeChat account of the Xinjiang People's Broadcasting station on the same day: “全区要充分认识开展“去极端化”工作是以习近平同志为核心的党中央做出的重要决策部署” ([FreeWechat](#), March 31, 2017).

[8] Original Text: “制定《条例》是自治区贯彻落实以习近平同志为核心的党中央治疆方略的重大举措” ([XUAR Discipline Inspection Commission](#), April 6, 2020).

[9] Original Text: “依法开展职业技能教育培训工作，是贯彻落实以习近平同志为核心的党中央治疆方略、实现新疆社会稳定和长治久安总目标的一项重大举措” ([Humanrights.cn](#), November 23, 2018). For Nurlan Abdumanjin's biography and credentials, see: <http://politics.cntv.cn/2013/11/21/ARTI1385013775952399.shtml>. Archived version available at: <https://archive.is/wip/xV8rz>.

[10] Original Text: “大家认为举办职业技能教育培训中心是自治区党委贯彻党中央治疆方略的重大举措，是实现新疆工作总目标进程中的积极探索和成功范例，坚信在新疆稳定发展中将日趋彰显其巨大作用。” ([Xinjiang University](#), November 22, 2018).

[11] Original Text: “新疆职业技能教育培训...这一培训符合目前新疆反恐维稳和去极端化的工作实际，更在于这一培训体现了以习近平同志为核心的党中央治疆方略” ([Chinaxinjiang.cn](#), October 22, 2018). For the described characterization of Guangming Net, run by Guangming Daily, see ([Baidu Baike](#), accessed September 14).

[12] Original Text: “党的十八大以来，以习近平同志为核心的党中央高度重视新疆工作，心系新疆各族人民，对新疆工作倾注了大量心血。习近平总书记亲自到新疆视察指导工作，多

次主持会议研究新疆工作，发表一系列重要讲话、作出一系列重要指示。...2017年全国“两会”期间，习近平总书记亲临新疆代表团参加审议并发表重要讲话，对新疆工作提出殷切期望，为新疆工作提供了根本遵循、注入了强大动力。我们全面贯彻落实新时代党的治疆方略，紧紧围绕社会稳定和长治久安总目标，团结带领全区各族干部群众，真抓实干、攻坚克难，天山南北发生了翻天覆地的变化” ([PRC Embassy in Canada](#), July 31, 2019).

[13] Original Text: “2017年3月10日，习近平总书记参加全国两会新疆代表团审议时强调，要紧紧围绕社会稳定和长治久安总目标 …。两年来，新疆维吾尔自治区党委、政府坚决贯彻落实习近平总书记重要指示，聚焦总目标，打好“组合拳”，敢啃硬骨头，善打攻坚战，…开创了新疆工作新局面。” ([China Daily](#), February 26, 2019).

[14] Zhao Xuan (赵璇), “The Implementation and Conduct of Xinjiang ‘De-Extremification’ Work” [新疆 ‘去极端化’ 工作的进程和举措], *Xinjiang University School Paper—Philosophy, Humanities and Social Sciences Edition* (新疆大学学报 [哲学人文社会科学版]) 47(02) 2019, Xinjiang University Politics and Public Administration Institute (新疆大学政治与公共管理学院), <https://bit.ly/38QI9W4>.

[15] The following assessment was kindly provided to the author by Erin Rosenberg, a specialist in international criminal law, currently a Visiting Scholar with the Urban Morgan Institute for Human Rights, and a former Senior Advisor to the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the U.S. Holocaust Museum.

[16] See Article 25 of the Rome Statute, available at <https://www.icc-cpi.int/resource-library/documents/rs-eng.pdf>.

Beijing's Growing Influence on the Global Undersea Cable Network

By Justin Sherman

Introduction

The vast majority of intercontinental internet traffic traverses submarine cables laid across the ocean floor. Private and state-owned firms have long invested in these submarine cables to carry internet traffic and other data, often in cooperation with one another due to the high costs and complex logistics of laying cables undersea. In recent years, Chinese state-owned telecommunications companies have greatly increased their investment in submarine cables; in 2021 alone, three state-owned Chinese telecoms had ownership stakes in 31 newly deployed cables ([TeleGeography](#), accessed August 30). Much of this investment has focused on infrastructure beyond the Chinese mainland.

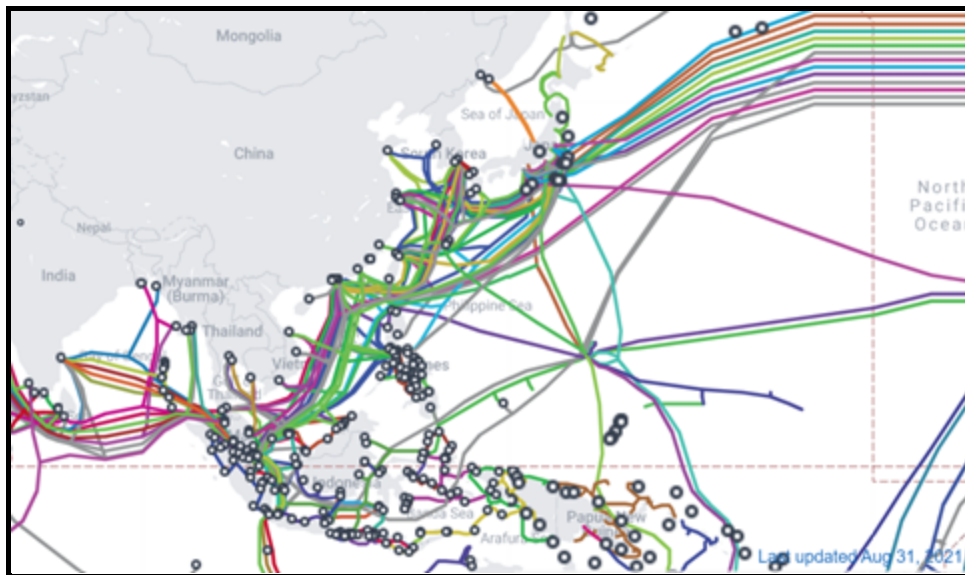


Image: A diagram of the submarine cables that connect to the Chinese mainland, compiled by the telecommunications market research firm TeleGeography and last updated on August 31, 2021 (Source: [TeleGeography](#)).

These Chinese state investments are occurring in the context of growing international concern about Chinese technology practices: specifically, how the Chinese government is working to undermine the global open internet; the degree to which the Chinese government exerts control over Chinese internet companies; and whether the Chinese government's overseas infrastructure and development projects—broadly represented by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—are a means of spreading surveillance technology and increasing technological dependence on China.^[1] In this context, Chinese state investments in submarine cables are especially significant.

Chinese State Investment in Cables

Laying a submarine cable is a costly, complex and logistically intensive process, with the longest intercontinental cables costing hundreds of millions of dollars to build and install ([SubTelForum](#), February 16, 2020). Construction often involves multiple companies (from those making internal fiber to those encasing fibers in metal) and installations can take several weeks of labor. As a result, international companies often make joint investments in cable projects or form consortiums that manage a project across different owners from different countries.

As of December 2020, 383 entities, comprising a mix of private and state owned enterprises, collectively owned 475 submarine cables deployed globally ([Atlantic Council](#), September 2021). Those involved include traditional telecommunications companies such as AT&T in the U.S. and Airtel in India, as well as newer internet companies like Facebook and Google. They also include state-owned telecommunications and investment firms such as Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd (India), Telecom Egypt (Egypt), and Ethio Telecom (Ethiopia).

Many Chinese investments in the global submarine cable network are directly controlled by the Chinese government. Three Chinese telecommunications companies with investments in submarine cables are entirely state-owned: China Mobile (中国移动, *Zhongguo yidong*), China Telecom (中国电信, *Zhongguo dianxin*), and China Unicom (中国联通, *Zhongguo liantong*). Two other Chinese firms, CITIC Telecom International (中信国际电讯, *Zhongxin guoji dianxun*) and Companhia de Telecomunicações de Macau (CTM, 澳门电讯, *Aomen dianxun*), each have ownership stake in a single submarine cable. CITIC Telecom is incorporated in Hong Kong and its parent company CITIC Limited (中国中信服务股份有限公司, *Zhongguo zhongxin fuwu fen youxian gongsi*) is majority-owned by the Chinese state-owned CITIC Group ([CITIC Telecom](#), accessed August 23). Similarly, CTM is incorporated in Macau and its largest shareholder (99 percent) is CITIC Telecom International ([CTM](#), accessed August 23). It is also worth mentioning that a state-owned Chinese electrical company, the State Grid Corporation of China (国家电网公司, *Guojia dian wang gongsi*), is a member of the National Grid Corporation of the Philippines, a consortium of infrastructure investors from around the world that owns a single submarine cable.

China Telecom has investments in submarine cables that go back decades, including an ownership stake in a cable deployed in 1999 and another deployed in 2016. China Mobile has ownership stakes in one cable deployed in 2020 ([TeleGeography](#), accessed August 30). In the current year, the three state-owned telecoms have substantially increased their investments in new cable projects. China Mobile has invested in at least eight cables that will be newly ready for service in 2021; China Telecom in twelve; and China Unicom in eleven ([TeleGeography](#), accessed August 30). Each of these firms have also invested in cables set to deploy in 2022, giving them additional ownership stakes in the global submarine cable network (see *table below*).

Chinese State-Owned Firm	Investment in Cable to be Deployed in 2022	Cable Touches...
China Mobile	Bay to Bay Express (<u>BtoBE</u>) Cable System	Singapore, Malaysia, China, US
China Telecom	Asia Direct Cable	Philippines, China (2 landing points), Japan, Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore
China Unicom	Asia Direct Cable	Philippines, China (2 landing points), Japan, Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore

Source: Author's research, [Atlantic Council](#), 2021, based on data from TeleGeography.

The three state-owned telecoms—China Mobile, China Telecom, and China Unicom—have all been the subject of United States government national security concerns. From 2019 to the present, the U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has labeled all three companies a national security risk to the United States, based on its findings that the firms are “subject to the influence and control of the Chinese government” ([FCC](#), May 9, 2019; [FCC](#), April 24, 2020). The logic underlying these concerns is that Beijing’s control of these companies effectively grants it control over the infrastructure that they oversee, which could enable anything from the planting of backdoors in cables as they are built to the interception or disruption of traffic once cables are deployed at the behest of Chinese intelligence or military services. The phenomenon of governments—including the U.S.—tapping into submarine cables to spy is well-documented ([Washington Post](#), July 10, 2013).

According to the FCC, CITIC Telecom International’s ultimate ownership—either by the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission or by the Chinese Ministry of Finance—is uncertain, with different publicly available documents providing evidence for each ([FCC](#), March 19). Nonetheless, the Chinese government’s control over both CITIC Telecom and CTM is undisputed. Indeed, the risk concerns about state-sponsored espionage and cyber operations that are outlined above stem from the Chinese government’s control of these submarine cable owners.

Lastly, CNN Philippines has reported on an internal government document, which asserts that the National Grid Corporation of the Philippines—in which the State Grid Corporation of China is a part owner—is effectively under the Chinese government’s “full control” ([CNN Philippines](#), November 26, 2019). It is difficult to assess the accuracy of such claims, not only because the report in question is secret but also because the exact ownership structures of international consortiums of cable owners can be highly opaque. Yet if such reports are accurate, the National Grid Corporation of the Philippines would be another vector of Chinese state influence in submarine cable investment—as well as increasing security risks around the cable it owns.

Geopolitical Returns on Chinese Submarine Cable Investment

It is important to note that the companies that finance and own submarine cables are not the same as the companies that actually build them, but cable owners' financial backing provides them the power to decide where a cable is laid, with which areas of the world it is connected, and how fast (speed, bandwidth) to make the connection. As a result, cable owners contribute to the reshaping of the global internet's physical layout—the constant evolution of servers, cables, and other man-made infrastructure that underpin the internet's operation.

This matters on the geopolitical level. Determining where cables are laid is a way of influencing how much internet traffic flows over one cable versus another. Traffic routing on the internet is not as simple as selecting the geographically shortest path between sender and receiver, and internet traffic is not necessarily sent along the fastest possible infrastructure route. Traffic routing does tend to favor faster routes over slower ones, which is why laying a new cable—one with higher speed and bandwidth than its neighbors—can be a way for governments to encourage traffic to move across different routes and even through certain borders. Reshaping the internet's physical traffic can lead to a wide range of benefits ranging from the gradual buildup of technological or economic dependence on a certain company to the interception or disruption of traffic by actors positioned on that cable.

Chinese investment in submarine cables is also tied to the state's massive BRI capacity-building program, which involves hundreds of billions of dollars in infrastructure spending across dozens of countries ([CFR](#), January 28, 2020). The Digital Silk Road (DSR, 数字丝绸之路, *Shuzi sichou zhi lu*) was first introduced as an expanded component of the BRI in 2015, and was elevated in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic last year ([PRC Ministry of Commerce](#), August 16, 2020). Its stated aim is to boost international cooperation in the digital economy—which includes developing information infrastructure, promoting information sharing and information technology cooperation, and encouraging internet economic and trade services. In April 2019, Lin Nianxiu (林念修), Vice Minister of the National Development and Reform Commission, said that China had signed Digital Silk Road “cooperation agreements” with more than sixteen countries and launched a “Belt and Road Digital Economy International Cooperation Initiative” with seven others ([China Daily](#), April 27, 2019). But tracking the number of official agreements likely undercounts the DSR's true reach, with foreign estimates suggesting that more than 40 countries may be participating ([The Diplomat](#), December 17, 2020). Chinese investments in ICT infrastructure in traditionally under-resourced regions such as Africa have also boomed since the DSR's launch.[1]

Chinese state media has publicized the involvement of Chinese state-controlled submarine cable owners in the Digital Silk Road. For example, *China Daily* touted China Unicom as a global submarine cable investor, a provider of internet infrastructure services (e.g., cloud computing), and a company with 32 subsidiaries around the world ([China Daily](#), April 27, 2019). In a February 2021 speech, Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that the Chinese government would “accelerate the development” of the Digital Silk Road as part of its “work

with other countries to boost global economic recovery and development” ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), February 7).

It is not unusual for companies to invest in submarine cables that do not touch the borders of the country in which they are incorporated. There are many financial benefits for companies who invest in cables in other parts of the world, including expanding connectivity to overseas markets, building out their underlying infrastructure to support products and services (such as cloud data centers), and profiting from licensing cable bandwidth. For this reason, it is not unusual that 36 percent of the submarine cables that China Mobile, China Telecom, and China Unicom have collectively invested in have no landing points in China. But the Chinese government’s explicit focus on digital infrastructure capacity-building around the world raises additional geopolitical questions about these state-owned firms’ decisions to invest in specific cables—as well as what benefits the Chinese government hopes to accrue from them.

Conclusion

There is little to suggest that security risks from these submarine cable investments will recede. Research into ties between the Chinese government’s capacity-building projects abroad and Chinese technology firms’ digital expansion into overseas markets continues. Just in 2020, for instance, a senior China Telecom executive called on the Chinese government to expand and protect its submarine cable network ([RFA](#), June 4, 2020). The Biden administration has also continued investigating ties between Beijing and the Chinese technology sector, and it continues to raise these issues at meetings with allies and partners.

Global society has become greatly more dependent on the internet during the COVID-19 pandemic, and consequently more dependent on submarine cables. As the Chinese government continues investing in physical internet infrastructure around the world, security, privacy, and economic dependence questions tied to those expenditures will only become more geopolitically urgent.

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Notes

[1] Some examples of this concern include: Samantha Hoffman, “Engineering Global Consent: The Chinese Communist Party’s Data-Driven Power Expansion,” ASPI, October 14, 2019, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/engineering-global-consent-chinese-communist-partys-data-driven-power-expansion>; Maya Wang, “China’s Techno-Authoritarianism Has Gone Global—Washington Needs to Offer an Alternative,” Human Rights Watch, April 8, 2021,

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/04/08/chinas-techno-authoritarianism-has-gone-global#>; Staff, “The New Big Brother: China and Digital Authoritarianism,” U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, July 21, 2020, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2020%20SFRC%20Minority%20Staff%20Report%20-%20The%20New%20Big%20Brother%20-%20China%20and%20Digital%20Authoritarianism.pdf>.

[2] For example, a report by IC Africa notes that Chinese average funding of ICT infrastructure grew from just \$399 million between 2012-2016 to announced investments worth \$1.1 billion in 2017. See: “Infrastructure Financing Trends in Africa—2017,” *IC Africa*, 2018, pp.17, https://www.icafrica.org/fileadmin/documents/Annual_Reports/IFT2017.pdf.

Divide, Depoliticize, and Demobilize: China's Strategies for Controlling the Tibetan Diaspora

By Tenzin Dorjee

Introduction

Last fall, the Tibetan community in New York City was scandalized by news that an New York Police Department (NYPD) officer named Baimadajie Angwang, allegedly of Tibetan ethnicity, had been arrested and charged with spying on the local Tibetan community for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ([New York Times](#), September 21, 2020). Court filings alleged that Angwang had been affiliated with the CCP since at least 2014 ([Eastern District of New York U.S. Attorney's Office](#), September 21, 2020). While news of Angwang's arrest intrigued national media and intensified Washington's growing concern about China's overseas influence operations, Tibetans have long felt the creeping presence of Chinese espionage activities in their communities. Traditional exile hubs like Dharamsala and Kathmandu have been menaced for decades, but this problem has now spread to Western outposts of the Tibetan diaspora.



Image: NYPD officer Baimadajie Angwang speaks at a press conference in New York City on February 7, 2019. (Source: [Epoch Times](#)).

Beijing has historically viewed the Tibetan diaspora—with its resilient exile government and highly effective transnational advocacy movement—as a threat to China's international reputation and its foreign policy objectives. This was especially so during its heyday in the late nineties and the early aughts, when the international Tibet movement dealt Beijing several defeats on the global stage—from thwarting China's bid for the 2000 Olympics to foiling a high-stakes World Bank loan that would have enabled Beijing to transfer some 60,000 Chinese settlers into eastern Tibet ([Los Angeles Times](#), September 24, 1993; [World Bank](#), April

28, 2000). During this time, Beijing began expanding its overseas influence operations targeting the Tibetan diaspora, refining its strategies and innovating new tactics to counter the Tibet movement.

But how does Beijing actually counter the Tibetan diaspora's opposition to China? What are the methods it uses to co-opt or neutralize Tibetans living in free democracies in the West? This article provides a preliminary answer to these questions using firsthand observations, policy reports, court documents, and personal interviews. The case of Baimadajie Angwang provides a glimpse into some of the tools and tactics that Beijing uses to infiltrate communities, depoliticize institutions, and silence individuals in the Tibetan diaspora.

Infiltrating Communities: Divide, Depoliticize, Demobilize

The motivations driving China's efforts to infiltrate the Tibetan diaspora are different from those behind its standard espionage programs that target the American defense industry or multinational corporations in the West. While the Tibetan community has neither military secrets nor cutting-edge technology, it has a vibrant transnational advocacy movement that Beijing has long sought to undermine. Outside of the Indian subcontinent, New York City has the largest and most dynamic Tibetan exile population, which makes it a prime target for the United Front Work Department (UFWD), the agency of the Chinese government responsible for managing or pre-empting potential sources of opposition to CCP rule.[1]

The first objective of Chinese infiltration into the Tibetan diaspora is to divide the community. At the direction of the UFWD, agents seek to sow seeds of division or fan pre-existing tensions within the diaspora. In conversations between Angwang and his handler at the Chinese consulate in New York that were recorded and published in the FBI's court affidavit, they discuss the need to "develop" relationships with religious minorities in the Tibetan community—such as Catholics and Muslims—and, in particular, to exploit sectarian tensions within Tibetan Buddhism.

Notably, Angwang names the Shugden issue—the most disruptive sectarian conflict to bedevil Tibetan Buddhism in the last century. He explains to his "boss" at the Chinese consulate that members of the "Bujie Xiongdan" (*sic*) group have been "discriminated against and neglected in the Tibetan community" and will therefore easily "feel the warmth of the motherland" if the consulate were to cultivate them ([U.S. District Court of the Eastern District of New York](#), September 19, 2020).[2] This rationale is undergirded by a classic "divide and co-opt" strategy that Beijing has implemented for years, not only against Tibetans, but also against Uyghurs and other ethnic or religious minorities living overseas. Extensive investigative reporting by Reuters has shown that Shugden groups waging a highly organized international smear campaign against the Dalai Lama had been co-opted by Beijing, citing a leaked internal Chinese government document from 2014 that referred to the Shugden issue as "an important front in our struggle against the Dalai clique" ([Reuters](#), December 21, 2015).

Another objective of Chinese infiltration is to depoliticize the Tibetan diaspora. The condition of exile tends to politicize people, which leads in turn to mobilization and activism. To counter this, Beijing wants to depoliticize the Tibetan diaspora, including its social associations and cultural institutions, with a view to demobilizing the Tibetan freedom movement. This strategic thinking is reflected in Angwang's exchanges with the leaders of the Tibetan Community of New York and New Jersey, the association that caters to the several thousand Tibetan residents of the greater New York metropolitan area.

In February 2019, at a Tibetan New Year event where Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was the guest of honor, the Tibetan activist and parliamentarian Dorjee Tseten gave a speech that touched on China's human rights violations in Tibet ([Students for a Free Tibet](#), February 9, 2019). Following the gathering, Angwang dropped in on a post-event debrief meeting at the community center, where he criticized the political nature of Mr. Tseten's speech and advised that the community center be made a politics-free zone. He further suggested that he could bring in wealthy Chinese Buddhists who might donate to the community center and alleviate its mortgage burden if the association would tone down its advocacy for Tibetan freedom and human rights.[3]

Angwang's suggestions to depoliticize the Tibetan community center and its activities were ignored by the association's leaders. But it is not hard to imagine an alternate scenario where less scrupulous or less sophisticated executives might have accepted the promise of financial assistance at the cost of political self-censorship. Angwang's offer exemplifies the Faustian bargain that Beijing's agents propose to Tibet-related organizations and institutions (often in subtle ways that leave room for deniability). This strategy has found some success in limited circles with some religious foundations and cultural institutions content that is critical of China. Mainstream Tibetan organizations and public institutions have so far proven resilient against Beijing's community-level stratagems—possibly because their relative transparency and inherently political nature make them less susceptible to bribery than private or cultural groups. Meanwhile, a more sophisticated tool has emerged in Beijing's arsenal, one that relies on targeting individuals rather than community infiltration and weaponizes familial relationships rather than financial rewards.

Neutralizing Individuals: The Visa-as-Bait Strategy

One of the most potent tools that Beijing wields against the Tibetan diaspora is access to family. All exiles dream of the home they left behind. For exiles who have elderly parents back home, this yearning can turn into desperation in the event of parental sickness or other emergencies. In the exiles' desire to visit their ancestral home and reconnect with their families, Beijing sees a strategic vulnerability. For example, Angwang clearly recognized the lure of the visa as a means to convert or neutralize individuals in the diaspora. According to the FBI complaint, he appears to have suggested "that issuing ten-year visas to Tibetans in the United States might assist their recruitment as intelligence assets." [4]

Historically, Tibetans came into exile in two big waves—one in the aftermath of Chinese invasion in the 1950s and the other in the liberalization era of the 1980s. Almost everyone in the second group has older parents, many of whom remain in Tibet. In the mid-2000s, Chinese consulates started issuing visas to carefully vetted Tibetan exiles, allowing them to make short trips to visit family in Tibet, albeit under the close supervision of UFWD minders. As word of these secret but sensational trips spread throughout the diaspora, more Tibetans began lining up at Chinese consulates in the hope of securing access to their ancestral homeland.

The Chinese visa application process is anything but straightforward for Tibetans, even those who are naturalized U.S. citizens ([U.S. CECC Testimony](#), September 30, 2020). At the Chinese consulate in New York, for instance, instead of going through the main consulate window where general applicants are processed, Tibetan applicants are taken to a separate area where they are grilled by a liaison officer. They are made to write down their personal stories, name all the groups they have ever joined, and state whether they have ever participated in a protest against China. Sometimes, when an applicant answers that she has never been to a protest, the officer might sternly invite her to look at his computer screen—showing a picture of the applicant at a Tibet rally—before rejecting her application.[5]

More disturbingly, Tibetan applicants are made to provide the names, locations, occupations, and other identification details of their relatives in Tibet. Each piece of information surrendered to the consulate is a data point that Beijing uses to map the Tibetan diaspora, linking the individual exile to their more vulnerable family members back home. This transnational relationship mapping is designed to seed a hypothetical sense of guilt in the conscience of the exile; it is meant to instill in the targeted individual the advance feeling that her political participation in exile might endanger her family in Tibet. The ultimate goal of this tactic, which a recent report by a Uyghur rights group has aptly called “coercion by proxy,” is the political deactivation of the exile.[6]

Tibetans are far from the only community affected by China’s long arm. Beijing’s ambitious foreign influence campaign uses a sophisticated set of tools, tactics, and strategies to conduct what can only be described as “repression without borders” against a host of potential opponents abroad ([U.S. CECC Testimony](#), September 30, 2020). One of its key strategies is the weaponization of access—to markets, funding, and family.

In targeting the Tibetan diaspora, the weaponization of access to family is a strategy that Beijing has refined to perfection. One of the sources interviewed by the author in the United States recounted how, toward the end of her last trip to Tibet, her United Front minders explicitly reminded her that her political behavior going forward would determine not only her future chances of securing a visa, but also the safety and well-being of the family she had just visited. In short, her family in Tibet is the hostage, and her silence in exile is the ransom—which she must pay everyday by refraining from actions online or offline that may be perceived as critical of the Chinese government. In other words, she has been neutralized.

According to recent news reports, the United Front's sustained overseas efforts to collect data on diaspora-homeland linkages are being complemented by more aggressive local data-gathering drives in Tibet. Chinese authorities have reportedly harassed Tibetan families in Shigatse, Tingri, Nagchu and Kardze prefectures, urging them to give up names and details of all their known relatives in exile ([RFA](#), July 30).

Another source recounted an incident that illustrates a different pathway by which this neutralizing force operates. A Tibetan man living in Europe was nominated as a new board candidate for the local chapter of Chushi Gangdruk.[7] He received enough votes to become a nominee, but received a call from his family in Tibet before he could participate in the next round of elections the following weekend. Chinese authorities had just visited and made cryptic remarks about the “recent political activity” of their “children abroad.” The family understood this as a veiled threat and promptly called their exiled son. He immediately withdrew his name from the slate of candidates: he, too, has been neutralized.

Conclusion

In the long run, China's visa-as-bait strategy of targeting individuals may prove to be more effective in its efforts to demobilize the Tibetan diaspora than its community infiltration tactics. Spying for China represents such a dramatic departure from the social norm that it remains unthinkable for the vast majority of Tibetan exiles. It is a bold red line that few are willing to cross. People like Angwang, who are recruited into the ranks of China's secret agents, are rare in the Tibetan diaspora, and his unique background shows that he is the exception that proves the rule.[8]

Unlike traditional espionage, seeking access to one's family in the ancestral homeland is part of normalized exile behavior, even if it comes at the cost of political self-censorship. In theory, the silencing of one individual voice in a broad-based grassroots movement inflicts no great loss on the collective cause. But in reality, there are significant social and political costs when a growing number of individuals use the same logic to justify their respective silence. Individual actions, no matter how insignificant, have collective consequences. What begins as the silence of an individual can end in the collective surrender of an entire movement.

The tactics and strategies discussed here are only a handful of the pathways through which the Chinese government works to divide, depoliticize, and eventually demobilize the global Tibetan diaspora. While some of its tactics are illegal, many are not. But all of them are aimed at creating a world in which transnational political activism on behalf of human rights in general, and Tibetan freedom in particular, becomes severely curtailed.

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Notes

[1] For more on the United Front Work Department, see: Alexander Bowe, "China's Overseas United Front Work: Background and Implications for the United States," U.S-China Economic and Security Review Commission, August 24, 2018, <https://www.uscc.gov/research/chinas-overseas-united-front-work-background-and-implications-united-states>.

[2] Note that this appears to be a mis-transcription of the name of the controversial deity Dorje Shugden, which is often translated into Mandarin as either 多杰雄登, *duojie xiongdeng*, or 多杰雄天, *duojie xiongtian*.

Editor's Note: The Shugden controversy refers to a sectarian divide in Tibetan Buddhism. The controversial deity Dorje Shugden has been adopted as an important religious figure by the Gelug school, but is not widely accepted by the more inclusive Nyingma school that has become predominant under the 14th Dalai Lama. This theological disagreement has resulted in significant in-fighting in the Tibetan diaspora.

[3] This account is based on multiple conversations the author had with community leaders and organizers who had interacted with Baimadajie Angwang between November 2018 to April 2019.

[4] "United States of America v. Baimadajie Angwang," Criminal Complaint filed by the FBI, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1318496/download>, p14.

[5] Note that there are no systematic studies of the rate at which Tibetan applications for China visas are approved, partly because many Tibetans who apply choose not to reveal that information. Nevertheless, it is common knowledge among the diaspora that a very small percentage of the applicants actually end up receiving a visa and the special permit required to visit Tibet. But even those whose applications are rejected have eventually surrendered their data to the United Front Work Department. See: "Testimony of Tenzin Dorjee, Tibet Action Institute, Before the Congressional Executive Commission on China," CECC, September 30, 2020, <https://www.cecc.gov/sites/chinacommission.house.gov/files/documents/Dorjee%20CECC%20Testimony%20Final%20Final.pdf>.

[6] "No Space Left to Run: China's Transnational Repression of Uyghurs," Uyghur Human Rights Project, June 23, 2021, <https://uhrp.org/report/no-space-left-to-run-chinas-transnational-repression-of-uyghurs/>.

[7] The specific country is purposely omitted here because naming the country might give away the identity of the individual concerned. Note that Chushi Gangdruk is a well-known political organization that once waged a guerrilla campaign against Chinese invasion in the 1950s and 1960s, but it is today a civil society group using nonviolent means to promote the Tibetan cause.

[8] There has been heated debate in the Tibetan community about the authenticity of Angwang's claims to Tibetan identity. While he is allegedly from Gyalrong, a far-eastern Tibetan region that has undergone a degree of cultural assimilation into China, he does not appear to speak any of the standard Tibetan dialects understood in exile; he was using English or Chinese in all of his conversations with New York-based Tibetans. Both his parents work(ed) for the Chinese government and are members or former members of the Chinese Communist Party. In my interviews with people who had interacted with him, I have been able to confirm that he has an uncle who is a bona fide exiled Tibetan.
