

Algorithm Manipulation: China's Image on TikTok as Seen by Polish Users



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Algorithm Manipulation: China's Image on TikTok as Seen by Polish Users

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Introduction

With the development of digital media in the early 21st century, social media platforms began to be perceived both as tools that could empower citizens in their relationship with government and as an unlimited space for civic and political engagement. The ease of access and speed at which content spreads online have created a dilemma: how can we effectively verify the authenticity of the information being shared, given the ever-increasing volume of content available? Verifying the credibility of sources and content has become a time-consuming process that users often overlook when it comes to new media and social media platforms. The main reason for this phenomenon is the contradiction between the tedious nature of the verification process and the ephemerality of content published on social media platforms – videos are short, concise, and designed to capture the user’s attention for a very brief period (15–60 seconds). These characteristics are taken into consideration during the platform development process and may be exploited by both public institutions and the private sector to interfere with and manipulate the content.

The issue of content manipulation on non-Western platforms like the English-language version of the Chinese platform *Douyin*¹ – TikTok – created by ByteDance in 2017 is especially crucial for understanding the influence of authoritarian regimes on online discourse in democratic societies like Poland, where the freedom of speech is guaranteed by Constitution and delivered by legal measures. This study examines the possible implications of algorithm manipulation regarding six key phrases: “Xinjiang”, “Tibet”, “Tiananmen Square massacre”, “Taiwan”, “human rights in China”, and “reeducation camps in China” on the Polish society. Given the significant number of TikTok users in Poland,² it can be argued that the algorithm manipulation on TikTok has an impact on the understanding of the People’s Republic of China in the Polish society. The main question raised in the study is: *how does the visible content on TikTok in Poland align with the official agenda of the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of*

1 Chinese: *Douyin* 抖音.

2 According to the “Digital 2025: Poland” report (Kemp, 2025), the app has 11.4 million users aged 18+ in Poland, representing 36% of the country’s adult population.

*the Communist Party of China*³? To imitate a native-Polish users' environment, six new TikTok accounts were created.

The study draws upon the legal environment of TikTok operations. The platform's subsidiary operating in Poland or generally on the European market – TikTok Information Technologies UK Ltd – is controlled by its mother company ByteDance which remains a private entity within China. However, due to the political system in the People's Republic of China, it is subjected to full state control and is not transparent in its operations.⁴ ByteDance is also obligated to strictly comply with Chinese law, including the National Security Law (2015) (Xi, 2015) and the Cybersecurity Law (Cyberspace Administration of China, 2016; effective: 2017) (Cyberspace Administration of China, 2016), which require online entities to fully cooperate with the state authorities of the Communist Party of China (CCP). Implementation of the Provisions on the Management of Algorithmic Recommendations in Internet Information Services (Cyberspace Administration of China, 2022) should also be noted, as the regulations require the apps algorithm to promote “positive energy” in line with the official CCP messaging. All this may raise legitimate concerns not only about the methods of storing and using user data, but also about the potential use of the popular app to disseminate propaganda messages consistent with the CCP's political line. The use of positioning algorithms, which may suggest propaganda or disinformation content to users, raises concerns. The operation of the algorithms is not transparent, and previous studies, including “Information Manipulation on TikTok and Its Relation to American Users' Beliefs About China” (Finkelstein, et al., 2025) and “Recommending Hate: How TikTok's Search Engine Algorithms Reproduce Societal Bias” (Matlach, et al., 2025) conducted on the English-language app revealed instances of censorship and biased content.

The first part presents the theoretical foundations for conducting a study on content manipulation, an overview of the current state of research, and the methodology used in this study, as well as the limitations.

The second part presents detailed research results broken down by keywords, along with a discussion of the conclusions drawn from them.

The third part provides a final summary of the findings and attempts to answer the main research question. Further research directions are also suggested.

3 *Xuanchuanbu* (宣传部) can be translated both as Propaganda and Publicity Department, since the word *xuanchuan* has no negative implication in Chinese. However, considering the nature of its operations, which is to aggressively promote messaging aligned with Chinese Communist Party goals both internally, and externally, the word „propaganda” is perhaps more fitting.

4 The algorithm's operation declared by the platform (available at: <https://support.tiktok.com/en/using-tiktok/exploring-videos/how-tiktok-recommends-content>) contradicts the results of research on algorithm bias (Matlach, et al., 2025).

1. Research interest and methodology

1.1 Background and literature review

The content manipulation online poses a threat to the freedom of expression in democratic societies like Poland. Freedom of expression and freedom of the press and other media are enshrined in Poland under Articles 54 and 14 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland (National Assembly of the Republic of Poland, 1997). As a member state of the European Union, Poland is also obligated to protect media freedom and pluralism and to ensure the credibility of the online environment in accordance with regulations such as the European Media Freedom Act of 2024, the Digital Services Act (DSA) of 2022 (European Parliament, 2022), the European Declaration of Digital Rights and Principles of 2022 (Official Journal of the European Union, 2022), and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) of 2018 (European Parliament, 2018). The operations of social media platforms in the European Union are regulated at the top-down level and operate under similar conditions in every member state, but enforcement of the laws depends on individual governments. Technology companies from third countries must comply with applicable regulations – particularly those mandated by the DSA – which require them to mitigate risks associated with the spread of misinformation and disinformation and ensure the transparency of algorithms on social media platforms. The extensive legal framework strives to ensure that the European information space is transparent and guarantees freedom of expression even on controversial topics, as well as unrestricted access to information.

A special case is represented by platforms operating in Europe, including Poland, which are controlled by entities from countries such as the People's Republic of China, where freedom of speech is not guaranteed and the infosphere is a strictly controlled environment. The most prominent example is TikTok – the international version of the Chinese platform Douyin created by the company

ByteDance. Despite the obligation to protect freedom of speech and the credibility of content disseminated in the EU, research into the platform's algorithm indicates that it is subject to external influence – specifically, that of the Chinese Communist Party. ByteDance has sought to defend its declared independence and its compliance with European law. However, studies on user experiences related to censorship and information manipulation, e.g., Eddie L. Ungless et al. (2025) suggest, for example, that the platform restricts content created by or concerning selected social groups, which may indicate discrimination based on ethnic origin or sexual identity. This mechanism aims to discourage users from posting or viewing content deemed controversial. This phenomenon demonstrates that the characteristics and processes typical of the Chinese infosphere are imperceptibly permeating the Polish online environment.

Unlike the Polish cyberspace, the Chinese cyberspace is an environment strictly controlled by state authorities – the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission⁵ and the Cyberspace Administration of China.⁶ Lee Siu-yau (2016) argues that the institutionalization of the Internet control system in China has helped to standardize Internet regulations and develop comprehensive surveillance tools for the Chinese government. The flow of information is restricted by numerous orders and prohibitions, the most significant of which are:

- “Seven base lines” (Chinese: *qi tiao dixian* 七条底线, Bandurski, 2013): the concept refers to the official guidelines published in 2013 by the CCP regarding the rules of using the Internet. These include: “law and regulation,” “the socialistic system,” “national interests,” “the rights and interests of citizens,” “public order,” and “the moral basis.”
- “Seven don't speaks” (Chinese: *qi bu jiang*, 七不讲; Bandurski, 2013): these rules were posted in 2013 on Weibo by East China University of Political Science and Law professor Zhang Xuezhong. They constitute a set of guidelines conveyed by Xi Jinping in the form of oral recommendations and related topics not to be raised publicly. Zhang was abruptly removed from his position at the university, and all content regarding “seven don't speaks” censored in the Chinese infosphere. The restricted topics include: “universal values,” “freedom of the press,” “civil society,” “civil rights,” “historical mistakes of the CCP,” “official bourgeoisie,” and “judicial independence.”

5 Chinese: *Zhongyang Wangluo Anquan He Xinxihua Wei yuanhui* 中央网络安全和信息化委员会.

6 Chinese: *Guojia Hulianwang bangongshi* 国家互联网信息办公室.

- “Five poisons” (Chinese: *wu du*, 五毒; Gordon, 2014; Tibetan Review, 2023): the term takes its name from five animals considered dangerous in ancient China, and in political discourse surrounding the CCP refers to five issues perceived as a threat to the Party. The alleged threats include “supporters of the Falun Gong,” “members of the Chinese Democratic Movement,” “supporters of Tibet,” “supporters of Taiwan independence,” and “supporters of Xinjiang/Uyghurs.”

Initiating a discussion on any of these topics may result in automatic censorship on Chinese platforms, while the individuals searching for content on these topics may be profiled and reprimanded, or even arrested and held legally accountable. Rebecca MacKinnon (2011) points out that the Chinese public’s ability to freely express opinions and engage in political discussions is illusory. Chinese authorities create the illusion of free speech online while constantly controlling the flow of information among citizens. This tactic is used as an argument against criticism from Western public opinion. The PRC government is gradually refining its methods of controlling online discourse through a process of adaptation, in which policy is adjusted to current trends. Jessica C. Teets (2014) calls this process *consultative authoritarianism*. This approach is crucial because, given the enormous number of Internet users, the Chinese government is unable to track every single online activity.

The inability to track the activities of all citizens has also led to closer cooperation between the government and technology companies in the PRC. The blurring of lines between the private and public sectors is a well-known phenomenon in the PRC, but it is particularly evident in the management of China’s cyberspace. Luqiu Luwei Rose (2017) argues that the Chinese government currently relies heavily on technology developed by the private sector and collaborates with it to create a more sophisticated mechanism for internet surveillance. In recent years, China’s largest tech companies, known as BAT (Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent), have been given greater responsibility for monitoring published content, thereby assuming a leading role in internet censorship. In her book, *China’s Digital Authoritarianism: A Governance Perspective*, Monique Taylor (2022) discusses a visible shift in censorship enforcement to tech companies. In this way, the private sector has become the enforcer of state regulations, and the mechanisms of the state censorship apparatus are clearly present on social media platforms. In this context, it is worth noting that, according to estimates from March 2025, at ByteDance alone, among approximately 100,000 employees, as many as 20–27% of workers are “content moderators” (Wang, 2025).

Taking into considerations China’s censorship system and the ways in which they are implemented on social media platforms, it is necessary to understand how platforms such as TikTok operate in an environment where freedom of speech

is legally guaranteed. Most of the findings from research conducted on TikTok in Europe find their way into the media in the form of warnings. Although these articles are primarily journalistic in nature, they are supplemented by descriptions of the authors' own observations regarding the use of the platform, such as experiments in which content is searched for on newly created accounts. The authors often highlight the issue of algorithm manipulation, which can lead, among other things, to the reinforcement of radical beliefs among users (Taylor, 2024), or concerns regarding the potential use of the app as a "Chinese weapon in cognitive warfare" (Farahany, 2023). Since the app's rise in popularity in Western countries, particularly in the U.S., there have been regular suggestions that it could be used to "export" the Chinese model of censorship and propaganda, to which younger users of the platform are said to be particularly susceptible (Ramli & Banjo, 2019).

Shang Lanyu et al. (2021) highlight the problem of detecting disinformation related to the use of AI and the creation of so-called deepfakes, which work to promote false content on the platform. The analysis highlights the problem of the lack of decisive steps to reduce false information on the platform. The authors therefore propose a special content detector that can help in recognizing manipulated data, which would help users verify the data.

Finkelstein et al. (2025) published an extended analysis of TikTok's impact on US citizens' perceptions of human rights issues in China. In a three-stage study, they analyzed the correlation between exposure to pro-China narratives and views on topics such as Tibet, Tiananmen Square, Uyghur rights, and Xinjiang. The authors concluded that TikTok is indeed influencing a more pro-Chinese stance among its audience. The impact of TikTok content manipulation on Polish society remains insufficiently researched. In 2025, the organization *Global Witness* published the results of a study analyzing the platform's impact on Poles' preconceptions in the context of the 2025 presidential election. The findings showed that TikTok's algorithm promotes and suggests content favorable to certain presidential candidates (Global Witness, 2025).⁷ This demonstrates that content appearing on the platform can be manipulated, which can shape users' perceptions of specific social phenomena.

This study attempts to partially fill this research gap by examining the platform's algorithm for objectivity on topics deemed controversial by China, using a sample of Polish users. The answer to the question regarding the level of objectivity and independence of the algorithm can serve as a starting point for further research on the platform as a tool for manipulating public sentiment. This is particularly relevant considering the recent SIMODS Project report on information

7 Before the vote, Poles using the TikTok platform were more exposed to far-right narratives.

manipulation in four countries (Poland, France, Slovakia, Spain). The findings show that among six major platforms (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok, X/Twitter, YouTube), TikTok has the largest volume of content that can be classified as mis/disinformation (Second Measurement of the State of Online Disinformation in Europe on Very Large Online

1.2 Methodology

For the purposes of the study, six new user accounts were created for users registered in Poland (region: Poland) aged up to twenty-five. The method was based on the method used in the American study conducted by Princeton and Rutgers University (Finkelstein, et al., 2025), adapting it to the needs and research capabilities of the institute.

The study utilized a modified version of the “user journey method,” described in, among others, the Amnesty International study “Driven into Darkness: How TikTok’s ‘For You’ Feed Encourages Self-Harm and Suicidal Ideation” (Amnesty International, 2023), which involves monitoring the platform while replicating the natural actions of a new user as closely as possible. For this purpose, cookies and cache were cleared each time, and the accounts used for monitoring did not interact with other users of the platform and did not take any actions that could influence the algorithm – viewed content was not “liked,” commented on, or added to favorites. This ensures that each time the results were “the default” a fresh platform user would receive upon looking for the search phrase. Monitoring was conducted on personal computers, using a browser and a Polish IP address.

The study period was set at 3 months (July 16, 2025–October 16, 2025). By using a broader timeframe and regularly monitoring content, we assessed the algorithm’s continuous and purposeful operation and avoided drawing conclusions based on short or one-time observations, which could negatively impact the quality of the study sample.

Data was collected manually twice a week, at regular intervals, by compiling and analyzing the first twenty content items that appeared on the platform after entering the search term. Each search term was checked by three accounts each time, resulting in a maximum of sixty content items per topic on a given day.⁸ In total, 9,583 content items were collected between July 16, 2025–October 16, 2025.

8 Due to temporary restrictions on access to accounts collecting data on individual topics in the following order: 1620, 1620, 1620, 1616, 1559 and 1558 materials.

TABLE I. STATISTICS ON COLLECTED DATA USED IN THE STUDY.

Keyword

Xinjiang		Tibet		Tiananmen Square Massacre		Human Rights in China		Taiwan		Re-education camps in China		Total	
No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1620	100%	1620	100%	1620	100%	1620	100%	1620	100%	1620	100%	9720	100%
1620	100%	1620	100%	1620	100%	1559	96.23%	1616	99.75%	1558	96.17%	9593	98.69%
0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	61	3.765%	4	0.247%	62	3.827%	127	1.307%

The analysis of the collected data considered measurement error resulting from missing content. For the search terms *human rights in China*, *Taiwan*, and *re-education camps in China*, the error was 3.765%, 0.247%, and 3.827%, respectively. The error for the entire study was 1.307%. The error indicates the potential scale of error in the results obtained for a given search term and was calculated based on the “missing” entries (Table I).

For the purposes of the study, it was assumed that the average Polish platform user can understand content in both Polish and English. Content related to the searched topics in languages other than Polish and English was classified as neutral. Following the key referring to the five poisons and seven starting points/seven unmentioned ones described in section 1.1 (Bandurski, 2013), the following terms were monitored (in Polish):

1. **“Sinciang” (English: *Xinjiang*)**: the colloquial Polish name for the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in northwestern China. Materials concerning Xinjiang and its minorities (Uyghurs, Tajiks) are subject to special censorship in the PRC, as the topic falls under the so-called “five poisons” – five topics considered forbidden in the PRC.
2. **“Tybet” (English: *Tibet*)**: the name of the country before its annexation into the PRC in 1951; it currently refers to the Tibet Autonomous Region. Materials concerning Tibet are also subject to censorship in the PRC (five poisons).
3. **“Masakra na Placu Tiananmen” (English: *Tiananmen Square Massacre*)**: a phrase referring to the brutal suppression of student protests on June 4, 1989. The protests are a taboo subject in China, and any mention of them is censored.

4. **“Tajwan” (English: *Taiwan*)**: The PRC considers Taiwan an integral part of the state, intensively promoting the so-called One China Policy. The topic of Taiwan is not banned in the PRC, but it is subject to strict control and censorship.
5. **“Prawa człowieka w Chinach” (English: *human rights in China*)**: a slogan referring to the controversy surrounding the respect for human rights in the PRC. The term “human rights” is not banned in China, and Beijing is conducting efforts, including at the UN, to change its definition. This is dictated, among other things, by an attempt to silence criticism of the Uyghurs and Tibet (Birenbaum, 2023).
6. **“Obozy reedukacyjne w Chinach” (English: *re-education camps in China*)**: this refers to labor camps (often called re-education camps) in Xinjiang Province, which have sparked controversy over human rights violations and whose existence Beijing vehemently denies, arguing that the centers are merely vocational training centers for the Uyghur population (United Nations Human Rights Office, 2022).

For readers’ clarity, the English versions of the keywords will be used in the paper henceforth. The materials were assessed for their message and sentiment, divided into five categories according to the following criteria:

- **Pro-China:** content that blatantly replicate the CCP’s message on a given topic; materials containing CCP symbols, referencing CCP or Chinese symbols (e.g., the flag, Chinese patriotic songs); materials that negate or counter criticism of the PRC or CCP, including historical and scientific facts; materials intended to improve China’s image, and that are advertising-like.
- **Neutral:** content that treat the topic in a neutral manner, containing no positive or negative messages, and are not emotionally charged; materials in languages other than Polish and English, which a Polish-speaking user will likely skip immediately. Materials in languages other than Polish or English were also put in the “neutral” group, unless they featured visible and clear captions or subtitles.
- **Critical:** content that question the CCP’s message on a given topic; materials that criticize China’s actions based on factual evidence and facts, not emotional content; materials that expose errors or distortions regarding topics such as the five poisons, criticize censorship on a given topic; materials that are skeptical of Chinese propaganda.

- **Anti-China:** content that undermine China's positive image, are not based on facts or merit, and rely on subjective and emotional messages; materials that insult China or Chinese citizens, are racist and xenophobic; and materials that groundlessly undermine China's image.
- **Unrelated:** content that are unrelated to the searched topic or refer to it only by a distant association (e.g., Tibet – an advertisement for a Tibetan restaurant in Poland). For the purposes of the study, the assumption was made that the actual cognitive relevance of a given material to the searched topic should be assessed each time. This was done by asking: does the material deepen the user's knowledge of the searched topic? If not, the material was classified as "unrelated." Using unrelated content to discourage users from seeking inconvenient information or to distract them is a common practice in the Chinese infosphere and media (King, et al., 2017).

It should be noted that a significant change compared to previous studies was the creation of separate categories for "critical" and "anti-China," instead of grouping all materials, for example, under the heading "anti-CCP" (Finkelstein, et al., 2025). Labeling voices critical of the PRC's policies or actions as "anti-China" or "sinophobic" is a widespread practice of the CCP aimed at restricting freedom of speech. This is achieved not only by attempting to silence and intimidate dissidents and members of the Chinese diaspora, but also through a method that the European External Action Service (EEAS) calls "suppression" (European External Action Service, 2025). It involves attempts to exert pressure on discourse, including academic discourse, regarding China abroad, for example through a system of economic or technological dependencies and diplomatic actions. The creation of separate categories made it possible to distinguish between critical voices that meet the democratic standard of freedom of speech and xenophobic or racist materials aimed at attacking China and its citizens.

The results are also broken down into thematic categories that highlight the core subject matter of the materials. As some materials may relate to more than one topic or phenomenon, they were classified based on the content identified (e.g., an advertisement for travel to Xinjiang – category: "travel"; a depiction of Uyghur life and customs – category: "Uyghurs"). Materials involving a broader thematic scope were assigned to the "Miscellaneous" category. All identified categories are presented in the charts included in the detailed section of the report.

Although the study was conducted within a relatively long-time frame, it faces limitations that need to be addressed: only twenty items that appear first upon searching each keyword were recorded, which is not enough to demonstrate the entirety of the content on the platform. Positioning, however, is the crucial

element of how algorithms on social media work. Therefore, a qualitative approach was adapted based on the notion that the more important or popular content comes first. Views, likes, or other post interactions were not recorded, and this could possibly be done in follow-up research to further determine what additional factors could contribute to materials being positioned in the way they are to the average users.

2. Results and analysis

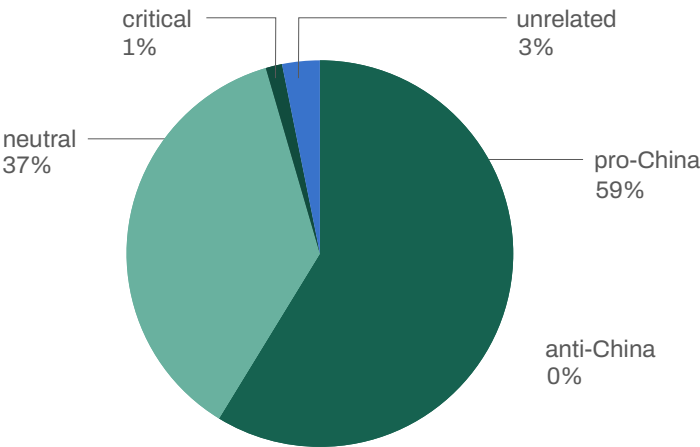
2.1 Keyword *Xinjiang*

Thematic categories:



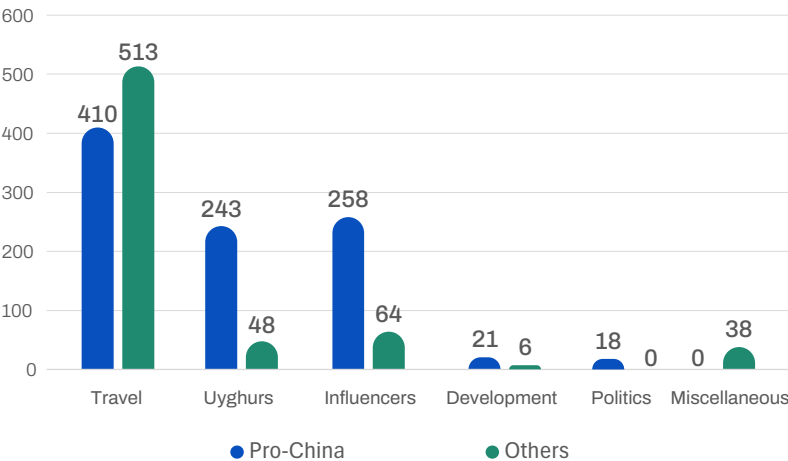
On the TikTok platform, travel-related content dominated (56.9% of all content) under the keyword “Sinciang” (the Polish-language spelling of Xinjiang). Most of it was advertising and likely created by specialized Chinese entities, whose goal was to promote not only tourism but also a favorable image of the region in the media. The materials featured pro-Chinese content: national symbols, CCP symbols, and patriotic songs. The actors featured emphasized their ethnicity with China. The propaganda message in this content can be described as subtle – it might be invisible to viewers unfamiliar with China and Xinjiang. The second most popular category consisted of content depicting individuals imitating English-speaking influencers (both foreigners and Chinese, Uyghurs, and Kazakhs) – within this category, as much as 80% of the content was openly pro-Chinese. This indicates collaboration between the creators featured in the materials and the state apparatus (Ryan, et al., 2022). The materials were supposed to be spontaneously recorded content, but they repeated the same propaganda pattern. For example, an influencer “accidentally” encounters Uyghurs who tell them about the advantages of living in the PRC or is surprised by the province’s high level of development. Videos featuring Chinese influencers were more aggressive in their tone and accused the CIA, among others, of spreading rumors about the situation of Uyghurs in Xinjiang (e.g., the @joeyyds666 channel, which produces propaganda content on every topic related to China).

CHART I. ANALYSIS OF THE SENTIMENT OF THE KEYWORD XINJIANG.



In the “Uyghurs” category, a staggering 83% of the content was pro-China. Their content pattern was like that in the “Influencers” category. A video from the Polish-language channel @tymonizm¹⁰, ranked highly, indicating that the algorithm favors channels affiliated with Chinese media entities. Materials involving cultural appropriation (a phenomenon described in greater detail in section 2.2 in the context of Tibet) also appeared in this category.

CHART II. TOPICAL BREAKDOWN OF THE PRO-CHINA CONTENT OF THE KEYWORD XINJIANG.



10 Jiang Tianyue, a Polish-speaking employee of China Media Group.

In September 2025, there was a gradual increase in content relating to the living standards of Uyghurs in China. This was related to the celebrations of the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region on September 25th. In the immediate vicinity of this date, all Chinese media channels worldwide (including CGTN and China Radio International) focused on intensively promoting narratives about the region's development and prosperity. At that time, TikTok also saw the highest levels of overtly propaganda content, indicating the direct involvement of Chinese government entities in content creation on the platform.

Some videos depicted good living conditions in Xinjiang, along with neighboring Turkmenistan, where poverty is said to be rampant and women lack citizenship rights. Propaganda footage of Xi Jinping visiting Uyghurs in Xinjiang also appeared. The videos featured professionally produced English subtitles.

It's worth noting that only 1% of all content under the *Xinjiang* tag contained messages critical of China's Uyghur issue, and these were ranked relatively low by the algorithm.

Based on the five poisons concept and comparing the results for the term *Xinjiang* with those for other search terms, it can be concluded that the topic of Xinjiang and the Uyghurs currently appear to be a priority for China in building a positive image of the country abroad. This stems not only from ideological concerns (national unity and homogeneity) but also from the strategic importance of the region (security and industry).

TikTok is home to professional channels designed to counter the international community's allegations of human rights violations in Xinjiang. This is consistent with Beijing's strategy, also on Western social media (X, Facebook), where a popular method of combating criticism of the CCP's rule is to develop anti-Western, primarily anti-American, counternarratives. For example, the American intelligence service (CIA) is accused of "spreading rumors" about the persecution of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. A similar tactic is used in attempts to accuse the US of instigating the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. The intensification of propaganda activities by entities with possible ties to the Beijing government appears to coincide with problems in the functioning of institutions independent of the CCP that comment on Asian affairs, including Radio Free Asia (Ellison & Cadell, 2025).

The PRC is exploiting the lack of US involvement in efforts to combat online disinformation and propaganda, as well as the limited capacity of Western countries, which in democratic systems are obligated to ensure freedom of speech for internet users, to increase their presence on all popular media channels. To strengthen their message, entities associated with the PRC government are

recruiting English-speaking influencers to conduct propaganda activities and create narratives on sensitive and controversial topics. It cannot be ruled out that such influencers will also be recruited in Poland in the future.¹¹

Entities affiliated with the PRC government are working to professionalize propaganda materials and expand their reach by using English, local languages (primarily China Media Group¹² entities), or providing professional subtitles, even for Chinese-language materials.

The topic of Xinjiang and the Uyghurs has been controversial and a subject of media debate for years. In this context, the very low number of critical materials regarding the PRC's stance on this issue is perhaps surprising. This may indicate a bias in the platform's algorithm.

2.2 Keyword *Tibet*

Thematic categories:



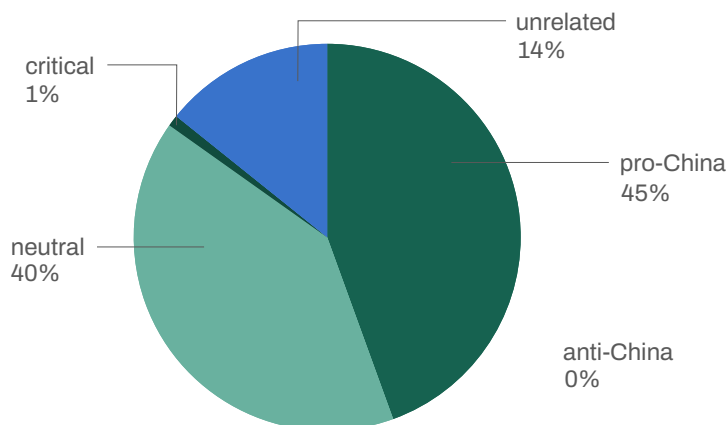
The overwhelming majority (63%) of content collected during the search for *Tibet* was related to travel. Nearly half of these were classified as *pro-China* based on the content present in the videos. The remainder advertised travel to Tibet in a neutral manner.

Similarly to the search for *Xinjiang*, the emergence of content created by influencers, most likely sponsored by entities affiliated with the PRC government, was noted. The videos were created according to the pattern described in [section 2.1](#) ("spontaneity," replication of content consistent with propaganda messages). Many focused on emphasizing the pace of Tibet's development and portraying the supposedly high standard of living of Tibetans. Promotion of Chinese renewable energy solutions was also featured. It should be emphasized that foreigners are not allowed to travel or stay in the regio independently.

11 Materials featuring Polish citizens cooperating with China Media Group, in which they advertise trips to Xinjiang, are present mainly on Facebook and Instagram platforms.

12 A media conglomerate operating directly under the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee, used to disseminate propaganda through a network of outlets (CGTN, China Radio International) and a network of "independent" influencers and media – both Chinese-owned and otherwise – as well as through actors influencing specific components.

CHART III. ANALYSIS OF THE SENTIMENT OF THE KEYWORD TIBET.



In the “Tibetans” category, as much as 55% of the content was non-pro-China (mainly neutral). Some of it was unprofessional and could have been posted on the platform by individuals identifying with the Tibetan diaspora. This content referred to Tibetan culture and the traditional Tibetan lifestyle and did not specifically address the China issue.

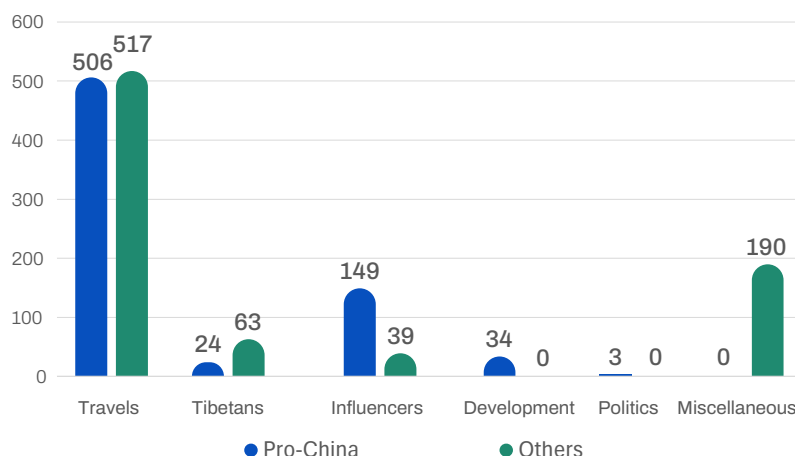
11% of all content was classified as “Miscellaneous” and grouped together due to its relatively high diversity: it concerned topics such as the broadly defined Buddhist religion and traditional medicine. It did not directly address the current situation in Tibet or the Tibetans.

The emergence of AI-generated content depicting false footage and landscapes purporting to originate from Tibet was observed. The analyzed material regarding *Xinjiang* (1.1) did not record the appearance of this type of content, although it does contain elements (unnatural colors, altered perspectives) suggesting that some of the footage was lightly edited to enhance its visual appeal.

Analysis of search results for *Tibet* may indicate that building a positive image of Tibet is currently not as important to the PRC as the issue of *Xinjiang*. This likely stems from the fact that Tibet is not currently a topic of public debate worldwide, as it was in the 1990s, when Tibetan freedom movements were also active in Poland. It is the result of Beijing’s long-standing efforts to limit the reach of groups advocating for the liberation of Tibet.¹³

¹³ The closest example: the case of diplomatic pressure from the PRC on Poland and the city of Warsaw in 2008, because of which the name “Rondo Wolnego Tybetu” (*Free Tibet Roundabout*) was abandoned in favor of “Rondo Tybetu” (*Tibet Roundabout*).

CHART IV. TOPICAL BREAKDOWN OF THE PRO-CHINA CONTENT OF THE
KEYWORD TIBET.



Nevertheless, the issue of Tibet appears to be important, among other reasons. In the context of promoting renewable energy technologies, this type of message also appears in Chinese propaganda materials in the Polish infosphere from channels owned by PRC entities.

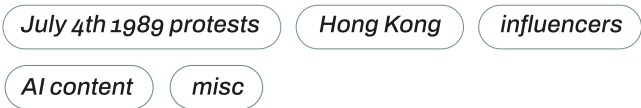
The TikTok algorithm favored travel and advertising content. However, it is worth noting the relatively high percentage (14%) of irrelevant content. This may be evidence of the mechanism described in the introduction, which bombards users with irrelevant or unrelated content to the controversial topic to distract them.

As with the *Xinjiang* entry, videos created most likely by entities collaborating with PRC appeared under the Tibet entry, which included elements of cultural appropriation (e.g., ethnic Han Chinese women posing as Uyghurs or Tibetans¹⁴). This indicates Beijing's continued efforts to sinicize ethnically diverse regions. It also reinforces the narrative of a homogeneous Chinese society. It is consistent with the trend of using ethnic minorities for propaganda described in the ASPI report "Frontier Influencers" (Ryan, et al., 2022).

¹⁴ Chinese: *Han Zu* (汉族): the dominant ethnic group in China, constituting approximately 91–92% of the population.

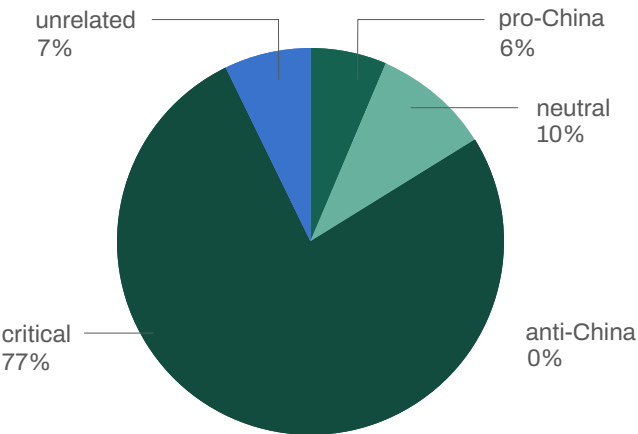
2.3 Keyboard *Tiananmen Square Massacre*

Thematic categories:



Although the brutal suppression of the 1989 student protests in Tiananmen Square is a taboo subject in the PRC and is subject to strict control and censorship, search results for “Tiananmen Square Massacre” on TikTok stood out from other search terms. The overwhelming majority (74%) of content concerned the Tiananmen Square protests and the CCP’s suppression of the protests, and as many as 89% of it was critical of the PRC’s actions.

CHART V. ANALYSIS OF THE SENTIMENT OF THE KEYWORD TIANANMEN SQUARE MASSACRE.



A small portion (7%) of the content referenced the 2022 Hong Kong protests.¹⁵ In this group, almost all content (except for rare pieces suggesting the CIA were behind the protests) was critical of the CCP’s actions. Pro-China content (6%) focused on denying the actual course of the protests and their brutal suppression. Influencers present in the videos argued, among other things, that the protests were not a movement for democratization (one of the five poisonous claims), that

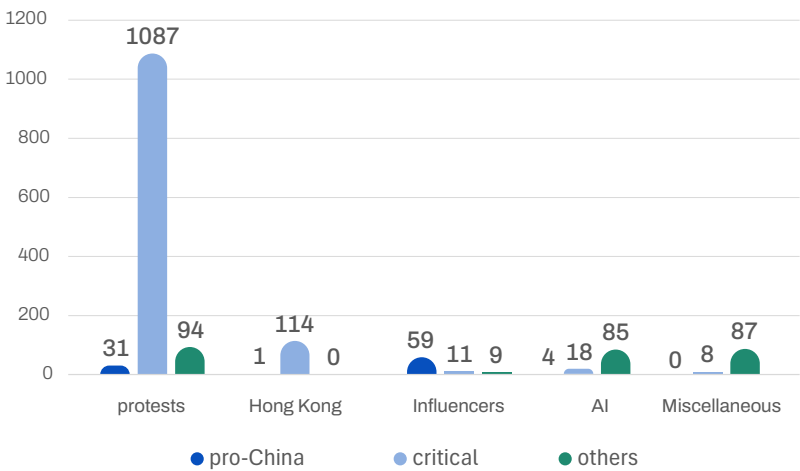
¹⁵ Chinese authorities banned the annual commemorations of the events in Tiananmen Square, sparking public discontent.

the suppression did not occur, or that the situation was inspired by the CIA or Falun Gong. The fact that information about the protests was unavailable in the Chinese information space was also denied.

While pro-China content constituted a small percentage of all collected content, numerous contents was observed in the categories “AI” and “miscellaneous,” the vast majority of which was unrelated to the search query. These included, among other things, supposedly humorous deepfakes depicting Xi Jinping denying the events in Tiananmen Square. Critical content in the “AI” category also concerned censorship on the Chinese LLM platform Deepseek.¹⁶

The topic of the *Tiananmen Square Massacre* also appeared on the platform in the context of the March 2023 hearing of TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew before the US Congress. Shou Zi Chew was questioned after US lawyers raised the issue of the app’s ties to the Chinese government and expressed concerns about the security of user data. In recordings published on TikTok, the Singaporean denied any ties to the Chinese government. He asserted that information about the events in Tiananmen could be found on TikTok and admitted that a “massacre” of students occurred there.

CHART VI. TOPICAL BREAKDOWN OF THE PRO-CHINA CONTENT OF THE KEYWORD TIANANMEN SQUARE MASSACRE.



The 2023 hearing of TikTok CEO to determine algorithm manipulation received widespread international coverage and fueled controversy surrounding the platform’s independence in the media. It cannot be ruled out that the “sacrifice”

¹⁶ The Chinese language model does not provide answers to questions about the so-called five poisons.

of Tiananmen Square and its exclusion from the algorithm, which suggests it promotes pro-Chinese content, is intentional. The goal would be to build a positive and objective image of the platform at a time when its operation is controversial, and the independent research described in the introduction shows that the opaque algorithm can be used for influence operations (e.g., the Moldovan elections).

The topic of the Tiananmen Square protests does not have the same media appeal as it did in the 1990s, for example, and therefore there may be no need to create as strong a counter-narrative as in the case of Xinjiang or the Uyghurs. Interest in the topic is waning, as is interest in the topic of free Tibet. This is a result not only of the passage of time but also of the “suppression mechanism” described earlier by Chinese diplomacy.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the issue of the Tiananmen Square protests remains important for Chinese dissident circles, including those in the United States, and constitutes one of the main arguments against the rule of the Chinese Communist Party. It can be assumed that at least some of the materials describing the protests and their aftermath originate from channels linked to the United States or the Chinese diaspora hostile to the CCP’s rule.

2.4 Keyword *Taiwan*

Thematic categories:

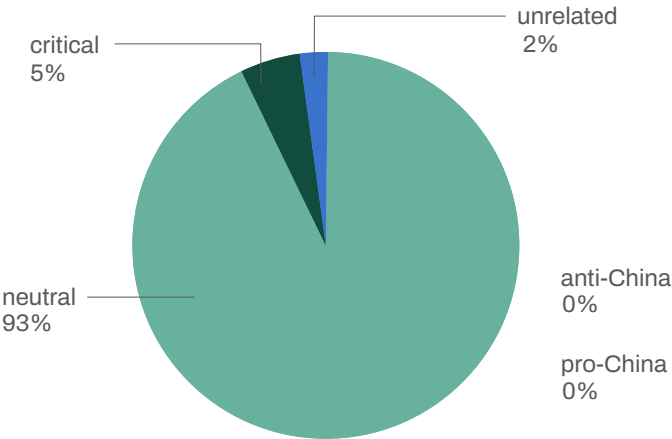


Taiwan plays a key role within China’s propaganda apparatus. From Beijing’s perspective, recognizing Taiwan’s independence, or even suggesting it, is considered crossing one of its foreign policy’s “red lines.” For this reason, this topic is strictly controlled by the Chinese authorities.

The results of the analysis showed that most of the content related to the keyword was neutral – 1,497 of the 1,616 posts analyzed, representing 92.6% of the total. Only 81 (5%) of the posts contained anti-Chinese elements. Four main categories of neutral content were identified, with content related to travel to Taiwan (including vlogs by Polish students and influencers) dominating. These accounts accounted for 89.7% (1,343) of the neutral posts (1,343; 89.7%). Among the neutral content, we could also distinguish content collectively labeled “Taiwan trivia” (87 posts in total – 5.8%).

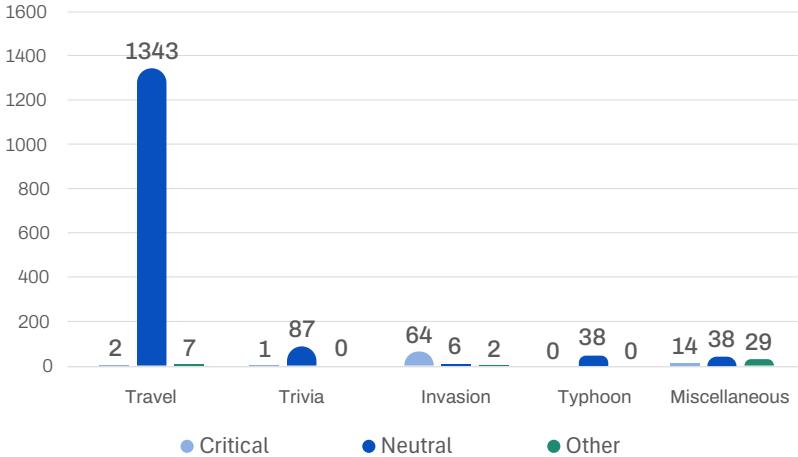
The analysis did not detect any pro-Chinese propaganda regarding Taiwan’s affiliation with the PRC. The slogan “One China” also did not appear in the analyzed posts. Content regarding a potential Chinese invasion of Taiwan was critical of Beijing (88% of posts in this category).

CHART VII. ANALYSIS OF THE SENTIMENT OF THE KEYWORD TAIWAN.



The topic of Taiwan is not censored on the TikTok platform, as evidenced by the relatively small number of posts unrelated to the keyword (35; 2.17%). However, content promoting the so-called Taiwan independence movement or discussions about the political environment on the island was not amplified. This characteristic of the content may indicate a deliberate move by a Beijing-sponsored propaganda mechanism, aimed not only at avoiding accusations of censorship but also at controlling discussions about Sino-Taiwanese relations.

CHART VIII. ANALYSIS OF THE SENTIMENT OF THE KEYWORD TAIWAN.



Furthermore, the lack of material regarding the “One China” policy and political life in Taiwan can also be understood from the perspective of the prevailing attitude in East Asia regarding political discussions in public. In Chinese, the term “politics is not discussed”¹⁷ is often used, suggesting that political topics should not be discussed on the forum. Topics related to Taiwan’s independence and its political scene are either not discussed on TikTok or are automatically censored by the platform’s administrators, as they cross so-called “red lines” and pose a threat to Beijing’s credibility.

2.5 Keyword *human rights in China*

Thematic categories:

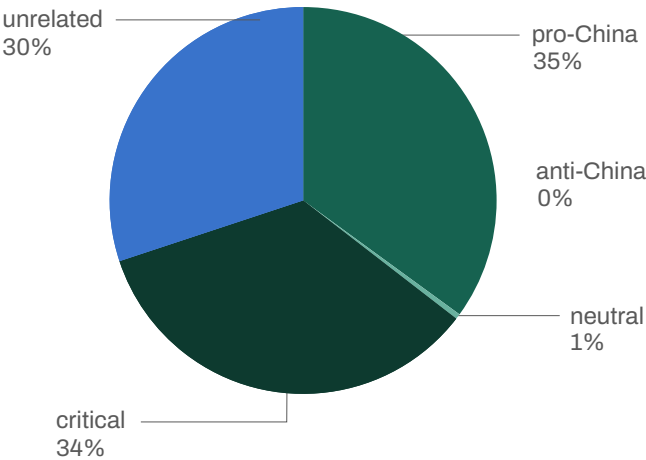


China often emphasizes that its understanding of the term “human rights” differs from the definition adopted by Western countries. Beijing is attempting to redirect attention from human rights violations to its achievements in improving living standards and reducing poverty.

Nearly one-third of the analyzed posts (469; 30.08%) did not refer to the keyword “human rights in China.” A nearly even distribution of content classified as pro-China and “critical” was observed – 546 (35.02%) and 537 (34.45%), respectively. With a difference of 0.57% between pro-China and critical posts and a measurement error of 3.765% for this keyword, it is impossible to determine which of the two was the dominant narrative. Furthermore, only 7 posts (0.45%) were classified as neutral. Of the 1,559 entries collected, 1,090 (69.92%) were directly related to the analyzed keyword.

17 Chinese: *bu tan zhengzhi* 不谈政治.

CHART IX. ANALYSIS OF THE SENTIMENT OF THE KEYWORD HUMAN RIGHTS IN CHINA.



The data analyzed can also be divided into subcategories based on their subject matter. These subcategories differ in the narrative they convey and their reception. Of these entries, the following topics accounted for over one-third (36.8%) of all entries.

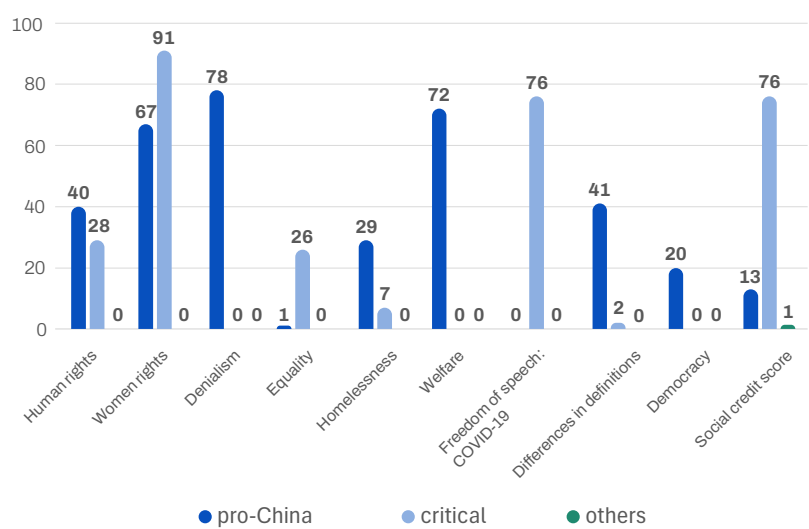
TABLE II. DIFFERENCE IN THE SENTIMENT BETWEEN SELECTED TOPICS IN RELATION TO THE HUMAN RIGHTS IN CHINA KEYWORD.

Woman rights	Social credit score	Denial of a given human rights issue	Freedom of speech: COVID-19
Total number of materials: 158 (14.5%)	89 (8.17%)	78 (7.16%)	76 (6.97%)
Critical			
91 (57.6%)	76 (85.4%)	0 (0%)	76 (100%)
Pro-China			
67 (42.4%)	13 (14.6%)	78 (100%)	0 (0%)

It is noticeable that criticism of the Chinese government is permitted on TikTok for certain topics. This particularly applies to women’s rights, social equality,

freedom of speech during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the social credit system. At the same time, a strong pro-China narrative can be observed in the context of the PRC's political system: democracy and the Chinese understanding of human rights. The platform also promotes content portraying China as a “welfare state” (issues such as homelessness/poverty and social policies). This perception of China is promoted by Beijing due to its significant role in building a positive image of the country to external audiences.

CHART X. TOPICAL BREAKDOWN OF THE KEYWORD HUMAN RIGHTS IN CHINA (SELECTED TOPICS).

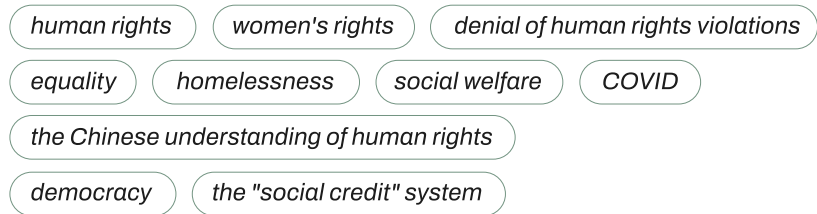


Content depicting prosperity in China becomes an argument for defending a political system that is fair to its own citizens. Such content may partially influence the perception of China's political system among Polish audiences, but it is most likely targeted at audiences in the Global South countries. In this way, the PRC can encourage economic cooperation between these countries by demonstrating the benefits of partnership with Beijing and offering a misleading vision of possible prosperity. As many as one-third of the collected posts were unrelated to the keyword, indicating that TikTok users are largely offered substitute topics that do not relate to the controversies surrounding human rights in China. This is evidence of Beijing's selective censorship process – blocking topics related to human rights abuses in China while simultaneously promoting materials about prosperity in China or other topics that build a positive image of the country. The promoted topics are considered “safe” by the authorities because they do not directly challenge their position, and criticism of them is permitted. This practice also aims to evoke a false sense of freedom of speech and is part of China's cognitive warfare aimed at presenting

the “correct” image of China. The recipient is isolated in a kind of information bubble (filter bubble) with access to a single type of information – most often propaganda – promoted by the platform’s algorithm.

2.6 Keyword *re-education camps in China*.

Thematic categories:



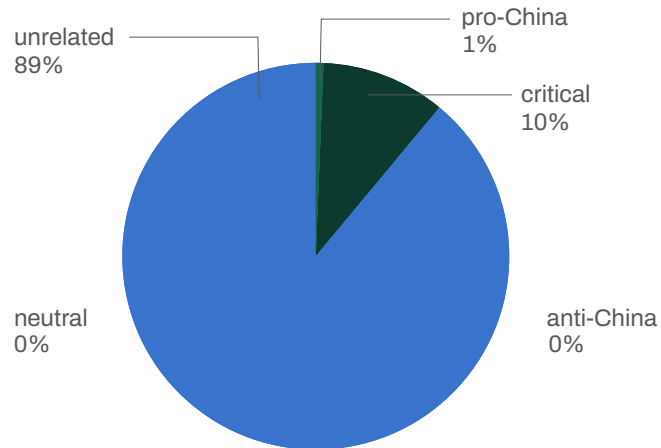
For years, the Chinese government staunchly opposed allegations of forced labor camps for the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang. Nevertheless, as recently as the 1950s, two distinct criminal justice systems were established in China. The first, now defunct, is the “re-education through labor” system,¹⁸ which operated from 1957 to 2013. Its primary goal was to rehabilitate criminals whose offenses were not significant to public order.

The second system, “reform through labor,”¹⁹ still plays a key role in the PRC’s justice system. The issue of so-called Uyghur re-education camps is a taboo subject in China, and discussions about them often provoke strong objections from Beijing. A distinct dominance of entries unrelated to the keyword was observed, accounting for 1,385 (88.9%) of the collected entries. Only 173 (11.1%) entries referred to re-education camps in the PRC. The results also show that materials related to this keyword were overwhelmingly critical of China, accounting for 94.22% (163).

¹⁸ Chinese: *laodong jiaoyang* 劳动教养.

¹⁹ Chinese: *laodong gaizao* 劳动改造.

CHART XI. ANALYSIS OF THE SENTIMENT OF THE KEYWORD RE-EDUCATION CAMPS IN CHINA.

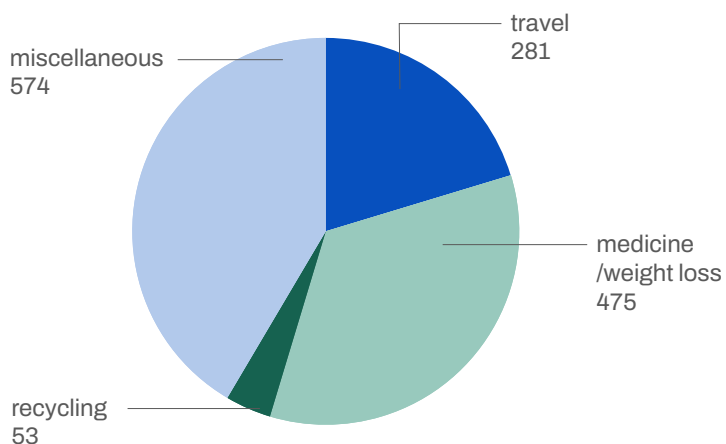


Posts classified as “unrelated” were divided into four main subcategories based on their content: “travel,” “medicine/weight loss,” “recycling,” and “miscellaneous.” Most of the analyzed content was characterized by low quality, which can be interpreted as spam or low-IQ content. A distinctive feature of this content is the dominance of fast-paced music, rapid cuts to individual frames, and the splicing of random frames. More importantly, this term showed a significant number of posts generated using artificial intelligence.

Of all the search terms analyzed, re-education camps in China keyword stood out due to the highest number of posts without any reference to the topic. This is related to the PRC’s campaign, described in section 2.1, aimed at specifically controlling discourse on the persecution of the Uyghur minority. Beijing calls the issue of persecution and placement of Uyghurs in forced labor camps the “lie of the century” (Zhang, 2021). TikTok operates under the principle of Xinjiang denialism, blocking and removing content related to this issue.

Furthermore, the platform attempts to redirect users’ attention to alternative topics by flooding them with low-quality content. The observed increase in similar and unrelated posts aims to discourage TikTok users from searching for content about re-education camps. This is one of the tools used by Beijing’s propaganda apparatus to control discussions related to controversies in China.

CHART XII. TOPICAL BREAKDOWN OF THE UNRELATED CONTENT OF THE
KEYWORD RE-EDUCATION CAMPS IN CHINA.²⁰



20 A different type of graph was used for Chart XII to better demonstrate a large and diverse number of subcategories within the *unrelated* category, which was not the case in any other keyword.

3. Conclusions and recommendations

The analysis of the search results for the six search terms included in the study revealed that considering the TikTok ownership and legal framework for Chinese information space - there are reasonable grounds to believe that the algorithm that positions content on the TikTok platform may be subject to manipulation and used for propaganda purposes. This applies but is not limited to activities aimed at shaping the image of a given country. The results show that the average Polish user of the platform, seeking information on topics related to China – especially sensitive issues such as Xinjiang, Tibet, human rights, and re-education camps – would receive content that was overwhelmingly pro-Chinese in nature. In the case of TikTok, there is no censorship mechanism (as in the Chinese-language version of the app, Douyin), and some topics were treated as a “safety valve” that ByteDance uses to deflect accusations of bias and collaboration with the Chinese government. Nevertheless, the study results indicate that it may seek to suppress topics deemed undesirable or controversial. This stands against the transparency and unrestricted access to information guaranteed by the EU and Polish law and demonstrates that apps from countries with controlled information environments may not be willing to sufficiently safeguard their products against information manipulation. The results of the conducted research indicate that there are at least several English-language accounts on the app responsible for spreading pro-Chinese propaganda messages. A few characteristics indicate their direct links to the Chinese propaganda mechanism, including they exclusively discuss topics important to the PRC’s message, promote an extremely pro-Chinese message, attempt to discredit individuals criticizing the CCP’s actions, and publish large amounts of professionally prepared content despite posing as, for example, ordinary tourists in China. Their scale of operations is large enough to contribute to shaping the views and attitudes of their audiences.

Currently, the scale of operations of Polish-language propaganda channels is relatively low, but it cannot be ruled out that this will increase in the future. Furthermore, it should be assumed that English-language content also represents an attractive source of information and knowledge for Polish users of the app.

Many of the materials classified as „pro-China” based on the adopted criteria contained statements or statements fully consistent with messages approved by the Publicity Department and other bodies directly subordinate to the CCP. The app does not designate state-owned channels as “state-controlled media,” as Facebook does. This means that it is impossible to determine which channels on the platform operate directly under government control.

Meanwhile, research conducted by, among others, Taiwanese iORG (iORG, 2024) indicates the existence of a network of channels directly uploading propaganda content from the Chinese version of the app (Douyin) to TikTok. Furthermore, a June 2025 DoubleThink Lab opinion poll (Hsu, 2025) revealed that Taiwanese frequent users of the platform are turning to pro-China and anti-American views. In case of this study, it was Mandarin-language content aimed at Taiwanese users, but it cannot be ruled out that the pro-Chinese content described in this report could similarly shape users’ (including Polish users) perception of China.

On a regional scale, as revealed in a report published in October 2025 by the Moldovan Centre for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation (Centrul Pentru Comunicare Strategica Si Contracarare A Dezinformarii, 2025), the platform’s non-transparent algorithm and lack of AI content moderation were used, among others, by entities linked to the Russian Federation to attempt to influence voters’ beliefs in the 2024 presidential elections.

The issue of an effective metric for measuring the “impact” of cognitive activities – including China’s propaganda offensive – is currently being addressed by global and European organizations researching FIMI (Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference), which refers to the manipulation of and interference in the information environment by external actors (such as Russia and China). Therefore, accurately measuring how content viewed on the TikTok platform might influence Polish-speaking users’ perceptions of topics related to China is very challenging. This is particularly true for the topics covered in the study, as due to Poland’s geographical distance from China and the lack of a significant Chinese diaspora in Poland, they are not a topic of daily discussion. Nevertheless, with China’s growing importance in the international arena, including Poles’ growing doubts about issues such as China’s support for Russia, it should be assumed that more people will turn to social media – including TikTok – to expand their knowledge on the topic.

The study recorded almost no anti-China content (apart from isolated content classified as unrelated because it did not relate to the search term and was intended solely to mock Chinese citizens). When examining content solely related to China, it is impossible to determine whether this was due to the algorithm’s

actions on this topic, or whether the platform was limiting the reach of any content deemed vulgar, xenophobic, or discriminatory based on nationality. To obtain a complete picture, it is recommended to conduct separate studies comparing, for example, anti-Chinese, anti-American, or anti-Japanese content present on the platform.

In summary, the examined material raises legitimate doubts about the impartiality of the TikTok app. It is impossible to definitively answer the question whether this is solely the result of the algorithm itself or the presence of a significant number of propaganda channels on the platform, whose activities are not moderated or labeled in any way. This raises doubts, especially considering the platform's subordination to a Chinese entity (ByteDance) operating within the Chinese legal system. Therefore, the app has significant potential to become a tool for shaping audience attitudes and views in the event of large-scale influence operations. Given the scale of Sino-Russian cooperation in information exchange, the TikTok app may pose a potential threat to the security of Polish users. Therefore, it is recommended not only to approach content appearing on the platform critically, but also to refrain from publishing sensitive data on the platform – this is particularly relevant for government entities and individuals associated with the state apparatus.

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