

# Silence on Xinjiang: Freedom of Expression on Chinese Social Media

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This research investigates whether Chinese netizens possess the freedom to express political opinions, particularly opinions that disagree with the Chinese state media narrative on controversial news, due to the cybersecurity policies in place since President Xi Jinping came into power in 2012. Previous literature notes how countries, with either democratic or authoritarian government models, have used fears of fake news to silence political commentary opposing the government-curated view. Literature also observes the rise of self-censorship among netizens in response to government threats of punishment for violating censorship regulations. To discover the state of the global media narrative and the Chinese state media narrative, this research found patterns in topics and framing of articles from Chinese state-supported news agencies and independent global news agencies to represent each narrative. Using these narrative frames, this research thematically coded hundreds of social media posts from the Chinese social media site Weibo and the global social media site Twitter posted between 2012 and 2022 to determine which posts align with which narrative and if politics could be discussed freely on Chinese social media in comparison to global social media. This research project predicted netizens on Chinese social media would self-censor political opinions opposing the Chinese state media narrative to avoid punishment. However, the overwhelming lack of political discussion on Weibo made the reason behind the lack of data, either censorship or self-censorship, difficult to determine. Analyzing why netizens on Chinese social media cannot or do not discuss controversial political topics on Weibo can aid in the creation of new policies meant to reduce censorship in China and increase freedom of expression.

Key words: Social media, China, Xinjiang



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Imagine a Chinese citizen hears about recent religious discrimination in Xinjiang from a friend, but this citizen hadn't heard anything about this issue in the news. They only see articles discussing efforts between CCP politicians and local Xinjiang authorities to cut down on terrorism in the region. All the articles warned that the West was lying about forced labor camps in Xinjiang. This citizen wants to know what other people are saying, so they log into Weibo, a popular Chinese social media website, and search posts on the issue. Nothing comes up but pictures from vacations and advertisements for Xinjiang food. This citizen grows frustrated and searches for footage of labor camps in Xinjiang. Only videos of happy, singing Uyghurs appear. They post a question about the issue and the lack of information on Weibo, hoping friends might have answers. Instead, the post is taken down and the citizen receives a government notice advising against asking questions for which the state has already provided answers.

The reality is the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) prevents freedom of expression on the Internet regarding discussion of controversial issues, like those concerning Xinjiang, through employment of censorship on social media as a means of maintaining the government's chosen narrative on each topic. Chinese state media under control of the CCP has projected an image of innocence surrounding mistreatment of the population of Uyghur Muslims in the Chinese autonomous region of Xinjiang. Recent articles by Chinese state media present allegations of misconduct towards Uyghurs in Xinjiang as false and intentionally damaging propaganda of foreign entities towards China ("So-called 'Xinjiang police files,'" 2022). State entities and media insist foreign countries, like the United States, perpetuate a false narrative for selfish political and economic gain ("US grills major," 2022). Continually releasing articles to fit the CCP's ideal image of China has resulted in increased state control of social media. With strict boundaries of what constitutes facts on controversial issues, Chinese netizens have little to no ability to discuss the validity of such facts without threat of punishment and censorship.

Media outlets in China post articles with a consistent portrayal of China to appease the CCP. State and media agreement on China's official account on an issue, especially a controversial one, confirm to audiences the notion that China functions without socio-political and ethnic turmoil. Chinese state media offered in English, such as the Xinhua News Agency, Global Times, and China Global Television Network, all perpetuate the official state narrative on controversial issues. Articles from all three agencies share the same message on Xinjiang-related stories, especially in denouncing allegations of mistreatment or oppression of Uyghurs by foreign countries and promoting a positive view of Xinjiang factories ("Xinjiang enterprises go," 2022). The concept of oneness, or togetherness, in the Chinese state reinforces an acknowledged, but largely unspoken, discouragement for dissent. If Chinese netizens could publicly disagree with the presented facts on a controversial

story or openly oppose the government's chosen account online, Chinese netizens would possess the right to freely express opinions without threat of punishment.

Social media posts in China experience censorship due to the CCP's strict regulations to the point where netizens often self-censor to avoid legal sanctions, especially after Xi Jinping's rise to power in 2012. Before the Internet's popularity in China, the government censored media outlets, like newspapers and television broadcasts, but government officials could not as easily regulate speech among citizens due to the country's vast size and population. With the Internet providing a central domain of communication, government censorship now possesses the capability to regulate discussions among citizens. China earned the title of having the most Internet users of any nation around 2008, and Xi Jinping became the leader of the People's Republic of China in 2012 ("20 Years of," 2014). The Internet and social media had become popular before Xi Jinping came into power, but President Xi's and the CCP's increased number of Internet restrictions under the guise of public safety has resulted in a significant decrease in freedom to disagree with the government online over the last decade. For example, netizens have utilized a variety of methods, including codifying messages with emoticons with similar meanings or pronunciation, to spread and hide censored messages (Bandurski, 2020). Self-censorship provides evidence against freedom of expression in Chinese Internet spaces. Without the ability to present materials and messages that the government disapproves of online, Chinese netizens lack the ability to freely discuss a vast number of topics on Chinese social media.

With the above information in mind, this research investigates how cybersecurity policies effective since President Xi Jinping came into power in 2012 impacted freedom of expression for Chinese citizens on the Internet. Following President Xi's inauguration tracks a clearly distinguished 10-year period when Chinese state policies evolved to include more restrictive online measures as the state of the Internet gained popularity around the world. To find answers, I searched English-language Chinese state media websites for articles pertaining to Xinjiang-related controversies posted from 2012-2022 to determine the official CCP stance on the topic. I then searched global news agencies, such as The New York Times and The Guardian, for similar article topics in the same date range for the global perspective on the controversies. Finally, I searched the Chinese social media platform Weibo and the global social media platform Twitter for posts on the same topics in the same date range to methodically code which perspectives, CCP-driven or global, exist among Chinese netizens. If Chinese netizens are not comfortable expressing opinions different from the state perspective on Chinese social media, then Chinese people lack freedom of expression on the Internet. Raising awareness may expose the issue, potentially leading to increased freedom of expression through netizens advocating for freedom and/or changes in government policy.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars analyzing online content find that governments use new legislation, emerging nationalist thought, and fears of spreading fake news to control online content and freedom of expression. The literature shows a pattern of changes in government action towards increasing nationwide censorship in Southeast Asia in the past two years. The expanding influence of social media on national populations provides new possibilities for avoiding and enforcing censorship to promote government policies. For example, multiple national governments in Southeast Asia have prevented discussion of controversial topics and criticism of the government in online content, directing international attention to possible human rights violations (Gilder, 2022, p. 293). Several nations, including Indonesia and Thailand, have instated new legislation and government-funded agencies focused on censorship to combat fake news (Dang, 2021, p. 48). This project reveals how the censorship policies of the authoritarian government in China affect netizens' perceptions of news on social media. Additionally, this research examines how censorship measures in China control national sentiment on topics of national and international scale and restrict online freedom of expression.

Comparative studies of Southeast Asian nations provide examples of how different government censorship strategies have resulted in either online repression or freedom of expression for citizens. Depending on the country, citizens may express opinions without threat of punishment or risk arrest due to online content moderation policies. Research finds whether governments choose strict or *laissez-faire* censorship legislation relates to a desire to curate propaganda or impose a democratic image. Investigations studying Vietnam find the country implements strict Internet monitoring and detainment of netizens for dissenting political views (Duong, 2017, p. 34). In some Southeast Asian countries, researchers observed harsh punishment for critical speech on the Internet “entrenches autocrats and encourages democratic backsliding” (Ong, 2021, p. 159). Despite attempts to increase censorship surrounding the 2008 elections in Malaysia, the overall censorship policy of the authoritarian government does not impede online freedom of expression (Liu, 2014, p. 802). International audiences, such as the United States, may view China's censorship policies as repressive in comparison to other states based on differing political and cultural expectations of government. However, this research into China's specific pattern of censorship seeks to uncover if a less repressive system of censorship exists where netizens experience a mix of restrictions and freedoms.

In recent years, scholars investigating the COVID-19 pandemic have discovered that many Southeast Asian governments have increased censorship measures since the beginning of 2020, resulting in restrictions of topics citizens may discuss online. Governments excuse added task forces and stricter legislation for the sake of protecting citizens from fake news regarding the

pandemic (while benefitting from reduced criticism of government policies). Because of the lack of an agreed upon definition of what constitutes fake news, many Southeast Asian governments have over-censored social media websites discussing the reality of how the pandemic and new pandemic-related policies negatively affect citizens (Dang, 2021). Recent findings reveal government agencies have taken advantage of the chaos surrounding the pandemic to silence the marginalized, causing difficulty for activists and bloggers to criticize the handling of the pandemic (Manley, 2021, p. 239). How China's attempts to combat the spread of harmful information about controversial topics, like the COVID-19 pandemic, have or have not increased the amount of censorship of other topics of national importance on social media will similarly reflect how the CCP's approach to national censorship will evolve for the future of online freedom of expression. If only large-scale topics experience censorship, the Chinese government may implement censorship based on a goal of maintaining their national reputation.

Previous research provides many explanations of why people of a nation may choose to self-censor. Self-censorship may function as a tactic to avoid punishment under an authoritarian regime or even occur without individuals' full awareness. Shen & Truex (2021) found authoritarian governments differ in the degree to which citizens criticize or feel comfortable criticizing the government based on whether the head of government faces electoral competition. Under authoritarian governments, like Russia, many journalists must self-censor and collaborate with the government by loyally writing state narratives in order to receive information to report and maintain employment (Pasti et al., 2022, p. 215). The amount of government support and degree of self-censorship do not always equate, as found in Robinson & Tannenbergh (2019), especially in the case of the Chinese Communist Party. As in the authoritarian states studied, investigating the policies of the Chinese state may show an encouragement of and a result of self-censorship among citizens when writing online. Discovering how netizens perceive state censorship, and subsequently self-censorship, determines the state of autonomy and freedom of expression on the Internet in China. If this research discovers citizens perceive self-censorship as necessary for functioning under the current government in China, then the data will reveal an infringement of citizens' freedom of expression in online Chinese spaces.

Like the comparative content analyses of the presented literature in Southeast Asia and in various authoritarian regimes, this paper explores the pattern of censorship on social media in China and the effects of such censorship on Chinese netizens. Scholars agree the type of government does not directly determine online freedom; however, international scholars often assume China possesses a low level of freedom of expression based on the country's authoritarian government. To understand the current situation and hypothesize about the future of Chinese social media censorship, this paper analyzes Chinese state media narratives compared to global media

narratives to see how state media influences citizens' online posting behavior on Chinese social media. Unlike past research, this paper postulates what self-censorship and netizen autonomy means for the overall freedom of expression in the country. This research provides evidence on the current state of freedom of expression on the Internet in China and predicts future trends of online freedom of expression. An emerging pattern of complete alignment with state narratives could show a need to overhaul the current system to prevent citizens' revolting over censorship. A pattern of allowing criticism of state narratives could potentially satisfy Chinese netizens enough to quash calls for censorship reform.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

To uncover the narratives and social commentary surrounding news on Xinjiang, this research utilizes secondary raw data from global news media, Chinese state media, global social media posts, and Chinese social media posts. I randomly selected three English-language global media agencies and three Chinese state media agencies to then find over twenty articles, ten from global media agencies and ten from Chinese state media agencies, on political Xinjiang-related news from each year between 2012-2022. After creating a Twitter account and searching on Weibo, both as anonymously as possible, I found Chinese- and English-language social media posts appearing within the week after the news articles were published. The global state media and Chinese state media provide comparable narratives, determined by diction and topic focus, on socio-political news about Xinjiang from 2012-2022. The similarities and differences between the narratives provide insight into how news about Xinjiang is discussed by the Chinese state versus the rest of the world. Analyzing the way state media frames Xinjiang news alongside how netizens on Chinese social media discuss such news showcases evidence of whether discussions outside of the state narrative experience censorship. Gathering data on which narratives of Xinjiang news, global or CCP, exist amongst Chinese netizens also suggests if political or controversial discussions can occur on Chinese social media.

To collect articles representing frames for Chinese state and global narratives regarding Xinjiang, I searched three Chinese state news agencies and three global news agencies for articles spanning from 2012-2022. I chose to search Global Times, China Global Television Network, and Xinhua News Agency to represent Chinese state-approved stories about Xinjiang. Al Jazeera, The Guardian, and The New York Times represent global narratives about Xinjiang news for this research. For all news databases, I randomly divided the eleven years to study among the databases, searching for articles published between 2012-2015 on The Guardian and Global Times, 2016-2019 on The New York Times and Xinhua News, and 2020-2022 on Al Jazeera and

CGTN. I chose one article from each calendar year from each news database using the data range search features and the search term “Xinjiang.” I read and selected articles with political themes and topics regarding Xinjiang after the search engines sorted articles by relevance and time. Randomizing the selection of news databases and years helps minimize bias in which articles represent the Chinese and global narratives. Using the same search term as well as only selecting politically-based articles also maintains relevance to the goals of this research project.

The original plan for collecting social media posts relating to Xinjiang news in China consisted of creating a Weibo and Twitter account. Technical issues prevented the creation of a Weibo account, but the research continued on Weibo due to the website’s allowance of non-users to search posts based on posting date and time and the website’s display of up to ten posts for each search for non-users. With this search ability and Twitter’s advanced search system, I compiled social media posts from both websites to gather data on whether Chinese netizens experience censorship or freedom of expression on social media. Specifically, I searched both Twitter and Weibo each day of week following the publication date of the articles for this research (Table 1). Like with the search for news articles, I only narrowed the search using the term “Xinjiang” in English and “新疆” in Simplified Chinese on Twitter and again in Simplified Chinese on Weibo to find the top ten relevant posts to the search. Unlike the news article search, posts underwent thematic coding regardless of political association, such as whether the poster was an individual or an organization and if the post’s topic was political. Using similar search terms and methods aligns the posts as closely to the news articles as possible. Thematic coding of posts compares narrative frames discovered in the collection and analysis of the global and Chinese state media articles.

Table 1:

Media	News Agency	Publication Year	Publication Month & Day
Chinese State	Global Times	2012	March 6
Global	The Guardian	2012	December 11
Chinese State	Global Times	2013	May 29
Global	The Guardian	2013	August 13
Chinese State	Global Times	2014	March 7
Global	The Guardian	2014	September 23
Global	The Guardian	2015	October 1
Chinese State	Global Times	2015	November 23
Global	New York Times	2016	January 3
Chinese State	Xinhua News	2016	January 15
Global	New York Times	2017	February 20
Chinese State	Xinhua News	2017	June 1
Chinese State	Xinhua News	2018	February 11
Global	New York Times	2018	November 6
Chinese State	Xinhua News	2019	November 19
Global	New York Times	2019	December 9
Chinese State	CGTN	2020	January 3
Global	Al Jazeera	2020	September 24
Chinese State	CGTN	2021	September 30
Global	Al Jazeera	2021	December 9
Global	Al Jazeera	2022	May 24
Chinese State	CGTN	2022	December 30



To appropriately analyze the articles and social media posts, I assigned two to three codes to each global media and Chinese state media article to indicate a distinct political narrative frame on Xinjiang-related news. I then designated each social media post with the same codes or marked the posts as “unrelated.” Using Microsoft Excel and basic statistics, I calculated the number of total posts and the percentages of posts from Weibo and Twitter aligning with each of the codes based on topic. After comparing the scale of percentages of posts according to each topic code, I compared the number of posts from official accounts or individual accounts and the number of posts in each language on Twitter. Analyzing the number of posts on Weibo and Twitter that contain politically themed messages about Xinjiang news shows whether controversial political topics can be discussed among Chinese netizens. Comparing the presence of political messages on Xinjiang news in each language, and which type of account posted the message, indicates comfortability on posting about such topics among Chinese netizens in comparison to global netizens and if only official, representative accounts are comfortable posting about politics. Disagreement with Chinese state narratives on political issues among Chinese netizens showcases freedom of expressing dissent on Chinese social media.

## ANALYSIS

### **Chinese State Media Narrative**

This research reveals Chinese state-supported news agencies largely publish articles depicting the Chinese Communist Party favorably, praising reform efforts and government policies regarding Xinjiang. News articles explain local and state policies to citizens and why the government has and continues to function with the well-being of citizens and the country in mind. Xinhua News Agency promotes a local Xinjiang government law prohibiting “differentiated treatment” in public spaces to convince Chinese citizens the government views people of all ethnicities equally (“China Exclusive: New,” 2016). In one of the only Chinese state media articles from this research with a listed author, Li’s (2015) article praises the Chinese state media for reporting details on a recent terrorist attack in Xinjiang and security procedure in the area following the attack. Researching the framing of Xinjiang-related news in Chinese state-supported media articles through word choice and themes reveals the government wants citizens to view policies and events positively. Seeing as the Chinese state media articles promote positivity around reform and ethnic solidarity, this research concludes that Chinese netizens posting these thoughts and feelings on social media would not experience censorship and legal punishment.

In addition to uplifting the ruling party and promoting solidarity among Chinese citizens, Chinese state media published anti-West narratives on Xin-



jiang news in the past decade. Many articles featured strategic attacks on journalists or state officials of Western nations in order to undermine anti-Chinese messages. Xinhua News Agency published an article about an unnamed Xinjiang government representative denying evidence from a New York Times report on the government's "de-radicalization efforts" ("Xinjiang's government spokesperson," 2019). Especially in the last five years, Chinese-supported media outlets published numerous articles about recent events and policies in Xinjiang with diction choices and framing tactics positioning the stories as exposing fake news from the West ("Fact Check: Lies," 2021). This depiction of division between China and the West in Chinese state media articles exemplifies how the Chinese state is willing to isolate the nation to protect the government's interests and, therefore, reveals how the state prioritizes defending the state media narrative. Calling out misinformation from Western reporters functions as a tactic of undermining non-state-regulated messages and signals to Chinese netizens to trust the state and relay state messages instead. Having to rely on the state for truth in reporting political news could make netizens resistant to aligning with global news media articles or reluctant to voice concern on Chinese state reporting on Chinese social media out of loyalty or fear.

The Chinese state narrative on Xinjiang-related news retains similar themes of ethnic and national unity throughout 2012 to 2022. The past decade has seen an evolution in leadership, policies, and ethnic tension in Xinjiang within the Chinese state, but the state media narrative largely remains the same. In 2013, an article about a CCP official touring Xinjiang wrote on efforts to foster "ethnic solidarity" through language and religious tolerance policies to improve Xinjiang's "stability" ("Yu tours Xinjiang," 2013). Emphasizing unity among Chinese people and opposing any foreign misinformation remain common themes of Chinese state media in 2022, especially following investigations into security and anti-terrorism efforts in Xinjiang ("So-called 'Xinjiang,'" 2022). Therefore, the government prioritizes maintaining the CCP's positive political reputation. This consistency in framing Xinjiang news to cater to CCP goals on Chinese state media may have encouraged the proliferation of pro-CCP posts or discouraged anti-CCP posts on social media throughout the decade.

### **Global Media Narrative**

Politically independent, globally published news agencies often emphasize harmful actions the Chinese state government commits when discussing Chinese politics in news articles, especially when concerning Xinjiang and Uyghur Muslims. How these global agencies describe China and the government could negatively influence global perceptions of the country and citizens. Globally published articles gathered for this research depict China as an enemy of human rights by focusing on the state's shortcomings and the country's commitment to the Chinese state narrative in the face of in-

ternational pressure from specific countries as well as the United Nations (Cumming-Bruce, 2018). Word choices describing China as “aggressive” and saying the country’s media campaign to defend policies in Xinjiang as going “on the offensive” portray the government as distanced from humanity and empathy (Buckley & Ramzy, 2019). The result of these kinds of descriptions of China could spread hatred and misinformation about Chinese policies and people, affecting how netizens discuss these topics on international social media. Keeping the facets of both the Chinese state media and the global media narratives in mind provides potential origins of biases toward political affiliations and reasons why such opinions proliferate on Chinese social media, like Weibo, and global social media, like Twitter.

While the goal of collecting news articles from independent news agencies from around the world was to represent the global narrative of Xinjiang-related news, some of the news articles presented a bias towards the politics of Western countries. In addition to questioning Chinese politics in general, many articles solely looked to Western countries for data on Chinese news, especially in countries where citizens and politicians may hold anti-Chinese sentiments due to international relations. Though this recent article discusses the investigation into human rights offenses in Xinjiang by an unofficial tribunal based in the United Kingdom, bias against the Chinese government in the tribunal’s home country and among members potentially affected the writing of the article to include harsh retellings of facts instead of neutral reporting (Roache, 2021). The Australian Strategic Policy Institute reported an investigation into the facts surrounding Xinjiang internment camps, and this article included how the organization’s findings contrast with the Chinese State’s findings and align with other Western nations, like the United States (“China running 380,” 2020). Like the potential connection between how the Chinese state media influences Chinese social media, global news media may influence global social media platforms. This influence may have inspired netizens, especially netizens from Western nations, to write anti-Chinese posts specifically in favor of Western countries and politics.

The narrative on Xinjiang-related news among globally published media agencies maintains similar goals of criticizing the Chinese government throughout the past decade. Similar to Chinese state media, global news articles maintained consistency in topic selection and framing, such as calling out the Chinese government for political wrongdoings and speaking with whistleblowers on the state of Xinjiang. An example article from 2012 describes China as oppressive and radical with the conscious mention of torture being an alleged common practice to incite confessions in the Chinese court system (“China sentences three,” 2012). Al Jazeera published an article in 2022 concerning the Xinjiang Police Files, a document aimed at providing documentary and photographic evidence of human rights abuses in Xinjiang internment camps, which focuses primarily on the state police force’s

use of violence and discrimination in the region (“Xinjiang leak reveals,” 2022). Seeing as the global news articles retain a similar consistency in topic throughout the decade as the Chinese state media articles do, such consistency could influence global netizens on social media. If the global media articles influence global netizens, but not Chinese netizens, posts drawing from the framing tactics of these global media agencies potentially appear more on global social media than on Chinese social media.

Politics on Social Media

Compared to posts from the Chinese social media site Weibo, Twitter contained significantly more politically motivated posts, suggesting a higher level of comfort when discussing politics on Twitter. Due to Twitter’s tendency to maintain a low level of censorship and encourage free discussion about politics in the past, this phenomenon occurred according to initial predictions. Looking at the total number of politics-related posts on Twitter and Weibo in Figures 1, 2, and 3, the number of political posts on Twitter in English was 127, 159 on Twitter in Simplified Chinese, and 27 on Weibo. The percentage of political posts on Weibo only amounted to 3.9%, while political tweets made up the majority of tweets in both English and Simplified Chinese (see Figures 1, 2, & 3). Observing Twitter as a comparison for what

Figure 1:

Twitter in English	Total # of Posts	Percentage of Total Posts
Political -CCP	77	35.2%
Political +CCP	15	6.8%
Political News (no opinion)	35	16.0%

Figure 2:

Weibo	Total # of Posts	Percentage of Total Posts
Political	7	1.0%
Political News (no opinion)	20	2.9%

Figure 3:

Twitter in Simplified Chinese	Total # of Posts	Percentage of Total Posts
Political -CCP	76	34.5%
Political +CCP	36	16.4%
Political News (no opinion)	47	21.4%

political opinions netizens on Weibo might wish to express shows the extent of abnormality in finding next to no political discussion on Weibo. From this observation, netizens on Weibo either experience a high degree of political censorship or heavily self-censor political opinions.

Globally sourced opinions on Twitter tend to reflect a Western, anti-CCP bias. Such opinions often speak negatively about Chinese state policies and actions in Xinjiang, especially when discussing newly discovered information on forced labor camps in the area. Additionally, these posters may also praise Western countries' investigations or reporting on news about Xinjiang. The number of English-language tweets complaining about or outright attacking CCP policies and practices outnumbers the supportive posts by 62 posts (Figure 1). This same figure also indicates how Western-biased and anti-CCP tweets comprise a significantly larger percentage of political English-language tweets compared to pro-CCP and neutral political news tweets. Seeing as global social media posts reflect the global media narrative on Xinjiang-related news, the Weibo posts appear likely to reflect the same situation with Chinese state media influencing Chinese social media. However, this assumed parallel fails to account for the differences in government control over online content in China compared to the Western-biased but international Twitter platform. Only a large data pool of posts from Weibo could reveal if the possible parallels of influence exist.

While the political affiliations of netizens on Weibo remain difficult to predict, netizens on Twitter appear biased towards the global media narrative. Political data from Twitter indicate positive feelings towards Western governments and negative feelings towards the Chinese state government in both Simplified Chinese and English. Among political discussion on Twitter in English and Simplified Chinese, the highest category of political posts includes anti-CCP and or pro-West themes, according to Figures 1 and 3. Furthermore, the percentage of neutral political tweets varies slightly among the studied languages; however, the percentage of pro-CCP and or anti-West tweets increased only about ten percent when observing tweets posted in Simplified Chinese compared to tweets in English. This data could indicate fluent users of Simplified Chinese share political opinions with fluent users of English. Generally, such data may show Chinese netizens on Weibo may share some political opinions with Twitter users but lack the comfort or ability to post such opinions on Weibo due to state censorship policies.

Twitter, in both Simplified Chinese and English, showcases posts supporting and condemning the Chinese Communist Party and poor treatment of Uyghurs. Though evidence proves Twitter contains a large percentage of political posts, assumptions about increased self-censorship among netizens using Simplified Chinese online predicted a lack of dissent toward the CCP on tweets in Simplified Chinese. Figures 1 and 3 show the percentage of total posts indicating a dislike for the CCP and/or forced labor of Uyghurs in Xinjiang was around 35% on posts in Simplified Chinese as well as En-

glish. While pro-CCP tweets in Simplified Chinese outnumber supportive tweets in English, pro-CCP tweets do not experience censorship on Twitter (see Figures 1 & 3). This phenomenon of the two studied languages containing similar levels of complaints about the CCP supports the hypothesis of self-censorship on Chinese social media. Potentially, netizens posting on Twitter in Simplified Chinese, the primary written language of the People's Republic of China, post political opinions that netizens in the PRC hold as well. However, Twitter users may post in fluent Simplified Chinese without living in the PRC.

### **Lacking Representation & Opinions**

Looking at the number of posts from social media accounts representing individuals instead of organizations or governments determines the degree of freedom of expression on each social media site. Posts from organizations or government agencies experience internal and external regulation and do not represent individual opinions. A higher volume of individual accounts posting on social media could reveal a higher level of freedom of expression and better represents individual opinions. Figures 4 and 5 show how Weibo posts and Twitter posts in English contain similar percentages of total posts from individuals at around 75%. Twitter posts in Simplified Chinese reveal a difference in percentage of total posts from individuals than on Weibo with 94% on Twitter and 75% on Weibo (see Figures 4 and 6). The hypothesis of this research assumed individuals on Weibo would experience more censorship than individuals on Twitter, especially regarding English tweets, and one method of censorship would be to have organizations overwhelm individual accounts to broadcast the Chinese state narrative on Weibo. Since both English Twitter posts and Weibo posts show a similar ratio of individual to official account posts, the data disproves this assumption.

Figure 6:

Twitter in Simplified Chinese	Official Posts	Individual Posts	Total Posts:
<b>Total # of Each:</b>	14	206	220
<b>Percentage of Total:</b>	6%	94%	

Censorship policies may keep netizens on Weibo from discussing politics, especially national political policies and practices on Chinese social media. Potentially, fear of carceral punishment may influence netizens to self-censor when tempted to post about politics, regardless of bias for or against the Chinese Communist Party. Figures 4 and 7 provide evidence of politics and political news receiving significantly fewer posts than other top-

ics with only 7 posts discussing a political opinion on Weibo and 20 of the 679 posts being about political news. The vast majority of posts on Weibo discussed unapplicable topics, according to this research’s coding system, because the content was not distinguishable enough to create new categories, like discussion of trips to Xinjiang or netizens’ favorite celebrities from Xinjiang (Figure 8). Because the data merely reveals a lack of evidence, difficulties arise in determining the cause of this lack of evidence. This research can only hypothesize reasons of why next to no politically supportive or dismissive posts regarding the Chinese government’s actions in Xinjiang exist on Weibo.

Figure 7:

Weibo	Official	Individual
Political	3	4
Political News (no opinion)	15	5
Economic	11	5
Culture	10	8
Food	11	88
Sports	14	40
NA (not applicable)	106	359

Figure 8:

Weibo	Total # of Posts	Percentage of Total Posts
Economic	16	2.4%
Culture	18	2.7%
Food	99	14.6%
Sports	54	8.0%
NA (not applicable)	465	68.5%

Assumptions may predict tweets in Simplified Chinese would replicate the lack of political posts on Weibo and result in fewer political tweets. However, tweets in Simplified Chinese turned out to be just as political as tweets in English. This occurrence could suggest that censorship and self-censorship on Chinese social media prevent netizens from having freedom of expression online. The total number of political tweets in Simplified Chinese outnumbered political tweets in English by about 30 tweets, according to Fig-

ures 1 and 3. The same figures show tweets on political news and anti-CCP sentiments exist as similar percentages of the total tweets. No evidence from this study reveals if or how tweets and Weibo posts resemble each other. Without a direct comparison of posts on each social media website, the data cannot draw conclusions about whether tweets reflect what Chinese netizens want to post about without the threat of censorship.

Because netizens on Weibo decide against discussing politics or lack the freedom to discuss politics on Weibo, the research could not conclude on the distribution of netizens' overall political affiliations. The data does not reveal whether Chinese netizens support the Chinese Communist Party or wish to critique the Chinese state government. Figures 2 and 7 show only one percent of all posts on Weibo appeared political and opinionated, but only four of those posts came from individuals instead of the government. Due to the majority of posts discussing inapplicable topics, Weibo lacks the wealth of political opinion Twitter has apart from the occasional local government conflict among individuals or state news media posting anti-Western propaganda (see Figures 1, 3, & 8). A lack of evidence cannot explain the existence of a phenomenon. Therefore, this research supports the need for further exploration to fully determine if Chinese netizens lack autonomy when posting political opinions on Weibo or self-censor to avoid legal punishment.

## DISCUSSION

### Policy Implications

Data from this research and past literature suggest a need for an international agreement to reduce the overall amount of censorship in the world. An internationally respected and powerful organization, such as the United Nations, should organize a joint policy between China and other U.N. member states to agree on how to allow for greater freedom of expression for netizens on social media. The nations should primarily agree to lift restrictions on political discussion on all social media sites that citizens use in each country and agree to form a non-partisan board of representatives from different parts of the world with education on social media and censorship to ensure compliance with the agreement. Previous literature shows journalists in some nations write political propaganda according to government desires in order to maintain employment, so allowing for freer political discussion could prevent governments from spreading corruption in this way (Pasti et al., 2022, p. 215). The data from this project showed a clear lack of political opinions present on Weibo, especially when compared to political opinions on Twitter, revealing netizens feel discouraged from discussing politics in some way. Therefore, reducing the amount of restrictions on political discussion will allow netizens to post opinions in discussions about local, national, and international politics without fear. Coming to an international agreement will prevent certain countries from feeling attacked for current



censorship policies and encourage collaboration between nations with differing ideals.

The lack of conclusive data explaining the reason behind a lack of political opinion on Weibo prompts a proposal for an international, independent study of Chinese users of Weibo. Without involvement from the Chinese government, an independent group of internationally-based, unbiased scholars should conduct a study asking users of Weibo in China questions to judge netizens' level of comfort with expressing political opinions online. As previous research explains, the amount of government support and degree of self-censorship among netizens do not always equate, so China's authoritarian government may wish to reduce censorship and punishments for violating censorship policies to maintain public support (Robinson & Tannenbunrg, 2019). The divide between pro- and anti-CCP posts in this research among netizens using Simplified Chinese on Twitter provides evidence of varying political affiliations and opinions netizens may also hold on Weibo. An independent research study will uncover why posts on Weibo are less often political compared to Twitter without anti-Chinese or anti-Western bias. With more knowledge on the reason behind this lack of free expression on politics, policymakers would possess data to know the origin of the problem and solve underlying issues, granting users of Weibo more freedom to discuss politics.

### **Global Relevancy**

The future of communication lies within people's rights to communicate online, and censorship preventing important discussions, like politics, restricts human rights of free speech. Both existing literature and this research agree censoring political opinions online results in reduced communication between netizens and less public critique of governments. Previous literature has observed a trend of carceral punishment for netizens criticizing government practices within Southeast Asian countries, resulting in destabilization of democracies in the area (Ong, 2021, p. 159). The articles representing the Chinese state narrative and the global narrative on Xinjiang-related events in this research represent how different nations communicate news. Without the ability to criticize local, national, or international politics, injustice and corruption can fester and result in an increase in oppression. Acknowledging censorship and the consequences of censorship will increase international communication and freedom of expression for netizens on a global scale.

The general population should be concerned about censorship because it can function as an effective method for governments to hide corruption. Increasing the amount of censorship on certain topics, especially political and controversial topics, could prevent citizens from nations with a high amount of censorship from discovering critical information on corrupt political funding, election fraud, and more. In the past few years, research shows governments around the world have used the global pandemic to censor activists

and hide government malpractice (Manley, 2021, p. 239). This research found posts on Twitter expressed pro-Western as well as pro-Chinese state sentiments, showcasing the diversity of opinions existing without over-censoring political opinion. Censorship in other countries connects to and encourages research of censorship in one's own country, resulting in catching and punishing cases of political corruption. Advocating against political censorship will lead to the insurance of maintaining and increasing the right to express political opinions for all people.

## CONCLUSION

Currently, netizens in China lack complete freedom for posting on the Chinese social media site Weibo. Chinese netizens lack the ability to or make a conscious choice not to discuss politics on Weibo, especially about controversial political topics. Without the freedom to discuss such topics, Chinese netizens lack overall autonomy on social media. The data could not conclude the reasoning behind the non-existence of political posts on Weibo due to a lack of political posts. However, the fact that political posts exist on Twitter but not on Weibo suggests such opinions should exist on Weibo. Therefore, some reason must exist, whether it be government policy and or individual choice, explaining why political posts by individuals do not appear on Weibo at the studied times. This data implies a lack of freedom on the Internet for Chinese netizens and an over-censorship of online content in China, meaning people in China are not allowed to or are afraid to post political opinions. Barring discussion of individuals' political affiliations, individuals should be able to post about politics on the Internet freely. As China gains political and economic power, the millions of Internet users in China should be able to have freedom of expression on social media domains to point out corruption and issues with political policies within and outside of the country to maintain individual autonomy and keep political powers from abusing human rights.

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