

China's soft power narratives: Influencers as intermediaries in Sweden

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Summary

- China has refined its communication strategy in Europe, with a new focus on influence through social media platforms and marketing trips to China for influencers as a central instrument.
- Influencer-based campaigns containing Chinese soft power narratives have emerged on Swedish social media, possibly as a systematic attempt to influence Swedish audiences with targeted messaging.
- The normalisation of sponsored pro-China content globally raises questions about objectivity and influencers' responsibility for disseminating biased content.

Social media: A new arena for Chinese influence

In the past decade, [social media](#) has evolved to become an influential arena for opinion formation. Asian countries such as [Japan and South Korea](#) have established a strong social media presence abroad through the growing popularity of their popular culture, food and beauty trends. [China](#) is not far behind in [incorporating social media platforms](#) into its strategic use of soft power to imprint positive views of China. The goal is to systematically [disseminate state-aligned narratives](#) that strengthen China's international image and increase its legitimacy. Foreign influencers have become significant [intermediaries](#) in the process of spreading such narratives by [accepting offers](#) to travel to China in exchange for posting content on social media. The content of these collaborations rarely provides objective representation of Chinese society and its political realities, and could therefore be classified as misrepresentation. [Europe](#) is becoming an increasingly important region for the deployment of this strategy.

Trips sponsored by Chinese government actors were a common type of co-optation long before the emergence of digital social media. However, collaborations with social media content creators whereby state-affiliated actors indirectly shape information flows through third parties pose new questions. In particular, transparency in [these partnerships](#) and the degree of editorial interference in the content warrant further examination. In contrast to professional journalists writing for traditional media, influencers are not bound by media ethics or requirements to be objective. This can be problematic if unfiltered information is presented without mentioning sources, thereby misleading the wider public.

The background to [these operations](#) is the Chinese Communist Party's aim to make official Chinese narratives more easily digestible for an international audience. Efforts to spread [soft power](#) increased following Xi Jinping's (习近平) inauguration as leader in 2012. Initiatives to establish a more positive image of China refocused the media strategy for spreading Chinese narratives.

Deploying Swedish influencers: Hit or miss?

The analysis below provides examples of how the phenomenon of influencer collaborations has played out in Sweden. The focus of the analysis is two sponsored trips to China in recent years with content published on the social media platform Instagram. These cases were among the first to be widely circulated on Swedish social media. Both trips follow the usual pattern for China's influencer trips, but each differs in its level of transparency and scope regarding the collaboration.

The first trip took place in October 2019 and the destination was Beijing. The newspaper Aftonbladet reported that some of the most influential [Swedish influencers](#) at the time had been offered payment to document and post material from the trip on social media. At the time of the planned collaboration, awareness about so-called re-education camps targeting Uighurs in Xinjiang had been heightened internationally, sparking [widespread criticism](#) of China in Sweden. The Chinese authorities described these camps as educational institutions for countering extremism and subversion. However, evidence has led several human rights organizations to classify the treatment of Uighurs as a [crime against humanity](#).

Consequently, several of the [influencers cancelled](#) their participation in the trip, referring to the injustices in Xinjiang. The participants who cancelled were ultimately replaced by four influencers with significantly fewer followers on social media, but the trip took place as planned. The Chinese sponsors were not explicitly identified in the published content, which could constitute a violation of Swedish marketing law. Even if this had no known legal consequences for the parties in this case, taking that risk could arguably signify acknowledgement of the controversy concerning Chinese sponsorship.

The second case was a sponsored trip planned in connection with implementation of a new visa-free policy for Swedish citizens in November 2025. A [marketing campaign](#) was planned by [the China Cultural Center in Stockholm](#), which followed a similar template to the previous arrangements, promoting tourism and Chinese culture on Instagram and Youtube. The Center is one of many similar ones established by China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism to heighten knowledge of Chinese culture around the world.

The 2025 trip had ten participants, but only three of these could be classified as professional social media influencers. All three also participated on the 2019 trip. By this time however, the three had well-established social media profiles. On this occasion, their social media posts openly stated that the trip had been sponsored by the China Cultural Center and the [state-owned Air China](#).

The three influencers has a presence on different social media platforms, with predominately travel and lifestyle content. One is most influential on Tiktok and used the platform to livestream the trip. Currently, this influencer has almost 13 million likes on Tiktok and close to 400,000 followers. The other two have their biggest following on Instagram and mainly posted content from the trip on Instagram. They operate a shared Instagram account with close to 100 000 followers.

Increased efforts, fewer critical reactions

Content from the two social media collaborations comprised lifestyle-oriented storytelling, emphasising tourism, food, urban development and technological innovation. An overwhelming majority of the posts from both collaborations were of Chinese modern architecture and AI technology, but there were also pictures of more traditional buildings such as drum towers and old bridges. On the second trip, participants went on several sightseeing tours exploring nature and mines, ate viral Chinese food and participated in traditional tea ceremonies. All in all, the content arguably portrays a softer, depoliticized image of China.

An element also specific to the 2025 collaboration was the portrayal of Chinese ethnic minorities. While visiting the Dali Dong village in the South-eastern Guizhou Province, the influencers posed for photographs with local residents, all of whom were pictured with big smiles on their faces. The descriptions on these pictures emphasise the village as traditional, referencing the Qing dynasty. It is described as well-kept and “intended” for the Dali Dong minority. The choice of words and the specific narratives used in these posts paint a picture of a tolerant, multicultural China, ignoring any of the problematic aspects of China’s policy on ethnic minorities, despite evidence that [discrimination against ethnic minorities](#) is in fact well established. Even if none of the posts explicitly contradicted this evidence, it may appear politically insensitive to post such content given the reality of the situation for ethnic minorities in China.

It is not uncommon for Chinese sponsored trips to visit Chinese regions predominately inhabited by ethnic minorities. In this case the participants visited the Dali Dong village, but there have also been examples of influencers [travelling to Xinjiang region](#) to post on social media. Such portrayals have been criticised for misrepresenting the difficult living conditions of and injustices against minorities in Xinjiang.

The two Instagram-oriented profiles posted 30 times on Instagram in connection with the 2025 trip. This is a significant increase compared to the first trip, which only generated five posts on Instagram by the same two profiles. The descriptions of the pictures posted in 2025 discuss in detail the marvels of Guizhou province, in expressions that often echo typical Chinese state narratives. In comparison, the posts from the 2019 partnership were short and contained very few such descriptions.

In terms of media coverage, the campaign in 2025 generated no discernible criticism in Swedish news outlets. The first trip generated criticism in newspapers and among the influencer and blogger community. This criticism, and the initial cancellation by the original participants in 2019, subsequently limited the number of posts, which led to less exposure for the sponsors and therefore a more modest commercial success. Similar examples of influencer trips have received heavy criticism within the influencer community in countries such as [Czechia, Poland and the United States](#). Whether the lack of discussion of the most recent Swedish collaboration is the result of soft power influencing attitudes among the Swedish public and in the media landscape is open to question.

China's influencer collaborations: The broader strategic pattern

While there have been relatively few cases of influencer collaborations in Sweden so far, they appear to reflect the broader pattern of China's external engagement. Since attempts to [influence traditional media](#) outlets in Sweden have been fairly unsuccessful, this could be the next step in its soft power efforts. Over time, such influence on the information landscape could contribute to incremental shifts in [public perceptions](#), particularly among younger people who primarily consume news and information through social media platforms.

In parallel with such collaborations, influencers producing China-friendly content are also increasingly present on European social media. It is common for foreign influencers based in China to portray everyday life in the country, its economic development and social stability in strongly positive terms. Many of these social media accounts have over 1 million followers on Instagram and reach large international audiences, functioning as informal ambassadors for China.

The responses to influencer collaborations with authoritarian states should not be alarmist, but do require awareness. As digital platforms continue to redefine the information environment, state-driven influence will increasingly operate through informal, commercial and culturally embedded channels rather than traditional propaganda outlets.



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About the Swedish National China Centre

The Swedish National China Centre was established in 2021 as an independent unit at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI). The Centre conducts policy-relevant research and aims to contribute to a long-term improvement in the state of China-related knowledge in Sweden. UI's publications undergo internal quality control. Any views expressed are those of the author.