

“RULES WERE FOLLOWED, ALLEGATIONS ARE FALSE”: THE SPIRAL OF INFORMATIONAL OPACITY IN THAILAND’S DEPORTATION OF UYGHURS

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In February 2025, Thailand deported 40 Uyghur detainees to China under the cover of darkness, amid contradictory official statements, delayed disclosures, and staged displays of transparency. This article introduces the concept of a spiral of informational opacity to capture how competing narratives, selective visibility, and asymmetrical power relations erode the conditions of knowledge in multi-actor information environments, rendering verification structurally impossible. Drawing on critical discourse analysis, the article identifies three mechanisms: cumulative sedimentation, mutual delegitimization, and structural instrumentalization. It contributes to disinformation studies by shifting attention from false content to conditions of verifiability, and to migration studies by conceptualizing deportation as epistemic exclusion.

On the night of February 27, 2025, the Thai government deported 40 detained Uyghurs to China. Conducted under the cover of darkness and without institutional transparency, the operation immediately sparked outrage from international human rights organizations, activists and journalists. As early as January 2025, rumors were circulating about a possible deportation. Anticipating the event, few activists and journa-

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lists positioned themselves outside the detention center, managing to film police trucks with tinted windows leaving the premises. Faced with the authorities² opacity, they resorted to tracking the China Southern Airlines flight via the application FlightRadar24 to confirm the aerial movements (Thai Enquirer, 2025).

The 40 deportees were part of a larger group of approximately 350 Uyghurs who had fled Xinjiang in 2014, hoping to reach Turkey via Southeast Asia. Detained in Thailand for over a decade without access to lawyers, relatives, or institutional support, these individuals were classified as illegal migrants, as Thailand never signed the 1951 Refugee Convention. China demanded their return, citing terrorism without clear evidence (Sarkar, 2025). They stood at the crossroads of overlapping ethnic, religious, political, and legal inequalities.

After the deportation, Thai and Chinese officials released a series of statements asserting that the deportees had returned voluntarily and would be treated humanely, designed to obscure the operation's coercive nature. This included images depicting staged "family reunions" after ten years of separation. The Uyghurs themselves were never able to speak or testify freely; their voices were replaced by carefully curated fragments that served official narratives (Taweepol & Wangcharoenpaisal, 2025). Competing claims, selective disclosures, and staged transparency generated a dense informational fog in which distinguishing verifiable facts from scripted performances became nearly impossible. This systematic confusion creates a double injustice: human invisibility and informational inequality.

To understand these overlapping dynamics, the article draws on information disorder scholarship while addressing its conceptual limits. Although Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) typology of information disorders based on intent offers a useful entry point, the informational environment surrounding the deportation exceeds intent-based categories: narratives overlap, omissions and ambiguities proliferate, and verification becomes structurally difficult (Chadwick & Stanyer, 2022; Kuo & Marwick, 2021). Building on work that conceptualizes opacity as an actively produced condition rather than a mere absence of information (Fenster, 2006; Ananny & Crawford, 2018; Lavigne *et al.*,

2 These 40 individuals were part of a larger original group of Uyghur men, women, and children estimated at over 350 people, though the exact number remains uncertain. Of this group, 172 were resettled in Turkey, 109 were deported back to China, and five died due to inadequate medical care before the deportation of 2025 (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

2022; Rentería, 2024a, 2024b), the article introduces the concept of a spiral of informational opacity to explain how competing narratives and asymmetrical power relations progressively erode the conditions under which truth can be reconstructed. By doing so, the article contributes to disinformation research by shifting the focus from false content to the structural conditions of verifiability, and to migration studies by conceptualizing deportation as a process of epistemic exclusion and not solely a legal or humanitarian failure.

The article addresses the following research question: under what conditions does multi-actor information production shape the distribution of epistemic authority, and through which mechanisms can this process generate epistemic inequality rather than transparency in the 2025 Uyghur deportation case?

To answer this question, the article adopts a qualitative approach grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis. It is based on a corpus of official statements, media coverage, and NGO materials from January to March 2025. This period encompasses the pre-deportation and post-deportation phases, leading up to the press trip to Xinjiang organized by the Thai and Chinese governments.

The article is structured in six sections. The first develops the conceptual framework, moving from information disorder to information control and introducing the concept of the spiral of informational opacity. The second examines the multilayered inequalities shaping Uyghur marginalization. The third outlines the methodological approach and corpus. The fourth, fifth and sixth sections analyze the deportation in three phases: uncertainty, reframing and controlled transparency, before the conclusion discusses the broader implications for research on disinformation, migration governance and information politics.

1. From information disorder to spiral of informational opacity

1.1. Rethinking information disorder

In Thailand, the term “fake news” (*khao bplom*) has become a central instrument of state communication. Popularized by government agencies, such as the Anti-Fake News Center, the term functions as an analytical category, but even more as a political instrument, used to

delegitimize dissent, silence criticism, and consolidate state authority (Asia Center, 2023). It is routinely applied to satire, opposition claims, or even verified reports that challenge official narratives, often without clear criteria. In this context, distinctions between different forms of misleading content are deliberately blurred. Yet critical media scholarship emphasizes the need for conceptual precision.

Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017, p. 20) framework of information disorder offers a foundational typology: disinformation refers to intentionally false or harmful content; misinformation to false content shared without intent to harm; and malinformation to information based on reality shared with malicious purpose.

As Waisbord (2018, p. 1869) argues, "misinformation and contested truths are constitutive of today's dynamics, multilayered, chaotic public communication." This perspective invites a shift away from isolated falsehoods toward an examination of the structural conditions under which truth itself becomes unstable. Research shows that what appears as disinformation often emerges from hybrid processes mixing true and false elements (Tandoc *et al.*, 2018; Chadwick & Stanyer, 2022), discursive ambiguity (Ross & Rivers, 2018), and strategic framing rather than clearly identifiable deception. Further, studies show that actors in positions of authority often process or select information in ways consistent with their interests, roles, or group alignments (Kahan, 2013), while factual corrections have limited impact when they contradict those interests (Nyhan & Reifler, 2015). Taken together, these insights reinforce the idea that intent is rarely observable and that intent-based distinctions remain analytically fragile.

Studies on media manipulation also highlight that disinformation actors rely on obfuscation, saturation, and genre mimicry, further dissolving the boundary between misinformation and disinformation (Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). Moreover, recent work warns that intent-based categories may be "analytically fragile" (Jack, 2017) or even misleading when applied to complex, multi-actor environments where informational responsibility is distributed (Soliman & Rinta-Kahila, 2023). Together, this literature underscores that contemporary information disorder is less about isolating falsehoods than understanding how hybrid and ambiguous narratives circulate within asymmetrical power structures.

In the Uyghur deportation case, the limits of intent-based distinctions become particularly visible. Multiple actors, including Thai, Chinese and US state officials, media organizations, NGOs, and inter-

national observers, produce competing interpretations of an event in which the primary subjects cannot speak. Claims circulate within environments structured by strategic confusion, where ambiguity is actively mobilized, and where the classification of a claim becomes politically negotiated and not necessarily analytically grounded (Sombatpoonsiri & Nguyen, 2022). Under such conditions, intentionality becomes empirically untraceable and analytically fragile (Rosenfeld & Wallace, 2024).

Uyghur voices are replaced by mediated fragments, conjectures, and instrumentalized representations. The result is a layered and contradictory information environment in which the deported Uyghurs become both the object and the casualty of narrative production: spoken about, for, and against, but never with.

For this reason, intent-based categories within the information disorder framework remain analytically insufficient for this case. Focusing on intentional falsehood obscures how the informational landscape surrounding the deportation is shaped by enforced silence, strategic ambiguity, selective visibility, narrative substitution, and the structural absence of Uyghur testimony. These dynamics operate independently of identifiable intent and point toward a broader systemic condition rather than discrete acts of disinformation.

1.2. From information disorder to conceptualizing the spiral of informational opacity

1.2.1. Conditions of verifiability and produced opacity

The limitations identified in the previous section invite a shift from assessing whether specific claims are true or false to examining the power relations governing their circulation. The focus moves from factual accuracy to the conditions that make verification difficult. Rosenfeld and Wallace show that “control and manipulation are closely connected” (2024, p. 263). Governments combine censorship, calibrated propaganda and strategic ambiguity to obstruct verification, while regimes mix verifiable elements with partial fabrications to maintain plausibility while shaping interpretation (Gehlbach *et al.*, 2016). Truth becomes diffuse, costly to reconstruct and difficult to stabilize.

Confining these dynamics to state action, however, overlooks a central feature of contemporary information environments. A plurality of actors contributes to the production of competing narratives, inclu-

ding those engaged in human rights advocacy or counter-information. As Kuo and Marwick argue (2021), these interventions are shaped by power relations, institutional constraints and political objectives, which influence what is selected, omitted or amplified. NGOs, journalists and diasporic networks therefore also produce their own framings. As Free-lon, Bossetta, Wells *et al.* (2022) note, digital platforms further encourage the unintentional amplification of partial or contested content through platform logics, ideological affinities and engagement-driven dynamics. Earl, Maher and Pan (2022) add that contemporary manipulation often relies on information to channel a set of tactics that redirect attention and reshape the informational environment through saturation and diversion rather than through direct censorship.

This invites conceptualizing information environments not as binary spaces opposing truth and falsehood, but as relational configurations where unequally empowered actors mobilize narratives to direct attention and frame events. Their interventions thicken the discursive field and multiply interpretations, making original facts increasingly difficult to establish, a cumulative interaction forming a spiral of informational opacity.

While opacity is often associated with a lack of transparency (Venard & Tshering, 2021), it can also be produced through practices that befoul or manipulate information as it circulates. Research on administrative opacity specifies how this operates through concrete tactics: hiding information, undermining its quality, delaying disclosure, and increasing processing costs (Rentería, 2024a), as well as non-recording cultures, defensive thinking, and simulation (Bannister & Connolly, 2011). Meza and Perez-Chiques (2021) show that even administrations with strong transparency policies generate uncertainty through calibrated ambiguity.

We conceptualize opacity as a self-reinforcing dynamic where competing narratives, performative transparency and unequal epistemic authority gradually weaken the conditions needed to interpret events. Unlike “disinformation” or “propaganda”, which imply identifiable perpetrators and clear intentions, opacity foregrounds how uncertainty is relationally produced through the interaction of multiple, asymmetrically empowered actors. This relational production of opacity is also shaped by the institutional environment within which international norms operate. In the field of refugee protection, the principle of non-refoulement functions within weak enforcement structures and depends largely on diplomatic pressure and reputational incentives,

while regional doctrines of non-interference limit external accountability (Chodorowska & Trylińska, 2021; Duangratana, 2022). Within such a configuration, uncertainty can persist and consolidate across institutional settings.

When fragments multiply and perspectives clash, understanding becomes harder. Making sense of shifting meaning proves difficult. Competing narratives, broken sources, state ambiguity, foreign interference and managed visibility fill the information space with partial interpretations. These interpretations carry unequal power according to the situation and their alignment often excludes the people most affected. Lavigne *et al.* (2022) show how selective disclosure and institutional performance create apparent clarity while deepening misunderstanding. Transparency then becomes a performance, determining which interpretations gain legitimacy and which stay at the margins.

1.2.2. Mechanisms of the spiral of informational opacity

This spiral of informational opacity captures an epistemic process in which statements, denials, reinterpretations and counterclaims accumulate and distance public understanding from original events. This dynamic unfolds through a reinforcing discursive process, in which multiple narratives accumulate within the information environment, increasing its density, multiplying interpretive pathways, fragmenting shared frames of reference, and gradually weakening the conditions through which knowledge achieves coherence and stability. The spiral concept shows how epistemic deterioration accumulates through saturation, selective disclosure and managed visibility. Although grounded in the Thai case, this mechanism is transferable to contexts where information is abundant yet unstable.

The opacity spiral operates through three mutually reinforcing mechanisms.

First, cumulative sedimentation: each claim builds upon prior ones, producing vertical layering that renders fact retrieval increasingly costly, requiring navigation through successive strata of distortion and reframing. Second, mutual delegitimization: all actors (in our case: governments, journalists, activists, NGOs) accuse others of fabrication, eroding epistemic foundations necessary for shared factual ground and generating what Higgins (2016) sees as a pluralization of truth. Repeated exposure to contradictory content induces cognitive fatigue (Lewandowsky *et al.*, 2013), lowering verification capacity. Third,

structural instrumentalization: states engage in deliberate manipulation and retain disproportionate power to shape information environments. Legal instruments like fake news regulations allow governments to dismiss unwelcome claims, stage selective visibility or mobilize proxies (Sombatpoonsiri & Nguyen An Luong, 2022), converting uncertainty into political resources.

However, the opacity spiral is not simply the sum of multiple manipulations. It emerges from the structural impossibility of determining which actors manipulate and which do not: journalists operate under surveillance, NGOs work with fragmentary evidence, activists speculate to fill informational voids. Their interventions may be strategic, constrained, or well-intentioned, but verification remains impossible. The spiral captures how competing narratives, produced under asymmetrical power relations and unverifiable intentionality, progressively erode the epistemic foundations needed to distinguish truth from falsehood.

These mechanisms interact across the temporal sequence of the deportation. The three empirical phases identified in the corpus: uncertainty, reframing and controlled transparency, correspond to key moments in the development of the case during which the mechanisms of sedimentation, delegitimization and instrumentalization become particularly visible within shifting configurations of discourse and authority.

The term dynamics designate the patterned, cumulative and relational interactions through which sedimentation, delegitimization and instrumentalization mutually condition one another over time, progressively transforming the informational environment and recalibrating the conditions under which meaning can be interpreted, stabilized and circulated.

During anticipation, sedimentation begins as rumors accumulate. The covert deportation intensifies delegitimization as actors dispute credibility. The Xinjiang press trip reveals instrumentalization as authorities orchestrate visibility and control access. Each phase activates the three mechanisms in different proportions, producing recursive dynamics rather than a linear progression.

At the center of this spiral stand the Uyghurs themselves. Hyper-visible as objects of discourse yet structurally voiceless, their exclusion reflects what Fricker (2007) conceptualizes as testimonial injustice. They are spoken about but rarely enabled to speak. Informational opacity thus emerges through an overwhelming proliferation of infor-

mation, which buries those most affected beneath competing claims, performative transparency and managed dissent.

2. Dynamics of inequality in the Uyghur trajectories

2.1. Structural and geopolitical production of Uyghur inequality

The term inequality has been used in various ways in contemporary debates (Holton, 2014; Atkinson, 2015). This study adopts a multidimensional approach, viewing inequality as structural disparities between social groups, linked to human rights, discrimination, and the recognition of diversity (Vizard, 2009). Such an approach recognizes that “no single dimension of overall inequality can adequately describe the full structure of the multiple, intersecting, and conflicting dimensions of inequality” (McCall, 2005, p. 1791). It invites us to interpret the exclusion of the Uyghurs as a configuration of power relations, imposed silences, and controlled representations across regional and international scales.

Uyghurs have long been perceived in China as a distinct minority, Muslim, Turkic-speaking, and non-Han historically associated with Xinjiang, formally incorporated into the PRC in 1949. Their marginality was shaped by earlier conflicts, including the brief secession of the East Turkestan Republic in 1945. With the creation of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in 1955, the Chinese state pursued an ambivalent policy of multiethnic unification, blending formal recognition with strategies of Sinicization: restrictions on religious practices, promotion of Han norms, and limits on cultural expression (Clarke, 2013; Shetty, 2023).

A key shift occurred after 9/11, when Beijing reframed the Uyghur issue through the lens of the “global war on terror” (Cunningham, 2012), presenting it as a matter of international security. Despite the lack of supporting evidence, this securitization was institutionalized via the 2015 anti-terrorism law, whose vague definitions enabled the criminalization of ordinary religious activity (UHRP, 2016). This laid the legal foundation for increasingly authoritarian governance combining surveillance, internment, and ideological re-education.

As repression deepened throughout the 2010s, particularly following the expansion of mass detention and surveillance policies, the Uyghur diaspora increasingly mobilized transnational advocacy

networks to internationalize their claims (Sarigözman, 2025). While such mobilization opened channels for international recognition, it also constituted the only viable route through which Uyghur voices could be heard, frequently mediated by institutional actors and constrained by geopolitical considerations. These efforts unfolded in a shifting geopolitical landscape, as Beijing promoted the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), assigning Xinjiang a central economic and strategic role. Reports of forced sterilizations, coerced labor, and mass detention prompted international outrage (Alpermann, 2022), countered by China's defensive narrative emphasizing stability, development, and national sovereignty (Alpermann & Malzer, 2024).

2.2. Inequalities of voice, representation, and information precarity

Inequality also manifests in the confiscation of mediation of voices. As Malkki (1996), Sigona (2014), and Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017) show, refugees are often silenced in public discourse, even when placed at the center of humanitarian mobilization. When they do speak, their words are typically rearticulated by third parties, such as NGOs, journalists, activists, who select what fits their agendas (Szörényi, 2006; Bishop, 2018; Bosch et al., 2019). In China, repression is total: “even politely expressed criticism can lead to arrest” (Setthamalinee, 2017, p. 40).

In the diaspora, the capacity to speak varies significantly by context, legal status, and resources. While English-language documentaries increasingly feature Uyghurs resettled in Western countries after detention in Xinjiang, and organizations such as the World Uyghur Congress actively participate in advocacy, such visibility remains uneven. Elite Uyghurs may contribute to narrative production, but this should not obscure the structural silencing of ordinary migrants, whose precarious legal situations and limited resources constrain their ability to participate in public debates (Yuan & Zhu, 2021).

This capacity to speak is deeply stratified by class and geography (Shichor, 2010). Working-class Uyghurs in exile often possess far fewer educational and linguistic resources than student or professional migrants. Makofsky, Ünal, and Abudugayiti's (2019) comparative study in Turkey illustrates these disparities, showing that recently arrived refugees struggled to understand or complete standardized questionnaires, an empirical indication of unequal access to the forms

of capital required for participation in transnational communication. Others continue to practice self-censorship because of family ties in Xinjiang, where surveillance can extend informally into the diaspora (Hojer, 2009).

The case of the 40 Uyghurs detained in Thailand represents the extremity of such silencing. Throughout their decade of detention, information about their situation remained almost nonexistent. No interviews or testimonies emerged, and only fragmentary updates circulated through intermediaries. Even organizations committed to foregrounding Uyghur voices anonymized testimonies for security reasons, as illustrated by reports stating that “this report was written by UHRP staff members with input from a researcher who wishes to remain anonymous” (UHRP, 2020). This situation exemplifies what Wall et al. (2017) describe as information precarity: refugees’ perception that information about their situation is inaccessible, ignored, or distorted, and that they lack the means to make their experiences publicly legible.

This entanglement of silencing, mediation, and stratification constitutes a distinct regime of inequality in which Uyghurs are denied not only protection but also authorship over their own narrative – spoken about, but rarely heard. The 40 deported Uyghurs thus face a double inequality: systematic exclusion from access to information, and exclusion from the capacity to author it.

3. Methodology

3.1. Methodological framework

This study adopts a qualitative approach grounded primarily in Critical Discourse Analysis to examine how the spiral of informational opacity functions as a mechanism of marginalization and epistemic inequality. Drawing on discourse as a social practice (Fairclough, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2016), the analysis explores how language, narrative ambiguity, and discursive framing obscure responsibility, disqualify dissent, and marginalize affected populations.

Visual materials, including letters, photographs, and staged videos, are treated as discursive artefacts within a broader communicative strategy. The analysis focuses on how they are framed, circulated, and mobilized to anchor official narratives and manage credibility.

Empirically, the analysis is structured around three mechanisms:

- Mechanism 1: The creation of uncertainty through sedimentation.
- Mechanism 2: The reframing and delegitimization.
- Mechanism 3: The instrumentalized visibility through controlled transparency.

Each mechanism is analyzed through a comparative reading of official discourse and counter-discourse, including statements from political opponents, journalistic investigations, and NGOs reports. This approach allows us to examine how narrative production anticipates, neutralizes, or discredits dissenting voices.

The corpus (Table 1) was compiled through keyword-based searches and continuous monitoring of Thai and international media coverage related to the deportation of Uyghurs and the subsequent press trip to Xinjiang. Articles, official statements and reports published between January and March 2025 were collected across news outlets, NGOs publications, government communications and international media.

This timeframe spans the pre- and post-deportation phases leading up to the press trip to Xinjiang organized by the Thai and Chinese governments. The corpus includes official statements from Thai and Chinese authorities alongside counter-narratives produced by NGOs, journalists and media outlets (*e.g.*, BBC Thai, The Reporters, Thai PBS, iLaw, Reuters). Sources in both Thai and English were included to capture how dissent circulated within and beyond Thailand.

The corpus includes diverse formats (articles, videos, posts) and was selected for its critical stance toward the official narrative. These materials are analyzed to understand how meaning, legitimacy, and voice are contested. We are not looking to assess the factual accuracy of the different claims. We focus on the communicative logics that produce opacity, obscure responsibility, and reinforce epistemic inequality.

Table 1. Corpus Overview (January–March 2025)

Source	Count	Example
Official State Discourse	10	Royal Thai Government ³ press conferences; Chinese Embassy statements, politicians’ statements
Thai Media	27	Thai PBS; The Reporters; Khaosod English; The Standard
International Media	11	Reuters; The Telegraph; The New Humanitarian; Associated Press ⁴
NGO/Advocacy Reports	4	World Uyghur Congress; Uyghur Human Rights Project

3.2. Methodological reflections and limitations

The main limitation of this study lies in its reliance on secondary data, with no direct access to the Uyghurs deported from Thailand. This creates an epistemic paradox: analyzing the production of informational opacity and silencing while being unable to access the voices of those most directly affected. Writing about epistemic inequality without including primary testimony raises the ethical tension inherent in attempts to “give voice to the voiceless” (Fengler & Kreutler, 2020, p. 42), while acknowledging the structural impossibility of doing so in this case.

Alternative strategies were considered, including interviews with journalists, activists, or NGO representatives. However, these actors also operate within specific institutional, political, or advocacy frameworks and may themselves contribute to the dynamics of opacity examined here. Similarly, Thai authorities largely remained silent or engaged in blame-shifting practices, reinforcing the ambiguity central to the informational environment under analysis.

3 Some information originally published on official communication channels by the Pheu Thai government was later removed. Materials available at the time of the first version of this article were no longer accessible when the final version was prepared.

4 Chinese and Turkish media sources were not included due to linguistic constraints and the need for contextual expertise regarding their media environments.

Interviews with Uyghurs in exile were also considered, and preliminary contacts were made. However, this article focuses specifically on the 40 individuals deported from Thailand, whose trajectories differ from those of resettled diaspora members. While diaspora testimonies are valuable, they remain partial and shaped by distinct political and legal contexts. Moreover, privileging “authentic” testimony risks becoming a symbolic gesture that leaves intact the structural conditions of epistemic injustice.

Instead of filling the absence of Uyghur voices, we analyze how that absence is actively constructed. Our aim is not to speak for the subaltern (Spivak, 1988), but to expose the structural mechanisms that organize symbolic exclusion. This reflects a stance of critical epistemic solidarity: recognizing our own positional limits while scrutinizing the power structures that shape the narrative.

Ultimately, this limitation becomes a lens through which to question how academic research itself may reproduce epistemic inequalities. The spiral of informational opacity is not only a media or political issue, but it also challenges the very conditions under which knowledge about marginalization is produced.

4. Mechanism 1: Creating uncertainty through sedimentation

The deportation of 40 Uyghurs from Thailand to China in February 2025 was not isolated. It echoes the 2015⁵ deportations under the Prayut Chan-o-cha military government, justified in the name of national security.⁶ “This is not Thailand’s problem,” Prayut stated (Lefevre & Dikmen, 2015). Thailand’s alignment with Beijing subsequently deepened, within what Setthamalinee describes as a transnational regime of exclu-

5 On 29 June 2015, 172 Uyghurs were sent to Turkey. On 9 July, 109 others were deported to China, triggering strong international protests. The UNHCR and several human rights organizations condemned the move as a clear violation of non-refoulement – the international law principle that forbids returning people to countries where they risk persecution (Setthamalinee, 2017, p. 45).

6 Security concerns grew after the 17 August 2015 bombing near Bangkok’s Erawan Shrine, which caused several deaths and injuries. Uyghur suspects were arrested, reinforcing the framing of the Uyghur issue as a terrorist threat and legitimizing further discriminatory measures.

sion (2017, p. 45).⁷ In 2015, opacity was unnecessary, the government’s position was explicit. Uyghurs were not seen as Thailand’s responsibility, the government prioritized national stability and its strategic realignment toward China after decades of US influence.

Ten years later, in January 2025, Thailand is no longer under direct military rule but remains a fragile democracy, governed by Paetong-tarn Shinawatra. The issue of the Uyghurs resurfaced in January 2025, under new institutional and discursive conditions. This time, it does not begin with an official declaration, but with a haze of fragmented signals and partial disclosures.

On January 10, 2025, the NGO Justice For All raised the alarm, based on testimonies from inside the Bangkok Immigration Detention Center, they reported that Uyghur detainees had been coerced into signing “voluntary deportation” forms. Originally framed as a consensual administrative step on January 8, pressure intensified on January 9. Photos were taken, and verbal threats of forced return to China became more frequent. The NGO stated:

Recent reports from Uyghurs inside a Thai immigration detention center in Bangkok indicate that Thai authorities are coercing Uyghur detainees to give information by filling out forms for possible repatriation purposes. [...] Additionally, it has been confirmed that their photos were taken and, according to the detainees, verbal threats of deportation back to China by officials in the immigration center have increased. (Justice For All, 2025)

Following the controversy, Colonel Kathathon Khamthiang, Deputy Commander of Immigration Division 3 and spokesperson for the Immigration Bureau, told BBC Thai: “No operational action has yet been taken, and Immigration officials have held regular meetings without receiving any specific political instructions” (Thongthep, 2025).

7 Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and does not legally recognize refugees, allowing authorities to classify displaced persons as “illegal immigrants,” “migrant workers,” or “victims of trafficking,” with varying levels of protection. The 1979 Immigration Act gives broad discretion in these decisions. Since February 2023, the Prevention and Suppression of Torture and Enforced Disappearance Act prohibits returning individuals to countries where they risk torture or enforced disappearance (Article 13). The 2025 deportations thus raise serious legal and ethical concerns, especially in light of China’s documented repression of Uyghurs.

At the same time, the Associated Press reported having received a letter from the group of 43 Uyghurs detained in Bangkok, calling on the public to stop what they described as “the imminent threat of deportation.” Part of the message reads: “We could be imprisoned, and we could even die.” The letter continues: “We urgently ask all international organizations and countries concerned with human rights to intervene immediately to save us from this tragic fate before it is too late” (Kang & Wu, 2025).

In response, detainees allegedly began a hunger strike at the Suan Plu detention center. No further information emerged from inside, despite the facility being in the heart of Bangkok, its operations remain opaque. Only a few images of the center circulate online, stripped of context and devoid of access (Yan & Newey, 2025). This first moment of the spiral is grounded not in fabrication but in strategic withholding, as information disorder operates through omission and controlled invisibility.

On January 17, a new layer was added, the National Security Council (NSC) internally approved the deportation. Yet, in response to a Facebook post by Fair Party MP Kanavee Suebsaeng stating that the Uyghur deportation would be discussed at the NSC meeting (Suebsang, 2025a), Deputy Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai publicly questions the source of this information: “How does Kanavee know what’s on the agenda?” he asks (The Nation, 2025a), implicitly dismissing the legitimacy of the claim. He then proceeds to deny the existence of any such plan of deportation.

If there is no deportation, there is nothing to question. Internal decisions contradicted public denials, creating a gap between what was done and what was acknowledged. This distance obstructed the possibility of informed public debate.

As NGOs, journalists, and a few MPs raise alarms, the official discourse fragments and shifts. On January 15, a statement from the Chinese Embassy accuses Western media of spreading “false narratives” to damage the country’s image and labels the detainees as “terrorists.” (China Embassy in Thailand, 2025). In response, the United States declares that no evidence of terrorism has been provided: “To my knowledge, there is no credible evidence to suggest that these men have committed any crime other than seeking refuge from persecution in their homeland and striving for a life of freedom abroad” (Congress of the United States, 2025). The Thai government then invokes the

memory of the 2015 Erawan Shrine bombing,⁸ previously attributed to Uyghur militants (BBC, 2016). No direct link is made to the current detainees, but the link is deliberately insinuated. The deportation thus becomes a preemptive measure, better to expel, just in case.

NGOs, journalists, and political opponents are absorbed into the system as objects of suspicion. Their alerts are turned against them. During a press conference, when asked whether the decision might provoke consequences, Phumtham Wechayachai redirected the accusation: “What do you want? To see this country destroyed?” (Asia News Network, 2025). Criticism itself becomes dangerous, and every objection is reframed as a threat to public order.

Then, on January 19, the intervention of the Grand Mufti and the National Human Rights Commission was used to explain the end of the hunger strike (World Uyghur Congress, 2025), with no further information provided.

Everyone speaks, except the detained Uyghurs. Their voices, already peripheral, are rendered inaudible. Their legal status dissolves into bureaucratic abstraction: the authorities claim they lack UNHCR documentation (Goldberg, 2025). This absence, often the result of structural obstruction, is reinterpreted as implicit proof of illegitimacy. What international law recognizes as a protection gap, becomes, in the official narrative, a mark of exclusion. They are no longer legal subjects, but undesired bodies.

On February 6, Prime Minister Paetongtarn traveled to China to meet with President Xi Jinping, but no public announcement about the Uyghurs followed the visit. However, several other bilateral issues were reportedly discussed during the trip, leading to speculation about possible behind-the-scenes negotiations. TikTok’s \$8.8 billion investment plan for Thailand, announced shortly after, was interpreted by some observers as part of broader strategic alignments (Sangwongwanich, 2025). Other critical voices, including MP Kanavee Suebsaeng, alleged

8 The 2015 bombing at Bangkok’s Erawan Shrine killed 20 people and injured over 120. Though the motive was never confirmed, it was widely seen as retaliation for Thailand’s deportation of Uyghur asylum seekers to China. Two suspects were arrested, one confessed, then recanted and the case remains unresolved (Hardstories, 2026).

In June 2026, the two Uyghur defendants in the Erawan Shrine bombing case were sentenced to death by the Bangkok South Criminal Court. Both maintained their innocence and said they would appeal; the World Uyghur Congress condemned the verdict, citing serious fair trial concerns (Thai PBS World, 2026).

the existence of a covert deal with China tied to Thailand's cooperation in cracking down on illegal call center operations based in Myanmar (Thai PBS, 2025a).

Each version contradicts the last without correcting it, piling up in a sequence that is mutually incompatible yet politically functional. None refutes the previous one, they simply overwrite it. Informational opacity operates as an architecture of ambiguity: state actors multiply competing versions while systematically obstructing independent verification, progressively degrading the conditions under which any claim can be assessed.

As the spiral begins to take shape, the media landscape becomes saturated with noise: journalists, activists, and diplomats seize upon the issue, yet none manage to pierce the opacity surrounding those most directly affected. The Uyghurs are at the center of the discourse, but their presence remains abstract, invisible.

It is in this climate of orchestrated ambiguity that the deportation takes place.

5. Mechanism 2: Reframing and delegitimization

In the weeks leading up to the deportation, the Thai government maintained a climate of ambiguity, repeatedly accusing critics and opposition voices of spreading fake news. Despite mounting concerns, no official statement was made.

On February 27, Thai activists and media revealed that a China Southern Airlines aircraft had departed Don Mueang Airport at 4:48 a.m. The plane, which arrived the night before from Kashgar, was believed to have deported the 48 Uyghurs.⁹ Around 2:14 a.m., six blacked-out, unmarked vans were seen leaving the Suan Plu detention center. Rama IV Road, the route to the airport, had been partially closed. By 9 a.m., the plane was no longer traceable via FlightRadar24. The operation was concealed through multiple layers of opacity, both logistical and political.

Initially, Prime Minister Paetongtarn stated:

I had not yet received detailed information on the matter, but if any country in the world has to do something, it has to adhere to the law, adhere to the international process,

⁹ It was known later that it was only 40 Uyghurs who were deported (The Reporters, 2025).

adhere to human rights. Every country has to adhere to this as a principle. (The101world, 2025)

This response, delivered even as journalists were presenting concrete evidence of the deportation, deepened public outrage. The same evening, the government held a press conference, in which Phumtham Wechayachai confirmed the deportation. The following day, he criticized media coverage, stating: “I think everything is clear. There should be nothing to worry about for the country”, and urging journalists to “present news that creates understanding” rather than continuing to question the government’s decision (Pheu Thai Facebook, 2025).

Both Phumtham and the Prime Minister criticized media speculation, declaring that “truth must prevail over belief” (The Standard, 2025a). Later, the Prime Minister defended her initial silence by invoking national security concerns and that she had been in talks with Chinese leaders ahead of the deportation who guaranteed the safety and humane treatment of the Uyghurs (The Standard, 2025b). At the same time, the Chinese government released official images of the deported Uyghurs disembarking in Xinjiang, escorted by Thai officials (Embassy of The People’s Republic of China in the Kingdom of Thailand, 2025). Among these circulated visuals, particular attention focused on a scene portraying an emotional reunion between a man identified as a returning Uyghur and members of his family after a decade of separation. The circulation of such imagery reinforced the official narrative of voluntary return and dignified treatment, embedding affective cues within the broader communicative strategy. Yet independent access to the deportees remained unavailable, and the circumstances under which the images were produced, selected and framed remained impossible.

This episode highlights the analytical limits of intent-based categories of information disorder. Officials framed their initial silence as a national security necessity, yet the systematic delay, denial, and subsequent release of choreographed imagery point to deliberate narrative management. What remains empirically inaccessible is intent on itself: whether silence was operational or strategic, the effect was to constrain scrutiny and steer interpretation. The resulting ambiguity, compounded by conflicting statements and staged visual evidence, suggests an information environment engineered less to inform than to control.

This moment marks the second phase in the spiral of informational opacity: a shift from concealment to strategic moralization. The framing of the deportation evolved rapidly. It was initially denied, then justified

as legally sound, and finally recast as a humane act. The Thai government claimed that the operation complied with international human rights standards, and that China had guaranteed no legal action would be taken against the returnees. A claim that directly undermines earlier statements suggesting the deportees were suspected terrorists. Officials also emphasized that the deportees would be reunited with their families, and they would receive good treatment, as claimed by the Chinese authority (Chinese Embassy Bangkok, 2025). By presenting the deportation in legal and responsible terms, the government controlled the narrative to reduce public scrutiny. The Uyghur deportees were shown as proof that the leadership had acted responsibly.

The government repeatedly insisted that the deportation was “voluntary” (Channel 3 News, 2025). Deputy Foreign Minister Tawee Sodsong invited the public to consult documents from the National Security Council (NSC) for proof (Thai PBS, 2025b), while Paetong-tarn Shinawatra continue to claim that “one must use the truth, not a belief” (The Standard, 2025a). However, reports from activists and journalists suggesting that the detainees had been coerced into signing documents, allegations the government neither confirmed nor allowed to be independently investigated.

Attempts by opposition MPs and human rights groups to challenge the official statements were quickly and systematically dismissed. MP Kanavee Suebsaeng presented handwritten letters he claimed to have received from the Uyghur detainees, imploring not to be deported. The government denounced the letters as fabricated, and Thailand’s Corrections Department stated that one of three Uyghur letters was fake, notably the prison stamp found to be the wrong one (The Nation, 2025b). Officials at Klongprem Central Prison reportedly compared the detainees’ handwriting with that of the letters and concluded they were “completely different” (Sattaburuth, 2025). Government spokesperson Jirayu Houngsub questioned why Kanavee had not passed the letter, supposedly intended for the Prime Minister, to her earlier, especially since he claimed to have received it in November (Naewnanews, 2025).

Meanwhile, Senator Angkhana Neelapaijit, former member of the National Human Rights Commission, condemned the repatriation process as a deliberate act of concealment. Speaking in her capacity as Chair of the Senate Committee on Political Development, Human Rights, and Public Participation, she revealed that the committee had also received handwritten letters from the detainees, scribbled on scraps of paper and passed in secret, explicitly addressed to the UNHCR and

clearly stating their refusal to be returned to China (BBC Thai, 2025). Senator Neelapaijit further questioned the government’s reliance on Chinese assurances, urging officials to clarify the procedures surrounding the deportation and to publicly demonstrate that the return has been genuinely voluntary (Neelapaijit, 2025). Her intervention contributed to shifting the debate from procedural legality to the credibility and moral consistency of Thailand’s human rights commitments.

Whether these letters are fake or not, the government operated a discursive shift: no alternative destination was available, and no third country had agreed to receive the deportees, framing the operation as a necessity. This rhetorical pivot reframed a morally contested act as a diplomatic inevitability. By invoking a lack of options, the government attempted to sidestep both legal and ethical accountability. It introduced a logic of limited responsibility. According to the official narrative, deporting the Uyghurs to China was the only viable outcome.

Deputy Prime Minister Phumtham declared that “sending Uyghurs to third countries is a fantasy” (iLaw, 2025a), framing the possibility of third-country resettlement as diplomatically unreal and politically impracticable.

This categorical dismissal was followed by reporting and parliamentary claims that introduced further complexity into the debate. An investigation by Reuters, citing diplomatic sources, reported that both Canada and the United States had offered to resettle the Uyghurs prior to the deportation (Wongcha-um, 2025). Thai PBS World similarly reported that the United States rejected Thailand’s claim that no country had offered resettlement (Thai PBS World, 2025). In addition, Fair Party MP Kanavee Suebsaeng drew on the official record from a July 10, 2024 meeting of the House of Representatives’ Committee on Legal Affairs, Justice, and Human Rights, during which a representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs allegedly informed the committee that the United States, Sweden, and Australia were prepared to consider accepting the detainees (Suebsang, 2025b). Human rights organizations also stated that third countries had expressed willingness to provide refuge (Refugee Council of Australia, 2025).

These accounts, however, did not stabilize the controversy. Thai officials responded by reframing the issue around the absence of a “formal” or sufficiently “serious” commitment (Bangkok Post, 2025b). The dispute thus shifted from whether expressions of willingness had been made as to how such expressions were classified, documented, and diplomatically validated. Expressions of interest, informal diploma-

tic exchanges, and legally binding agreements were treated as distinct categories, with only the latter recognized as politically operative.

Later, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs admitted that several countries had been in talks with Thailand and had expressed their willingness to take in Uyghur refugees. Despite this, Thai officials, including Assistant Foreign Minister Rasmee Chaleejan, insisted that none of these countries had shown a sufficiently “serious commitment,” using this ambiguity to justify the government’s position (The Government Public Relations Department, 2025), though they did lie before being forced to admit that some countries proposed to take the Uyghurs (Thai PBS World, 2025).

The United States Embassy in Thailand posted a condemnation of Thailand’s action on its X account. Thai citizens responded with outrage, citing Trump’s immigration policy (US Embassy Bangkok, 2025a). On March 15, the United States imposed visa sanctions on Thai officials. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Turk, condemned the deportation as a violation of international law, citing Article 3 of the Convention Against Torture and Article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (US Embassy Bangkok, 2025b).

In this second phase, a new layer emerges: the deportation has taken place, but the opacity spiral deepens. Evidence, testimonies, and condemnations accumulate, yet are systematically dismissed as disinformation, by the government, which accuses critics (whether domestic or international) of tarnishing the country’s image and threatening national security, and by the opposition, which frames the voluntary deportation as a lie and an obvious violation of human rights. Into this polarized environment, a third-party actor, namely the United States, enters the fray, further complicating the moral landscape. As seen in the hostile reactions to the US Embassy’s statements online, criticizing the United States for applying a double standard. The involvement of foreign powers sparks backlash and weakens public support for the deportees’ cause.

As officials, activists, and international actors multiply competing claims, the deportees themselves are reduced to diplomatic pawns or symbolic tokens. Their voices remain excluded and unheard. They are spoken about, never with. The 40 Uyghurs remain the raw material of the narrative.

6. Mechanism 3: Instrumentalizing visibility through controlled transparency

In response to mounting criticism, the Thai and Chinese governments organized a carefully choreographed media visit to Xinjiang from March 18 to 20. While presented as a gesture of transparency, this event functioned to generate controlled visibility while deepening structural opacity, dilute criticism, and reassert control over the discourse. By incorporating verifiable elements within a tightly managed framework, authorities produced selective disclosure that appeared as evidence while preventing independent verification (Lavigne *et al.*, 2022).

During this visit, only five of the 40 Uyghurs were showcased to a selected group of Thai journalists. Significantly, several of Thailand’s most respected voices in investigative journalism, including renowned human rights reporter Thapanee Eadsrichai, were excluded from the delegation. As reported by The Reporters, where Eadsrichai serves as editor-in-chief:

Thapanee emphasizes her neutrality and practices journalism guided by human conscience. She revealed that the Chinese embassy invited her to a meeting and proposed a visit to Xinjiang, but this would likely not happen this time as the Thai government has selected the media outlets itself (Line Today, 2025).

Participating journalists reported that the trip was meticulously organized, with all interactions monitored by Chinese authorities and no opportunities provided for spontaneous conversation or unscripted interviews as the news director of the media Thairath: “On the Uyghur trip, Thai journalists were closely followed by Chinese security, and officials requested to scan their images before they could be sent back to Thailand” (Prachatai, 2025).

In statements reported in the Thai media, one Uyghur man is said to have declared: “I am not being forced, I have 100% freedom, I have never been mistreated” (Thai PBS, 2025c). When questioned by Tawee Sodsong, he also said he had never written any letter during his detention. In the articles about this trip, the Uyghurs are barely visible. Their words are generally relayed by the Thai officials who were present, as illustrated by this article headline: “Tawee visits the Uyghurs: he claims they are not coerced and enjoy complete freedom” (*Ibid.*). The

Uyghurs themselves are said to have been victims of disinformation by a terrorist group. “The Uyghur man also recounted the events that led to his arrest, claiming that the terrorists had lied to him, causing him to flee the country illegally. But now I am back home. Now, I am a farmer” (Ibid.). Those constructed as victims of deception are made to speak, through state mediators, the language of state truth. They are told they were deceived not by governments, but by terrorists. And now they are free, not by legal process, but by rhetorical decree. The opacity spiral completes itself: uncertainty denounced through selective clarity, absence filled through choreographed presence, voice restored through ventriloquism.

During the visit, Chinese authorities specifically requested that media members blur the faces of the Uyghurs in photographs and videos, to protect their privacy. Later, Phumtham, defended the authenticity of these encounters, asserting that “They are not Hollywood actors who can cry on command” (Matichon, 2025). How can one assess the sincerity of someone’s tears when their face has been deliberately obscured? We do not know.

Media coverage of the Xinjiang visits predominantly foregrounded Thai officials and their orchestrated interactions, positioning state representatives at the center of the visual and narrative frame through which the encounter was interpreted. The communicative configuration thereby generated the impression of dialogue through carefully structured encounters, curated circulation of images and tightly managed access to participants. In the earlier phase, opacity was sustained through limited visual circulation; at this stage, imagery operated as a calibrated instrument of regulated exposure within a broader architecture of controlled transparency.

Staged photos of smiling reunions were not intended to invite verification but to end the conversation. In this sense, the image becomes an epistemic substitute for testimony: not evidence, but closure. This effect is reinforced by the persuasive power of visual content, which is more emotionally engaging than text and more likely to be processed heuristically, thereby weakening the conditions of verification (Powell *et al.*, 2015). The tightly managed nature of the media visit further aligns with what Paris and Donovan (2020) describe as cheapfakes: low-cost audiovisual manipulations based on selective framing, decontextualization, and the exclusion of contradictory elements.

Beyond these technical manipulations, media outlets identified additional concerning patterns in the visit’s orchestration. As Pravit

Rojanaphruk, the editor-in-chief of Khaosod English, noticed: “In reality, there is no need to lie. Simply select the most cooperative Uyghurs, filter media coverage, and the job is done” (Rojanaphruk, 2025).

Phumtham emphasized that “the families were selected based on their willingness to engage with the delegation, as Thai officials had no right to infringe upon their rights” (Bangkok Post, 2025a). This statement reveals a fundamental paradox: the very moment when Uyghurs are ostensibly presented as autonomous subjects capable of choice appears to be precisely when their agency is most constrained and instrumentalized.

This resembles astroturfing, where coordinated campaigns use real individuals or social bots, to simulate grassroots endorsement and manufacture apparent consensus, making autonomous expression difficult to distinguish from orchestrated performance (Zhang *et al.*, 2013; Keller *et al.*, 2020).

Notably, throughout this entire affair, terms such as “fake news”, “manipulation”, “disinformation” were rarely employed in public discourse, even though these phenomena were precisely what was at stake. As MP Kanavee Suebsaeng characterized it, this constituted “73 Days of Lies” during the 26th ordinary session of the National Assembly on March 24, 2025 (True Thai Channel, 2025). He delivered a comprehensive address supporting the censure motion against Paethongtarn Shinawatra, arguing that the Prime Minister lacked essential qualifications, leadership capabilities, and political will, alleging that her administration had operated outside both national and international law, thereby damaging Thailand’s global reputation. The deportation of 40 Uyghur refugees to China on February 27, 2025, served as the focal point of his critique, which he characterized as a “grave mistake” while denouncing the government’s foreign policy as being “written by hand and erased with dirty feet” (iLaw, 2025b).

The government’s response to parliamentary criticism exemplified a concerning shift from evidence-based debate to personal attacks and undermining credibility. Opposition MP Kanavee Suebsaeng, who had led public questioning of the deportation operation, became the target of ad hominem attacks from Deputy Prime Minister Phumtham, who labeled him a “professional liar” with no experience in national security matters. Rather than addressing the substantive evidence presented, the government chose to attack the MP’s legitimacy and qualifications. As Phumtham stated: “You are a habitual liar. You have never governed the country and you have no experience. You rely on imagination, not

on reality and you speak without considering national interests and security” (Voice TV, 2025).

In this final mechanism, the opacity spiral culminates through the strategic deployment of controlled transparency. The press trip served as a staged performance of transparency, presented as a means of verification. The Uyghurs are made visible through fragments orchestrated by the state, images that, far from restoring their voice, erase their capacity to act. In such configurations, institutional actors, with superior communicative power, can instrumentalize the label of “fake news” to systematically delegitimize counter-discourses. Those who challenge the official version are rendered illegitimate. Meanwhile, the multiplication of evidence and counterevidence produces not clarity, but confusion. The spiral thus culminates in an informational regime where visibility becomes a form of silence, where verifiability becomes structurally impossible, and where authority operates not through the suppression of information but through its saturation and managed circulation¹⁰.

7. Conclusion

When truth becomes structurally unverifiable, marginalized populations become both hypervisible and voiceless. The February 2025 deportation of 40 Uyghurs from Thailand to China demonstrates how informational opacity functions not as an absence of information, but as its weaponization: a condition in which competing narratives, selective disclosure, and asymmetrical epistemic authority progressively erode the foundations needed to establish what happened, to whom, and under what circumstances.

This article has introduced the concept of a spiral of informational opacity to capture how verification itself becomes impossible in multi-actor information environments marked by legal ambiguity, transnational power asymmetries, and the structural exclusion of migrant voices. Through three mutually reinforcing mechanisms (cumulative sedimentation, mutual delegitimization, and structural instrumentaliza-

10 Three of the remaining Uyghurs in Thailand were eventually resettled in Canada, thanks to advocacy by the diaspora and support from several embassies. Unlike the others, they likely avoided forced repatriation because they held dual Kyrgyz-Chinese nationality and carried no Chinese ID at the time of arrest (Rakkanam, P., “Three Uyghur men detained in Thailand are resettled in Canada,” *Radio Free Asia*, 28 April 2025, <https://www.rfa.org/english/uyghur/2025/04/28/uyghurs-thailand/>).

tion), the spiral renders those directly affected simultaneously central to discourse and absent from it. They are spoken about everywhere, yet heard nowhere.

This framework contributes to information disorder research by shifting analytical attention from intentionality to structure, from isolated falsehoods to systemic conditions of verifiability. While Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) typology remains foundational, the Thai case exposes its limits in contexts where intentionality is opaque, responsibility is dispersed, and verification is structurally obstructed. By connecting critical disinformation studies with research on migration governance and epistemic injustice, this article foregrounds testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2007) as a central mechanism through which marginalized populations are invoked yet denied authorship over their own narratives.

The Thai case also clarifies the evolving modalities through which accountability is structured within contemporary information environments. As Rosenfeld and Wallace (2024) observe, information control increasingly operates through calibrated ambiguity, where uncertainty is sustained within managed communicative frameworks. The analysis developed here conceptualizes opacity as a relational configuration produced through the interaction of asymmetrically empowered actors, in which journalists, activists, and NGOs circulate interpretations within constrained informational conditions while those most directly affected remain excluded from narrative authorship. Comparable configurations have been identified in research on Rohingya refugees in Myanmar, where state-led delegitimization combined with transnational advocacy efforts yet did not restore epistemic agency to displaced populations (Ronan, 2019; Kironska & Peng, 2021).

Future research could refine this concept by examining how specific configurations of state discourse, journalistic investigation, advocacy, and diplomatic intervention shape the conditions of verification across different political contexts. Such work would deepen understanding of how epistemic inequality is constructed and reproduced through diffuse processes, distributed power and without requiring unified strategies.

The 40 Uyghurs deported from Thailand were not rendered invisible by an absence of information. They disappeared through its abundance, through the proliferation of narratives that spoke for them, about them, against them, but never with them. This is the political function of the opacity spiral: not to eliminate subjects from view, but to trap them in discourse while stripping them of voice. Understanding this

dynamic is essential for recognizing how marginalization operates through visibility itself, and how being seen everywhere can become another form of erasure.

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