The human rights repertoire: its strategic logic, expectations and tactics

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To cite this article: Margaret Hagan (2010) The human rights repertoire: its strategic logic, expectations and tactics, The International Journal of Human Rights, 14:4, 559-583, DOI: 10.1080/13642980802704312

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13642980802704312

Published online: 19 Jul 2010.

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The human rights repertoire: its strategic logic, expectations and tactics
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The article explores the strategic use of ‘human rights’ in challenger activism. Drawing upon a wide variety of observations from academics, politicians, and journalists, it formalises the concept of ‘the human rights repertoire’. Political actors employ this set of strategies by making claims of human rights abuse in order to further their interests. The article delineates the logic and expectations of the repertoire, as well as its intermediate goals and the claim components and behaviour it uses to achieve them. The human rights repertoire is an information-based, non-violent strategy, which relies on the power of norm invocations and displays of abuse to secure support from the target audience. To demonstrate the specifics of the repertoire, the article draws upon the case study of the transnational Uyghur campaign, which uses the human rights repertoire as its primary means to secure Western support in their challenge to the Chinese authorities.

Keywords: human rights; Uyghurs; social movements; ethnic activism; transnational activism

Introduction
The language and concept of ‘human rights’ pervade international relations. ‘Human rights’ are forwarded as ideals to which all should aspire, as standards to which governments can be assessed, and as political tools used to advance a particular agenda. This article considers this third and increasingly common usage: human rights norms as political tools. This usage has been found among state and non-state actors alike. As found repeatedly since the early 1990s, ‘allegations of human rights violations [have] become tools in the political and diplomatic struggle’, with ‘political elites us[ing] real and imagined human rights violations to push their own power struggles before the international community’. Increasingly, ‘human rights discourse may be taken up – and abused – by those whose agendas have little or nothing to do with human rights’. The classification as a victim of human rights abuse has grown into ‘a valuable and jealously protected tool of war’, with challengers and states entering a ‘struggle over who should be cast as aggressor and who as victim’. Political actors use claims of human rights abuses to advance their own bargaining position and weaken that of their opponents. They enter into claim competitions on an international stage, trading allegations of human rights abuse in order to garner foreign support for their agenda.

The use of human rights claims as a primary strategy to challenge a state, to limit internal challengers, or to justify foreign policy has resulted in a new repertoire of political

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ISSN 1364-2987 print/ISSN 1744-053X online © 2010 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/13642980802704312 http://www.informaworld.com
activism: the human rights repertoire. The human rights repertoire consists of collecting, publishing, distributing, and advocating human rights claims. It may be used in combination with other diplomatic or military action, but increasingly actors (especially non-state actors challenging state authorities) rely upon the human rights repertoire as their sole strategy. They concentrate on the collection and distribution of information as a main engine for political change. Sometimes they use claim-making in combination with acts of physical violence, mass protest, or civil disobedience, but often they limit themselves to information-based tactics. They expect that if they compose compelling human rights claims and distribute them to the appropriate audiences, they can coalesce political support and secure more bargaining power. This article considers the use of the human rights repertoire by activists representing ethnic minority communities, who seek foreign support in their challenge to state authorities. The activists use human rights claims to convince Western governments, media, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that the ethnic minority needs foreign support and that foreigners have a duty to assist them. One current example of this increasingly common situation is that of the transnational Uyghur campaign. Representing the Uyghur community in Xinjiang province in Western China, the Uyghur activists rely upon the human rights repertoire to engage Western powers and, in turn, convince the People’s Republic of China (PRC) authorities to compromise with their grievances and demands.

This article uses the Uyghur campaign as a case to facilitate the understanding of the human rights repertoire. Despite the new prevalence of human rights claim-making, the repertoire has not been defined or differentiated systematically. What constitutes the human rights repertoire, and what are the variations within it? Previous studies have considered human rights claim-making peripherally, as a component of wider processes, like the boomerang appeals of human rights activists or the transnational mobilisation of ethnic communities. These studies within social movement and human rights literature provide a rich starting point, but many gaps within the literature exist. There is not yet a systematic understanding of: (1) the logic of human rights claim-making; (2) the components of human rights claim-making; and (3) the behaviour used to promote claims. This article presents an initial schematic of the human rights repertoire, with special attention to these three matters. It expects future studies to draw upon other cases to add to and nuance the findings provided here. A working overview of the repertoire, drawing upon social movement and political science literature, is summarised in Table 1.

The logic and expectations of the HR repertoire

The central assumption within human rights claim-making (as with all information strategies) is that claims can determine whether and how foreign actors involve themselves in a situation. It assumes that outsiders’ perceptions about a situation can be as important as the actuality on the ground. The actor which makes the most convincing claim controls the target audiences’ perceptions of the situation, which in turn allows the actor political control. When activists challenge state authorities, they compete to promote their own version of the situation and discredit the other’s. Information strategies presume that no ‘truth’ about a situation exists: ‘for the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see’. Using language, discourse, symbols, images, and other information, actors construct politically powerful claims, which define the situation in their favour and sway the audiences. In matters of foreign policy, claim-making is expected to hold particularly strong power. The less direct knowledge audiences have of a situation, the more influence claim-making can have over their policy-making. Since
foreign-policy matters often concern distant countries, little-known cultures, and abstract values, only very few in the audience will normally be able to base their opinions and beliefs on immediate observations and personal experience. Instead, in many important questions, they will have to rely on the labels and narratives (prominent, trustworthy, like-minded, well-informed) of others and on the interpretations they have earlier accepted in similar situations.  

The more peripheral the conflict situation, the better chance that information strategies can sway foreign actors’ policy towards it.

The human rights repertoire constitutes one branch of claim-making, and one that is increasingly popular in international relations. The repertoire relies upon the ‘human rights claim’ to gain the attention and support of foreign audiences. A human rights claim consists of the written, verbal, or pictorial allegation that a person has suffered fundamental abuse by another. It tags a certain situation as one of ‘human rights abuse’, situating it into a long-standing matrix of other abuses, which carries a certain set of narratives, logic and prescriptions. The human rights claim, as used by activists challenges a state, frames the situation as one of abuse suffered by a victimised group, perpetrated by an aggressive state, and in need of foreign redress. It ‘diagnoses’ what is wrong with the situation; gives a ‘prognosis’ of what ought to be done; and identifies the ‘motivation’ of the target audience for getting involved. The claim establishes the ‘identity’ of the aggrieved group; identifies the ‘injustice’ which has been done to them; and proposes the ‘agency’ of the target audience to assist them. The main goal of the human rights claim is to ‘diagnose’ the situation as one of chronic human rights abuse. As with all claims, ‘the diagnosis already implies

### Table 1. The human rights repertoire.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Claims</th>
<th>Behaviour</th>
<th>Strategic goals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identify violations of human rights, democratic activity, or minority protection</td>
<td>Generate and collect information</td>
<td>Convince Western actors to engage campaign with support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invoke norms, state’s commitments to them, or legal imperative to uphold them</td>
<td>Lobby target audiences with e-mail, telephone, meetings, newsletters</td>
<td>Tap into masterframes of target audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justify why outside involvement is necessary</td>
<td>Solicit press coverage</td>
<td>Illustrate grievances and victimhood of community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formulate political proposals that redress the violations</td>
<td>Invite foreign officials and rapporteurs to visit area</td>
<td>Identify points of access and instruments for distributing information, and capitalise upon them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attend international conferences and training</td>
<td>Identify opponent and its aggression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tour campaign leaders</td>
<td>Justify the necessity of foreign involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Establish offices in Western capitals</td>
<td>Create ‘brand’ for community and campaign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Produce videos, texts, and images</td>
<td>Limit dissemination and resonance of negative information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Publish a website</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disseminate national histories, flags, maps</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Solicit contributions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organise democratic selection of representatives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Avoid falsehoods and violence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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much of the treatment’. The prognosis of a human rights claim is that foreign actors must come to the aid of the one suffering abuse and punish the one enacting or permitting the abuse. For campaigns challenging the state, the human rights claim makes victimhood a ‘moral trump card’ that can be used to secure foreign support in spite of a state’s claims to exclusive sovereignty or its opposition to foreign involvement. Challengers use human rights claims to ‘captur[e] the moral high ground in the battle for global public sympathy’, in the hope that this high ground allows for political advancement for their cause. Not all human rights claims succeed, though. Some pull Western actors into engagement, others are ignored, rejected, or downplayed by the target audience. As Michael Ignatieff recognises, ‘there is nothing in the pictures of atrocity or suffering that automatically engenders compassion or involvement. Some pictures, some places engage us; others do not’. A successful claim attracts and directs the attention of its target audience, convincing them to engage the campaign or escalate its level of engagement. There is no guaranteed strategy for succeeding in either objective, nor has there been formal academic study of the variable success of human rights claims. Academic and journalistic literature does provide some anecdotal observations about which human rights claims receive the best reception. The case study here of the Uyghur campaign gives additional indications as to what components make a successful human rights claim. Based on these combined observations, an initial schematic is provided in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components of a claim</th>
<th>Intermediate aims of a human rights claim</th>
<th>A successful claim establishes these traits</th>
<th>Ultimate aims of a human rights claim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Display abuse in detail through written, oral, visual accounts</td>
<td>Delineate moral narrative</td>
<td>Claims:</td>
<td>Attract attention of target audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide images and video of corporal violence and suffering</td>
<td>Build identifications with victim</td>
<td>Compelling</td>
<td>Direct their sympathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalise abuse with individuals’ testimonies, accounts, images, biographies</td>
<td>Provide clear prescriptions</td>
<td>Resonant</td>
<td>Precipitate and sustain foreign engagement with the campaign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on ‘iconic’ status or ‘posterboy’ position of individual victims or activists</td>
<td>Establish credibility</td>
<td>Urgent</td>
<td>Counter claims and allegations of state, or those of other opponents of campaign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invoke metaphors and comparisons to dramatise minority’s situation and legitimate foreign involvement</td>
<td>Instil sense of urgency and severity</td>
<td>Campaign:</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Include credibility markers that demonstrate campaign’s commitment to liberal norms</td>
<td>Set normative traps</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refute counter-claims made by opponent</td>
<td></td>
<td>Victimised</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threaten security crises if engagement does not occur</td>
<td></td>
<td>Credible</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Systematic study of human rights claim-making is necessary, but it is difficult. Claims can be made in an enormous variety of ways, and there are no clear means by which to judge the effects they have. The measure of claims’ success is whether they attract attention to the campaign, elicit sympathy for it, and promote political support for its ambitions – in other words, precipitating supportive engagement. But no clear causalities exist between a campaign’s claim of abuse and Western actors’ engagement with them. The process of claim reception occurs in the abstract, over an extended period of time, and with great individual variation. Even if a Western actor says that human rights claims were the decisive factor in why it engaged a campaign, this cannot be taken as fact. But there is anecdotal evidence which proposes what claims will resonate best among Western audiences. Journalists, authors, academics, and government officials all have identified different components, styles and mechanisms within claims that make them politically strong. This section collects together many of these observations to propose a scheme of ‘successful human rights claim-making’.

**Intermediate aims**

A successful claim will perform some or all of the following functions: (1) delineate a moral narrative; (2) build identifications between the audience and the victim; (3) provide clear prescriptions; (4) establish the credibility of the claim; (5) instil a sense of urgency and severity; and (6) set normative traps. If a human rights claim achieves these objectives to some degree, it has a strong chance of success.

1. **Delineate a moral narrative**

Perhaps the most important goal of a human rights claim is to present a clear moral narrative, in which a perpetrator harms a victim, and an outsider intervenes to set things right.21 ‘A stark picture of virtuous struggle against a villainous foe’ resonates abroad.22 A moral narrative has a clear perpetrator harming a clear victim, inviting the audience to intervene in defence of the victim. The narrative need not be completely Manichean, with the victim of abuse portrayed as wholly virtuous or the perpetrator as evil (though some claims may tend towards such extremism). A claim that delineates the abuse, the perpetrator, and the victim, will present its audience with a moral situation, which invites greater involvement from them. It attracts audiences because of its apparent possibility ‘to cut through the complexities and corruptions of politics and national interests. Here at last, [the audience thinks, i]s something morally uncomplicated, something altruistic, something above politics’.23 A human rights claim that presents a clear moral narrative can attract outsiders to attend to the act of abuse and intervene in the wider situation on behalf of the victim’s group.

2. **Build identifications with ‘victim’**

For a human rights claim to translate into foreign engagement, it must encourage the audience to identify with the victim in the claim. If the audience does not identify with the victims, then it will not support the campaign.24 The claim must individualise the victim – giving personal details that make him ‘relatable’ – and make him stand as a representative of the wider community. If an audience becomes acquainted with an individual, then they may follow his situation over an extended period of time, building awareness and solidarity with the general campaign. This links back into the concept of ‘synecdoche’, in which a single case is promoted to encapsulate a general situation.25 One individual case comes to stand for an entire community’s, simplifying the complexities of the situation and building audience attachments. To encourage identification, the claim must provide
sufficient background information, personal details, and character descriptions. The more that the audience knows about the victim (the claim’s logic proceeds), the more they will involve themselves in the campaign. Often campaigns prioritise individuals who can be interpreted as ‘pure’ victims – without political ambitions or culpability in the conflict – with the assumption that foreign audiences will be more attentive and interventionist on their behalf. The gender, appearance, and age of the individual is key; claims involving women and children as victims have been used frequently with the expectation that they will resonate with particular strength.

(3) **Propose clear prescriptions**

A claim is more likely to succeed if it clearly identifies routes of action to redress the abuse spotlighted. This entails delineation of responsibility, so the audience can recognise who or what is responsible for the occurrence of this abuse. If a claim does not include an explanation of why the abuse occurred, the audience can feel confused and impotent. Claims resonate if they convince the audience that they can assist the victims, and ‘right the wrongs’. Audiences may be attracted to seemingly unattractive topics – violence, misery, suffering, abuse – but only if they are convinced that they can help resolve these problems. If they feel helplessness or confusion towards the situation, they will disregard it, but if they are convinced that their involvement can improve the crisis or assist the victims, they will pay much greater and more dedicated attention.

(4) **Establish credibility**

To resonate, a claim must present itself and the claimant as unbiased. It must convince the audience that they are working to uphold human rights norms and not to pursue a self-interested or political agenda. The more neutral the claim appears, the more its information can be trusted and persuade the audience. Its sense of authority and reliability will pre-empt counter-claims of bias, falseness, exaggerations, or propaganda. If a campaign can build a reputation of credibility for itself, then its claims will be accepted more readily, and it will enjoy a higher chance of securing support from the audience. A claim that lacks consistency, coherence, impartiality, and verifiability will be dismissed as untrustworthy, as will the campaign that made it. As Keohane and Nye observe, ‘Political struggles focus less on control over the ability to transmit information than over the creation and destruction of credibility.’ A successful human rights claim bolsters a campaign’s reputation of trustworthiness and legitimacy. It also deflects any of the state’s counter-claims, which attempt to undermine the campaign’s reputation.

(5) **Instil sense of urgency and severity**

Another priority of a human rights claim must be to convert the audience’s moral judgment, sympathy, and sense of obligation into political action. The claim must convince the audience to act immediately, instilling in them a sense of urgency and intolerance about the abuses. If there is no sense of urgency, or if the abuses seem to be tolerable, then the audience may not act upon the emotions the claim has elicited. Complementary to this sense of urgency is a demonstration of Western strategic interest in the minority’s situation. If a claim can show that the abuse indicates a threat to security in the region or beyond, or if Western economic and political interests are at stake, then it has a high chance of resonating abroad. The severity of the abuses and the urgency of their implications both reinforce the appeal.
With human rights claims, activists try to compel Western actors to behave according to the liberal-interventionist norms they espouse. They hope to enact a ‘normative trap’, arguing that since actors have committed themselves to these ideals generally, they must uphold them in this specific case. They reference precedents of high-level involvement in other aggrieved people’s situations in order to compel Western powers to do the same again. They argue that the actor’s legitimacy and soft power will wane if they do not uphold these precedents and behave according to their moral rhetoric. Campaigns expect normative traps to precipitate engagement, even if Western policy interests oppose it. States and international actors can be caught within their own legal precedents. They cannot make policy just to fit the needs of the day. Their past actions – and especially their invocations of laws and norms – will partially constrain their activities. Because states wish to avoid seeming inconsistent or hypocritical, activists can use their previous standards and precedential actions to convince them into engagement.33

As the human rights repertoire is employed more frequently, the question of legitimate versus illegitimate claim-making arises. In order to achieve the objectives listed above, political actors use a variety of tools, some more suspect than others. In the most notorious cases, actors invent information, falsify statistics, or commit acts of self-violence in order to make more powerful claims. In less extreme cases, actors oversimplify a situation, avoiding contextual factors, historical analysis, or multi-sided perspectives, and they depict a situation as one of absolutes – right versus wrong, abusive versus oppressed, good versus evil. Not all human rights claim-makers follow this path, though. More discussion is necessary to delineate the different styles of the human rights repertoire, along the spectrum of legitimate versus illegitimate. The defining criterion might include the accuracy of the information, the inclusion of historical and other contextual factors, the integration of multiple perspectives, the amount of verifiable references, and the presence of emotionally-charged language. This article will not propose such a scheme, though it notes the importance of it in the study of the human rights repertoire and the critics who question its biases.

Claim components

If the six intermediate aims are priorities for a claim-maker, what specific tactics can be used to achieve them? Many studies and journalistic accounts have identified components of claims – including stylistic, content, and presentation techniques – which achieve these priorities. A claim will attract the attention of audiences, resonate with them, and mobilise them into support of a campaign if it contains one or more of the components delineated below: displays of abuse, personalisation, security threats, metaphors, and credibility markers. The Uyghur activists have relied on these tactics in their use of the human rights repertoire, and previous literature spotlights them as crucial to making persuasive claims.

Like many other recent transnational campaigns, Uyghur activists assume that they can use information distribution and human rights norms to persuade Western actors to support them in their challenge to the state. The Uyghur community, located inside China in Xinjiang province and throughout a wide diaspora in Central Asia, Europe, and North America, has prioritised the human rights repertoire in its appeals to Western state and non-governmental organisations over the past decade and a half. Members of the Uyghur minority are unsatisfied with their situation in China, with most grievances regarding their treatment by state officials. This dissatisfaction has existed for decades, but only in the mid-1990s did Uyghurs form a concerted campaign to attract Western assistance in their challenge to the PRC.
Their campaign has met with limited, slow success over the past decade. Using the human rights repertoire, the minority was able to engage non-governmental and media organisations abroad to form a transnational advocacy network. From there, the Uyghur activists began to engage the US, Canadian, and European governments as well. Western powers gradually put the minority campaign on their agendas, recognised its grievance claims, met with its leaders, supported its organisations, and provided other low-level support to it. Within a decade, the Uyghurs have moved from an unknown in the West to a group mentioned regularly by leading North American and European officials. As Uyghur activists enjoy more engagement with Western actors, the activists have continued to work within the human rights repertoire, developing more tactics within it and learning from other social movements’ use of it.

The Uyghur campaign serves as a rich case study to examine the tactics in use within the repertoire, in addition to more general observations that are not specific to one minority’s situation. In the following section, examples from the Uyghur campaign and other campaigns’ activism are used to illustrate specific tactics employed to achieve the aims of the human rights repertoire. This compendium is not complete. Campaigns are innovating new techniques, and more studies are needed to incorporate the wide array of campaigns’ activities and future developments. This list acts as an initial schematic, intended for future additions and nuance. The basis of the human rights repertoire is the human rights claim. Most often, it takes the form of the human rights report. It contains accounts of the abuses suffered, with details of the act, its consequences, and its perpetrators. It integrates individual accounts into a broader context, presenting statistics of abuse and broader grievances of the minority. The format originated with human rights organisations, particularly Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, and has now been adapted by ethnic challengers and others using the human rights repertoire. The report could be styled as an ‘urgent action’, spotlighting a single incident of abuse and calling for action on it, or as a ‘survey report’, in which a series of abuses are detailed and broader prescriptions are offered. The structure of the report serves the claims’ chance of success. The report’s statistics, details, and summaries make claims easily digestible, ready to be referenced in governmental and NGOs reports, and endowed with a sense of legitimacy. The human rights report is the main tool in the campaign’s lobbying efforts, to be distributed to its target audiences and referenced in its other appeals. The components within the human rights report also matter for its outcome; the following paragraphs discuss which components have met with success.

**Displays of abuse**

Human rights claims that spotlight abuses to human bodies have special resonance. *Corporal abuse* occurs in a discrete time frame, has demonstrable effects upon the body, and is committed by a single, identifiable person. Many other kinds of abuse – like those to do with cultural, psychological, and political matters – do not make for as powerful claims as those demonstrating physical violence to humans or human possessions. When bodies are harmed, a claim tends to become more personal and dramatic, prompting greater audience involvement. Corporal abuse claims display a ‘stark immediacy of the power relationship’, making it visible and affecting. Activists can use displays of ‘corporeal violation as a means to sensitize the world to [the] terror and violence’ of the group’s situation and to make ‘the abstractions of injustice or racism or prejudice or pain’ into concrete, urgent realities for the audience. ‘Corporal abuses’ include those dealing with beating or mutilation of the body, especially those that lead to death. Sexual abuses, like rape or forced abortions, have been found to have a special power to compel foreign
attention and sympathy. Within a wide range of conflicts over the past century, political actors deployed rape claims to advance their agendas. Allied forces focused on German soldiers’ rape practices during World War I; US-sponsored groups promoted claims of Iraqi authorities raping women during the first and second Gulf Wars; and Bosnian Muslims and Kosovar Albanians spotlighted the rape of women by Serb forces. The final category of corporal abuse is physical displacement, as with refugees or displaced people. Though the victims’ bodies have not been directly harmed, their mass displacement in convoys or camps has a similar effect in claims. It makes the group’s grievances visible and immediate. Scenes of refugee convoys and camps (e.g., of Kosovar Albanians in 1999 and Iraqi Kurds in 1991) have galvanised strong Western responses in the past. The high levels of publicity they attracted contributed to unprecedented foreign policy decisions in support of the minority group. Video footage of ethnic Albanians fleeing their homes and travelling in long columns across the countryside had “an extraordinary impact in galvanising Western opinion in favour of doing “something”. Even if the victims are anonymous or presented without any details about their background, the presentation of abuse to their body is sufficient to make a claim resonate. Corporal abuse delineates a moral narrative, builds identifications, and suggests strong prescriptions.

The Uyghur campaign has prioritised claims involving corporal abuse of members of the minority group. In their written publications, they document each act of physical abuse suffered by individual Uyghurs, with detailed description of the acts of violence and their consequences for the body. They include statistics and accounts of the victims’ experiences on their websites and in their publications, as well as first-person testimonies from the victims. The Uyghurs staged events at US universities, in which former political prisoners testified about their abuses to student audiences. Student newspapers detail the testimonies given at some Uyghur university events, in 2000 and 2001.

Tears came to Aman Turkel’s eyes Thursday night as he spoke to students in Washington, D.C. about his torture at the hands of the Chinese government. Turkel, speaking through an interpreter at George Washington University, told of his experiences being brutalized while in a Chinese prison, a victim of what he described as Chinese ‘persecution’ of his native people, the Uyghurs. ‘During the torture, one of the Chinese guards pointed his finger at me and said, “We will castrate the inferior masculinity of your turban-heads and prostitute your girls”,’ Turkel recounted. “What can you turban-heads do to our great Chinese nation? With our spit, you will all drown.” Then, they used electric clubs to knock me down again and again.”

Abdulgheni Musa cried as a translator read his speech to the small crowd gathered in University of Maryland’s Jiminez Hall Wednesday night. An escaped political prisoner from East Turkestan, he recounted memories of brutal torture and horrific suffering forced upon him by the Chinese government after he was put in jail for a crime he said he didn’t commit. One of his friends had metal sticks nailed into his fingers and his nails pulled out one by one. Musa was placed on an electrical chair seven times at such high charges that he would receive concussions. The Chinese guards threatened castration of the men and prostitution of the Turkestanians, he said. Musa shared a jail cell with six others for more than one and a half months. ‘I constantly faced physical and mental torture’, the translator read. He escaped when a doctor finally admitted him to a hospital after he was too weak to even go to the bathroom on his own.

The activists organised similar testimonies to be given at European, US, and Canadian government hearings. Providing details of the abuse — though careful not to veer into the grotesque or vulgar — is expected to galvanise Western support. The inclusion of personal testimony enhances the resonance of a human rights claim. Quotes or interviews with people who suffered abuse invite identification with the victim and draw upon the audience’s interest in corporal violence. The more personal and first-hand the testimony
provided, the more affecting the claim should be. Testimony makes ‘a problem real to distant publics’, and it ‘attests to the credibility and reach’ of the claim-maker.\(^{43}\) Personal testimony individualises claims and makes them more apt to resonate with foreign audiences. As many activists believe, ‘it helps to make the need for action more real of ordinary citizens.’\(^{44}\)

Aside from testimonies, statistics, and basic accounts of abuse, images and videos of abuse bolster the strength of claim. They draw upon the power of corporal abuse and make it more affecting by displaying greater detail than do written or oral claims. Visibility highlights the severity of the abuse and spotlights the suffering of the victim. Audiences seem to respond with more agitation to visual claims as well. In the news media and other venues, ‘graphic stories will always tend to take precedence.’\(^{45}\) Images of abuse attract an audience to the claim and last in their memory for a longer period than text.\(^{46}\) As witnessed in religious iconography and high art from past centuries, humans seem to possess an innate appetite for displays of deformed and violated human bodies.\(^{47}\) Images both increase the audience’s connection to the victims and allow for a simple understanding of a complex situation. Images allow the claim-maker to impose meaning upon a situation, including moral generalisations.\(^{48}\) Images ‘that emphasize dramatic aesthetic form but lack specific historical detail’ are especially powerful; the claim-maker can frame and narrate them as they wish.\(^{49}\) Moreover, images can become iconic more easily than textual or verbal claims can; they are repeated, spread widely, and remembered for a longer stretch of time. Often, images of conflict become the main representation of the situation; foreign audiences understand the political situation through the images they see. An image – especially of one actor committing violence against another – melts away the complexities of the conflict, directing the audience towards an obvious and strong moral judgment against one side and for the other. If a minority campaign can promote images of violence the minority has suffered, it can achieve this effect, delineating a moral narrative and offering a clear moral prescription.

Images of corporal abuse hold special power. They can grab audiences’ attention and direct their reactions, even to the point of encouraging political opinions they otherwise would oppose. A recent report about a US debate on the Iraq intervention testifies to the special power of graphic displays of victimhood. As one journalist found, images of victimised bodies had a powerful effect upon the otherwise contentious audience.

There were two moments in the debate when everybody felt the same way. Like what happens sometimes in a concert or a play, the audience becomes one emotion. It happened the first time when Rocky [Anderson] showed photos of dead Iraqi civilians, including bloody bodies of Iraqi children. Initially, the audience cried foul. You’re hitting below the belt. But as the images continued, the room became quiet. Photos of dead children: time stopped, thinking stopped. All that was left was the feeling, this can’t go on, we have to stop doing this. It was like mass nausea. Then the screen showed a government document, and everyone snapped out of it. It happened so quickly. But then it happened again when [Sean] Hannity showed images of dead Kurds, victims of Saddam’s nerve gas bombing. Whole families lying dead in the street, little kids, dead children. The room became like a quiet lake.\(^{50}\)

As evident from this account, images of corporal abuse not only rivet an audience – they silence them, render them thoughtful, and bring them above their usual political biases. Accounts of recent foreign policy-making testify to this power. US and European policymakers show greater willingness to support foreign campaigns as more scenes of their victimhood appear. For example, reports of Bosnian Muslim and Kosovar Albanian individuals’ suffering were noted as the galvanising force behind more interventionist
Western action in the Balkans. When a gruesome scene of killings in the Bosnian village of Gornje Obrinje was shown on the front page of The New York Times, US special envoy Richard Holbrooke described it as being like a mute witness at the [National Security Council] meeting in the Situation Room. There was an enormous debate, and it broke out with the picture stirring people. There was a decision then to press ahead for NATO action, and to try and sidestep the British, French, German and Russian view that you needed a Security Council mandate.51

In Britain, Foreign Office lawyers who dismissed calls for Western intervention in Bosnia with arguments that it had no precedent in international law were similarly drowned out by those who had seen the atrocity stories coming from the conflict, and who now felt compelled to intervene.52 A few years later in Kosovo, scenes of abuse, like ‘refugee convoys, mutilated corpses, and Serb paramilitary units on the rampage’ precipitated high levels of engagement.53 Displays of violence were cited by Western powers as a main motive to engage the ethnic Albanian campaign with substantial support in 1999, whereas they had only given the Albanians low level support for most of the 1990s, when there were not ‘all-important dead bodies’.54 In certain instances, it seems, a campaign can use images of corporal abuse to make human rights claims resonant enough to accelerate Western powers’ support of their group.

The Uyghur campaign has attempted to enact this same effect; images of victimhood are central to their claim-making strategies. Uyghur publications – particularly those from early stages of the campaign, during the mid- to late-1990s – have included many scenes of Uyghurs who have been tortured, executed, and subjected to forced abortion, as shown in Figure 1.

The East Turkestan Information Centre (ETIC) publishes webpages and reports that include graphic images of limbs swollen and black, allegedly from being beaten by Chinese officials. It shows a medical operation, which is captioned as a young Uyghur woman being forced to have an abortion by Chinese medics. Execution images are common, with pictures of men about to be killed and then lines of covered corpses. Videos of abuse and deformities are available on the ETIC’s site as well as on YouTube, as posted there by semi-anonymous users. Minimal context are provided with the images. The city and year is occasionally provided, but the names of the victim, perpetrator, or photographer are not. Nor are the specific contexts of the people, or the background to what the image displays. The pictures are not traceable or verifiable. The newer Uyghur organisations, like the UAA and UHRP, do not publish images of corporal abuse. They use images, but they are headshots of political prisoners and activists, documentation of Uyghur demonstrations, and some stills of riots and protests in Xinjiang. The initial Uyghur campaign spotlighted images of suffering and violence, but those organisations who have received support from Western actors have backed away from any claims that could be considered vulgar, unreliable, or traumatic during the past half decade.

Personalisation is another important component of a human rights claim. It spotlights the abuse of one individual, as well as his background, family, and ongoing problems. Personalised claims encourage identification and sympathy for the victim, as well as a sense of urgency. As one MEP reasoned, once Western audiences conceive of a situation in terms of personal narratives, and not simply in numbers, then they are more likely to engage in it.55 Graphic novelist Joe Sacco, who has published extensively on people involved in conflicts, finds that anecdotal, personalised accounts are more effective than strictly factual ones.
You can find any number of hard, hard stories that would fill an Amnesty report or a Human Rights Watch report that are terrible stories, and are compelling in their way. And I’ll tell some of those. But yeah, it’s that little thing – it’s the little things that break things down. I mean it’s that sort of thing that in some ways is the most telling because you can relate to it. Torture is a
By relating the specific story and victimhood of a certain person, and making that person familiar to the audience, the claim attracts greater attention and sympathy.

The Uyghurs have used personalised accounts of abuse extensively, especially since Rebiya Kadeer’s case met with an unprecedented, vigorous Western response. Rebiya Kadeer has been the most successful case of individualised human rights claims in the Uyghur campaign. Kadeer had risen to prominence in the Uyghur and Turkic community in the 1990s. As a mother of 11, leading businesswoman, and official in the provincial government, she was a unique figure in the Uyghur community. She was elected to the Xinjiang Government in 1987 and was appointed to the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference in 1992. Her relationship with the Xinjiang and PRC authorities soured at the end of the decade. She lost her governmental positions in 1998 when she refused to denounce her husband, an academic exiled in the US, whom authorities accused of separatism. Rebiya Kadeer’s husband, Sidik Rouzi, was a political prisoner in China as well. He went into exile and eventually settled in the US during the 1990s. He had been involved in diaspora activism before Kadeer’s arrest. In 1997, the government barred her from travel outside the country. In 1999, Chinese officials in Xinjiang arrested Kadeer on her way to meet a visiting delegation from the US Congress. Government officials found newspaper clippings regarding Xinjiang and the Uyghurs on her person; in March 2000 she was sentenced to eight years in prison for ‘divulging state secrets to foreigners’. In March 2005, however, after vigorous transnational protest on her behalf, Kadeer was released early from prison. US and European officials, along with Amnesty International and other non-state actors, had made her case one of their special concerns and brought up Kadeer’s situation in their meetings with China between 2000 and 2005. Upon her release, they declared that the change in Chinese policy was due to their intense pressure on the officials through human rights dialogues and bilateral talks.

In the wake of this successful human rights claim, Uyghur activists have tried to use this same pattern of appeals for other individual Uyghurs. They now regularly promote certain individuals to be victims of PRC gross human rights abuse, comparing their cases to Rebiya Kadeer’s and calling for Western actors to embrace these individuals as they had Kadeer. Some of the individuals they have spotlighted include Kadeer’s three adult sons, the Canadian Uyghur Huseyin Celil, the Uyghur detainees in Guantanamo Bay, and author Nurmemet Yasin. Within individualised claims, Uyghur activists provide images, biographies, and ongoing coverage to the individual and his family, in addition to general statistics and accounts of the Uyghur situation. In the style of Amnesty International reports, they issue regular ‘urgent action’ appeals which spotlight a single Uyghur’s case, including a short description of the abuse, minimal biographical background, and instructions on how Western actors can help the person. Moreover, the UAA has an online form which welcomes visitors to post details of any Uyghur political prisoner who is not yet documented in their literature. The campaign has found substantial success with individualised claims, especially when the individual Uyghur has transnational ties. Huseyin Celil, a Uyghur with Canadian citizenship, has brought the Uyghur campaign unprecedented supportive attention in Canada since his imprisonment in China. The Uyghurs detained in Guantanamo Bay have also brought more focus to the Uyghurs’ larger grievances, particularly during the controversy and legal cases regarding these detainees’ release from the facility and resettlement. Media outlets and government officials in Western countries profile the individual Uyghurs and also recognise the larger grievances and demands of the minority campaign.
Taking personalisation a step further, claims that build an *iconic victim* benefit a campaign. A ‘poster child’ figure can ‘simplify and clarify complex issues for mass audiences’. The audience becomes familiar with this individual’s life history and personality, and follows his life not just during a single episode of abuse but over a long period of time. To be an iconic figure, a person must have charm and an engaging personality; the audience does not only identify with him but admires him. The Uyghurs have made the construction of ‘iconic victims’ a central part of their campaign, especially with Rebiya Kadeer. With the help of the Uyghur activists’ promotion, Kadeer has acquired an iconic status among political circles throughout Europe and North America. She has been compared to the Dalai Lama frequently; she was described by a Western diplomat as a ‘cross between Mother Teresa and Oprah Winfrey’. Kadeer has won the Rafto Prize and been nominated several times for the Nobel Prize. Politicians make regular statements congratulating her bravery and morality, and she is invited to testify before major Western governmental bodies. Her fame and reputation have been building since the 1990s, and the Uyghur campaign assists in this ascension by arranging her political visits, helping her to compose testimonies and publications, providing translation, sending out press releases, and supporting her in her activism. While she was still imprisoned, the Uyghur campaign distributed one image of her widely. It is a portrait of Kadeer in which she is swathed in white cloth, wearing a serene expression with a slight smile. This was one of the only images available of her until after she was released, and it has been cited as an attractive force, making Kadeer’s case memorable, sympathetic, and immediate to foreign audiences. Since that photograph, the Uyghur groups have photographed Kadeer extensively, especially in her meetings with state leaders, her family, and prominent Western officials, as shown in Figure 2.

The Uyghur campaign promotes these images as ‘iconic’ ones for Kadeer, which not only verify Western support for the Uyghurs but demonstrate her charisma, virtue, and importance. Kadeer’s innate characteristics and personal history have made her an ideal candidate for a ‘human rights icon’, and the Uyghur activists have succeeded in promoting her as such. Her iconic status has had immense benefits for the Uyghur campaign. Kadeer’s life story has become an accessible and memorable shorthand for the entire community’s situation, which in turn has gained them unprecedented levels of access, awareness, and support among their target Western audiences.

**Metaphors + comparisons**

*Metaphors* and other comparisons also constitute key components of successful human rights claims. A campaign can use certain terms – like ‘atrocity’, ‘massacre’, ‘ethnic cleansing’, and especially ‘genocide’ – to link their community’s situation into familiar aggressor–victim narratives. Metaphors linking a situation to the Holocaust and Nazism attract attention, as do links to Pol Pot, Milosevic, and other well-established aggressors who are commonly judged as evil, or to ‘well known and emotionally charged events’. Since audiences tend to be ‘cognitive misers’, giving them an established narrative with which to interpret an unfamiliar situation can guarantee more attention and sympathy. The same moral judgment made on these past occurrences could be transposed onto the situation at hand. Metaphors make complex situations comprehensible to foreign audiences, and easier to see in clear moral terms. Comparisons are crucial claim components; by linking the minority’s situation into other priorities and interventions of Western actors, they try to build familiarity and identifications and to set normative traps. A young campaign can borrow the awareness and reputation of established campaigns, and they can pressure Western actors to abide by the same policies they’ve used in other situations.
The Uyghur campaign has tried to invoke such comparisons. Rebiya Kadeer has issued a series of condemnations of Chinese policy, using accusations of ‘genocide’ to attract Western audiences. She has interviewed that ‘the Chinese government has been trying to wipe the Uyghurs from the earth without the world knowing it’.62 She calls on the West to stop China from perpetrating a ‘cultural genocide of the Uyghur people’.63 The Uyghurs also invoke comparisons to the Tibetan community.64 They hope to piggyback on the Tibetans’ reputation and victimhood narrative, so that the Uyghurs could enjoy the same levels of support as their campaign. Aside from this common comparison, minority activists have invoked Western involvement in other, more high-profile foreign situations. In the run-up to the US intervention in Iraq, Uyghurs said that if such an intervention...
was taken, similarly strong action must be taken in regards to China. Activist Alim Seytoff argued that

Jiang Zemin to the Uighurs, Tibetans, the Chinese people, is like Saddam Hussein to the Iraqi people. Both are dictators and murderers who don’t hesitate to use military force against their own people to continue their evil rule. If there has to be a regime change in Baghdad, there also should be a regime change in Beijing because the dictators in Beijing are not any better or any different from the dictators in Baghdad, in Iraq.

The Uyghurs try to use US foreign policy as a normative trap to precipitate higher engagement with the campaign.

In addition, Uyghur activists link their situation in with abuses that are of special priority to Western audiences. Particularly when addressing American institutions, the activists highlight forced abortion and family planning restrictions; curtailment of religious freedom; and communist oppression. They expect that these comparisons will attract US audiences that care about these issues, winning their support for the Uyghurs. Established Western narratives about these issues – which already are morally-charged and possess great resonance – can be transferred to the Uyghurs’ situation. The other comparison that the Uyghur activists invoke is that of colonialism and indigenous people. Since other groups making claims about the rights of ‘indigenous people’ have succeeded in securing foreign support in the past years, the minority activists have identified it as an opportunity for their own campaign. They claim that the Chinese state is taking the land from the ancient people of the region, the Uyghurs, by encouraging an influx of Han Chinese migrants. Activist Seytoff reported,

We are being internally colonized. ...There were 300,000 Han in Xinjiang in 1949. Now they are half the people. If you want to move to Xinjiang [unlike the rest of China] no residency permit is necessary. You just go. The Uighur people are being pushed into the desert, forced out of cities and towns. Is there a single Uighur oil executive? I don’t think so.

A similar statement was made by Erkin Alptekin: ‘We are in the same position as the Tibetans. ... The Chinese want to replace us with their own people as colonists, and assimilate those of us who remain, wiping out our culture.’ In another interview, Seytoff described China’s claim to the territory of Xinjiang as follows,

It is more like the Mongolian government, today’s Mongolian government, claiming all the territories occupied by the Mongol empire of Genghis Khan as historic Mongol territory since ancient times. It is like today’s Greek government claiming all territories occupied by Alexander the Great as part of Greece since ancient times. Or more like the Turks claiming all the territories occupied by the Ottomans as historically part of Turkey’s territories. It is the same thing that China is claiming.

They also claim that ‘the benefits of the region must go to the indigenous people first, not to support the economy on the coastal areas of China’. These arguments tap into a developing branch of activism on behalf of indigenous people worldwide. If a group can position themselves as ‘indigenous’, and not just an ‘ethnic minority’, then they have greater access to Western actors, and more likely will enjoy a higher level of support from them.

Credibility markers

Within their claims, minority activists use credibility markers to indicate their liberal virtues. The activists embrace Western liberal norms and consciously, insistently constrain
themselves within them. In their publications, interviews and speeches, the activists invoke
the themes of ‘non-violence’, ‘democracy’, ‘peace’, and ‘nobility’. They declare that the
campaign refuses to use violence, that they are committed to democracy, and that they
wish to promote women’s, children’s and minority rights. These invocations and denuncia-
tions are intended to, first of all, demonstrate to Western actors that the campaign fits within
their normative preferences and so qualifies for their support. Second, the declarations aim
to counter the state’s claims that the minority is violent, criminal, separatist, or terrorist.
They are ‘credibility markers’, meant to convince Western audiences of the minority’s right-
eousness, trustworthiness, and importance. If successful, these markers demonstrate the
legitimacy of the campaign, as well as the Western actors’ obligation to assist them.

Alongside credibility markers, campaigns include refutations of counter-claims. State
officials frequently issue claims denouncing the campaign and accusing its activists of crimi-
nality, radicalism, self-interest, and maliciousness. The campaign can use its own claims to
prevent these counter-claims from resonating abroad. Their refutations include evidence of
the activists’ liberal virtues, denunciations of extremist factions, and counter-accusations
against the state. The Uyghur campaign has faced frequent and damning counter-claims
from the PRC. Activists have taken great pains to demonstrate that they are not funda-
mentalist Muslims and not violent terrorists, as Chinese officials have alleged. Because the
PRC strategy relies so much upon these allegations to undermine the campaign’s chances
of securing Western support, the campaign responds to them delicately and often. In inter-
views with Western media, Erkin Alptekin said that ‘he and other prominent supporters of
Uyghur independence have never advocated violence, and militancy among the population
is rare’. Another Uyghur activist, Nury Turkel, interviewed that

Uyghurs are not very religious. They are very secular. I am a Muslim myself. I was born
Muslim, but I don’t practice. Many Uyghur people don’t believe in Wahabism, which many
Islamic groups in Arab states practice, because we are not really religious. We were a
people before we turned to Islam.

In another interview, Huji Turedi of the UAA explained that

We are neighbours with fundamentalist Afghanistan. But Uyghurs have never been extremist in
history. We have had a diverse religious background. One-third of the Uyghur population was
Buddhist until the 16th century [and] many rituals in today’s Uyghur society are relics of
Shamanism.

Kathy Polias, an activist working with the Uyghur Human Rights Coalition, wrote a letter to
the editor in response to a *New York Times* article on the Uyghurs. She felt that the article
had misrepresented the Uyghur campaign; she denied that they were extremist or violent, or
that they were motivated by religion. In her words,

while there have been a few instances in which Uyghurs have used violent means to protest the
Chinese government’s oppressive policies, the vast majority of Uyghur political dissidents
have used peaceful methods of protest. Furthermore, they have dissented in the name of
human rights and freedom, not in the name of religion.

The WUC issues press releases in response to Chinese accusations against the activists, or
after they announce a raid of Uyghur separatists in Xinjiang. They reject all allegations of
terrorism – especially those made against Western diaspora leaders as ‘demonizations’,
‘unfounded allegations’, and ‘disinformation’. Occasionally the campaign acknowledges
that some Uyghur factions have engaged in violence, but they qualify these incidents as
sporadic, isolated, and unsupported by most Uyghurs. These refutations intend to reinforce the activists’ liberal, trustworthy reputation while undermining the state’s counter-claims.

**Threats**

Activists occasionally include threats within their claims as well. In order to convey the urgency of the situation and to demonstrate Western security in their situation, they threaten that regional and Western security will be at risk unless foreign actors support them. Minority activists argue that Western actors, despite their preconceptions, actually do have a stake in the conflict situation. They try to persuade states and other organisations that their security and their citizens’ welfare are at risk, just as the minority community’s is. Uyghur activists often include threats in their human rights claims. In some claims, the campaign tries to use the Uyghurs’ situation as a warning to Western citizens. For instance, the head of the Uyghur Canadian Association interviewed that Canadian citizens should get involved in Huseyin Celil’s case so that other Canadian citizens would not face similar abuse by the PRC. In his words, ‘If Canada loses this case, China will have an open door to try any Chinese Canadian at any time. That would be a disaster.’

The most common threat in Uyghur claims, however, is that the more that Uyghurs’ human rights and democratic activity are violated by the PRC, the more Western security and regional interests will be threatened.

To increase their claims’ sense of urgency and importance, the Uyghur activists try to create a sense of an impending humanitarian emergency or ethnic conflict to give their grievance claims greater resonance, threatening that the uneasy peace in Xinjiang will devolve into conflict unless Western powers give greater support to the campaign. The activists, especially Erkin Alptekin, threaten that the minority will undergo a ‘backburner radicalization’ unless Western powers accelerate their support. If Western powers continue to give only low-level support to the Uyghurs, Alptekin suggests, the Uyghurs will turn to violent strategies and extremist allies to advance their campaign. Since the mid-1990s, he has interviewed that ‘We are squeezed into a corner [and an explosion is coming that could] shake the Earth to its foundations.’ In 2001, he said, ‘We have been warning for years that Eastern Turkestan could blow up someday if it is surrounded by hot wars.’ Alptekin became even more specific in his threat in 2004, when he said that ‘The United States should raise the problem of the Uighurs to the same level as that of the Tibetans, and pressure China to open dialogue with all its minorities’, even if the Chinese government resents it. The alternative: more, rather than fewer, recruits for Islamist terrorism, drawn from the turbulence of China.

WUC spokesman Dilxat Raxit, has made similar threats. In 2003, he interviewed that ‘I do not know when the pressure-cooker situation will explode, but I am sure it will happen.’ The previous year, he said that if Beijing would not engage the Uyghurs in political dialogue, then ‘Xinjiang could become a second Palestine’. With these threats of destruction, violence, and radicalisation, the campaign tries to convince Western actors that they deserve more support, more recognition, and a higher place on their foreign policy agendas.

Not all information released by minority campaigns contains all the components listed above. Typically, the claims include a combination of several tactical components. The campaign activists learn (mainly from their engagement with Western actors and observation of other campaigns) how to construct successful claims. The Uyghur activists are one of many challenger campaigns that rely upon the human rights repertoire as a crucial – if not the only – set of tactics to promote their grievances and political
demands. State powers often make human rights claims as well, and would have the same intermediate aims and tactical actions as a minority campaign would. The human rights repertoire does not consist only of the construction of human rights claims, though. Once claims have been constructed and compiled, they must also be distributed to the target audiences, and in a manner that makes them resonate as powerfully as possible. At its essence, the human rights repertoire is a reactive strategy — it requires that a campaign wait for abuses to be committed and then use claim-making to capitalise upon them. There are actions which a campaign can employ, regardless of another actor’s perpetration of abuse, to attract foreign support with the human rights repertoire.

**Behaviours in the human rights repertoire**

1. **Form organisations to represent minority and to collect, compose, and distribute abuse claims**

   These may take the form of information distribution centres, human rights groups, political parties, youth groups, cultural organisations, or other bodies. The more formalised the campaign (with specific mission statements, leaders, and locations), the more legitimate it seems. The Uyghurs have established a series of pro-democracy and human rights organisations in the several years that they have engaged Western powers. The more formal organisations, it seems, the more numerous and legitimate the activists appear.

2. **Publish regular claims to foreign audiences**

   Regular publications (e.g., a newsletter, an online list-serve, faxed reports, or a website dedicated to human rights claims) allow for quick distribution of claims, including those with imagery or video. These reports can be used in lobbying efforts and referenced as credible sources in testimonies and Western actors’ reports.

3. **Partner with Western organisations**

   Activists make contacts with, lobby, and apply for funding from Western NGOs, news outlets, states, and international organisations. Ethnic allies (kin states, diaspora groups, or the exile community) are apt to respond, as are international organisations with links to ethnic allies or the target state. A campaign can ally itself with major international human rights groups or religious organisations to help distributing claims and give them a stronger reputation. Campaigns, like the Uyghurs and the Bosnian Muslims, have targeted Jewish organisations with special fervour, in the expectation that such a connection will provide strong symbolic capital to the victimhood claims. Alliances with respected individuals, like Elie Wiesel, Jimmy Carter, the Dalai Lama, or others with strong moral reputations, also are useful. If these individuals endorse their claims, then they will reach a wider audience and be taken with greater urgency and faith. Hiring public relations firms, or similar advisory bodies, has become increasingly common in the repertoire. Campaigns employ experts to advise them on making claims and to distribute the claims with greater efficacy.

4. **Formalise and institutionalise activism among minority community**

   Activists can run training sessions for minority community members to promote the campaign. They encourage links between the community in the target state, the long-standing
diaspora community, and recent exiles. These efforts demonstrate that the activists are democratic representatives of the entire community and allow them to collect information and resources from as many sources within their community as possible. They can open up funding channels and new communication paths. It can mobilise the community behind the campaign and give the activists a reputation of legitimacy and liberal credentials in front of their target audiences. In other cases, more radical behaviour used to promote human rights claims has been documented. Besides just organising minority activism, compiling claims, and distributing them, some campaigns have engaged in more suspect activities. These include the fabrication of human rights violations, staging of abuses, denial of support to vulnerable community members, direct provocation of abuse, and threats against critics.85 None of these behaviours were exhibited in the Uyghur case, but their appearance elsewhere suggests that the human rights repertoire is not always a moderate strategy. It can take radical forms, in terms of the harm it causes or deception it involves. State officials often argue that all human rights claims are radical, in that they provoke backlashes, disrupt social harmony, and deceive the audience about the reality of the situation. These allegations often are unsubstantiated, but they are not completely baseless. Human rights claims can have problematic motives and outcomes. The human rights repertoire is not inherently moderate or peaceful. Though it centres on liberal norms, it does not necessarily uphold them. In some instances, the claim’s effects or the behaviour used to promote it can endanger these norms. Future studies can build a more comprehensive schematic, delineating moderate from radical types of the human rights repertoire.

Conclusions

As the use of human rights rhetoric grows more pervasive in international relations, the strategic use of its norms and claims needs greater definition and exploration. This article formalises the concept of ‘the human rights repertoire’, an information-based strategy, which uses a variety of framing techniques, arguments, and stylistic choices to present a certain community’s situation as one of ‘abuse of victims by aggressors’. The repertoire is unique from other strategies because it is largely devoid of violence, protests, or mass action. Instead, it relies on the communication of information and invocation of liberal-interventionist norms. Often it is preferred by groups, like ethnic communities or ideological social movements, challenging the state, though state authorities increasingly employ human rights claims in their own strategies as well. Increasing numbers of challenger campaigns, like the Uyghur one, rely upon the repertoire as their sole set of tactics to achieve political change.

The human rights repertoire is a reactive strategy, but not a passive one. It centres on the designation of ‘victimhood’ and depends largely on other actors’ behaviour to create incidents which can be framed as an aggressor abusing a victim. Despite its being reactive, it does not make activists totally dependent upon the occurrence of an ‘abuse’. Campaigns possess agency when using the human rights repertoire. The repertoire’s power lies in the construction and distribution of information. A campaign’s choices (about how to frame information, which information to present, and how to distribute it) can make a major difference in how target audiences receive claims. Activists don’t have to wait for actors to commit severe abuses against their community members; they can use information tactics to make a wide range of incidents resonate as severe, urgent, and deserving of foreign involvement. As the Uyghur activists (along with many other recent ethnic campaigns) have learned, they possess some control over the fate of their appeals for Western support when using the human rights repertoire. The Uyghur campaign has
innovated ways to use human rights claims to argue for engagement and, in some cases, to succeed in securing it.

This article provides a schematic of the repertoire intended for expansion and nuance in future studies. It provides an outline of the component aims and tactics employed within the human rights repertoire. The ultimate aims, the intermediate aims, and the claim components and behaviour within the human rights repertoire are profiled in detail, though other campaigns may employ other variations of the strategy. The article expects the charts and lists provided here to expand with continued study of the Uyghur and other challenger campaigns that pursue foreign support through human rights claim-making. Studies of states’ human rights claims may also add to the definition of the human rights repertoire. This article brings together a wide variety of observations and conclusions, formalises the concept of the human rights repertoire, proposes a systematic definition of its components, and opens several new lines of academic study. From this initial work, richer and more reliable understandings of the repertoire, its uses, and its outcomes can be constructed.

Notes


27. Susan Sontag notes the ubiquitous symbolic power of a dead child. She writes, ‘To an Israeli Jew, a photograph of a child torn apart in the attack on the Sbarro pizzeria in downtown Jerusalem is first of all a photograph of a Jewish child killed by a Palestinian suicide bomber. To a Palestinian, a photograph of a child torn apart by a tank round in Gaza is first of all a photograph of a Palestinian child killed by Israeli ordnance. To the militant, identity is everything. And all photographs wait to be explained or falsified by their captions. During the fighting between Serbs and Croats at the beginning of the recent Balkan wars, the same photographs of children killed in the shelling of a village were passed around at both Serb and Croat propaganda briefings’. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2003), 9.


32. Keohane and Nye, ‘Power and Interdependence in the Information Age’.


35. Ibid.


40. Uyghur political websites include those of the Uyghur American Association (UAA: http://www.uyghuramerican.org/), the World Uyghur Congress (WUC: http://www.uyghurcongress.org), the Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP: http://www.uhrp.org) and the East Turkestan Information Center (ETIC: http://www.uygur.org/english.htm). Collected survey reports and individual urgent actions are presented on each of these sites, with text, picture, and sometimes video claims detailing abuses Uyghurs have suffered.


44. Ibid., 227.


47. Sontag, ‘Looking at War’.


52. Ibid., 182.


61. Lakoff, ‘Metaphor and War’.


67. Marquand, ‘Go West.’

68. Schwartz, ‘Beleaguered Uighurs’.


70. Kadeer, ‘A Voice for the Uyghurs.’


76. Seytoff, interview.


80. Schwartz, ‘Beleaguered Uighurs’.


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