

The “Phone Disaster”: How WeChat became digital traps for Chinese Uyghurs | Rest of World

By Darren Byler

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The young Uyghur man, whom I’ll refer to as Qeyser, saw a phone for the first time in 2005, when he was 15 years old. In his village in southern Xinjiang — a Muslim-majority region in northwest China — mobile phones arrived before landlines. “The first phone I ever saw was the flip phone of the vice secretary of our village’s work brigade,” he recalled. “It was pretty simple but looked really complicated to me. It had all these numbers and letters. I thought, ‘How could he call and write at the same time?’” He and the other young people followed the Communist Party official as he searched for a signal. “He would speak in a loud voice to whoever was on the other end of the phone, making a big show of it. It was like magic.” The future was coming to Uyghur villages, a storm on the horizon.

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