

# **State Violence in Xinjiang: A Comprehensive Assessment**

# Contents

[Executive Summary](#)

[Contributing Authors](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 1. Forced Labour](#)

*Laura T. Murphy*

[Chapter 2. Child Separation and Coercive Birth Controls](#)

*Rian Thum*

[Chapter 3. Torture and Sexual Violence in the Camps](#)

*Rachel Harris*

[Chapter 4. Destruction of Religious Practice and Heritage](#)

*Jo Smith Finley*

[Chapter 5. Cultural Destruction](#)

*Jo Smith Finley*

[Conclusions](#)

# Executive Summary

State violence towards Turkic Muslim peoples in Xinjiang is of significant humanitarian, economic, and security interest for policymakers, businesses, and the public across the world. This report shows how **China's party-state organises and co-ordinates systematic and interconnected practices of ethnically targeted violence in Xinjiang, which prevent intergenerational transmission of cultural, linguistic, and religious practices, the foundations of the targeted groups.**

## Key findings:

- State violence towards Xinjiang's peoples has rapidly intensified since 2014.
- The officially stated intent of policy in Xinjiang is to "break their roots".
- Mass detainment, forced labour, child separation, repression of religion and language, and sexual violence and torture are systematic, interconnected practices.
- Widespread and systematic forced labour for ethnic minorities includes coercion, forcible transfers of population, and child-separation (chapter 1).
- Transfers of Uyghur children from their families to state care have grown rapidly since 2017 (chapter 2).
- Coercive "birth control policies" and internment for women with "too many children" has significantly contributed to declining Uyghur birth rates (chapter 2)
- Widespread and systematic practices of rape and sexual violence are routine methods of torture and punishment within the camps (chapter 3).
- Religious practice as a criterion for extra-legal detention is part of broader campaigns to "Sinicise" religion (chapter 4).
- "De-extremification" campaigns include coerced intermarriages, arbitrary detention of cultural figureheads, and forcible mass "re-education" (chapter 5).

## Contributing Authors

The contributors to this report received no funding for this voluntary, independent, and non-partisan research, that is not affiliated to or supported by any governmental or non-governmental institution, organisation, or body. The contributors' expertise is based on years of fieldwork on ethnic relations, religious practice, political violence, and development in Xinjiang. Each contributing author has published significant academic research in social anthropology, political science, and political economy focused on the issues and region in focus. The substantive chapters of the report were researched and written by the named author before being reviewed as a team. The report makes no policy recommendations or legal judgements. It provides relevant factual evidence drawn from their areas of expertise for policymakers, experts in international law, businesses, and scholars, regarding allegations of state violence in the region.

### [Professor Rachel Harris](#) (SOAS University of London)

Rachel Harris is Professor in Ethnomusicology at SOAS University of London. Professor Harris has conducted fieldwork in Xinjiang, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan over a period of twenty years, publishing three seminal monographs, *Singing the Village* (Oxford University Press), *the Making of a Musical Canon in Chinese Central Asia* (Routledge), and *Soundscapes of Uyghur Islam* (Indiana University Press). She has co-edited three volumes on music (*Gender in Chinese Music*, 2013, the ethnomusicology textbook, *Pieces of the Musical World*, 2015, and *Theory and Practice in the Music of the Islamic World*, 2018) and is series editor for the Routledge [SOAS Studies in Music](#) Series. Professor Harris' current research interests focus on intangible cultural heritage, music and identity formation, soundscapes and state projects of territorialization.

### [Professor Laura T. Murphy](#) (Sheffield Hallam University)

Laura T. Murphy is Professor of Human Rights and Contemporary Slavery at the Helena Kennedy Centre for International Justice at Sheffield Hallam University. She is an expert on international forced labour, and she has published several books and many academic articles on modern slavery. She is currently working on three reports regarding forced labour in the Uyghur region, one on the solar industry, another on the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, and a third on textiles (in collaboration with University of Leiden). She has lived in and visited the Uyghur region for significant periods over the last 15 years.

**Dr Jo Smith Finley** (Newcastle University)

Dr Jo Smith Finley is Reader in Chinese Studies at Newcastle University. Dr Smith Finley has conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Xinjiang for nearly three decades, publishing extensively on Uyghur identities and ethnic relations, Chinese state securitisation of religion, PRC counter-terrorism measures as state terror, and political “re-education” in Xinjiang as (cultural) genocide in leading outlets including *the China Journal*, *Asian Ethnicity*, *Inner Asia*, *Central Asian Survey*, and the *Journal of Genocide Research*. Her monograph, *The Art of Symbolic Resistance: Uyghur Identities and Uyghur-Han Relations in Contemporary Xinjiang* (Brill), is a seminal ethnographic study of evolving Uyghur identities and ethnic relations over a period of 20 years (from the 1991 Soviet to the 1997 Ghulja disturbances and the 2009 Urumchi riots to the present). She is a frequent commentator to print and broadcast media, serves as expert country witness in Uyghur asylum cases, and advises legal firms, refugee support organisations, government departments, NGOs, and think-tanks.

**Dr Rian Thum** (University of Manchester)

Dr Rian Thum is Senior Lecturer in East Asian History at the University of Manchester. Since 1999, he has regularly conducted field research in Xinjiang and other areas of China with large Muslim populations, both Uyghur- and Chinese-speaking. His book, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History* (Harvard University Press, 2014) uses historical and ethnographic methods to offer a new understanding of Uyghur cultural practices. Since the emergence of China’s mass internment programme for Turkic minorities, Thum has consulted for media organizations, businesses, NGOs, and government agencies and his writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Foreign Affairs*, and *The Nation*.

**Dr David Tobin** (University of Manchester)

Dr David Tobin is Hallsworth Research Fellow in the Political Economy of China at the University of Manchester. He has several years of fieldwork experience in Xinjiang with peer-reviewed articles published on China’s ethnic policy, political violence, and Han-Uyghur relations in *China Quarterly*, *Oxford Bibliographies*, *Inner Asia*, and *Positions - Asia Critique*. His book with Cambridge University Press, *Securing China's Northwest Frontier: Identity and Insecurity in Xinjiang*, analyses the relationship between identity and security in Chinese policy-making and its impact on Han-Uyghur relations. His current research focuses on explaining [China’s new ethnic policy](#) and collecting Uyghur diaspora narratives on violence and trauma.

## Introduction

China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) has become the site of the world's largest extra-legal detention and surveillance of an ethnic group since 1945. Leading researchers use official Chinese statistics to estimate that since 2016, between [one and three million people have been detained without trial](#), subject to invasive [surveillance](#), [sexual violence](#), [child-separation](#), and [psychological trauma](#), forcing them to abandon native language, religious beliefs, and cultural practices. Outside the camp system, over 10 million Turkic-speaking Muslims are subject to networks of [forced labour](#), [hi-tech surveillance systems](#), and [checkpoints and interpersonal monitoring](#) to control personal mobility. China's party-state initially denied existence of the camps before describing them as voluntary “vocational training” or “re-education” facilities, and later, as “counter-terrorism” measures. However, since 2017, Uyghurs and other Turkic-speaking diaspora, including [Tursun Mhriqul](#), have shared first-hand testimonies of torture, sexual violence, and forced labour while separated family members abroad, including [Nyrola Elima](#) and [Jewlan Shirmemmet](#), publicly campaign for knowledge of their family members' whereabouts and health.<sup>1</sup> This report reviews the evidence. It will show how **China's party-state organises and co-ordinates systematic practices of ethnically targeted violence, which prevent intergenerational transmission of cultural, linguistic, and religious practices, the foundations of the targeted groups.**

Xi Jinping's 2014 announcement of a “[People's War on Terror](#)” in Xinjiang marks an intensification of state violence in Xinjiang. Uyghurs and other Turkic-speaking Muslim interviewees and online diaspora accounts describe how their identity has been routinely targeted as an “ethnic problem” (*minzu wenti*) to be resolved since 1949, through state-sponsored mass Han-migration, birth control policies, restrictions on religious practice, arbitrary arrests, Mandarin-medium education, and cultural erasure. Uyghur diaspora

---

<sup>1</sup> Further details on these interviews are available on request. For an extensive record of detainee accounts, see: Mauk, Ben (2019) ‘[Weather Reports](#)’, *The Believer*.

interviewees describe the Chinese naming of their homeland as Xinjiang (“new frontier”) in 1884, the official narratives of “peaceful liberation” by People’s Liberation Army (PLA) troops in 1949, and subsequent repression of religion and language as evidence of colonialism and long-term genocidal intent. For example, the Xinjiang Military Division that governed the region between 1949 and establishment of the autonomous region in 1955, originally recommended that Uyghurs reject religion before entering the party. However, the CCP’s Central Committee made the tactical decision to encourage Muslims to join the party before insisting they “give up religion”.<sup>2</sup>

The intent of current ethnic policy was explicitly stated in a 2018 regional government directive to “[break their lineage, break their roots, break their connections](#)”.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, *the 50 Whys*, an official, compulsory “ethnic unity education” text used in all universities in 2009, already stated that “only the three Evils” (terrorists, extremists, and separatists) dispute that Uyghurs are “not an Islamic group” and “not a Turkic group”.<sup>4</sup> However, state violence targeting Indigenous identities is publicly framed through benevolent language of “poverty reduction” and “counter-terrorism”, which chapter 1 will show mean forced labour and arbitrary detainment. The “[Three News](#)” (*san xin huodong*) housing campaign included 24 million house visits by party cadres, coercively introducing standardised construction plans and furniture for private Uyghur homes as “modernisation”, while removing all symbols of Indigenous culture, including basic architectural features such as *supa*.<sup>5</sup> Tobin’s 2009 fieldwork found repression of religious practice in private spaces, including surveillance of university staff and students’ diet and prayers was normalised. “Birth control” policies were arbitrarily enforced, interviewing

---

<sup>2</sup> CCP Central Committee (1950) ‘Zhonggong Zhongyang Guanyu Tongyi Xinjiang Jiandang jige Wenti de Guyiding de Pifa’ (‘Reply from the CCPC on Several Issues Regarding Establishment of the Party in Xinjiang’) in *Zhonggong Zhongyang Wenxian Yanjiushi* (‘CCP Central Committee Document Research’) (ed) (2010) *Xinjiang Gongzuo Wenxian Xuanbian* (Xinjiang Work – Selected Documents). Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe (‘CCP Central Committee Party Literature Publishing House’).

<sup>3</sup> The original document posted by the Kashgar Government has been [archived](#).

<sup>4</sup> Xinjiang Education Press (2009) *50ge Weishhenme: Weibu Guojia Tongyi fandui Minzu Fenlie, Jiaqiang Minzu Tuanjie Duben* (*The 50 Whys: Protecting National Unification, Opposing Ethnic Separatism, Strengthening Ethnic Unity Study Book*). Wulumuqi: Xinjiang Jiaoyu Chubanshe (‘Xinjiang Education Press’).

<sup>5</sup> Grose, Timothy A. (2020) ‘[If you don’t know how, just learn: Chinese Housing and Uyghur domestic space](#)’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 1-22.

multiple women who endured forced abortions, despite legal permission to have more than one child under “preferential policies” (*youbui zhengce*). “Re-education” methods described in chapter 3 were practiced in university classrooms but are now applied to millions of people extralegally detained in camps, under threat of immediate physical, psychological, and sexual violence. Chapter 2 shows how parents who question monolingual education in child-separation facilities are officially treated as “enemies of the people”. The long-term, consistent, and widespread treatment of Indigenous linguistic and religious practices as security threats enabled rapid intensification of state violence under the “People’s War on Terror” campaign, which targets all Turkic-speaking, majority Muslim group members regardless of political affiliation or beliefs.

“Ethnic dispersion” (*minzu fensan*) policies to break up “compact ethnic communities” were celebrated in 2009, with success defined by number of minorities living in “scattered areas” and development of Han-populated cities, particularly oil-producing Bingtuan hubs, Shihezi and Karamay.<sup>6</sup> The camp system, including related forced labour and child separation practices, accelerates dispersion by targeting and breaking up families with “[relatives in detention](#)” a key indicator determining internment. Families are often given no official verdicts for relatives’ disappearances, leading many to campaign and pressure authorities to give explanations, which include not watching state television, not greeting officials appropriately, not smoking, using *whatsapp* messenger, being born in the 1980s-’90s (“untrustworthy generation”), “contractual requirements” to maintain employment, being exposed to “foreign thought”, “obtaining second citizenship”, “applying for a foreign visa” or wanting to travel abroad, and “disturbing public order” by writing letters to gain information on family whereabouts and health.<sup>7</sup> Uyghur and Kazakh interviewees and diaspora accounts describe how not knowing their family’s whereabouts while knowing anything could happen to them is “torture”, “constant struggle”, and “trauma”,

---

<sup>6</sup> State Council (2009) ‘*Zhongguo de Minzu Zhengce yu ge Minzu Gongtong Fanrong Fazhan*’ (‘China’s Ethnic Minority Policy and the Common Prosperity of all Ethnic Groups’). Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe (‘People’s Publishing Press’), p.3.

<sup>7</sup> The Xinjiang Victims’ Database (XVD) records over 13,000 detainment cases. Reasons listed here draw from “[exemplary entries](#)” because they are verified by multiple witnesses and written in detail.

with interviewees discussing deteriorating mental health, anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts,<sup>8</sup> fear of surveillance, and recurring nightmares.<sup>9</sup>

Child and family separation practices target Uyghurs but intensification of “birth control” policies since 2016 affect all Indigenous groups in the region. Many leading first-hand testimonies on physical and sexual violence in the camps come from Kazakhs, including [Erbol Ergoli](#),<sup>10</sup> [Gulzira Auelhan](#),<sup>11</sup> and [Amanzhan Seituly](#).<sup>12</sup> Gulzira Auelhan was informed she was “exposed to foreign thought” by staying “too long” in Kazakhstan, testifying how detainees aged 17-72 were kept in rooms with 18 to 60 people and repeatedly hit with electric batons when exceeding permitted two-minute toilet breaks (“always on the head”). Surveillance cameras monitored detainees’ behaviour and emotions, with crying leading to punishment of 14 hours sitting upright on hard chairs for being “infected with bad thoughts”. Amanzhan Seituly described regular beatings and solitary confinement for using the “wrong words” or being unable to sing the national anthem. Former Uyghur detainees’ testimonies to US Congress, human rights organisations, and independent journalists describe similar cramped rooms without sanitation, daily beatings, torture for crying or using Uyghur language, daily renunciations of Islam and praising Xi for bowls of gruel, and organised gang-rapes by guards while prisoners are forced to watch or even assist the violence.<sup>13</sup>

The causes, consequences, and implications of such large-scale, ethnically targeted state violence towards Turkic Muslim peoples in Xinjiang is of significant humanitarian, economic, and security interest for policymakers, businesses, and the public across the

---

<sup>8</sup> See XVD for [list of documented suicides](#).

<sup>9</sup> Diaspora artist, Yi Xiaocuo, describes not knowing as “trauma” and provides an online platform, [Camp Album](#), to support affected families.

<sup>10</sup> See: Foreign Policy (2019) ‘[Detainees are trickling out of Xinjiang’s camps](#)’, 18 January.

<sup>11</sup> See: BBC (2019) ‘[Former inmates describe camp punishment](#)’, 24 November.

<sup>12</sup> See: [Amanzhan’s video testimony](#).

<sup>13</sup> For major examples, see: Amnesty International (2020) ‘[Hearts and Lives Broken: The Nightmare of Uyghur Families Separated by Repression](#)’; Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2018) ‘[Eradicating Ideological Viruses](#)’; Tursun, Mihrigul (2018) ‘[Congressional-Executive Commission on China: Testimony of Tursun Mihrigul](#)’. 28 November.

world. This report shows how **China's party-state organises and co-ordinates systematic practices of ethnically targeted violence in Xinjiang, which prevent intergenerational transmission of cultural, linguistic, and religious practices, the foundations of the targeted groups.** The official and explicit intent of these interconnected practices of cultural destruction, religious repression, mass detention, forced labour, child and family separation, and sexual violence is to “break their roots”.

## Methodology

The report presents a comprehensive assessment of evidence drawn from official primary sources, including official Chinese government documents, procurement contracts, statistics, internal statements, and white papers, as well as interviews with families affected and testimonies presented by witnesses to the US Congress, international media, and NGOs. The report centres the human impact of party-state policy in its analysis by linking official empirical data to available testimonies and original interviews. The report and research were structured by focusing on the key issues of concern raised and highlighted by diaspora interviewees, namely, forced labour, child separation, coercive birth control, sexual violence, repression of religion, and cultural destruction. Interview materials presented in the report focus on cases verified by multiple eyewitnesses and documentation, considered the most reliable testimonies.<sup>14</sup> The methodology triangulates evidence using multiple official sources, linked to detailed, semi-structured interviews conducted with families affected, using open and broad questions (e.g., “how has your life changed?” and “how has your family been affected?”). Open questions enabled interviewees to raise issues they deem important and to talk on their own terms, reducing researcher-bias and enabling clearer understanding of policy impact. Conversational interviewing methods are standard practice when conducting social science research in Xinjiang and other contexts in which it is safer to discuss the impact of policy on everyday life without making direct political commentary.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> These “tier 1” testimonies on *Xinjiang Victim's Database* (<https://shahit.biz/eng/>) are the most strongly evidenced cases, including eye-witness verification, interviews, and official documentation.

<sup>15</sup> For examples of these interviewing techniques in Xinjiang, see: Bovingdon, Gardner (2002) ‘The Not-so-silent Majority: Uyghur Resistance to Han Rule in Xinjiang’, *Modern China*, 28(1): 39-78; (2010) *The Uyghurs: Strangers in their own Land*. New York: Columbia University Press; Smith, Joanne (2000)

Since 2017, Uyghur diaspora have become increasingly vocal in public calls for access to their families. However, each personality is unique in outlook and coping strategies, which must be respected by researchers. All interviewees discussed family separation as “trauma” or “torture” and many describe subsequent mental health problems. Our methods respected their privacy and personal boundaries, continuously reminding them they are free to discuss, or not to discuss, any topic and can end the interview with no explanation. Interviewing victims of violence and families experiencing trauma requires background expertise to understand their cultural perspectives and must be conducted by listening to and engaging with their needs. No political activists were interviewed and each individual stated their motivation for being interviewed, anonymously or publicly, was the hope of seeing their families again. Twelve Uyghur diaspora families were interviewed requesting full anonymity.<sup>16</sup> [Nyrola Elima](#) in Sweden and [Jewlan Shirmemmet](#) in Turkey were the two highest profile interviewees and their publicly available case details verified.<sup>17</sup> Nyrola’s and Jewlan’s cases are examples of detainment without explanation of highly-educated, apolitical, Mandarin-speaking professionals and civil servants, receiving no vocational training, suffering deteriorating ill-health, who appear to be targeted because their family members are abroad.

Most interviewees described their experiences as “only one story” or *only* “the tip of the iceberg” to highlight there are many people who cannot speak out and there are many topics not fully discussed in public. For example, Ruqiye in chapter 3 highlights the stigma of publicly discussing sexual violence, claiming 99% of women have these

---

‘Four Generations of Uyghurs’, *Inner Asia*, 2: 195-224; (2002) ‘Making Culture Matter: Symbolic, Spatial, and Social Boundaries between Uyghurs and Han Chinese’, *Asian Ethnicity*, 3(2): 153-174; (2006) ‘Maintaining Margins: The Politics of Ethnographic Fieldwork in Chinese Central Asia’, *the China Journal*, 56: 131-147; Tobin, David (2011) ‘Competing Communities: Ethnic Unity and Ethnic Boundaries on China’s Northwest Frontier’, *Inner Asia* 13(1): 7-25; (2020) *Securing China’s Northwest Frontier: Identity and Insecurity in Xinjiang*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>16</sup> All interviews for were conducted by David Tobin, except when noted in the substantive chapters.

<sup>17</sup> This included Nyrola’s physical evidence of bank transfers and title deeds for a family home in Australia, the purchase of which was declared as “supporting terrorist activities” following her public campaign for information on family members’ disappearances. As in all similar cases, this baseless accusation severed contact between family members inside and outside the region.

experiences but “feel too ashamed” to speak, consistent with slow release of women’s narratives in cases of mass rape. Readers of the report, therefore, should be cognisant that its findings are substantiated and corroborated using multiple, significant sources of evidence but that uncovering the full impact of state violence in the region will involve further investments in working hours, research funding, and collaborative work between policymakers and researchers. However, even without direct access to the region or research funding, the “tip of the iceberg” provides enough substantial evidence and testimony to conclude that multi-faceted state violence in Xinjiang systematically targets every aspect of Indigenous identities and prevents inter-generational cultural transmission.

## Findings

The report finds that **China’s party-state organises and co-ordinates systematic and interconnected practices of ethnically targeted violence in Xinjiang, which prevent intergenerational transmission of cultural, linguistic, and religious practices of Turkic-speaking Muslims**, the foundations of those targeted groups. Systematic and interconnected policies of arbitrary detainment and disappearances, forced labour, family breakups and child separation, forced birth control, torture and sexual violence, and destruction of mosques and religious shrines, are all inter-related, systematic practices, institutionalised in mass internment camps, factory production, and child-rearing facilities. These systematic practices enact destruction of the cultural and physical foundations of groups, most notably the family unit, inflicting serious physical violence on camp detainees while causing widespread disconnection and intense trauma for family members outside the camps. The report’s findings reinforce conclusions and add new dimensions to the growing number of academic reports cataloguing [violence in the camps](#), [child-separation](#), [sterilisation policies](#), and [forced labour](#), research conducted by leading NGOs, including [Human Rights Watch](#) and [Amnesty International](#), [independent journalists’ interviews with diaspora](#), and key [testimonies](#) of those affected.

# Chapter 1. Forced Labour

Laura T. Murphy<sup>18</sup>

Beginning in the spring of 2018, significant evidence began to emerge that the CCP imagined their system of over 380 detention and internment camps as merely one part of a planned transformation of XUAR into a hub in the Belt and Road Initiative. While continuing to intern people in camps without trial, local governments shifted their focus to the creation of an enormous forced labour regime that would coerce practically every able-bodied adult citizen in the region to work. In many counties, arbitrary quotas drove local government officials to recruit as many workers to labour transfer programmes as possible. Though state-sponsored labour transfers and poverty alleviation strategies, and indeed [forced labour](#), had long existed in XUAR, they were now operating on a backdrop of systematic and interconnected internment camps and extra-judicial imprisonment that made refusal to participate a non-option.

By the Chinese government's own accounting, the CCP has placed millions of citizens of the XUAR into "[poverty alleviation](#)," "[surplus labour](#)," and "[labour transfer](#)" programmes. The [Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps](#) is one example of the forced labour regime in effect in the region – not only does it run prisons and internment camps in XUAR, but it [governs entire cities](#) that are major "[transferrers](#)" of labourers for these programmes. A [CCP report](#) from 2020 documents the "placement" of 2.6 million

---

<sup>18</sup> Dr. Murphy's research on forced labour in the Uyghur region utilises publicly available information (including customs records, corporate filings, state media reports, social media posts, and government guidance and speeches) in conjunction with first-person testimony found in advocacy archives and media to map the supply chain from the Uyghur region to the UK and other international destinations. She compiles the data into extensive datasets that document specific industries most affected by the mass forced labour programme in XUAR. Through this research, she is documenting the scope, scale, and severity of forced labour in the Uyghur region.

citizens (“rural workers”) in “surplus labour” initiatives, which relocated them to farms and factories within Xinjiang and across the country. By the CCP’s own reports, this represents a 46.1% year-on-year increase in the number of XUAR citizens “transferred” for work. They report that they had employed another 440,800 minority citizens through other labour programmes in the previous year alone. In sum, these figures could constitute as much as 23% of the minority population of XUAR working in forced labour programmes. Additionally, between [10 and 20%](#) of the population could be held in internment camps or extra-judicial prisons, meaning a third or more of the minority population may be held in this intertwined system of internment and forced labour.

Experts in political economy and global supply chains have clearly identified that, as they are practiced in XUAR, these “surplus labour” initiatives are mechanisms of a massive programme of forced and coercive non-voluntary labour. These programmes deny citizens the human right to “free choice of employment” afforded by [Article 23 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights](#) and articles 6,7, and 10 of the [UN International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights](#). According to the [UK Modern Slavery Act of 2015](#) and the [UN Palermo Protocol](#) (to which China is a signatory), these programmes qualify as “modern slavery” and “human trafficking” because the victims are compelled to work by means of “the threat or *use of force* or other *forms of coercion*...of *fraud*, of *deception*, of the *abuse of power* or of a *position of vulnerability* . . . for the purpose of exploitation.” The [Abolition of Forced Labour Convention No. 105](#), which pertains to all members of the ILO (of which China is a founding member), expressly prohibits state-sponsored forced labour as punishment for:

- (a) as a means of political coercion or education or as a punishment for holding or expressing political views or views ideologically opposed to the established political, social or economic system;
- (b) as a method of mobilising and using labour for purposes of economic development;
- (c) as a means of labour discipline;
- (d) as a punishment for having participated in strikes;
- (e) as a means of racial, social, national or religious discrimination

As the evidence below will clearly indicate, China is employing forced labour for at least four of these five purposes, in contravention of this convention.

The Chinese government claims that these programmes are in accordance with national law and that workers are voluntarily engaged in labour transfer programmes. However, the significant evidence that follows shows that labour transfers are employed in an environment of unprecedented coercion, under threat of re-education and internment. Many workers are unable to refuse or walk away from these jobs, and thus the programmes are tantamount to *forcible transfer of populations* and *enslavement*. Furthermore, the process is, by design, part of a wider campaign of genocide against the Uyghurs, as evidenced by the explicit intent described by the government and government-funded studies *to forcibly transfer children of the group to another group* and *to destroy the Uyghur people, in whole or in part*.



**Figure 1. “Poverty alleviation”** walnut picking plant in remote Hotan village. Signage in Xinjiang’s factories often read **“Labour is Glorious,”** reminiscent of the infamous “Work is Freedom” signs from the Nazi regime’s labour camps in Germany. Banner reads: **“Employ one person, alleviate poverty for a household; *Labour is glorious*; Getting rich is glorious; Let’s unite as one, and run toward a well-off life together.”** Source: *Xinjiang Weishi* ([Xinjiang Satellite Television](#)).

## Enslavement: Internment Camp Factories

First-person testimony of people who [have been held in the camps](#), worked as [security](#) or teachers within the camps, or have [relatives in the camps](#) reveal that minority citizens held in internment camps are forcibly sent to work as part of their daily schedules; participation in the labour programmes is [not voluntary](#) and is [coerced through threats of imprisonment, which first-person testimony has indicated involves torture](#).

For evidence of China's use of forced labour in the massive extra-legal internment camp system, one need only look to [China's state media](#). In 2018, China Central Television (CCTV) released a video report depicting a Uyghur worker who had been held in an internment camp. Signage on the factory wall pointed to a supplier for a sporting goods retailer in the U.S. First-person testimony collected by the [Associated Press](#) confirmed that minorities held in the camps were being compelled to work in factories making goods for export. [Worker Rights Consortium](#) conducted a full analysis of the working conditions of the camps and determined it to be forced labour upon verification that the workers were in fact detained in internment camps and unable to choose not to work.



**Figure 2.** State media broadcast about internment camps victims working in factories reveals signage for *Hetian Taida*, a supplier to Badger Sportswear (Badger has since eliminated all contracts with Hetian Taida). Source: CCTV via New York Times.

People who are supposedly “released” or “transferred” from the camp system are often required as part of their release to [work in co-located](#) or [proximate factories](#) for “[industrial park employment](#)” in relatively secluded locations . [Chinese government reports](#) have clearly indicated that factories are being built inside or near camps to facilitate these “releases.” Reporters have identified at least [135 camps](#) that have co-located factories but initial research suggests that there are many more. In the April of 2018, Kashgar regional government alone reported that they had plans to transfer [100,000 detainees](#) from the camps to employment (at a promised pay rate of only £34 a month) into industrial parks that they had encouraged Chinese companies from other provinces to build in XUAR.



**Figure 3.** Lop County Small and Micro Industrial Park Source, co-located with Lop County Number 4 internment camp and at least one other. Source: CNN.



**Figure 4.** Source: [BBC](#).

## Enslavement and Forcible Transfers of Population

In addition to compelling internment camp victims to work, the CCP has designated as “surplus labour” those Uyghur citizens living outside the camps who either lack jobs, are seasonally employed, or are retired. Local governments are required to [identify all “surplus labourers”](#) and [compel] them to take jobs in factories. These surplus labour programmes affect nearly every minority family across the region, regardless of their experiences of internment, and regardless of their level of poverty. The Chinese government has instituted a “[Employ one person, end poverty for one household](#)” and “one [household](#), one stable employment” [campaigns](#) that encourage local governments to ensure that one person from every household be submitted for training and placement in a labour transfer program. This arbitrary system of coercive labour forces people to

leave their children and families behind, forcibly separating families and leaving the young and the elderly in the care of the state.

As documented by a Chinese government-funded study conducted by Nankai University and confirmed by our own research, there are at least [three distinct programmes of forced labour transfers](#) being executed by local governments in XUAR at this time: 1) Forced labour transfers to factories outside of XUAR; 2) Forced labour transfers to factories inside XUAR but at a distance from the worker's home, and 3) forced labour transfer to a "satellite" factory in one's own hometown. All three involve elements of coercion that is characteristic of forced labour and modern slavery by [international and UK](#) definitions, as the programmes operate in the context of systematic state violence, arbitrary detention, mass surveillance, and persistent state intimidation.

We know that this is a coercive system because the CCP explicitly argues that "[terrorists, separatists, and religious extremists](#)" incite Xinjiang citizens to "refuse to improve their vocational skills, economic conditions, and the ability to better their own lives" as justification for requiring local governments to implement labour transfers at a mass scale. The programmes are thus grounded in the logic of labour as a supposed strategy of "counter-terrorism". Therefore, if a Uyghur person resists a state-sponsored programme purportedly designed to encourage vocational skills and poverty alleviation, they are diagnosed as being infected by the above named "three evils," which results in re-education, internment, and even prison. Thus, no Uyghur has the opportunity to say no without the very high risk of being disappeared. This logic has been used the rationale for the [CCP's crackdown and criminalization](#) in the Uyghur region, namely the camp system.

As further evidence that these are not voluntary programmes that are designed to lift people out of poverty, there is the fact that many of the people who work in the camps are trained professionals and business people ([university graduates](#), [film makers](#), [dentists](#), [nurses](#), [medical professionals](#), [restauranteurs](#), [business owners](#), [engineers](#), [marketing professionals](#), [retirees](#)) who are not under-employed and who would not otherwise work in factories. Nonetheless, they are forced to work in what the CCP calls "[labour-](#)

[intensive](#)” industries. Others are forced to be complicit in the work of the camps, assigned to work as [teachers](#) (a leaked [government list](#) names several camp graduates recruited as teachers) or [security guards](#) in the camps, despite sometimes having been victims of the camps themselves.

In some Han-majority regions of China, where citizens have the choice as to whether or not to participate in the programmes, “poverty alleviation” has indeed been successful. In XUAR, however, it is impossible for a citizen to refuse these supposed opportunities for “poverty alleviation” because if they do, there are dire consequences. Han “relatives,” who are assigned to visit and even live in Uyghur homes to educate them in civilized behavior and monitor them for signs of deviation from party ideology, are required to [report anyone who resists](#) “poverty alleviation” programmes. [Points can be deducted](#) from a [scorecard](#) that is kept for some minorities in the region – a low score has resulted for many in being sent to the internment camps or [delaying the release of family members](#) held in the camps.

Contrary to the [CCP’s claims](#) that the people of Xinjiang “enjoy the right to work, aspire to move out of poverty and backwardness and are working towards that goal,” there is ample evidence that people do not want to be transferred and are repeatedly harassed by government cadres until they relent to accept jobs far from home. In Aksu, farmers who did not want to leave their land for factory work were subject to a government campaign to sign over their land to a trust (for a minimal monetary compensation), which resulted in 58,000 farmers having to relinquish their land and more than [73,000 farmers being transferred](#) to “labour-intensive industries.” The Nankai study concluded that one of the impediments to the success of the poverty alleviation strategies was that “fettered by traditional concepts, there are still some laborers who are [unwilling to leave their homes](#) and have serious homesickness.” A CCTV broadcast told the story of several young women who were distraught at the thought of leaving their families and lives behind to go work thousands of miles away, but [government officials and labour agents harassed the women](#) for days, promising them the ability to return home at any time and great wealth, in order to convince them to go, which they only did reluctantly. Chinese media

regularly celebrates the success of local cadres who provide “ideological education” to people reluctant to participate in poverty alleviation work schemes until the point where the person relents.

The scale of the labour transfer programme has a profound effect on the population of Xinjiang. The numbers of people being transferred are staggering. A state media report indicated that in 2018 alone, Hotan had transferred [611,500 people](#). Nilka County reported that between January and September of 2017, nearly [300,000 people](#) were transferred. Aksu prefecture reported over [156,000 transfers](#) in the same period. Megaiti County reported transferring [64,000 laborers](#) to work in 2019. These are the largest reports of labour transfers, but state media regularly celebrates these transfers which range in scale from a few dozen workers to [tens of thousands of workers](#). In an analysis of these documents and others, researcher Adrian Zenz [estimated](#) that as many as 1.6 million Uyghurs are “at risk” of being forced into these labour transfers. It is our judgement that this is a very conservative assessment and likely an under-estimate, if state media reports are reliable for quantifying the numbers of transfers.

Many of the [factories employing supposedly free XUAR citizens are surrounded by razor-wire fences](#), iron gates, and security cameras, and are [monitored by police](#) or additional security, while Han workers’ mobility is unrestricted in the workplace or when they choose to return home, even when they are employed in the same factories. [Uyghur and Kazakh workers are not allowed to leave the factories voluntarily](#). First-person reports indicate that people working in the camps are either [unpaid](#), [paid far less than the minimum wage](#), [paid only minuscule amounts](#), or [have their salaries reduced](#) with the explanation that they owe a debt to their employers for food or transport to work. The [local police hold worker identification cards](#), controlling their movement. These are all [clear indicators of human trafficking and modern slavery](#). Indeed, some who have escaped this forced labour regime have explicitly described it as “[slavery](#).”

Minority workers are trained through [military-style discipline programmes](#) and organised with “[militarised management](#)” that is meant to eradicate “their ingrained lazy, lax, slow,

sloppy, freewheeling, individualistic ways so they obey company rules.” [Advertisements for shipments](#) of hundreds of XUAR workers promote the transfer of minority workers who are described as “docile, obedient, never lazy, hardworking” and indicate that these workers can arrive with their own security officers as supervisors. The Nankai University report indicated that [groups from 30 to hundreds of workers](#) are being transported out of their villages in the Hotan region regularly for assignments in factories across the country. In March 2020, in the midst of Covid, local Xinjiang governments collaborated to run an “[express train](#)” filled with nearly 750 Uyghurs from Hotan bound for Zhundong Coalfields/Industrial Park, where they were put to work.

Leaked government records collected by *The Intercept* indicate the [organisational structure for maintaining control over the Uyghur workers who are transferred](#). More than 50 separate police reports from Urumqi between 2018-2019 included the following language:

“V) The control of surplus labour force from southern Xinjiang

At the beginning of the spring, the number of migrant workers increased immediately, and the surplus labour force in southern Xinjiang living in the jurisdiction [Urumqi] was controlled in two ways. The employer was responsible for their management and control during work; the community where they reside [was responsible for their management and control] after they got off work. The management committee and the neighbourhood watch unit were required to register the workers when they arrived and left. They are required to report every Monday when the community raises the national flag. They are required to participate, speak vows of loyalty [brandishing their swords], expressing their position [on government policy], and accept the transformation of their ideology better and faster.”<sup>19</sup>

The CCP holds communities to [quotas](#) and [goals](#) for their ambition of employing a million surplus labourers by 2023 and provides [significant financial and tax incentives](#) to

---

<sup>19</sup> 七道湾派出所周分析研判总结（2018.6.18-2018.6.24）乌鲁木齐市公安局水磨沟区分局七道湾派出所 25-JUN-18, Qidaowan Police Station Weekly Analysis and Judgment Summary (2018.6.18-2018.6.24) Qidaowan Police Station, Shuimogou District, Urumqi City Public Security Bureau 25-JUN-18.

corporations that recruit the identified minority “surplus labourers” including subsidies for the cost of building new factories, transporting the products made there to the coast, training programmes for the new labour recruits (including Chinese language training), transportation of new workers, and salaries of workers.

Evidence suggests that there is an enormous state-engineered profit motive for companies to engage in these so-called “poverty alleviation” programmes, while there is negligible decrease in poverty. Indeed, in one [economic benefit forecast](#), for instance, a company projected 800 million to 1 billion RMB in income from a poverty alleviation programme with 50-60 million in profits, but it only projected 20 people being brought out of poverty through the programme. Han-owned businesses profit from this forced labour regime in many ways, including by running the many [labour transfer](#) agencies that operate hand-in-hand with the government and companies to facilitate the transfer of workers from vocational training schools to factories. These agencies can receive rewards of up to [100 yuan per person](#) that they transfer and are provided other incentives and subsidies from the government for facilitating transfers within and outside XUAR.

### **Evidence of intent to destroy the group, in whole or in part, including forcible transfers of children to another group**

The Nankai University report indicates explicitly that the forced labour transfers “not only [reduces the Uyghur population density](#) but also is an important method to “influence, meld, and assimilate Uyghur minorities.” Since 2018, evidence has emerged of family separations and so-called “left-behind children” (留守儿童) being educated and often boarded in Han-language and culture schools as a result of [one or both parents being in internment camps](#). [Zenz](#) has documented the increase in the size and number of [orphanages and boarding schools](#) that was eventuated by the (perhaps unanticipated, perhaps planned for) negative effects of the mass internments.

Forced labour programmes compounded the need for state-run childcare for children forcibly abandoned by “poverty alleviation.” The Nankai University study indicated that people from the Hotan region were unwilling recruits to the labour transfers because they needed to remain home to care for their children and elderly. In response, the Hotan government organised free and low-cost nurseries for children to “resolve the concerns” of parents who have been transferred for work who would otherwise be “[held back by children](#)”. Uyghur parents describe this as family separation with children “[living like orphans](#)” in “jail”. One Han teacher’s appeal for clothing donations on Jiangxi Teacher’s College website described a Hotan facility’s conditions as children in “thin, torn, dirty, and smelly clothing”, working in freezing winter classrooms,<sup>20</sup> while parents engage in seasonal agricultural work.<sup>21</sup>

Workers are unable to refuse forced-labour posts or to prevent child-separation, which is **tantamount to forcible transfer of populations and enslavement**. The forced-labour process is, by design, part of a wider campaign of genocide against the Uyghurs, as evidenced by the explicit intent described by the government and government-funded studies *to forcibly transfer children of the group to another group* and *to destroy the Uyghur people, in whole or in part*.

---

<sup>20</sup> Haoren Wang (2019) ‘[Zhijiao hao laoshi dai haojie zhuben jiceng fumu bianjiang](#)’ (‘Support good teacher Dai Haojie, take root and serve the frontier’).

<sup>21</sup> It is common practice for rural families across China leave children in grandparents’ care while travelling for seasonal work.

## Chapter 2. Child Separation and Coercive Birth Controls

Rian Thum

Since 2017 the Chinese state has carried out an unprecedented transfer of Uyghur children from their families to state care. According to Chinese government figures, between 2017 and 2019, an additional 382,700 primary and middle school children in Xinjiang were placed in boarding schools, bringing the total number of primary and middle school children in boarding schools to 880,400. The Xinjiang Education Department [explicitly announced](#) that the push for boarding schools was intended to isolate students from the influences of their families. Uyghurs have little room to resist the placement of their children in residential schools and numerous individual cases show that involuntary separation is widespread.

The mass internment of adults from 2017 created a second avenue for the transfer of minority children to state guardianship. Children of the million or more adults placed in internment camps were variously placed in orphanages and residential schools, sometimes even when only one parent had been interned. The state initiated a large programme to build new orphanages, and the expanding network of boarding schools was tapped to house children of interned parents. In addition to the orphanage construction boom and ordinary boarding schools, special residential schools and nurseries have been established near internment camps, housing the children of internees. At least one is even named after its associated internment camp.



**Figure 1.** Dormitory at the “Keriya County Vocational and Technical Training Education Centre Workers’ Elementary School.” Around 2018, the terminology for internment camps shifted from “**Transformation education training centres**” to “**Vocational and Technical Training Centres**”.

## Assimilationist residential schools in grades 1-8

Before 2018, Xinjiang was extraordinary within China for its low percentage of students in boarding schools. China’s national [boarding rate in 2010](#) (the latest accessible data) was 39% higher than Xinjiang’s [boarding rate in 2017](#),<sup>22</sup> despite a decade-long push to create new boarding schools in Xinjiang up to 2017 (with a 43% increase in Xinjiang’s number of boarding schools from [2006](#) to [2017](#)). A [recent report](#) by the Xinjiang Education Department shows that, over the course of two years from the end of 2017, the

---

<sup>22</sup> Note that the 2017 report cited here has a discrepancy between the absolute number of boarding school students (497,800) and the percentage of all students in boarding schools (erroneously reported as 39.44%). The erroneous percentage is likely the boarding rate for middle schools, not all schools. We calculate a rate of 15.61% by dividing the total number of boarding students by the total number of students as reported in the [2018 China Statistical Yearbook](#) (497,800 / 3,188,089). The total rate in 2018 was 21.67%, and in 2019 it was 24.57%.

government expanded the boarding school population in grades 1-9 by a remarkable 382,700 students in Xinjiang, slightly surpassing the 2010 national boarding rate of 22%.

The effects were particularly strong for Xinjiang's middle school students, [49% of whom](#) were in residential schools by the end of 2019. This number is a minimum account of the number of minority ethnic students of this age group placed in boarding schools. Given that a) the boarding school expansion targeted rural areas and Xinjiang's Indigenous populations are disproportionately rural in comparison to the Han, and b) the expansion of boarding schools has continued since 2019, the percentage of Indigenous/minority children in residential schools is likely substantially higher. It is reasonable to conclude that the majority of Indigenous middle school students are now in residential schools.

The government's stated reasons for expanding residential schools in Xinjiang are notable both for their divergence from policy goals in the rest of the PRC and for their explicit assimilationist intent. Elsewhere in China, boarding schools are used to increase educational access for rural children affected by internal migration of adults to cities and the attendant closure of local rural schools. By contrast, [a 2017 report](#) by the Xinjiang Education Department, which placed residential-school expansion at the top of its list of priorities, explained the goals of residential schools as follows:

to promote the teaching of the national standard language [Mandarin Chinese] and to create a stable and peaceful learning environment for students, blocking the influence of the family's religious atmosphere on the children to the greatest extent and reducing the occurrence of 'teaching science in school, listening to the scriptures at home, with thinking and ideas suffering the shocks of moving back and forth.'

As this document makes clear, the residential school expansion is aimed at non-Mandarin speaking students, i.e. the Indigenous groups of Xinjiang. Separation of the children from their families is portrayed as desirable because it prevents the transmission of culture,

framed here as “religious environment,” and ways of thinking particular to Xinjiang’s minority groups.

The report further mandates that the Chinese language be used not only as the primary language of instruction, but as the language of communication more generally within the residential schools. As with the boarding schools themselves, the expansion of Chinese-language education has been extremely fast, with coverage rising from [38.7% to 82.8%](#) between 2016 and 2017 alone. Enforcement of Chinese language use can be extremely strict, and officials have gone as far as [stating](#) that individuals who are unsatisfied with the government’s Chinese-language mandates are “enemies of the people.”

The Xinjiang Department of Education has also aimed to maximise the number of Han Chinese teachers employed in these schools and [boasted in 2017](#) that “the recruitment of teachers, especially the number and proportion of Han teachers, is unprecedented in history.” [By the end of 2019](#), the majority of Xinjiang’s full-time teachers for grades 1-8 were Han, despite the fact that 77% of students were from minority ethnic groups.

The mass internment programme has frequently imprisoned people for reluctance to participate in government-led social initiatives, including infractions as minor as failing to watch state television. For this reason, parents cannot safely resist efforts by officials to shift their children to residential schools. [Numerous affected families’ accounts](#) of children taken to boarding schools against the wishes of family members confirm that the enormous transfer of Uyghur children to Han-dominated state control is often achieved without parental consent.

The expansion of residential schooling to cover half or more of the minority middle school population is significant because it demonstrates that the transfer of indigenous/minority children to Han-dominated state care is not merely the by-product of mass internment but is a goal in and of itself. The transfer of children thus occurs both in interconnection with the interment system and as an independent phenomenon.

## Orphanage construction boom

While the transfer of minority children away from minority families has been a general goal, it was accelerated by the mass interment campaign. As Xinjiang authorities rounded up a million or more ethnic minority adults over the course of 2017 to 2019, the government embarked on a major campaign of building orphanages.

For the years 2017 and 2018, I have located procurement documents for 44 separate orphanage construction projects, with 42 of those posted in the 18-month period of February 2017 to August 2018. Most of the projects included in this number are construction of new orphanages, and the remaining are expansions of existing orphanages, normally adding floorspace on a scale equal to an entirely new orphanage (see Appendix: procurement documents). The procurement documents are collected from one procurement website (qianlima.com) and do not represent the full scale of the orphanage construction campaign. For example, a [2018 report](#) by the Kashgar government's "poverty alleviation" bureau describes funding 30 new orphanages not represented in our sample of procurement notices. Procurement documents suggest that the building of new orphanages slowed by 2020, but it did not cease. As recently as July of 2020, Tiemenguan requested bids for orphanage construction.

Xinjiang's orphanage construction boom runs counter to national trends in China. A recent [report](#) by Zhiyan Consulting Group, using data from China's Ministry of Civil Affairs, shows that nationally, the number of orphans dropped by half from 2014 to 2019. [An interview](#) by state news outlet Xinhua with the head of the Ministry of Civil Affairs reported the decline from 2012 to 2019 as "nearly 40%." Meanwhile the national number of beds in orphanages fluctuated within a narrow band between 89,000 and 96,000, with no consistent trend. This data suggests that the Xinjiang orphanage construction boom is not part of a national orphanage expansion, but instead a policy with local goals specific to Xinjiang. A search of procurement documents in the neighbouring province of Gansu corroborates Xinjiang's outlier status, with only seven orphanage construction projects located for the entire period of 2017-2018, roughly 16% of the number located for Xinjiang.

In at least one Xinjiang county, the new orphanage construction campaign could not keep up with the rising number of children left in the wake of mass internment. In the autumn of 2017, an [orphanage worker interviewed](#) by Radio Free Asia complained of overcrowding, which he attributed in part to the arrival of the children of interned adults. He said that conditions were “terrible,” and that “because there are so many children, they are locked up like farm animals in a shed.”

Direct links between internment and transfers of children to state care are numerous in government documents, but they do not generally make a clear distinction between boarding schools (寄宿学校) and orphanages (儿童福利院). While newly built orphanages addressed some of the needs created by internment, ordinary boarding schools were also tapped to absorb many of the children of interned and imprisoned Uyghurs. The relationship between internment and all types of state care is treated together in the following section.

## **Links between internment and transfer of children to state care**

Publicly available government documents openly discuss the connection between internment and transfer of children to state care. Special instructions for dealing with children whose parents are both detained appear in various kinds of government directives, for example a [2019 set of instructions](#) for “medical insurance work.” These references demonstrate the widespread effects of internment on children at multiple points of interaction with the state.

The most detailed document to emerge to date is a rather [urgent directive](#) from the Kashgar government urging educational personnel to improve their handling of “hardship students” (困境学生), which the document specifies includes children with interned or imprisoned parents. The directive orders officials to “immediately send those who should be sent” to boarding schools and “resolutely put an end to the phenomena of negligence in monitoring and caring for” students in this category. More specifically, it

emphasises feeding children three meals a day, avoiding large common beds, and putting no more than 24 children in one bedroom. It also stipulates the teaching of Chinese language and monitoring children’s ideological inclinations and psychological states.

In some cases, residential schools and nurseries have been established specifically for internment facilities. A Xinjiang Daily news [report](#) about an internment camp in Hotan describes an associated school that houses the children of those detained, noting that some of them call their teachers “mama.” [Another residential school](#) near Keriya is named after the internment camp with which it is associated.

## **Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group**

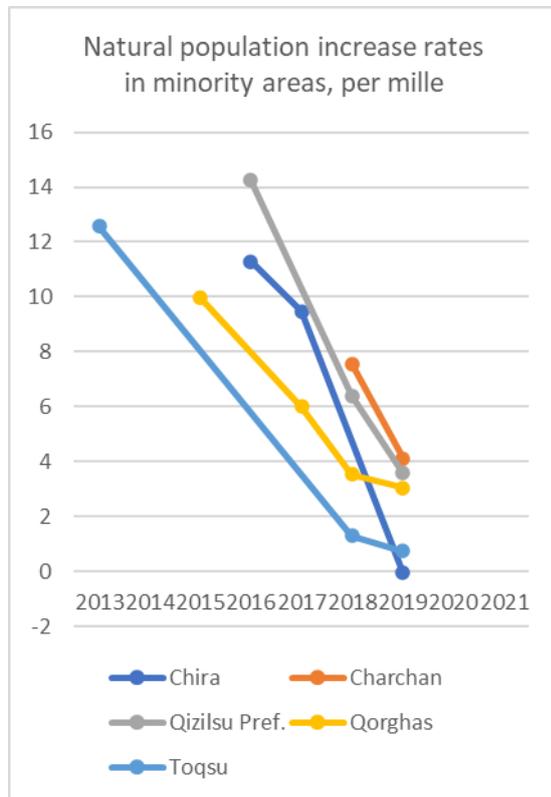
Population growth rates in parts of Xinjiang primarily inhabited by indigenous/minority people plummeted from 2017 onward. After years of natural-increase rates in the range of .9% to 1.6% per year (9 to 16 per mille), growth rates in minority regions fell to the range of 0 to 0.4% by 2019. At least one minority region experienced a natural-increase rate below zero. This region is Chira county (Hotan prefecture), which has the highest percentage of minority inhabitants among those examined for this report, at over 98%.

These drops represent a crash in birth rates caused by two factors. The first is draconian state-mandated birth control policies with no parallel elsewhere in the People’s Republic of China. These policies include, for example, the internment of women who give birth to “too many” children. The second is the mass internment of adults of child-bearing age, which has placed internees in sex-segregated facilities for years at a time.

## **Plummeting population growth in minority areas**

Chinese authorities have removed most of the data on birth rates that local governments formerly posted online, especially data from 2019 onward. For this report we located five sub-regional administrative units with predominantly minority populations that still had

2019 government data online, either on government sites or reproduced on content-aggregating sites like ahmhxc.com.<sup>23</sup>



The chart (left) shows the change in natural increase rate, which represents the difference between births and deaths in number per thousand.<sup>24</sup> We limited our analysis to sub-regional units with minority populations of 60% or higher (4 counties and 1 autonomous prefecture). Government data shows steep declines, leading to natural increase rates approaching zero (0-0.4% or 0-4 per mille). We located data for one predominantly Han county, Qitai (72% Han), which in contrast to minority regions, saw a rise in its already low natural increase rate, from 2.42 to 3.63 per mille between 2017 and 2018.

Our findings corroborate robust analysis published [by Adrian Zenz](#), which surveyed all minority regions in the period 2005-2018 and found steady declines in natural increase rates from 2013 onward, accelerating in 2016 and eventually reaching 0.4% (4.06 per mille) in 2018. Our analysis also shows that in counties with available data, the decrease continued into 2019, with some tapering as rates approached zero. Government-reported targets suggest efforts to bring birthrates even lower over the course of 2020, though there is no data to confirm that those targets have been achieved.

<sup>23</sup> Data from Shayar county was also available, but contradictions in its 2019 data made it unusable, with the same figure provided for birth rate and natural increase rate. Charchan’s 2017 data is also omitted from our analysis because its birth rate does not accord with its reported raw birth numbers and overall population numbers. The data point for Toqsu 2016 is taken from the larger prefecture, of which Toqsu is a component, and is therefore a proxy for Toqsu.

<sup>24</sup> Sources for chart data: Qorghas [2015](#), [2017/18](#), [2019](#); Chira [2016](#), [2017](#), [2019](#); Charchan [2018](#), [2019](#); Qizilsu [2016](#), [2018](#), [2019](#); Toqsu [2013](#), [2018](#), [2019](#).

## Coercive measures to enforce the limitation of births

As in the case of child transfers to boarding schools and extra-judicial internment in “re-education” camps, China’s birth limitation policies in Xinjiang represent the repurposing, intensification, and adaptation of approaches used in other parts of China to undermine the viability of Xinjiang minority ethnic groups. On paper, the birth limits in Xinjiang are the same as the rest of China. However, enforcement is starkly divergent. In other parts of China, violators of birth restrictions face fines, normally income contingent. For Xinjiang’s minorities, the range of punishments includes extrajudicial internment, which is not the case in any other part of China.

A leaked document from Qaraqash lists the reasons for the internment of nearly 500 individuals from a handful of neighbourhoods.<sup>25</sup> The single most common reason cited was giving birth to too many children, for which 149 people were interned. [Testimonies](#) from former detainees and family members of detainees shows that internment is used across the minority regions of Xinjiang to enforce birth control policies.

The full range of enforcement techniques is analysed in an extraordinarily thorough [article](#) by Adrian Zenz, which includes his reporting on government documents showing that in 2018, 80% of the net newly inserted IUD devices across the whole of China were inserted in Xinjiang. We reviewed his evidence and confirmed his analysis. We also reviewed that Chinese government’s attempts to refute the Zenz article and found these attempts inaccurate and frivolous, characterised by ad hominem attacks, straw-man arguments, misrepresentation of statistics, and above all a failure to address central claims in Zenz’s study.

---

<sup>25</sup> We can provide the document upon request. We are not including it in our initial submission because it includes a large number of individuals’ names and personal information. The document is [described](#) in this Associated Press story.

## Chapter 3. Torture and Sexual Violence in the Camps

Rachel Harris

I am Professor Rachel Harris at SOAS, University of London, and I have published extensively on the expressive and religious culture of the Uyghurs. Since 1995, I have conducted extended periods of ethnographic research in urban and rural areas of Xinjiang. Over this period, I have observed incremental levels of repression of the region's indigenous peoples. In 2009, I began a research project on religious practice among Uyghur women, funded by the AHRC and Leverhulme Trust, and spent extended periods working with rural Uyghur women in southern Xinjiang. The findings of this project are published in my recent book '[Soundscapes of Uyghur Islam](#)'. Since 2014, China has refused without explanation to grant me visas, and since 2017, when the authorities effectively criminalised contact with the outside world, I have been unable to speak with any of my contacts within Xinjiang. My collaborator on this research project, Professor Rahile Dawut of Xinjiang University, has been detained without charge since November 2017. One of her students who assisted with the project was also detained. I am deeply concerned for their safety and well-being, and for the safety and well-being of the rural women with whom I worked, as it is highly likely that they too have been detained in connection with the peaceful everyday practice of their faith.

In 2016, the XUAR Justice Department ordered the construction of a massive system of detention camps, officially termed "[concentrated educational transformation centres](#)." People were detained for an extraordinary range of minor infractions relating to religious practice, signs of insufficient loyalty to the state, age group, or connections abroad. In 2018 local authorities were further ordered to ensure that at least one member of every household received "[vocational education](#)" for at least [one to three months](#). Estimates of detainees in the newly constructed or expanded camps [range from 1 to 2 million](#). A 2019

local government document, known as [the Karakax List](#), containing the personal details of thousands of Uyghurs provides the most comprehensive account of the mechanics of the system of detention.

According to [government documents from 2017 and 2018](#), including procurement requests related to the camps, local governments obtained lists of weapons and prison supplies, including cattle prods and electric batons to maintain control over detainees. Uyghur detainees within the internment camps are systematically tortured, raped, deprived of their fundamental human rights, humiliated and subjected to inhumane treatment, including solitary confinement without food for prolonged periods. There are multiple reports of significant numbers of [deaths of detainees](#).<sup>26</sup> Elderly and prominent religious figures are particularly vulnerable to [death in detention](#).

According to witness accounts, detailed below, detainees can be tortured for failing to comply with strict military-style orders and rules or everyday behaviour, including speaking with each other, turning off the permanently lit bright cell lights, or even for smiling, crying, eating too slowly, or exceeding the minimal time allotted for bathroom breaks. Former detainees – both male and female – have testified to designated torture rooms within the camps, where methods of torture include shackling detainees in “tiger chairs,” hanging from a wall or ceiling, whipping and beatings by metal rods and electric prods. Eyewitnesses have testified to blood covering the floors, walls and describe detainees emerging from the torture rooms, [some without fingernails](#). These accounts have been extensively cross-checked before publication. [Tursunay Ziawudun](#), for example, provided travel documents and immigration records to the BBC to corroborate the timeline of her story. The BBC also checked her descriptions of the camp with satellite imagery.

In addition to the well-documented serious bodily harm inflicted on Uyghur detainees, the mental harm suffered is so severe as to further the physical destruction of the group, driving some to commit suicide. Detainees are subjected to identical daily routines of

---

<sup>26</sup> For full list of reports, see Xinjiang Victims Database (XVD): <https://shahit.biz/eng/#lists>.

indoctrination, forced to watch Communist Party propaganda, chant Party slogans, set prayer mats on fire or eat pork, and further punished by way of mock executions or solitary confinement. Uyghur detainees are routinely forced to write, and present, “self-criticisms” and apologise for aspects of their identity and past, including religious history and practices, in front of groups of detainees. Those who refuse are subjected to solitary confinement, beatings and [food deprivation](#).

Witness accounts come primarily from former camp teachers, and from Kazakhstan citizens who have been released and able to leave the country. One male former detainee, [Abduweli Ayup](#), a well-known poet, has also testified to being raped by officers during detention. However, the majority of accounts of rape highlight the experience of women and the majority of women’s accounts highlight experiences of sexual violence. This suggests a [widespread and systematic practice of rape](#) inflicted on women within the camps.

[Gulbahar Jelil](#), an ethnic Uyghur, citizen of Kazakhstan, was detained for 15 months in Urumchi in 2016-17. She gave an interview in Turkey after her release. Jelil reports on the systematic dehumanisation of detainees: they were forbidden to speak in Uyghur, kept in overcrowded cells, lacking basic hygiene, kept under constant surveillance, and administered unknown drugs, which they believed to be sterilisation. [She reports](#) witnessing young women detainees having breakdowns, smearing faeces on the walls, and subsequently disappearing.

Many details of Gulbahar Jelil’s account accord with that of [Mihrigul Tursun](#). Tursun returned to Xinjiang from Egypt in 2015 and underwent several periods of detention. In 2017 she was interrogated for 7 days without sleep, her head shaved, and then detained for several months. She reports being kept with 68 women in one underground cell, having to sleep in turns, use the toilet in front of security cameras, and sing songs praising China’s Communist Party before being given food. Inmates were forced to take unknown medication, including pills that made them faint and a white liquid that caused bleeding in some women and loss of menstruation in others. Tursun has claimed that

nine women from her cell died during her three months in detention. Tursun herself underwent torture: she recounts being placed in a high-chair, with her legs and arms locked in place, and being electrocuted via a helmet which caused her whole body to shake violently.

A February 2021 report by [the BBC](#) brings together interviews with several former detainees and a guard who experienced or saw evidence of an organised system of mass rape, sexual abuse and torture.<sup>27</sup> Tursunay Ziawudun, who fled Xinjiang after her release and is now in the US, was held in a camp in Kunes/Xinyuan county. She has recounted her [personal experience of gang rape and sexual torture](#), including many disturbing details. She described women being removed from the cells every night and raped by one or more masked Chinese men. She herself was tortured during interrogation – knocked down and kicked in the abdomen - and later gang-raped on three occasions, each time by two or three men.

Sayragul Sauytbay, another ethnic Kazakh teacher in the camps, confirmed that rape was widespread. She told the BBC that the guards “picked the girls and young women they wanted and took them away”. She provides an account of the public gang rape of a young woman brought before about 100 other detainees in order to extract a forced confession. Those detainees watching who averted their eyes or expressed shock [were taken away for punishment](#).

The [BBC](#) also interviewed [Gulzira Auelkhan](#), a Kazakh woman from Xinjiang who was detained for 18 months in the camp system. Auelkhan said she was forced to strip Uighur women naked and handcuff them, before leaving them alone with Chinese men. Afterwards she would take the women to shower. She also details financial aspects to the abuse, with men paying to be able to rape the prettiest young women.

---

<sup>27</sup> For further reports, see: Bunin, Gene (2019) “[Because you had to do it very quickly or you could be punished](#)”, *Art of Life in Central Asia*, 1 November.

[Qelbinur Sedik](#), an Uzbek woman from Xinjiang and former Chinese language teacher in the camps, now lives in Holland and has published [memoirs of her experiences](#). She reported a conversation with a Chinese policewoman who told that rape “had become a culture” within the camps, including gang rape and the use of “four kinds of electric shock”, “the chair, the glove, the helmet, and anal rape with a stick”.

At the first camp where an Uzbek woman from Xinjiang worked, she estimates more than 3,000 prisoners were held, with 50 or 60 people crammed into each cell. Groups of two or three, sometimes up to seven, were called out for interrogation during the day. The torture room was in the basement. A police officer colleague at the camp told her about the methods used: four kinds of electric shock: the chair, the glove, the helmet, and anal rape with a stick. Sedik reports hearing screams echoing throughout the building, during lunch and sometimes in class.

In September 2017, at the end of her first contract, Sedik was assigned to a women’s facility in Urumchi which held about 10,000 women, mostly educated younger women. In this camp, she was told by a guard that every day 5-6 girls were taken out by the camp guards, tortured, and raped. She saw young women return to her lessons in severe pain. She later learned of a group of young detainees released in Urumchi in December 2017. Some had been tortured so severely that they had to have an arm or leg amputated. Others had gone mad. Many former detainees report suffering from memory loss, insomnia, and suicidal thoughts upon release. There are reports that many of those released into the community in Xinjiang are turning to alcohol or other addiction.

[Gulbahar Haitwaji](#), a long-term resident in France, was coerced to return to Xinjiang in 2017, and spent 2 years in a camp near Karamay. In interview she describes the extreme exhaustion of daily “physical education” tantamount to military training, and. Women who collapsed were dragged out and never seen again. An old woman was punished for closing her eyes in class, accused of praying. She describes her experience as one of dehumanisation and brainwashing: memorising long tracts of political literature, forced

sterilisation, violent interrogation, and being forced to denounce the ‘crimes’ of her own [daughters](#) in public [self-criticism sessions](#).

Journalist Ben Mauk conducted a series of interviews in Kazakhstan in 2018 and has reported on numerous [testimonies from former detainees](#). Gulzira Auyelkhan, a 40-year-old Kazakh woman reported suffering repeated beatings about the head because she took more than two minutes on the toilet. She also alludes to women detainees being “taken away at night.” Another of Mauk’s interviewees, called Rahima, details dehumanising treatment in the camp where she was detained, including verbal abuse, beatings, interrogations, being forced to stand for hours, and being struck with an electric prod.

Rahima Mahmut interviewed a young Uyghur woman called Ruqiye in Germany in 2020, who gave a harrowing account of her own rape and torture, including being held for hours at a time in an underground room filled almost to the roof with water. She survived her experience only because her family paid bribes to get her released. Ruqiye claimed that, “[99% of women are actually experiencing \[rape\]](#), but they wouldn’t talk about it because they feel too ashamed.”

On the basis of my long-term experience and research in the region, I consider these accounts to be credible and that, sadly, they are likely to be representative of the experience of large numbers of women detained in the camps. The descriptions of daily life inside the camp, and the nature and methods of the abuse, are broadly consistent across different accounts, provided by women who spent time in different camps, and who are speaking from different countries. Reports of sexual violence have been slow to emerge, but this is consistent with what we know of other contexts (eg Bosnia). Women hold back from speaking out, not only because of the fear of repercussions – often on family still inside Xinjiang – but also because of notions of personal, family and even national shame and humiliation. It is noteworthy that Chinese government sources have sought to discredit these accounts using baseless ad hominem attacks to cast doubt on the moral standing of the witnesses – again, a familiar tactic of victim blaming.

## Chapter 4. Destruction of Religious Practice and Heritage

Jo Smith Finley<sup>28</sup>

The stated goals of the 2017 XUAR Regulations on “[de-extremification](#)” included “making religion more Chinese” (Article 4); prohibiting the rejection or refusal of public goods (e.g., alcohol or cigarettes) and preventing the “generalization of the concept of halal into areas beyond halal foods” (Article 9); leading believers to “establish correct beliefs” (Article 13); and guiding believers to “correctly handle the relationship between law and religion” whilst confirming “correct faith” (Article 35).<sup>29</sup> At the core of the “de-extremification” campaign, therefore, lay calls for “Sinicisation of religion,” or its “adaptation to socialist society to make believers aware of their role in serving state interests and supporting CCP leadership.”<sup>30</sup> From 2016, the Party sought to “solve the problem of to whom to listen, whom to trust, and whom to follow” via an education in ideals and beliefs. Uyghurs were to be trained to follow not God but the CCP.<sup>31</sup>

### Religion as Criterion for Internment in a “Re-education” Camp

This “[People’s War on Terror](#)” is not as focused as earlier “Strike Hard” campaigns against “illegal religious activities”; rather, it is a “[carpet-bombing approach](#)”, described

---

<sup>28</sup> In addition to summarising secondary source materials available in the public domain (academic, journalistic, NGO), I draw on interviews and observations conducted during my two most recent research trips to Xinjiang: Field Trip 1 (13 – 25 September 2016, Ürümqi), Field Trip 2 (28 June – 18 July 2018, Ürümqi and Kashgar).

<sup>29</sup> See: XUAR Government (2017) ‘[Regulations on De-extremification](#)’.

<sup>30</sup> Klimeš, O (2018) ‘Advancing “Ethnic Unity” and “De-Extremization”’: Ideational Governance in Xinjiang under “New Circumstances” (2012–2017).’ *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 23 (3): 413-436, see 9; 15-16.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid: 9-10; 12.

by the state in terms of an [indiscriminate use of “weed-killer.”](#) In one case, a female undertaker was imprisoned [for washing bodies according to Islamic custom.](#) In another, a man in his sixties was incarcerated for [“possession and dissemination of extremist religious content”](#) after sending a non-authorized explanation of the Qur’an (Uy. *tabligh*) to his daughter’s mobile phone. In a third, a Uyghur student studying in the U.S. was incarcerated for 17 days when he attempted to visit relatives in Xinjiang and forced to watch videos on appropriate interpretations of Islam. There have been reports of [torture](#) and [death in custody of respected religious scholars.](#)

Since the promulgation of the XUAR Regulations on De-extremification in March 2017, the state has characterised religious extremism as a dangerous [“virus” or “addiction”](#). An [official CCP audio recording](#), transmitted to Uyghurs in 2017, demonstrates this perception of Islam as pathology:

Members of the public who have been chosen for re-education have been infected by an ideological illness. They have been infected with religious extremism and violent terrorist ideology, and therefore they must seek treatment from a hospital as an inpatient. ... The religious extremist ideology is a type of poisonous medicine, which confuses the mind of the people.

In practice, the definition of a “religious extremist” – and potential terrorist, since “extremism” is deemed the ideational basis of terrorism – refers to anyone participating in Islamic practices, however peaceful and ordinary. Chinese authorities use medical analogies to justify internment of using [population targets and arrest quotas.](#)<sup>32</sup> Uyghur Islam is treated as a biological threat to society, akin to a virus that must be cleansed.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Famularo, J (2018) “‘Fighting the Enemy with Fists and Daggers’: The Chinese Communist Party’s Counter-Terrorism Policy in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.’ In *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in China: Domestic and Foreign Policy Dimensions*, edited by Michael Clarke, 39-73. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>33</sup> Roberts, S. R. (2018). ‘The biopolitics of China’s “war on terror” and the exclusion of the Uyghurs.’ *Critical Asian Studies* 50(2), 232-258.

A range of eligibility criteria for extra-legal internment have been identified; however, “extremist religious practices” sit at the top of the list. Such practices include growing a beard (especially a long one); praying regularly; inviting too many people to one’s wedding; giving children names of Islamic origin; appearing too religious (e.g., wearing veils, headscarves, or long clothes in Muslim style); reciting an Islamic verse at a funeral; washing bodies according to Islamic custom; holding strong religious views; allowing others to preach religion; teaching the Qur’an to one’s children; asking an imam to name one’s children; attending the mosque regularly; studying or teaching “unauthorised” forms of Islam; praying at a mosque other than on a Friday (the traditional day of prayer in the Central Asia region); attending Friday prayers outside of one’s own village; making the pilgrimage to Mecca; or possessing illegal religious content on a mobile phone or computer (including text messages containing religious language, Qur’anic verses or graphics, simple explanations of the Qur’an, or pictures of women wearing the niqab).<sup>34</sup>

Inside the internment camps, coercive secularisation is standard practice, with internees coming under daily pressure to renounce Islam. Former inmates described being required to criticise their own Islamic beliefs and those of fellow inmates or loved ones. In two-hour self-criticism sessions, internees had to recite slogans such as “We will oppose extremism, we will oppose separatism, we will oppose terrorism”. Alternatively, guest lecturers from the local police or judiciary would teach internees the dangers of Islam, separatism, and extremism, then test them with quizzes across four-hour sessions. Instructors demanded “Do you obey Chinese law or Sharia?”, then each internee had to present a self-criticism of their religious history, while criticising and being criticised by

---

<sup>34</sup> See: Byler, D (2018) ‘[Violent Paternalism: On the Banality of Uyghur Unfreedom.](#)’ *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 16 (24:4); ‘[This Is What A 21st-Century Police State Really Looks Like.](#)’ BuzzFeed, 18 October 2017; ‘[China’s Mass Indoctrination Camps Evoke Cultural Revolution.](#)’ Associated Press, 18 May 2018; ‘[Apartheid with Chinese Characteristics: China Has Turned Xinjiang into a Police State Like No Other.](#)’ *The Economist.*, 31 May 2018; ‘[My Soul, Where Are You? Families of Muslims Missing in China Meet Wall of Silence.](#)’ *The Guardian*, 13 September 2018.; ‘[Searching for Truth in China’s Uighur “Re-education” Camps.](#)’ *BBC News*, 21 June 2019; ‘[Former Inmates of China’s Muslim ‘Reeducation’ Camps Tell of Brainwashing, Torture.](#)’ *The Washington Post*, 16 May 2018; ‘[“Eradicate the tumours”: Chinese civilians drive Xinjiang crackdown.](#)’ *AFP*, 26 April 2018; ‘[Crackdown in Xinjiang: Where Have All the People Gone?](#)’ *Financial Times*, 5 August 2018; ‘[A Summer Vacation in China’s Muslim Gulag: How One University Student Was Almost Buried by the “People’s War on Terror.”](#)’ *Foreign Policy*, 28 February 2018.

their classmates. One former internee summarised this as ‘[endless brainwashing and humiliation](#)’. Some were forced to eat pork as a punishment, while those considered “religious extremists” were forced to drink alcohol. Internees were encouraged to replace their loyalty to God with allegiance to the Chinese state. As [one Kazakh formerly interned in a camp](#) outside Qaramagay in the north explained, “They would say, there is no religion. The government and the party will take care of you”.

## **Restrictions on religious practice– outside the internment camps**

Religious restrictions had been forcefully imposed on Uyghur society for four-five years prior to the onset of mass internment, and they worsened after 2017.<sup>35</sup> Restrictions were initially imposed most heavily in south Xinjiang, considered to be the Uyghurs’ religious heartland. On 21 September 2016, a migrant taxi driver told me that he had come to Ürümchi from Khotän because of the constant police checks and surveillance in the south, where authorities “kept a tight grip on society and social behaviour.” Restaurant staff, who had moved up north from Kashgar and Aqsu, told me a similar story on 18 September 2016: “It’s better to be in Ürümchi now, as there’s no freedom in the south. There, young men can’t even grow a short beard or moustache – all facial hair is forbidden now. Only older men are allowed to grow a longer beard. Women are forbidden to wear the niqab or burqa.” My academic colleague R confirmed on 21 September 2016 that women could not wear the hijab in the south and added that southerners wearing the niqab were frequently refused entry to Ürümchi and given one-way tickets to leave. The migrant taxi driver from Khotän observed that, “a lot of people have been put in prison down south for very small things, like wearing veils and growing beards.” I heard this repeated many times during the 2016 field trip.

On 16 September 2016, I observed Friday prayers at the Yan’an Road mosque from the pavement. Although the mosque was now fenced off with metal bull bars placed before the gate, and kept closed until prayer time, several hundred men of all ages entered at

---

<sup>35</sup> See: Smith Finley, J (2019) ‘The Wang Lixiong prophecy: “Palestinization” in Xinjiang and the consequences of Chinese state securitization of religion.’ *Central Asian Survey*, 38(1), pp.81-101.

6pm. None had long beards and there was no audible call to prayer, as usually heard in the past. Piety could be expressed through veiling and modest clothing in 2016, although the niqab and burqa could no longer be seen (present since the 2000s but now banned) and the hijab was worn in modified form. As Uyghur policeman R2's wife exclaimed on 25 September 2016: "This is not a real hijab! – a true hijab would cover half of my forehead and completely cover my hairline. With mine, you can see some of my hair peeking out. Also, a real hijab would be longer at the front... We would get in trouble with the authorities if we wore a *real* hijab!" Most young women in the Uyghur districts were modestly covered, wearing tunics and under-trousers, or very long skirts and dresses.

By 2018, the environment in Ürümchi had tightened and earlier restrictions now seemed relatively relaxed. My walking survey of the city's large mosques (Khantängri mosque, Aq mosque, and Yan'an Road mosque) on 28-29 June 2018 found them all completely empty. No-one went in or out – at any time of day – and each mosque complex was heavily securitised with high metal fences covered in coiled razor wire and padlocked gates. Notably, each boasted a bright red PRC flag hoisted high on a flagpole and a screen running [digital slogans against "religious extremism."](#)



**Figure 6.** The deserted Yan'an Road mosque, Ürümchi. 29 June 2018.

While entry was permitted in theory via securitised data gates (equipped with facial recognition technology), no-one seemed to want to go in. Conversations with doorkeepers at Ürümchi's Khantängri mosque (2 July 2018), Yan'an Road mosque (2 July 2018) and Aq mosque (4 July 2018), as well as at the Hui mosque on Heping South Rd (8 July 2018) revealed that:

- Only between 10 and 20 elderly (retired) men entered at prayer times.
- Most other retired men feared having their retirement benefits stopped by the government if they entered.
- People working in state work units could not enter, because they would lose their jobs (state employees are not allowed to be openly religious).
- Everyone else, even the independent businessmen, were too scared to go in: [“We want to go in the mosque... but if we do, they will take us to prison ... they check our identity cards.”](#)



**Figure 7.** Security checkpoint with iris-scanner, entrance to the Aq Mosque, Ürümchi. 29 June 2018.

In a conversation with two North American teachers based in the city, I learned on 9 July 2018 that the crescents had been removed from the city's mosques several months earlier, and then replaced again after a nine or ten-day period. They said it was unclear whether this policy reversal related to the international outcry about the internment camps or to an internal policy split in the regional CCP leadership. They described how religious policies had been recently relaxed in Ürümchi, following new reporting on the camps, with local people suddenly encouraged to go back into the mosques. However, they observed: "No-one will go... because everyone is too afraid."

In Kashgar, mosques were closed in 2018, and many were desecrated to greater or lesser degrees. On 10 July 2018, I asked the hotel receptionist why the name of the hotel had been recently changed from Sultan Hotel ('Sultan' denoting a king or sovereign of a Muslim state) to Nu'erlan Hotel. He explained that the local government had changed it. Clearly, it was now no longer permissible to call places and venues by names with links to Islamic history. The new name, Nu'erlan, had the harmless meaning of "bright" or "dazzling." My next question to the receptionist was "What time do folks go in the mosque?" to which he replied after a short pause with a polite smile: "They don't go in the mosque." A female tour guide and juice-bar owner similarly stated on 12 July 2018 that "people in Kashgar do not go in the mosque at the moment," and confirmed that this had been the case for a year (directly corresponding to the month of publication of the XUAR Regulations on De-extremification, March 2017). Throughout the five days I spent in Kashgar, I observed only one older woman wearing a basic headscarf, and she was subsequently ordered to take it off when she passed through a security checkpoint.

Kashgar's ancient Heytgah Mosque, the most important religious venue in the region, had been converted into a museum and the Arabic calligraphy once adorning the entrance had been ripped away. The following extract from my field diary details what I found there on 10 July 2018:

A ticket seller (45-yuan entry) and two riot police with riot shields sit inside the entrance. I express surprise that tourists are allowed in and ask when the

people are allowed in to pray? The police immediately become threatening, demanding to know my business. Inside is a ghostly museum, a historical site. There is no one praying. Across the front wall of the far prayer hall are banners reading: “Ethnic unity is happiness (福 *fu*); Splittism and rioting are calamity (祸 *huo*).” Young Uyghur men in traditional embroidered shirts (but no hats - uncovered heads in the mosque) usher Han and foreign tourists into the rear prayer hall at the back. I ask one what he thinks of tourists entering the prayer hall? He briefly shakes his head, and says “This is just my job ... I wouldn’t know about that.” As I walk away, he gets out his phone, and apparently informs the police on the door of what I said. When I approach an older guy watering plants, he moves away metre by metre, then shakes his head when I say hello. Seconds later, a police officer appears at about 8 metres and hangs around until I move away.



**Figure 8.** “Love the Party, Love the Country” banner, ticket seller, policeman and riot shields, entrance to the Heytgah mosque, Kashgar. 9 July 2018.



**Figure 9.** Padlocked neighbourhood mosque, with “de-extremification” regulations, Kashgar Old Town. 10 July 2018.

As for smaller neighbourhood mosques in Kashgar Old Town, on 11 July 2018, I found these padlocked and secured with razor wire, without exception. Locals told me no-one had entered them for over a year. In some cases, the crescent had been removed from the dome, and when I enquired what had happened to it, neighbours replied, “they [local authorities] took it away!” All the mosques were adorned with the PRC flag, and covered in framed propaganda posters on the outside walls or running digital screens detailing the regulations on “de-extremification”, “ethnic unity work” or “illegal religious activities” (as at the Heytgah mosque). Earlier “Love the Country, Love Religion” (i.e., Love the Chinese nation first and your religion second) banners were now replaced with versions proclaiming, “Love the Party, Love the Country!” One neighbourhood mosque had even been converted into a café bar called “The Dream of Kashgar,” where Han Chinese backpackers could purchase cold beer.



**Figure 10.** “The Dream of Kashgar,” converted mosque-cafe, Kashgar Old Town. 10 July 2018.

This situation caused considerable fear in the Uyghur community. On 13 July 2018, I asked an older Hui man and his Uyghur wife what had happened to their mosque. He confirmed that it had been closed for some time. Both were clearly upset. When I told them that the Heytgah mosque was open for tourism but not for prayer, they looked at one another in shock that even this major venue had been desanctified. Then, his wife asked what I do. As soon as I told her I was a scholar, she ventured, “so, you know about the situation then?” and promptly burst into quiet tears. I comforted her, squeezing her arm, and saying that everything changes, things would get better at some point. She then asked me: “When will they get better?”

My academic colleague visiting the northern oasis of Ghulja at this time reported similar patterns. On 14 July 2018, a Kazakh respondent told her, “my father used to pray at home in secret, but now he is so scared of the consequences, he has stopped praying altogether.” Another man told her he still prayed in secret at home. A third couple said they were “not allowed to talk about things like that” [i.e., prayer]. When my colleague looked for mosques in Ghulja, she found local people reluctant to give her directions.

Some even claimed there were no mosques in Ghulja (“mosque” having become a dangerous word). The two mosques she located had been closed for a year and their crescents removed six months previously. My colleague reported talking to a taxi driver in Ghulja about the situation, whereupon he started to cry, showing her a photograph of him sporting a moustache and explaining it was no longer possible to grow one: “It is not officially forbidden but everyone knows the consequences of doing so.”

More recently, evidence of mosque demolitions has emerged. In April 2019, Shawn Zhang, a Chinese PhD student in Vancouver, posted [‘before and after’ satellite images](#) of the ancient [Keriyä mosque](#) in southern Khotän. This towering architectural monument, dating back to 1237, had undergone extensive renovations during the 1980s and 1990s, and was photographed on an Islamic festival day in 2016 with thousands of worshippers spilling out. On 14 November 2017, the building was visible on satellite images but by 11 April 2018, it had been razed to the ground.



**Figure 11.** Deserted Büwi Märyäm Khenim Mazari, Bāshkirem, Kashgar prefecture. 13 July 2018.

Meanwhile, the region’s Sufi shrines (*mazar*) have been [closed or turned into museums](#). During my 2018 visit to the Büwi Märyäm Khenim Mazari in Bāshkirem outside Kashgar,

the shrine was deserted and padlocked, and the surrounding garden had been stripped of its votive offerings (figure 11). When I tried to walk around the site, I was arrested by a policeman who came out of the police station, which had been built directly adjacent, and subjected to three rounds of interrogation via three levels of police: first, local police (in Uyghur), then district police (in Chinese), and then municipal plain clothes police (who drove all the way out from Kashgar city).

Other major shrines, such as the Jafari Sadiq shrine, have been [partially demolished](#). The impact of shrine demolition was explained by highly esteemed – and since 2017, disappeared – Uyghur folklorist and ethnographer, Rahile Dawut, speaking in 2012:

If one were to remove these...shrines, the Uyghur people would lose contact with earth. They would no longer have a personal, cultural, and spiritual history. After a few years we would not have a memory of why we live here or where we belong.

Uyghur graveyards have been [desecrated and destroyed](#). In September 2019, Agence France-Presse visited 13 destroyed cemeteries across four cities, and found exposed bones remaining in four of them. Examining satellite images, they concluded that the [grave destruction campaign](#) had been ongoing for over a decade. On 9 July 2018, I interviewed two teachers from the US, based in Ürümqi. Like scholars working on Xinjiang at that time, they were aware of regional government plans to build many new cemeteries in Xinjiang, and worried about the implications of destroying ancient Uyghur graveyards and replacing Uyghur traditional burial practices with cremations.

During my 2018 trip to Xinjiang, I also documented the defacement and removal of halal signage from Muslim eateries, both Uyghur and Hui (Chinese-speaking Muslims descended from Arab soldiers and traders). Across the regional capital, Ürümqi, halal signage had been, or was in the process of being, systematically removed from catering premises. On 5 July 2018, I noticed that newly opened Uyghur restaurants bore no halal signage at all, only the restaurant or Uyghur owner's name in Chinese and Uyghur script. One owner told me it was “not allowed to have halal signage now,” and confirmed this

prohibition had taken effect since “de-extremification” regulations were published. Another owner told me, “we did not put it in the plan”, meaning they did not include it at design stage, but assured me that “everyone knows” the food served inside is halal. In 2018, locals were extremely practised in self-censorship and saying only the safe thing.



**Figure 12.** Self-censored Uyghur restaurant (no halal signage), Ürümchi. 4 July 2018.



**Figure 13.** Hui restaurant with *Qingzhen* (halal) characters and mosque insignia removed (top left), Ürümchi, 5 July 2018.

In July 2018, I took countless photographs of restaurant signs in which the halal symbols had been blacked out, covered over with wooden planks, or scraped and torn off, as well as new signs that did not carry the label 'halal'. In one district slated for renovation as part of the “beautification” project, I found a Hui restaurant on Heping Road South that unusually had all signage *except* for the halal symbol removed. The female Hui employee told me: “We're not allowed to carry the halal sign any more, but this one doesn't matter because they're ripping all the shop fronts off anyway, and they know it will be gone soon... but even if the halal sign does not appear up there, I will still have it in my heart (pointing to chest).” An academic colleague sent me similar images of Hui Muslim restaurants in Ghulja, where halal signage been removed but also the Hui ethnonym (*Huizhu*) and Muslim-sounding names of their owners. This evidence suggests a broader campaign has begun against other Muslim groups, under the auspices of the national drive to “Sinicise” minority languages, religions and cultures.

## Chapter 5. Cultural Destruction

Jo Smith Finley

From 2015, teams of CCP cadres, local government officials and scholars were dispatched to visit – and later conduct “[homestays](#)” in – rural southern Xinjiang homes to report on so-called “[extremist behaviours](#)”. Behaviours considered “untrustworthy” in this context included everyday Islamic practices, ostensibly legal under PRC laws: fasting at Ramadan, wearing veils and growing beards, avoiding alcohol, possessing a Qur’an. Such expressions of ethnic group identity were automatically equated with disloyalty to the state and ethnic “splittism” (separatism). As such, perceived infractions could lead to internment in a “re-education” camp (or “transformation through education” centre). These arbitrary internments [disrupted Uyghur reproduction](#) by separating husbands from wives and prevented inter-generational cultural transmission by separating parents from their children. Outside the camps, reports have also emerged of [coerced marriages](#), with Uyghur women pressured to take Han husbands and [facing internment](#) – or internment of their family members – if they refused. These practices together are evidence of how the party-state seeks to dilute Uyghur culture – and Uyghur genes.

### **Coercive Chinese language tuition in the internment camps**

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) [Regulations on De-Extremification](#) published on 31 March 2017 mandated establishment of the network of “transformation through education” centres where Uyghurs experience political “re-education” involving coercive Sinicization of both language and culture. On 6 July 2018, I asked a group of melon sellers in Ürümchi why people were being detained. The men declined to answer, but a female trader explained the official line regarding “vocational training”: “Well, they want us to learn Chinese, right? Because it’s the national language.” Investigative

journalists working on the ground and using interviews with camp survivors have widely reported that camp internees are [forcibly required to study](#) Mandarin language (including classical Chinese texts), Chinese laws on Islam and politics, the “spirit of the CCP’s 19th Party Congress”, CCP policies on minorities and religion, and the [state-sanctioned version of Chinese history](#). [One Kazakh former inmate](#) described being locked in classrooms and monitored by guards. He noted that elderly detainees, often farmers who could barely write, were required to learn 3,000 Chinese characters to earn their exit from the camp. This often proved impossible: in his two months there, he did not see anyone released. [Eldost, a Uyghur former broadcaster for Xinjiang Television](#) recruited to teach in a camp, explained how when teaching the Three Character Classic (*Sanzi jing*), a Song dynasty text used to teach children Confucian values, he would invent mnemonic devices to aid older internees’ learning. He advised them to stop using religious phrases, such as “Praise God” in Arabic and Uyghur, to avoid punishment. In a camp in Qaramay, internees were taught that the indigenous sheep-herding Central Asian people of Xinjiang were “backward and yoked by slavery” before “liberation” by the CCP.

## **Coercive Chinese-medium education outside the camps**

Slow linguicide (or, linguistic genocide) in Xinjiang predates the internment camps, with Chinese-medium (Mandarin-only) education gradually rolled out from university down to kindergarten level since 2002, and since 2017, replacing the previous “bilingual education” policy that was designed to slowly phase out the Uyghur language.<sup>36</sup> In 2018, Chinese state authorities erased all online documentation about the “bilingual education” policy and replaced it with a new “national language education” policy.<sup>37</sup> [“Measures to eliminate Turkic languages”](#) were thus one of the grounds listed in support of the complaint submitted to the International Criminal Court on 6 July 2020 by a group of London-based international barristers led by Rodney Dixon QC, calling for an investigation into senior Chinese officials for genocide and crimes against humanity.

---

<sup>36</sup> Smith Finley, J., & Zang, X. (Eds.). (2015) *Language, Education and Uyghur Identity in Urban Xinjiang*. London: Routledge; Burdorf, H., “The Uyghur Crisis: A Deeper Look,” Faiths Forum for London/Faiths United Youth Network webinar, 18 March 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Personal communication, Hanna Burdorf, PhD candidate, Newcastle University, 2019.

For the past few years, Uyghur children in Xinjiang have had no choice but to attend Chinese-medium schools, where they are immersed in Mandarin Chinese for all but three hours per week. During three hours of Uyghur language tuition, pupils learn Uyghur as if it were a second language.<sup>38</sup> According to my current PhD student, who conducted field research in Xinjiang in 2019, in some areas, Uyghur language education appears to have ceased altogether from 2017.<sup>39</sup> The effects of this policy of steadily decreasing Uyghur-medium education are illustrated by, for example, an eight-year-old Uyghur girl I met in an Ürümqi bazaar on 6 July 2018 being unable to sing an entire song in Uyghur. Hearing only Chinese-language (and some English-language) songs in her primary school classroom, she said she “used to know a Uyghur song when she was little” (before she went to a Chinese-immersion school), and tried to sing it, but couldn't remember the words. The store-holder commented “[a lot of Uyghur kids are like this now,](#)” and reflected that he worried about the damage that would be inflicted on the next generation's Uyghur language skills and knowledge of Uyghur culture. The girl's fragmented knowledge of a single Uyghur song dated back to her kindergarten days – a time before the new era of Mandarin Chinese as [‘the language of re-educated patriotic Uyghurs.’](#) On 13 July 2018, I met [three Uyghur boys \(6, 8, 5\)](#) playing outside a juice bar in the refurbished Kashgar Old Town. The six-year-old claimed he spoke Chinese best, but also Uyghur well. While I watched him converse with his mother for a long time in Uyghur, he could not remember the words to any Uyghur songs. On the other hand, he was able to sing the entire Chinese national anthem and a second song in Chinese designed to help children learn the four tones.

---

<sup>38</sup> Confirmed in interviews with two primary school teachers, resident in Ürümqi and Kashgar respectively, and with children aged 6-8 years (July 2018).

<sup>39</sup> Burdorf, H., ‘The Uyghur Crisis: A Deeper Look,’ Faiths Forum for London/Faiths United Youth Network webinar, 18 March 2021.



**Figure 1.** After singing China’s national anthem in perfect Chinese, a six-year-old Uyghur boy recreates on his face a vanished Uyghur cultural norm—the beard—using white sticky labels, Kashgar Old Town. 11 July 2018.

Investigative reports from the region tell a different story in relation to children of “doubly-detained” parents who were placed in state care, ranging from orphanages to public schools with boarding facilities. Such facilities are [heavily securitised](#) and promote systematic linguistic and cultural assimilation. [Chinese Human Rights Defenders](#) working for *Bitter Winter* magazine reported in 2019 that Uyghur pupils in “national education” boarding schools were being [psychologically “tortured,”](#) describing their extreme caution when trying to write in Chinese “as if they were skating on thin ice.” Though fluent in their mother tongue, they were forbidden to use it in the classroom and forced to speak awkwardly in Mandarin. As a result, the reporters wrote, some stopped talking at all.

In 2018, [visual examples of linguistic, cultural and religious erasure](#) could be found everywhere in Xinjiang. I photographed a textile banner outside the Ürümchi No.1

primary school, showing a Han Chinese educator teaching a mixed-ethnicity class of children how to say “Hello” in Chinese. The poster included the Chinese characters with Pinyin transliteration and Uyghur Latinised script; but the Uyghur modified Arabic script (above the Uyghur latinised script) had been blacked over and cut out from the poster. This is evidence of policy intention to eliminate use of the Uyghur script owing to its connection to Islam (as happened during the Cultural Revolution period, 1966-76).



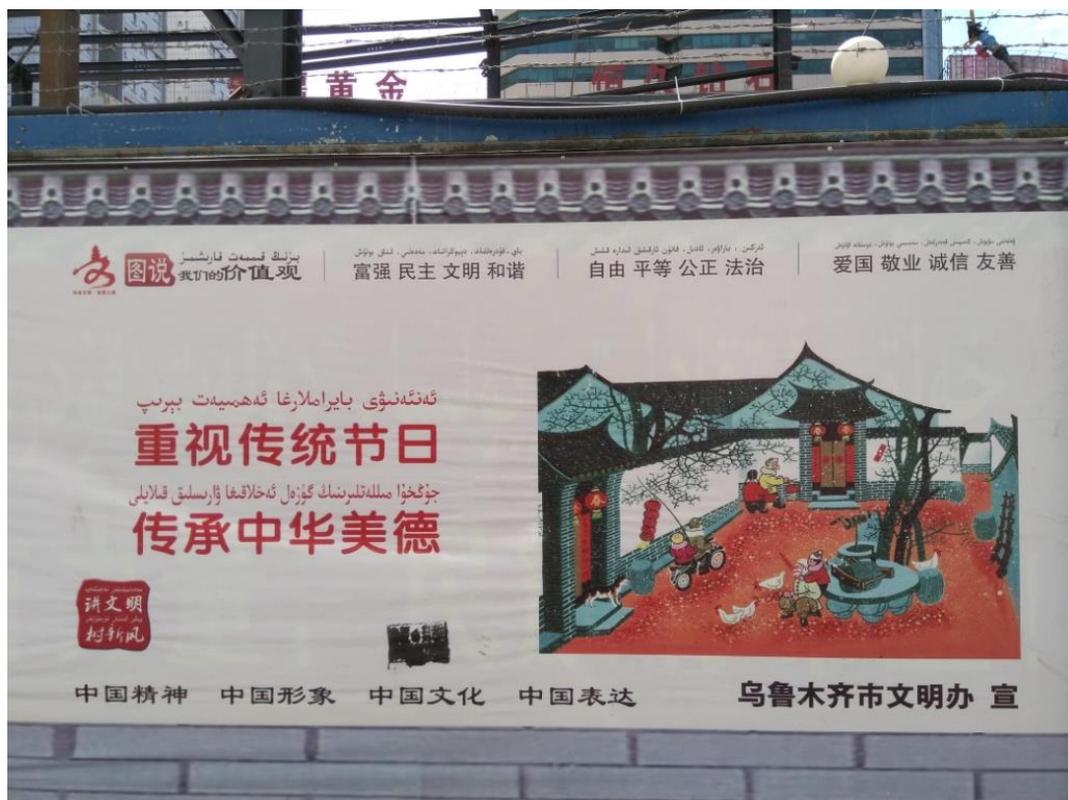
**Figure 2.** Banner outside Ürümchi No.1 primary school, wall secured with razor wire. The red slogan reads: “Respect teachers, respect education; improve your personal quality”. 5 July 2018.

## Coercive Sinicisation and cultural erasure

The national [PRC Counter-Terrorism Law of 2015](#) defines terrorism so broadly, that it “criminalises virtually any Uyghur expression of dissent or religiosity as well as many Uyghur cultural traditions.”<sup>40</sup> This broader emphasis on culture – and the demand to

<sup>40</sup> Roberts, S. R. (2018). ‘The biopolitics of China’s “war on terror” and the exclusion of the Uyghurs.’ *Critical Asian Studies* 50(2), 232-258.

Sinicize it – is rooted in a Han-centric assimilationist trend triggered by proponents of the “[second generation ethnic minority policy](#)” who criticised the slow pace of “natural” assimilation following the 2009 Ürümchi riots. The intensifying drive to Sinicise minority cultures was evidenced in an array of visual propaganda posters when I visited Xinjiang in summer 2018. One large poster (Figure 3) exhorts citizens of Ürümchi to “Respect traditional festivals, pass down Chinese virtues.” An accompanying image shows unmistakably ethnic Han traditions, now re-cast as national “Chinese” traditions.



**Figure 3.** Propaganda poster in Ürümchi exhorts citizens, “Respect traditional festivals, pass down Chinese virtues.” Subsidiary slogans read: “Chinese spirit, Chinese image, Chinese culture, Chinese expression.” 2 July 2018.

In Kashgar Old Town, I found evidence on 10-12 July 2018 of Uyghur households having to try hard to prove and display their adherence to Han Chinese culture, and thereby their loyalty to the party-state. The whole area was unusually quiet, apart from the occasional group of small children and their grandparents who were looking after them. Parents were noticeable in their absence, and many of the homes were padlocked (indicating that parents were likely in camps). Many doors carried a Chinese-language

plaque on them, reading “Civilised household” or “Peaceful household” – either an earlier award from local authorities for political loyalty, or else the occupants’ attempt to prove loyalty to the Chinese authorities. In a neighbourhood far from the tourist trails, I found original adobe-built Uyghur homes with traditional arched wooden window frames and colourful painted gates, as per Uyghur tradition. However, each home had clearly made the effort to espouse Han Chinese traditions and celebrate Chinese Spring Festival, evidenced by the faded, weather-battered red lanterns that still hung there, and the New Year rhyming couplets pasted on each door.



**Figure 4.** Deserted home with Chinese lanterns and new year couplets. Kashgar Old Town, 10 July 2018.

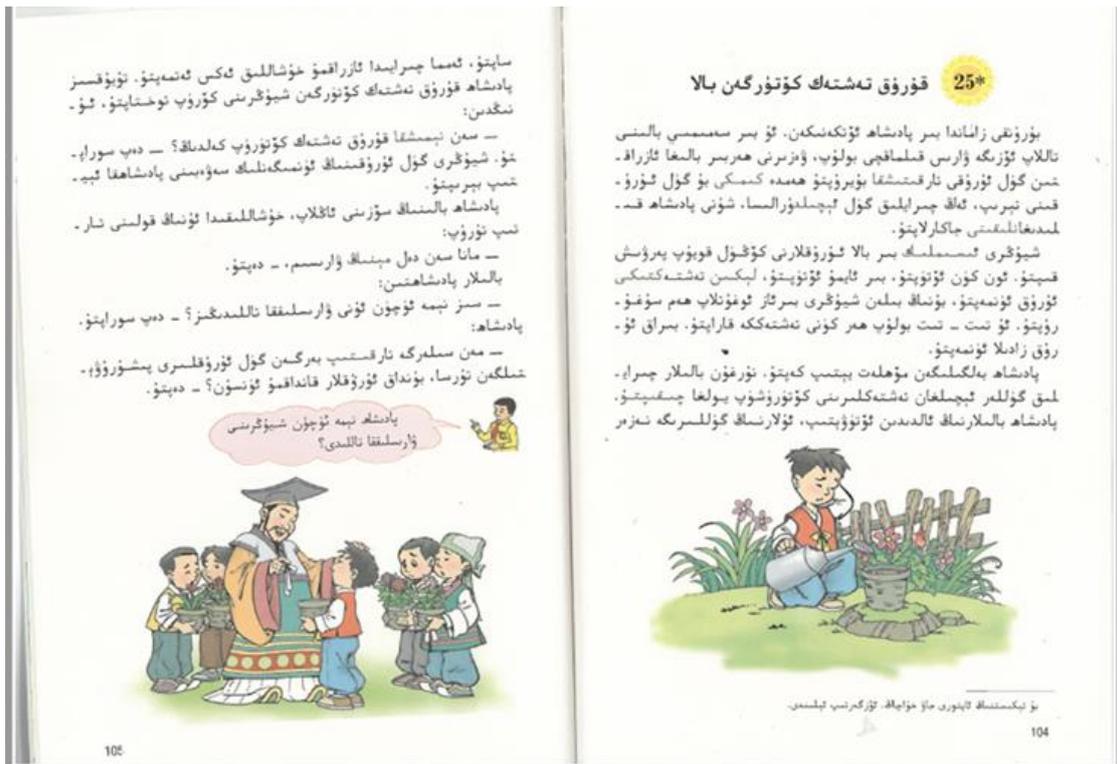
Books teaching the Uyghur script to children had almost entirely disappeared by 2018, with references to Islam and Uyghur culture systematically erased from the remaining

Uyghur-medium primary school textbooks. On 7 July 2018, a Uyghur bookseller in Ürümchi showed me a set of Uyghur-medium primary textbooks titled *Til-Ädäbiyat* (*Language and Literature*), stating that they had been originally published in 2015 but revised in 2018. She lamented that during the revision, their contents had been “changed” and that references to Uyghur culture and history were replaced with Han Chinese cultural references. She explained: [“No one is allowed to talk about \[Islamic\] festivals anymore...we don’t have any festivals now. And no-one dares to say \*Ässalam Älläykum\* \[an Islamic religious greeting\] anymore either!”](#)

Analysis of a set of six recently revised Uyghur-medium primary level textbooks, *Til-Ädäbiyat* (*Language and Literature*, 2018 [2015]), revealed that while Han Chinese cultural and social life (Confucian, secular) is highlighted in the books, Uyghur cultural and social life (Turkic, Islamic) is almost totally absent (the word ‘Islam’ does not appear, while the ethnonym ‘Uyghur’ appears only once or twice in the official name for the region, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region); pictures of human characters show only Han facial features and cultural dress, while Uyghur features and cultural dress are absent; the human characters in the texts are Han Chinese, with typical Chinese personal names, but Uyghur personal names are largely absent (the few that do appear in practice drills are devoid of Islamic associations); texts about animals and nature largely depict elements of inner and coastal Chinese physical geography and ecology, while those native to the Xinjiang region are largely absent; Han Chinese and Western literatures are highlighted (but not Turkish or Middle Eastern – i.e., Islamic – literatures), while Uyghur literature and folklore are largely absent; folk stories are mostly selected from Han Chinese sources, while Uyghur folk stories are absent; and all of the selected poems are by Han Chinese authors (and translated into Uyghur), with works by Uyghur poets missing.<sup>41</sup> These cuts embody a deliberate intention to ‘invisibilise’ – and in the long term, eradicate – the Uyghur people as a separate ethnic group or nation.

---

<sup>41</sup> Mahmut, D. and Smith Finley, J. (2022) ‘Corrective “Re-Education” as (Cultural) Genocide: A Content Analysis of the Uyghur Primary School Textbook *Til-Ädäbiyat* (2018, rev. 1st ed).’ In: Clarke M (ed) *The Xinjiang Emergency: Exploring the Causes and Consequences of China’s Mass Detention of Uyghurs*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.



**Figure 5.** Pictures of human characters show only Han facial features and cultural dress. Primary school textbook *Til-Ädäbiyat* (2018, rev. 1st ed., Xinjiang Education Press).

Coerced, state-sponsored intermarriage is another means of Sinicisation. Strong stigma among Uyghurs virtually forbids intermarriage with Han Chinese but the state has aggressively incentivised and promoted Han-Uyghur intermarriage since 2014. This campaign has accelerated since 2017, with one mixed couple telling reporters in June 2020 how they were [given money](#) for housing, washing machine, refrigerator, and TV. However, evidence from analysis of PRC state narratives suggests [that coercion is present in some of these inter-ethnic matches](#). A pattern has been identified, whereby a Han migrant or security worker chooses a Uyghur woman, initiates contact, and then works with local authorities (variously, county civil affairs bureaux; town government cadres and visiting “relatives”, i.e., party cadres sent to stay in Uyghur homes and monitor for “extremist” activity; armed police; township Party committees; county-level cooperatives; “religious management committees”) to convince the families to agree. Such [forced marriages](#) are occurring in a climate of terror, in which a person’s refusal could lead to their classification as “untrustworthy” and trigger detention in a camp. There have also

been reports of Chinese officials and local Han residents abusing their power to “make personal demands” of Uyghur women, especially those whose male family members are detained. As a female Uyghur exile has asked: “If Uyghur women refuse an offer of marriage, what is to stop officials from branding these women, or their families, as ‘suspicious,’ to be taken away without charge or trial, never to be seen again? Under these circumstances, [how could a woman dare to refuse an unwanted marriage?](#)”

## **Detention of Famous Cultural Figures (“Killing the Chicken to Show the Monkey”)**

During the period of mass detention, Xinjiang authorities have publicly targeted celebrity and cultural figureheads, a deliberate policy of inducing fear. The [detention of Uyghur cultural leaders](#) – artists, writers, poets, academics, publishers, singers, comedians and athletes – promotes the state’s project to ‘[eradicate local languages and cultures](#)’ and serves as a warning to the broader population that no-one is safe – not even elites. This broad targeting of all cultural figureheads is underscored by detention of celebrities beyond the realm of high culture, for instance, [Erfan Hezim](#), the footballer who moved down the leagues to Shaanxi Chang’an Athletic following a year in detention, or philanthropist businessman [Nurtay Hajim](#), given a life sentence in 2018. Cornell University professor, [Magnus Fiskesjö](#), describes mass arrests of cultural figures “as an intentional, well-planned, multipronged genocide, targeting the dignity of whole peoples and cultures by humiliating their best and brightest, including our fellow scholars.”

My long-term friend [Abdurehim Heyit](#) – a famous singer, dutar player and peaceful nationalist – was detained as part of the targeting of cultural figureheads. On 19 September 2016, I met him by chance in a Uyghur district of regional capital Ürümqi. When I stopped to speak with him, my female Uyghur companion pointedly continued walking up the road and did not want to be seen talking to him (indicating deep political anxiety). On 22 September 2016, Heyit told me about his trip to Iran a month earlier, where he had performed with Iranian musicians, and to Turkey – both Muslim majority countries, a fact that may partly explain his subsequent detention.



**Figure 6.** Pictures of Abdurehim Heyit before/after detention ([Source: XVD](#)).

When I returned to Xinjiang in 2018, Heyit had been ‘disappeared,’ reportedly detained in February 2017 (6 months after the accession of new CCP regional Party Secretary, Chen Quanguo). A musical instrument seller told me on 4 July 2018 that Heyit’s detention was “a misunderstanding,” and that some lines in one of Heyit’s songs had been misinterpreted as “jihadist,” protesting: “There is nothing extremist in any of Heyit’s songs. The problem is, the Han don’t understand our language. They look at the Uyghur language, try to translate it, get it wrong, then misinterpret the meanings.” In this case, the state [conflated non-violent nationalist sentiment with ‘religious extremism.’](#) It later transpired that Heyit had been detained over the song [‘Fathers’ \(Uy. \*Atilar\*\)](#), which employs the phrase “martyrs of war” in reference to the sacrifices of Uyghur ancestors. He was initially [sentenced to 10 years imprisonment](#) and told he would never perform live or record songs again. Following the international outrage that met rumours of his death in detention, he was later released and is now said to be under house arrest. In another example, the bilingual pop singer [Ablajan Awut Ayup](#) is believed to have been detained simply because he [“promoted Uyghur culture and identity.”](#)

## Conclusions

State violence targeting Turkic Muslim peoples in Xinjiang is of significant humanitarian, economic, and security interest for policymakers, businesses, and the public across the world. This report has shown how **China's party-state organises and co-ordinates systematic practices of ethnically targeted violence in Xinjiang, which prevent intergenerational transmission of cultural, linguistic, and religious practices**, the foundations of the targeted groups. The officially stated intent of these interconnected practices of mass extra-legal detention, forced labour, child and family separation, sexual violence, repression of religion, and cultural destruction is to “break their roots”.

### Key findings:

- State violence towards Xinjiang's peoples has rapidly intensified since 2014.
- Officially stated intent of policy in Xinjiang is to “break their roots”.
- Mass detainment, forced labour, child separation, repression of religion and language, and sexual violence and torture are systematic, interconnected practices.
- Widespread and systematic forced labour for ethnic minorities includes coercion, forcible transfers of population, and child-separation (Chapter 1).
- Transfers of Uyghur children from their families to state care have grown rapidly since 2017 (Chapter 2).
- Coercive “birth control policies” and internment for women with “too many children” has significantly contributed to declining Uyghur birth rates (Chapter 2).
- Widespread and systematic practices of rape and sexual violence are routine methods of torture and punishment within the camps (Chapter 3).
- Religious practice as a criterion for extra-legal detention is part of broader campaigns to “Sinicise” religion (Chapter 4).
- “De-extremification” campaigns include coerced intermarriages, arbitrary detention of cultural figureheads, and forcible mass “re-education” (Chapter 5).

Further research is needed on each of these topics to track policy changes and assess their ongoing human impact. This research requires funding to gather and collate data but also institutional support and public commitments to academic freedom to foster a more conducive research environment. Cyber-security experts have shown that the party-state uses [surveillance technologies](#) to intern Xinjiang's peoples and monitor their connections with non-PRC citizens, a significant impediment to knowledge production on each topic addressed in this report. Some topics also require urgent attention, including [sterilisation of women](#) and testimonies of camp detainees being injected with unknown chemicals and falling ill.<sup>42</sup>

This urgency is captured by the changing data, with many camp detainees, aging and in ill-health, being transferred to different facilities without explanation and growing numbers moved to prisons across China. The Xinjiang Victims Database has recorded 267 such cases of people aged over 50 and in ill-health. For example, [Ismayil Sidiq](#), a 53-year old farmer, was sentenced to 10 years within 5 days of arrest, then transferred to prison in another region of Xinjiang and given a further 11 years sentence for praying (“illegal religious activity”), telling Uyghur inmates they shouldn't inform on each other (“inciting ethnic hatred and discrimination”), and refusing to write a “thought report” (“undermining prison supervision”).

[Nyrola Elima](#) has campaigned from Sweden for release of her aging Aunt, [Mahire Yaqup](#). Mahire worked as a Mandarin language teacher, civil servant, and insurance salesperson, while raising children alone. In 2018, Mahire was detained in a “vocational training centre” without explanation, though when pressured, officials referred to her family's 2013 bank transfer to pay for relatives' new home in Australia. Following her release in December 2018, Mahire spoke with Nyrola before being detained by Ghulja Public Security Bureau (PSB) in 2019. She looked extremely “pale and weak,” having lost 13kg in weight during detention, suffering liver damage without access to healthcare, and receiving “no vocational training”. Nyrola's contact with her retired parents, 62-year old mother, [Gulbekrim Memtimin](#), and 65-year old, [Qasim Tohti](#), was severed in 2017 as

---

<sup>42</sup> See: [Gulbahar Jalilova's](#) and [Zharknybek's and Gulzira Auelhan's accounts](#).

they are held under arbitrary house arrest. Nyrola explained she wants no involvement in politics but must speak out for her family. As her eyes welled with tears, she explained the pain of worrying about her family's health and reading their suffering reduced to terminology debates by *the Economist*: "while the world is debating a word, we are dying."

The targeting and breakup of [Jewlan Shirmemmet's](#) elderly family members followed similar patterns. Jewlan's mother, [Suriye Tursun](#), was a party cadre and civil servant on the verge of retirement but was sentenced to 5-years in a camp with no written verdict in 2019. Jewlan has had no contact since January 2018 at which time she was in poor health. Jewlan continues to press the Chinese embassy and consulate staff in Turkey to be permitted to speak with them, who instead have asked him to provide information on all his contacts and activities in Xinjiang and Turkey. Jewlan's family, like Nyrola's, had no prior criminal records until moving abroad. Jewlan moved to Turkey to study law and his mother visited him for 15 days with an official Chinese tour group in 2013. The only attempt at explanation from embassy staff members was "*maybe* terrorist activities". Jewlan concludes that his family members are being targeted and their connections broken because he is a Uyghur who chose to study abroad. His aging father, [Shirmemmet Hudayar](#), was detained and brother, [Irfan Shirmemmet](#), held under arbitrary house arrest. Both were subsequently sacked from civil servant positions. No official explanations have been given. Jewlan wants no involvement in politics and says he is targeted because in the party-state's eyes, "as long as you are Uyghur, you are political."

The treatment of these two families is the "tip of the iceberg" but their experiences illustrate how state violence in Xinjiang arbitrarily targets and breaks up family units, depriving them of community to "break their roots." **China's party-state organises and co-ordinates systematic practices of ethnically targeted violence in Xinjiang, which prevent intergenerational transmission of cultural, linguistic, and religious practices, the foundations of the targeted groups.**