

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Camp Fix: Infrastructural Power and the “Re-education Labour Regime” in Turkic Muslim Industrial Parks in North-west China

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Abstract

Industrial parks in north-west China occupy a liminal space between labour camps and private industry. Drawing on worker interviews, government documents, industry materials and images this article shows that for-profit public-private industrial parks have been built as part of a “camp fix” mechanism centred on detaining and “re-educating” Uyghurs and Kazakhs at the periphery of the nation. It argues that these industrial parks concentrate forms of repressive assistance and “dormitory labour regimes” that operate at other frontiers of Chinese state power and point these strategies of disempowerment towards a seemingly permanent, ethno-racialized underclass, producing a “re-education labour regime.” It further argues that the material infrastructures of these surveilled and policed spaces themselves are productive in enforcing the goals of the “camp fix”: the creation of high-quality, underpaid, docile and non-religious Muslim workers who are controlled through the built environment.

摘要

新疆工业园区占据了劳改营与私营工业之间的一个界限空间。本文利用工人访谈、政府文件、行业材料和图像。文章显示营利性公私工业园区的建设是作为“营地解决方案”机制的一部分，该机制以拘留和“再教育”国家边缘的维吾尔人和哈萨克人中心。它演示，这些工业园区集中了在中国国家权力的其他前沿运作的压制性援助和宿舍劳动制度的形式，并将这些剥夺权力的策略指向一个看似永久的、种族化的下层阶级，从而产生了“再教育劳动制度”。它进一步演示，这些受监视和监管的空间本身的物质基础设施在执行“营地解决方案”的目标方面是富有成效的：通过建筑环境强制执行高质量、低薪、温顺的非宗教穆斯林工人。

Keywords: infrastructural power; re-education labour regime; camp fix; industrial parks; Xinjiang; Uyghur

关键词: 基建力量; 再教育劳动制度; 营地解决方; 工业园区; 新疆; 维吾尔族

On 3 November 2018, Erzhan Qurban, a middle-aged Kazakh man from a small village 50 kilometres from the city of Ghulja in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, was released from the “re-education” (*zaijiaoyu* 再教育) camp where he had been held for nine months. As has been often reported by dozens of former detainees, conditions in these camps had been deeply traumatizing.¹ Describing the circumstances of his detention Erzhan said,

The toilet was a bucket by the window, there was no running water. In the daytime, we were sitting in rows on our plastic stools. The food was handed to us through an opening in the door. At 7 a.m., we had to sing the Chinese national anthem and then we had three minutes for breakfast. Afterwards, we learned Chinese until 9 p.m. Our teachers were Kazakhs or

¹ Byler 2021; Amnesty International 2021.

Uyghurs. We were watched by four cameras in our room which ensured that we didn't talk to each other. Those who spoke anyway were handcuffed and had to stand by the wall. "You don't have the right to talk, because you are not humans," said the guards. "If you were humans, you wouldn't be here."²

Over time the gruelling routine began to change his mental state. "The first two months, I thought of my wife Maynur and my three children. Sometime later, I only thought about food," Erzhan said.³ As he was told he had "graduated" he thought that perhaps now he would be free to return to his former life as an immigrant in Kazakhstan. Yet, just a few days later he was sent to work in a glove factory in an industrial park in Ghulja city.

About the time that Erzhan was reduced to thinking about his bodily survival, in May 2018, Pan Daojin 潘道津, the front commander and Party secretary of Yili prefecture, arrived to inspect a newly built industrial park on the other side of town.⁴ He came with a delegation from Jiangsu which was tasked with providing industrial "aid" in Xinjiang. Pan, who was also from Jiangsu, had been appointed to his position in December 2016 just as the mass detentions of the re-education system began. During the inspection of the industrial park he "fully affirmed the achievements" of the business leaders from Nantong city in Jiangsu who had funded the industrial park. The delegation showed off the factory of the Jiangsu-based Sanrun Garment Group 三润服装有限公司 (Solamoda Group) – a company that had supplied companies such as Forever 21 and other international brands. They also stopped by the glove factory where Erzhan would eventually be assigned. This factory was managed by employees of the Luye Shuozidao Trading Company 绿叶硕子岛商贸有限公司, a manufacturer based in Baoding city in Hebei province owned by a conglomerate called Huawei Group 华伟集团.

Wang Xinghua 王兴华, the general manager of the glove factory, speaking in a state television interview released in December 2018, said that "with the support of the government, we have already 'recruited' more than 600 people."⁵ One of these 600 government "recruits" was Erzhan, who had arrived from the labour camp less than a month before. Continuing, Wang said that since the founding of the new factory in 2017, "we have generated more than 6 million US dollars in sales. We plan to reach 1,000 workers by the end of this year. We plan to provide jobs to 1,500 people by the end of 2019." In fact, the glove factory in Ghulja had by then far surpassed the capacity of its parent factory back in Hebei, which employed less than 200 people.⁶ Moving manufacturing to Xinjiang made sense for the company. Since 2018 the state has provided subsidies to build factories and ship goods from Xinjiang. Construction of the factories was often funded by local governments in eastern China as part of a "pairing assistance" programme. Up to 4 per cent of factory sales volume was subsidized in order to cover shipping expenses from the new location.⁷ A state programme gave re-education system employers 5,000 yuan for each assigned worker they trained. Most importantly, as in every county in Xinjiang, there were thousands upon thousands of traumatized detainees like Erzhan in nearby camps. The logics of the re-education system funnelled them into industrial parks where infrastructures of control – walls, surveillance systems, checkpoints – held them in place.

2 "Ihr seid keine Menschen," *Die Zeit*, 31 July 2019, <https://www.zeit.de/2019/32/zwangslager-xinjiang-muslimen-china-zeugen-menschenrechte/seite-2>.

3 *Ibid.*

4 "Jiangsu yuan yi qianyan zhihui bu lingdao yanjiu nantong shi duikou yuan Jiang gongzuo" (Leaders of Jiangsu Aid to Yining Front Headquarters investigate the paired aid to Xinjiang from Nantong city), *Nantong yuanjiang jinxing shi*, 31 May 2018, archive.md/f490v.

5 Ili Television 2018

6 See the following link describing the capacity of the original factory of the company: https://web.archive.org/web/20191211094113/https://huaweiglove.en.alibaba.com/company_profile.html?spm=a2700.icbuShop.conu5cfl7.1.4af811a5izQHdr.

7 Millward 2021.

Drawing on in-depth and repeated interviews conducted with former detainee-workers in Kazakhstan, Chinese state documents and industry reports,⁸ this article argues that the goal of these re-education industrial parks is to turn Kazakhs and Uyghurs into a deeply controlled proletariat, a docile, unfree and productive underclass without the social protections afforded to the more formally recognized rights-bearing non-Muslim working class. Zeroing in on two individuals who worked in the same factory, and who independently corroborate each other's accounts, I show how the lived effects of surveillance infrastructure – enforced unfree labour – are used to turn a population of people into workers undergoing a process of “re-education.” I contend that state authorities and private industrialists hope that the industrial park–camp mechanism – what I refer to as the “camp fix” – will simultaneously extend state power in the region and the market expansion of the Chinese textile and garment industry via an ethno-racialized “dormitory labour regime.” This work regime is intended to squeeze constant surplus value from criminalized workers – the former detainees that form the primary demographic examined in the article – and an ethno-racialized population of able-bodied and yet undetained farmers dubbed “surplus workers.” This system of controlled labour itself has become a “carrier” (*zaiti* 载体) of the regional economy,⁹ an infrastructural mechanism that is both “fixed in space” and strives to “fix” problems created by the structural antagonisms of the broader economic and political system.¹⁰ The camp fix assures that formerly interned Muslim labourers cannot organize forms of collective autonomy, much less leave their industrial parks since failure to work can result in internment or imprisonment.

In what follows I examine the history of commercial infrastructure development in modern China that contributed to the rise of the Xinjiang re-education industrial parks. The second half of the paper then examines how one of Erzhan's co-workers, another former detainee named Gulzira Auelkhan, experienced the structures and infrastructures of the re-education industrial park. It ends by examining the implications of these technopolitical systems for understanding the distribution of power in contemporary Xinjiang and the effects of these infrastructures on modes of production. Ultimately, I show that the space of re-education industrial parks elaborates on forms of state power figured as “repressive assistance” among historically marginalized populations throughout China and as “disempowered development” elsewhere in China's Inner Asian frontier.¹¹ This elaboration is carried out in part by expanding on the infrastructural power found in the ubiquitous “dormitory labour regime” that is used systematically in eastern China to extract surplus labour from migrant workers.¹² Taken together these forms of statecraft and infrastructure power produce a relation of domination over an ethno-racialized, permanent underclass of unfree labourers slotted into a “re-education labour regime” that is both exceptional to, and derivative of, economic and political systems across the nation. A combination of walls, technical surveillance systems, human surveillance and the fortified camps structured around controlling Uyghurs

8 This article draws on repeated interviews with 15 former detainees conducted in Kazakhstan in 2020 and via ongoing online communication. The article focuses primarily on interviews with two former detainees who worked in the same industrial park. I cite media interviews conducted with these former detainees before and after interviews conducted by the author as a way of verifying the consistency of their accounts across time and in conversation with multiple interviewers. These interviews are supplemented by available state documents describing the construction of the factories and companies involved, and in one case, a state-published video that includes one of the detainees while in the factory. Their accounts were further verified by a field visit to the region by the author in 2018 and an additional 13 interviews with former detainees conducted by the author in Kazakhstan, the United States and Europe between 2020 and 2021. While still a limited sample of detainee-worker interviews, they nevertheless indicate a consistent detainment and assigned labour process that resonates with available open-source and internal state documents from locations across the region.

9 Xinjiang Development and Reform Commission 2018.

10 For discussion of the genealogy of the “spatio-temporal fix” to capital overaccumulation as articulated by David Harvey and others see Wilson Gilmore 2007.

11 Pan 2020; Fischer 2013.

12 Smith and Pun 2006.

and Kazakhs prevents them from obtaining labour rights and personal autonomy. Instead, they are held in place as a group of privately employed labourers that can be underpaid and exploited by Han corporate managers who function as state proxies.

The History of Industrial Park Infrastructure in Contemporary China

The structures and infrastructures of the peri-urban industrial park that confronted Erzhan are rooted in both the political economy of China's Maoist period that was typified by walled work units and the period of market expansion that was typified by more open industrial parks. Technopolitical systems – defined as the way both the more visible *structures* and the more hidden *infrastructures* work together to produce built environments for political and economic intervention – have a long history in Chinese industrial urban development. One key form in shaping the dispositions, or orientations, of power within this material complex has been the structure of walls themselves. As the architectural historian Duanfang Lu has argued, modern Chinese urban built environments have grown in and out of urban forms in three distinct phases.¹³ First, in the 1950s in many locations city walls were destroyed as remnants of a feudal past.¹⁴ Work units, or *danwei*, which were primarily located on the periphery of historic urban centres in the intervening decades were initially built without walls as a means of promoting equality and saving resources. But by the 1960s, citing the “impossibility” of managing a unit without the control of walls, units (in Beijing) began constructing walls as a buffer against the “roaming” and “thieving” of out-of-place rural migrants. By the 1970s “the wall was once again an essential part of Chinese life.”¹⁵ New work units were organized in direct relation to their enclosure. The wall became a primary feature of urban security; a primary feature of urban partitioning along lines of household residency and unit belonging.

In the 1980s and 1990s a new urban form that centred on controlled, export-oriented manufacturing began to emerge in Special Economic Zones (SEZs): industrial parks. These peri-urban development spaces built in places like the Pearl River Delta were not subject to the same restrictions on private and international ownership as the rest of the nation. Instead, they were linked directly to the norms and markets of the global economy. As the scholar Ting Chen shows, in many cases these new developments were built to follow a logistics-friendly layout with standardized concrete-framed blocks surrounded by grids of broad open streets which encouraged accessibility and internal circulation.¹⁶ Still, as land was divided first by state-owned enterprises and then by private companies different walled formations and hidden infrastructures of utilities and security took form. In some cases, where these infrastructures were shared by enterprises, walls and streets remained open, but in other cases where private companies and state enterprises took the form of concentrated conglomerates they were turned into a dense grid of dead ends and walled enclaves meant to both keep strangers out and workers in. In many cases, like the *danwei* that preceded them, these massive market-driven private and state-owned enterprises offered housing, canteens, clinics and shops for company workers.

By 2010 huge complexes, such as the paradigmatic Foxconn complex which produces Apple products in Shenzhen, had become their own world of compressed space, consisting of multiple shifts of high-speed production.¹⁷ By building migrant workers' domestic life into the factory space itself factories established a “dormitory labour regime” – a conceptual framing I will return to near the

13 Lu 2005.

14 Piper Rae Gaubatz notes this was not the case everywhere in China, particularly in Han-majority cities at the frontier of the nation. Gaubatz 1996.

15 Lu 2005, 136–137.

16 Chen 2017.

17 Chan, Selden and Pun 2020.

end of this article.¹⁸ This orientation of worker life towards the assembly line puts labour supply “on tap” as a human resource, allowing employers to extend the working day at will in response to “fluctuations in product demand” and as such “functions as a form of coercive control, whereby employers have power not only over employment but also the housing needs of employees.”¹⁹ Due to spatial and economic constraints, in many cases living in factory dormitories is taken to be a basic condition of employment. This condition of employment is given legal force by household registration (*hukou*) laws that prevent migrants from becoming permanent residents of the city. On-site housing not only enhances employers’ ability to recoup wages via rent and food surcharges, it also provides managers with enhanced power to demand mandatory overtime and monitor attempts among workers to organize for labour protections through human and technological surveillance. In many cases work-team leaders are responsible for tightly monitoring worker activity on and off the factory floor. As Pun Ngai shows, managers can literally turn basic provisions such as electricity, water and heat on and off in both the dormitory and factory.²⁰

Infrastructural Power

Michel Foucault has argued that the “enframing” technique of architecture – the way it delimits the possibilities for movement and interaction – is what makes it a political act.²¹ Following Foucault in his analysis of model villages in colonial Egypt, Timothy Mitchell writes that “the architecture of distribution and the art of policing can acquire a hold over individuals not simply by confining them but by opening up and inscribing what is hidden, unknown and inaccessible.”²² In such a way the material experience of the world is given structure and significance; movement is regulated; the environment is controlled. The structures of walls and infrastructures of surveillance open up certain forms of movement while foreclosing others. Surveillance systems can act as invisible walls that sort populations and permitted actions. The threat of penal systems, which surveillance systems both symbolize and support, interpellates people, calling them into what anthropologists of technology refer to as “scripts of action” that function along gendered and ethno-racial guidelines.²³ This is particularly the case in colonial situations, such as colonial Egypt, and, as scholars such as David Tobin have shown, in Xinjiang – where ethno-racial difference is given material expression through architectures of control.²⁴

Taken together this *infrastructural power* – what I take to be materialist reframing of the way biopower is enacted at the scale of populations and disciplinary power is enacted at the scale of the body – produces the dispositions or flows of life that can in some cases be thought of as “on tap” as Smith and Pun put it.²⁵ This flow is produced through an efficient division of labour – slotting individuals into defined roles on the factory floor and in the dormitory, surrounding community and nation.²⁶ The final steps of the system come from a system of production and consumption through labour and rent contracts; and of controlled movement through space through the use of keys, walls and surveillance. In the context of advanced infrastructural systems in Xinjiang, the bio-power and disciplinary power is combined in what Mark Poster refers to as a “super-panoptic”

18 Smith and Pun 2006.

19 Ibid., 1456.

20 Pun 2005.

21 Foucault 2009.

22 Mitchell 1988, 46

23 Bray 2007

24 Tobin 2019. For an in-depth discussion of Xinjiang as an internal settler colony *and* capitalist frontier see Millward 2021 and Byler 2022.

25 See Foucault 2009; Smith and Pun 2006.

26 Mann 1984.

effect.²⁷ Instead of merely the analogue threat of an invisible guard in a guard tower or even a guard watching a closed-circuit camera – as is typified by Foucault’s model of disciplinary power, in a super-panoptic system the tools of real-time “dataveillance” and algorithmic assessment assess patterns in behaviour and sort populations on watchlists in real time, radically extending the power of those who design and monitor the infrastructural systems. Importantly for the purposes of this article, for former detainees such tools extend carceral logics into industrial parks.

As the geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore shows in her study of spaces of capital and control in California, prisons are spaces that collect and harness surpluses of state power, capital and populations.²⁸ The judicial and built systems of these spaces legitimate the authority of the state as the protector of the majority, providing an avenue for a legitimated exercise of power. They provide industrial support through construction, cheap prison labour and prison guard jobs to the communities that surround them. Finally, and most importantly, they are used to warehouse disfavoured ethno-racial populations, particularly men, thereby subordinating those populations to the state and the favoured majority and diminishing the vitality of their social reproduction. This “prison fix,” as she refers to it, moulds “surplus finance capital, land, and labour into the workfare-warfare state,” centring it around “containment of crime,” figured as a vaguely defined, abstract social imperative.²⁹ While she is referring to the racialized surpluses that resulted from 1980s deindustrialization in California, rather than the bodies of unwanted ethno-racialized populations who are deemed unproductive due to their attachment to their ancestral lands and ways of life as in Xinjiang, I contend that in both locations the logics of a carceral fix to the contradictions of capital and state power hold. The crisis of surplus, whether as an aspect of a war on crime or drugs, or a war on separatism or terrorism, produces its own solution in a domestic militarism “concretely recapitulated in the landscapes of depopulated urban communities and rural prison towns.”³⁰ While the camp fix uses a different legal and work regime, emerges from a different national history, draws on more overtly authoritarian statecraft and utilizes advanced technologies to further elaborate intricate and more flexible forms of control, the prison fix and camp fix share a similar basic function of using ethno-racialized carceral infrastructure to fix broader political and economic issues. As Ching Kwan Lee has shown, since the worldwide recession of 2007 the Chinese developmental state has accumulated significant surplus capacities in a wide range of sectors.³¹ When the domestic market for real estate, energy and other products is saturated due to overaccumulation, profit rates are falling and labour costs are rising, provincial authorities, ministries, state-owned enterprises and private companies all have an interest in lobbying the central government to promote new forms of investment. With the re-education campaign in north-west China, Chinese authorities and private industrialists have used the political space of an interlinked camp and factory system to produce a “camp fix” at a frontier of the nation.

A “Carrier” of the Economy

Since 2017, factories have flocked to Xinjiang to take advantage of the newly built industrial parks of the re-education camp system and the cheap labour and subsidies that accompany them. In fact, in late 2018 the primary development ministry for the region circulated a statement that the camps, or “vocational skills education and training centres” (*jiaoyu peixun zhongxin* 教育培训中心), had become a “carrier” of economic stability. Because of this camp fix – both a political response to the perceived threat of Uyghur difference, and a material instantiation of surplus fixed-capital

27 Poster 2018.

28 Wilson Gilmore 2007.

29 Ibid., 85.

30 Ibid., 86.

31 Lee 2017.

investment – Xinjiang has attracted “significant investment and construction from coast-based Chinese companies.”³² This is particularly the case in Chinese textile- and garment-related industries, since China sources more than 80 per cent of its cotton in Xinjiang.³³ In an effort motivated at least in part by rising labour costs among Han migrant workers on the east coast, by 2023 the state plans to move over 1 million textile and garment industry jobs to the region.³⁴ If they succeed, it will mean that as many as one in every eleven textile and garment industry jobs in China will be in Xinjiang.³⁵ The camp fix, it appears, is meant to address the structural antagonism produced by a resource extraction economy that has pushed Uyghurs off their lands and rendered their labour surplus. It is also a response to the demands created by rising labour costs in eastern China, which have risen by 5 to 10 per cent each year since 2001.³⁶ These costs, along with the rising costs of eastern-China factory real estate and energy and the subject population of Muslim workers, create the economic conditions for the Xinjiang camp fix as a lucrative site for a kind of internal offshoring.

There are two primary tracks through which Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims are involuntarily assigned to work in the camp-associated factories that form the central focus of this article. First, many detainees in camps are placed by local authorities in factories inside or adjacent to camps. Second, some new industrial parks host a mix of detainees, like Erzhan, and “rural surplus labourers” who are not former detainees.³⁷ This mix of former detainees and non-detainees are often assigned to these positions through contractual agreements facilitated by authorities in the worker’s place of household registration, camp management and factory managers. As a document from the development and reform commission of Xinjiang mandates, local authorities across the region are to “establish a development-mechanism linkage between the industrial management of rural collective economic organizations and *the industry of education and training centres*” – the euphemism used for re-education camps and associated factories.³⁸ Though total numbers of workers funnelled through this “development mechanism linkage” – a direct description of what I term the camp fix – have not been made publicly available, given the overall scope of detentions and camp-associated factory construction it is clear that the number of detainee-workers affected by this programme number in the hundreds of thousands, a number that expands dramatically if extended to non-detainee labour.³⁹ In both tracks, Turkic Muslim detainees are forcibly assigned to these positions. Refusing to work could result in their detention. As documents used by state security workers note, refusing “poverty alleviation” (*fupin* 扶贫) schemes, a euphemism often used for assigned factory work, is regarded as a sign of untrustworthiness and religious extremism.⁴⁰

32 Xinjiang Development and Reform Commission 2018.

33 “Provincial data shows China’s shifting agricultural trends,” *Gro Intelligence*, 6 March 2019, <https://gro-intelligence.com/insights/articles/provincial-data-shows-chinas-shifting-agricultural-trends#Cotton>.

34 Dominique Patton, “Xinjiang cotton at crossroads of China’s new Silk Road,” *Reuters*, 12 January 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-xinjiang-cotton-insight-idUSKCN0UQ00320160112>.

35 International Labor Organization 2014.

36 Krystal Hu, “Offshoring goes full circle: Chinese firms shipping out,” *CKGSB Knowledge*, 6 September 2017, <https://english.ckgsb.edu.cn/knowledges/offshoring-full-circle-chinese-firms/>.

37 There is yet another track of unfree labour and factories that falls outside the scope of this study. These are the workers and factories that employ Uyghur and Kazakh surplus labourers, but do not employ former detainees. My research shows that factories that employ former detainees, or a mix of former detainees and non-detainees, are typically more securitized than factories that solely employ assigned surplus workers and do not employ detainees. Although non-detainee workers too are forced or coerced into work in dormitory and factory compounds, this study does not seek to address the intermedial labour regime – between the dormitory labour regime and the re-education labour regime – of those who have been assigned to work in non-camp factories in Xinjiang and other parts of country.

38 Yuan 2019, emphasis added.

39 For region-wide estimates of numbers of people assigned to forms of unfree work, though primarily focused on non-detainee labour see Xu et al. 2020 and Zenz 2021.

40 United Front Work Department of Xinjiang 2014; “Çin’in yeni planlarının yazılı emri ifşa oldu” (Written order of China’s new plans revealed), *Turkistan Press*, 23 July 2018, <http://turkistanpress.com/page/cin-39-in-yeni-planlarinin-yazili-emri-ifsa-oldu/247>.

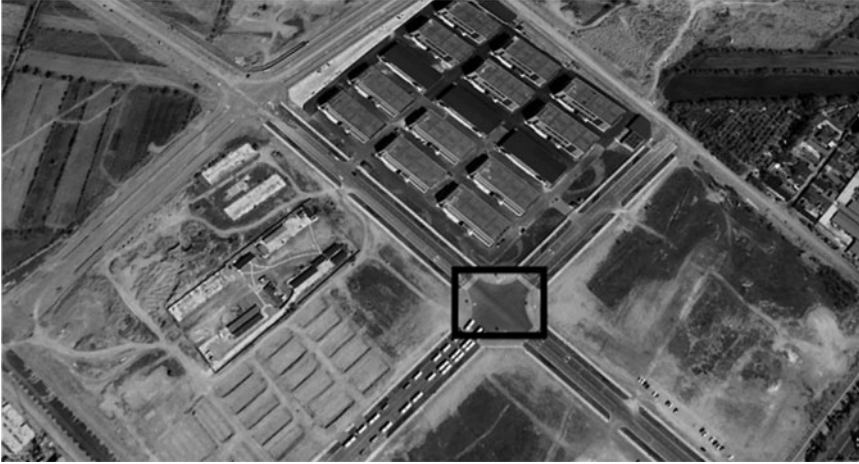


Figure 1. A Satellite Image of the Industrial Park Where Erzhan Was Assigned to Work on the Outskirts of Gulja
 Notes: Note the transportation buses which ferry detainee-workers to the industrial park from walled dormitories.

The glove factory where Erzhan was sent appeared to have a mix of both “track one” and “track two” involuntary workers. Many, like Erzhan, arrived in the factory after briefly being released from labour camps. Yet, according to a state report, it appears as though more than 1,800 others were sent to work in the industrial park in mid-2017 (see Figures 1 and 2), long before the first detainees were transferred from the camps.⁴¹ These early arrivals were likely track two underemployed rural workers who were determined to be part of the “normal” population, rather than “untrustworthy” extremists.

Several months before Erzhan arrived at the glove factory, another Kazakh detainee was also transferred from a nearby re-education camp to work at the factory. Before arriving, Gulzira Auelkhan, a 39-year-old mother of two, had endured 15 months of horrific abuse in crowded cells with anywhere from 18 to 60 other detainees, most of whom were Uyghur.⁴² In interviews I conducted with her in Kazakhstan in 2020, Gulzira told me that detainees in her cell were at times shocked with electric batons or struck with wooden clubs if they used the toilet for longer than two minutes. The blows often fell on their heads; detainees were given hair dye for their closely cropped hair in order to mask some of the visible bruising before higher level officials visited the camp.⁴³ They were told to smile during the inspections. As a classified 2017 directive from the former deputy Party secretary of Xinjiang, Zhu Hailun 朱海仑, makes clear, detainees are to be transferred into assigned factory work at the industrial parks only if they are able to demonstrate rigid forms of self-discipline.⁴⁴

In my interviews with her, Gulzira said that like Erzhan when she was released from the camp she thought she might be given greater freedom. But within several days a local village leader appeared with a document saying that she must report for work at the glove factory. When she arrived at the factory, she was told that as a trainee she would be paid 600 yuan per month, less

41 Zero Distance Yining County 2017.

42 See Gulzira’s entry in the Xinjiang Victims Database here: <https://shahit.biz/eng/viewentry.php?entryno=1723>.

43 For evidence of consistency in Gulzira’s account see Erkin Azat, “Gulzira Auelkhan’s records in a Chinese concentration camp: ‘I worry about the lives of those eight who have not signed a contract in the factory,’” *Medium*, 4 March 2019, <https://medium.com/@erkinazat2018/gulzira-aelkhan-s-records-in-a-chinese-concentration-camp-i-worry-about-the-lives-of-those-c18a2038a5a2>.

44 The translated directive can be found here: <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6558510-China-Cables-Telegram-English.html#text/p1>.



Figure 2. On 15 August 2017, 1,805 “Surplus” Minority Herders and Farmers Entered the New Industrial Park and “Put on Leather Shoes” to Become Industrial Workers

Notes: Image location in area of black box pictured in [Figure 1](#).

than half the minimum wage, for the first three months. She would also be paid a small amount, around one yuan per pair of gloves according to her “efficiency.” She said, “the most skilled worker could sew 60 pairs a day. I tried my best, but I could only sew 13 pairs.”⁴⁵ Since she did not have good eyesight, she found that it was impossible for her to improve her production levels.

Another former detainee-worker I interviewed, Dina Nurdybai, described a similar system of underpayment. While initially she was told she would be paid close to the minimum wage of 1,800 yuan per month, she later learned that like Gulzira and Erzhan much of her salary would be garnished due to the living costs which were covered by the garment factory. In the end she received only an average of nine yuan per month. Other former detainees described similar systems of underpayment or non-payment for work. The former detainee and worker Erbaqyt Otarbai told me that in the textile factory where he was put to work there was never discussion of payment. Instead, the factory, which in this case was inside a re-education camp enclosure, was framed as a workhouse for the able-bodied poor. The provisioning of room and board was payment enough. The workers were instructed to tell officials and journalists who inspected the factory that they had come to the factory voluntarily.

Dina Nurdybai also told me that at the factory where she was assigned first as a worker, and later as detainee supervisor, was divided into locked cubicles. The other workers, most of whom she recognized as former detainees, had to ask permission to use locked bathrooms. They worked in front of cameras, and were also subjected to body checks several times per day. Unlike in Gulzira’s and Erzhan’s cases, the workers were provided cellular phones that they were required to carry at all times. “We couldn’t have a real phone,” Dina said. “We could not use the phones to talk. They were just for the government to track us.” The phones meant that there were fewer checkpoints, but they knew they were not free to leave. The factory complex functioned as a type of enclosed company town: “Everything in our lives was inside the complex, the factory, the kindergarten, the cafeteria, the store, everything was there. In this camp women who had small children were allowed to stay together with them at night. Some also had husbands. It was better than the other camp, but still we were not free.” In her view, the camp workers who came with them to the factory and the managers, treated them as though they were criminals. “They told us over and over that ‘you have no rights otherwise you wouldn’t be here.’” In her view, this was why they locked

⁴⁵ Vanderklippe 2019.

them inside rooms on the factory floor and controlled their movement. “It was because they were afraid, and because they thought we did not deserve to be free. It was easier for them this way.”⁴⁶

Although there was less security in the factory than the camp, in all of my interviews, former detainees reported that they were not allowed to leave the factory and dormitory complex where they had been assigned. Gulzira reported that she observed that no one tried to escape or enter the facility without permission. Since they were only in the factory during the day, and they were never without human and video surveillance they felt they were never out of sight of factory managers or surveillance cameras. Furthermore, she said, “After being in a camp, your ID card would ring whenever you went through checkpoint and they’d take you to the police station to be interrogated, making it impossible to be free.”⁴⁷ Life at the factory was better than life in the camp cells, but she understood that in the new space she was being asked to prove that she had been truly re-educated and had become an industrial worker.

In addition to the infrastructure-enforced discipline of the factory and industrial park, the structures of material walls continued to be a part of her life. Every night after work she and other detainees were taken by buses to a makeshift dormitory around three kilometres away. Inside the blue-roofed buildings, which had been inspected to the approval of Party Secretary Pan Daojin several months before the detainees were transferred to the factory, detainees were permitted to walk around, but they were not permitted to leave the premises. Gulzira told me that workers were given political ideology texts to read and recite in the factory at times before work and at the end of the day. They also received Chinese language and ideology training over 45-minute-to-one-hour periods in the dormitory after their shifts. In both the factory and dormitory, they were watched by state officials at all times.⁴⁸ In many cases, the low-level guards that rotated through the factory and dormitory were the same workers she had met in the camp in the previous year. The guards determined where and when workers could move within the compound. They turned the lights off at the end of the day and turned them on the next morning. Space for conversation and contemplation – periods that might be referred to as “free time” – were limited to less than one hour at the end of the day. There were checkpoints at the entrance of the dormitory and factory. Worker IDs and faces were scanned multiple times per day.

In my interviews with her, Gulzira said, “We would have our bodies and phones checked when we arrived, in the middle of the day. When we were leaving for the dormitory at the end of the day they would check again, because they were worried we might take a needle or something. After we got to know (the police contractors) we asked, ‘why are you still here watching us?’” She said she knew that the answer to this question was that they were monitoring whether or not they were acting like submissive “re-educated” industrial workers. What this implies is that Muslims like Gulzira and Erzhan must adopt proletarian or industrial-worker behaviour and basic “achieved quality” (*suzhi* 素质) – a type of cultivated social capital that is used throughout the Chinese education system and broader marketplace to describe valued forms of production and consumption – even while they were excluded from the limited freedoms Han migrant workers enjoy.⁴⁹

Both Erzhan and Gulzira were permitted to visit their families for several hours during one day on the weekend. A company bus would ferry them back and forth from the dormitory to their home

46 Emerging research suggests that Uyghur and Kazakh farmers who are assigned to work in factories in Xinjiang and across the country as part of the second track of non-detainee labour, are often not as tightly associated with criminality as the former detainees I interviewed. Those placed in “general” and “secure” categories for job placements are typically sent to regional centres in Xinjiang and eastern China respectively. Those who fall into a “controlled” category – the subject of this article – are typically sent to “training” and more tightly managed Xinjiang factories. See Murphy and Elimä 2021, 12; Qapqal County Social Security Bureau 2018.

47 Vanderklippe 2019.

48 For consistency in Gulzira’s account see reporting by Vanderklippe. Ibid.

49 For an extended discussion of “quality” evaluation in frontier spaces see Byler 2022 and Yeh 2013. See Anagnost 2004 for its conceptualization in Chinese economy.

villages. A month into their “training,” however, they found out that these trips were quite costly. Bosses at the factory, such as General Manager Wang, told them that because of the expense of the shuttle service and their food expenses their 600-yuan salary (approximately US\$100, one-third of the state-mandated minimum wage in the region of 1,800 yuan) would be slashed in half. Erzhan later recalled, “I worked on a production line for 53 days, earning 300 yuan in total.” As a government document from 2018 shows, in Kashgar prefecture 100,000 detainees were scheduled to move to work in newly built industrial parks and satellite factories.⁵⁰ Other prefectures are aiming for similar numbers. In Kashgar, the document explained, for each detainee that was put to work the factory owners would receive 5,000 yuan dispersed over three years. These subsidies, which roughly translate to a food subsidy given to camps to feed detainees, were likely put in place to prevent the type of wage garnishment that Erzhan and Gulzira experienced.

During her time in the factory, Gulzira secretly sent an image of the factory floor to her husband in Kazakhstan. Later she warned him that she was being forced to sign a contract or risk being sent back to the camp. During a routine scan the image and message were discovered. Gulzira told me that she was immediately detained. This time she was strapped into an interrogation chair for many hours and then held in isolation. However, unbeknownst to her, in Kazakhstan, her husband had also spotted her in a propaganda video for the factory.⁵¹ Her husband immediately began to petition Kazakhstani authorities to pressure Chinese authorities to have her released. Several weeks later, after signing documents saying she would never speak about what she experienced, she was allowed to return to Kazakhstan.

Implications of Re-education Industrial Parks

As Jennifer Pan has shown, since the early 2000s Chinese state authorities have embarked on a widespread plan to engage targeted populations ranging from religious and ethnic minorities to former prisoners and protestors with what she terms “repressive assistance.”⁵² What began as a welfare campaign to address poverty among historically marginalized populations was transformed into a programme of surveillance and control through a mechanism of authoritarian statecraft she refers to as “seepage.” This process describes the way state power begins to shape the effects of seemingly unrelated programmes and infrastructures. The paradigmatic example of this approach is the way poverty alleviation programmes – which often do offer real aid – simultaneously extract data from targeted groups and foster state dependence, while pulling them into relationships of obligation. As Emily Yeh has demonstrated, in Tibet “the gift” of economic development is used to establish a new frontier of capitalism.⁵³ This process in effect however produces a kind of “disempowered development,” because although some poverty is alleviated and new infrastructures are built, in general the process nevertheless increases the political disempowerment and relative poverty of Tibetans.⁵⁴ This is because the poverty alleviation programmes are premised on the role of Han settlement in Tibetan areas and a Han-centred financial infrastructure and logistics system. In the end the rising cost of living and displacement that is caused by infrastructure and industrial development, largely benefits the newcomers, while at the same time systems of surveillance and control have increased in the Tibetans’ own homeland.

50 “Guanyu yinfa ‘Kashen diqu kunnan qunti jiuye peixun gongzuo shishi fang’an’ de tongzhi” (Notice on issuing the “Implementation Plan for Employment Training for Disadvantaged Groups in Kashgar”), Kashgar Regional Office, 10 August 2018, web.archive.org/web/20181204024839/http://kashi.gov.cn/Government/PublicInfoShow.aspx?ID=2963.

51 Rebecca Wright, Ivan Watson and Isaac Yee, “Black gold: how global demand for hair products is linked to forced labor in Xinjiang,” CNN, 10 October 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2020/10/asia/black-gold-hair-products-forced-labor-xinjiang/>.

52 Pan 2020.

53 Yeh 2013.

54 Fischer 2013.

Writing in a similar vein, Rune Steenberg and Alessandro Rippa show that a similar pattern has developed in southern Xinjiang – where “Aid Xinjiang” poverty-alleviation programmes have provided investment opportunities for paired assistance with other Chinese cities and provinces such as Shenzhen in Kashgar and, as in the glove factory where Erzhan and Gulzira worked in Ghulja, Jiangsu.⁵⁵ They show that since 2014 and the beginning of the “people’s war on terror,” the re-education campaign has seeped into poverty alleviations programmes resulting in hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs and Kazakhs being interred in re-education training centres or camps like that to which Erzhan and Gulzira were taken. As I have shown elsewhere, in the context of Xinjiang, an army of over 1 million mostly Han civil servant “volunteers” were asked to serve as “relatives” of targeted families – particularly families who had a family member in the camps or prisons.⁵⁶ These relatives were tasked with monitoring the families – many of whom were now missing a father or husband due to extra-legal detention, by living with them as uninvited guests in their homes, and also finding ways to alleviate their poverty. In this case, poverty alleviation is shaped not simply by economic logics and desires for control over dissident citizens, instead Han “older brothers and sisters” are attempting to replace subordinated Turkic Muslim identities with Han cultural values and state ideologies through banal processes of re-education. At the same time, since these processes are marked by an ethno-racialization that prevents Uyghurs and Kazakhs from fully assimilating, and because, as in Tibet, the financial system is concentrated around Han-centric logics, Muslims are slotted into a disempowered, unfree and perpetually underclass position. In their “poverty alleviation” work, the Han “volunteers” along with local officials are tasked with deciding not only which Uyghur and Kazakh residents should be sent to camps, but also what should be done with them when they have “graduated” and what jobs should be assigned to other community members who were deemed part of the “surplus work force” – a euphemism for able-bodied, ethno-racialized, subsistence farmers who can be pressed into low-wage or at times unpaid jobs. The “volunteers,” officials and factory owners coordinate the organization and assignation of batches of detainees and Kazakh and Uyghur farmers to be transferred to the dormitories and factories that are often far from worker homes.

The logics of this system of expropriation – a form of state-authorized economic theft of labour that operates outside of freely agreed-upon contract law to which non-Muslim citizens, even rural-to-urban Han migrants, are entitled – are perpetuated by a system of structures and infrastructures. It is in the built environment of the new industrial parks that we see the technologies of disempowered development brought into confluence with the technologies of the “dormitory labour regime” which was used in eastern China to facilitate easy exploitation of Han migrant workers. While in eastern China the household registration system prevented migrant workers from becoming an urban proletarian class for themselves, in Xinjiang a strongly coercive involuntary camp and factory system puts the tools of the dormitory labour regime into relationship with the infrastructure of camp walls and the grids of ID and phone checks.⁵⁷ It is for these reasons that the industrial parks in north-west China occupy a liminal space between re-education camps and the private industry of the dormitory labour regime, between the partial proletarianization of freely chosen migrant labour and the unfree labour camp.

As a result, the dormitory labour regime in re-education industrial parks comes to resemble South Africa’s quintessential spatial fix of Apartheid unfree labour – the mine compound.⁵⁸ Workers are not gendered in the same way – female Kazakh and Uyghur workers often appear to be preferred – and workers are put to work in low-skill manufacturing rather than dangerous manual labour as in the South African Apartheid context. Yet the placement of workers in

55 Steenberg and Rippa 2019.

56 Byler 2018.

57 Pun 2016.

58 Burawoy 1985.

accommodation near the site of production and within the sight and control of company managers who have been deputized as state proxies resembles the ethno-racialized immobilization of Apartheid more than the class- and household-registration-based exploitation experienced by Han migrants in eastern China. However, there are some features that make Xinjiang re-education industrial parks unique relative to both of these contexts. In South Africa, white settlers and their descendants were largely uninterested in imposing a European identity on native inhabitants. In Xinjiang the resulting re-education labour regime is premised on the proletarianization of Uyghurs and Kazakhs as a loyal, docile and permanent underclass carried out primarily by Han citizens under the direction of a party-state that is an emerging world power. Working under the mandate of an internment camp system *and* one of the most sophisticated surveillance systems in the world, they are also tasked with training Uyghur and Kazakhs to replace their ancestral traditions with “secular” or majoritarian Han values which are taken to be Chinese.⁵⁹

In north-west China state documents note over and over again that the new industrial parks are being built to teach what is taken to be an unmarked and universalized basic “achieved quality” to Uyghur and Kazakh detainees and other surplus labourers. What is often left unsaid in state-approved documents is the way the documents of the workers in Xinjiang internment factories are confiscated or their IDs are marked as non-passing, placing them under a universalized form of unfreedom. These forms of coerced labour are subsidized and directed by the state, operationalized by a complex web of surveillance and the threatening presence hundreds of internment camps. Unlike in other cases of human trafficking and forced labour elsewhere in the contemporary world, is not a covert or exceptional form of labour exploitation. In these industrial parks it has been mandated and institutionalized by state authorities.

The introduction of state-directed, Han-exclusive corporate power over Uyghur and Kazakh life has the effect of accelerating the alienating effects of factory labour across ethnic and class difference. Alienation, removing individuals from the ownership of their labour as workers and, in this case, from their autonomy as Turkic Muslim individuals, is in fact a primary feature of the re-education industrial park. The priority of re-education infrastructure is assuring the “on tap” delivery of re-educated workers to the park via shuttle buses, and via ongoing tracking of cell phones carried by workers, the locked cubicles in some factories, and the camera systems in all factories that segment and assess worker activities in real time. The human surveillance carried out Han and Muslim re-education supervisors, the surveillance and checkpoint system and the existential threat of the camp holds the workers in place regardless of whether or not walls physically surround them.

In a state-media-produced video from the glove factory a consciousness of re-education shows through. For instance, a Uyghur co-worker of Erzhan’s and Gulzira’s, a man named Mewlanjan Memtimin, said, “Since we now have Han bosses, we make a lot [of gloves], and I am also really improving my use of the national language.”⁶⁰ Mewlanjan’s sentiments reflected the propaganda banners proclaiming ethnic solidarity and social stability that hung throughout the factory spaces. All of the detainees who performed for the video camera spoke in glowing terms about the work in the glove factory. Some mentioned that now they were only being paid 600 yuan, but that later they would receive a base salary of 2,500 yuan. Some even mentioned that because of the piecework incentives there was the possibility of earning even more than that. None of them mentioned how much of their salary was garnished by their employers or that the detention was their only alternative to the work they were doing. And ultimately the full recognition of the “quality” which they are being taught – correlated to normative majoritarian values of industrial productivity, Chinese-language ability and so on – is held in abeyance by their designated difference. Even if they

59 Smith Finley 2019.

60 Ili Television 2018.

work “like a non-Muslim” they are still ultimately slotted into subordinated roles and their labour is devalued even as their work gains “quality.”

Nearly all the gloves that are made by detainees in the satellite factory of Luye Shuozidao Trading Company are sold abroad. On the company’s Alibaba distribution site, they note that the price of their gloves ranges from between US\$1.50 and US\$24.00 per pair depending on the style of the glove and quantity purchased. Some are distributed by the upscale Hong Kong-based boutique Bread n Butter, which has outlets in malls around the world where they likely are sold for far more. In any case, the price at which these gloves are sold is more than, at a minimum, ten times higher than the price workers are paid per pair. In an essay written in adulation of the internment factory complex, a Ghulja county official wrote that when the Turkic Muslim farmers and herders arrived at the factory they “took off their grass shoes, put on leather shoes, and became industrial workers.”⁶¹ The counterfactual imagery of “backward” (*luohou* 落后) minority people being given the “gift” of factory discipline through internment precisely captures the spirit of the “quality”-acquisition process as viewed by Han managers. Over and over in the video produced for state television, the reporter noted that the Turkic Muslim workers did not even pause to look up at the camera during the filming.⁶² The reporter interpreted this as a sign of their excellent work ethic as newly trained “high-quality” workers. Both Erzhan and Gulzira mentioned that their managers emphasized that the gloves they were making were for export so the quality of their sewing had to be very high. The training they were receiving in “quality” had to be reflected in the quality of the gloves they mass produced, even as they were not accorded the payment or worker protections that “high-quality” work portended in other contexts in the nation. Instead, they were simply supposed to be grateful that they were not deemed untrustworthy and detained.

Conclusion

This article has shown that the re-education industrial parks of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region simultaneously proletarianize and ethno-racialize Turkic Muslim former detainees and other “surplus workers.” The structures and infrastructures of industrial parks attempt to produce a constant flow of re-education “quality” from unfree workers, who have been trained in industrial discipline in the camps and by surveillance systems. This “camp fix” for rising labour costs and surpluses of excess capital in eastern China and the violence of Uyghur dispossession and the accompanying war on terror function as a limit case of repressive assistance programmes that target disfavoured populations elsewhere in China. In order to protect their investment in the coerced workers and continue to receive state subsidies for training them, factory managers act as proxies for the state – simultaneously building state power while extending frontiers of global capitalism.

It is here, at the limit of both Chinese and global politics and economy, that the article’s examination of infrastructures of re-education intervenes in scholarship on dominant modes of production and evaluation in China – particularly discussions of the dormitory labour regime and “achieved quality” in such work – showing how they can be weaponized in frontier locations as part of a so-called war on terror. Muslim detainee-workers embody a form of exploitation a step beyond the already extreme forms of exploitation that has confronted non-Muslim migrant workers in China for decades. No matter how degraded Han migrant workers might be, they are not criminalized detainee-workers as in the re-education labour regime. The Xinjiang “camp fix” intervenes in scholarship on carceral capitalism and state power to show how in the contemporary moment, technology and the exceptional space of a domestic ethno-racialized war extends the logics of the

61 Zero Distance Yining County 2017.

62 Ili Television 2018.

prison factory and the Apartheid “compound labour regime” to enact unfree work under conditions of “smart” infrastructures and the threat of detention.⁶³

In Xinjiang’s re-education labour regime factory managers know they have near unlimited power at their disposal within the domain of the industrial park. Uyghurs and Kazakhs are not permitted to quit or even complain. In the global race to the bottom, the least expense for the highest rates of production, the re-education industrial parks in Xinjiang are as far as labour exploitation can go. Turkic Muslims’ labour rights are denied by a combination of walls, technical surveillance systems, human surveillance and the fortified camps that are often only several kilometres away from the factory spaces. The heavily surveilled dormitories or camps where workers are held ensure that workers recognize themselves as an expendable human resource that is blocked from personal autonomy. At the frontier of the national and global economy, these spaces combine the statecraft of repressive assistance with an ethno-racialized and coercive version of the dormitory labour regime to produce a new re-education labour regime.

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63 Burawoy 1985; Wilson Gilmore 2007.

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