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Starting in 2017, Chinese authorities began establishing a number of 'reeducation camps' in China's northwestern Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region with the purported aim of preventing the proliferation of extremism and terrorism among the local Muslim population—in particular, the Uyghurs. According to the most conservative estimates, hundreds of thousands of people were arbitrarily locked up in these camps. Factories quickly flocked to the area to take advantage of the cheap labour and subsidies offered by the camp system. As this essay argues, the goal of these newly built factories is to transform Kazakhs and Uyghurs into a compliant and productive proletariat without the social welfare afforded to formally recognised rights-bearing workers.

Factories of Turkic Muslim Internment

Darren BYLER¹

On 3 November 2018, Yerzhan Kurman, a middle-aged Kazakh man from a small village fifty kilometres from the city of Ghulja in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, was released from the camp where he had been held for nine months. He thought perhaps now he would be free to return to his former life as a migrant in Kazakhstan. Yet, just a few days later, he was sent to an industrial park in Ghulja City to work in a glove factory. For the next fifty-three days, he experienced life in an internment factory that was built to ‘raise the quality’ (提高素质) of minority workers.

Yerzhan had been detained soon after he came back to China to seek medical treatment for his daughter and care for his ailing mother in early 2018. In a 2019 interview with the German magazine *Die Zeit*, he said:

On the evening of 8 February 2018, they picked me up in a minibus. It was already dark and they put black plastic sacks over our heads and handcuffs on our hands. There were five young men from my village with me on the minibus. The room in which I had to stay for the next nine months was 5 meters by 5 meters and located on the third floor. On the door, a sign said ‘No. 12’. Our floor alone accommodated 260 men. In my room, we were 12. Later I heard that there had been more than 10,000 men detained in our camp.²

Yerzhan was unsure exactly where the camp was located. It may have been the one built in the fields on the outskirts of the city, just seven kilometres from the industrial park where he was later forced to work.

As is often reported by former detainees, conditions in the camp were appalling. Describing the circumstances of his detention, Yerzhan 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 7am, we had to sing the Chinese national anthem and then we had three minutes for breakfast. Afterwards, we learned Chinese until

9pm. Our teachers were Kazakhs or 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.'³

Yerzhan still does not know why he was taken. Like others detained in Ghulja, his internment was likely due to the fact that he possessed a passport and travelled to Kazakhstan—one of twenty-six Muslim-majority countries on a Chinese Government watch list.⁴ Over time, the gruelling routine began to change his mental state. He said: 'The first two months, I thought of my wife Maynur and my three children. Sometime later, I only thought about food.'⁵

About the time Yerzhan was reduced to thinking about his bodily survival, in May 2018, Pan Daojin, the Front Commander and Chinese Communist Party Secretary of Yili Prefecture, arrived to inspect a newly built industrial park on the other side of town.⁶ He came with a delegation from Jiangsu that was tasked with providing industrial 'aid' to Xinjiang. Pan, who is also from Jiangsu, had been appointed to his position in December 2016, just as the mass detentions of the reeducation system began. During the inspection of the new industrial park, he 'fully affirmed the achievements' of the business leaders from Nantong City in Jiangsu who had funded it. The delegation showed off the new factory of the Jiangsu-based Solamoda Garment Group, a company that partners with Forever 21 and other international brands. They also stopped by the highly productive glove factory where Yerzhan would be eventually assigned. This factory was managed by employees of the Luye Shuozi Island Trading Company, a manufacturer based in Baoding City, Hebei Province.

According to the general manager of the glove factory, Wang Xinghua, speaking in a state television interview released in December 2018: 'With the support of the government, we have already *recruited* more than 600 people [emphasis added].'⁷ One of these 600 government 'recruits' was Yerzhan, who had arrived from the camp less than a month before. General manager Wang went on to say that, since the founding of the new factory in 2017: 'We have generated more than US\$6 million 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 has now far surpassed the capacity of its parent factory, which back in Hebei

employed less than 200 people.⁸ Moving manufacturing to Xinjiang made economic sense for the company, which sold 96 percent of its leather gloves across the border in Russia and Eastern Europe.

But there were other reasons exponential growth was so easy. Since 2018, the state has provided subsidies for the building of factories and shipping goods from Xinjiang. Construction of the factories was often funded by local governments in eastern China as part of a ‘pairing assistance’ (配对与援助) program. Up to 4 percent of new factory sales volume was subsidised to cover shipping expenses from the new location.⁹ Most importantly, as in every county in Xinjiang, there was a standing labour reserve of tens of thousands of desperate, traumatised detainees like Yerzhan in nearby camps.

A Carrier of the Economy

Since 2017, factories have flocked to Xinjiang to take advantage of the newly built industrial parks associated with the reeducation camp system and the cheap labour and subsidies that accompany them. In fact, in late 2018, the primary development ministry for the region, the Xinjiang Reform and Development Commission, circulated a statement that the camps or ‘vocational skills education and training centres’ (教育培训中心) had become a ‘carrier’ (载体) of the economy.¹⁰ Because of this system, Xinjiang had attracted ‘significant investment and construction from coast-based Chinese companies.’ Since China sources more than 80 percent of its cotton from Xinjiang, there was a special emphasis placed on textile and garment-related industries.¹¹ In an effort motivated at least in part by rising labour costs among Han migrant workers on the east coast, the Chinese state plans to move more than one million textile and garment industry jobs to the region by 2023.¹² 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.¹³ The 1,500 jobs at the glove factory in Ghulja are part of that number.

Broadly speaking, there are three primary tracks through which Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims are involuntarily assigned to work in the newly built factories as part of the reeducation labour regime. First, many detainees in camps are placed in factories inside or adjacent to the camps; they work inside the same space in which they are held at night. Second, some new industrial parks built in regional centres host a mix of former detainees and ‘rural surplus labourers’ who are not former detainees.

These surplus labourers are chosen from populations of self-employed rural farmers and peri-urban Kazakhs and Uyghurs who previously found contingent work in heritage trades and service industries. In a new carceral instantiation of what Chris Smith and Pun Ngai refer to as the ‘dormitory labour regime’ used to surveil and exploit migrant workers in eastern China, former detainees who join these surplus labourers in the urban industrial parks are often held in locked dormitories at night, as in the case of Yerzhan.¹⁴ Some ‘surplus labourers’—like migrant workers in eastern China—are permitted to return to their own homes at night or to stay in accommodation of their choice in the regional centre. Third, newly built county-level and smaller-scale ‘satellite factories’ (卫星工厂) in rural areas host Uyghur workers near their homes. These worker populations of mainly women with young children are assigned by local village and township-level authorities to work while their children are cared for in daycare facilities; their husbands work in the city or are detained in camps. While there are different levels of coercion in these tracks, all three result in forms of family separation and dependence on the state and private industry proxies for training and discipline in Chinese-speaking environments.

In all cases, Turkic Muslim detainees are forcibly assigned to these positions. As documents used by workers in ‘neighbourhood watch units’ (社区) and ‘village-level work brigades’ (大队) note, refusing to participate in ‘poverty alleviation’ (扶贫) schemes—a widely used euphemism for assigned factory work and other forms of ‘coercive assistance’—is regarded as a sign of untrustworthiness and religious extremism.¹⁵ The grassroots state workers who partner with police and private and state-owned enterprises to implement the campaign are charged with providing employees from populations within their jurisdictions. They often accompany workers to the factories and, at times, act as intermediaries between factory management and the workers. They also enforce discipline on the factory floor and, in some cases, in dormitories. In a radical contravention of the supposed ‘freedom’ associated with market-based contract law, state authorities assume that the only reason a Muslim worker may not want to be separated from their family and work for low wages in a Han-managed factory is because of their aversion to contact with non-Muslims. Forcing Uyghurs and Kazakhs to work in a Chinese-speaking environment can then be framed by state workers and employers as liberating them from their native way of life and traditions. This framing elides the process of state and market dependence that is created by dispossessing Uyghurs and

Kazakhs of what Marx would describe as their own ‘means of production’ and the radical forms of unfreedom that are produced by forced labour in an alien environment.¹⁶

The glove factory where Yerzhan was sent appears to have a mix of both former detainees and involuntarily assigned ‘surplus workers.’ Many, like Yerzhan, arrived in the factory after briefly being released from a camp. Yet, according to a state report, more than 1,800 others were sent to work in the industrial park in mid-2017, long before the first detainees were transferred from the camps.¹⁷ According to Yerzhan and a second worker whom I interviewed, named Gulzira Auelkhan, these early arrivals were ‘track two’ underemployed rural workers who were determined to be part of the ‘normal’ population and assigned to work without first being placed in a camp.

Unfree Labour

Several months before Yerzhan arrived at the glove factory, another Kazakh detainee was also transferred there from a nearby reeducation camp. Before arriving, Gulzira, a thirty-nine-year-old mother of a toddler, whom she left with her husband in Kazakhstan, had spent fifteen months of horrific abuse in crowded cells with eighteen to sixty other detainees, most of whom were Uyghur.¹⁸ Detainees in her cell were repeatedly shocked in the head with electric batons if they used the bathroom for longer than two minutes. Their closely cropped hair masked some of the bruising, and detainees were given dye to darken their hair and scalp before higher-level officials visited the camp.¹⁹ They were told to smile during the inspections.

Due to the relatively low level of her perceived ‘pre-criminal offences’—according to documents supplied to the United Nations by the Chinese Government, many detainees in the camps had not actually committed a crime²⁰—Gulzira had been placed in a camp that had the least amount of security. What had marked her as ‘untrustworthy’ was a previous visit to Kazakhstan and the fact she watched Turkish TV shows in which women wore hijabs. In her section of the camp, there was less of an emphasis on ideological retraining. Instead, the detainees studied Chinese all day, every day. Kazakh and Uyghur languages were not permitted.

Like Yerzhan, when Gulzira was released from the camp, she thought she may 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 plant, she recognised her new boss, general manager Wang. She had seen him several times back in the camp, on tours with camp officials. She surmised that he must have picked her to work in his factory while she was still in the camp. She was told that, as a trainee, she would be paid 600 yuan per month (approximately US\$100)—one-third of the 1,800-yuan state-mandated minimum wage in the region—for the first three months. She would also be paid a small amount, around two jiao (20 Chinese cents), 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.’²¹ Since she did not have good eyesight, she found it impossible to improve her productivity. Speaking to Berlin-based journalist Ben Mauk, she said: ‘In the end, I worked there for a month and a half. It was piecework. I earned one jiao for every glove I finished. All told, I made more than two thousand gloves and earned 220 yuan. So, you see, it was like slavery.’²²

Although there was less security in the factory than the camps, the detainees were not allowed to leave. In an interview in January 2020, months after she had fled across the Chinese border to Kazakhstan, Gulzira spoke of checkpoints at the entrances to the dormitory and factory where her identity card and face were scanned. She said:

We would have our bodies and phones checked when we arrived, and 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 [sewing] needle. After we got to know [the police contractors,] we asked them, ‘Why are you still here watching us?’

While they never replied, she told me she knew the answer to this question was that the security workers were monitoring whether or not they were acting like submissive ‘reeducated’ industrial workers. She noted that, like every other Turkic Muslim she knew, her passport had been confiscated and travel beyond the parameters of their assigned locality—whether it was an industrial park or the relative freedom of a village—was not permitted. In addition, like the majority of assigned workers, she had very little money with which to attempt to pay someone to smuggle her out. Life at the factory was better than life in the camp, but she understood that in this new space she was being asked to prove that she had become a truly reeducated industrial worker.

Outside the discipline of the factory and industrial park, the infrastructure of material walls continued to be a part of her life. Every night after work, she and other detainees were taken by bus to a makeshift dormitory around three kilometres away. There, detainees were permitted to walk around the campus, but they were not permitted to leave the premises. According to reporting by *The Globe and Mail*, the workers 'received readings in the factory before work and, at day's end, 45-minute Chinese lessons in the dormitory, where they were watched at night by an official'.²³

Both Yerzhan 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 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, their 600-yuan salary would be halved. Yerzhan later recalled: 'I worked on a production line for fifty-three days, earning 300 yuan in total.'

Government documents show that, in Kashgar Prefecture in 2018, 100,000 detainees were scheduled to move into and work in the newly built industrial parks and satellite factories.²⁴ Other prefectures aimed for similar numbers. In Kashgar, for each detainee put to work, the factory owners would receive 5,000 yuan dispersed over three years. These subsidies were likely put in place to prevent the type of wage garnishment that Yerzhan and Gulzira experienced. However, since the factories function as an extension of the camp system, operating in a legal grey zone outside civil and human rights, prevention of worker abuse falls on the moral code of people like general manager Wang. As an industrialist acting as a proxy for the carceral state, he knew just as well as Yerzhan or Gulzira that any complaint, any slowdown in production, could result in their replacement with other detainees. He could treat them in any way he wanted.

Social Implications of Reeducation Industrial Parks

Newly built industrial parks in northwestern China occupy a liminal space between 'reeducation' camps and private industry, proletarianisation and coerced labour. State documents note over and over again that the new industrial parks are being built to instil an undefined 'basic quality' (基础素质) in Uyghur and Kazakh detainees and other Muslim surplus labourers. What is often left unsaid in state-approved documents is the

way these factory spaces function as an archipelago of institutions at the periphery of the Chinese social contract—the implicit agreement that a state will protect its citizens in exchange for their loyalty. For Uyghurs and Kazakh Chinese citizens, this social contract has been shattered as what Michel Foucault refers to as the prison archipelago is enlisted in a mode of colonial-capitalist production—a reeducation labour regime—that erodes the vitality of indigenous social reproduction.²⁵ The documents of the workers in Xinjiang internment factories are confiscated or their identification cards are marked as invalid, placing them under a pervasive form of unfreedom. These types of coerced labour are subsidised and directed by the state and operationalised by a complex web of surveillance practices and a logistics system that are bringing the Chinese factory to the Uyghur and Kazakh homelands. All of this material development is authorised by the threatening presence of hundreds of internment camps that signify the power of the state over Turkic Muslim life.

Importantly, the effects of this system are not limited to northwestern China, or even to China itself. Nearly all the gloves that are made by detainees in the satellite factory of the Luye Shuozi Island Trading Company are sold abroad. On the company's Alibaba distribution site, they note that the prices of their gloves range from US\$1.50 to US\$24 per pair depending on the style and quantity purchased. Some are distributed by the up-scale 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 exponentially higher than the price workers are paid per pair. This system of expropriation—a type of state-authorized theft—is justified by the rhetoric of charity, of 'aiding Xinjiang' (援疆) with the gift of the cultural capital provided by knowledge of the Chinese language, or framed as Han factory owners helping detainees cultivate the 'quality' (素质) needed to be disciplined industrial workers.²⁶

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.'²⁷ The counterfactual imagery of 'backward' (落后) minority people who wore primitive 'grass' (草) shoes being given the gift of factory discipline through internment precisely captures the spirit of the 'quality' acquisition process as seen by state workers and contractors. In a regional state media video valorising the implementation of a coercive job program, the reporter repeatedly

noted that the Turkic Muslim workers did not even pause to look up at the camera during the filming.²⁸ The reporter interpreted this as a sign of their excellent work ethic as newly trained ‘high-quality’ workers. This discourse was also instilled by management. Both Yerzhan and Gulzira mentioned that their managers emphasised that they were making gloves for export, so the quality of their sewing had to be very high. The training they were receiving in ‘human quality’ would be reflected in the quality of the gloves they mass produced.

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 differences. Alienation—removing the individual from the ownership of their labour as workers and, in this case, from their autonomy as Turkic Muslim individuals—is a primary feature of the reeducation factory. The goal of the reeducation industrial parks is to turn Kazakhs and Uyghurs into a deeply controlled proletariat, a new docile yet productive lumpen class—those without the social welfare afforded to the formally recognised rights-bearing working class. By turning a population of people regarded as not deserving of legal protections into a permanent underclass, state authorities and private industrialists hope they will extend the market expansion of the Chinese textile and garment industry. They are building a colonial frontier in capitalist accumulation—a process that is simultaneously a new iteration of racialised capitalism and contemporary settler-colonialism.²⁹ This system of controlled labour is ‘carried’ (载体) by a massive reeducation system, a mechanism of infrastructural state power that ensures that this new class of interned labourers cannot rise up as a class for themselves. In fact, because of this extralegal system, the only thing that protects Turkic Muslim workers from expropriation and violence is the goodwill of their Han managers. As indicated by the payment scheme at the glove factory, worker protections often appear as a form of ‘investment’ in the quality of Turkic workers even while worker wellbeing and indigenous social relationships are viewed as valueless.

At the Limit of Global Capitalism

Since the factories function as an extension of the camp system, outside the rule of law and at the margin of the social contract, factory managers can treat Uyghur and Kazakh workers as disposable. In December 2018, managers at the factory threatened Gulzira with being sent back to the

camp if she did not sign a one-year work contract.³⁰ It was only because her husband in Kazakhstan began a campaign for her release—after she managed to text images of the factory to him and he spotted her in a state video promoting the industrial park—that local authorities reluctantly agreed to allow her to return to her family on the other side of the border. They were attempting to silence challenges to the ‘aid Xinjiang’ narrative.³¹ Yet, when these attempts failed, they cut their losses and let her go.

There is a nearly limitless standing reserve of other detainees who do not have advocates for them outside China. The archipelago of the reeducation labour regime continues out of sight, a ghostly presence at the end of global supply chains. In the race to the bottom—the least cost for the greatest productivity—the reeducation factory in Ghulja is at the limit of contemporary global capitalism.