

The architecture of repression

Unpacking Xinjiang's governance

Vicky Xiuzhong Xu, James Leibold and Daria Impiombato



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What's the problem?

Since the mass internment of Uyghurs and other indigenous groups¹ in China was first reported in 2017, there is now a rich body of literature documenting recent human rights abuses in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.² However, there is little knowledge of the actual perpetrators inside China's vast and opaque party-state system, and responsibility is often broadly attributed to the Chinese Communist Party,³ Xinjiang Party Secretary Chen Quanguo,⁴ or President Xi Jinping himself.⁵

For accountability, it is necessary to investigate how China's campaign against the Uyghurs has been implemented and which offices and individuals have played a leading part. The current knowledge gap has exposed international companies and organisations to inadvertent engagement with Chinese officials who have facilitated the atrocities in Xinjiang. It has also prevented foreign governments from making targeted policy responses.

Finally, it is essential to carry out such an investigation now. Amid debate internationally about whether the recent events in Xinjiang constitute genocide,⁶ Chinese officials are actively scrubbing relevant evidence and seeking to silence those who speak out.⁷

Figure 1: A 'resist infiltration, snatch the two-faced' mass oath for school teachers in Hotan Prefecture in 2017. Many women are visibly crying.



Source: 'Ten thousand teachers in Hotan Prefecture take part in 'speak up and brandish the sword' mass oath in Keriye County' [和田地区万名教师集体发声亮剑宣讲宣誓大会在于田举行], Keriye County official WeChat account [于田零距离], 16 June 2017, [online](#).



What's the solution?

This project maps and analyses the governance mechanisms employed by the Chinese party-state in Xinjiang from 2014 to 2021 within the context of the region's ongoing human rights crisis. To that end, the authors have located and scrutinised thousands of Chinese-language sources,⁸ including leaked police records⁹ and government budget documents never before published. This archive of sources is made publicly available for the use of others.

For policymakers, this report will provide an evidence base to inform policy responses including possible sanctions. For the general public and anyone whose interests are linked to Xinjiang and China more broadly, this project can inform risk analysis and ethical considerations.

Finally, a detailed understanding of Xinjiang's governance structures and processes and their relationship to wider national policies can contribute to a more concrete understanding of the Chinese party-state and its volatility.

Figure 2: American brand Nike was implicated in Xinjiang's coercive labour transfer schemes. Uyghurs transferred from Xinjiang receive Chinese language and indoctrination classes at Nike's contractor Taekwang factory in Qingdao, Shandong, around June 2019.



Source: 'Municipal United Front Work Department conducts Mandarin training at Qingdao Taekwang "Pomegranate Seed" Night School' [市委统战部'石榴籽'夜校走进青岛泰光举办普通话培训班], Laixi United Front official WeChat account [莱西统一战线], 1 July 2019, [online](#).

Executive summary

The project consists of two parts.

- An interactive [organisational chart](#) of some 170 administrative entities that have participated in Xinjiang's governance since 2014. The chart includes a brief profile of each party, government, military, paramilitary and hybrid entity at different bureaucratic layers, and more.¹⁰
- This report, which highlights the governance techniques and bureaucratic structures that have operationalised the Chinese party-state's most recent campaigns against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

The report is structured as follows.

Section 1: Background

This section is an introduction to the 2014 Counterterrorism Campaign and the 2017 Re-education Campaign in Xinjiang, which represent a top-down response to the perceived radicalisation of Uyghur society and a systematic effort to transform Xinjiang and its indigenous inhabitants.

Section 2: The return of mass campaigns

The crackdown against the Uyghurs has a striking resemblance to Mao-era political campaigns. ASPI can reveal that, in addition to mass internment and coercive labour assignments, Xinjiang residents are also compelled to participate in acts of political theatre, such as mass show trials, public denunciation sessions, loyalty pledges, sermon-like 'propaganda lectures', and chants for Xi Jinping's good health. In doing so, they're mobilised to attack shadowy enemies hiding among the people: the so-called 'three evil forces' and 'two-faced people'.

Despite widespread recognition that mass political campaigns are 'costly and burdensome', in the words of Xi Jinping, the party-state has again resorted to them in Xinjiang. This section analyses the party-state's reflexive compulsion for campaigns, and *campaign-style governance*, which is an intrinsic feature of the Chinese political system that's often overlooked in the current English-language literature.

Section 3: Hegemony at the grassroots

ASPI researchers have gained rare and in-depth insights into Xinjiang's local governance after analysing thousands of pages of leaked police files. This section focuses on the case of one Uyghur family in Ürümqi. Like at least 1.8 million other Uyghurs, Anayit Abliz, then 18, was caught using a file-sharing app in 2017. He was interned in a re-education camp and eventually 'sentenced' by his Neighbourhood Committee—a nominally service-oriented voluntary organisation responsible for local party control. While he was detained, officials from the Neighbourhood Committee visited his family members six times in a single week, scrutinizing the family's behaviours and observing whether they were emotionally stable.



Draconian control measures are typical of mass political campaigns, including those in Xinjiang. During the crackdown against the Uyghurs, authorities implemented five key policies (including the ‘Trinity’ mechanism, which is first reported by ASPI here) that led to the unprecedented penetration of the party-state system into the daily lives of Xinjiang residents. Those policies gave Xinjiang’s neighbourhood and village officials exceptional power to police residents’ movements and emotions, resulting in the disturbing situation in which a Uyghur teenager’s social media posts about finding life hopeless were deemed a threat to stability and triggered police action.

Xinjiang’s community-based control mechanisms are part of a national push to enhance *grassroots governance*, which seeks to mobilise the masses to help stamp out dissent and instability and to increase the party’s domination in the lowest reaches of society.

Section 4: The party’s knife handle

Many Uyghurs become suspects after being flagged by the Integrated Joint Operations Platform (IJOP), which is a ‘system of systems’ where officials communicate and millions of investigations are assigned for local follow-up.

ASPI can reveal that the IJOP¹¹ is managed by Xinjiang’s Political and Legal Affairs Commission (PLAC) through a powerful new organ called the Counterterrorism and Stability Maintenance Command,¹² which is a product of the Re-education Campaign. One source states that a local branch of the command monitors the re-education camps remotely.

The PLAC is a party organ that oversees China’s law-and-order system, which is responsible for Xinjiang’s mass detention system. The PLAC’s influence tends to grow during times of mass campaigns, and the budget and responsibilities of the Xinjiang PLAC have expanded significantly in recent years—despite efforts by Xi Jinping to abate its status nationally. Two other factors may have contributed to the PLAC’s predominance in Xinjiang: its control over powerful surveillance technologies employed during the two campaigns, and a 2010 governance model in Ürümqi called ‘the big PLAC’, which was masterminded by Zhu Hailun, who is considered by some to be the architect of the re-education camp system.

Section 5: Weaponising the law

Law enforcement in Xinjiang is hasty, harsh and frequently arbitrary. Senior officials have promulgated new laws and regulations that contradict existing ones in order to accomplish the goals and targets of the campaigns; on the ground, local officers openly boast about acting outside normal legal processes, and their voices are sometimes amplified by state media. ASPI has found evidence that some neighbourhood officials in Ürümqi threatened to detain whole families in an attempt to forcefully evict them from the area.

Many Uyghurs have been detained for cultural or religious expressions, but police records reveal that low-level officials have also interned Xinjiang residents for appearing to be ‘dissatisfied with society’ or lacking a fixed address or stable income. In one case, Uyghur man Ekrem Imin was detained because his ‘neighbourhood police officer was trying to fill quotas’. As reported by Ürümqi police, he then contracted hepatitis B (which went untreated) as well as syphilis inside Xinjiang’s, and China’s biggest detention facility.¹³ This raises further questions about the conditions inside Xinjiang’s re-education facilities.

Efforts to weaponise the law in Xinjiang mirror wider legal reforms under Xi Jinping, where previous ideals about procedural accountability and judicial independence have been cast aside and the law is now openly used to tighten the party's grip over society and eliminate social opposition.

Section 6: The frontline commanders

County party secretaries are the most senior officials at the local level in China, and their role is crucial to the regime's survival, according to Xi Jinping. In Xinjiang, they oversee the day-to-day operations of the two campaigns. Researchers at ASPI have compiled a dataset of Xinjiang's county party secretaries over the past seven years and found that the vast majority of these 'frontline commanders' are Han. At the time of writing (September 2021), not a single county party secretary in Xinjiang is Uyghur, which speaks to the erasure of once-promised ethnic self-rule, and to deeply entrenched racism at the heart of the Han-dominated party-state system.

This section profiles three of the most celebrated county party secretaries in Xinjiang. Yao Ning, a darling of the Chinese media for his elite academic background at Tsinghua and Harvard universities. Claiming absolute loyalty to the party-state from a young age, Yao now sits at the top of a chain of command over nine newly built or expanded detention facilities in Maralbeshi County.¹⁴ He has struggled with mounting pressure and the death of a close colleague due to exhaustion, but finds solace in quotes by both Mao and Xi.

Yang Fasen, who pioneered new governance tools during the campaigns, was recently promoted to vice governor of Xinjiang. His innovative propaganda templates—that the authorities dubbed the 'Bay County Experience'—were copied by other counties in Xinjiang during the Counterterrorism Campaign. During a 2015 speech in front of Xi Jinping in Beijing, Yang claimed that subjecting undereducated Uyghur youth to labour reform (a practice that became commonplace later in the Re-education Campaign) can improve social stability.

Both Yao Ning and Yang Fasen are from the majority ethnic group in China, the Han. The third profile is of Obulqasim Mettursun, a Uyghur official, who like most Uyghurs serve in a deputy position under a Han overseer. He went viral after penning an open letter pleading with fellow Uyghurs to 'wake up' and actively participate in the party-state's stability maintenance efforts. He represents an ideologically captured and dependent class of Uyghur officials committed to serving the party in largely ceremonial roles.

Section 7: 'There is no department that doesn't have something to do with stability'

During Xinjiang's two campaigns, few offices or officials can escape the political responsibility of 'stability maintenance' work. At times, repressive policies have been carried out by the most innocent-sounding, obscure government agencies, such as the Forestry Bureau, which looked after Kashgar City's re-education camp accounts for a year.

The final section highlights the astounding number of offices involved in key aspects of the Chinese party-state's crackdown in Xinjiang: propaganda, re-education, at-home surveillance and indoctrination, forced labour and population control. Extra emphasis has been placed on propaganda as it has been the least reported aspect of the two campaigns, albeit highly important.



In Xinjiang, re-education work not only occurs in so-called ‘vocational education and training centres’, but is also front and centre in everyday life, as the party-state seeks to alter how people act and speak. Through more than seven years of intense propaganda work, Uyghurs and other indigenous groups now find themselves being assigned fictional Han relatives, and being taught how to dress and maintain their homes;¹⁵ their courtyards are ‘modernised’ and ‘beautified’¹⁶ while their ancient tombs and mosques are destroyed.¹⁷

Section 8: Conclusion

Xinjiang’s bureaucratic inner workings reflect a wider pattern of authoritarian rule in China. In fact, some governance techniques used in Xinjiang during the two campaigns were conceived elsewhere, and Xinjiang’s ‘stability maintenance’ tools are increasingly replicated by other Chinese provinces and regions including Hong Kong. Further research should be conducted on campaign-style governance in China in general, and its policy implications. Further studies on the cycle of collective trauma through China’s recurring campaigns may also be timely, taking into consideration that many senior Chinese officials, including Xi Jinping and Zhu Hailun, claimed that their personal experiences of being ‘re-educated’ through hard labour have been transformative.

Appendixes

ASPI researchers have curated three appendixes of key Xinjiang officials who have served in party, government, military, or paramilitary roles at the regional, prefecture and county levels from 2014 to 2021. In the sixth section of this report, the frontline commanders, the authors used the third appendix — the names and basic information about Xinjiang’s more than 440 county party secretaries over the last seven years — to generate data for analysis and visualisation. The appendixes have not been published but we will consider requests to access this research.

1. Background

The modern history of Xinjiang is marked by conquest and colonialism, with repeated efforts by the Chinese state to assert its sovereignty and control over the region's indigenous inhabitants. Following the 'Global War on Terror' led by the United States in 2001, the People's Republic of China (PRC) began to frame Uyghur dissent and resistance as 'extremism' and 'terrorism'.¹⁸

In the wake of the 2009 Ürümqi riots and several acts of Uyghur-led violence—some born out of protest and others of a terrorist nature¹⁹—top party leaders blamed the 'three evil forces' (三股势力) of 'terrorism, extremism and separatism' for the unrest in Xinjiang.²⁰ International experts agree that Uyghur militants exist in Syria and Pakistan in small numbers, but argue that they pose little direct security threat to China.²¹ That view is widely rejected inside China, where a mix of racial discrimination, settler-colonialism and an irrational fear of instability has driven Xinjiang policy in recent times.²²

Following a visit to Xinjiang in April 2014, Xi Jinping argued that Islamic extremism had infected a large swathe of Uyghur society²³ and called on party officials to chase 'violent terrorists' like rats: 'strike early, strike small, strike fast and use an iron fist to destroy [them]'.²⁴

On 23 May 2014, the Xinjiang Party Committee launched a year-long Counterterrorism Strike Hard Campaign in Xinjiang following decisions from the Central Communist Party Committee (中央党委) and the National Counterterrorism Leading Small Group (国家反恐怖工作领导小组), which is an interagency taskforce led by senior security and army officials.²⁵ Xinjiang, the 'main battlefield' of a national campaign against terror, would employ mass mobilisation (全民动员), tough measures and extraordinary methods, the *People's Daily* reported.²⁶

In January 2015, the Xinjiang Party Committee under then Party Secretary Zhang Chunxian (张春贤) announced that the Counterterrorism Campaign²⁷ would be extended for another year.²⁸ Zhang was removed from his position in August 2016.²⁹ Despite having commanded the campaign from the beginning, many commentators suggested that he had been 'soft in his approach to Xinjiang's governance' (柔性治疆).³⁰



Figure 3: Thousands of soldiers gather in Hotan City at the start of the Re-education Campaign. Similar military parades also took place in Ürümqi, Kashgar, and elsewhere in Xinjiang.



Source: 'Xinjiang holds "counterterrorism stability maintenance mass mobilisation ceremony" in Hotan' [新疆维吾尔自治区在和田举行反恐维稳誓师大会], *Tianshan News* [天山网], 17 February 2017, [online](#).

Zhang's replacement was Chen Quanguo (陈全国), the former Party Secretary of the Tibet Autonomous Region,³¹ who had a reputation for innovative 'stability maintenance' (维稳) measures, using covert spot checks to boost bureaucratic performance.³² Under Chen, it's widely accepted that between several hundred thousand and 1 million Uyghurs and other indigenous people in Xinjiang have been rounded up and interned in what Chinese authorities call 'vocational education and training centres' (职业技能教育培训中心) since the spring of 2017.³³

Chen Quanguo instructed the centres, commonly known as 're-education camps' in English, to 'teach like a school, be managed like the military, and be defended like a prison'.³⁴ Detainees are held without legal recourse for matters as innocuous as using a file-sharing app to download music,³⁵ and are subjected to indoctrination as well as physical and mental torture.³⁶

The 2017 campaign, which this report refers to as the 'Re-education Campaign', was a continuation of the 2014 Counterterrorism Campaign. Nonetheless, under the new regional leader, the 2017 campaign had a distinct five-year plan to radically alter Xinjiang society: to stabilise the situation during 2017; to consolidate during 2018; to normalise during 2019; and to achieve 'comprehensive stability' (全面稳定) by the end of 2021.³⁷ The 2017 campaign also expanded to include mass coerced labour assignments,³⁸ mandatory birth-control measures³⁹ and more intense indoctrination.⁴⁰

Figure 4: A ‘resist infiltration, snatch the two-faced’ mass oath for school teachers in Hotan Prefecture in 2017.



Source: ‘Ten thousand teachers in Hotan Prefecture take part in “speak up and brandish the sword” mass oath in Keriye County’ [和田地区万名教师集体发声亮剑宣讲宣誓大会在于田举行], Keriye County official WeChat account [于田零距离], 16 June 2017, [online](#).

As the 2014 Counterterrorism and 2017 Re-education campaigns differ greatly in scope and intensity, the authors discuss them separately where possible. Together, the two campaigns constitute what some experts assert are crimes against humanity⁴¹ or genocide.⁴²

Amid international criticism, in late 2019, Xinjiang officials claimed that most re-education camp ‘trainees’ had been released.⁴³ There’s some evidence that lower security facilities have been decommissioned,⁴⁴ with detainees transferred to mandatory job assignments or ‘community management and control’ (社区管控), which is similar to house arrest.⁴⁵ Official statistics also suggest that, since 2019, long and unjustified prison sentences have surged in Xinjiang,⁴⁶ coinciding with satellite imagery evidence that shows high-security prisons expanding.⁴⁷ Many individuals in the Uyghur diaspora report having multiple family members sentenced, some for up to 10–20 years in prison.⁴⁸



2. The return of mass campaigns

International comparisons of Xinjiang’s ongoing human rights crisis are conceptually important, but analysts must also assess the 2014 Counterterrorism Campaign and 2017 Re-education Campaign within the framework of China’s domestic history and politics. With the use of mass imprisonment, re-education camps, and coercive labour assignments, policies in Xinjiang mark a return to the mass political campaigns and extreme campaign-style governance of the Maoist era.⁴⁹

During mass campaigns, Chinese officials often blame an influx of foreign ideas for posing a perceived existential threat to Chinese society.⁵⁰ In Xinjiang’s case, they attribute the ‘tumour’ or ‘virus’ of extremism to Uyghur dissent or resistance.⁵¹ In response, all sectors of society must be mobilised against shadowy enemies: during the Cultural Revolution, the ‘five black types’ (黑五类); and in Xinjiang, the ‘three evil forces’. Mao’s term ‘double-dealer’ (两面派)⁵² has also been given a new lease on life in Xinjiang, where many have been sentenced after being accused of being ‘two-faced’—supporting the party in public only to criticise it in private.⁵³

Old campaign rituals are back, too. Officials in Xinjiang have been punished for not being able to recite quotes from Xinjiang Party Secretary Chen Quanguo,⁵⁴ and residents are required to chant their loyalty to the party and wish President Xi Jinping good health.⁵⁵

Figure 5: Officials from Aqyar Township, Aksu Prefecture announcing plans to elicit more gratitude towards the party from villagers.



Source: ‘Aqyar Township holds an advancement meeting to normalise and institutionalise “two studies, one action” party theory studies, and the launch ceremony of the “three gratitudes, three wishes” initiative among party members among farmers and herdsmen’ [阿合雅镇召开“两学一做”学习教育常态化制度化推进会暨在农牧民党员中开展“三感恩、三祝愿”活动启动仪式], Aqyar Township official WeChat account [阿合雅镇零距离], 14 June 2017, [online](#).

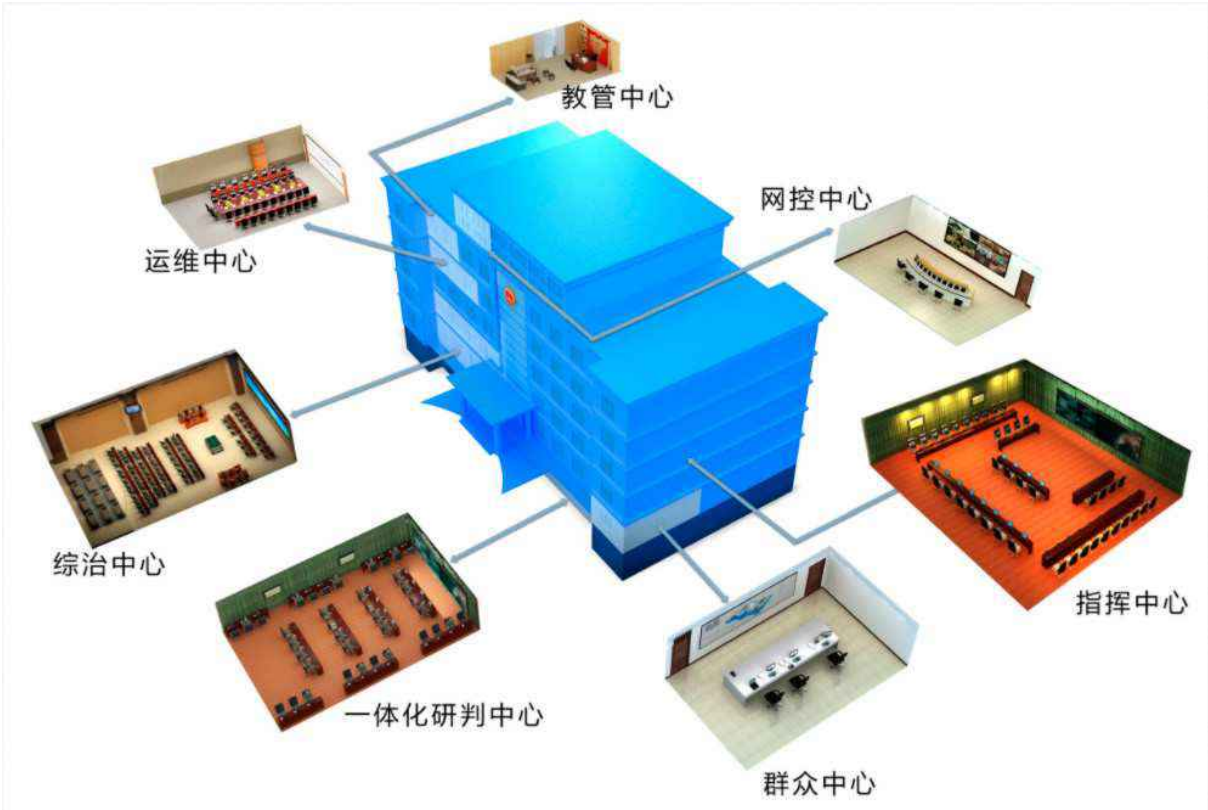
After Xi Jinping personally ordered officials to bring back neighbourhood informants in Xinjiang,⁵⁶ another Mao-era technique, authorities have popularised public denunciation sessions (揭批)⁵⁷ and public loyalty pledges known as ‘speak up and brandish the sword’ (发声亮剑).⁵⁸ Mass ‘show trials’ (公判大会)⁵⁹ have also returned,⁶⁰ where suspects are paraded and sentenced in front of sizeable audiences.⁶¹ This form of mass political theatre was outlawed in 1988 and has since been met with condemnation when it occasionally occurred elsewhere in China.⁶² It has long been one of the ‘most controversial elements of the Chinese criminal justice’, wrote history professor Klaus Mühlhahn in 2010, and prevents China from moving closer to international standards.⁶³

Senior party officials intended Xinjiang’s 2014 Counterterrorism Campaign to be a political movement from the outset. In an article from August 2014, then Party Secretary Zhang Chunxian wrote that the campaign was ‘definitely not just about cracking down on a few terrorists, but a serious political struggle against separatism, infiltration and subversion’.⁶⁴

Campaign-style governance is a state-of-emergency approach to governance that entails centralising resources, mobilising the masses and halting regular bureaucratic functions.⁶⁵ Before Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, many scholars held the view that, although campaign-style governance persisted in PRC policymaking to an extent, mass campaigns aimed at political realignment had largely perished, replaced by more contained and carefully managed campaigns focused on economic development.⁶⁶

However, in Xinjiang, the party-state has returned to mass political campaigns in an attempt to manufacture loyalty, conformity and stability through a root-and-branch transformation of the society. Compared to previous campaigns, such as the Anti-rightist Movement, the Cultural Revolution and the 1983 Anti-Crime Strike Hard Campaign, Xinjiang’s mass campaigns are delineated along ethnic and religious lines at a time when the party possesses far greater capacity, resources and power, and is aided by superior surveillance technology, while being fully connected to the world.

Figure 6: Chinese company Visionstar’s technology solution for Xinjiang PLAC’s Counterterrorism and Stability Maintenance Command, which connects an ‘IJOP evaluation centre’ with other surveillance and coordination mechanisms at various levels.



Source: ‘Technology solution for the PLAC’s Counterterrorism and Stability Maintenance Command’ [政法委反恐维稳指挥部解决方案], Visionstar Tech [威视讯达], [online](#).



In Xinjiang and elsewhere, the Chinese party-state exhibits a reflexive compulsion for mass political campaigns. Many scholars see campaign-style governance as a core feature of contemporary Chinese policymaking.⁶⁷ Sociologist Feng Shizheng considers it to be a legacy of the party-state's revolutionary past. He argues that campaigns occur because party leaders believe they possess superior ideas and therefore a responsibility to indoctrinate or 'pour' (灌输) advanced thinking into people's minds.⁶⁸ Political scientist Lang Peijuan describes the authorities' frequent use of campaigns as a 'political habit' or 'superstition'.⁶⁹

Writing in 2017, sociologist Zhou Xueguang argued that the two opposing approaches of campaign-style governance and 'norm-based governance' (常态化治理) have long alternated and coexisted in China.⁷⁰ Campaigns can be viewed as a tool for the party-state to correct the perceived failings of its vast bureaucratic machine. Zhou asserts that many bureaucratic structures have adapted during the party's 70-year rule to meet the needs of campaigns, and some campaign practices have become normalised.

Similarly, Chinese professor Li Hui contends that mass campaigns ultimately reflect the gap between the party-state's desired governance outcomes and current administrative capabilities. 'Norm-based governance with continuous effectiveness is an ideal state that can be infinitely approached, but never fully realised. In contrast, the existence of campaign-style governance may be the norm at this stage,' she wrote in 2017.⁷¹ Calling it a 'guerrilla policy style', Elizabeth Perry and Sebastian Heilmann find campaign-style governance to be defined by 'secrecy, versatility, speed and surprise', and to represent a marked departure from the 'democratic norms of political accountability, legal consistency, and procedural stability'.⁷²

These chiefly negative views about mass campaigns are in theory shared by every Chinese leader after Mao, including Deng Xiaoping,⁷³ Jiang Zemin⁷⁴ and Hu Jintao.⁷⁵ Xi Jinping, whose immediate family experienced imprisonment, re-education, death and torture during the Cultural Revolution,⁷⁶ has previously criticised campaigns as costly and burdensome, reportedly asking at one point, 'Hasn't our country suffered enough in this regard?'⁷⁷

Figure 7: Xi Zhongxun, Xi Jinping's father, being paraded at a 'struggle session' during the Cultural Revolution.



Source: 'Bao Tong remembers the Cultural Revolution: Xi Zhongxun was a victim of "father Mao Zedong" [鲍彤忆文革：习仲勋是毛泽东“大大的受害者”], *Voice of America*, 6 May 2021, [online](#).

In a cycle of mass trauma and abuse, the campaigns in Xinjiang bear Xi's imprimatur. In at least three separate speeches between 2014 to 2020, Xi proclaimed that 'the party's Xinjiang governance methods and strategies are completely correct' and that '[we] must adhere to them in the long term'.⁷⁸

Seven years on, the party's war against the Uyghurs has not run out of steam, as many other campaigns have in the past.⁷⁹ Consistent with Zhou Xueguang's theory that campaign-style governance can transition into new norms, authorities have sought to permanently remould Xinjiang society and reach a perfect state of 'comprehensive stability' by the end of 2021.⁸⁰

Local residents, too, worry that the campaigns may have become the new reality of life in Xinjiang. 'There has been six years of this already,' Meng You, a Han student from Xinjiang, told anthropologist Darren Byler in 2020. 'So it feels like it might continue on for a long time, even though it is not sustainable to keep it this way. Everyone is unhappy.'⁸¹



3. Hegemony at the grassroots

In 2019, a database used by the Ürümqi City Public Security Bureau (乌鲁木齐市公安局) and the wider Xinjiang Public Security Bureau was compromised, and thousands of police files were leaked to journalist Yael Grauer,⁸² who then shared access with ASPI.

Drawing on those files, this section chronicles the story of one family and their neighbourhood in order to demonstrate the unprecedented penetration of the party-state system into the daily lives of Xinjiang residents during the two campaigns. This family's story is a microcosm of Xinjiang's grassroots mobilisation, where the Neighbourhood Committee (社区居委会),⁸³ a nominally service-oriented voluntary organisation, has morphed into a powerful policing organ. Its new functions now include issuing travel permits for Uyghur residents,⁸⁴ monitoring residents' actions and emotions in their homes, committing individuals to re-education camps and subjecting relatives of those detained to 'management and control' orders that are akin to house arrest.

'No other abnormalities were found'

On 11 November 2018, at around 10:30am, staff members from the Neighbourhood Committee of Ürümqi's Xinmin West Street⁸⁵ escorted two residents to attend Anayit Abliz's (阿纳依提·阿布力孜) sentencing hearing at a 'vocational education and training centre', also known as a re-education camp. According to a police memo, the two men, aged 52 and 24, were the father and older brother of Abliz,⁸⁶ who was 19 years old at the time.⁸⁷

An hour later at the hearing, Abliz and his family sat at a long table across from four Neighbourhood Committee staff members. Four representatives from the local procuratorate (检察院), China's equivalent to a public prosecutor, were present up on a stage. The hearing, termed 'Two Announcements, One Lecture' (两告知一宣讲), was intended to 'inform students of how they participated in terrorist and extremist activities and lecture [them] about the party and government's policy of lenient treatment according to law.'⁸⁸

Abliz was informed that he would be sentenced to three years in prison for using a file-sharing app called Zopya (快牙) and a virtual private network (VPN)⁸⁹ back in 2017. Abliz admitted to having used Zopya but said there was no evidence of him ever using a VPN.

'He was dissatisfied with the verdict and disagrees,' the memo says. However, 'under the persuasion of his family members, he eventually signed the statement.'

In the next paragraph, the memo goes on to say, Abliz's father and older brother were 'emotionally stable' on hearing the verdict, and 'did not disclose to Abliz the fact that his mother had been detained for re-education (收教).'

'No other abnormalities were found,' the memo concluded.

Figure 8: A residential complex in Shuimogou District, Ürümqi, near where the Abliz family resided.



Source: 'Auction announcement' [拍卖公告], Xinjiang Jiasheng Auction Co. Ltd. [新疆嘉盛拍卖有限公司], [online](#).

In urban China, *shequ* (社区) refers to the local neighbourhood or community where hundreds to thousands of residents live. A Neighbourhood Committee is by law a vehicle for residents to self-govern,⁹⁰ although it's simultaneously the lowest tier of the party's organisational hierarchy. Its rural equivalent is the Village Committee (村民委员会).⁹¹

Following the collapse of socialist work units and rural communes, the neighbourhood and village committees emerged as organs of local control in the post-Mao period, helping to strengthen what Chinese leaders call 'grassroots governance' (基层治理). While his predecessor, Hu Jintao, pushed for the committees to more effectively self-govern through competitive local elections,⁹² Xi Jinping has sought to exert more direct party control at the grassroots level by emulating Mao's mass mobilisation techniques.

Xi took inspiration from the 1963 'Fengqiao Experience' (枫桥经验),⁹³ in which work units and commune brigades mobilised the masses in targeting and transforming the 'enemies' hiding among the people.⁹⁴ Adapted for contemporary use,⁹⁵ Xi has unleashed the neighbourhood and village committees to expand the party's visibility and control at the grassroots and to pre-empt any source of instability.⁹⁶ Grassroots mobilisation efforts increasingly blanket China and have been criticised for their arbitrariness during the Covid-19 pandemic, when neighbourhood committees outside Xinjiang denied residents who returned from travel access to their own homes.⁹⁷

Unlike most other places in China, where the party's grassroots mobilisation efforts are still underway,⁹⁸ Xinjiang's neighbourhood-based control mechanisms have been tested and solidified through the implementation of five local and national policies. Dividing local communities into micro-policing units as small as 10 families, the authorities have combined human and automated surveillance tools to profile and pre-emptively target mostly ethnic minorities, removing any sense



of privacy or safety from their homes.⁹⁹ These policies have also targeted other Xinjiang residents deemed a threat to stability, for example those who had purchased risky financial products, and a former soldier who'd participated in nuclear tests.¹⁰⁰

The meaning of home, neighbours and the Neighbourhood Committee have all fundamentally altered in Xinjiang. During the two campaigns, many neighbourhood officials reportedly wear military fatigues,¹⁰¹ and cadres and civilian residents alike are mobilised to perform intelligence and policing tasks. This redistribution of law enforcement power to civilians and civil society groups blurs the line between civilians and cadres, victims and perpetrators.¹⁰² Uyghur poet Tahir Hamut Izzil, who lived in Ürümqi in the early months of the Re-education Campaign, wrote:

‘People eventually felt as though they were part of the police, with a taste for watching and reporting on one another. They remained constantly ready to confront enemies, and at the same time often felt that they themselves were the enemy. I began to sense this indistinctly in the people around me, and even in myself.’¹⁰³

Figure 9: A Fanghuiju cadre sent down to Yarkant County stated in 2019 that in his experience, at least two fully-armed guards typically accompanied the cadres during home visits.



Source: ‘Three years of village-based work honed (my) will, tempered my party spirit and forged my soul...’ [在三年的驻村工作中磨练意志·锤炼党性·锻造灵魂...], Gudao Xifeng [‘古道西风’] via Meipian [美篇], [online](#).

3.1 Police substations

A 2012 policy embedded a police substation (警务室) in every neighbourhood or village in Xinjiang, assigning at least one police officer to live in the substation around the clock, and three auxiliary officers in assistant roles.¹⁰⁴ By 2018, Xinjiang had more than 9,000 police substations, of which 7,400 were located in rural villages and 2,100 were attached to urban communities—in total staffed by around 10,700 police officers, 30,870 auxiliary police officers and 48,010 militia guards (民兵).¹⁰⁵ In addition, thousands of new police checkpoints, known as ‘convenience police stations’ (便民警务站), were constructed since late 2016.¹⁰⁶

3.2 Grid management

The grid-management system (网格化管理), first introduced in Beijing in 2004 and later in Xinjiang in 2012, works by dividing local communities into small geographical and administrative cells.¹⁰⁷ In each cell, a grid manager and other staff collect information and report any potential problems to the neighbourhood or village committee and the police.¹⁰⁸ The grid’s political purpose is twofold: extending the party’s reach at the grassroots level and securitising residential communities.¹⁰⁹

3.3 The Fanghuiju program

Initiated in 2014, the *Fanghuiju* (访惠聚) program is a state-sanctioned campaign in which officials and sometimes civilians (mostly belonging to the Han ethnic majority) are mobilised to visit or occupy the homes of Uyghurs and other indigenous families.¹¹⁰ The officials undertake programs of indoctrination and surveillance, while calling themselves fictional family members of the men and women they might then decide to consign to the camps.¹¹¹ (For more detail see Section 7.3)

3.4 The ‘Trinity’ mechanism

First reported here in English, the ‘Trinity’ mechanism (‘三位一体工作机制’) was introduced at the start of the Counterterrorism Campaign and later implemented throughout Xinjiang. It ensures that every neighbourhood and village is co-managed by neighbourhood or village committee officials, police officers and external Fanghuiju work teams (‘访惠聚工作队’).¹¹² During Xi Jinping’s 2014 inspection tour of Xinjiang, he reportedly gave high praise to the mechanism.¹¹³

The Trinity mechanism mirrors the ‘Revolutionary Neighbourhood Committee’ (革命居民委员会) established around 1968, when a different trinity consisted of party cadres, military officers and residents’ representatives. The 1968 trinity formed the de facto lowest rung of state power and controlled residents’ movements, the interior decorations of their homes and the outfits that they wore. The Revolutionary Neighbourhood Committee damaged the relationship between residents so much so that one academic called it ‘morbid’.¹¹⁴

In Xinjiang, the neighbourhood or village committee is the principal arbitrator of the re-education processes. During the Re-education Campaign, the Trinity mechanism holds at least two daily meetings:¹¹⁵ a ‘morning dispatch’ (早派工) to assign home visits and ‘investigations’, and an ‘evening evaluation’ (晚研判) to decide what actions to take in response to those ‘investigations’, including whether any individuals should be sent away for re-education.¹¹⁶



In some cases, individuals are stopped at checkpoints and interrogated at local police stations by intelligence officers before being sent to the camps.¹¹⁷ When they're released, they return to the Neighborhood Committee's 'management and control'.¹¹⁸

3.5 Ten-household joint defence

In the first months of the Re-education Campaign, the neighbourhoods' grids were further divided into micro-units made up of 10 households.¹¹⁹ This hyper-local version of grid management is known as 'ten-household joint defence' (十户联防).¹²⁰

By late 2018, Xinjiang reportedly had more than 60,000 joint households.¹²¹ A 'joint household manager' (联户长), also known as a 'ten households manager' (十户长), receives official training in collecting intelligence,¹²² handling potential re-education camp detainees,¹²³ delivering propaganda lectures,¹²⁴ directing daily anti-terror drills and arranging labour assignments.¹²⁵ They're financially rewarded based on their performance.¹²⁶

Within the police and intelligence network at the grassroots, there are also informants (信息员).¹²⁷ While one Ürümqi Party School journal article claims the informants report to the joint-household manager,¹²⁸ police reports indicate that the neighbourhood informants, who are referred to as a series of letters and numbers (for example, DX18-2-80) answer directly to the secret police—formally known as the Domestic Security Bureau (国保)—who serve in the local police station.¹²⁹

Figure 10: Joint household manager Tayir Baq in Shayar County, Aksu Prefecture. There, residents take turns to manage the joint household.



Source: 'Neighbourhood watch and social interactions help to create harmonious and safe households: Aksu, Xinjiang uses the "joint households" mechanism to innovate social governance' (邻里守望户户联动打造和谐平安家园：新疆阿克苏“双联户”机制创新社会治理), *Legal Daily* (法制日报), 22 November 2018, online.

Often, no official explanation is given to family members after detainees are sent into re-education for a few months or years.¹³⁰ In some documented cases, the Neighbourhood Committee liaises with re-education camps to arrange a hearing, but not others. When a hearing does happen, sometimes the Neighbourhood Committee asks family members of detainees to bring a letter of gratitude and read it aloud after the verdict.¹³¹

‘There was no abnormal behaviour‘

By the time Abliz had his sentence hearing, he had been detained for at least eight months. During that time, leaked police records show that his family members were closely monitored, their daily activities chronicled in a series of reports filed under the heading ‘Situation regarding persons who are detained or going through re-education’ (被收押、教育转化人员情况).

Within a single week in February 2018, a Neighbourhood Committee staff member surnamed Yang and at least three other cadres made six recorded visits to the Abliz family, according to police reports (Table 1).

Table 1: Visits to the Abliz family home by Neighbourhood Committee officials, February 2018

Date	Time	Police report	Source
22 Feb 2018	21:30	Yang entered the Abliz household and found Abliz’s father, mother and sister at home. His father went to work that day as usual; his mother and sister did not go out. His brother had travelled to a different city to apply for a new ID card and was expected to return in 3 days. ‘No suspicious activity occurred during communication with them, nothing suspicious was found in their home. Items in their home in order. Ideological status is stable. Actively cooperating with the Neighbourhood Committee’s work,’ Yang reported.	‘Report 1646’ ^a
24 Feb 2018	22:10	Yang entered the Abliz home and found the father, mother and sister watching television. Yang chatted with them, ‘promoting the spirit of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China’.	‘Report 1647’ ^b
25 Feb 2018	17:00	Yang entered the Abliz home to have the ‘weekly chat’ with the family.	‘Report 1648’ ^c
26 Feb 2018	21:45	Abliz’s father and sister were home. His mother had not returned home from work. His brother was still out of town for the new ID card, and was anxious about the delay, Yang noted. ‘There are no suspicious items in the house, the items in the house are neatly arranged and the ideological status is stable. Actively cooperating with the Neighbourhood Committee’s work.’	‘Report 1649’ ^d
27 Feb 2018	21:45	Yang again entered the Abliz household. The family was going about their business. ‘There are no suspicious items in the house, the items in the house are neatly arranged and the ideological status is stable. Actively cooperating with the Neighbourhood Committee’s work,’ Yang observed.	‘Report 1650’ ^e



28 Feb 2018	21:20	<p>Yang entered the Abliz household. The father, brother and sister were home.</p> <p>After propagating information related to the ‘two sessions’ (China’s annual high-level political meetings), a party cadre (unclear whether it was Yang or someone else) informed the family that the police station had asked them to sign an affidavit promising to not make a complaint to a higher level of authority (presumably about Abliz’s detention).</p> <p>The brother said the family wanted to speak with Abliz and that he hoped the Neighbourhood Committee could help contact the ‘school’ (a euphemism for a re-education camp).</p>	‘Report 1651’ ^f
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Notes:

- a ‘Ürümqi Public Security Bureau, Shuimogou District Branch, Xinxing Street Police Station, Xinmin West Street Neighbourhood Police Substation’ (乌鲁木齐市公安局水磨沟区分局新兴街派出所新民西街社区警务室), Ürümqi Police Records, 23 February 2018, [online](#).
- b ‘Ürümqi Public Security Bureau, Shuimogou District Branch, Xinxing Street Police Station, Xinmin West Street Neighbourhood Police Substation’ (乌鲁木齐市公安局水磨沟区分局新兴街派出所新民西街社区警务室), Ürümqi Police Records, 25 February 2018, [online](#).
- c ‘Ürümqi Public Security Bureau, Shuimogou District Branch, Xinxing Street Police Station, Xinmin West Street Neighbourhood Police Substation’ (乌鲁木齐市公安局水磨沟区分局新兴街派出所新民西街社区警务室), Ürümqi Police Records, 26 February 2018, [online](#).
- d ‘Ürümqi Public Security Bureau, Shuimogou District Branch, Xinxing Street Police Station, Xinmin West Street Neighbourhood Police Substation’ (乌鲁木齐市公安局水磨沟区分局新兴街派出所新民西街社区警务室), Ürümqi Police Records, 27 February 2018, [online](#).
- e ‘Ürümqi Public Security Bureau, Shuimogou District Branch, Xinxing Street Police Station, Xinmin West Street Neighbourhood Police Substation’ (乌鲁木齐市公安局水磨沟区分局新兴街派出所新民西街社区警务室), Ürümqi Police Records, 28 February 2018, [online](#).
- f ‘Ürümqi Public Security Bureau, Shuimogou District Branch, Xinxing Street Police Station, Xinmin West Street Neighbourhood Police Substation’ (乌鲁木齐市公安局水磨沟区分局新兴街派出所新民西街社区警务室), Ürümqi Police Records, 2 March 2018, [online](#).

Figure 11: According to one Fanghuiju official, many Uyghur families ‘would not talk to the cadres at all’, or ‘acted cold’ towards them.



Source: ‘Three years of village-based work honed (my) will’, *Gudao Xifeng*, [online](#).

Earlier that month, at 21:15 on 9 February 2018, two individuals from the Fanghuiju work team entered the Abliz home.¹³²

A Fanghuiju manual used in Kashgar Prefecture (喀什地区) asked its work teams to show warmth to their Uyghur ‘relatives’ and give kids candy. It also provided a checklist that includes questions such as: ‘When entering the household, do family members appear flustered and use evasive language? Do they not watch TV programs at home, and instead only watch VCD discs? Are there any religious items still hanging on the walls of the house?’¹³³

The two Fanghuiju officials that visited Abliz’s family on 9 February 2018 found them at home watching television and chatting. One official asked about Abliz’s brother’s health, showing warmth as the manual instructed. His mother and sister did not go out that day. ‘Thoughts are stable and everything is normal,’ the cadres reported.¹³⁴

On 4 January 2019, days before Abliz’s 20th birthday and three months after his sentencing hearing, a re-education camp official phoned the Neighbourhood Committee to say that Abliz’s hand had been injured *again*. It was injured from a fall earlier and ‘relapsed’, the report says. The neighbourhood official told Abliz’s father about the injury and observed that, upon hearing the news:

‘His father was emotionally stable; his tone of voice was normal; there was no abnormal behaviour.’¹³⁵

The Xinmin West Street Neighbourhood, where the Abliz family lives, is part of the Shuimogou District (水磨沟区). In February 2019, under the jurisdiction of the Shuimogou District Police Station, a total of 552 households had family members detained. Relatives of the detainees were ‘getting emotional and constantly went to their neighbourhood committees to ask questions,’ according to an 11 February police memo.¹³⁶

In response, the police station decided to dispatch officers to visit whoever asked questions in their homes more frequently in order to ‘calm their thoughts’. The same police report mentions a teenage Uyghur girl who had dropped out of school and whose father was detained for re-education, stating:

‘[Her] mood has been down lately. She sometimes posted texts on [her] WeChat Moment¹³⁷ about finding life hopeless. The neighbourhood police officer has worked on her thinking. The Neighbourhood Committee will pay more attention to this person’s movements and report [to the police station] in a timely manner.’¹³⁸



4. The party's knife handle

Individuals often become suspects after being flagged by the Political and Legal Affairs Commission (政法委员会, PLAC). Ürümqi's police records reveal that the PLAC sends push notifications of 'micro clues' (微线索)¹³⁹ via the predictive policing system IJOP to the Neighbourhood Committee and police when irregularities are detected: someone having an unexpected visitor at home, driving a car that does not belong to them,¹⁴⁰ receiving an overseas phone call¹⁴¹ or using file sharing apps such as Zopya.¹⁴² In police reports, these often innocuous acts are described as 'enemy movements' (敌情)¹⁴³ or 'important intelligence' (重要情报).¹⁴⁴

Figure 12: Zhu Hailun, then head of the Xinjiang PLAC, speaking at a military parade in Hotan at the start of the Re-education Campaign.



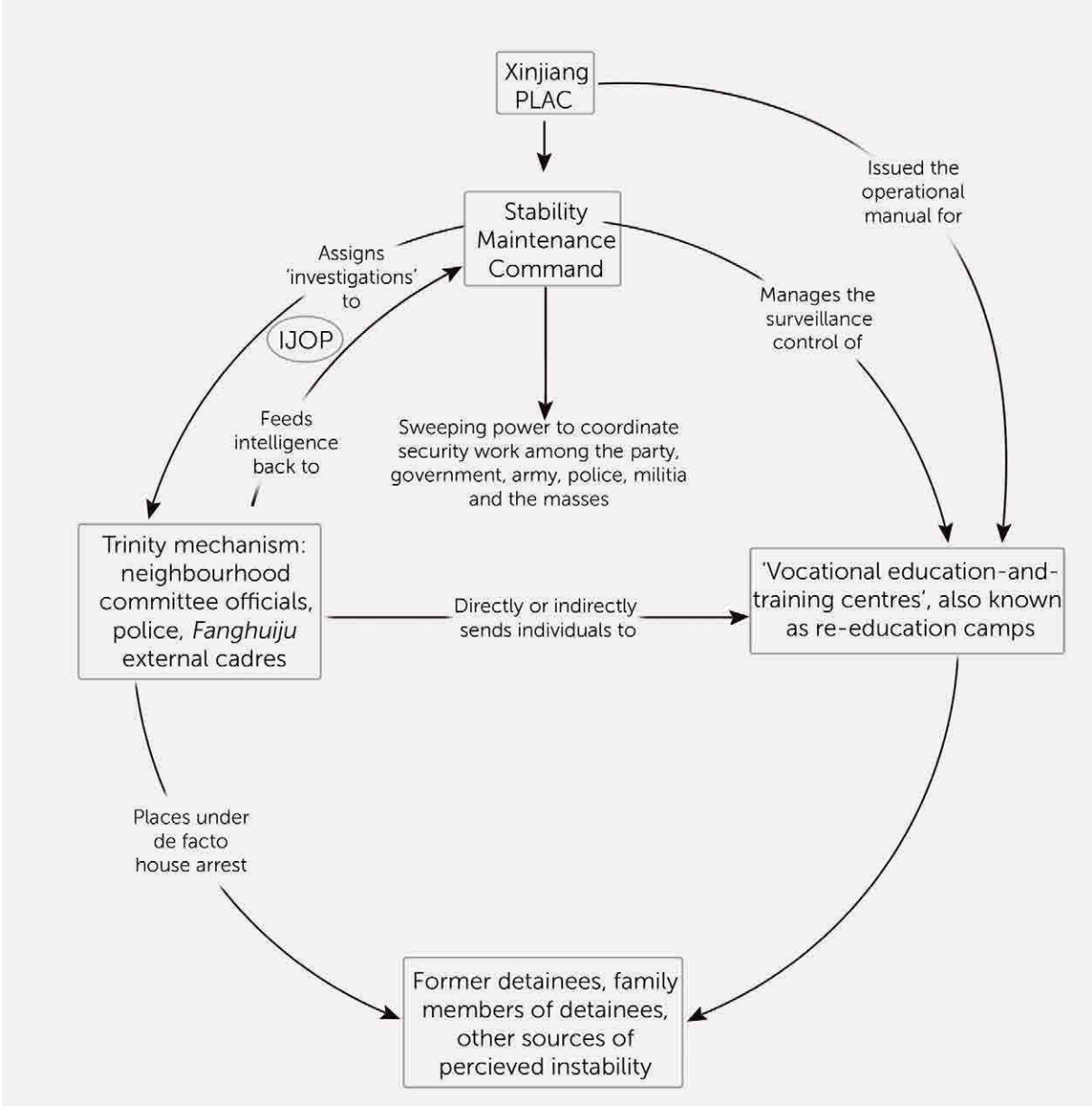
Source: 'Xinjiang holds counterterrorism stability maintenance mass mobilisation ceremony in Hotan' [新疆维吾尔自治区在和田举行反恐维稳誓师大会], *Tianshan News* [天山网], 17 February 2017, [online](#).

The PLAC is a powerful party organ that oversees what Chinese officials call the 'political and legal affairs system' (政法系统),¹⁴⁵ which includes the police, the procuratorate, the court, the justice department and other security organs.¹⁴⁶ At various administrative levels, those agencies fall under the government, but are ultimately answerable to the party via the PLAC. Referencing Mao yet again, Xi Jinping has dubbed the political and legal affairs system the party's 'knife handle' (刀把子) and insisted that the handle be firmly in the hands of the party and the masses.¹⁴⁷

Elsewhere in China, the PLAC is typically a coordinating body without operational capabilities,¹⁴⁸ but during Xinjiang's campaigns, the PLAC prompted millions of investigations at the grassroots level. Between July 2016 and June 2017, its IJOP flagged 1,869,310 Uyghurs for having used Zopya.¹⁴⁹ This possibly included Anayt Abliz, who was first detained in 2017 for using the app.

The PLAC operates the IJOP via a powerful new body called the Counterterrorism and Stability Maintenance Command, first reported here by ASPI.¹⁵⁰ The regional Stability Maintenance Command was established under the PLAC in September 2016.¹⁵¹ It has sweeping powers to coordinate security work among the party, the government, the army, the police, the militia and the masses.¹⁵² Local stability maintenance commands were subsequently established at the subregional level.¹⁵³

Figure 13: An illustration of the relationship between the PLAC, the Stability Maintenance Command, the IJOP, the 'Trinity' mechanism and the re-education centres.



Source: ASPI.

In Kelpin County (柯坪县),¹⁵⁴ where ASPI researchers have identified two detention facilities built after 2017,¹⁵⁵ the Stability Maintenance Command under the local PLAC employed 370 staff members in 2018, who worked in military attire.¹⁵⁶ Thirty-one of those employees staffed the control rooms of re-education camps.¹⁵⁷ Budget documents from Bayingolin (巴音郭楞) and Ürümqi show that the local PLAC also operates the technological aspects of the grid-management system.¹⁵⁸



Information does not just travel one way from the PLAC to the ‘Trinity’ mechanism. Grassroots officers also feed intelligence gathered during routine checks or investigations back to the IJOP.¹⁵⁹ The identities and movements of those who are linked to current and former detainees (what the authorities call the ‘three kinds of people’, 三类人员),¹⁶⁰ are entered into the system and regularly updated, as demonstrated in the case of Anayt Abliz’s family.¹⁶¹

Officials also use the IJOP for communication.¹⁶² They are given performance scores and assigned tasks in the system. Maya Wang and her team, who reverse-engineered the IJOP in 2019, described it as ‘a system of systems’.¹⁶³ Beyond local communities, the IJOP siphons more data from petrol stations, checkpoints on the streets, and schools.

This significant technological capacity places an enormous amount of unchecked power in the hands of Xinjiang’s PLAC officials. However, technology is hardly the only reason why the PLAC is central to the crackdown in Xinjiang, as the PLAC itself is a product of campaign-style governance and evidence of the Chinese bureaucratic system’s inbuilt flexibility.¹⁶⁴

Throughout modern Chinese history, the PLAC has acted like a barometer of political mobilisation and upheaval. First established in 1958 at the height of the Great Leap Forward,¹⁶⁵ the PLAC wielded unrestrained power, which was considered to be a contributing factor to the Cultural Revolution.¹⁶⁶ After the upheavals in the 1950s and 1960s, the PLAC took a back seat and was dissolved in 1988, only to be reinstated in 1990 following the Tiananmen Square protests.¹⁶⁷ For many scholars, its very existence proves that there’s no meaningful divide between the Chinese Communist Party and the government.¹⁶⁸

From 2002, Zhou Yongkang (周永康) ruled over the central PLAC, turning ‘stability maintenance’ into a costly industry and himself into China’s ‘security tzar’.¹⁶⁹ During Xi’s term, Zhou was purged in 2013, and the status and influence of the PLAC at both central and local levels have been curtailed.¹⁷⁰ To get rid of ‘remaining poisons’ left over from Zhou’s time, Xi began another purge inside the political and legal affairs system in 2020 to ensure its utmost loyalty.¹⁷¹

Despite a purported national decline, the Xinjiang PLAC’s visibility and political influence rose and its duties have expanded in recent years,¹⁷² consistent with the pattern from previous mass political campaigns. Another contributing factor to its prominence in Xinjiang could be the former head of the Xinjiang PLAC, Zhu Hailun (朱海仑), who is considered by some to be the architect of the re-education camps,¹⁷³ and put forward a governance model called ‘the big PLAC’ (大政法委) in as early as 2010.

Following a stint as the head of the Xinjiang PLAC between 2006 and 2009,¹⁷⁴ Zhu was appointed the Ürümqi Party Secretary in the wake of the 2009 riots and the sacking of the previous secretary Li Zhi (栗智). In an effort to restore order, Zhu came up with the idea of ‘the big PLAC’,¹⁷⁵ a model aimed at revolutionising stability maintenance work by improving intelligence gathering, coordination between various security organs and grassroots mobilisation.¹⁷⁶

More importantly, it marked Ürümqi’s early experimentation with grid management and what became known as the Trinity mechanism. In 2010, a pilot program of the ‘big PLAC’ was implemented in the four central districts in Ürümqi, including the Shuimogou District where the Abliz family resided.

Within one year, 16,900 new surveillance cameras were installed in the pilot program, 16 new neighbourhood committees and eight new police stations were opened, and the spending and staff for each neighbourhood committee more than tripled.¹⁷⁷

Following the arrival of Chen Quanguo, Zhu Hailun resumed his position as head of the Xinjiang PLAC in November 2016. The following year, he signed off on a re-education camp manual that was later leaked to the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists.¹⁷⁸



5. Weaponising the law

Led by the PLAC, Xinjiang’s political and legal affairs system has driven the most repressive aspects of the two campaigns, including the extrajudicial detention system and the formal carceral system that are estimated to have both detained hundreds of thousands, frequently without due process.¹⁷⁹

Similar to ‘campaign-style law enforcement’ (运动式执法) in past iterations,¹⁸⁰ during Xinjiang’s campaigns, law enforcement decisions are hasty, harsh and arbitrary. Senior officials have promulgated new laws and regulations that contradict existing ones to meet the expedient needs of the campaigns. On the ground, local officers openly boast about acting outside legal precedes — with the endorsement of senior leaders and state media. At all levels, officers are compelled to swear loyalty oaths to the party and stay ‘politically firm’.

Figure 14: Officers from Xinjiang’s prison system swearing collective loyalty oaths to the party, 2017.



Source: ‘Huge numbers of party members and cadres in the Xinjiang prison system “speak up and brandish the sword” en masse’ [新疆监狱系统广大党员干部集体发声亮剑], Xinjiang Prison Administration (新疆监狱管理局), 10 June 2017, [online](#).

In 2014, a few days into the Counterterrorism Campaign, in an account that was later amplified by state media¹⁸¹ and a well-known think tank,¹⁸² senior Xinjiang police officer Ma Fei (马飞) wrote:

‘[We] must do everything possible to send the most untrustworthy, extreme religious [people] in our jurisdiction to the most reassuring place—the detention centre. Please don’t talk to me about what constitutes a crime. When a case is established, it’s time to sever heads. With the crackdown on religious extremism, we’d rather be excessive than lenient ...’¹⁸³

That same year, the Xinjiang High People’s Court (自治区高级人民法院) announced plans to conduct mass show trials and denunciation sessions.¹⁸⁴ As discussed in Section 2 of this report, a show trial is a form of political theatre that has been outlawed and widely criticised in contemporary China.

One of the most high profile show trials in Xinjiang took place in the northern city of Ghulja (伊宁市) in May 2014, where truckloads of alleged ‘separatists’ and ‘terrorists’, mostly Uyghurs, were driven into a sports stadium and sentenced before a crowd of 7,000, their heads pushed down by police officers.¹⁸⁵

Figure 15: A 7,000-people show trial was held in Ili Prefecture in a sports stadium, in May 2014. The event was held under the watch of armed soldiers.



Source: Li Xin'an (李新安), 'Xinjiang's Ili Prefecture holds mass ceremony of public verdict, public arrest and public detention; 55 defendants publicly sentenced' [新疆伊犁州举行公判、公捕、公拘大会 对55名被告人公开宣判], *People's Daily Online* [人民网], 27 May 2014, [online](#).

'With a resolute attitude and iron fists, heavy punches and ruthless hands,' then head of Ghulja's PLAC Li Huiming (黎明辉) told the assembled crowd, 'we will resolutely knock out the enemy's arrogance with thunderous strikes and win ultimate victory in the people's war to strike hard against terrorism and instability'.¹⁸⁶ The following year, Li's superior Xiong Xuanguo (熊选国) who headed the regional PLAC, instructed the Xinjiang High Court to increase its show-trial efforts.¹⁸⁷

In 2016, a social media statement by the Public Security Bureau of Altay City (阿勒泰市) defined the Counterterrorism Campaign as imposing 'severe and heavy penalties':

'If you could have a suspended sentence [in the past], you will [now] be actually sentenced; if you could have been sentenced to 3 to 10 years in accordance with the criminal law, you will [now] definitely be sentenced to 10 years.'¹⁸⁸

In 2014, the Xinjiang High Court also explicitly ordered an increase in trial speed¹⁸⁹—a tactic similar to the 1983 Strike Hard Campaign, when some 1.7 million people were sentenced in a period of four years.¹⁹⁰ Setting aside normal criminal law procedures, judicial organs jointly processed cases to reach unprecedented trial speeds during the 1983 crackdown, leading to a large number of unjust, false and wrongful verdicts, and death sentences.¹⁹¹ In Xinjiang, detainees' fates are also decided by so-called 'political and legal joint conferences' (政法联席会议).¹⁹² Similar to Xinjiang's crackdown, over a six-month period, the 1983 campaign had 563,000 individuals interned at labour reform and re-education facilities.¹⁹³

Back in Xinjiang, in 2017, Chen Quanguo repeatedly instructed officials to 'round up everyone who should be rounded up'.¹⁹⁴ The same year, as head of the PLAC in Xinjiang, Zhu Hailun ordered prefecture and county party secretaries to personally oversee re-education work.¹⁹⁵ However, formal legislation related to the detention and indoctrination facilities did not appear until 9 October 2018, when the 'Xinjiang De-extremification Regulations' (新疆去极端化条例) were retrospectively revised to allow local governments to set up 'vocational skills education and training centres' and other types of 'transformation through education organs' (教育转化机构).¹⁹⁶



There are numerous examples of other illegal behaviours by Xinjiang officials during the two campaigns, including missing verdicts and records, the fabrication of legal documents and, more broadly, the criminalisation of religious and cultural behaviour by Uyghurs and other indigenous groups.¹⁹⁷ As researcher Gene Bunin points out, the way law is applied in Xinjiang today, even in the Chinese context, is ‘completely illegitimate and egregiously illegal in its behaviour’.¹⁹⁸ Take the following examples.

On 14 September 2017, a log from Ürümqi’s convenience police station SY-150 described that neighbourhood officials had tried to force relatives of detainees to move away from the Minghua Street Area in the Tianshan District, which was set to be demolished and reconstructed. The neighbourhood officials reportedly told some residents:

‘You have family members who have been detained and investigated by the public security organs, so you can no longer purchase properties or live here. If you don’t move away promptly, your entire family will be detained.’¹⁹⁹

Figure 16: Officials from Changji Prefecture inspecting the operations of Ürümqi ‘convenience police station’ GX-001 at the start of the Re-education Campaign.



Source: ‘Changji Prefecture inspection group visits Ürümqi City to inspect and discuss stability maintenance work’ [昌吉州代表团来乌鲁木齐市考察交流维稳工作], *Sina News* [新浪新闻], 2 June 2017, [online](#).

In 2019, a Xinjiang official told Human Rights Watch that at one stage during the Re-education Campaign:

‘There were quotas for arrests in all the locales, and so we began to arrest people randomly: people who argue in the neighborhood, people who street fight, drunkards, people who are lazy; we would arrest them and accuse them of being extremists. There was not enough room for them all in the centers, so they built new ones.’²⁰⁰

Cases in the Ürümqi police records reveal similar behaviours by grassroots officials. In 2017, Uyghur man Ekrem Imin (伊克热木·伊明) was detained and later re-educated at the Dabancheng Detention Centre, where he contracted hepatitis B as well as syphilis, a police report says.²⁰¹ The hepatitis B went untreated at the facility and Imin's wife was not allowed to bring him medication. Imin was told he had been detained only because his 'neighbourhood police officer was trying to fill quotas'.²⁰² The Dabancheng Detention Centre is estimated to be able to hold 10,000 people at once, and is Xinjiang and China's largest.²⁰³

Uyghur woman Güzelay Memetislam (古孜力阿依·买买提司拉木) was detained by the Xingfu Road Police Station (幸福路派出所) on 3 October 2017. She was sent to a re-education camp for being labelled an 'untrustworthy individual who is dissatisfied with society'.²⁰⁴ Similarly, an Ürümqi Neighbourhood Committee sent Ekper Tursun (艾可帕尔·吐尔逊), a Uyghur divorcee who travelled frequently for business, to re-education on 8 March 2018 because he 'doesn't have a fixed address or fixed income', a report says, continuing: 'He is difficult for [neighbourhood] management and control'.²⁰⁵

Figure 17: Altay Prefecture procuratorate officials swearing a collective oath while holding a banner that promises to 'stay absolutely loyal to the party'.



Source: 'Strengthen ideals and beliefs, be absolutely loyal to the party, be a loyal, clean and responsible people's prosecutor of the new era [坚定理想信念 对党绝对忠诚 做新时代忠诚干净担当的人民检察官], Xinjiang Procuratorate [新疆检察] via Weibo [微博], 22 February 2019, online.

The 'egregiously illegal' law enforcement in Xinjiang is an extreme example of China's harsh and instrumentalist approach to the law under Xi Jinping. Through legal reforms, the party has been increasingly consolidating centralised power and remoulding judicial institutions to its own advantage. In that process, it has shifted away from concepts of procedural accountability and judicial independence,²⁰⁶ and openly 'turned against the law' in the opinion of Chinese legal expert Carl Minzner.²⁰⁷

This turn has ironically occurred at a time when 'governing the nation in accordance with law' (依法治国) is spoken about as a cornerstone of the party's governance model and considered a key aspect of 'Xi Jinping Thought' (习近平思想).²⁰⁸ In Xinjiang, the party has created the 'Govern Xinjiang in Accordance with Law Committee' (依法治疆委员会)²⁰⁹ with Chen Quanguo as its head.



The phrase ‘governing the nation in accordance with law’ used to be associated with social justice and fairness²¹⁰ and was enshrined in the Chinese Constitution in 1999.²¹¹ Under Xi Jinping, it now refers to law in a Marxist-Leninist sense, in which the law is an expression of the party’s will; and follows China’s ancient legalist tradition, in which harsh punishment is viewed as essential for good governance.²¹²

‘We must never copy the models and practices of other countries and must not follow the path of Western “constitutionalism”, “separation of powers” or “judicial independence”,’ Xi Jinping said in a 2018 speech.²¹³

6. The frontline commanders

According to Chinese state media, Xi Jinping has a ‘county party secretary complex’ (县委书记情结),²¹⁴ that is, a fixation on the chief party officials in China’s roughly 3,000 county-level administrations. In his governance vision, the county-level party committee is the party’s ‘frontline command’ (一线指挥部), and the county party secretary the ‘frontline commander’, whose loyalty to the party and ability to mobilise the masses are crucial to the prosperity and very existence of the regime.²¹⁵

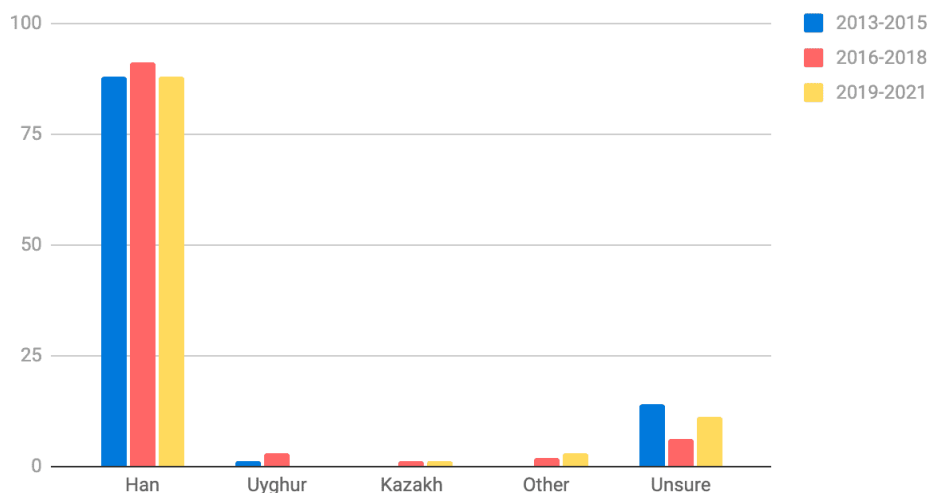
Between 2014 and 2017, the Central Party School and the Central Organisation Department (中央组织部, akin to the party’s human resources division) gave every single county party secretary from across the country two months of in-residence training in Beijing.²¹⁶ Xi personally taught some classes²¹⁷ and published a book in 2015 setting standards for county party secretaries,²¹⁸ demanding that they demonstrate absolute loyalty to the party and be ‘smart on politics’ (做政治的明白人).²¹⁹

In Xinjiang, in line with the frontline commander metaphor, county party secretaries are directly responsible for a number of ‘first-in-command projects’ (一把手工程), from orchestrating the Counterterrorism Campaign in their jurisdictions,²²⁰ to leading a taskforce that oversees the county’s Vocational Education and Training Service Management Bureau (职业技能教育培训服务管理局)—also known as the Re-education Bureau (教培局),²²¹ to signing ‘statements of target and responsibility’ (目标责任状) for coercive labour transfers²²² and, finally, to overseeing the implementation of population-control measures.²²³

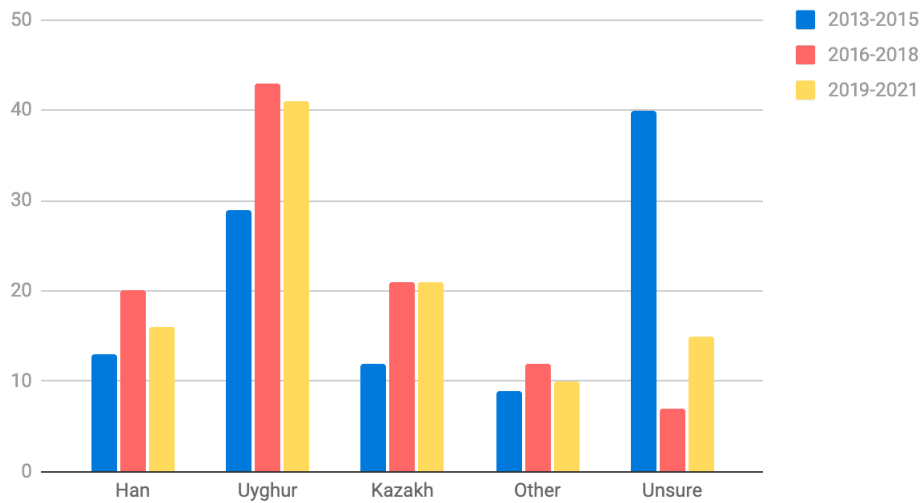
Researchers at ASPI have compiled the names and basic information of Xinjiang’s hundreds of principal and deputy county party secretaries between 2014 and August 2021,²²⁴ and found that throughout the campaigns, the vast majority of Xinjiang’s ‘frontline commanders’ at the local level are Han (Figure 18). In most counties, a Uyghur or other minority official plays the ceremonial role of second-in-command—as deputy party secretary and concurrently county magistrate (县长). Despite Xinjiang’s legal status as a Uyghur Autonomous Region, ASPI researchers could not identify a single Uyghur party secretary at the county level at present (September 2021).

Figure 18: Ethnicity of Xinjiang’s county-level party secretaries (top) and deputy party secretaries/heads of government (bottom) between 2013 and 2021.

Xinjiang County Party Secretaries



Xinjiang County Deputy Party Secretaries, Heads of Government



Source: ASPI.

These statistics suggest a systematic distrust of Uyghurs and other ethnic officials, as well as the underlying racial discrimination within the Han-dominated party-state system.²²⁵ They demonstrate how the party's initial promise of ethnic self-rule (民族自治), as codified in the Chinese Constitution,²²⁶ is now a fig leaf held by a dependent class of Uyghur officials serving the party in chiefly ceremonial roles.

Among Xinjiang's county party secretaries over the last seven years, three individuals have been most celebrated by the media, the Organisation Department and sometimes Xi Jinping himself. This section profiles those three officials in order to tease out the dynamics of local politics in Xinjiang and highlight their role in operationalising the two campaigns.²²⁷

6.1 The true believer

1 July 2021 was the Chinese Communist Party's 100th birthday. A day prior, inside Beijing's Great Hall of the People, Xi Jinping met with 103 local officials from across the country who were awarded the title of 'Outstanding County Party Secretary' (优秀县委书记).²²⁸

The youngest among them was Yao Ning (药宁),²²⁹ 36 years old and Han, who attracted considerable media attention for his unusual academic background. Unlike many of his peers who'd obtained qualifications from local universities or the Party School, Yao was educated at two of the most prestigious universities in the world—Tsinghua and Harvard.²³⁰

Figure 19: Yao Ning, the Harvard-educated party secretary in Xinjiang.



Source: 'County Party Secretary who was born after 1985 and graduated from Tsinghua, about to receive national commendation' (清华毕业的85后县委书记·拟获全国表彰), *Beijing Daily* (京报网), 7 May 2021, [online](#).

In early 2019, Yao Ning was appointed Party Secretary of Maralbeshi County (巴楚县),²³¹ a small and predominantly Uyghur county²³² where ASPI researchers have identified nine detention facilities built or expanded since 2017.²³³ Months before Yao's arrival, authorities in Maralbeshi sought to recruit 320 new re-education camp staff members; the positions were open to only Han men aged 18 to 45 years.²³⁴

As party secretary, Yao's duties are likely to have included ultimate responsibility for the operations of the re-education camps in Maralbeshi,²³⁵ as well as mass labour transfers that have resulted in forced labour and the displacement of Uyghur workers.²³⁶ In a recent interview, Yao openly discussed his efforts to promote Maralbeshi's labour transfer policies,²³⁷ claiming that 37,700 individuals in Maralbeshi were assigned employment during his two years in office.²³⁸



Figure 20: A prison in Maralbeshi County that has been operational throughout Yao's term. This facility was significantly expanded in the first quarter of 2017, with construction ongoing in 2021 in two areas of the facility. Six watchtowers are visible in the satellite imagery.



Source: ASPI.

Yao personifies Xi Jinping's ideal cadre: young, loyal and capable.²³⁹ After spending his early years in Shanxi Province, Yao studied engineering at Tsinghua University. As an undergraduate, he actively participated in student politics, heading the Communist Youth League and the party branch for his cohort, and was elected president of the student association.²⁴⁰

As early as a student election held in 2008, Yao demonstrated exceptional patriotism and political ambition, saying he hoped to work in China's frontier regions and serve the country. '[I'd like to] go to the place where the motherland needs [me] the most. Get up on the big stage and have a big career,' he said.²⁴¹ Later that year, he was selected by the university to be an 'Outstanding Undergraduate Communist Party Member' (本科生优秀党员).²⁴²

Between 2010 and 2011, Yao was an Asia Fellow at Harvard University's Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation. The fellowship was part of his PhD program in public policy at Tsinghua University.²⁴³ Upon completing his studies in late 2014, Yao began working in Xinjiang's Kashgar Prefecture, first in predominantly Uyghur Yengisheher County (疏勒县), and then in Maralbeshi County.

In a 2018 Tsinghua alumni interview, Yao sounded grateful for the opportunity to serve the state in Xinjiang, reportedly saying that nowhere in central or eastern China could he obtain equivalent work experience on counterterrorism, stability maintenance and poverty alleviation. His revolutionary idealism, Yao said, stems from the education at his alma mater, Tsinghua.²⁴⁴

Occasionally, he spoke about the struggles in his work. In December 2019, he posted on China's Twitter-equivalent, Weibo, that a Xinjiang official close to him had suddenly passed away, 'exhausted by work to death'.

'We were joking around on the phone a few days ago and all of a sudden this person is gone,' he wrote, 'for southern Xinjiang to have today's peaceful situation, so many cadres have sacrificed. RIP ...'²⁴⁵

Figure 21: Yao Ning's Weibo post.



Source: 'Yao Ning's Weibo posts' (药宁的微博), Weibo (微博), 25 February to 17 June 2021, online.

Yao's wife, Zhou Lingxiu (周凌休), is a graduate from Tsinghua and an ethnic Mongol from Inner Mongolia²⁴⁶—another frontier region where indigenous language and culture are under threat from a recent party-state crackdown.²⁴⁷ According to Zhou, Yao is under a tremendous amount of pressure in Xinjiang: 'Several times in the middle of the night he called me from Kashgar. Usually he is strong, but even he was bawling.'²⁴⁸

Campaign-style governance often compels bureaucrats to give up on their ability to independently process information and make sound judgements, according to sociology Professor Zhou Xueguang.²⁴⁹ Yao admits struggling with contradictory bits of information he receives in Xinjiang. 'It's difficult to discard what is false and retain what is true,' he said in a 2018 interview, reportedly concluding that one has to learn how to make one's own judgements.²⁵⁰



On Weibo, Yao posted in early 2019 a photograph featuring the Maoist slogan ‘Serve the people’ (为人民服务) with the caption: ‘Whenever [I’m] exhausted, I find this picture taken years ago and look at it. [My] only hope is to never lose sight of [my] original aspiration.’²⁵¹ ‘Never losing sight of the original aspiration’ (不忘初心) is a catchphrase of Xi Jinping, often used to inspire grassroots officials like Yao Ning to serve the Chinese people and help rejuvenate the Chinese nation.²⁵²

Figure 22: Yao Ning, centre, leads a collective loyalty pledge to the party in Maralbeshi County in 2021.



Source: ‘Maralbeshi County launches the oath-swearing ceremony of new party’s representative, Yao Ning’ (巴楚县开展新党员代表入党宣誓活动,药宁领誓), Maralbeshi County People’s Government (巴楚县人民政府), 27 June 2021, [online](#).

6.2 The innovator

Throughout Xinjiang’s two campaigns, the regional second-in-command had been deputy Party Secretary Shohrat Zakir (雪克来提·扎克尔), a Uyghur official who, until 30 September 2021, had concurrently been Xinjiang’s governor, the head of the Xinjiang Government.²⁵³ Under Zakir, there were 11 vice-governors.²⁵⁴ Among them, the highest-ranking and most powerful was Erken Tuniyaz (艾尔肯·吐尼亚孜), a Uyghur official who also spent four months in 2012 at the Harvard’s Ash Center as a New World Fellow.²⁵⁵ Tuniyaz is currently serving as the acting Xinjiang governor at the time of writing.²⁵⁶

The lowest ranking and most recently promoted vice-governor²⁵⁷ is the 50-year-old Han official Yang Fasen (杨发森). A recipient of the 2015 ‘Outstanding County Party Secretary’ title, Yang is now the youngest ministerial-level official (省部级领导) in Xinjiang.²⁵⁸

During the years between the 2009 Ürümqi riots and the start of the Counterterrorism Campaign in 2014, Yang served as Party Secretary of Bay County (拜城县), a remote and largely Uyghur county in Aksu Prefecture (阿克苏地区).²⁵⁹ There, he created what later came to be celebrated as the ‘Bay County Experience’ (拜城经验).²⁶⁰

Figure 23: Yang Fasen speaking at the Great Hall of the People in front of Xi Jinping in 2015.



Source: ‘Yang Fasen, born after the 70s, assumes new post, becoming the youngest ministerial-level [official] in Xinjiang. He was once awarded the honour of “the Nation’s Outstanding County Party Secretary” [“70后”杨发森履新，成新疆最年轻省部级，曾获“全国优秀县委书记”荣誉], *Sina Finance News* [新浪财经新闻], 31 March 2021, [online](#).

The Bay County Experience is a set of propaganda policies aimed at bringing innovation and flair to the party’s ‘de-extremification’ work. For Yang’s small-town administration, that meant centralising resources from state media outlets, government websites and foreign-facing propaganda capabilities to form one propaganda superbody, the Bay County Propaganda Centre (宣传中心).²⁶¹

Established in January 2013, the centre boasted three floors and 600 square metres of space and cost ¥2,000,000 (US\$314,000) to build.²⁶² It arranges media interviews, produces content and pushes out unified messages onto different platforms, including radio, television, social media and village loudspeakers. The centre also makes and disseminates ‘cultural products’ such as propaganda flyers, pamphlets, plays, paintings and jingles.²⁶³

The centre is similar to a wholesale vegetable market, a Bay County official told reporters, where ‘officials are like the vegetable farmers, propaganda staff are like distributors and the target buyers would be the county’s cadres and the masses of all ethnicities.’²⁶⁴



Yang Fasen's Bay County Experience is also characterised by efforts that turn everyday citizens into active propagandists.²⁶⁵ During his time, sermon-like 'propaganda lectures' (宣讲) were popularised and people from all walks of life—cadres, lawyers, religious leaders, doctors, scientists, farmers, business owners, women and young people—were mobilised to combat 'religious extremism' by delivering the lectures.²⁶⁶ Bus drivers, especially, were asked to propagate to passengers and simultaneously spy on them for signs of 'extremism'.²⁶⁷

Figure 24: A Bay County propaganda lecture in 2019 that asked residents to be grateful to the great motherland and praise their happy lives.



Source: 'Bay County propaganda lectures themed "be grateful to the great motherland, praise [our] happy lives" held in Dawanqi and Laohutai townships' [拜城县“感恩伟大祖国·歌颂幸福生活”主题宣讲走进大宛其、老虎台乡], Bay County People's Government [拜城县人民政府], 11 August 2019, [online](#).

Considered advanced and innovative, the Bay County Experience was frequently promoted by state media during the Counterterrorism Campaign.²⁶⁸ In the latter half of 2014, Yang was transferred to Kucha County (库车县).²⁶⁹ Following his departure, propaganda officials from around Xinjiang travelled to Bay County to visit the Propaganda Centre and learn from the Bay County Experience.²⁷⁰

In a national TV segment, officials from Onsu, Kelpin, Mekit (麦盖提县) and Akchi (阿合奇县) counties praised Bay County's 'de-extremification' practices, finding them 'innovative', 'down-to-earth' and 'impressive'. Ablimit Hüseyin (阿布里米提·玉素云), who headed the Propaganda Department in Konasheher County (疏附县), told reporters in October 2014 that her county would copy the Bay County model and construct a propaganda centre by end of the year 'at the latest'.²⁷¹ Before the end of the year, several other counties had established similar propaganda centres.²⁷²

Originally from neighbouring Gansu province, Yang joined the People's Liberation Army in Xinjiang at the age of 19.²⁷³ After three years in the army, he slowly worked his way up from an office secretary position. He was hardworking and did not take holidays, according to state media, and during the Counterterrorism Campaign often worked late into the night together with police officers and other cadres.²⁷⁴ He is reportedly full of energy: one account relates that he once burst into a song about how short life is while giving a propaganda lecture.²⁷⁵

In July 2015, in his cohort of some 100 ‘Outstanding County Party Secretaries’, Yang was one of only five to shake Xi Jinping’s hand and speak at the Great Hall of the People,²⁷⁶ which in China is deemed a great honour. During his speech, Yang claimed that overseas terrorists had posted his photos online and threatened to retaliate against him.²⁷⁷

Well before the Re-education Campaign, when many Uyghurs were detained for being labelled ‘untrustworthy individuals born after the 1980s and 1990s’ (80后·90后不放心人员),²⁷⁸ Yang asserted in front of Xi Jinping that subjecting young, uneducated Uyghurs to labour reform can bring about stability:

‘Because more than 80% of detainees were born in the 80s or 90s and 99% of them had an education level below high school, we have swiftly implemented a plan to ‘train and educate ten thousand youth in order to promote employment and ensure stability’. We have trained 30,000 people for free so the idle youths can have a skill, have something to do, earn some money and have things to look forward to. [This policy] can reduce [stability] risks to the greatest extent possible.

Through unremitting efforts, the religious atmosphere of the county has faded, the people of all ethnic groups have significantly improved their ability to distinguish right from wrong and the positive energy of counterterrorism and stability is forming.’²⁷⁹

Following his ‘Outstanding County Party Secretary’ award, Yang experienced an astronomical rise in the ranks. In December 2016, he was promoted to Deputy Party Secretary and PLAC Secretary of the Hotan Prefecture (和田地区),²⁸⁰ one of the frontline regions in the two campaigns where ASPI researchers have identified 52 detention facilities newly built or expanded.²⁸¹ In February 2018, Yang became Hotan’s principal Party Secretary²⁸² and by March 2021, the youngest ministerial-level official in Xinjiang.²⁸³

6.3 The model minority

Since 2017, almost every ethnic minority deputy party secretary in Xinjiang has published at least one written pledge to ‘speak up and brandish the sword’. In stark, jingoistic and highly repetitive language, they promise to ‘be grateful to the party, listen to the party, and follow the party’²⁸⁴ and to ‘forever remember the generosity of the party.’²⁸⁵ They swear to ‘ferret out’ the party’s enemies—the ‘two-faced people’ who are ‘inferior to beasts’;²⁸⁶ to ‘root out’ and ‘smash’ the two-faced people and the ‘three evil forces’;²⁸⁷ to fight ‘bloody battles’ with them ‘till death’.²⁸⁸

Some Uyghur officials now claim that their people are not descendants of Turks and that Uyghurs have been a part of the Chinese nation-race (中华民族) since ancient times.²⁸⁹ One official disavowed the Uyghur language, saying that speaking it makes one unpatriotic and thus a ‘two-faced person’.²⁹⁰



Figure 25: Uyghur official Obulqasim Mettursun posing for camera, with a copy of Xi Jinping’s book on his desk.



Source: ‘Obulqasim Mettursun: Emphasise “Unity” with every word and every sentence’ [吾布力喀斯木·买吐送:一字一句写团结], *People’s Daily* [人民日报], 16 July 2017, online.

The first Uyghur official to publish such a pledge was Obulqasim Mettursun (吾布力喀斯木·买吐送). At the start of the Re-education Campaign, he was the Deputy Party Secretary of Jay Township (加依乡) in Keriye County (于田县), and went viral for penning ‘A wake-up call to fellow Uyghurs’ (致维吾尔族同胞觉醒书).²⁹¹ According to his own account, Mettursun wrote the open letter after being ‘inspired’ by a series of military parades held throughout Xinjiang that spring—‘I have to say something!’ he later told reporters.²⁹²

In the letter, Mettursun expressed gratitude for the party’s policies and suggested that Uyghurs were not fully accepted or respected in Chinese society because many Uyghurs had enabled the ‘three evil forces’ by failing to ‘brandish their sword’.²⁹³ He wrote:

‘Each of us Uyghurs should adopt a firmer position to fight against the “three evil forces”, should be more proactive in opposing the “three evil forces”. Only as such ... will Uyghurs be prosperous, and truly recognised and tolerated by everyone.

Fellow Uyghurs, let’s wake up! ... Use our courage and responsibility to win the understanding and respect of the people; use our contribution to gain our dignity that has been lost ... Only a sincere awakening from the heart can let us have a happy life ...’

Mettursun was barely fluent in Chinese.²⁹⁴ According to official account, he wrote the first draft on 19 February 2017 in the Uyghur language and had it translated into Chinese.²⁹⁵ He then asked for the approval of the township’s principal Party Secretary, Han official Li Zhonggang (李仲刚), and took three days to conduct ‘propaganda lectures’ around the 12 villages under the township’s jurisdiction, reciting the letter to villagers until his voice broke.²⁹⁶ ‘Some villagers wiped their tears while listening and then went to the neighbouring village to listen to another one,’ state media claimed.²⁹⁷

Figure 26: Obulqasim Mettursun delivering a propaganda lecture to villagers.



Source: 'Obulqasim Mettursun: A persistent practitioner of national unity' [吾布力喀斯木·买吐送：民族团结的执着践行者], *Tianshan News* [天山网], 16 January 2018, online.

Late at night on 3 March, Mettursun's letter was published on Keriye County's official WeChat account.²⁹⁸ On 25 March, the Xinjiang Party Committee mandated a region-wide campaign to 'learn from comrade Obulqasim Mettursun' and awarded him the 'Outstanding Communist Party Member' (优秀共产党员) and 'Advanced Model of National Unity' (民族团结进步模范) titles.²⁹⁹

Around April 2017, Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities began to disappear into re-education camps. On 6 April 2017, Ürümqi's New Inmates Prison (新收犯监狱) invited Mettursun to conduct a virtual 'propaganda lecture' to remove the inmates' 'extreme thoughts'. The prison publicised the event on WeChat, reporting that many inmates said they now wanted to follow Mettursun's example, 'learn from his intense patriotism ... listen to the party, be grateful to the party, and follow the party.'³⁰⁰

As his voice was amplified, Mettursun's career progressed. On 18 May, two of the most senior officials in the region, Party Secretary Chen Quanguo and the then head of the Organisation Department Ma Xuejun (马学军) met with Mettursun in Ürümqi.³⁰¹ Chen spoke highly of Mettursun's 'intense patriotism' and gifted him a copy of Xi Jinping's book, *The Governance of China* (习近平谈治国理政).³⁰²



Figure 27: Chen Quanguo and Ma Xuejun meeting Mettursun in Ürümqi.



Source: 'Chen Quanguo meets Obulqasim Mettursun' [陈全国在会见吾布力喀斯木·买吐送], Ürümqi City Government Website [乌鲁木齐市政府网站], 19 May 2017, online.

By August, the Xinjiang Party Committee initiated a second round of the 'Learn from Mettursun' campaign³⁰³ and everyone in Xinjiang, from party officials to ordinary citizens, was asked to follow his example. Mettursun was prominently featured in state media, sometimes holding Xi Jinping's book and vowing to 'kill the enemies to the point of their extinction',³⁰⁴ and other times sitting in his office with the book on his desk.³⁰⁵

In August 2017, six months after he first wrote the letter, Mettursun was promoted to be Deputy Party Secretary of Awat County (阿瓦提县).³⁰⁶ In October, he made a high-profile trip to Beijing to attend the National People's Congress as a Xinjiang delegate.³⁰⁷ Within a year of becoming a county-level official, he wrote 17 new missives about 'brandishing the sword' and toured the region to present some 130 propaganda lectures.³⁰⁸

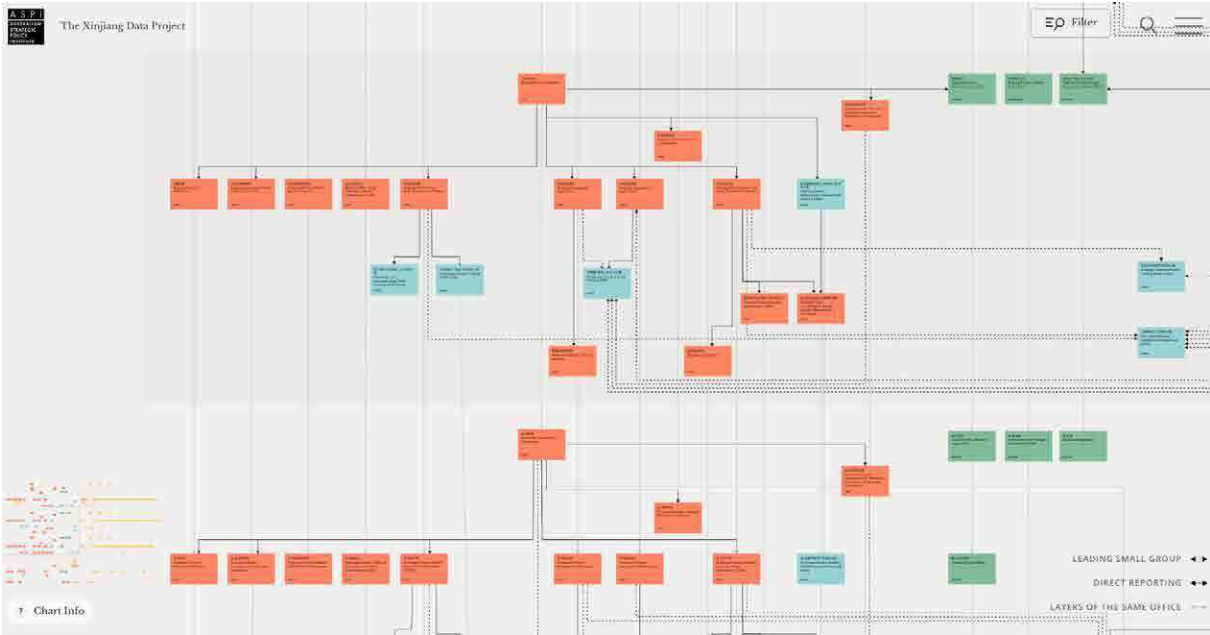
Despite his continued celebrity status, Mettursun's career has so far plateaued at a deputy position like most of his Uyghur peers serving the party-state. More recently, in 2021, he attended press conferences held by the Central Propaganda Department (中央宣传部), testifying to foreign journalists that in Xinjiang 'people's wallets are bulging more and more and the happy smiles on their faces are getting more and more beautiful'.³⁰⁹

7. ‘There is no department that doesn’t have something to do with stability’

As Zhang Chunxian wrote in August 2014: ‘There is no place, no department, no individual that doesn’t have something to do with stability.’³¹⁰ During Xinjiang’s campaigns, few offices or officials could escape the duty to play a part in highly politicised ‘stability maintenance’ work. At times, repressive policies have been carried out by the most innocent-sounding, obscure government agencies, such as the Forestry Bureau (林业局), which looked after the accounts of the re-education camps in Kashgar City (喀什市) for a year.³¹¹

This section offers an overview of the main aspects of the two campaigns and points out the administrative bodies that are involved. The five aspects discussed here are propaganda, the re-education camps, the Fanghuiju program, coercive labour assignments and population control. Readers can also view [an interactive chart](#), where the authors have mapped out more than 170 administrative bodies that are directly or indirectly connected to Xinjiang’s human rights crisis.³¹²

Figure 28: Screenshot of an organisational chart featuring party, government, military, and hybrid entities that have participated in Xinjiang’s governance since 2014.



Source: ASPI.

7.1 Propaganda

Compared to elsewhere in China, propaganda efforts in Xinjiang are more intense, omnipresent and racially charged. In chronological order, this subsection outlines Xinjiang’s propaganda work policies, which include public loyalty pledges, ‘propaganda lectures’, chants wishing Xi Jinping good health, and public denunciation sessions of ‘extremists’ and ‘two-faced people’. As discussed in Section 2, these political rituals bear the hallmarks of Mao-era mass political campaigns.



On 28 May 2014, a major Xinjiang work conference was held in Beijing four days after the launch of the Counterterrorism Campaign. During the conference, Xi Jinping instructed that in order to achieve stability and party control in Xinjiang, a key measure was to ‘vigorously promote cadres who are loyal to the party, who dare to speak up and brandish the sword in critical moments.’³¹³ At this point, ‘brandishing the sword’ seems to be a metaphor for firmly expressing one’s loyalty to the party and being in a combative position to defend it.³¹⁴

Figure 29: School teachers in Hotan Prefecture in a 2017 collective loyalty pledge.



Source: ‘Ten thousand school teachers and students in Hotan Prefecture collectively “speak up and brandish the sword”, voicing the strongest roar of justice, vowing to fight against the “three evil forces” and “two-faced people” till the end’ [和田地区万名教师学生集体发声亮剑 发出正义最强音 誓与“三股势力”和“两面人”斗争到底], Hotan Government Affairs Online [和田政务在线], 27 June 2017, [online](#).

The metaphor soon evolved into acts of political ritual unique to Xinjiang. Nine days after the conference in Beijing, some 10,000 individuals in Cherchen County (且末县) took a public pledge to ‘brandish the sword’ against ‘terror and violence’.³¹⁵ In July 2014, following a violent clash between a group of Uyghurs and Chinese security forces,³¹⁶ officials in Yarkant County (莎车县) reportedly shouted with raised arms, ‘Resolutely safeguard national unity!’ and ‘Resolutely safeguard the dignity of the law!’ in the yard of a local Village Committee. Some 130 village-level officials jointly signed a pledge to denounce the violent attack.³¹⁷ Since then, officials, civilians,³¹⁸ religious leaders,³¹⁹ entrepreneurs,³²⁰ arts workers³²¹ and people with disabilities³²² have all signed similar pledges to ‘brandish their swords’.

Public pledge ceremonies called ‘speak up and brandish the sword’ soon became commonplace, where participants put a fist next to their face while standing up, vocally condemn ‘religious extremism’ and praise the party and its policies.³²³ Participants are also asked to sign their names on massive propaganda banners and ‘solemnly promise to be grateful to the party, listen to the party, and follow the party’.³²⁴ Some officials claim that these events can cure the disease of ‘extremism’ and improve the psychological health of the masses.³²⁵

Figure 30: A women's sign and promise ceremony in Tumshuq City, Xinjiang.



Source: 'Massive propaganda lectures: Photographs from Tumshuq City's "Big Denounce, Expose and Criticise" activities' [大宣讲：师市“大揭批大声讨大宣讲”系列活动精彩图集], Tumshuq City's Propaganda Department (市党委宣传部), 28 April 2017, [online](#).

On 26 August 2014, the Xinjiang Organisation Department said in a public work report that the department would promote six minority officials who had led the efforts to criticise the 'three evil forces' in public or in the media.³²⁶ As for the 65 candidates who were found to be 'not politically strong enough', who 'did not dare to speak up and brandish the sword in critical moments', their nominations were dropped.³²⁷

Four months later, under the instructions of then Xinjiang Party Secretary Zhang Chunxian, the Propaganda Department prepared lecture outlines and hand-picked 'propaganda lecture groups' (宣讲团).³²⁸

Propaganda lectures are sessions in which a group of speakers spends weeks or months touring local villages and townships,³²⁹ speaking at schools or stadiums to anywhere between dozens and tens of thousands of residents at a time.³³⁰ The speakers typically include party and government officials, law enforcement officers, religious leaders, teachers, former detainees, psychologists,³³¹ as well as ordinary citizens known as 'grassroots propaganda lecturers' (草根宣讲员).³³²



Figure 31: A ‘grassroots propaganda lecturer’ training session in Kashgar City in 2017.



Source: ‘Kashgar City conducts training on the spirits of the 19th National People’s Congress for grassroots propaganda lecturers’ [喀什市对草根宣讲员进行党的十九大精神专题培训], Kashgar City’s official WeChat account [喀什市零距离], 16 November 2017, [online](#).

During the Re-education Campaign, the Justice Department played a leading role in mobilising and organising propaganda lecture groups, primarily through its ‘Propaganda Lecture Office to Promote Harmony and Prevent Crimes’ (促进和谐预防犯罪宣讲办公室).³³³

In April 2017, the Xinjiang United Front Work Department (自治区统战部) held a series of ‘three loves, three oppositions’ (三爱·三反) seminars in Ürümqi that lasted more than 10 days, with nearly a thousand representatives from all sectors of Xinjiang society in attendance.³³⁴ ‘Three loves, three oppositions’ is a slogan shortened from a Xi Jinping quote: ‘Love the Communist Party of China, love the motherland, love the big family of the Chinese nation-race; oppose separatism, oppose extremism, oppose violence.’³³⁵

The ‘three loves, three oppositions’ was swiftly adopted as a theme of propaganda lectures and public pledges around Xinjiang³³⁶ and expanded to become ‘three loves, three oppositions, three gratitudes, three wishes’ (三爱·三反·三感恩·三祝愿). The added ‘three gratitudes’ and ‘three wishes’ are recited during group loyalty oaths as:

‘Grateful to the great motherland, grateful to the Communist Party of China, grateful to General Secretary Xi Jinping; wish the great motherland prosperity, wish General Secretary Xi Jinping good health, and wish the people of all ethnic groups unity and harmony.’³³⁷

Flag-raising ceremonies, propaganda lectures and public pledges are often carried out in combination and later published in state media, which frequently describe audience members becoming emotional and melting into tears during these events.³³⁸

During the two campaigns in Xinjiang, the authorities also popularised struggle sessions termed ‘big denounce, expose and criticise’ (大声讨·大揭批). These sessions entail public condemnation of individuals accused of being ‘two-faced’³³⁹ and calls for the public to inform on such people living in their community.³⁴⁰

Figure 32: A ‘big denounce, expose and criticise’ struggle session in Maralbeshi Township in 2018.



Source: ‘Maralbeshi Township holds “big propaganda lecture, denounce, expose and criticise” rally which is also a “speak up and brandish the sword” advancement meeting’ [巴楚镇召开“大宣讲、大揭批、大声讨·大反思”活动暨发声亮剑大会现场推进会], ‘Pretty women in Maralbeshi’ [巴楚靓丽巾帼] via Wechat [微信], 21 March 2018, [online](#).

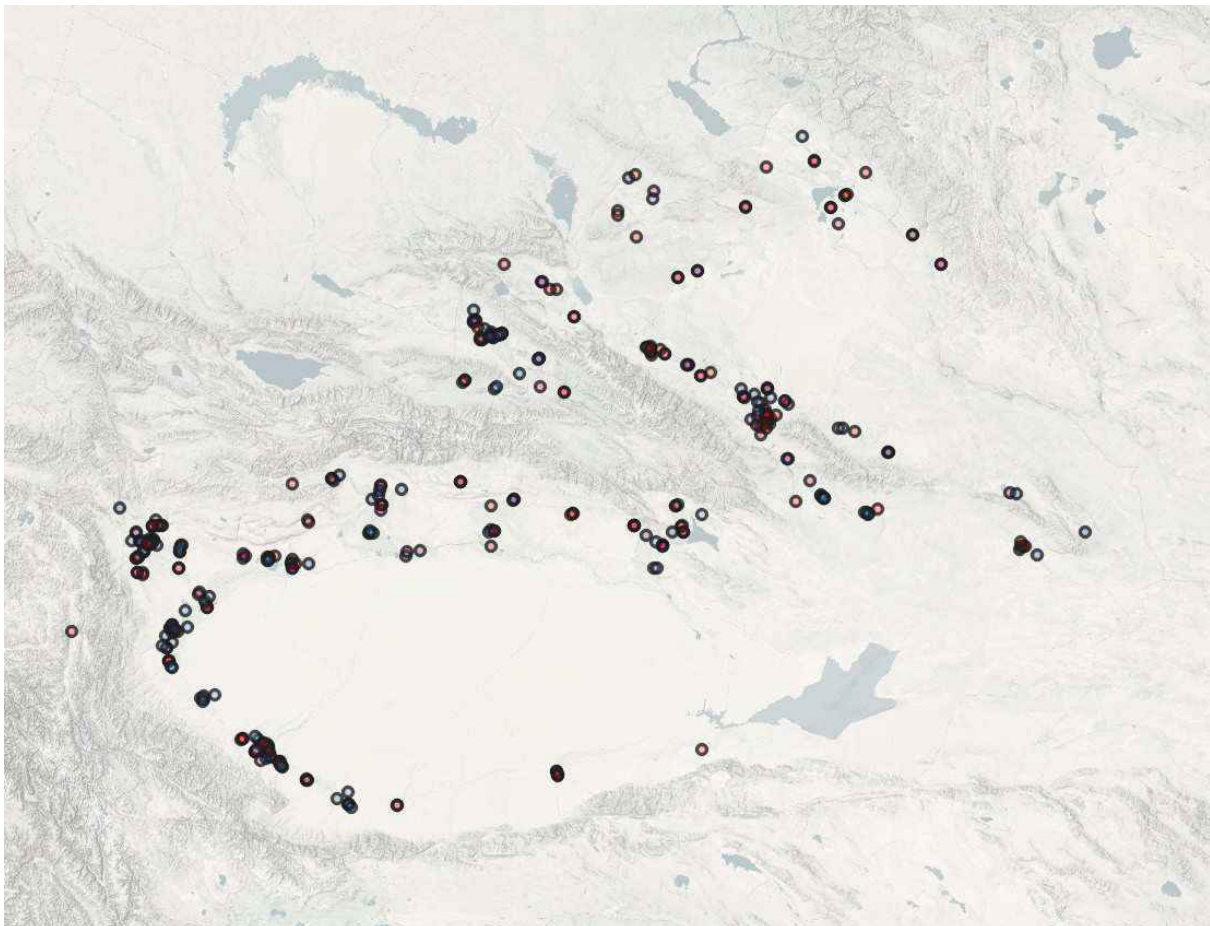
At the local level, smaller scale propaganda lectures have been organised by Fanghuiju work teams, village-based mosque management committees (驻村管寺管委会)³⁴¹ and neighbourhood or village committees.³⁴² Between 2015 and 2020, 12,000 Fanghuiju work teams and 1.1 million officials reportedly went into people’s homes in southern Xinjiang to deliver ‘de-extremification’ propaganda lectures.³⁴³ Local public pledge ceremonies have been organised by government offices (such as the procuratorate or the court),³⁴⁴ neighbourhood and village officials, local chapters of the All-China Women’s Federation (全国妇女联合会),³⁴⁵ and private businesses.³⁴⁶



7.2 Re-education camps

Researchers have identified a broad set of justifications used during the Re-education Campaign to detain Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities, including religious expressions (fasting, prayer, wearing a headscarf or having a beard),³⁴⁷ foreign links (past overseas travel, contact with someone abroad or applying for a passport),³⁴⁸ consumption of unapproved information (use of Zappya or WhatsApp) or having too many children.³⁴⁹ At times, there is no justification at all, as discussed in Section 4 of this report.

Figure 33: ASPI researchers have identified 388 detention facilities in Xinjiang built or expanded after 2017 (as of September 2020).



Source: Nathan Ruser, Xinjiang detention facilities dataset, ASPI, 24 September 2020, [online](#).

A number of party and government organs in Xinjiang began drafting a set of ‘de-extremification’ regulations in 2015, including the PLAC, the Public Security Department (公安厅), the Justice Department (司法厅) and others.³⁵⁰ Following central approvals, the Xinjiang De-extremification Regulations were enacted on 29 March 2017, only to be amended in October 2018 to retrospectively justify the network of re-education detention facilities.³⁵¹

As stated in Section 3 of this report, the Trinity mechanism is immediately responsible for handing Uyghurs over to the camps. Since 2018, re-education camps have been formally managed by re-education bureaus across Xinjiang at the county and prefecture level.³⁵² The bureau is overseen by

a taskforce called the Vocational and Education Training Leading Small Group (职业技能教育培训领导小组). The taskforce is headed by the local party secretary and includes bureaucrats from the Public Security Bureau, Justice Bureau (司法局), Education Bureau (教育局) and Health Commission (卫生健康委员会) at the local level.³⁵³

In Kashgar City, ASPI researchers have identified at least five re-education camps that were constructed or expanded after 2017.³⁵⁴ Until the creation of the Re-education Bureau, the Forestry Bureau managed Kashgar City's budget for the new detention facilities, which came to ¥9.75 million (US\$3 million) in 2017.³⁵⁵

Detainees are required to take classes and pass tests on a variety of subjects, including political ideology and the Chinese language. The local Education Bureau draws up test papers and records detainees' scores.³⁵⁶ A detainee's test scores are in theory one of the main criteria for their release.³⁵⁷

Figure 34: Re-education camp 'trainees' giving a performance wearing traditional Han clothing in a village.



Source: 'Three years of village-based work honed (my) will', *Gudao Xifeng*, online.

According to an official document from Karamay City (克拉玛依市), the local Human Resources and Social Security Bureau (人力资源和社会保障局) handles the paperwork when detainees are released from re-education camps.³⁵⁸ In at least one location, Pichan County (鄯善县) in southern Xinjiang, the Justice Bureau pays for the detainees' food and living expenses.³⁵⁹



7.3 The Fanghuiju program

As mentioned in Section 3, Fanghuiju is an ongoing policy that dispatches mostly Han officials and sometimes civilians to surveil and indoctrinate Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities during home visits or stays.³⁶⁰ In Chinese, Fanghuiju is shorthand for ‘Visit the People, Benefit the People, and Link the Hearts of the People’ (访民情、惠民生、聚民心). In February 2014, the Xinjiang Party Committee announced the initial round of Fanghuiju and plans to send down 200,000 cadres to local neighbourhoods and villages over three years.³⁶¹ Fanghuiju later merged with a similar program called ‘Becoming Family’ (民族团结一家亲)³⁶² and has continued until the time of writing.

Figure 35: Xinjiang deputy Governor Qadarbek Qamza conducting a home visit in a village near Yarkant County.



Source: ‘Three years of village-based work honed (my) will’, *Gudao Xifeng*, online.

The Fanghuiju program is organised by a Fanghuiju Office (访惠聚办公室) that exists at various administrative levels³⁶³ under the Organisation Department.³⁶⁴ In 2015, Xinjiang’s Organisation Department published several Fanghuiju handbooks, which clarified how to deal with potential issues that participants might encounter, such as what to do when a family refuses to let officials inside their home or how to interact with the family members of detainees.³⁶⁵ In addition to increasing the short-term visibility of the party-state in Xinjiang, the Fanghuiju program also seeks to cement long-term party control at the grassroots by restructuring the local political landscape.³⁶⁶

As of 2016, Xinjiang’s Fanghuiju Office was led by the head of the Organisation Department, Ma Xuejun,³⁶⁷ and included officials from the United Front Work Department, Propaganda Department, Party School, Women’s Federation, Xinjiang’s PLAC, and others.³⁶⁸

Following Chen Quanguo’s arrival in October 2016, the Xinjiang Party Committee launched the ‘Becoming Family’ initiative,³⁶⁹ which asked all of Xinjiang’s party cadres, government officials and managers at state-owned companies to integrate themselves into the lives of Uyghur or other minority families, creating bonds as fictitious close relatives.³⁷⁰

Figure 36: Chen Quanguo speaking at a regional ‘Becoming Family’ mass mobilisation conference.



Source: ‘Xinjiang holds mobilisation conference for the “Becoming Family” initiative’ [自治区召开“民族团结一家亲”活动动员大会], Guma County official WeChat account [皮山县零距离], 17 October 2016, [online](#).

In December 2017, the Xinjiang Party Committee launched a second round of ‘Becoming Family’, sending more than 1.12 million cadres and civilians into indigenous households for a five-day stay every two months.³⁷¹ In practice, the ‘Becoming Family’ initiative is an extension of and has merged with the Fanghuiju program,³⁷² although the ‘Becoming Family’ taskforce and office fall under the United Front Work Department³⁷³ and not the Organisation Department.

Since 2017, Chen Quanguo has personally headed the regional Fanghuiju taskforce (which sits atop the Fanghuiju Office).³⁷⁴ The same year, Xinjiang’s Development and Reform Commission (发展和改革委员会) developed an information management system to improve the efficiency of Fanghuiju visits.³⁷⁵

Almost every department and office in Xinjiang sends cadres to participate in the Fanghuiju program, including those that normally have nothing to do with surveillance or ethnic policy, such as the Department of Housing and Urban–Rural Development (住房和城乡建设厅)³⁷⁶ and the Agricultural Machinery Bureau (农牧业机械管理局).³⁷⁷



7.4 Coercive labour assignments

During the Re-education Campaign, Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities from rural parts of southern Xinjiang have been labelled ‘surplus labour’ (富余劳动力) or ‘poverty-stricken labour’ (贫困劳动力) and sent to work in factories in other parts of Xinjiang or China.³⁷⁸ Between 2017 and 2021, 600,000 ‘surplus labourers’ from southern Xinjiang were scheduled to be trained and transferred to new locations for work, according to state media.³⁷⁹

ASPI’s previous report *Uyghurs for sale* revealed that in factories far away from home, Uyghur workers typically live in segregated dormitories and undergo organised Chinese-language and ideological training outside working hours. They are subject to constant surveillance, and prohibited from practising their religion.³⁸⁰ Chinese media reported in 2017 that not a single villager in a remote part of Guma County (皮山县) would voluntarily sign up to a labour-transfer scheme in Anhui Province, 4,000 kilometres away, until party officials visited individual homes to pressure people into taking part.³⁸¹

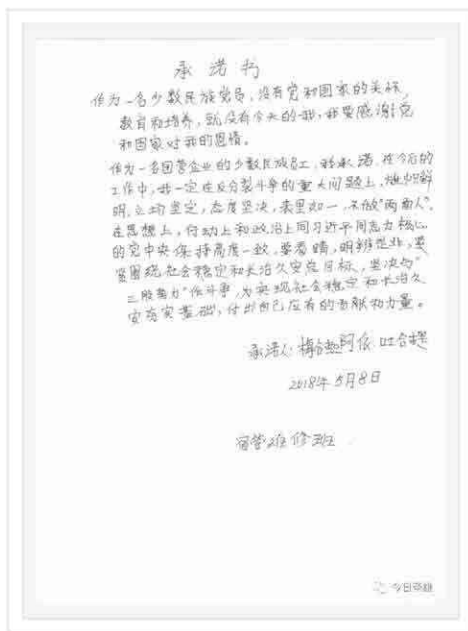
Xinjiang’s Department of Human Resources and Social Security (自治区人力资源和社会保障厅) is directly in charge of the job assignments. The department provides ‘free training’ to ‘poverty-stricken labourers’³⁸² and gives subsidies to participating companies.³⁸³

A labour-transfer taskforce known as the Systematic Labour Transfers from Poverty-Stricken Areas of Southern Xinjiang Leading Small Group (南疆四地州深度贫困地区有组织转移就业工作领导小组) was created in late 2018 at the regional level and headed by the head of the Xinjiang Organisation Department.³⁸⁴ Local branches of the taskforce are typically led by the area’s party and government leaders and are coordinated by the local Human Resources and Social Security Bureau.³⁸⁵ A 2017 government memo from Iwirghol District (伊州区) in Qumul City (哈密市) states that its labour-transfer taskforce assigned transfer quotas to its member departments.³⁸⁶ Another government press release says that a transfer quota was imposed on every official in Nilqa County (尼勒克县).³⁸⁷

Numerous official sources at all levels state that transferred workers are assigned minders and have limited freedom of movement.³⁸⁸ The Xinjiang Department of Human Resources and Social Security employs bilingual minders to monitor minority workers and runs a surveillance system called the ‘rural labourer job transfer management system’ (农村劳动力转移就业管理系统), which tracks the workers in real time.³⁸⁹

According to a government memo from Karashahar Hui Autonomous County (焉耆回族自治县), transferred workers are not allowed to leave their work assignments or go home without the approval of both the county and prefecture level labour transfer taskforces.³⁹⁰ Any ‘abnormal circumstances’ (异常情况) relating to the workers’ conduct are reported back to the county-level PLAC, the Public Security Bureau and the labour transfer taskforce in Xinjiang.³⁹¹ *Washington Post* reporters who visited a Nike factory in Qingdao in 2020 also found Uyghur workers not allowed to go home, and the exterior of the factory resembling a prison.³⁹²

Figure 37: Like all other employees at her factory, Uyghur worker Mihray Tohti wrote a loyalty pledge by hand to ‘speak up and brandish the sword’.



Letter of Commitment (Translation)

As an ethnic minority party member, there would be no me today without the care, education, and cultivation of the party and the state. I want to thank the party and the government for their grace and blessings.

As an ethnic minority of a state-owned enterprise, I promise, from this day forward in my work, to hold a firm position on the weighty battle against separatism. My attitude will be resolute; I will stand firm in my position; and stay true to my thoughts -- never a 'two-faced person'. In my thinking, actions and politics, I will remain firmly in line with the Central Party Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core. I will see [sic] things clearly, tell right from wrong, and strictly revolve around the general goal of social stability and enduring peace. In order to resolutely fight against the 'three evil forces' and consolidate the foundation for social stability and enduring peace, I should devote my share of strength and contribution.

Promisor: Mihray Tohti
8 May 2018

Dormitory management and maintenance

Source: 'National unity | Keep "speaking up and brandishing the sword"; promise to fight against the "three evil forces"' [民族团结|持续发声亮剑 誓与“三股势力”作斗争], Xinjiang Shengxiong Energy Resource Co., Ltd. official WeChat account [今日圣雄], 18 May 2018, [online](#).

As part of the labour-transfer schemes, various departments in and outside Xinjiang are tasked with 'fixing jobs' (落实岗位) for Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in their particular industries.³⁹³ Instead of providing welfare, these acts of 'job creation' have displaced Uyghurs and other indigenous people from their homeland, tearing communities and families apart.³⁹⁴ Transferred workers are typically between 18 and 40 years old,³⁹⁵ many of whom leave children, elderly relatives and livestock behind.³⁹⁶ In Kargilik County (叶城县, a 93% Uyghur county),³⁹⁷ for example, 2,428 elderly residents, 1,941 children and some 336,900 animals were placed under state care following job assignments.³⁹⁸

The Xinjiang Development and Reform Commission facilitates transfers of workers to fixed-asset investment projects (固定资产项目), which include infrastructure construction and other state-owned projects.³⁹⁹ The Xinjiang State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (自治区国有资产监督管理委员会)⁴⁰⁰ facilitated the transfer of 16,000 'poverty-stricken labourers' to state-owned enterprises between 2017 and 2019.⁴⁰¹ The Department of Human Resources and Social Security facilitates transfers to public welfare postings (公益性岗位). The Xinjiang Department of Industry and Information Technology (自治区工业和信息化厅) facilitates transfers of workers to the textile, garment, agricultural and electronics manufacturing sectors.⁴⁰² The Department of Housing and Urban-Rural Development facilitates transfers of workers to the construction sector.⁴⁰³ The Xinjiang Poverty Alleviation and Development Office (自治区扶贫开发办公室) coordinates with the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce (中华全国工商业联合会) to bring private enterprises to southern Xinjiang in preparation for job transfers.⁴⁰⁴



Figure 38: Transferred workers from southern Xinjiang ‘speak up and brandish the sword’ at a factory in Toqsun County.



Source: ‘Keep “speaking up and brandishing the sword”; promise to fight against the “three evil forces”’, Xinjiang Shengxiong Energy Resource Co., Ltd., 18 May 2018, [online](#).

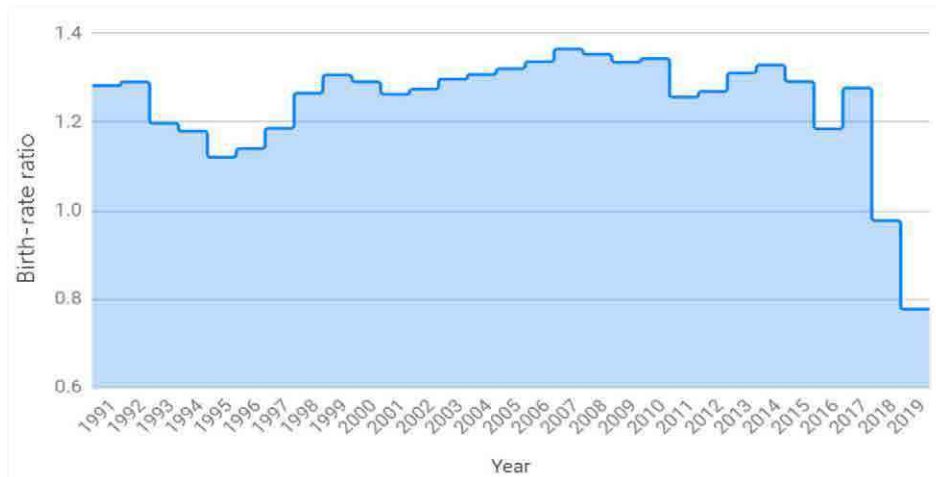
Other government and party agencies are tangentially involved in labour transfers. In 2019, the Women’s Federation in Keriye County, for example, sent 50 women to work at an electronics factory in Qingdao, Shandong, and 500 women to Ürümqi to work in housekeeping and catering services.⁴⁰⁵ Fanghuiju work teams have also visited homes and conducted unspecified ‘investigations’ in an attempt to persuade Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities to take up job assignments.⁴⁰⁶

7.5 Population control

During the Re-education Campaign, authorities in Xinjiang launched a series of crackdowns on ‘illegal births’ (违法生育) to curb the birthrate among Uyghur and other minority women.⁴⁰⁷ Minority women found to have violated ‘family planning’ (计划生育) policies face hefty fines, disciplinary punishment, internment and mandatory sterilisation.⁴⁰⁸ ‘Illegal births’ that had occurred as early as in 1992 were retrospectively punished.⁴⁰⁹

As a result, Xinjiang’s official birthrate fell by nearly half (48.74%) in the two years between 2017 and 2019.⁴¹⁰ The decrease has been even more dramatic in southern Xinjiang, where the highest proportions of indigenous people live.⁴¹¹ These ‘family planning’ measures specifically target Uyghurs and other indigenous groups, while outside Xinjiang the party-state is attempting to boost birthrates by discouraging Han women from getting non-medical abortions.⁴¹²

Figure 39: Crude birthrate ratio, Xinjiang versus the whole of China, 1991-2019.



Source: Nathan Ruser, James Leibold, 'Family de-planning: the coercive campaign to drive down indigenous birth rates in Xinjiang', ASPI, 12 May 2021, [online](#).

In a leaked name list of camp detainees from Karakash County (墨玉县),⁴¹³ 149 out of 484 listed detainees had been held for having too many children.⁴¹⁴ In 2017, Abdushukur Umar, a Uyghur fruit merchant, was detained in a camp and later sentenced to seven years in prison—one for each child, authorities told relatives who were interviewed by *Associated Press*.⁴¹⁵

The key government organ responsible for Xinjiang's family planning policies is the Xinjiang Health Commission. In 2020 alone, the commission spent ¥140 million (US\$22 million) on reducing birthrates and cracking down on 'illegal births' in southern Xinjiang.⁴¹⁶ Following 2017 and 2018 directives from the Xinjiang Health Commission on family planning policy,⁴¹⁷ a taskforce called the 'Targeted Crackdown on Illegal Births Leading Small Group' (违法生育专项治理行动领导小组) was created at the prefecture,⁴¹⁸ county⁴¹⁹ and township levels, as well as inside government departments and companies.⁴²⁰

The office of the taskforce is located within the Health Commission, and its members include officials from a wide range of government and party organs, such as the Public Security Bureau, United Front Work Department, Propaganda Department, Education Bureau (教育局), Women's Federation, Commission for Discipline Inspection (纪律检查委员会), Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau (民族宗教事务局), Civil Affairs Bureau (民政局), Finance Bureau (教育局), Human Resources and Social Security Bureau Justice Bureau, and others.⁴²¹ Xinjiang's Regulations on Population and Family Planning (新疆维吾尔自治区人口与计划生育条例), revised in 2017, also lists most of those agencies as helping to implement family planning policies.⁴²²

At the grassroots level, neighbourhood or village committee party secretaries, Fanghuiju work teams, family planning clerks and grid managers carry out the day-to-day crackdown on illegal births.⁴²³ Punishing illegal births is a key performance indicator for local officials,⁴²⁴ and any violation of family planning regulations is grounds for their immediate demotion or dismissal.⁴²⁵

This campaign to reduce Uyghur and other minority births follows Xi Jinping's 2014 directive for the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps⁴²⁶ to 'optimise population resources' (优化人口资源).⁴²⁷ The Han-dominated paramilitary organisation interpreted the directive to mean prioritising population expansion, especially in the Uyghur-dominated south.⁴²⁸



8. Conclusion

By examining the Chinese party-state's governance methods, this report illustrates how human rights abuses are being carried out in Xinjiang and by whom. Mass campaigns aimed at political realignment are not artefacts of a bygone era. Rather, they are occurring at a time when Chinese society is more tightly connected with the world than ever before, and pursued along racial and religious lines in Xinjiang with profound social impacts. Consequently, this is the first PRC mass campaign that liberal democracies have experienced up close, while knowingly or unknowingly consuming its outputs, such as products made with forced labour.⁴²⁹

Xinjiang's bureaucratic inner workings fit a wider pattern of authoritarian rule in China. In fact, many of the governance techniques used in Xinjiang during the two campaigns were first conceived elsewhere, such as the grid-management system (Beijing, 2004)⁴³⁰ and the ten-household joint defence (Tibet, 2015).⁴³¹

Some of Xinjiang's governance tools are also being replicated elsewhere. In 2017, the Xinjiang PLAC hosted 22 inspection tours from the central government and other provinces.⁴³² In 2018, Ningxia's PLAC Secretary, Zhang Yunsheng (张韵声), vowed to 'learn and borrow' from Xinjiang's experiences after inspecting the Stability Maintenance Command and the IJOP.⁴³³ The Hong Kong Government's counterterrorism taskforce also made a high-profile inspection tour to Xinjiang that year.⁴³⁴

Further research should be conducted on the psychological drivers of China's mass political campaigns, the collective trauma they generate and their social implications. Many senior Chinese officials who experienced personal trauma during the Cultural Revolution helped orchestrate the Xinjiang crackdown with revolutionary zeal. Two of the most notable cases are Zhu Hailun⁴³⁵ and Xi Jinping.⁴³⁶ Both men were subjected to re-education as teenagers (Zhu in Xinjiang and Xi in rural Shaanxi), and subsequently claimed their experience of hard labour was transformative.

After becoming 'redder than red' to survive his family's ordeal during the Cultural Revolution,⁴³⁷ Xi Jinping has turned to Mao's playbook in mobilising the vast resources of the Chinese bureaucratic system to manufacture stability and conformity across the nation. The Uyghurs and other indigenous communities have borne the brunt of those efforts, and the two campaigns discussed in this report have led to increased interethnic distrust and resentment between Han and indigenous communities in Xinjiang.⁴³⁸

Without a fundamental reckoning inside the party-state system, as well as a wider rethink of race relations and settler-colonialism across Chinese society, the campaign policies in Xinjiang are unlikely to be fully unwound; nor are the wrongs of the two campaigns likely to be redressed (平反).

Notes

- 1 The Chinese party-state officially recognises 56 *minzu* (民族) groups in China: a single Han majority and 55 numerically much smaller groups that currently make up nearly 9% of China's population. The term *minzu* is deeply polysemic and notoriously difficult to translate. Depending on the context of its use, the term can connote concepts similar to 'nation', 'race', 'people' and 'ethnicity' in English. Party officials initially used the English term 'nationality' to render the term into English. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the party gradually pivoted away from nationality, preferring the term 'ethnic minorities' for the non-Han groups and reserving the term 'nation' for the collective identity and name of the 'Chinese nation-race' (中华民族). See James Leibold, 'The minzu net: China's fragmented national form,' *Nations and Nationalism*, 2016, 22(3):425–428. While party officials reject any assertion of indigeneity in China, Harvard historian Mark Elliott argues that China's non-Han peoples are better thought of as indigenous communities rather than as 'ethnic minorities', which is a term widely used to refer to migrant populations in places such as Canada or Australia, as these groups 'continue to live on lands to which they have reasonably strong ancestral claims; in their encounter with the majority Other, all of them assume the status of "natives" vis-a-vis the representatives of a central (often formerly colonial or quasi-colonial) government from the outside; and all of them find themselves in positions of relative weakness as a result of an asymmetrical power structure, often the consequence of technological inferiority.' Mark Elliott, 'The case of the missing indigene: debate over a "second-generation" ethnic policy', *The China Journal*, 2015, 73:207, [online](#). Throughout this report and our website, we've used the terms 'indigenous', 'ethnic minority' and 'nationality' interchangeably to gloss the term *minzu*, depending on the context. When we refer to the Uyghurs generically, we're also referring to other Turkic communities in Xinjiang: the Kazakhs, Tajiks, Kyrgyzs and Uzbeks who have also been targeted in China's crackdown in Xinjiang.
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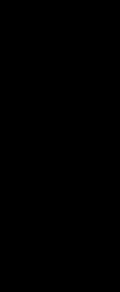
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Acronyms and abbreviations

ASPI	Australian Strategic Policy Institute
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
ICPC	International Cyber Policy Centre
IJOP	Integrated Joint Operations Platform
PLAC	Political and Legal Affairs Commission
PRC	People's Republic of China
VPN	virtual private network





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