

## Briefs | Analyses

# The Uyghur Issue: Beyond Human Rights

Colonization, counter-terrorism rhetoric, AI development  
The vanishing of cultural spaces of resistance

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## TERROR CAPITALISM

An interview with Darren Byler

**The oppression of the Uyghurs began with a colonization process. Could you tell us more about this? How has it developed?**

Settler colonialism is defined by three factors: material and cultural dispossession, institutional domination, and settler occupation. My book *Terror Capitalism* shows that the underlying source of tension in Xinjiang is a process of dispossession that began in the 1990s as the state and corporations began to incentivise non-Muslim migration into Uyghur majority areas in Southern Xinjiang. This area has immense oil, natural gas, and cotton resources. This process of dispossession built into an internal settler colonial dynamic as Uyghurs lost control of their schools, mosques, banks, the police, and their grass-roots political institutions. I also show how the new economy brought by settler presence produced a higher cost of living while simultaneously allowing state and non-Muslim actors to seize Uyghur land and block Uyghurs from jobs in the new industries. While it may not have been the intention of the state to exclude Uyghurs and create animosity, the Han-led development campaign had the effect of further impoverishing Uyghurs, creating greater forms of desperation and farmer protests in the 1990s and 2000s.

**How did the rhetoric of terrorism become part of this process?**

I've found that most violence in the region centered around protest and discontentment that rose out of this experience of loss. While there are a handful of Uyghur suicide attacks, such as the March 1, 2014 attack at the Kunming train station, that do meet international standards for what constitutes terrorism, most incidents classified as terrorism by the Chinese state appear to be unplanned protests and skirmishes between Uyghur farmers and armed police. The counter-terrorism laws that were implemented in 2016 are some of the broadest counter-terrorism laws in the world. As I have seen in classified police documents, this means that things as minor as attending a mosque more than 200 times, downloading WhatsApp, or being part of a Quran study group on WeChat were considered terrorism or extremism activities and reasons for detention. Extremely broad definitions of terrorism became a tool of removing people who were

viewed as problematic from their ancestral lands. In my book, I argue that the contemporary global rhetoric of “terrorism” and the tactics and technologies of “counter-terrorism” function to normalize the devaluation of the bodies, religion, and culture of Muslims. The terms “terrorist” or “fanatic” emerge out of colonial contexts and were used to delegitimize the claims and the violent and non-violent resistance of the colonized. We should understand the term terrorist as a contemporary iteration of older terms such as “barbarian” and “savage.” This is not to say that violence characterized as terrorism is justified. Quite the contrary, I am arguing that such violence should be regarded as “mass killings” or murder in the same way that violence by non-Muslims is regarded in both China and the West. Because of the way the term post-9/11 is associated with Muslim others, the sign of “the terrorist” should be understood to produce a new global sequence in racialization. The racialization of Uyghurs as an ethnic other that is always/already a potential terrorist is one aspect of this process.

**You argue that one of the primary forms of capital produced in the camps is data. May you elaborate? How is the repression of Uyghurs related to China’s goal to lead the world in artificial intelligence (AI) development?**

The central conceptual framework of my book, terror capitalism, does more than describe the growth of the security industrial complex that has swallowed up Xinjiang, it considers how the data harvesting and analytics of technology-led securitization are productive, rather than merely descriptive. Data harvesting and surveillance produce forms of evaluation and enclosure, which in turn produce a new type of workers who are assigned to work both in and outside the camp system. These Muslim workers, who are not quite prisoners but are also not free, are now thought to be a carrier of the Xinjiang economy according to the regional development ministry. Ultimately, terror capitalism is about building new frontiers for global capital while subtracting the way of life Uyghurs had before its arrival.

In addition, part of what I want to understand is how the broader economy and politics of China and the world have led to the current situation in Xinjiang. I was living in Xinjiang in 2014 when the People’s War on Terror began and heard already at that time about the disappearance and ‘reeducation’ of the relatives of young Uyghur migrants that I was meeting in the capital city Urumqi. The first detentions were related primarily to human surveillance, with local police taking away people they understood to be political leaders. So it was not initially led by the technology companies. Post-2015, which is when AI technologies began to break through worldwide, those machine-learning assisted surveillance systems arrived and were implemented at an unprecedented scale. The state invested around 100 billion USD in infrastructure development, with a significant portion earmarked for AI-assisted digital forensics tools and face recognition systems. They also implemented a new biometric ID card system that included facial imagery, voice signatures, iris scans, and other markers. This dataset for the 25 million people of Xinjiang—including both Muslims and

non-Muslims—is one of the most symmetrical and data-rich datasets in the world. So from the point of view of tech companies, receiving access to this data provides them with a way of training algorithms and building site-specific tools that can then be adapted for many other purposes. In the book, I cite a study that shows that within about two years of receiving access to Chinese government data, face recognition companies are able to build and sell commercial products. Supporting Chinese state security is really the most viable path for AI companies to succeed in China’s digital economy.

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The largest companies, China’s official “national AI champions” like HikVision, Dahua, SenseTime, Yitu, Megvii, iFlytek, and others, appear to have benefited the most in terms of investment and contracts related to China’s anti-Muslim war on terror. These companies are at the center of Xi Jinping administration’s drive to compete with and surpass European and North American companies when it comes to breakthroughs in artificial intelligence development by 2030. While Chinese companies now lead the field when it comes to face recognition, in most other domains of the global digital economy technology firms from the United States are still dominant. And many of the technologies used in China are dependent on components from firms around the world. In my writing, I argue against a “Tech Cold War” framing and suggest instead that what is necessary are global regulations of technology-led oppression.

**A vast army of police assistants, including many young Uyghurs, enforce the rules of the camps and monitor the population. What do we know about these low-level perpetrators?**

In 2017 local Public Security Bureaus in Xinjiang hired around 90,000 new security personnel. Around 60,000 of these new workers were assigned to work in more than 9,000 newly built police stations called People’s Convenience Police Stations. These stations functioned as surveillance hubs as part of an urban grid policing network. They were built several hundred meters apart from each other and had banks of television screens inside them. The low-level workers were supposed to monitor the screens and conduct spot checks of people within the jurisdictional boundary of their grid. They were given digital forensics devices that they used to scan the IDs and phones of people they profiled as potentially suspicious. When

I visited in 2018 I observed the way they targeted Muslims and ignored Han people. Part of their job was to make sure that non-Muslims were not inconvenienced by the surveillance and checkpoints. In classified police documents, the workers talk about scanning more than 1,000 phones per week within one of these small grids. They said that the phones of many people that had not yet been detained had been scanned more than 10 times.

One of the low-level workers, a young Kazakh policeman, said in an interview after he reached Kazakhstan that when the police assistants scanned someone's phone the phone gave a color-coded diagnosis. If it flashed red it meant the person was untrustworthy and should be immediately detained. They loaded those people into a police van. After the van was full, it would be taken to a pre-trial detention center, where interrogators would decide if the person should be sent to the "closed concentrated education and training center" or criminally prosecuted. Another interviewee, a Uyghur man from Urumqi, talked about how he saw those vans be filled up every day in his neighborhood. This went on for months and months. After the camps were built and crowded with detainees, many of the police assistants were also assigned to work in the camps themselves as guards.

Many of the police assistants did not know exactly what their job was going to be when they agreed to do it. They just knew that they would be well paid and that since they were working for the police, they and their families would be protected. They were just regular people, mostly farmers, with no police training other than a 10-day bootcamp when they began the work. As they learned about the camps that were being built and saw their neighbors and friends being sent to them, many regretted the choice they had made. But state workers who showed any mercy to people deemed untrustworthy, or who questioned the system or quit their jobs were also detained. They were told that they possessed state secrets, so they were not supposed to talk about anything they experienced.

**Some Han Chinese are also forced to move in with Uyghur families to monitor them 24/7. Could you tell us more about this so-called "relatives" campaign?**

When I visited the region in 2018 I interviewed a number of these Han "volunteers" who were sent to Southern Xinjiang to monitor the families of the people who had been detained and others were deemed potentially "untrustworthy." According to Chinese state media, there are over 1 million of these mostly Han workers. They are not really volunteers but rather selected by the Communist Party Committee in their place of employment to represent the company as part of the campaign. They are told that if they refused they could lose their job or be demoted, and that if they accepted they would receive bonuses and advancement. Their job is to work with village-level police and the Civil Affairs Ministry to help create digital files for all of the people who had been added to the police watchlists. They are supposed to monitor the Muslim families they were assigned to adopt as their "brothers and sisters," and make sure

they are not showing any signs of resistance to the campaign. During weekend visits at the height of the campaign in 2017 and 2018, they brought the families gifts as a kind of compensation for the loss of income that came from their family member being taken away. But they also tested the religiosity and Chineseness of the family by making sure that they were willing to drink alcohol, eat food without asking if it was halal or not, and whether they spoke Uyghur in front of them. They brought candy for the children since the children often spoke Chinese better than their parents and would tell them about things their parents said when the state workers were not there.

..... The human and digital surveillance that these "relatives" produce is one of the most intimate forms of state violence that this entire system has produced. It has forced regular Han citizens to take a side in supporting the campaign. And it produced extreme

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forms of antagonism between the volunteers and the Uyghurs who were forced to host them. In some cases, it appears that the visits produced forms of sexual violence toward Muslim women whose husbands had been taken.

Of course, while the majority of Han people in the region and across the country do appear to support this system of anti-Muslim racism, in my research I found that there was a small, but a substantial minority of Han people in Xinjiang who tried to push back against this system. In my book, I talk about the way Han people who grew up in Xinjiang often see the system as oppressive and counter-productive. And the way they try to help their Uyghur neighbors. They have limited ways of helping, and they have to do it secretly, but still, some do try. One of the reasons why we have been able to obtain hundreds of thousands of classified documents is because people in the government and concerned citizens want the world to know what is happening to the Uyghurs.

**What does the system signal regarding the future of surveillance?**

In Xinjiang, it appears that state authorities are thinking about this system as a generational process. They are using automated technologies and an army of low-level security workers to remove significant numbers of the adult population from the villages and make them productive as factory workers, while at the same time they are separating them from their children. More than 500,000 children are being raised in residential boarding schools in the region. My feeling is that the state recognizes that the adults cannot be fully "reeducated," but they believe with the assistance of technology they can be permanently controlled. It appears their goal is to focus even

more attention on the next generation of Uyghurs, assuring that they are fully assimilated and disassociated with their Uyghur difference. Histories of colonial processes in North America and Australia show that they are not likely to be successful in this effort. We also see elements of the surveillance that is used in Xinjiang being used in other minority areas such as Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, Qinghai, Tibet and Yunnan. In those areas, police departments have also purchased the digital forensics tools used to scan people's phones. And in some cases, they are using grid-style policing and face recognition cameras.

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**The cost of building, implementing, and maintaining systems like the one in Xinjiang is quite high. Unless the state feels an economic and political threat they will likely not commit to similar systems elsewhere in China. The one possible exception to this is Hong Kong.**

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to this is Hong Kong. With the introduction of the new National Security Law in Hong Kong in 2020, it is possible that a similar digital enclosure system could be built there. But right now, most people in Hong Kong are using platforms and technologies that are owned or built by Western companies so state control is a bit limited.

Outside of China, we see Chinese firms building surveillance systems as well, but again not at the density of systems and human labour associated with systems in Xinjiang. One troubling trend I'm seeing is the way governments in places like Cambodia and Zimbabwe are confining internet traffic to a single state-controlled provider, giving the government access to the data of people within their jurisdiction. This appears to me to be a step toward a state-controlled digital enclosure that mimics aspects of Chinese digital control. But again, this is not a replication of systems in Xinjiang, but a more general replication of Chinese systems of digital control.

**Was some of the policing system deployed against Uyghurs used on the general population during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

China's response to COVID-19 centered on the grid-style policing that was used to the greatest effect in Xinjiang prior to this. This meant that urban spaces were divided into grassroots level grids that were managed by the Civil Affairs Ministry and "volunteers" that were drafted by their employers. The primary way that the spread of Covid was stopped in China was by

locking people down within their grids and mobilizing millions of state workers. Over time Chinese AI national champions also pioneered new forms of medical surveillance, using apps and GPS tracking, to determine who had been exposed. The app interfaces appear quite similar to the phone scanning tools that were used in Xinjiang. They give the state workers readings of green, yellow, and red. However, rather than tracking ideological "viruses" of so-called terrorism, they are now tracking actual viruses, but the technology and systems were quite similar. The face recognition companies that benefited the most from policing contracts in Xinjiang also marketed heat tracking camera systems that were very similar to the one they built to guard the perimeters of camps in Xinjiang. In response to Covid, they were fine-tuned to detect fevers rather than simply the presence of heat signatures as they do in camp security contexts.

**Is international pressure making any difference against the totalitarian system in Xinjiang?**

The past US administration, and conservative lawmakers in the US and in Europe, have used the Xinjiang case as a way of demonizing the Chinese political system and amplifying what they see as a global threat to democracy. At the same time, the same people often refuse to acknowledge the role that the rhetoric, tactics, and technologies of the Global War on Terror have played in demonizing Muslims around the world. They also often fail to consider the way an emerging economic rivalry between Western countries and China is linked to their concern for Uyghurs. The Chinese political system and threats to democracy are certainly a cause for concern, but the argument of my book is that the Xinjiang case requires a more fundamental critique of global Islamophobia, the ethics of surveillance, and the colonial effects of global capitalism. My book is also suggesting that the best approach to "counter-terrorism" would be an active process of decolonization and anti-racism.

All that said, international pressure appears to have accelerated the response of the Chinese state to close some of the camps, while converting others to factories and still others to prisons. So the effect appears to be an attempt by China to better hide what it is doing and also to try to legalize the mass internment. I think they were quite startled by the way global brands began to relocate their supply chains in order to avoid coerced Uyghur labor. The start of boycotts of Chinese surveillance companies has also had an effect on China's global ambitions. The moral cost of the mass internment and coercive labour system in Xinjiang is really just beginning to be felt in China. My sense is that it already has done a great deal of damage to China's global reputation as an aspiring world leader. It makes it less likely that China will be seen as a global cultural leader. But it remains to be seen how the Chinese public will grapple with the fallout in years to come.

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**To go further**

This interview was conducted by Aurélie Louchart following Darren Byler's talk at the [EURICS/IFRAE/Université de Liège webinar on \*Capitalism, Regimes of Surveillance, and the Covid-19 Pandemics: Lessons From China and Beyond\*](#).

## Vanessa Frangville

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# THE EMERGENCE AND THE VANISHING OF A SPACE OF RESISTANCE

The Uyghur online series *Anar Pishti*

Launched in February 2016 by an Ürümqi-based team of young Uyghurs and Kazakhs, *Anar Pishti* (Ch.: 石榴熟了) is a web series that uses parody, sarcasm, and spoofs to tackle critical issues in today's Uyghur society. Inspired by Chinese-language *egao* or short satiric vignettes, *Anar Pishti* soon gained popularity among Uyghurs and Han viewers. Four seasons were produced between 2016 and 2017, which opened a space for laughing off tensions in a region under tight state surveillance.

The series' title, *Anar Pishti* ("The pomegranate is ripe"), is an amusing nod to Xi Jinping's policy of cultural assimilation and to a political slogan widely spread in the Uyghur region after 2015: "all ethnic groups should unite together like pomegranate seeds" (民族像石榴籽一样紧紧抱在一起). This title sets the tone for the early stage of the series: it uses triviality and lightheartedness amid an unprecedented crackdown on Uyghur culture and civil society to create a space of expression. It is indeed widespread among Uyghurs to use jokes, curses, or irony to present their feelings and frustrations on uncomfortable topics: humor can be a covert way to express discontent publicly without taking too many risks in an uncertain environment. Thus, seasons 1-4, shot in Uyghur with Chinese subtitles, address various societal issues related to gender roles, consumption, family, addictions, unemployment, poverty, but also pervasive State surveillance practices and their impact on Uyghurs' every life. Besides, in a context of crisis where social bonds are threatened (by family separation, surveillance, and fear), *Anar Pishti* generates a space to share particular jokes based on play word in Uyghur, on individual stories or interpretations of history

that resonate and make sense for most Uyghurs but may leave outsiders puzzled, thus maintaining a strong sense of "in-group-ness" and a feeling of unity among young Uyghurs. In many ways, the first seasons are a window on the cultural intimacy of Uyghur society before 2018.

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### Holding on thanks to humor

For instance, in a parody of the famous novel *Journey to the West*, the monk Xuanzang and his travel companions, as they enter the Uyghur region, are constantly arrested by "demons," including a policeman and a customs officer. The monk is outraged by all the controls he must go through and is particularly horrified by the body scanning, which he considers "disrespectful" and "insulting." He remains doubtful that these demons are here to "ensure the security of every ethnic group." Through the words and reactions of a popular Chinese mythological figure, *Anar Pishti* reveals the mixed feelings of many Uyghurs who are randomly checked at every step.

In another episode, the lead character struggles to buy cabbage in a street market. First, he is required to record his details in a notebook and to explain what he will do with cabbage. He is then required to prove that he has already bought the meat he wants to cook the cabbage with. However, the meat stall owner also asked for proof that he had bought cabbage first. The man eventually leaves the market without food. Apart from the absurdity of the situation that can trigger laughter among viewers, the scene offers insight into the complexity of carrying out everyday life activities. Mistrust and fear have permeated so deeply in every layer of the Uyghur society that every act, as trivial as it may be, can be an object of suspicion. Not following procedures may lead to arrest or punishment. A last example shows two characters dressed as Superman and Spiderman, standing on a roof and setting off to rescue an endangered woman. However, the superheroes are stopped by a policeman as soon as they step a foot in the streets. Unable to show their ID and *bianmin cards* (a passbook system implemented in 2014 and replaced in 2016 by a new biometric ID system that tracks Uyghurs' every movement and



communication), they recite in Mandarin the twelve “socialist core values.” Performing the official rhetoric of a harmonious society, the turned-outlaws-superheroes can leave free.

### The 2018 shift

Many other episodes show how conveying negative affects about surveillance can be done through humor and absurd comedy: *Anar Pishti* vignettes only ridicule experiences that all Uyghurs share to make them more bearable. However, as control continued to tighten in the Uyghur region in 2017, a shift took place towards the end of season 4 and following a year-long silence. The series eventually resumed in May 2018, with a complete change in tone and topics. While previous episodes mostly featured Uyghur and Kazakh, Han characters appear systematically in most episodes after 2018. The introduction of more Han characters implied a change in Uyghur characters’ relationship, as it also marked a shift from Uyghur as the main language of the series, to Mandarin Chinese becoming the only language heard from season 5. This move from Uyghur to Chinese wiped out any possibility to use puns or witty jokes based on word play that only Uyghur speakers could understand and that were very loosely (if at all) translated into Chinese in previous seasons. As a result, jokes became more regulated and focused on limited topics; furthermore, the intimacy created exclusively between Uyghur-speaking actors and viewers disappeared, as Mandarin was imposed as the only reference language. Even the title of the series was changed to *Anar Rohi* or “Pomegranate spirit” (石榴精神) from season 4. The term spirit powerfully evokes other Chinese political propagandist set expressions like “socialist spirit” (社会主义精神) or “national spirit” (民族精神). This new title thus refocuses on a shared effort to create cohesion among various ethnic groups.

Topic wise, episodes from season 5 carefully avoid references to surveillance or arbitrary arrest. Narratives refocus around love stories (including between Han and Uyghurs),

banal domestic jokes and family spoofs. This radical rewriting of a popular Uyghur web series allowed its creators to carry on their work and even to release a first full-length movie in 2021: *One of the Ripe Pomegranate Is Shot to the End* (石榴熟了之一拍到底), that certainly deserves more exploration.

Because *Anar Pishti* sketches were largely informal, they didn’t seem to be systematic critiques or complaints at first glance. Moreover, the series astutely appropriated popular references that could speak to any Chinese and Uyghur viewers alike: parodies of Hong Kong gangster movies, martial art movies, Chinese classical literature, Hollywood superheroes and Arabic folktales, thus creating a subtle balance between familiarity and strangeness. However, within a year, as the series became increasingly successful, such opportunistic forms of resistance ceased to fly under the radar of the authorities. What happened between 2017 and 2018 remains unknown, as any attempts to contact the series creators have failed and may now put them at risk. Whether pressure was exerted on the team seems beyond doubt, however it is difficult to identify where the pressure came from and to which extent self-censorship also came into play. Such radical changes in the series outline a general trend of tightening ideological control over cultural content and stakeholders in the Uyghur region and illustrate a move towards a cultural and social re-engineering that reframes every aspect of Uyghur life: their language, experience of everyday realities, daily interactions and meaning to what happens around them. Any space of transgression or resistance is targeted and destroyed. In this context, laughter is allowed only if it doesn’t challenge the authority.

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### To go further

This article is based on Vanessa Frangville’s talk at the [EURICS/IFRAE/Université de Liège webinar on \*Capitalism, Regimes of Surveillance, and the Covid-19 Pandemics: Lessons From China and Beyond\*](#) on December 16, 2021

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