

Chinese Re-Education Camps in Xinjiang: Biopower and Governmentality in Chinese Ideology

By

Richard Can Anar

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Supervisor: Prof. Michael Merlingen

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Abstract

Historically China has been using different types of controlling and disciplining techniques on its minorities for many decades. Uyghurs, a Turkic-Muslim minority, has been brutally oppressed in the last decade due to riots in the country's Northwest. The Chinese state swiftly mobilized several securitization policies within the region, most notably: re-education camps. Re-education camps operate on a fine-tuned system of Chinese biopower, one that aims at transforming and assimilating Uyghurs to generate productive and trustworthy bodies that fit in the state-capitalist machinery of the Chinese polity. Prominent scholars have argued that Chinese biopolitics utilizes perpetual exclusionary practices where Sino-Uyghur relations are bound by endless oppression and punishment. However, the data suggests that Chinese biopolitics creates conditional integration possibilities, in other words, a paradoxical existence for Uyghurs where their culture and religion must be overwritten by the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party. This inclusionary aspect of Chinese biopower is generated through re-education camps that function solely to identify Uyghurs that are fit to be transformed and separate Uyghurs that reject any assimilatory practices. The data suggest that conditional integration does exist under strict conditions of permanent assessment and surveillance. The (re)inclusionary aspect of Chinese biopower is widely understudied due to the lack of opportunities to conduct independent field studies. Nonetheless, the research presented aims at furthering existing research to achieve a more nuanced understanding of the current situation in the Uyghur region.

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Introduction

My homeland has no place for my body

Other lands have no room for my soul¹

18. November 2020, Washington DC

-Aynur Qaram

Tr. Joshua L. Freeman

Uyghurs are a Muslim/Turkic minority living in the far north-west of China. They predominantly speak a linguistically Turkic language and live in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) or, as referred to by the Uyghurs, Eastern Turkistan.² Officially 12.7184 Uyghurs are living in the region. Additionally, it is estimated that around 500.000 Uyghurs live outside of the Uyghur homeland, mainly in Turkey and in other Central Asian

¹ “The Poet Aynur Qaram.” Channel Draw, April 13, 2021. <https://www.channeldraw.org/2021/04/13/the-poet-aynur-qaram/>.

² The name Xinjiang (‘New Frontier’ in Chinese) was given to the land after the Qing Empire’s conquest of the region in the 18th century. The name Xinjiang officially used since 1880, when the region was included officially as part of the modern Chinese empire. Uyghurs consciously avoid the name as the Turkic name for the region is *Shārqi Turkistan* or Eastern Turkistan. Another pre-Qing name of the region is *Altishahr*, or six cities in Uyghur. In his book “*The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History (2014)*” Rian Thum points out that even though the name Altishahr never ‘officially’ existed on a map, the use of the name is still relevant amongst Uyghurs today. The name Eastern Turkistan was officially used in the 1930s and 1940s, during two decades of Uyghur independence movements, resulting in two short-lived independent Eastern Turkistan Republics during the two decades. The name Eastern Turkistan has been linked with extremist behaviours in China. Therefore many Uyghurs prefer the name *Uyghur Diyari* which translates to ‘Uyghur region.’ As suggested by Sean R. Roberts in his book “*The War on Uyghurs (2020)*”, as a scholar, it is rather difficult to use any of these terms without either side presuming a specific politico-ideological agenda. Therefore, this thesis will use the name ‘Uyghur homeland’ or ‘Uyghur region’ when referring to internal matters of the region and Xinjiang when official Chinese statements or policies are in question.

countries. Uyghurs have been living amongst Turkic tribes in the region for around 2000 years and have conflicted with expanding Chinese armies for hundreds of years. Since 1759, when the Qing empire took over the Uyghur region, the Uyghurs and Chinese have been in a cycle of on and off total domination. There were two short periods of Uyghur independence between 1933– 1934 and 1944–1949 in the First Eastern Turkistan Republic and the second Eastern Turkistan Republic. Later, the Chinese Communist Party would strive, so far as was possible, to model the borders of its new People's Republic of China (PRC) after those of the Qing Empire. By this logic, the Uyghur homeland was transformed from dependencies of the Inner Asian Qing Empire to an integral part of the nation-state of China.³ In 1949 the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) ended the last independent Uyghur Republic, and the region has been part of the People's Republic of China since then.

In the 1990s, some Uyghur groups who have been calling for an independent Eastern Turkistan formed the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ESTIM). The group is a designated terrorist group by the United Nations Security Council,⁴ And the U.S.⁵ While the organization has been most active in the late 1990s and early 2000s, inciting knife attacks and bombings against Chinese Police in the Uyghur region, its activities have decreased after China stepped up security measures in the region and created security alliances with its Central Asian partners to decrease illegal border crossings into the Uyghur region.⁶ Furthermore, a crucial turning

³ Thum, Rian. Introduction. In *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.

⁴ "EASTERN TURKISTAN ISLAMIC MOVEMENT Security Council." United Nations. United Nations. April 7, 2011. https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/entity/eastern-turkistan-islamic-movement.

⁵ The U.S. designated ESTIM a terrorist organization in 2003 under Title 8 of the United States Code Section 1189. Nonetheless, it removed the organization from the List in October 2020, citing doubts that the organization "still exists." To see the official statement: <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/11/05/2020-24620/in-the-matter-of-the-designation-of-the-eastern-turkistan-islamic-movement-also-known-as-etim-as-a>

⁶ Bovingdon, Gardner. *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land*, 116–17. Columbia, NY: Columbia University Press, 2020.

point in Sino-Uyghur security relations occurred after the 2009 Urumqi riots. The riots started after his Chinese co-workers killed a Uyghur worker in a factory in the Uyghur region. The killing happened after a rumour that the man had raped a Han woman. Nevertheless, the majority of Uyghurs criticized the lack of investigation into the matter by the Chinese police. The riots in Urumqi⁷ killed at least one police officer and a dozen Han civilians and left many more injured.⁸ The event triggered a substantial change in the security framework and application within the Uyghur region. The region turned into a full-scale security dominion where the increasingly capable Chinese security forces created a modern/sophisticated surveil-discipline-punish cycle.⁹

In 2016 Chen Quanguo was appointed as party secretary in XUAR, after almost a decade in Tibet, where he became known for creating a solid police state and ruthless surveillance networks. Quanguo's appointment changed many things in the region, as Rahima Mahmut remembers.¹⁰ She remembers: "His appointment made everything worse, he ordered Uyghur students from abroad to come back for questioning, those refused had to count in that their families would be in trouble. Also, it was ordered that all communication with family members living outside of China had to be cut off." Furthermore, Quanguo set up one of his most known security apparatuses in the Uyghur homeland: the convenience police stations. These makeshift police stations are set up in every busy street in the region with 500 meters between them. This tight-knitted security/police presence is complemented with a highly

⁷ Urumqi is the capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in the Northwest of the People's Republic of China.

⁸ Wong, Edward. "Riots in Western China Amid Ethnic Tension." The New York Times. The New York Times, July 5, 2009. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/06/world/asia/06china.html>.

⁹ Leibold, James. "Surveillance in China's Xinjiang Region: Ethnic Sorting, Coercion, and Inducement." *Journal of Contemporary China* 29, no. 121 (2019): 46–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2019.1621529>.

¹⁰ Rahima Mahmut is an Uyghur journalist, Human Rights Activist, and one of the interviewees of this thesis's empirical data/interviews section.

sophisticated CCTV camera system, including face recognition technology.¹¹ Moreover, Quanguo has created a security apparatus similar to the British imperial system, where 'native' populations are hired and trained to suppress and surveil over their land.¹²

Furthermore, China's crackdown on Uyghurs has gained attention worldwide in the last two decades. Notably, when in 2017, troublesome reports emerged in the Summer of 2017 about the large-scale internment of Uyghurs in China. Sean R. Roberts remembers noticing "... something was seriously wrong as our Uyghur colleagues and friends in the region began disappearing. Many Uyghur students studying abroad were called back to their homeland by the government at this time, and Uyghurs in the diaspora were told by relatives inside China to stop contacting them."¹³ As the outside world noticed more signs day after day, prominent journalists who visited the Uyghur region in 2017 reported about the existence of re-education camps.¹⁴ Chinese authorities were denying any sort of accusations of the mass detention of Uyghurs. Gay McDougall, a member of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, declared in the summer of 2018 that the region was slowly turning into "something resembling a massive internment camp," with mass detention, re-education, and disappearances.¹⁵

¹¹ Qiang, Wu. "Urban Grid Management and Police State in China: A Brief Overview." China Change, November 8, 2015. <https://chinachange.org/2013/08/08/the-urban-grid-management-and-police-state-in-china-a-brief-overview/>.

¹² Zenz, Adrian. "Chen Quanguo: The Strongman Behind Beijing's Securitization Strategy in Tibet and Xinjiang." Jamestown, September 21, 2017. <https://jamestown.org/program/chen-quanguo-the-strongman-behind-beijings-securitization-strategy-in-tibet-and-xinjiang/>.

¹³ Roberts, Sean R. Introduction. In *War on The Uyghurs: China's Campaign against Xinjiang's Muslims*, 1–1. S.I.: Manchester University Press, 2021.

¹⁴ Chin, Josh, Clément Bürge, and Giulia Marchi. "Twelve Days in Xinjiang: How China's Surveillance State Overwhelms Daily Life." The Wall Street Journal. Dow Jones & Company, December 20, 2017. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/twelve-days-in-xinjiang-how-chinas-surveillance-state-overwhelms-daily-life-1513700355>.

¹⁵ Cumming-Bruce, Nick. "No Such Thing': China Denies U.N. Reports of Uighur Detention Camps." The New York Times. The New York Times, August 13, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/13/world/asia/china-xinjiang-un.html>.

Literature Review

This thesis aims to analyze how biopolitics and governmentality effects the ‘exclusion’ and ‘transformation’ of Uyghurs in the region, drawing from Giorgio Agamben's analysis of *Homo Sacer*¹⁶ as a category for bodies outside of the classical notion of the legal status of bodies within a polity. Moreover, the research presented uses a hybrid approach drawing together Agambenian and Foucauldian ideas through the help of Butler’s seminal work on the governmentality of extra-legal government practices and the role of power in the creation of a perpetual emergency status *or* “sovereign power which, in an emergency (im Ernstfall), results in the abrogation of legal entitlements or legal protection.”¹⁷ To extend this point, Agamben argues that the suspension of legal rights directly links with how the juridico-institutional structure exercises power and that the existence of the modern *Homo Sacer* is intrinsic in how modern states project biopower of subjects within society.¹⁸ As Erlenbusch puts it, “the sovereign decision on the political inclusion of individuals by allowing for their execution eventually becomes the ultimate biopolitical gesture and biopolitics and sovereignty become indistinguishable, if not the same thing altogether.”¹⁹ Particularly, Erlenbusch argues that in the eyes of Agamben, the difference between the body as a holder of rights and the body as a subject of exercising sovereignty creates a dilemma in distinguishing “...the body as a holder of rights and the body as the surface of sovereign power which, in an emergency results in the abrogation of legal entitlements or legal protection.”²⁰ In fact, “the decision on whether a case

¹⁶ Giorgio Agamben used the ancient Roman term; verbatim translated as 'sacred man' to identify bodies that were neither governed by natural law nor by divine law. In other words, a body that may not be sacrificed but could be murdered with impunity. Therefore, creating a paradoxical being cast away from society as inherently 'unproductive' and 'unwanted.' To see more: Giorgio Agamben. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998)

¹⁷ Erlenbusch, Verena. “The Place of Sovereignty.” *Critical Horizons* 14, no. 1 (2013): 44–69. <https://doi.org/10.1179/15685160x13a.0000000003>. 48.

¹⁸ Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer, Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.

¹⁹ Erlenbusch, Verena. “The Place of Sovereignty.” 57-58.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

of emergency exists and, therefore, whether rights apply, is a sovereign one.”²¹ Therefore, the politicization of Uyghur life through demonstrating its exclusion from Chinese legal frameworks through mass incarceration in re-education camps constitutes a vital element in the ideological construction of the Uyghur *Homo Sacer*. This thesis will explore how the Chinese state operates biopolitical techniques on the bodies of Uyghurs, forming a modern version of *Homo Sacer* in the Chinese context where biopolitics and the exercise of power construct a perpetual paradoxical existence for Uyghurs. One in which they are neither entirely excluded from public life nor are included in the socio-legal sense as their rights might be revoked by the power projection of the Chinese state at any moment, rendering them from everyday existence and creating a sub-existence within re-education camps where natural law clashes with biopolitical ‘securitization’ of Uyghur bodies. Furthermore, the empirical data of this thesis demonstrates that Chinese biopolitics aims at assimilating/transforming Uyghurs into productive members of Chinese society. Nonetheless, the paradoxical existence of Uyghurs does not end through successful assimilation as the securitization of Uyghur bodies has become an intrinsic element of the biopolitical ordering practices of the state in the Uyghur region.

To add to this point, the thesis will use Sean R. Roberts’ linkage of the ‘securitization’ and ‘dehumanization’ of Uyghurs in recent years, with a combination of Foucauldian biopolitics and Agamben’s seminal work on the power of sovereignty in the modern context and its creation of a contemporary *Homo Sacer* within societies. Furthermore, Roberts argues that the Global War on Terror (GWOT) played a fundamental role in the ideological shift within the Chinese approach to ‘control’ Uyghurs and the ‘alleged’ security threat they posed to the overall stability of the polity.²² On the exact parameters of the argumentation of this thesis, Roberts demonstrates how the paradoxical nature of the Uyghur body situates within

²¹ Ibid.

²² Roberts, Sean R. “The Biopolitics of China’s ‘War on Terror’ and the Exclusion of the Uyghurs.” *Critical Asian Studies* 50, no. 2 (2018): 232–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2018.1454111>.

the same parameters as Agamben's *Homo Sacer*, as Uyghur bodies have been designated 'unproductive' and outside of 'civilized' life, therefore Chinese state ideology has formed an intricate system of 'exclusion' combined with techniques of constant re-assessment of Uyghurs.

Michel Foucault argued that a defining characteristic of states in the modern period is their tendency to make all politics into biopolitics, which focuses on the productive force of individual bodies, or citizens, as either productive or unproductive to the polity. The productive bodies within society are viewed as both the object of governance and as a critical tool in the hands of the government, while unproductive bodies are viewed as dangerous to the polity and should be "banished, excluded, and repressed," a process in which the productive dutifully assist.²³ Sean R. Roberts argues that in describing this focus of modern governance on the productive force of human bodies, that the biopolitical polity views itself as a living organism, the health of which depends upon fostering the productive actors within it while excluding the infectious potential of those who are unproductive or, even worse, counter-productive.²⁴ Furthermore, another fundamental principle of Chinese state ideology that emerged in the last two decades is the "harmonizing" aspect of CCP ideology. The policy discourse of a "harmonious society" has been used in official statements since 2006. Former President Hu Jintao coined the term during rapid socio-economic development and China's immersion in the globalization process. Furthermore, there is a direct link between Chinese economic development and the effort to "harmonize" and "discipline" the Chinese people, especially minorities like Uyghurs.²⁵

²³ Foucault, Michel, Mauro Bertani, Alessandro Fontana, and David Macey. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1975-1976*. New York: Picador, 2003.

²⁴ Roberts, Sean R. 'The Biopolitics of China's "War on Terror" and the Exclusion of the Uyghurs'.

²⁵ Manoranjan, Mohanty. "'Harmonious Society': Hu Jintao's Vision and the Chinese Party Congress", *Economic and Political Weekly* 47, no. 50 (2012): 12–16, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41720457>.

As mentioned above, this thesis builds upon a theoretical framework of Foucauldian concepts and Agamben's concept of the sovereign's power and the 'modern' *Homo Sacer*. Nonetheless, to draw these concepts closer to one another and to soothe the transition of the thesis from theory to empirical analysis, a close examination of Judith Butler's essay "*Indefinite Detention*" will be conducted to bring together concepts of sovereign power and the Foucauldian notion of governmentality and the 'indeterminate' nature of power. However, in this thesis, the main focus is re-education camps, and in *Indefinite Detention*, Butler develops the central ideas around the treatment of inmates in Guantanamo Bay. Although the similarities are evident between the two installations of camps, as in both cases, the 'inmates' are excluded from the modern notion of natural law, and their bodies are fundamentally in the hands of unelected, unbridled 'officials.' Nonetheless, re-education camps entail an essential distinction, they impose Chinese ideology on the Uyghur inmates indulging in assimilatory practices that aim at transforming Uyghurs into productive 'trustworthy' citizens.²⁶ This, without any doubt, was not the case in Guantanamo Bay, where the aim was to 'interrogate,' 'exclude,' and 'punish.' Chinese re-education camps operate on a different level of power, they are not functioning on (only) medieval prude power that punishes and kills. Re-education camps demonstrate the biopower of the Chinese state, one that aims to form bodies of Uyghurs through the power that for the state exerts "a positive influence on life, that endeavours to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations."²⁷ This is a fundamental breaking point from Roberts' *Homo Sacer* argument for the contemporary life of Uyghurs in the Uyghur region as the biopolitical aspect of Sino-Uyghur relations is absent with the Agambenian conceptualization of Chinese oppression towards Uyghurs. Therefore, Butler's

²⁶ Zenz, Adrian. "Thoroughly Reforming Them towards a Healthy Heart Attitude": China's Political Re-Education Campaign in Xinjiang." *Central Asian Survey* 38, no. 1 (2018): 102–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2018.1507997>.

²⁷ Foucault, Michel. *The Will to Knowledge (The History of Sexuality Volume I)*. London: Penguin, 1998. 137.

analysis of power under conditions of permanent emergency creates a valuable gateway to understanding how bodies are excluded and transformed through governmentality and biopolitics. To extend this point, Erlenbusch argues that:

“By productively engaging Agamben's work on exceptional politics within a Foucauldian framework of governmentality, Butler manages to sever the link between emergency politics and traditional juridical-institutional models of power in favour of an account of sovereign practices in the context of an understanding of power more broadly conceived. As will become clear, Butler thereby develops an account of contemporary power relations under conditions of permanent emergency.”²⁸

Butler argued that to understand the hybrid systematic 'emergency' status of the American Global War on Terror (GWOT), a nuanced or more contemporary examination of power projections is necessary. Furthermore, in *Indefinite Detention*, a particular way of examining governmentality is introduced, irreducible to the law and sovereignty that similarly breaks away or 'uses' law as a tool to achieve subjective political stability and order.

“Neither is necessarily grounded in law, and neither deploys legal tactics exclusively in the field of their respective operations. The suspension of the rule of law allows for the convergence of governmentality and sovereignty; sovereignty is exercised in the act of suspension, but also the self-allocation of legal prerogative; governmentality denotes an operation of administration power that is extra-legal, even as it can and does return to law as a field of tactical operations. The state is neither identified with the acts of sovereignty nor with the field of governmentality, and yet both act in the name of the state ... precisely because our historical situation is marked by governmentality, and this implies, to a certain degree, a loss of sovereignty, that loss is compensated through the resurgence of sovereignty within the field of governmentality ... The resurrected sovereignty is thus not the sovereignty of unified power under the

²⁸ Erlenbusch, Verena. “The Place of Sovereignty.” 53.

conditions of legitimacy, the form of power that guarantees the representative status of political institutions. It is, rather, a lawless and prerogative power, a 'rogue' power *par excellence*.”²⁹

During the war on terror, the U.S. Department of Defense suspended the universal application of human rights law and exercised complete ‘sovereign power’ over the detainees in Guantanamo Bay. Moreover, these decision-makers were part of a 'hybrid' breed of government officials acting outside of judicial and legislative constraints. Butler called these governmental bodies “petty sovereigns.”³⁰ Moreover, examined the power relations these subjects enabled as “part of the apparatus of governmentality; their decision, the power they wield to ‘deem’ someone dangerous and constitute them effectively as such, is a sovereign power, a ghostly and forceful resurgence of sovereignty in the midst of governmentality.”³¹ Erlenbusch extends this point and argues that governmentality and sovereignty both act as extra-legal powers that construct the conduct of conduct through a complex variation of powers that penetrate and determine the legality of actions to ensure the overall productivity and well-being of the polity.³²

Furthermore, the Chinese state constantly emphasizes the legality of its actions towards the Uyghurs; for example, in an interview Shohrat Zakir, chairman of the Xinjiang regional government, started his speech with “The Xinjiang region strictly abides by laws and regulations. In its counter-terrorism and de-extremization work, it is not targeting specific ethnic groups or specific religions. Instead, it is targeting the three forces of violent terrorist crimes, extremism, and separatism, he stressed.”³³ Similarly, in the most recent press conference in Xinjiang on the topic of re-education camps and forced labour, Elijan Anayat,

²⁹ Butler, Judith. "Indefinite Detention." In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, 50–100, Judith Butler (ed.), London: Verso. 2004. 55-56.

³⁰ Butler, Judith. "Indefinite Detention." In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. 56.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

³² Erlenbusch, Verena. “The Place of Sovereignty.” 55.

³³ Siqu, Cao. “Vocational Centers in Xinjiang Will Disappear When Society No Longer Needs Them: Official.” Global Times. Accessed May 11, 2021. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1141882.shtml>.

the Spokesperson of the Information Office of People's Government of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, pointed out the 'legal' aspects of the conducts in the Uyghur region in his answer to a question from the present CNN reporter, "The vocational education and training centers legally established in Xinjiang were schools with the character of de-radicalization, which are no different in essence from the "community corrections" enforced in the U.S., the DDP (Desistance and Disengagement Programme) in the U.K., and the de-radicalization centers in France, all being conducive attempt and proactive exploration for preventive counter-terrorism and de-radicalization."³⁴ If one were to read these statements through the arguments Butler made in *Indefinite Detention*; it would create a clear picture of what Butler identified as the use of power and sovereignty as a tool for governmentality physically creating power structures that function through (extra)legal conducts to enforce security agendas that operate outside of legal frameworks, however, use the argument of legality, ensure overall safety and 'unleash' the full power of discipline/punish/surveil tactics the state possesses, on a particular group that now has to live with the consequences of living under this hybrid existence of 'legal' suppression and incarceration.³⁵

³⁴ The second press conference by Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region on Xinjiang-related issues in Beijing. Accessed January 14, 2021. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1846454.shtml.

³⁵ Butler, Judith. "Indefinite Detention." In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*.

Framework

Perpetual repression or transforming minds?

The fundamental ontological facet of re-education camps is to re-structure Uyghur bodies into productive and reliable members of the Chinese polity. This 'productive' power is a distinctly overlooked function of re-education camps. To add to this point, highly renowned scholars such as Roberts emphasize the 'excluding' factor of Chinese ideology towards Uyghurs while “describing this focus of modern governance on the productive force of human bodies, that the biopolitical polity views itself as a living organism, the health of which depends upon fostering the productive actors within it while excluding the infectious potential of those who are unproductive or, even worse, counter-productive.”³⁶ This argument omits a crucial element of the ideology behind re-education camps. While it is logical to pin down the oppression towards Uyghurs as a mere repressive-exclusionary practice, it is crucial to delve back into Foucauldian analysis of biopolitical population transformation techniques to adjust bodies to the capitalist production machinery. On this point, Foucault stated, “[t]his bio-power was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism’ which made possible ‘the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes.”³⁷

³⁶ Roberts, Sean R. ‘The Biopolitics of China’s “War on Terror” and the Exclusion of the Uyghurs’. 244.

³⁷ Foucault, Michel. *The Will to Knowledge (The History of Sexuality Volume I)*. 140-141.

This thesis will aim at furthering Roberts' argument to incorporate the 'productive' biopower of the Chinese state that deliberately transforms "minds and hearts"³⁸ of Uyghurs to form bodies fit to enter the broader polity not as a bare 'threat' but as a fully transformed piece of the polity. Furthermore, Roberts argues that "...the repression of alleged counter-productive Uyghurs has intensified under the guise of combating terrorism, the option of integration has gradually disappeared. Repression increasingly has begotten violent resistance from some Uyghurs, which, in turn, has led to more repressive state policies and the fostering of more violent resistance. Particularly, Roberts argued that the GWOT systematically changed the treatment and regulation of Uyghurs by the Chinese state, reducing the Uyghur body to a subject that had to be put in a cycle of "repression-violence-repression."³⁹ To add to this point, Roberts states, "Gradually, this cycle of systematic repression has led to a complete breakdown in trust between the Chinese government and its Uyghur population and has rendered integration virtually impossible."⁴⁰ Whilst Roberts' cyclic "repression-violence-repression"⁴¹ analysis has significant theoretical and empirical ground within the context of the Chinese treatment of Uyghurs; this thesis argues that this analysis only covers one side of the same coin. Furthermore, the ultimate aim of re-education camps is to transform Uyghur identity. In this process, the repressive cycle is very evident. Nonetheless, a very recent report from Spiegel demonstrates that China aims to re-include "schooling" and "obedient" Uyghurs into society as a sign of internal harmony and a demonstration of power towards the outside world. In the report, journalist Georg Fahrion remembers how the Uyghur region has changed since his last visit, "In Kashgar, we are happy to see that the city is so much livelier than in 2018. Back then, many of the shops in the old town were closed up, and when asked why, people would

³⁸ *Inside China's 'Thought Transformation' Camps* - BBC News.YouTube. YouTube, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wmld2ZP3h0c>.

³⁹ Roberts, Sean R. 'The Biopolitics of China's "War on Terror" and the Exclusion of the Uyghurs' 236.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

frequently respond: "The owners have gone to school to study," a common euphemism for the re-education camps."⁴² In addition, Fahrion reports that while strolling through town, he encounters a lot more Uyghurs than his last visit, many of them portraying random gestures of well-being and verbally affirming how much better it has gotten after 'schooling.' To extend this point, Fahrion writes that the overall experience seemed like "Uyghurs as obedient extras in a portrayal of their own lives, a religion without passion or youth, a culture reduced to Disney-esque exoticism, easily digestible for the masses: This version of Uyghur existence appears to be the one desired by China's leaders."⁴³ The reporting of this abovementioned article portrays precisely how this thesis aims at diverging from Roberts' argument of 'perpetual exclusion,' re-education camps open a brutally designed gateway to re-inclusion, one in which Uyghur bodies are transformed to the point where their obedience is internalized.

However, as Fahrion points out, recent observations demonstrate that the number of re-education camps is reduced in the Uyghur region, as the CCP is convinced that it has changed enough 'minds' and those who have not been transferred to 'proper' prisons, deemed un-transformable. The report states, "One possible interpretation: Those whom China has deemed incorrigible may have since been sentenced and transferred to regular prisons. Many of those whom officials believe had assimilated to a sufficient degree could very well have been released – or put into the Labor Transfer Scheme that has distributed Uyghurs among factories across the country. The system of surveillance has since been perfected and the populace brought into line."⁴⁴ This thesis contributes to the overall understanding of the biopolitical

⁴² Fahrion, Georg. "In the Sinister Disneyland of Xinjiang: China's Ongoing Oppression of the Uighurs." DER SPIEGEL, May 27, 2021. <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/in-the-sinister-disneyland-of-xinjiang-china-s-ongoing-oppression-of-the-uighurs-a-8f34a7d2-cdcf-4083-bd5b-bd58ab519b47>.

⁴³ Fahrion, Georg. "In the Sinister Disneyland of Xinjiang: China's Ongoing Oppression of the Uighurs." DER SPIEGEL, May 27, 2021.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

transformation techniques Uyghurs are being objected to. As mentioned above, the perpetual “repression-violence-repression”⁴⁵ Roberts's suggestion is one component of the current events; however, recent reporting and the empirical data of this thesis argue that Chinese biopower aims at ‘changing’ minds and re-introducing Uyghurs into society as ‘trustworthy’ citizens. The empirical data demonstrates the tight knitted brutal bureaucratic surveil-punish apparatus of the Chinese state, but (unlike) previous scholars⁴⁶ focuses on the transformation/assimilation component of re-education camps. Built by an ideology that operates openly on the 'minds' of Uyghurs seeking a situation where the vast majority of Uyghurs have erased their own culture and assimilated to a point where 'independence' or 'riots' are archaic thoughts of past generations.

⁴⁵ Roberts, Sean R. ‘The Biopolitics of China’s “War on Terror” and the Exclusion of the Uyghurs’ 236.

⁴⁶ Sean R. Roberts in 'The Biopolitics of China's "War on Terror" and the Exclusion of the Uyghurs' focuses purely on the exclusionary element of re-education camps, leaving out completely the 'thought transformation' element of these facilities. In "Thoroughly Reforming Them towards a Healthy Heart Attitude" Adrian Zenz touches upon the transformational element of re-education camps more than Roberts, nonetheless, lacks empirical data analysis. This lack is filled with strong contextualizing and historical analysis that portrays how and why China decided to open up re-education camps. This analysis, however, lacks recent data that demonstrates how the situation has evolved in the last three years.

Methodology

I feel obliged to highlight how my subjectivity and reflexivity might have influenced the qualitative data presented in this thesis. As Roulston points out, "Qualitative researchers and interviewers are inevitably part of the studies that they conduct, whether or not they make explicit the connections between their subject positions and how these impact the outcomes of their studies in their reports."⁴⁷ Therefore, I acknowledge my positionality during the process of the research. I am sympathetic to the cause of the Uyghurs and that my interviewees knew (at least partially) about my subjective opinion on the topic. While this may have positively affected the 'trust' component of the interviews itself, it also may have influenced the content or body of information the interviewees shared with me. However, my interest in the topic, combined with my cognitive view of the current situation of the Uyghurs, opened up many fruitful gateways to explore this sensitive topic deeper, as my subjectivity was present at every step of the empirical analysis of this thesis. It created opportunities for positive and safe talks with the interviewees who shared their insights, understanding that my subjective view was sympathy rather than a 'cold' research interest. To add to this point, Letherby, Et. Al argues that the (known) subjective position is not a mere drawback; on the contrary, it opens up new opportunities primarily through interviews that entail traumatic experiences being shared.⁴⁸ Furthermore, "researchers can critically examine their perspectives and assumptions about key elements of the research project – including theoretical perspectives, personal hypotheses concerning the research findings, and positions concerning the research participants – through

⁴⁷ Roulston, Kathryn. "Theorizing the Researcher: The Reflective Interviewer." In *Reflective Interviewing: A Guide to Theory and Practice*, 115-29. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2010. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446288009>.

⁴⁸ Letherby, Gayle, John Scott and Malcolm Williams. "Theorised Subjectivity." In *Objectivity and Subjectivity in Social Research*, 79-102. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2013. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781473913929>.

writing subjectivity statements.”⁴⁹ As I prepared for each interview, I wrote down my assumptions and sympathies with the interviewee. This helped me to critically analyze how my subjectivity penetrated even the (pre)interview phase, thus opening up some possibility of critical reflexivity on my part.

Moreover, another essential aspect to consider within my research is that two of my interviewees have experienced many severe traumatic experiences in the past as members of the Uyghur community. As Emerson and Corneli explain:

"Individuals who have experienced traumatic events such as abuse, rape, torture, war, domestic or community violence, disaster (natural or artificial), or forced emigration are often considered to be vulnerable by researchers, ethicists, and institutional review boards. This is largely due to concerns about the potential for feelings of stress or distress to be reactivated during the research by remembering, analyzing, and discussing past experiences. It is also perceived that asking about traumatic events is more invasive than asking other types of questions and that participants who have experienced trauma may be at risk of dignitary or social harm in the event of an unintended data breach."⁵⁰

Again, as a young scholar, I discussed this matter with scholars with more experience in the field and evaluated, to the best of my capabilities, any situations that may put the interviewees in situations of re-traumatization. I made it clear (pre-interview) that both interviewees

⁴⁹ Roulston, Kathryn. "Theorizing the Researcher: The Reflective Interviewer." In *Reflective Interviewing: A Guide to Theory and Practice*.

⁵⁰ Anderson, Emily E. and Amy Corneli. "What Ethical Issues Should I Consider When Conducting Research With Individuals Who Have Experienced Traumatic Events?" In *100 Questions (and Answers) About Research Ethics*, 61-62. , SAGE 100 Questions and Answers. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2018. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781506348681>.

could/should stop the process when they felt uncomfortable or distressed. However, both of the 'vulnerable' interviewees expressed that the process of talking and voicing their opinion had a positive impact and, I was assured that the interviews created no distress with any participant. In addition, Anderson and Corneli also point out that "You should also make it clear during the informed consent process that data collection is for research and not for treatment or therapy purposes. You should be especially sensitive to the potential for this misunderstanding when working with populations who lack access to services."⁵¹ Here I must point out that both interviewees were in positions where psychological help was available to them provided by professionals at the time of the interview. It was clear from the beginning that the aim of the interview was not treatment but research.

Furthermore, I concentrated on three aspects of shortcomings in my interviews; the first is the shortages of communicating online, as it may have happened that I could not 'read the room' due to the distance. Second, this thesis entails several 'academic' social science theories that none of the interviewees are familiar with. Therefore, I avoided terms and concepts that would create an odd and unfamiliar feeling within the interviews. In addition, I specifically avoided historical questions such as: "What happened in 1949, did the Chinese army take over Eastern Turkistan peacefully?", since none of the participants were historians as well as the elementary point that the interviews aimed to explore their personal experiences under the Chinese regime. Thirdly, two of the interviews were conducted in English with bits of modern Turkish communicated mainly by the interviewees. However, one of the interviewees did not speak or write English but could communicate in Turkish. The interviewee asked for help from other people when some words were unfamiliar to me, and I had to do the same on some

⁵¹ Ibid.

occasions. This lack of direct communication may have created unknown errors and shortcomings in the interviewing process, even though I went over the entire transcript with a native Uyghur Turkic speaker after the interview. Nonetheless, I must acknowledge my inability to foresee any errors that may have occurred due to the chosen methodology.

I have conducted three interviews with Uyghurs from different backgrounds. I conducted the interviews in a semi-structured style. I prepared some questions before the talk but let the interviewees choose to direct the conversation in any direction they thought would be necessary for the topic. The Uyghur community is very tight-knitted, and from the beginning, I understood that to conduct substantial interviews, I needed to earn the trust of the people I was going to interview. Furthermore, I used the snowball sampling technique to create a ‘chain of referral’ this technique has been known to work specifically with qualitative research on marginalized and stigmatized ethnic groups who developed a ‘natural’ protective and secretive practice towards outsiders.⁵² After my first interview with Rahima Mahmut, we developed a relationship based on trust and common research interests. The fact that we both speak Turkish accelerated the timeframe of the relationship; as she puts it, "It feels just more comfortable to talk about these difficult topics without having to think about how an English word or phrase might take the conversation out of context."⁵³ Rahima put me in touch with the other two interviewees who both live in Europe and have been in re-education camps before escaping the country through semi-legal ways, and I will not name the two interviewees as per their request and their fear of pressure towards their families back in China.

⁵² Allen, Mike *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*. 4 vols. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2017. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483381411>.

⁵³ Interview. 04.05.2021

One of my interviewees worked as a Chinese language teacher in the Uyghur region and was involuntarily transferred to a re-education camp to teach the Uyghur inmates Chinese. The interviewee has talked about personal experiences publicly before, nonetheless, asked me to withhold any given name as news from intensified pressure on the family in China has reached the interviewee. In addition, the interviewee is in the process of obtaining legal residence in Europe and was advised by immigration lawyers to withhold names from public statements. I conducted all of the interviews through Zoom; just like Skype, Zoom has been criticized recently by scholars due to its lack of non-verbal signals and difficulty in creating emotional closeness.⁵⁴ However, scholars also argue that there are certain advantages to conducting online interviews. With challenging and traumatic experiences, the comfort of distance and the virtually created level of anonymity helps interviewees open up more as their feeling of control increases with the interviewer.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Fielding, Nigel G., Raymond M. Lee, and Grant Blank *The SAGE Handbook of Online Research Methods*. ,55 City Road, London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2017. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781473957992>.

⁵⁵ Adams-Hutcheson, Gail, and Robyn Longhurst. “‘At Least in Person There Would Have Been a Cup of Tea’: Interviewing via Skype.” *Area* 49, no. 2 (2016): 148–55. <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12306>.

Contextualization

The creation of re-education camps was an extreme step towards what China considered a 'core' region and emphasized the importance of the Uyghur region in the context of the '*Belt and Road Initiative*,' trade with Central Asia Middle East.⁵⁶ Zenz argues that the government-led systematic transformation of thoughts in the Uyghur region dates back to 2013.⁵⁷ Since then, China has officially acknowledged the existence of re-education camps in a White Paper titled "*Vocational Education and Training in Xinjiang*"⁵⁸, which argues that the re-education camps are a vital part of the fight against 'religious extremism' and significantly contribute to the employability of Uyghurs that enter these facilities. In 2019, the Xinjiang Autonomous Region (XUAR) government opened up a selected re-education camp to foreign journalists; on the question of how long these facilities were needed, Short Zakir, chairman of the Xinjiang regional government, answered, "Vocational centers in Xinjiang will disappear when society no longer needs them"⁵⁹ voicing the perpetual nature of these 'transformation' facilities. The CCP counts on the systematic incarceration of Uyghurs to transform Uyghur identity from its core, even for those without any separatist or Islamic tendencies. As one interviewee expresses: "My family was never very religious. We celebrated Eid or Ramadan more because everyone

⁵⁶ Martin, Peter. Bloomberg.com. Bloomberg, April 19, 2019. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-04-19/how-china-is-defending-its-detention-of-muslims-to-the-world>.

⁵⁷ Zenz, Adrian, "'Thoroughly Reforming Them towards a Healthy Heart Attitude': China's Political Re-Education Campaign in Xinjiang", *Central Asian Survey* 38, no. 1 (2 January 2019): 102–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2018.1507997>.

⁵⁸ 'Vocational Education and Training in Xinjiang', ENGLISH.GOV.CN, 17 August 2019, http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201908/17/content_WS5d57573cc6d0c6695ff7ed6c.html.

⁵⁹ Siqu, Cao. "Vocational Centers in Xinjiang Will Disappear When Society No Longer Needs Them: Official." Global Times. Accessed May 11, 2021. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1141882.shtml>.

in the neighbourhood was celebrating it. My older brother was put in a re-education camp in late 2018, and we did not see him for six months. He already spoke fluent Mandarin and was familiar with Communist Party writings. He was just a number for them when he came out. He was not able to speak about his time there for at least two weeks."⁶⁰

However, after Chen Quanguo's appointment, the detention criteria changed from previous extremist activity or propaganda to a quota-based structure where Muslim majority regions were assigned a certain number of detainees⁶¹ to "eliminate any sort of extremist thought before it turns into action, ... therefore one can be placed in vocational training even before committing a crime."⁶² The new quota-based approach suddenly constructed the vast majority of the Uyghur population as 'fit' to be 'transformed' into non-extremist and productive members of Chinese society. Furthermore, this approach is a direct example of how Butler analyzed the "extra-legal" nature of "petty sovereigns" in the context of America's conduct with detainees at Guantanamo Bay.⁶³ The Uyghurs in re-education camps are 'forced' by the sovereign to enter re-education facilities that have deemed them guilty of a crime they have not committed, nonetheless actively projecting tactics of governmentality on the Uyghurs for specific policy outcomes and security. As Butler elaborates, "Governmentality operates through policies and departments, through managerial and bureaucratic institutions, through the law, when the law is understood as "set of tactics," and through forms of state power..." Extending this point, Butler clarifies how governmentality uses the subjective object of 'security through biopolitical power projection, "Marked by a diffuse set of strategies and

⁶⁰ Interview. 01.05.2021

⁶¹ Zenz, Adrian. "Thoroughly Reforming Them towards a Healthy Heart Attitude": China's Political Re-Education Campaign in Xinjiang."

⁶² Vocational Education and Training in Xinjiang. Accessed April 29, 2021. http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201908/17/content_WS5d57573cc6d0c6695ff7ed6c.html.

⁶³ Butler, Judith. "Indefinite Detention." In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*.

tactics, governmentality gains its meaning and purpose from no single source, no unified sovereign subject. Rather, the tactics characteristic to governmentality operate diffusely, to dispose and order populations, and to produce and reproduce subjects, their practices, and beliefs, in relation to specific policy aims.”⁶⁴ To add to this point, leaked information from the Uyghur region demonstrated specific criteria officials were using to randomly fill up the quota for each Muslim majority region. These criteria apply to any Uyghur person that fits any of the following descriptions:

- “- is aged between 15 and 55, i.e., of military age.
- is of Uyghur ethnicity.
- is unemployed.
- has religious knowledge or prays five times a day.
- possesses a passport.
- has visited one of 26 ‘sensitive’ countries or overstayed a visa.
- has family members in a foreign country.
- home-schools their children.”⁶⁵

These criteria create an environment where any member from the Uyghur population might be targeted with ease. As one interviewee explains, “Just being Uyghur is enough to be locked up and forced to assimilate completely. They want us to become just like the Han people

⁶⁴ Butler, Judith. "Indefinite Detention." In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. 52.

⁶⁵ Smith Finley, Joanne. “Securitization, Insecurity and Conflict in Contemporary Xinjiang: Has PRC Counter-Terrorism Evolved into State Terror?” *Central Asian Survey* 38, no. 1 (2019): 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2019.1586348>.

from the mainland, but we are not and will never be.”⁶⁶ In 2018, the government rolled another program to extend the functionality of the surveillance methods within the homes of Uyghurs. The "becoming kin" program selects families and assigns a Han governmental official to the family (primarily men) that stays with the family for a specific time to check the family's 'trustworthiness.' The most known red flags for the Party are not drinking, owning a Quran, and not having children that are fluent in Mandarin.⁶⁷ In our first interview, Rahima Mahmut explained how the system works: "... these men come into the house unannounced and become part of the family for a couple of weeks. Most of the time, they observe if the family is 'trustworthy' or not. Nonetheless, there are times when these officials provoke family members on purpose to observe if they would break and give away anything that they might be hiding.”⁶⁸ In January 2021, the Xinjiang Regional Government conducted a press conference on the current situation of the Uyghur region. Foreign press such as CNN, Associated Press, and Reuters were also in attendance, a first in any press conference with high-level government officials. A journalist from Reuters asking about the extent of surveillance techniques in the region also mentioned the "becoming kin" initiative. In his response Xu Guixiang, spokesperson of the government of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, argued that the program was a massive success in 'integrating' the two people and had created many 'friendships':

"Since 2016, some 1.1 million civil servants have paired up with more than 1.6 million local people, treating each other like family members. They have respected and helped each other and forged deep bonds through close interactions. Among them, there are not only Han cadres and workers paired with ethnic minorities, including

⁶⁶ Interview. 01.05.2021

⁶⁷ "China Has Turned Xinjiang into a Police State like No Other." The Economist. The Economist Newspaper, June 2, 2018. <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2018/05/31/china-has-turned-xinjiang-into-a-police-state-like-no-other>.

⁶⁸ Interview. 11.04.2021

Uyghur, but also ethnic minority cadres and workers, including Uyghur, who pair up with Han people. Cadres and workers of all ethnic groups give full play to their advantages, actively help them solve practical difficulties in work and life, such as medical treatment, employment, and schooling.”⁶⁹

To extend on this point, including a broader perspective on these two asymmetrical accounts of programs initiated by the Chinese government in ‘problem’ areas such as Xinjiang and Tibet. Tynen argues that the XUAR government officials have changed their strategy in the face of increasing media attention towards the situation in the Uyghur region. The previous strategy was a simplistic dual approach of “hiding and closing off,” as was the case with re-education camps in the summer of 2017. Nonetheless, officials have changed their approach to a ‘controlled’ opening of the region and allegations—spinning and re-colouring brutal assimilation and incarceration techniques as ‘development’ and positive integration.⁷⁰ Furthermore, Holder argues that the CCP has used similar ‘persuasion’ and human-to-human surveillance techniques before. In 2011 the regional government implemented ‘project beauty’ in the Uyghur Region. Officially it was to boost the local fashion industry and to create jobs. However, it was quickly uncovered that the actual aim of the program was to ‘persuade’ Uyghur women to change their clothing from the traditional Islamic to the ‘modern’ Chinese mainstream style. In this process, many Han women visited Uyghur families to check up on their wardrobes and demonstrate in person how a ‘modern’ Chinese woman is dressed.⁷¹

⁶⁹ The second press conference by Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region on Xinjiang-related issues in Beijing. January 14, 2021. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1846454.shtml.

⁷⁰ Tynen, Sarah. “Dispossession and Displacement of Migrant Workers: The Impact of State Terror and Economic Development on Uyghurs in Urban Xinjiang.” *Central Asian Survey* 39, no. 3 (2020): 303–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2020.1743644>.

⁷¹ Holder, Ross. “On the Interrelatedness of Human Rights, Culture and Religion: Considering the Significance of Cultural Rights in Protecting the Religious Identity of China’s Uyghur Minority.” *The International Journal of Human Rights* (2020): 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2020.1725487>.

As Raza points out, re-education camps in the form mentioned earlier are a very recent phenomenon. Nonetheless, the Chinese Communist Party has used the principle of 'transformation through education' or 'labour' since the Cultural Revolution in 1966. In addition, in 1955, the concept of "Re-education Through Labor" was used to suppress and transform political enemies of the communist regime.⁷² This 'transformation through education' approach is deep-seated in Chinese ideology, which has found new ways of applying it over the decades as the focus of the CCP shifted from counter-revolutionaries to ethnic minorities, especially Uyghurs. My research focuses on the personal experiences of Uyghurs who have experienced life under the strengthened socio-ideological transformation apparatuses of the Chinese state. The re-education camps hold a significant role in this aspect of life under the Chinese government's aim to change the overall life and culture of Uyghurs to transform/assimilate Uyghurs to 'unquestionably' fit into the mainland polity.

⁷² Raza, Zainab. "China's 'Political Re-education' Camps of Xinjiang's Uyghur Muslims." *Asian Affairs* 50, no. 4 (2019): 488–501. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2019.1672433>.

Interviews

Who Ends up in Re-education Camps?

This section will follow a big picture close focus approach to layout empirically the steps put in place by the Chinese state to transform Uyghurs. This approach will foster a more nuanced understanding of the complete picture of re-education camps' ideological function, demonstrating more to the mind and heart-changing apparatus than mere perpetual exclusion and punishment from point-zero onwards. This focus will lay down the first bricks of the main argument of the empirical analysis of this thesis, that the ultimate aim of re-education camps is to break Uyghurs from their own culture and (re)introduce them into the polity 'productive' and 'trustworthy' members. Therefore, the stories of how re-education camps entered the lives of the interviewees will be examined. The first interviewee is paradoxically the only one that has not been in a re-education camp. Nonetheless, Rahima Mahmut felt the policy change of the Chinese government from thousands of kilometres away as her family had to cut off any communication to prevent any member from being forced into 'schooling.' The interviewee mentioned above Rahima Mahmut, is an Uyghur singer, activist, and the U.K. representative of the World Uyghur Congress in the United Kingdom. Rahima remembers how in 2017, the line of communication with friends and family suddenly was broken off. All of her calls and messages were unanswered, and she was removed from existing chat groups. "I was worrying every day. I could not stop thinking about the worst-case scenario, that they were taken away, you know."⁷³

⁷³ Interview. 04.05.2021

One day her brother picked up the phone, "Immediately, I asked him why they were not picking up," she remembers her brother telling her with a sad voice: "... It is better this way, we leave you in god's hands, and you leave us in god's hands too." In 2019, a data leak from within the Chinese government showed a detailed list of how government officials created categories such as "safe" or "dangerous" to categorize Uyghurs and other minorities. The categorization aims to evaluate if the person is ready to be "free" or in need of further "education." This leak demonstrated how even a phone call from a relative living abroad could result in a person's incarceration. "Back then, I did not understand why my family and friends took such a hard stance against our communication. Now that we know more about how the Communist Party decides on whom to put in re-education camps, I understand their decision".⁷⁴

Notably, the now "Karakax List" known document details how 311 people were interned and, for the first time, reveals how the Chinese authorities' decision-making process within the autocratic-bureaucratic state apparatus operates. The document portrays how the Chinese state has created a tightly knitted administrative security apparatus that "fully substitutes trust with control." Mainly, the List demonstrates how governmental officials ("petty sovereigns."⁷⁵ as per Judith Butler) watch former detainees even after they are "released but (they) remain under scrutiny and may be re-interned." Additionally, some official reasons for internment or constant re-assessment are everyday religious activities, none of which create any 'terrorist' threat. For example, "going to Friday prayer" and "growing a beard" are considered sufficient reasons to incarcerate or re-assess former inmates of re-education camps.⁷⁶ These practices are blatantly in violation of the Chinese Constitution, as Article 36 of

⁷⁴ Interview. 04.05.2021

⁷⁵ Butler, Judith. "Indefinite Detention." In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. 56.

⁷⁶ Zenz, Adrian. Journal of Political Risk, February 17, 2020. <https://www.jpolrisk.com/karakax/>.

the Constitution states that all citizens “enjoy freedom of religious belief.”⁷⁷ Furthermore, Article 4 declares, "All ethnic groups shall have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages and to preserve or reform their traditions and customs.”⁷⁸

This apparent suspension of fundamental law demonstrates distinctly what Butler argued in shifting the discourse from the Agambenian "sovereignty, which is a relation of power and law that takes the form of the law's suspension."⁷⁹ to what Butler calls “spectral sovereignty.”⁸⁰ that is, “an instrument of power by which law is either used tactically or suspended; populations are monitored, detained, regulated, inspected, interrogated, rendered uniform in their actions, fully ritualized and exposed to control and regulation in their daily lives.”⁸¹ To extend this point, concerning the Chinese 'tactical' suspension of law to regulate/control Uyghur bodies, Butler argued: “governmentality is the condition of this new exercise of sovereignty in the sense that it first establishes law as a 'tactic,' something of instrumental value, and not 'binding' under its status as law.”⁸² This is precisely how the Chinese state operates. Uyghurs are put in a perpetual cycle of surveillance and re-assessment, nonetheless as the interviews will demonstrate the function of these (extra)legal conducts, such as the concept of forced 're-education' itself. For Uyghurs that ‘assimilate’ and accept the perpetual modus of constant re-assessment and surveillance, the CCP offers tactics of (re)inclusion into the state-capitalist production machinery of the Chinese state.

⁷⁷ Constitution of the People's Republic of China, n.d. <http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/constitution2019/201911/1f65146fb6104dd3a2793875d19b5b29.shtml>.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Erlenbusch, Verena. “The Place of Sovereignty.” 55.

⁸⁰ Butler, Judith. "Indefinite Detention." In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. 61.

⁸¹ Ibid., 97.

⁸² Ibid., 62.

The second interviewee is the first person I have talked to who has been inside a re-education camp. Before, the interviewee worked as an elementary school teacher who taught Chinese in the Uyghur region for almost 20 years. When I ask about how re-education camps entered the interviewee's life, the interview's tone turns darker immediately. "Early 2017, I heard of stories about people disappearing that were later put into 'boarding schools,' the rumour back then was that these people were somehow linked to terrorists."⁸³ As a teacher in the Uyghur region, the interviewee remembers how one of the school children told the interviewee randomly that his father was taken away by the police. "It was the first time someone I knew was taken away; the father of the child owned a tailor shop close to my parents' house. I knew him he was a quiet and honest man; I remember thinking that it must have been a mistake. I was not critical of the Chinese government back then. I studied Chinese and became a Chinese language teacher, and I never had problems with authorities. There were even some in my friend circle that voiced criticism about my lack of objections towards Beijing."⁸⁴

In late 2017 the interviewee was ordered to enter a 'screening' process to select Uyghur teachers to teach inmates of re-education camps Chinese. "When the school principal⁸⁵ told me that party officials would screen me. He seemed very pleased and even told me that he recommended me for the job. When I asked for more details, he told me that I was going to learn more soon."⁸⁶ Within that week, the interviewee mentions being uncomfortable for the first time within any event, including the Chinese government as with Chen Quanguo's appointment, the main streets of all Uyghur cities were visibly being patrolled more by police with heavy armour, and the sight of checkpoints increased to a point where someone could get

⁸³ Interview 29.04.2021

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ The interviewee mentioned that the principal of the school was Han Chinese.

⁸⁶ Interview 29.04.2021

checked a couple of times just on their way to buy groceries and back home. "The screening process went very well as I was familiar with Communist Party writings and expressed my approval of the economic boom and modernization of the last decades."⁸⁷ During the screening process, the goal of the questioning became clear right after the first pair of questions, "They told me that it was my duty as a good citizen to assist the Party in teaching illiterate and backward Uyghurs to become educated and integrated members of society."⁸⁸ "Were you convinced that this is what you were going to do?"⁸⁹ I asked as a follow-up question, "Yes, at the time, I thought that this was the correct thing to do. I became a Chinese language teacher for the same reason so that my people and Hans could get along better." This is the first piece of empirical data that supports the claim of this thesis that re-education camps are institutions that are not mere facilities bound to the unending "repression-violence-repression"⁹⁰ cycle proposed by Roberts. The biopolitical agenda of re-education camps is to 'forcefully' assimilate and transform rather than exclude perpetually.

The third interviewee worked for ten years as an accountant at a small Uyghur business and, from the beginning of the interview, pointed out that after turning 18, the interview never had any issues with the Chinese government. "When I was younger, I had heard of ideas of independence and used to call Chinese people bad words such as "pig" amongst friends but, after turning 18, I focused on my career and taking care of my family."⁹¹ The interviewee had heard of stories of people disappearing but never took it seriously as "most of these stories came from the countryside where people had more extremist thoughts...."⁹² In 2017 the

⁸⁷ Interview 29.04.2021

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Roberts, Sean R. 'The Biopolitics of China's "War on Terror" and the Exclusion of the Uyghurs' 236.

⁹¹ Interview 22.04.2021

⁹² Ibid.

interviewee's younger sister was summoned to come back from Turkey, where she studied for a 'check-up.' "We heard similar things from families who had relatives studying abroad, so it was not a big surprise, we were waiting for the official paper to arrive months ago."⁹³ However, the interviewee's sister refused to come back, which resulted in several police visits to the family's house, "They usually came after dinner time and questioned us on a wide array of topics ranging from if we attended Friday prayer to sudden requests of singing the national anthem."⁹⁴ One week after the last house visit, the police came to take away the interviewee, "They took me to a building where I had to spend the night in a cell no one was talking to me even when I asked them questions, the next day I was transferred to a re-education camp it was dark all the time almost no windows. Finally, one of the guards answered me when I asked why I was brought here. He told me that I was here to learn Chinese. We were talking in Chinese already. I was confused; I learned Chinese years ago when I was in school."⁹⁵ The interviewee's description demonstrates how the 'calculated' transformation/assimilation practices are aimed at every member of the Uyghur society without any logical pre-screen practices. To extend this point, the Uyghur society is taken as a whole this fits with the essential argument of biopolitical approaches to population transformation/control, which aims "to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order."⁹⁶ The Chinese state has created re-education camps to put Uyghur lives into 'order' to ensure that Uyghurs become so assimilated that they will unquestionably become part of the Chinese polity as a whole.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Interview 27.04.2021.

⁹⁵ Interview 27.04.2021.

⁹⁶ Foucault, Michel. *The Will to Knowledge (The History of Sexuality Volume 1)*. 138.

Integration, despite "petty sovereigns"?

This thesis aims at portraying how re-education camps are foundationally assimilatory facilities that aim at changing Uyghur identity. Nonetheless, during the interviews, I noticed a brutal dichotomy through the interviewee's testimonies between assimilation and actual violence practiced by the officers that physically and mentally torture inmates. As Butler suggests in *Indefinite Detention*, I will call these "petty sovereigns."⁹⁷ as in governmental officials that proclaim the right of (extra) legally determine over the life and death of inmates or persons whose life lays under the total control of government facilities. The interviewee has expressed many memories about petty sovereigns that made the interviewees risk escaping after their time in the re-education camp was over. "As a teacher, it was tough as most of the students already knew some level of Chinese therefore, the officers told me to teach them Communist Party writings and ideology as well as talks about the great economic boom of the last decade."⁹⁸ When I ask the interviewee if there was any mistreatment, the interviewee continued, "Even though most spoke Chinese, there were some especially older inmates that were struggling with the language. I remember guards screaming at them and randomly taking off their clothes to humiliate them."⁹⁹

Another interviewee that was incarcerated has similar memories, "I was once slapped just for writing something wrong in Chinese, it was a simple mistake, but in that place, every official is just waiting for an opportunity to hit you or to humiliate you."¹⁰⁰ When I ask if there were no officials that treated them with respect, "There was one teacher that came once a week

⁹⁷ Butler, Judith. "Indefinite Detention." In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. 56

⁹⁸ Interview 22.05.2021.

⁹⁹ Interview 22.05.2021.

¹⁰⁰ Interview 27.04.2021.

to teach basic computer lessons, mostly basic presentations and how to write and so on. She always told us that everything would be fine if we accept the Party's rule completely at every second in our lives. Then we could go back to our lives...."¹⁰¹ As per the most recent journalistic report¹⁰² from the Uyghur region, it is evident that most Uyghur' who were interned during 2017-2018 are now back in their homes. This means that the Chinese state believes that mass re-education worked, and the previously interned Uyghurs are currently assimilated enough to become productive members of Chinese society.

When I ask if the interviewee has noticed any cultural change amongst friends or family, the success of 'forced' assimilation becomes more evident, "Many of my friends have accepted the superiority of the Communist Party and avoid any harm by acting ideally as the Party wants it to be."¹⁰³ When I asked if these people had businesses before the brutal crackdown on Uyghurs, the interviewee confirmed and went on, "... the Party wants the Uyghurs to denounce any element of our culture, mostly religious. If businesses want to continue under these circumstances, there is no other way for them."¹⁰⁴ The interviewee told me how, through the thriving cotton business¹⁰⁵ many Uyghurs became wealthier in the last decade. "There are many families who stopped practicing Islam and accepted the way of the Chinese Communist Party."¹⁰⁶ When I asked about the rewards of stopping openly practicing Islam, the interviewee tells me, "There are definite rewards in social and economic life, however, I was also an ideal citizen in the eyes of the authorities but look what happened to me, I was also forced to get schooled. However, if I accepted their way, my life could have

¹⁰¹ Interview 27.04.2021.

¹⁰² Fahrion, Georg. "In the Sinister Disneyland of Xinjiang: China's Ongoing Oppression of the Uighurs." *DER SPIEGEL*, May 27, 2021.

¹⁰³ Interview 27.04.2021.

¹⁰⁴ Interview 27.04.2021.

¹⁰⁵ The cotton industry in Xinjiang is the leading producer of cotton in China, accounting for about one-fifth of the world's cotton production and four-fifths of China's domestic cotton production. Several critics of the industry's practices have noted widespread human rights abuses in the industry, prompting global boycotts.

¹⁰⁶ Interview 27.04.2021.

been comfortable now I just could not, leaving your culture is something I could not accept even if it means that I had to flee.”¹⁰⁷ The constant surveillance and punishment cycle might affect any Uyghur at any moment. This "panopticon" like surveillance technique and constant disciplining creates a dim outlook for Uyghurs who wish to stay out of harm's way with the CCP. However, through the empirical data obtained through interviews, it is plausible to claim that (re)integration is possible for Uyghurs as long as Uyghurs constantly prove that they are assimilated unconditionally to the way of the Chinese Communist Party. Therefore, the empirical data obtained through this thesis demonstrates an option for (re)integration for Uyghurs, a conditional option that requires former re-education camps inmates and others to renounce their own culture and prove their loyalty to the Chinese state at every level of social life.

¹⁰⁷ Interview 27.04.2021.

Conclusion

This thesis portrays a comprehensive picture of the current situation of Uyghurs living under the tightened security and surveillance situation in the Uyghur region. It builds upon a Foucauldian theoretical framework that argues that the Chinese re-education camps attempt to transform Uyghurs into economically productive and assimilated members of Chinese society. Previous scholarly work on Uyghurs emphasized (only) the exclusionary aspects of Chinese biopolitics in the Uyghur Region. Drawing comparisons to a 'modern' *Homo Sacer* position for Uyghurs left them without any option to integrate into the Chinese mainland. However, the empirical data suggests a 'conditional' integration option, one that fits into the grand scheme of Chinese biopolitics that aims to transform Uyghurs into 'trustworthy' citizens of the People's Republic of China.

The empirical findings of the thesis contribute to Sean R. Roberts'¹⁰⁸ previous research and furthers its main argument to prove that the Chinese state indeed pursues a network of biopolitical policy towards its Uyghur minority. In other words, this policy aims to break down the cultural codes of Uyghur life through the power that destroys or disciplines but opens up conditional possibilities of (re)inclusion. My data also demonstrates how re-education camps have created a tight-knitted governmentality environment where (extra)legal practices have replaced natural law and "petty sovereigns" abuse power over Uyghurs at any given moment. The empirical data demonstrates that this abuse has created much severe discomfort and has led many Uyghurs to flee the country, such as the two interviewees of this research. However,

¹⁰⁸ Roberts, Sean R. 'The Biopolitics of China's "War on Terror" and the Exclusion of the Uyghurs'.

the empirical data additionally demonstrates that for Uyghurs who (forcefully) accept the power structure of Chinese biopolitics, there is a way of integrating back into society. The 'conditional' integration of Uyghurs is a very under-researched field, mostly since independent research in the Uyghur region is impossible. Finally, while talking about 'conditional' integration, one of the interviewees reiterated similar words to the poem by Aynur Qaram at the beginning of this thesis, "There is surely a way to live in Xinjiang, maybe even comfortably depending on your job. However, you must accept to leave your soul behind; there is no other way."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Interview 27.04.2021.

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