

Mass Detention and Forced Assimilation of Uyghur Children in China¹

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Abstract

One of history's largest operations to detain and force-assimilate children is currently under way in China. Organized by China's government, it forms part of a campaign targeting 12-15 million native Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other Muslim ethnicities in East Turkestan. This was launched in 2017, but has roots in "race"-based, discriminatory settler-colonialist policies pursued since 1949, and earlier. The campaign impacts hundreds of thousands of children held in boarding schools and orphanage camps, force-isolated from their family, language, and culture. Beatings and torture are reportedly ubiquitous. Recent testimonies suggest children are de-culturized and lose their native language within 2 years.

In this paper we focus on presenting and evaluating available information on the campaign affecting children, while also exploring comparisons with children in similar situations of family separation. We build on eyewitness account and testimonies; Chinese social media, where guards post images and video; Chinese official statements, and more. We also contextualize this current program as part of the wider campaign erasing cultural and religious heritage, which affects the whole of native society; the concurrent shift towards de-recognition and erasure of all ethnic minorities in China; and the distinctively settler-colonial setting of China's Western peripheries.

Keywords

Mass family separation, detention camps, forced assimilation of children, schooling, genocide, settler colonialism, ethnic minorities, Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Muslims, East Turkestan, Xinjiang, China

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Research ethics

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1. Introduction: Children in the settler colony of East Turkestan (Xinjiang)

The study of settler colonialism has often centered on Anglo-American and European colonial projects; and how settlers displace and replace natives to appropriate their resources.² However, the Chinese empires are often overlooked, despite their long history of settler colonialism. In the *Routledge Handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism*,³ China is not mentioned at all, and does not even figure in the index! Yet China's history is substantially one of imperial conquest and colonialist expansion.⁴ Settler colonies were a feature since the oldest empires, recognized as military (*jun tun*) and civilian (*min tun*) colonies tilling *tun tian* "settler land".⁵

Chinese colonialist projects have targeted imperial frontiers in western China during Manchu empire, including East Turkestan, with the Chinese name 'Xinjiang' ('New Frontier') since its conquest in the 1700s.

Manchu conquest of China was century early than their conquest of East Turkistan. After Manchu empire was overthrown in 1911, Chinese Nationalist Party and Communist Party emerged in Chinese territory and East Turkistan Republic Established twice in 1933 and 1944 in East Turkistan's territory.

The modern Chinese state revives the older imperial view that Chinese civilization is superior and others are inevitably absorbed — now adding the modern drive to accelerate this by force, to create a "unified" Chinese nation. This leaves behind older ideas like the Communist Party's own 1930s promise to those conquered by the empires past: Once the CCP took power they would be allowed to secede, as independent nations.⁶ Yet in 1949, coming to power, the Communists claimed all the imperial conquests (less Mongolia, already independent with Soviet help). East Turkestan and Tibet, although *de facto* independent states, were invaded and annexed as colonies — despite world "decolonisation."⁷

In the 1950s onwards, the Communists offered symbolic autonomy while large numbers of Chinese settlers poured in, especially in East Turkestan where they now overshadow the native Uyghurs. In 1954, a paramilitary corporation (the 'Bingtuan') was set up to exploit oil, etc., and solidify Chinese sovereignty; it now "owns" large tracts of the region, including its own cities.⁸

State schooling, built up over decades, already weaponized for assimilation, is being expanded and shifted to the accelerated “boarding school” mode where native languages are forbidden.

“Boarding schools” form a key part of the new, massive campaign launched in early 2017 against native Uyghurs, Kazakhs, etc. They may already hold 1 million children, either placed before the start of the genocide (some in boarding schools that permitted home visits), or confiscated since 2017 from parents in detention or forced labor. In practice, whether the parents are indefinitely detained, or already perished, many institutions function as prison-like “orphanages,” especially for pre-schoolers. These institutions (schools/orphanages) are hard to differentiate from afar; the key goal of accelerated assimilation is shared by all.

Capturing and isolating the children from their language and roots is identified as genocide in the UN Genocide Convention (§IIe, “Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group”)⁹ — from Uyghur to Chinese. Consequently, the entire Chinese program is now widely regarded as genocide. In this article, we will discuss China's tools of genocide, which are rooted in settler colonialism, by taking a closer look at the children caught up in China's genocidal campaign.

2. The New Genocidal Campaign Launched in 2017: Why Children Become a Special Focus

The new campaign launched in 2017 is multi-pronged. First, a massive surveillance machinery with street cameras, face recognition, DNA databases, phone monitoring, etc. was built up and used to target and detain Uyghurs, Kazakhs and other ethnicities.

As many as 1.8 million Uyghurs, Kazakhs and others have been detained (perhaps 15% of the total ethnic population), in the prison-like camps, where they are subjected to forced assimilation: Their native language and religion is prohibited, and there is heavy indoctrination in Chinese.¹⁰ The genocidal purpose is officially hidden behind a rhetoric of defence against terrorism, but is often bluntly communicated to detainees:

“They said they would keep us there up to 50 years, until the whole nation, Kazakhs, Uyghurs, and other Muslim nationalities, would disappear. They said there was a document sent from

above, from the administrative center, and that they were acting based on that document. They said no one can change the document since it was sent from the Central Committee [...] [T]he current system would not change until all Muslim nationalities would be extinct. “Only when you, your children and your grandchildren become Chinese would the current system change,” they said.¹¹

The camps also serve as a sorting device, as “graduates” (most of whom are parents) are passed on to forced labor, prison, home or house arrest, or (presumably), to their death. Forced labor, provided by able-bodied camp survivors, is either carried out in supervised factories, or in camps reconstructed for the purpose, or in agriculture (notably the cotton industry).

Camp internment and forced labor are often not announced or acknowledged even to relatives and does not involve any legal procedures. Those sentenced to prison are sometimes acknowledged in announcements of judicial sentences, often several decades long. Those killed are not acknowledged. Occasionally social media show clips of emaciated former camp detainees sent home to die, usually within days of their release; the Xinjiang Victims Database includes over 200 deaths in the camp system, but this is probably the tip of the iceberg.

The main thrust of the genocide appears to be not mass killing, but forced assimilation, bolstered by the society-wide campaign against ethnic cultures, languages, and Islam:¹² Mosques, pilgrimage sites, and historical cemeteries bulldozed; ethnic neighborhoods razed; in Uyghur dwellings, ethnic design is demolished; Uyghur bookstores closed; holidays force-replaced with Chinese ones. As part of this “cultural genocide” cultural leaders, singers, musicians, poets, authors, and imams are simply disappeared.¹³ As the International Criminal Court announced in 2021,¹⁴ when widespread cultural destruction coincides with an apparent genocide, it can be regarded as corroborating evidence of genocide.

For the purpose of eradicating the targeted ethnicities, the genocide also includes the systematic mass sterilization of Uyghur and Kazakh ethnic minority women, documented both through personal testimony and the analysis of Chinese government statistics.¹⁵ The UN Genocide Convention (Article II.d)¹⁶ explicitly identifies “Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group” as a sign of genocide, and this aspect in particular, more than the family separations and confiscation of children, contributed to the international recognition of the Chinese government’s comprehensive campaign as genocide.¹⁷

We argue that children become a special focus of China's accelerated colonialist efforts, because children represent the future of the Uyghurs. When children are prevented from growing up Uyghur, and instead force-transformed into Chinese-speaking workers unable to carry on Uyghur traditions, it means the eradication of the people as such.

Like many other nations, Uyghurs and Chinese both view the concept of a child through the biological lens, as crucial for the survival and continuity of their respective nation. Uyghurs traditionally believe that children are source of happiness and backbone of the family. They view families without children as lifeless, using the widespread metaphor *bala bar oy bazar, bala yoq oy mazar* which translates to "families with children are like a bazaar; without children, like a graveyard." This also means families and societies without children are dead, too. Uyghurs strongly tie their hope for their nation's existence, growth and future to the concept of "children," or, the new generation. Expressions rooted in Uyghur folklore, such as *men koyermen balamgha balam koyer balisigha* meaning "I love my child, and my child love his child," vividly illustrate the value that Uyghur society places on children as the guarantee of continuity, growth and development in the future.

China's systematic targeting of Uyghur children through institutionalized attacks not only aims to cut the biological roots and connections of these Uyghur children but also signifies a deliberate effort to destroy the Uyghur nation through preventing its continuation.

The Uyghurs' concept of "child" greatly differs from that of the ethnic Han Chinese settlers, in terms of both religion, politics and economy. Uyghur folklore promotes the tradition that *balining rizqini Allah beridu* ("a child's sustenance will be provided by God"), and people believe economic poverty shouldn't prevent them from having more children, as they trust in God's plan and believe that God will provide *riziq* for every child. Due to their strong religious beliefs surrounding the notion of "child," Uyghurs appreciate children as gifts from God, expressing gratitude by saying *Bala digen Allahning soghisi*, or "children are a reward from God."

In sharp contrast, the Han Chinese settler state's political and economic perception of "child" is associated with "population control and poverty alleviation." Other than aiming to eliminate Uyghur population through limiting Uyghur births, this is one reason they have long implemented family planning measures and strict sterilization policies against Uyghur women. Uyghurs consistently oppose these policies and do not consider Uyghurs over-populated like Han

Chinese. They believe poverty emerged from Chinese colonialist exploitation of the Uyghur's natural resources, wealth, and opportunity for livelihood, rather than from an excessive number of Uyghur children.

Uyghurs also hold strong cultural beliefs regarding the importance of caring for children and the necessity to keeping them with their parents. According to Uyghur proverb, *yitinning aghzi ashqa tegse burni qanaptu*, “when the orphan gets a meal, their nose bleeds” — even if an orphan receives something beneficial, misfortune stays with them. Another very popular proverb, *arpa terik tulumda, yetim bala bulungda* (“Barley and millet in a goat skin bag; An orphan child in a corner”¹⁸) which means, like grain is kept in coarse bags, the orphan will have to stay in a corner (far from the seat of honor), also expressing the misery of children without parents. Moreover, the significance of family and the utmost importance of parents in child development is strongly emphasized in sayings like *dada oyning tuvriki, ana oyning yuriki* (“A father is the pillar; a mother is the heart of the house.”)

Similar to many other communities, Uyghurs regard being orphaned as signifying the loss, tragedy, poverty and breakdown of families. Today, therefore, the deliberate policy of the Chinese state detaining parents and forcibly removing their children, amounts to the catastrophic destruction of the Uyghur nation. It is an act of dispossession, that cuts the ties of would-be new Uyghur generations to their land and country. These children's sense of belonging will be shattered as they mature without knowledge of their parents' identity and are prohibited from embracing their traditional heritage — their parents symbolize or represent their land and country, as in the saying *atangmu yer, anangmu yer* (“father and mother, both your parents are your country”).

Chinese state propaganda presents the state care of Uyghur orphans, and state boarding schools for Uyghur children, as policies and actions that serve these children's best interests. Yet it remains a heart-wrenching tragedy for the Uyghur people, as they see these policies are designated to tear apart Uyghur families and help ensure there is no Uyghur nation in the future.

Before 2017, many school-age Uyghur children lived at home with parents or grandparents, as did under-age small children. Some older boarders could return home on weekends. With the mass detentions, children are sent to new schools/camps; even children from families not yet decimated by mass detentions or forced labor are sent to permanent boarding schools.¹⁹

Currently available number of Uyghur children held in separation from their families, is 883,000, between 2017-2019. This figure would include 500,000 children already previously held boarding schools, as mentioned in a 2017 Chinese government document referenced by the New York Times²⁰; the figure also includes an additional estimate of 383,000 Uyghur children sent to boarding schools from 2017 to 2019, as calculated by Adrian Zenz.²¹ Today, the number could be much higher, since the Chinese government since 2019 has continuously implemented the same policy of removing Uyghur children, as part of their elimination of future Uyghur generations.

So far, the children detained have been those of parents in concentration camp or parents in forced labor or in prison, plus the previous children from families not yet affected by the mass detentions or forced labor. Now, however, there is also a plan to include all children above age 9, in boarding schools.²² The number of children separated from their families may already surpass one million.

The age of detained children is 7 months to 16 years. Conditions vary, from previous schools to those newly set up, and from those for infants, to school-age children. Siblings are separated, or they might speak to each other in Uyghur. Sometimes girls and boys are mixed in the same dormitories; sometimes 3-4 kids are squeezed into a single bed.²³

In the upcoming sections, we will delve into the effects of Chinese institutionalized abuse and indoctrination on the physical and mental development of Uyghur children, as well as their formation of Uyghur identity. Furthermore, we will examine the significant role of Han race nationalism and settler colonialism within institutional policies concerning Uyghur children in the implementation of genocide.

3. Impact of China's Mass Child Separation and Institutional Indoctrination

We have found no published research about these family separations. Globally, there is some research on children of migrant-laborer parents like the rural “left-behind” children in China. That research confirms that “prolonged parent-child separation is independently associated with cognitive impairment and psychopathological problems during adolescence.”²⁴

Such adverse effects likely occur even though such children are not comparable in all respects: Unlike Uyghur children, the Chinese “left-behind” children are often left with grandparents, not forcibly cut off from their language and culture or from all family.

We also note that adverse effects may arise quickly: A study of children during the Nazi bombings of London determined that children separated from their parents suffered more trauma, than those exposed to aerial bombings(!).²⁵

Recently, in the Americas, there’s been research on the family separation policies of the U.S. Trump administration in 2018 (which, however, did not affect more than about 5,500 undocumented migrant families), and also, on “unaccompanied” children, traveling alone.²⁶

More directly relevant comparisons may be found in the psychological impact of language loss among indigenous peoples;²⁷ in the trauma left by the very similar “Indian Schools” in North America’s past;²⁸ and the Ukrainian children taken by Russia and subjected to forced adoption and Russification (now treated as war crimes).²⁹ Since the numbers of victims are dramatically higher in China, we should expect that such prosecutions also take place against those responsible there.

Sadly, due to how the Chinese government prohibits access for anyone it cannot fully control, it is not possible at present to undertake proper research, to investigate the past and present conditions, or the impact of permanent separation suffered by Uyghur children taken into Chinese orphanage camps and boarding schools.

In this section, based on the data that we have collected (including eyewitness accounts and related testimonies, Chinese social media materials and international news reports), we will examine as far as possible the effects when mass numbers of Uyghur children of detained parents are removed from their homes and placed in state run institutions for their Sinification, or assimilation into a Chinese culture identity.

3.1 Eyewitness Accounts and Related Testimonies

The Chinese government exerts strict control over all potential escape routes. Uyghurs are everywhere subject to ethnic profiling, and prohibited from communicating with anyone abroad. Since 2017, cell phones are routinely inspected. The few who managed to escape are camp survivors whose spouses (or kids’ parents) had citizenship of other countries. Such rare escapes

were sometimes facilitated through diplomatic pressure from such countries. We conducted interviews with a few parents sharing experiences of their children's victimization. For some we used pseudonyms. Where possible, information is cross-checked and compared for accuracy.

Devastating Stories of Infant Separation

When mothers were detained, breastfeeding babies are separated, with some left to die, deprived of mother's milk. One young man in Europe said: "We are lucky, I got a Dutch passport for my son. When the local government did not dare to take my baby away but detained my wife, I asked the Dutch consulate to become involved because my four months old baby needed breastfeeding." The devastated young Uyghur man, Elqut Otuken, a Dutch citizen who married an Uyghur woman in 2013, was interviewed by the secondary author. His wife, who had done nothing wrong, was detained in 2019 and sent to a camp for one month, while he was in Europe. As a result, his four-month-old baby was deprived of breastfeeding. Such misdeeds have, directly or indirectly, touched all Uyghurs. Elqut's baby was indeed lucky — rescued with his mother, with Dutch help. Elqut described his baby's situation:

It took a while until I got my wife released and brought to Holland. Even though, the Chinese government did not take away my baby because of his Dutch passport, and left him with his grandmother, he was separated from his mother while she was nursing him. Everyone knows how important mother's milk is for the baby, there is nothing can replace it, since it's necessary for the baby's optimal growth and development. My healthy baby turned to a sick baby, because he doesn't like infant formula. We had a very difficult time raising him even after my wife was released. Her milk ceased because of trauma and terror during her detention.³⁰

Camp survivor Mihrigul Tursun has triplets, who were two months old when she was detained in an airport and separated from her babies. One of her babies died while she was in prison, because Chinese medical staff at the hospital made a hole in the babies' throat and attempted to feed them through it, while their mother's nursing was denied them:

I was arrested in 2015 when my babies were two months old and needed breastfeeding. After three months, they learned that my babies were born in Egypt and tried to force me to sign fake

papers that my babies were born in China. I refused. I told them that my husband has the babies' birth certificates, and he will search for his children. So they released me into house arrest after my relatives bailed me out. But they already killed one of my triplets at the hospital. Even so, they sent me to the re-education camps again in 2016 and took my babies away again. I couldn't see them until 2018.³¹

Physical and psychological abuse

It is very dangerous to communicate about Uyghur children. Individuals who attempt to report anything sensitive or controversial may themselves face harsh punishment.

Salihe A, interviewed by the second author, currently lives in Kazakhstan. When she was allowed to visit her grandchildren, they looked awful; she said: "My grandchildren's parents were detained, and I was allowed to see them only after 2 years, once, through [Chinese] facetime online, just before I left for Kazakhstan... There were so many bruises on their faces, but they would just cry, not talk; I also didn't dare to ask. "When parents or relatives got permission to visit kids, they would often cry, yet they would also be afraid to say anything wrong and go silent instead."³²

In many cases, people still in East Turkestan are extremely cautious, and have no courage to speak up, as they face harsh penalties and are slandered with spreading false information. "Even if the parents learned that how children were abused by Chinese teachers, they can't do anything," said Zumret Dawut, a camp survivor who is currently living in Washington DC. "During my son's primary school year in 2017, he was subjected multiple times to severe physical abuse at the hands of his Chinese teacher. My son hid this from me, but I managed to find out and I took it upon myself to bring this matter to the attention of the school administration, hoping for some sort of apology and promise to stop the mistreatment. However, instead of addressing the issue, school authorities threatened me with police, and even the possibility of arrest. Fearing the consequences, I felt compelled to remain silent and couldn't protect my son. So, I let the things go unresolved," she said.³³

Camp survivor Mihrigul Tursun also explained as follows, what happened to her triplet kids. She believed that one of the triplets died because of mistreatment, and the physical and mental condition of the other two, is not very stable even today:

In April 2018, my Egyptian husband brought Egyptian diplomats and rescued me and my children. Chinese guards took me to the police station to meet with my children. My heart raced with fear and worry, not knowing what to expect. I barely recognized them. Their heads seemed disproportionately large, their bodies small and fragile, and their skin was covered with bruises and injuries. As I approached them, they looked scared, and tried to hide behind the old Chinese female guard who brought them to the police station.³⁴

The pain of the separation weighed heavily on her. It took tremendous patience to get her little ones to become attached to her again.

One of Mihrigul's children endured unknown physical abuse in the orphanage camps. "He is 9 years old now, but he still cannot control his bowel movements, and uses diapers. Both of my kids are in special-need classes at the school because of their behavioral problems," she said, "Doctors in the USA said one of them needs brain surgery. They think his brain was damaged when he was a baby."³⁵

Another moving account from children rescued from China emerged in 2022,³⁶ including testimony from the children themselves: Lütfullah was four and his sister Aysu six, when they were taken from their Uyghur parents Abdüllatif Kuçar and Miriam (Meryem) Aimati, during a home visit. The father, Kuçar, a businessman previously shuttling between Istanbul and Urumchi for years, was detained; he had acquired Turkish citizenship which was now suspect. Then he was expelled back to Turkey — alone. His wife was forced to stay, along with the children. Late one night, while speaking with her husband on the phone, she too was detained. The children were taken the day after, and then spent 20 months alone, at two *different* 'schools' outside Urumchi.

Ultimately, the children were allowed to leave China again after the father was able to insist that they were Turkish citizens. Their mother was forced to stay in China, and seemed on her last, when the family saw her: She had been given 20 years in prison,³⁷ but was taken to a hospital where the family was reunited – for 15 minutes. Seeing her emaciated state, unable to sit up by herself, and her arms with black marks from restraints, her husband broke down. It was forbidden to touch each other, but he lifted her up, only to realize she could not stand on her own — another trauma for the children watching.

In the Chinese "boarding school," the two children were not allowed to speak Uyghur, only Chinese. Aysu and Lütfullah knew some Turkish; that too was forbidden. Any infraction

was punished, for example, by forcing children to stand stretching out their arms in front, in a “motorcycle” position — children’s torture. Usually no-one talked; no-one could speak at all except by permission from the staff. One child per hall was designated an assistant, who would also harrass other children.

After 20 months, when a police car delivered them to the father to fly back to Turkey, the children were starved, cowed, and silent. They had forgotten all Uyghur and Turkish. They would not utter a single word — likely a result of the fear of punishments. It was months before they regained linguistic capability, and confidence. These observations align closely with numerous anecdotal accounts from East Turkestan since the start of the genocide.³⁸

Inside the facilities, everything was closely regimented; children were beaten for the smallest infraction, or shut in dark rooms. Thus, back in Istanbul, they did not even dare to move from one room to another in their apartment — they lacked permission! Such deep-seated, internalized fear frightened their father as well as other family members in Istanbul. Their new stepmother observed: “They were like living dead.”

The many children that China has force-detained are likely living like Aysu and Lütfullah every day: cowed, starved, and in constant fear. It parallels conditions inside the camps for adults, where the Uyghur language and culture are also strictly forbidden. Even the sparse food and starvation conditions fit with the adult camps. The fear is recognized across society: Everyone is fearful of being sent to the camps — and having their children confiscated.

Strange behaviours caused by the trauma of separation

The separation from their mother, especially, appears to inflict a deep trauma upon those children, leaving them with a persistent sense of insecurity and unpredictability and it is possible it may last for generations.³⁹ Even infants are made to live in a world of constant worry and stress, where they are unable to find anyone to trust. This trauma impacted upon their development, generating an unhealthy stress response.

“Every night, after giving them a shower and putting them into bed, I gave them long hug and gentle kiss wait until they fall asleep before I back to my own bedroom to sleep. But as dawn breaks and I wake up, I would find them still asleep but clutching onto my bags, shoes and car keys. They always wake up around midnight while I am sleeping, just to find those things,” said

Mihrigul. “They think I will disappear while their sleeping and their source of comfort was to hold on to my personal belongs. Usually, it is even very difficult for me to go to the washroom as my children cry and scream in front of the washroom door. It is also extremely difficult for me to leave them with other caregivers, since they are afraid of strangers.”

Her children’s peculiar behaviours stemming from the trauma they endured in infancy become more visible as they grow. She finds it challenging to change their behavior no matter how she repeatedly explains to them they are now with her, safe, and will never be left uncared for. “Her children’s peculiar behaviours stemming from the trauma endured in infancy became more pronounced. She finds it challenging to change their behavior despite repeatedly explaining to them they are now safe, and will never be left uncared for. “Any time I bought snacks on the table, they snatch and stash them away, as if someone would steal their food or I wouldn’t allow them to eat [...]” Psychologists might explain this behavior by reference to the fact that they were once left in hunger, unloved and alone, during the forcible separation from their mother, and that fear still lingers in their subconscious, which may have led them to coping with it in unhealthy ways — as if they still believe that they will be left in hunger and live unprotected, once again.

Note on the Credibility of Eyewitness Accounts and Related Testimonies

Eyewitness accounts and victim testimonies credibility are tested through well conducted interview including invitations and open-ended questions. Additional documents such as photos, social media accounts of victims in the stories, names and locations and contextual times and situations related to witness testimonies are collected to verify the consistency of details and completeness. Consistency of victim testimonies relied on memories verified with repeated interviews at different times. Victim testimonies that relied not on memories but on emerging current situations, are verified through cross-checking observations.

3.2 Independent Media and Chinese Social Media Evidence

The Chinese authorities censor all media, and actively prevent journalists from investigating the genocide. International social media are prohibited overall, however, Chinese clones widely used

in China can also be seen abroad. Local user's posts sometimes contain revealing glimpses from across the region, and may be transferred from Chinese apps like Douyin to Tiktok, Twitter, or other global media. Videos on Chinese social media can be divided into five kinds:

- * from independent media based outside China
- * from single parent/grandparent or siblings
- * from Chinese school teachers/staff in institutions
- * from Chinese freelancers (settlers/visitors)
- * those published by Chinese state organs, as propaganda

For obvious reasons, many posts don't mention the exact place and date. Still, some context can be reconstructed, and we add our analysis. We believe these videos taken together, posted by different users in different locations but painting a similar picture of society-wide suffering, in effect can corroborate each other. Videos posted by the Chinese school teachers and Han Chinese freelance journalists with nationalistic aims are usually very obvious, as they proudly advertise the assimilation of Uyghur kids into Han Chinese. There is only one video posted by independent media, *Bitter Winter*. We believe the credibility of this video is very high since it was taken secretly by the Chinese workers who could access to the prison style orphanage facilities. It is a third party investigation highly consistent with China's policy towards Uyghurs and their children.

Unveiling the Impact of Abusive Polices Inside the Orphanage Camps

Bitter Winter, an Italy-based magazine, has undercover journalists in China (often Chinese Christians; some have been detained). They secretly filmed one orphanage camp called Loving Heart. According to their video,⁴⁰ in 2017 this facility held 2,000 Uyghur children, all from "double detained Uyghur families" where both parents were detained. Police teachers instruct them in Chinese language and politics, under military discipline. They were forced to eat pork, and their language, culture and religion is all forbidden. Facility workers revealed that these kids are unstable; some tried to kill themselves by drinking chemicals or eating fish bones.⁴¹

There are also videos that show how Uyghur children are abused and beaten in the classroom by Chinese teachers, but such videos are typically immediately erased, once posted. In

one of the Douyin (Tiktok) video that we downloaded before it was erased, a young Uyghur mother complains that government workers forced her to go to factory work and took her toddler away, to a residential kindergarten. She said, “The daycare workers burned my child’s skin and left it untreated. There are 7-8 kids. They pour hot water on kids head, saying they are giving them a ‘shower.’ After that I couldn’t give a bath to my child when I picked him up for one of the permitted weekends. He is very afraid of water now. How can I trust them and send him back? But I have no choice, the government workers forced me to sign the contract to take my child.”⁴² This mothers’ entire Douyin account was erased, hours after her clip posted. This is the only example posted by an Uyghur mother after she discovered what had happened to her child.

Similarly, even if the child is not from a “double detained” family, is living with one parent, and has been sent to a residential kindergarten (as in the clip mentioned above), it is not easy for the parent to stay informed about their child’s daily life. There is strict censorship about any trauma inflicted upon the children by Chinese staff members. On the other hand, numerous Douyin videos have been posted by Chinese staff showing desperate kids who are crying collectively before bedtime, as they realize that they cannot return home and are forced to sleep there.⁴³

Bitter Winter published several articles with firsthand information from Han Chinese teachers: Uyghur children were left hungry, mistreated, and depressed, and couldn’t focus on “learning.” Some teachers, who had answered a call for employment teaching Chinese to children in East Turkestan, wanted to leave as soon as they arrived, uncomfortable with having to punish students so frequently, and heavily.⁴⁴

As the planning ethnic destruction is the priority through assimilation of these children, these institutions are not focused on the wellbeing or the security of the children. Chinese workers in orphanage camps revealed that many children in the camps attempt to commit suicide by drinking cleaning detergent.⁴⁵

Dealing with Grievances

In one video posted on Chinese social media, a Chinese school teacher asked his “students”, “What is your biggest worry?”⁴⁶ The Uyghur children’s answers reflect the challenges of losing their identity while coping with grief, and include: “My biggest worry is:

When will my Father return?"; and "Why does Dad need to 'study'?" (this euphemism refers to the adult camps); "When will my Uncle return?"; "Why did my Dad die?"; — these all clearly reflect the worries that those children are dealing with. It may not help, when one Chinese teacher sings to children taken from their parents, in another clip: "China is Your Mama."⁴⁷

Children separated from both parents ("double detained"), aren't allowed to go outside.⁴⁸ Children with one parent detained and placed in boarding schools; or in daycare centers with home visits every 2 weeks, may not have to deal with total isolation; nevertheless, they too grapple with worry about missing parents, siblings or relatives taken away before their eyes. This may cause recurrent depression, harming both physical health and cognitive development.

Many of these children's parents were arrested for having more than two or three children considered as a violation of China's family planning policies or in other words Xi Jinping's fear of Uyghur population as a national security threat.⁴⁹ Children separated from parents, a situation commonly referred to children's whose one or both parents (double detained) detained may feel a huge part of them is missing, deep sense of loss that is not possible to fill. They also grapple with constant worry about their missing parent or siblings or relatives detained and taken away before their eyes. This may cause early childhood depression, recurrent depression, and effect their physical health as well as cognitive development.

Institutionalized Political Indoctrination Process

The power of these Chinese settler institutions, the boarding schools and orphanage camps are immense, their main focus is, as expressed in the Chinese slogan: "Cut their generation, cut their roots, break up their lineage, break up their origin" (断代、断根、断联、断源) of Uyghur children, to facilitate Chinese state genocidal policies. This intent was officially stated in a "Number 6 document" distributed by Kashgar government administration office on March 6, 2018.⁵⁰

Inside, instruction overwhelmingly prioritizes the indoctrination of the Communist Party's political agenda, and the imposition of the Han Chinese language. Chinese culture is compulsory, and includes "Red" (Communist) songs; a paper described every Uyghur kid in Urumchi county's Imam village fluently reciting both Confucius and the Three Character Classic

(*San Zi Jing*) in Chinese, and singing Chinese opera pieces like “Mulan,” “Red Lantern,” “Shajiabang; and other classic Chinese pieces from Henan Opera, and Beijing Opera.⁵¹

There are also many videos posted by Chinese teachers that show Uyghur children in Han Chinese ethnic uniform. This is not worn in China proper, but here is part of the “break the roots” efforts of make the children not only speak Han Chinese but also to look and feel like Han Chinese people.⁵² We can see from another the video that Uyghur kids also were forced to deny their Uyghur identity as they consciously obeyed their Chinese teacher and dictate: “I am Chinese, I have black hair and black eyes.”⁵³ This type of “race” indoctrination is probably imposed on Uyghur kids at a very early age. In one of the Douyin videos posted by Chinese workers, an Uyghur toddler about two - three years old answers questions about Chinese red flags, and says “Xijiping” (the name of China’s leader) when he asked who he loves the most.⁵⁴

Under the guise of education, the development of children’s free and critical thinking skills, as well as their beliefs and opinions, are heavily restricted. Instead of encouraging analysis and independent thought, these Uyghur children are coerced into memorizing party propaganda and regurgitating information from textbooks, effectively hijacking the intellectual development of their brain, and creativity. The hopes and dreams of these children are not allowed to flourish organically but rather is directed towards a predetermined agenda of the Chinese state colonizers. Creation of such as an absolute loyal, robotic new generation of Uyghurs will contribute to the justification of the innocence of Chinese colonialism as these new generation of Uyghurs not only cannot represent their own identity, perspective and historical roots but will defend Chinese colonialism to their land in the future.

These Chinese institutions serve as primary instruments for carrying out the state’s ongoing, gradual genocidal agenda, and part of this is to recruit Uyghur children into the CCP’s warrior ideology. One Han Chinese individual (profile name, *Cao Gangqi in Xinjiang*), self-defined as a promoter of patriotism and “ethnic unification,” posted numerous videos on his Douyin account where he asked questions of random Uyghur children in the street. (These kids are probably not from orphanage camps, who aren’t allow to go out; most likely they’re from boarding schools). We collected 38 of his videos on the day celebrating the establishment of the People’s Republic of China.⁵⁵ All questions relate to loyalty to China, and the Communist Party. From their body language and tone, we easily see that the children’s answers are dictated and memorized. Only two kids said they will become a teacher, like their Chinese teacher, when they

grow up. The rest of the kids all speedily provide answers such as “I love China”; “I love the Communist Party”; “I Will Become A Soldier and Protect China’s Border Territory”; “I Will Become a Policeman and Arrest Bad People”; “I Will Sacrifice My Blood for China, My Country”; “I Will Die For China and Not Be Afraid.”⁵⁶

By training these children as slave-minded future warriors of China who are unconditionally willing to sacrifice themselves for Chinese state.

Clearly, the intention of these child focus policies far more than forced assimilation, but genocidal intent that transform those kids into “Mankurt,”⁵⁷ so they can use them for their own dangerous missions, such as wars.

The indoctrination process in orphanage camps and boarding schools is painful. Videos posted by Han Chinese teachers depict children sitting in rigid plastic chairs for prolonged periods, appearing fatigued and exhausted as they struggle and forced to learn Chinese language. They are forced to repeatedly recite Party slogans. Despite constantly yawning and even crying, they are compelled to chant the “Red” Communist Party songs, and their emotional distress is evident.⁵⁸

Prohibited to Unite with Parents

A special category is the parents who escaped and left children behind in China, with grandparents, or with a remaining spouse. Before 2017, most parents expected to be able to leave and return. After the sudden interruption of all telephone and other contacts in 2017, many of their children were disappeared, force-taken by the Chinese State.⁵⁹ Amnesty International demanded that China release all children whose parents didn’t approved their detention; the BBC tried to collect such cases in the UK, demanding that the Chinese ambassador investigate these disappearances, but in vain.⁶⁰

There are also children who left by a parent with relatives in Istanbul and other Uyghur diaspora centers, hoping to reunite later. In many cases, the parent was detained in China and could not be contacted again. (CNN journalists located one girl left behind with grandparents).⁶¹

Conversely, those who ended up abroad but with their children, find it is hard to discuss the genocide with their children — and explain why it is no longer possible to visit or even speak to relatives like their grandparents.

One well-known example of China blocking reunification abroad is the case of four Uyghur siblings trying to join their parents in Italy. When the genocide launched, they parents could not return to collect their children — they realized they'd be detained too. Then, these four made a desperate escape from their camp, helped by secret contacts to go to Beijing. However, despite the Italian Embassy having approved a family reunion visa, just before leaving the country they were arrested in a hotel room by Chinese police. The eldest sibling, Zumaira Ablikim, was coerced into making a false confession on Chinese state media, stating they did *not* wish to join their parents in Italy.⁶² Later it was revealed that she'd been coerced.⁶³

Forcing children into making a false confession is serious violation of Article 40 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and prohibiting children from uniting with their parents is also a serious violation of Article 10(2) states:

A child whose parents reside in different States shall have the right to maintain on a regular basis, save in exceptional circumstances, personal relations and direct contacts with both parents. Towards that end and in accordance with the obligation of States Parties under article 9, paragraph 1, States Parties shall respect the right of the child and his or her parents to leave any country, including their own, and to enter their own country. The right to leave any country shall be subject only to such restrictions as are prescribed by law and which are necessary to protect the national security, public order (*ordre public*), public health or morals or the rights and freedoms of others and are consistent with the other rights recognized in the present Convention.⁶⁴

4. Evidence from Chinese Official Statements on Government Actions and Institutions

The mass confiscation of children is openly admitted by the Chinese authorities, such as on camera to the BBC, in 2019. There are several factors behind this candid admission: First, the Chinese authorities cannot hide it. Initially they had thought they could hide their massive new detention camp system to the outside world, but this became untenable when foreign researchers using satellite photography and Chinese government documents were able to show the staggering extent of the new camps. Thus, in late 2018, the authorities switched tactic and admitted the

camp's existence, but claimed they were 'Vocational training' institutions, for would-be terrorists (which was soon contradicted by evidence of huge numbers of innocent professionals, as well as elderly, none of whom fit the propaganda image). In reality the camps serve two purposes, as part of the genocide: forced assimilation through prohibition of native language use and heavy indoctrination in Chinese; and also as a sorting device, channelling "graduates" either into forced labor, prison, or, presumably, death.

The collapse of the lie about the camps, meant that it was impossible to lie about the children. It remained to try to portray both the concentration camps for adults, and those for children, as good things, including good for the children. Thus Chinese state officials and media today will describe these policies as educating Uyghur children and civilizing them for a better future.⁶⁵

For example, the international state TV international station CGTN posted a video described how poor farmer kids gained from government funded education in boarding schools, looking to a bright future.⁶⁶ However, the video presents only high school students, never discussing Uyghur kids removed from their families at a younger age, and, of course, above all prohibiting journalists, news organizations or UN inspections from taking place other than as a fake Potemkin game.

Other than the official explanations and justifications, the leak of secret documents from inside the Communist Party and government has been extremely helpful for our understanding of the genocide on the whole. This includes leaks on the child victims.

In 2020, important documents revealing the statistics of detentions and child confiscations in Yarkand county in the southern part of East Turkestan, proved especially illuminating.⁶⁷ According to these government files, in 2018 more than 9,500 children in this one county were experiencing either "single" or "double" hardship in that one or both of their parents were in the camps for adults. Extrapolating a similar figure for all of the region, up to 250,000 children may have at least one parent in detention.

Finally, we must note that children and youth have also been found in the detention camps intended for adults. Police ID photographs taken of detainees and revealed in the 'Xinjiang Police Files' leak of secret State documents, show multiple detainees as young as 14 and 16 (and also many elderly persons), swept up with other innocents.⁶⁸ In addition, the leaked so-called 'Shanghai List' of 'terrorism suspects,' includes children as well: "162 of [those on the

list] are under the age of five. The document says that children as young as five have been “met and examined” by security personnel.⁶⁹ (In the Xinjiang Victims Database⁷⁰, with more than 50,000 records, many minor-age detainees are also noted.)

Conclusions

The Chinese government is proceeding with a multi-year plan for genocide in East Turkestan (Xinjiang) launched in 2017. It prominently includes mass permanent family separations — and these policies are now being further exported to other regions, such as Tibet.⁷¹ If this process continues unimpeded, it will clearly in due course lead to the destruction of the Uyghur, Tibetan, and other peoples, “as such” — as specified in the U.N. Genocide Convention (1948), meaning that these nations will be eradicated and no longer exist.

Chinese settler colonialism’s powerful role in the targeting of Uyghur Children through its institutions has served for genocide as follow:

- (a) Chinese settler colonialism is inseparably linked to master race of Ethnic Han Chinese nationalism. This connection is seen in institutions such as orphanage camps and boarding schools which are directly designated and operated by Chinese communist central government. Confucian Chinese ideology and ethnic Han Chinese culture also plays a significant role in this relationship. As a consequence, these institutions serve as effective tools of the Chinese settler colonial state’s genocidal intention that aimed to destroy future well- being and continuation of Uyghur generation.
- (b) Here, Sinification of Chinese settler colonialism surpassed assimilation of these children as it manifested the intent of genocide, the *dolus indirectus* of this massive campaign, which does not primarily aim to kill or destroy these kids, but to assimilate them as Chinese workers in the manner of the Mankurt story. Their original ethnic identity will no longer exist, or be remembered.⁷² It seems to us that the Chinese regime’s current approach goes beyond the conventional understanding of assimilation, since the intention is most likely not to have these children or their future descendants be the equals of the settler colonialist Han Chinese race, that is taking over and already dominating their ancient homeland. Instead, the indoctrination

implemented on Uyghur children reveals an intention to mold them into a new Chinese sub-race, characterized by slave mentality, serving the dominant Han Chinese colonizer race with utmost loyalty. These assimilated new Chinese can probably never be treated as equal to the existing Han Chinese race, nor can they be Uyghur, since this identity is not permitted to be preserved as a living ethnic identity. The campaign of schooling and teaching we see now has the ultimate goal of erasing any future Uyghur generations, while preserving a new sub-race of subservient laborers.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which China also has signed, states in its many articles the obligation of states to protect children's physical and mental health, including, for example, Article 25.⁷³ This convention also clearly prohibits removing children from their family environment, in the Preamble, as follows:

Recognizing that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding,⁷⁴

However, China seized parents to create a precondition to remove Uyghur children from their families, en masse. This is a massive, intentional violation of the basic right of a child, to a full and harmonious development of personality. The same convention, article 7 (1), 8 (1), both emphasize children's right to acquire a birth name, the right to know and to be cared for by his or her parents, and the right to preserve their identity and nationality — which China violates.⁷⁵ Even Article 20, which allows for the possibility of State care of children, is violated: paragraph (2) insists that if care must be provided by the State,

Such care could include, inter alia, foster placement, kafalah of Islamic law, adoption or if necessary, placement in suitable institutions for the care of children. When considering solutions, *due regard shall be paid to the desirability of continuity in a child's upbringing and to the child's ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background.* [our emphasis]⁷⁶

Now, if East Turkistan is seen not as an occupied country, but as an inseparable part of China and/or one of the legal provinces of China, and if the Uyghurs are one of the 56

minorities of China, as Chinese authorities have claimed, then their children's rights must be protected based on Article 30 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Children:

In States where there are minorities or indigenous peoples based on ancestry, religion or language, a child belonging to such a minority or indigenous people shall benefit from his own culture together with other members of the minority community to which he belongs. They cannot be deprived of the right to believe and practice their religion ... and to use their own language.⁷⁷

However, the Chinese authorities plays both sides: by flagrantly violating Article 30, it seemingly puts Uyghurs in a category that does not belong to the nations of China, while it also still claims that Uyghurs are an ethnic minority of China — unless of course, this is only a ruse until that “minority’s” its very existence can be undone by genocidal means.

China's violations of many international laws, including the Convention of the Child, reflects the actual colonial status of East Turkistan as an illegally occupied nation, not one of the ethnic minorities of China or an indigenous people of China. In this perspective, Chinese settler colonialism in the region is the root cause of mass scale displacement of Uyghur children, implemented with institutionalized genocidal policies that aim to eradicate even the future generations of Uyghurs not yet born.

Endnotes with full references

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⁵⁰ “断代、断根、断联、断源” — Kashi [Kashgar] Government Information Public Platform, “Guanyu yinfa ‘Kashi dichu 2018 nian guan cha gongzuo yaodian fuze ren fenjie fang’an de tongzhi” 关于印发《喀什地区 2018 年督查工作要点责任分解方案》的通知 [Notice on the Publication and Distribution of the Kashgar Region “Plan for Distributing Essential Inspection Work Task”, 2018], *Government Information Public Platform of Kashi*, March 6, 2018,

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⁵¹ “Xin Chun Zou Jiceng: Ba Zhonghua Youxiu Wenhua Jin Haizi Xinli” (新春走基层: 把中华优秀传统文化种进孩子心里) [Chinese Spring Starts from the Grassroots: Planting Brilliant Chinese Culture into Children’s Hearts], *Xinjiang Wenming Wang*, Jan 23, 2017, http://xj.wenming.cn/wmdjr/201701/t20170123_4027438.shtml; this article was originally published in *Xinjiang Daily*.

⁵² Duoyin video, downloaded and saved by Rukiye Turdush.

⁵³ Rukiye Turdush (@parlabest), “Chinese Teacher Forced Uyghur Kids to Dictate: I am Chinese.” Twitter, April 17, 2021, 1:54 p.m.;

<https://twitter.com/parlabest/status/1383478984428572679?s=20>

⁵⁴ Rukiye Turdush (@parlabest), “Sad to hear Uyghur Babies Answer the Question in Chinese and Say: “Xi Jinping”” Twitter, Dec. 14, 2019, 8:45 p.m.; accessed May 23, 2023,

<https://twitter.com/parlabest/status/1206027477589598208>

⁵⁵ Cao Gangqi’s profile in Douyin is dedicated to Chinese communist party as a propaganda tool, with words like “beautiful villages, strengthen ‘San Nong,’ tell Xinjiang’s story, build patriotism, spread ethnic unity, send positive energy.” The term “San Nong” in his profile words were drawn from Xi Jinping’s report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China which indicates how the people were “born from agriculture, are happy from agriculture, and prosper from agriculture” (因农而生, 向农而兴, 依农而盛). A related article is here:

http://paper.people.com.cn/rmzk/html/2023-03/20/content_25972703.htm

⁵⁶ Videos collected by camp survivor Zumret Dawut, and provided to the second author.

⁵⁷ Chingiz Aitmatov, *The Day Lasts More Than Hundred Years* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1983); this vision was also memorably depicted in the 1990 Soviet-Turkmen feature film *Mankurt*, which depicts a fictional Central Asian people conquered, enslaved, and brainwashed into forgetting their original identity, and then recruited into soldiers serving their conquerors (the Mankurt slaves).

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- ⁶² Zumaira’s video speech originally published in local Kashgar news, downloaded by second author.
- ⁶³ Video conversation between Yahya Ablikim and his mother in Italy, provided to second author by Yahya’s cousin Araphat Ablimit. This sort of coerced video is a common means of repression used by Chinese authorities.
- ⁶⁴ G.A. Res. 44/25, Convention on the Rights of the Child, (November 20,1989); art. 10(2).
- ⁶⁵ Shohret Hoshur, “Uyghur Children of Incarcerated Parents Undergo Political Education in Xinjiang Schools: ‘We’re Providing a Very Good Education to These Children,’ A Political Ethics Advisor Told RFA,” *RFA*, Aug. 26, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/political-education-08262021171715.html>
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⁷⁴ *Id.* para 6.

⁷⁵ *Id.* art. 7 (1), 8 (1).

⁷⁶ *Id.* art. 20 (2)

⁷⁷ *Id.* art. 30.