

How China Uses Work to Reshape Uyghur Identity and Control a Strategic Region

State labor programs were aimed at lifting one of the nation's poorest regions out of poverty, but they have also served as a tool to erode resistance to Chinese rule.

By David Pierson
Reporting from Hong Kong

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The Uyghurs arrive in Chinese factory towns by train and plane, often in groups wearing matching caps or jackets. They are sent by the government to work where they are needed, whether it is molding rubber slippers, assembling automotive wiring or sorting chicken carcasses.

A joint investigation by The New York Times, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism and Der Spiegel has revealed that Uyghurs are being sent out of their homeland, Xinjiang, on government work programs, more widely than previously documented.

We found that workers are now involved in making a variety of goods for many well-known brands in factories across the country, presenting a challenge to international regulators looking to identify and purge forced labor from supply chains.

Uyghur workers were traced to more than 70 factories in at least five major industries.



Source: The LandScan Program, Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL); Satellite Imagery by Esri; OpenStreetMap (OSM); Landsat - Graphic by Pablo Robles

Experts estimate that tens of thousands of Uyghurs have been transferred under these programs. While the precise conditions faced by these workers remain unclear, United Nations labor experts, academics and human rights advocates assert that the programs are coercive in nature.

“For these Uyghurs being forced and dragged out of their homes to go to work, it’s hell,” said Rahima Mahmut, a Uyghur activist in exile and executive director of Stop Uyghur Genocide, a British-based rights group.

“It’s like you’re being taken from one country to another. That’s how different it is,” she said. “From the language, to the food, to the way of life.”

The Chinese Embassy in Washington said that allegations of forced labor in Xinjiang were “nothing but vicious lies concocted by anti-China forces.”

The embassy said the government’s policies made the region safer. “Xinjiang-related issues are not human rights issues at all, but in essence about countering violent terrorism and separatism,” it said.

The Chinese government has long played a central role in the transfer of Uyghurs from their homes to both jobs elsewhere in Xinjiang and in other parts of China. The jobs strategy was initially aimed at reducing poverty and unemployment, but in recent years it has become a crucial part of Beijing’s efforts to reshape Uyghur identity in the name of security.

The authorities have imposed an intense security crackdown in Xinjiang to quash any sign of resistance to Beijing’s rule after a spate of violence involving Uyghurs. In 2013, a sport utility vehicle plowed into a crowd near Tiananmen Square in Beijing, killing two and injuring dozens; and in 2014, a group armed with long knives attacked people at a train station in the southwestern city of Kunming, killing 31.

The violence convinced China’s top leader, Xi Jinping, that Islamic extremism was not a fringe ideology, but something that had burrowed deep into Uyghur society, according to internal Chinese documents leaked to The New York Times in 2019. He responded with a wave of repression in Xinjiang that included holding Uyghurs in internment camps and forcing them to work in factories and fields.

The authorities used the labor transfer program to control Uyghurs who were not in the camps, according to Adrian Zenz, an anthropologist who is an expert on Uyghur forced labor. Chinese officials deemed many of these Uyghurs “idle” and therefore a threat, requiring close monitoring.

A report shared with Chinese officials in 2018 written by scholars at Nankai University, in northeastern China, suggested the transfer program be expanded to reduce the population density of Uyghurs in Xinjiang and to “meld and assimilate” the ethnic group.



Leaked internal Xinjiang police files obtained by the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, a nonprofit anti-communist group in Washington where Mr. Zenz works as director of China Studies, show that anyone who resists participating in a government program like a labor transfer can face arrest.

Some Uyghurs choose to go because they have grown weary of constant surveillance and security checkpoints that can make life in parts of Xinjiang feel like an open air prison, overseas Uyghur activists say.

The recruitment process is also coercive, experts say. It often consists of government work teams going door-to-door in villages and compelling farmers to leave their homes, often for the first time.

Government officials are offered incentives to recruit as many Uyghurs as possible to meet targets set by the state for the number of transferred workers, said Darren Byler, a professor and anthropologist studying Uyghur culture at Simon Fraser University, in Canada.



A sendoff ceremony for a group of migrant workers from the city of Hotan in Xinjiang in 2020.
Source: gov.cn

Uyghurs also join the program because there are few other opportunities. Many rural Uyghurs have lost work as the government has seized land for development and large state-owned farms. And Uyghurs have long faced discrimination by Chinese employers, who often favor hiring workers of the ethnic Han majority.

The Nankai University study said there were many instances in which transferred Uyghurs were prevented by local police in other provinces from getting off their trains. This led to many “embarrassing” incidents, the authors wrote, in which the workers would get approval to leave the train station, only to be denied entry at their factory gates. And if they were granted access to the factory, they would sometimes be prevented from working and sent home.

David Pierson covers Chinese foreign policy and China’s economic and cultural engagement with the world. He has been a journalist for more than two decades.