

# Invisible Desert

Danika Cooper

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Desert landscapes are often described as empty, vacant, and lacking and are frequently depicted as voids, gaps, or blank spots on maps. But emptiness is not a geographical feature. Rather, it is a cultural construction and representational technique that has, both directly and indirectly, contributed to social, environmental, and economic exploitation of desert landscapes.<sup>1</sup> Twelfth- and thirteenth-century European definitions of the word desert directly translate into wasteland, which evolved from the late Latin *desertum*, meaning 'thing abandoned'. This designation of the desert as an empty wasteland, which has well surpassed its European origins, suggests that it has no real social, environmental, or economic value.<sup>¶</sup> Historian Vittoria di Palma argues that the term wasteland itself is a category of land defined entirely by absence. She writes: 'The emptiness that is the core characteristic of the wasteland is also what gives the term its malleability, its potential for abstraction; a vacant shell, it lies ready to include all those kinds of places that are defined in negative terms, identified by what they are not.'<sup>2</sup> It is this correlation between deserts and wastelands that has helped contribute to perceptions that the desert is worthless and in need of sweeping transformations.

Environmental sociologist Valerie L. Kuletz makes the case that contemporary environmental science research continues to legitimise discourses of emptiness and wastelands by hierarchically organizing bioregional value according to productive capacity through the universally adopted Global Land Cover system.<sup>3</sup> This categorisation is partly the result of land cover and land use classification systems used globally by governments to standardize processes for taxation and economic development purposes.<sup>#</sup> Nearly all its categories classify lands through an association with an industry, such as urban development or agriculture. The majority of arid regions are

<sup>¶</sup> It is important to note that many non-European cultures have viewed deserts as spaces of rich culture and ecologies. The most seminal examples are the Hohokam people of the southwestern United States, the Rajasthani pastoralists in the Indian subcontinent, and the ancient Egyptians.

<sup>#</sup> Global land cover datasets have been used since the 1970s. Since the 1990s, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the United States Geological Survey (USGS) have produced the most comprehensive and widely accepted datasets that are used throughout the globe by governments and institutions to track and monitor land cover change.<sup>4</sup>

classified as barren land in the MODIS Land Cover classification dataset. Defined in the dataset as 'land with limited ability to support life,' barren land is characterised by many of the features of desert landscapes—'dry salt flats,' 'bare exposed rock,' 'transitional areas,' and 'mixed barren land.'<sup>5</sup> Given that there is no desert or arid category in the MODIS dataset, these landscapes are almost always categorised as barren land. Directly correlating economic productivity with vegetation, land cover categorisation systems frame the value of these barren geographies to primarily derive from their ability to be physically manipulated and repurposed into other, more productive land uses. These environmental classifications and the perceptions that they enable have material consequences on how desert landscapes are governed, designed, developed, maintained, and valued, and have created public perceptions that deserts are geographically remote and culturally isolated. This strategic invisibility has allowed the pursuit of activities that are out of public view and beyond the realm of judicial and civic oversight.

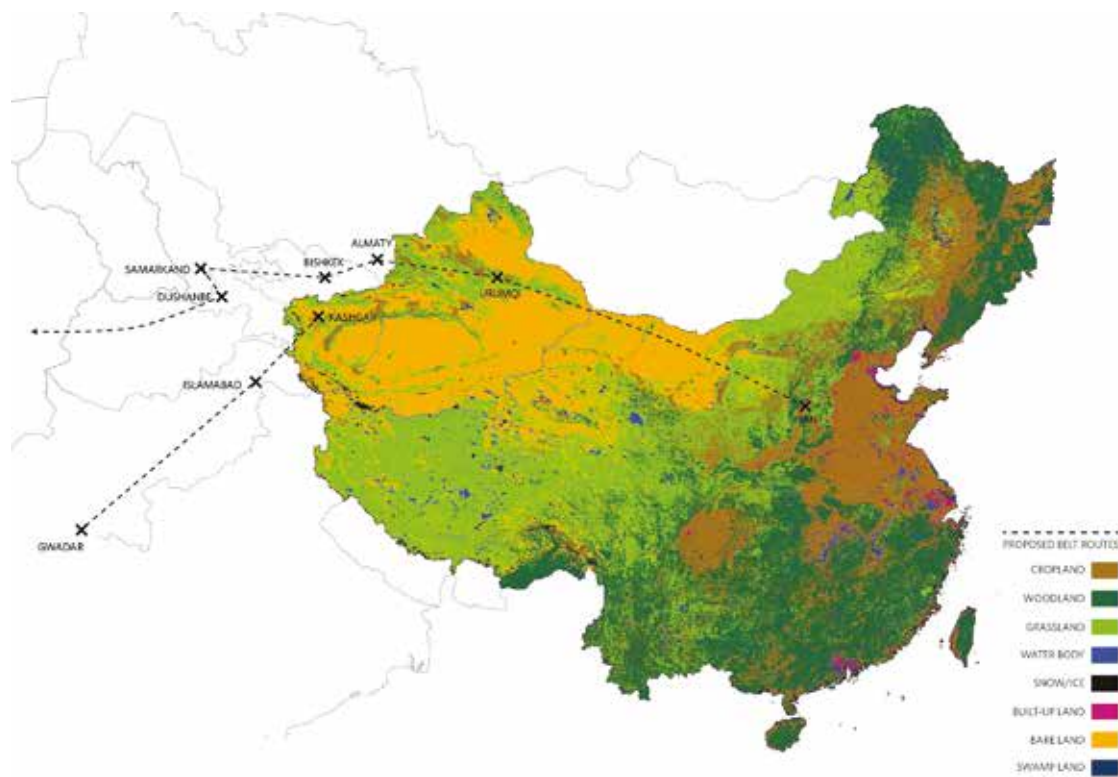
The internment of China's Muslim-minority populations in Xinjiang is one of numerous examples from across the globe in which the strategic invisibility afforded by desert landscapes has enabled the infringement of human rights to promote a geopolitical agenda. Governments, at all levels and from across the globe, have long exploited desert landscapes to relocate populations, test weapons, dispose of toxic materials, mine natural resources, and reinforce lethal borderlands. For example, during Britain, Spain, and France's colonisation of the Americas, Indigenous peoples were brutally forced to relocate to deserts in order to gain access to their land and resources. These actions continued after the creation of the United States in 1776, and their colonial legacies continue to shape Indigenous relations with the United States government today.<sup>6</sup> At the height of the Second World War, Japanese Americans were forcefully interned in U.S. deserts as a matter of 'national security.'<sup>7</sup> Not long after, those same deserts became the sites of nuclear testing and detonations, activities that continued for almost 50 years.<sup>8</sup> Today, the soil and air reflect the protracted environmental toxicity of nuclear colonialism.<sup>9</sup> In Chile, Augusto Pinochet exploited the Atacama Desert's massive scale, lack of development, and hence, extreme invisibility from the public eye to execute and bury political prisoners in unmarked, remote parts of the desert from the 1970s until the 1990s.<sup>10</sup> In the Negev Desert, Bedouins were forcefully removed in the aftermath of World War II to provide the newly-formed state of Israel with lands that could be irrigated for settlement and agriculture—consequences of which continue to shape global politics.<sup>11</sup> The commonly held, but fundamentally false, perception of deserts as landscapes of desolate and empty spaces has allowed governments, institutions, and private enterprises alike to exert intensive control over these territories, often with little regard for long-term socio-environmental consequences.

## The Strategic Invisibility of Xinjiang

Hidden in the desert territory of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Xinjiang) in northwest China are massive, high-security compounds currently imprisoning over a million people. The People's Republic of China (PRC) is exploiting the region's geographic remoteness, cultural isolation, and the insidious discourse of the global War on Terror to justify and obscure the mass surveillance and internment of its minority-Muslim citizenry. In the case of Xinjiang, perceptions of the region as empty and without value have resulted in transformations of the physical landscape and associated social structures over the last decade. Despite the massive scale and rapid rate at which these changes have been occurring, restricted access to and documentation of the area—especially the 're-education' camps—makes the region's invisibility altogether more profound.

Maintaining total control over Xinjiang's territory and population is a critical element of the Communist Party of China's (CCP) recent intentions to capitalise on the region's strategic geographic location and economic potential. Xinjiang is a vital geography in China's global ambitions, and the Uyghurs' cultural differences and separatist desires pose an existential threat to the state's motives. While the exploitation of Xinjiang has taken place for centuries, the CCP has sought to further reaffirm control of the region as a strategic play in the country's new global trade plan, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI, which aims to mimic the transcontinental trade economy established through the original Silk Road, depends upon Xinjiang's longstanding geostrategic role as a bridge between mainland China and Central Asian countries, Europe and, eventually, Africa. Ancillary to this has been the forced assimilation of Muslim-minority communities into mainstream Chinese culture, and in doing so, the suppression of dissent. While the BRI promotes extreme global connectivity, its success relies upon the continued invisibility of Xinjiang and its Uyghur people. Yet as the deliberate concealment of the state's treatment of the Uyghurs becomes even more imperative to their objectives, China's foreign policy and economic agenda becomes more visible to the global community.<sup>¶</sup>

¶ It is important to note that precisely because of the region's low population density and remote location that these events are able to take place and that despite increasing suspicion of human rights violations, there is limited documentation and evidence. China has been highly effective in both denying access to sites and controlling the narrative about Xinjiang to its own citizens, such that most people within mainland China are completely unaware of what is happening to the Uyghurs and other Muslim minority groups. If these same actions were pursued in high-density urban areas, keeping them hidden and secret would be nearly impossible, but the geographic remoteness of the region and the successful public intimidation of the Uyghurs keep these violations invisible. As such, I am deeply indebted to the dedicated scholarship of Adrian Zenz and Shawn Zhang, who have each painstakingly worked to expose this atrocity with almost no official data nor any physical access to Xinjiang.



Two of the most central and lucrative Belt routes proposed through China's mega-infrastructure project, The Belt and Road Initiative, rely on Xinjiang's strategically located geography and 'bare' land classification. Map data from MODIS Global Land Cover dataset (2010) and the BRI maps produced by The World Bank Organization (2018).

Unsurprisingly, the majority of Xinjiang is classified as barren land in the MODIS Land Cover classification dataset. This classification belies the fact that the region of Xinjiang contains oasis villages, towns, and cities where over 11 million Uyghur people live, work, and worship.<sup>12</sup> It is not only rich in coal, oil, gas, lithium, and zinc but is also favorable to grazing livestock and the cultivation of cotton, cereals, melons, grapes, and the Aksu 'sweetheart' apple—a plant sustaining a billion-dollar industry and grown exclusively in Xinjiang.<sup>13</sup> Ignorance of the Uyghurs' venerable and established culture is the result of strategic intervention.

For millennia, Xinjiang has been home to an ethnically Turkic people called the Uyghurs, who had been primarily nomadic, though they also built impressive oasis cities with sophisticated agricultural techniques.<sup>14</sup> At the height of the Silk Road's global influence, Xinjiang was a crossroads for culture and religion: At its trade centers in the oasis towns of Kashgar, Khotan, and Yarkhand, the Uyghurs were influenced by interactions with people from Persia, India, China, Mongolia, Turkestan, and Greece and were introduced to Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Manichaeism.<sup>15</sup> In approximately 1000 CE, most of the region's population converted to Islam, which today remains the primary religion of the region.<sup>16</sup> The Uyghurs remained an autonomous population until the Chinese Qing imperial dynasty conquered Xinjiang in the mid-18th century, bringing the region and the Uyghur people under Chinese leadership. Throughout the 19th century, Uyghurs made numerous, though unsuccessful, attempts to regain independence and reject colonisation.<sup>17</sup>

In 1955, Xinjiang formally became a Chinese 'autonomous' region, an administrative division defined through an affiliation with a particular ethnic minority.<sup>¶</sup> Today, Xinjiang remains strategically located, forming China's border with eight neighboring countries: Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. It is China's largest administrative region: At 1.6 million square kilometers, Xinjiang is approximately one-sixth of China's land mass, equivalent in size to Great Britain, France, Germany, and Spain combined.<sup>18</sup> Geologically, the region is significant for the Flaming Mountains, the Taklamakan Desert, the Turpan Depression, and the Tian Shan ('Heavenly Mountains'), all meaningful cultural landscapes to the local population. However, the region, along with the Uyghur community, has remained

<sup>¶</sup>In principle, this is meant to give members of that minority rights not afforded to others. There are five autonomous regions in China that are each associated with one or more ethnic minority: Zhuang Autonomous Region, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, Tibet Autonomous Region, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, and Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. It is important to note that despite these regions being created in acknowledgement of ethnic diversity, these populations have been substantially disenfranchised socially, politically, and economically. Tibetans are perhaps the most well-known example of this, but they are by no means the only ones to have experienced such marginalization. It is important to note that Tibet's status as an Autonomous Region is a delineation that has been ascribed by the Chinese state but is highly contested by Tibetans and much of the international community, who believe that Tibet is a sovereign nation.

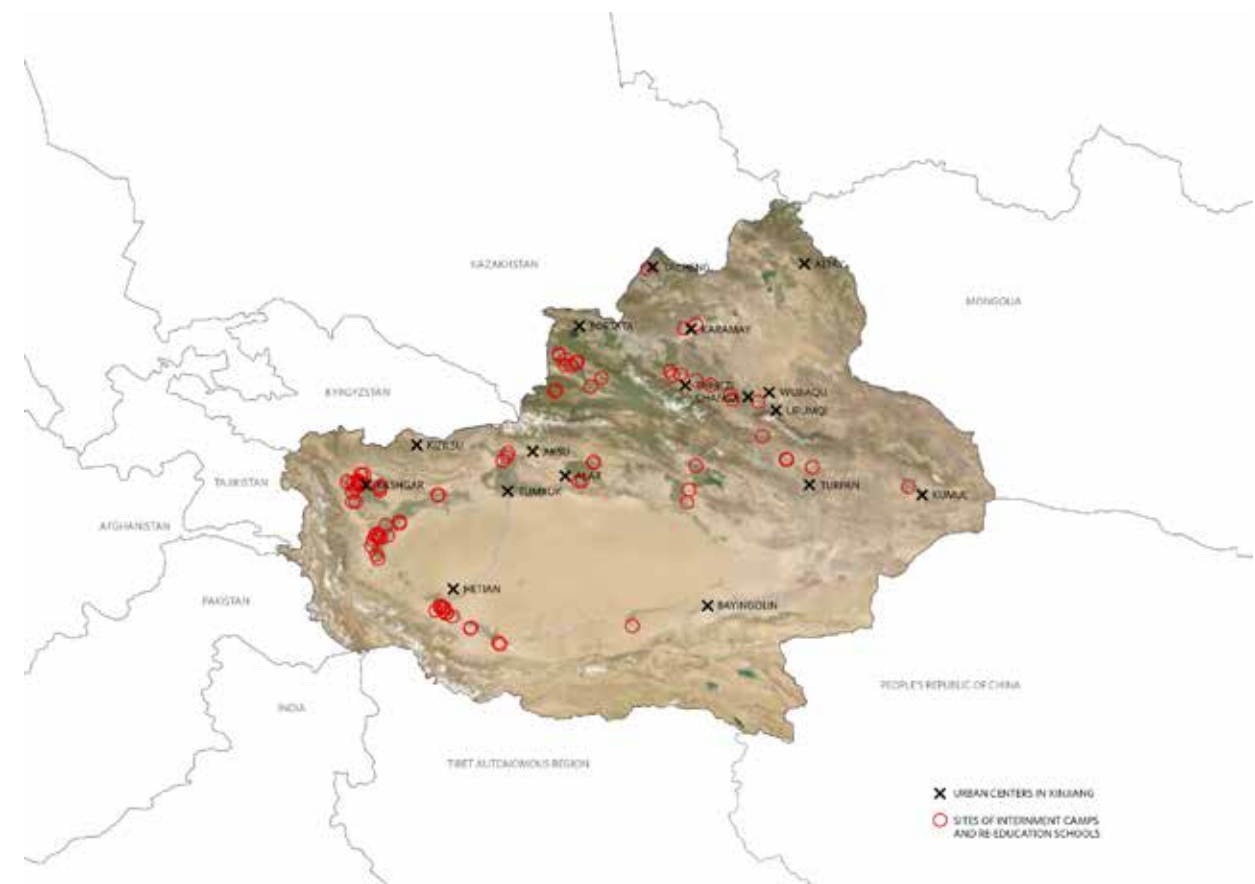
largely excluded from broader Chinese histories and Han culture. The continued separation of Xinjiang and its people from mainstream Chinese culture fortifies the concealment of activities pursued in the region.

## Invisibility, Infrastructure, and the 'Project of the Century'

In January 2018, The Guardian reported that China had detained nearly 120,000 Muslim citizens in 're-education schools' deep in the Taklamakan Desert.<sup>19</sup> A year later, reports by Officials from both the United Nations and independent researchers estimated that 1.5 million people had been detained, without due process and without consent.<sup>20</sup> Satellite imagery confirms the existence of nearly one thousand massive, high-security compounds scattered throughout the region.<sup>21</sup> Chinese officials claim that these camps, in coordination with the intensified mass surveillance and security in the region, are necessary responses against violent, anti-state episodes attributed to ethnic separatism, terrorism, and religious extremism.<sup>22</sup> Critics have categorised the targeting of the Uyghurs, with the intention of eliminating their presence within the Chinese state, as cultural genocide.<sup>23</sup> Scholar Adrian Zenz goes further to describe the efforts by the Chinese state as a 'targeted political re-education effort that is seeking to change the core identity and belief system of an entire people.'<sup>24</sup>

In response to criticism, the Chinese government has remained adamant that the centers are voluntary educational centers that directly benefit the Uyghurs by providing language education and vocational training.<sup>25</sup> In 2018, Hu Lianhe, a top Chinese official, told the United Nations Human Rights panel that 'for those who are convicted of minor offences, we help and teach them vocational skills in education and training centers, according to relevant laws. There is no arbitrary detention and torture.'<sup>¶</sup> China's UN Ambassador, Zhang Jun said at the 2019 United Nations General Assembly that the accusations against China are 'baseless' and a 'gross interference in China's internal affairs and deliberate provocation.'<sup>27</sup> Zhang went further in stating: 'Care for human rights is a hypocritical excuse employed by the United States to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries. By making relentless efforts to defame China on Xinjiang, the United States aims to undermine China's stability and contain China's development. Such malicious attempt [sic] will never work.'<sup>28</sup> Yet evidence from satellite imagery shows the creation of the carceral architecture and infrastructure necessary to carry

<sup>¶</sup> Despite Xinjiang only accounting for approximately 1.5 % of the country's total population, 21 percent of all arrests in 2017 were made in Xinjiang, according to the human rights advocacy group, Chinese Human Rights Defenders.<sup>26</sup>



Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is strategically located, linking China to many Central Asian countries, Pakistan, and India. It is estimated that there are at least 1,000 camps and re-education schools scattered throughout Xinjiang, holding close to 1.5 million Uyghurs. These new infrastructures fundamentally change the landscape of the region and redistribute the population away from urban centers and into these camps. Map data from Shawn Zhang, "List of Re-Education Camps in Xinjiang." Medium, May 21, 2019.

out such large-scale detention that has, and continues to, transform the physical and cultural landscape of Xinjiang.

The Uyghur separatist movement and their continued claim to this region as autonomous from the Chinese state have serious political and economic ramifications for the viability, stability, and international appetite for investment in BRI. The CCP's dependence on Xinjiang as the geographic hinge to the rest of the world poses an uncertainty that threatens the future of the project.<sup>29</sup> In order for the state to mollify this risk, political strategy necessitates that the Uyghur population either be forced to fall in line, or their challenge to state authority be made invisible. What's more is that the economic interests of China's neighbors and geo-political partners have allowed the ongoing mistreatment of the Uyghur community. For instance, Pakistan, despite being a Muslim-majority country, signed a letter in July 2019 along with 36 other countries that praised China for its 'remarkable achievements in the field of human rights.'<sup>30</sup> Three years later, in 2022, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) released a scathing report suggesting that China had committed 'crimes against humanity.'<sup>31</sup> Despite mounting evidence, many countries, Pakistan included, continue their partnerships with China. One cannot help but assume that such international support is directly tied to the financial and political gains that countries will incur through their involvement with the BRI.<sup>¶</sup>

The first key component of the BRI network is its land-and-sea corridor through Pakistan. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) aims to shorten the route of importing oil and gas from the Middle East to China by avoiding the existing route through the Strait of Malacca. Malacca is notoriously crowded and relatively shallow, making its crossing long and arduous. The CPEC would finance the construction of new infrastructure at the Port of Gwadar on the Arabian Sea along with an extensive rail and road network through Pakistan and into Xinjiang. In exchange, China promises to make Pakistan a key partner in the BRI and to finance and build energy and transportation infrastructure throughout the country.<sup>32</sup>

### Global 'War on Terror' Discourse as Tool for Spatial Surveillance

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, events, the PRC began to associate Uyghur political dissent in China with the burgeoning global 'War on Terror' discourse. In November 2001, just

<sup>¶</sup>The Uyghur community believes that the Chinese government unjustly colonised them and as a result, they have actively contested their control by the Chinese government. They have fought for their independence from the Chinese state unsuccessfully since the Qing imperial dynasty conquered them in the eighteenth century.

weeks after 9/11, the CCP published an official document, 'Terrorist Activities Perpetrated by "Eastern Turkistan" Organizations and Their Links to Osama bin Laden and the Taliban,' positioning the Uyghur community as a major threat to national security.<sup>33</sup> The document refers to the Uyghurs as 'terrorists,' a notable shift from previous official party descriptions of them as 'separatists.' Cultural anthropologist Sean Roberts writes: 'It is likely that the state's sudden claim of a Uyghur terrorist threat was less a response to new security concerns in the region than an attempt to justify existing policies suppressing Uyghur nationalism and religiosity by framing them in the discourse of global "War of Terror."'<sup>34</sup> In this context, certain human rights and legal protections have been considered null and void, providing justification for mass surveillance and internment of the region's Muslim minorities.

The architect of such extreme action against the Uyghur people and other Muslim minority communities in China was Chen Quanguo.<sup>¶</sup> His leadership as Xinjiang's Communist Party Secretary manifested in the drastic physical transformation of the region's landscape and urban centers. Under Chen's leadership from 2016–2021, Xinjiang was transformed into a mass security state, making it one of the most heavily fortified and policed regions in the world, paradoxically resulting in an enormous amount of focus being placed on the region by state officials and security personnel.<sup>35</sup> In cities like Urumqi, Kashgar, and Hotan, public and private spaces are continually surveilled and monitored through advanced, intrusive policing systems. A dense grid of checkpoints, police stations, armored vehicles, and high-definition cameras define the current urban form of cities within Xinjiang.<sup>36</sup> Facial recognition software tracks nearly every person on the street.<sup>37</sup> Police-related jobs increased to over 90,000 in 2016, from just over 5,000 a decade earlier.<sup>38</sup> Nearly 95 percent of these new positions were created to work in the extensive network of 7,500 new police stations in Xinjiang.<sup>39</sup> Further, the seemingly omnipresent surveillance system is a new type of civic infrastructure in Xinjiang that revolves around fear tactics and punishment. The pervasive fear of being identified as a terrorist and being sent to the camps has had a drastic spatial effect on the urban centers. Once thriving cities and towns, many of Xinjiang's population centers are now ghost towns with empty streets, shuttered businesses, and locked mosques.

In 2015, China's governing body, the National People's Congress, passed counter-terrorism legislation that criminalised Uyghur expression of dissent or religiosity and has resulted in both the police and ordinary citizens viewing many Uyghur cultural traditions as signs of terrorism or extremism.<sup>40</sup> The legislation also included an initiative to 're-educate' the Uyghur population.

<sup>¶</sup>It should be noted that prior to his post in Xinjiang, Chen had been Party Secretary of Tibet (2011–2016) where his successful policies for suppressing dissent were widely lauded by the Chinese Community Party. Much of his tactics from Tibet have been instituted and intensified in Xinjiang.





Shown here are 96 aerial images from Google Earth Pro of sites that have been identified as internment camps or re-education schools by activist Shawn Zhang. His detailed and dedicated research has provided visual evidence of the existence of these sites, even as the Communist Chinese Party (CCP) has adamantly denied their existence. Map data from Shawn Zhang, "List of Re-Education Camps in Xinjiang." Medium, May 21, 2019. Aerial imagery produced by Google Earth, CNES/Airbus, and Maxar Technologies.





These aerial images, taken between 2016 and 2019, show how the landscape is fundamentally transformed over time by the construction of the camp architecture, transportation networks, and security infrastructure necessary to conceal the imprisonment of the Uyghur population. Aerial imagery produced by Google Earth and Maxar Technologies.

According to the Chinese government, re-education camps are intended as poverty-alleviation measures that provide opportunities for vocational skills training and language assimilation, a justification that makes any Uyghur or ethnic minority vulnerable to encampment.<sup>‡</sup> In August 2019, China's Ambassador to the United Nations Yu Jianhua claimed that China had helped lift 20 million people out of conditions of poverty in the last five years through economic progress.<sup>42</sup> However, Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities are forced into these programs without consent and without any indication or judicial process for why they are being imprisoned and when they will be released. Those who have been through re-education claim that they were made to memorise patriotic texts, speak exclusively in Mandarin, confess their 'faults,' denounce their religious traditions and culture, and report on the activities of fellow internees. Those who do not follow orders or fail to adequately appease the guards are beaten, placed in solitary confinement, or deprived of food and sleep.<sup>43</sup>

Despite the CCP's denial that these are heavily policed internment camps, Adrian Zenz has compiled and published a body of governmental documents that provide evidence of the existence and oppressive purpose of these compounds. Zenz's research shows that the elements listed within the CCP bid titles for infrastructure development projects in the region are inconsistent with education facilities. Instead, they are components most often associated with carceral architecture. For instance, one bid is titled 'Convert former office building into transformation for education center.' However, the descriptions of requirements focus almost exclusively on detainment and policing infrastructure.<sup>44</sup> Most of these governmental bids mandate the installation of comprehensive security features that turn existing facilities into prison-like compounds; they call for surrounding walls, barbed-wire fences, reinforced security doors and windows, surveillance systems, secure access systems, watchtowers, guardrooms, police stations, and facilities for armed police forces. Zenz has estimated that as of 2019 there were at least a thousand of these camps, with up to 1.5 million people held within them, and almost all located in remote and unseen parts of Xinjiang.<sup>45</sup> In 2020, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) launched its 'Xinjiang Data Project' that tracks and maps re-education centers and prisons.<sup>46</sup> The ASPI's research found that more than 60 detention centers were expanded in scale during July 2020.<sup>47</sup> Most of these compounds have been identified by scouring satellite images of Xinjiang produced by open software like Google Earth. If Zenz and ASPI's estimates are accurate, maintaining the invisibility of this extensive constellation is remarkable.

Uyghur activist Shawn Zhang uses Google Earth imagery to link these CCP bid documents with the architecture of the compounds and demonstrate the rapid expansion of facilities on site.

<sup>‡</sup> Meng Jianzhu, secretary of the CCP and Legal Affairs Commission, said in 2018: "[Through] religious guidance, legal education, skills training, psychological interventions, and multiple other methods, the effectiveness of transformation through education must be increased, thoroughly reforming them towards a healthy heart attitude."<sup>41</sup>

In one example, satellite imagery showed a location featuring only one building on March 6, 2017. On April 26, a Request for Proposal was published, and one month later, on May 26, construction had begun on the site. By November 30, an entire compound of buildings was nearly complete. In September 2018, additional buildings were constructed, continuing the methodical expansion of the site's facilities. Architectural components built on site included high barbed-wire fences and watchtowers encircling the 'education' center.<sup>48</sup> In addition to the built projects, there has been a wave of job positions advertised throughout China claiming the positions are to help run the education and training centers, but often the job descriptions and requirements fail to have any relationship to vocational skills training: Instead, they seek applicants who possess a military background or police training. Moreover, prospective teachers did not need to prove any specific degrees or documented skills.<sup>49</sup>

## Strategic Visibility

In November 2019, hundreds of pages of official, internal CCP documents were leaked to *The New York Times*. These documents were the first piece of concrete evidence that the very top officials of the Chinese state have mandated this system of repression and imprisonment, and that the ambitions of such a system are to suppress the Uyghurs' religious and cultural freedom. The documents reveal that in April 2014, President Xi Jinping gave a series of internal speeches outlining a crackdown against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang and calling for a unified 'struggle against terrorism, infiltration, and separatism' using the 'organs of dictatorship' and showing 'absolutely no mercy.'<sup>50</sup>

Despite this evidence that actions pursued in the region have violated basic human rights, most global powers have remained largely silent in meaningfully condemning China for its treatment of the Uyghur population, outside of a letter published in 2019<sup>51</sup> and the OHCHR report published in 2022.<sup>52</sup> Since then, the PRC has not slowed down its 'mass arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearances, mass surveillance, cultural and religious persecution, separation of families, forced labor, sexual violence, and violations of reproductive rights.'<sup>53</sup> In response to the two-year anniversary of the OHCHR report, Maya Wang, associate China director at Human Rights Watch, made the lack of impact by the UN and other members of the international community explicit. In 2024, she said, 'Beijing's brazen refusal to meaningfully address well-documented crimes in Xinjiang is no surprise but shows the need for a robust follow-up by the UN human rights chief and UN member states. Contrary to the Chinese government's claims, its punitive campaign against millions of Uyghurs in Xinjiang continues to inflict great pain.'<sup>54</sup>



Very few countries have imposed any financial or political consequences on China that would galvanise it to heed their warnings. Reticence from the international community to enact any meaningful blows to China is largely attributable to the entanglements of the global economy resulting from China's dominance in industry and manufacturing, which is only likely to increase as the Belt and Road Initiative further strengthens China's position at the epicenter of global trade. Linking the economic benefit of the BRI with the human rights violations of internment camps has been a shrewd political strategy by China: It has forced global powers to choose between the promise of economic growth and publicly denouncing human rights violations.

Xinjiang reveals the potency and power that perceptions of landscapes have on policy with direct social and spatial ramifications, especially when places like deserts are perceived as empty and valueless wastelands. The strategic invisibility of Xinjiang's desert landscapes and the human rights violations that continue to occur in them serve the political and economic agenda of the People's Republic of China. Specifically, the BRI's visibility hinges on the continued invisibility of the Uyghurs. Simultaneously, the construction of the BRI through Xinjiang fundamentally inverts the perception of the region as empty and undeveloped, erecting new infrastructural, urban, and social systems that uphold China's global vision. In this way, the BRI project as a whole is about strategic visibility insofar as it draws attention to regions in order to produce a new set of perceptions and opportunities for prosperity, at all costs.

Notes

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22. Castets, "What's Really Happening to Uighurs in Xinjiang?"
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24. Cumming-Bruce, "U.N. Panel Confronts China"
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26. Kuo, "China Denies Violating Minority Rights."
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32. Boone, "China President Arrives in Pakistan."
33. Communist Party of China, "Terrorist Activities Perpetrated by 'Eastern Turkistan' Organizations."
34. Roberts, "The Biopolitics of China's 'War on Terror,'" 238.
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37. Buckley and Mozur, "How China Uses High-Tech Surveillance."
38. Zenz and Leibold, "Chen Quanguo," 18.
39. *Ibid.*
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