Conclusion
Darren Byler, Ivan Franceschini, and Nicholas Loubere

As we are wrapping up this volume in early November 2021, the ground in Xinjiang is already shifting. In October 2020, concerted pressure from trade unions such as the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations and advocacy groups such as the Worker Rights Consortium forced ethical trade associations such as the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) to withdraw their support for Xinjiang carceral institutions—most notably, the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, or Bingtuan (BCI 2020). Previously, the BCI—whose stakeholders include dozens of global brands ranging from H&M to Adidas—was a primary partner of the Bingtuan through the latter’s Cotton & Linen Company (Mathews 2019). In the year since BCI announced it would no longer work in Xinjiang, most of its affiliated brands declared they would no longer source cotton from Xinjiang or work with suppliers who employed labour from Xinjiang. This, combined with US Government sanctions on Xinjiang cotton, constituted a substantial shock to the Chinese economy, with swings of more than US$100 million from profits to losses among some of China’s leading textile companies, prompting a nationwide campaign in China to denounce and boycott companies that refused to use Xinjiang cotton and labour (Dou et al. 2021).

The economic effects of global brands moving away from Xinjiang were accompanied by other material changes on the ground in northwestern China. First, state authorities declared that all ‘trainees’ in the ‘concentrated closed education and training centres’ had graduated (Wang 2019). At the same time, local authorities began posting notices of contracts being awarded for the construction of new prisons. Investigative reporters who found their way to former camps discovered that, in some cases—including at the largest facility in the region—the camp had simply been relabelled as a detention facility (Kang 2021a). Other researchers, who wish to remain anonymous, observed that in some places where tourism was encouraged, People’s Convenience Police Stations had been disguised as non-police facilities. In some, camera systems had been ripped from their posts; in others, checkpoints remained, but were no longer being used. Another researcher who visited the region in 2020 and who also spoke with us under condition of anonymity was
told the reason for this was the locality had run out of money to maintain the technology. But he also found that, at least in the cases he observed, the newly hired grid workers and tens of thousands of police were still employed as intelligence workers, and that, in general, the surveillance systems continued to operate, just a bit further in the background and in more targeted ways. He and others who have visited the region in the past two years surmised that the height of state violence may now be in the past, that fear has been instilled throughout the Muslim population, and people throughout society have begun to adapt to the new norms (see, for instance, Kang 2021b).

Does this mean the Xinjiang emergency is over? That ‘we have won’, as one overenthusiastic Western commentator recently wrote in response to one such report? Unfortunately, the recent shift is no cause for celebration. While the most visible manifestations of state violence in Xinjiang might be receding from public sight, the situation is far from returning to the status quo ante. Uyghur-language media has been permitted again in the form of television shows and book publication, but only when accompanied with Chinese or as a translation from Chinese. Uyghurs who have emerged from the camps are often not returned to their former positions in society. In fact, many who have been transferred from the camps are still absent from their families, in factories far from home. Still others have been given formal prison sentences and will not be released any time soon. The system appears to be shifting from internment without due process and criminal sentencing to proletarianisation and criminal prosecution and mass imprisonment of former detainees. As we mentioned in the introduction to this volume, state documents show that as many as 533,000 people in Xinjiang were formally prosecuted between 2017 and 2020—a rate around six times higher than the national average (Byler 2021). Official documents also show that around 500,000 children have been assigned to residential boarding schools and, since 2017, the state has hired more than 90,000 new, avowedly non-religious Chinese-speaking teachers (China Education Bureau 2017; Liu 2019). With family separation through processes of removal, incarceration, and coercive proletarianisation still endemic throughout Uyghur and Kazakh society, the process of eliminating and replacing aspects of Muslim social life remains in motion, even if the Chinese authorities are now more cognisant of the economic and moral costs of orchestrating this social engineering project.
What can be done about this? On a practical level, we can think of at least three undertakings. First, we can organise educational and grassroots activities that support truth and reconciliation, such as teach-ins and solidarity events led by both Xinjiang Muslims and Han citizens. Such activities could put those who claim belonging in northwestern China in conversation with global prison abolitionists and those engaged in struggles against settler colonialism in Asia and around the world. Second, we can provide support to initiatives that document and analyse what is happening in Xinjiang, such as the Xinjiang Documentation Project and the Xinjiang Victims Database, either by offering them our time and relevant skills or by simply circulating their materials. Finally, if we work in a university that conducts research that might find application in the repressive activities in Xinjiang or for a company that does business with actors in the region, we can campaign to put an end to these partnerships.

On a theoretical level, we need to fight for a broader epistemological reorientation of the discussion on Xinjiang, especially within the left. It is now more important than ever that we leave behind the frameworks that have dominated the discussion so far—both the ‘essentialism’ of those who treat the camps as a specifically Chinese phenomenon related to the authoritarian or totalitarian nature of the Chinese Communist Party and the ‘whataboutism’ of those who maintain that we have no moral authority to criticise the Chinese Government or that the camps, if they exist at all, might not be as bad as people say. So far, the position of the left has been characterised by notable silences and ambiguities on Xinjiang, with several prominent voices engaging in outright denialism in the conviction that criticising the Chinese Government’s practices in the region means endorsing its political opponents—most notably, the US Government. It need not be like that. It is obvious that one can be critical of the Chinese authorities without necessarily taking the side of their geopolitical opponents. From this point of view, we believe that a first step for a meaningful critique from the left would be to acknowledge that the Xinjiang camps have been enabled through entangled sets of complicities inherent to the global capitalist system, and recognise how they represent an extreme manifestation of worrying global technological, economic, and political trends that have been unfolding for some time. While not absolving the Chinese Government of any responsibility, such a position might lay the foundation for a more meaningful politics to address the status of the world in which we are living, in China and beyond.