Even before mass internment in Xinjiang became a major point of international contention in the late 2010s, the plight of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in northwestern China was the focus of considerable attention. As early as the 1990s, China’s rise as the ‘factory of the world’ led to a massive influx of Han settlers to the region, attracted by opportunities in sectors as diverse as oil and natural gas, and, eventually, cotton and tomatoes. In documenting this economic boom, scholars and journalists, both Chinese and foreign, showed how native peoples were largely excluded from the most lucrative opportunities—a situation that fostered dispossession and marginalisation, fuelling a resentment that was already lingering for a variety of historical reasons (Cliff 2016; Millward 2021; Byler 2022). This resentment came to a head in late 2013 and early 2014, with a spate of violent attacks carried out by Uyghur civilians that directly targeted Han civilians, the most notable of which took place in urban centres such as Beijing, Kunming, and Ürümqi. Unlike many previous attacks, which were often spontaneous and targeted state representatives, these were planned and coordinated, utilising knives, vehicles, and explosive devices to wreak havoc among innocent civilians. In response, the Chinese authorities launched the ‘People’s War on Terror’ (反恐人民战争).

However, the ‘Strike Hard’ campaign of the People’s War on Terror ended up targeting many more people than the criminals who carried out the attacks and those who directly supported them. Instead, it precipitated a general criminalisation of religious and cultural practices. Initially, only religious leaders were sent to camps, but by 2017, the Party-State began to assess the entire adult Muslim population. It was not simply about preventing terrorism; rather, the People’s War on Terror had become a program of preventing Uyghur, Kazakh, and other peoples from ‘being’ Muslim and, to a certain extent, from practising the way of life of their ancestors. In the years since, hundreds of thousands of people have been detained in prisons and camps, while hundreds of thousands of their children have been placed in residential boarding schools where they receive ‘patriotic’ non-Muslim training. Many of the relatives of detainees have been assigned to work in factories far from their homes.
The program is enforced through a comprehensive biometric surveillance and checkpoint system, as well as an army of police contractors. It is a camp and factory system at the forefront of ‘smart’ control, a limit case in the co-construction of colonial and capitalist frontiers. If that were not enough, at the same time, many of the sacred landscapes of these peoples—from cemetery shrines to mosques—have been demolished or transformed.

This edited volume sets itself three goals in relation to these developments. First, it attempts to document the reality of the surveillance state and how the state and its proxies strive to capture the social institutions of Uyghurs and others through processes of dispossession and occupation. It shows how a relationship of domination is established and reproduced. Second, it aims to shed light on the workings and the root causes of this system by examining its linkages to past political campaigns, global counterterrorism logics, and the expansive drive of global capital. And, finally, it argues for the need for an epistemological shift in how the progressive left engages with Xinjiang if it wants to live up to its vocation to change the world and not just analyse it.

**Framing the debate**

As we have written elsewhere (Franceschini and Loubere 2020, forthcoming), recent discussions surrounding developments in China have largely been dominated by two competing frames, which we have termed ‘essentialism’ and ‘whataboutism’. The essentialist approach is characterised by an obstinate refusal of any attempt to find similarities and linkages between dynamics in China and elsewhere. This form of argumentation tends to emphasise the set of attributes specific to a certain context as its defining elements and takes China as a discrete unit separated from the rest of the world. In particular, today’s essentialist arguments mostly centre on the idea that authoritarian China cannot be compared with liberal-democratic countries because they represent fundamentally different political systems—and any suggestion that there may be commonalities is immediately and vociferously denounced as whataboutism and moral relativism. The whataboutist approach, instead, dismisses any criticism of the Chinese authorities as hypocritical on the faux moral premise that they are doing nothing more and nothing less than what everyone else is doing. While essentialists hold that the camps in China
are an exclusive manifestation of the authoritarian or totalitarian nature of the Chinese Communist Party, whataboutists usually ask how anyone in the West can put forward any criticism of Xinjiang given the long colonial history of their own countries, the grim situation in their prison systems, the mass detention of refugees, and the disasters unleashed by the global War on Terror.

The mass internment in Xinjiang has probably done more than anything else to strengthen essentialist views of China today. Indeed, it is easier to place all the blame on the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (and certainly it deserves blame) and forget how the Xinjiang camps as carceral infrastructure aimed at reinforcing a colonial presence represent the culmination of a century-long global process in which concentration camps were first conceived by the Spanish in Cuba in the late 1890s, expanded by the British in South Africa during the Boer War, normalised by all warring factions during World War I, and finally manifested in the extreme variants of the Soviet gulags and Nazi lagers, before lapping into the more familiar forms of ‘black’ detention sites that became common in Latin America in the 1970s (Pitzer 2017). It is equally easy to neglect the connections that link these camps to global brands and multinational corporations, or how the technologies that have made the camps possible have been spearheaded in Western universities.

This volume starts from the assumption that both essentialist and whataboutist frames are inadequate to either explain the current situation or lay the foundation for meaningful political action. As such, we turn our analysis to the economic factors that have produced both protest and violence in northwestern China. Using a materialist mode of analysis, these essays argue that the process of removal of Uyghurs and others from their land, combined with the physical and digital enclosure of their societies, constitutes an ongoing process of ‘original accumulation’—or capitalist frontier building. Because state authorities have framed minority peoples as a threatening, yet detainable, subject population, their existence offers technology companies the space and funding that are unavailable in other parts of China to develop new technologies. Importantly, these technology-assisted forms of social control do not simply identify preexisting forms of criminality that had not yet been detected. Instead, they actually produce what the state and private corporations categorise as ‘precriminal’ offences of thought and action or ‘terrorism and extremist crimes that were not serious’ by criminalising normative
religious behaviours and social relations. These new technologies can then be used to assist in the ‘legal’ theft of pre-terrorist workers’ labour when they are assigned to work in unfree conditions. The dispossession of Uyghurs and others should be thought of as linked to processes of labour exploitation in eastern China and forms of state capital–driven development in other spaces in the country. The key premise of the book is that state power is channelled through private and public infrastructure and institutions to intensify ethno-racialisation and produce a contemporary colonial system at a frontier of global capitalism—something we refer to elsewhere as ‘terror capitalism’ (Byler 2022).

Zeroing in on the logics that drive and justify these processes of accumulation allows us to examine the way the strategies and technologies that are being used borrow not only from the Chinese historical experience, but also from global discourses of counterterrorism, technologies of biometric surveillance, and consumer-driven industries that seek to maximise profits. This not only rejects the false binaries set up by proponents of whataboutist arguments, but also allows us to challenge the questionable essentialist claim that democratic states in North America and Europe are somehow free from responsibility for human rights abuses, while China is uniquely susceptible to them due to its political system. Disrupting this binary by making these interconnections explicit also helps to prevent research on Xinjiang from being taken up by right-wing politicians who wish to exploit and exacerbate growing Sinophobia around the globe to push forward geopolitical conflict that can only end in disaster.

In short, this kind of approach underlines global linkages and connections. Through these essays, we emphasise that highlighting the colonial processes at work requires that decolonial and anti-racist refusal in Xinjiang be linked to other instances of contemporary colonisation in places like Hong Kong, Taiwan, Kashmir, and Palestine, and ongoing settler colonialism in North America and Australia. Likewise, the struggle against labour malpractice, mass incarceration, and police brutality in North America and Europe must be thought of alongside the systems of enclosure in Xinjiang. Anti-imperialism means standing in opposition to imperialism and all its subimperial derivations, and standing with the colonised and unfree wherever they may be.
**Key controversies**

In compiling this book, we have been mindful of three key controversies that have held sway in debates about Xinjiang in recent years. The first is whether we should resort to the term ‘genocide’. While particular aspects and effects of the post-2017 system in Xinjiang do meet legal definitions of the term—namely, the transfer of children from one ethnic group to another that is facilitated by a widespread residential boarding school system and a negative eugenics program named ‘Complete Inspection and Handling of Illegal Births’ (全面彻底处理清查违法生育) that along with widespread family separation has produced a dramatic decrease in birth rates (Li 2021)—the system does not seem to be one of intentional mass death. Rather, it seems to be premised on a biopolitics of ‘making live’ as docile, submissive workers, detainees, and prisoners. This is not to say that the system, like all settler-colonial structures, is not focused on eliminating key aspects of what makes Uyghurs and others who they are—which is the reason we chose *Xinjiang Year Zero* as the title for the book, as we will explain shortly. However, rather than centring our attention on legal debates concerning the term genocide, we have focused primarily on analysing the logics and effects of the system, and on documenting the lived reality of the people who are experiencing it.

Another key controversy is the exact number of people detained. Although the Party-State has said that more than 533,000 individuals have been prosecuted in Xinjiang since 2017 (Byler 2021b), Chinese officials have declined to publicly say exactly how many individuals whose terrorism and extremist crimes ‘were not serious’ or ‘were serious but not malicious’—the state definitions used for those sent to camps rather than prisons—were detained. State officials have, however, estimated that as many as 30 per cent of adults in some areas were ‘infected’ with extremism—another description of ‘untrustworthy’ behaviour. Internal police documents obtained by *The Intercept* and the Xinjiang Victims Database confirm that a minimum of 8–20 per cent of Muslim adults in locations with the most available data, such as areas of Hotan, Aksu, and Ürümqi, were in some form of detention, ranging from house arrest to imprisonment (Xinjiang Victims Database 2021; Byler 2021a). These state data, combined with open-access analysis of the construction of new detention facilities, interviews with former detainees from across the region who spoke about levels of crowding in facilities, as well as researcher visits to the region as recently 2021, give us some confidence that as many as
10 to 15 per cent of the adult population of Muslims—some 900,000 to 1.5 million people—have been, or are, in some form of detention. Since this estimate is not yet conclusive, throughout the text we have tended to refer to the numbers detained as hundreds of thousands.

Finally, there is considerable controversy regarding the naming of the ancestral homelands of approximately 12 million Uyghurs, 1.5 million Kazakhs, and several hundred thousand Kyrgyz, Sarikoli Tajiks, and others in contemporary northwestern China. The name ‘Xinjiang’—literally, ‘new frontier’—appeared as the definition of ‘colony’ in Chinese dictionaries published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This colonial name was adopted first by a Manchu emperor near the beginning of the Qing Dynasty and codified as the legal name of the region in 1884 following what the Turkic peoples of the region referred to as a military massacre by the armies of Zuo Zongtang. As such, the name Xinjiang evokes a settler-colonial past and present, in a manner like that employed in British Columbia or Australia to mask the placenames of the aboriginal peoples.

The most strident voices when it comes to renaming these homelands are from Uyghur advocacy organisations based in North America and Europe who wish to reclaim the term ‘East Turkestan’—the historical name claimed first by a short-lived Islamic republic in the 1930s and then by a Soviet-backed republic in the 1940s. However, since many of the advocates of East Turkestan appear to be exclusively Uyghur and appeal to a type of right-wing ethnonationalism rather than an inclusive democratic and decolonial ethos, we have decided not to use this name. Furthermore, because the term East Turkestan is associated in Chinese media discourse with small Uyghur militant groups in Syria and Pakistan, the name carries with it associations that act as obstacles to solidarity for many non-Uyghurs and Chinese citizens who otherwise may stand in solidarity with oppressed peoples in northwestern China.

In the absence of a name that addresses the concerns of hundreds of thousands of native peoples who would be excluded through the adoption of the name East Turkestan, we have used the colonial name Xinjiang as a reminder of the prohibition of formal decolonial political formations inside China. In some cases, we also use local naming traditions like ‘homeland’ or terms that emerge from Maoist multiculturalism such as ‘autonomous region’. We have also striven to emphasise that these indigenous peoples claim a precolonial **priorness**—particularly in the case of the Uyghurs and Kazakhs, which are the two largest groups in
the region—in their attachment to their homelands. This, in turn, allows us a way of thinking beyond the nation-state when considering future decolonial pathways.

About this book

Why did we choose the title *Xinjiang Year Zero*? Even though the term ‘year zero’ (as well as ‘year one’) has been used with more positive connotations in relation to both the French Revolution and the year 1945, we are obviously aware that it is more recently associated with 1970s Cambodia, when the Khmer Rouge, after seizing power, proclaimed the advent of Year Zero and proceeded with systematic brutality to erase all Cambodian culture and traditions with the aim of creating a new revolutionary individual. Are we suggesting a direct comparison between what is happening in Xinjiang today and the ominous precedent of the Cambodian killing fields? No, because as far as we know, there is no evidence of mass killings in Xinjiang today; one could even argue that mass murder becomes somewhat superfluous when one has at their disposal pervasive surveillance tools that leave almost no room for dissent. A direct comparison with the Cambodian genocide is also inappropriate because the ideological underpinnings of the Chinese Party-State today are the opposite of the revolutionary fervour displayed by the Khmer Rouge; if anything, as we have argued, the Chinese authorities are attempting to create a new, cheap workforce ready for capitalist exploitation.

But there are at least two uncanny resonances that, after much deliberation, prompted us to choose this title. First, as in Cambodia decades ago, the Chinese authorities have embarked on a quest to radically reshape the subjectivities of Uyghur, Kazakh, and other peoples, imprisoning them en masse and preventing them from practising their traditional ways of life in an attempt to clean the slate and engineer a new type of docile and ‘civilised’ (proletarianised) citizen. Whether they will succeed remains to be seen, but ‘year zero’ seemed to us a very apt term to define this ambition to manufacture a historical rupture. Second, what is happening in Xinjiang today is unfortunately being met with scepticism among certain groups on the left. This recalls the way many prominent leftists questioned the horrific tales of Cambodian refugees in Thailand in the 1970s and systematically attacked those who dared denounce the crimes of the Khmer Rouge. This leftist support for the Khmer Rouge, despite all the evidence of what was happening in Cambodia, later served to
discredit the left and deeply undermined leftist causes. We see the same
dynamic unfolding today. In this sense, this book represents our attempt
to frame the possibility of a critique of China from the left in a bid to
avoid repeating the mistakes of the past.

The book is structured in three broad sections. In the first, we explore
the historical roots of the current repression in Xinjiang, as well as its
discursive framing and justification. In the opening chapter, Ye Hui
situates the repression of Türkic Muslims in Xinjiang in the long-run
history of global imperialism, outlining how the dispossession of popu-
lations in Xinjiang today is an effect of secular nation-building. This is
followed by Zenab Ahmed's analysis of assimilationist policies targeting
Uyghur spirituality and mythic storytelling. Next, Guldana Salimjan traces
how conceptions of racial purity and authenticity have shaped national
consciousness throughout the history of the People's Republic of China.
In this section’s final two chapters, David Brophy examines how Beijing
taps into global discourses of counter-radicalisation emerging from the
US-led War on Terror, and Darren Byler digs into how counterinsurgency
strategies developed in the United States, Israel, and Europe have been
adapted for ‘community policing’ in Xinjiang.

Section two situates the case of contemporary Xinjiang in a longer-run
history of Han settler colonialism. We start with a photo essay by Tom
Cliff depicting the lives of Han settlers in Xinjiang, followed by a detailed
examination by Guldana Salimjan of the ongoing human transfer project
in Xinjiang through the banal language of recruitment and employment.
Next, Sam Tynen explores multiple forms of everyday dispossession and
displacement of Uyghurs, and Timothy A. Grose outlines the ways in
which Uyghur spaces are being reorganised, resulting in the disruption
of conceptions of home. We then turn to Rian Thum, who details the
meaning and implications of the destruction and desecration of three
of the most revered sacred and historical sites in Xinjiang, followed by
Guldana Salimjan’s explanation of how the discourses and practices of
ecotourism are used to justify the removal of Kazakh communities. The
section closes with a chapter by Darren Byler elaborating on how the
internment camps are producing cheap labour for the factories moving
to Xinjiang to take advantage of the situation.

In the final section, we shift to the global nature of mass detention
and the emergence of a high-tech surveillance state in Xinjiang. In the
first chapter, Nicholas Loubere and Stefan Brehm draw connections
between experiments with ‘social credit' and broader global processes of
financialised inclusion, reflecting on what this means for social control. Next, Darren Byler explores how Xinjiang’s ‘Safe Cities’ are facilitating forms of surveillance and digital enclosure. Gerald Roche examines the role of an international private security firm in Xinjiang, considering how the global security industry precipitates the circulation of methods and technologies of control in China and beyond. In the final two chapters of the book, Séagh Kehoe looks at the plight of women and ethnic minorities in Tibet and Xinjiang from the perspective of the Chinese and international feminist movements, and Nitasha Kaul compares China and India in their treatment of ‘othered’ populations in Xinjiang and Kashmir, respectively.

This volume is an outgrowth of the Made in China Journal—which we edit—and many of the chapters have been previously published in the journal’s pages. The Made in China Journal, and the many projects associated with it, is rooted in the belief that the scholarly community needs to reappropriate academic research through open-access publishing models, and that academic research should be accessible more broadly to the public. It is with these commitments in mind that we have curated this volume, with the aim of helping the international community conceptualise what is happening in Xinjiang in the context of longer-run histories of settler colonialism and as a facet of the rapid expansion of repressive technologies of social control emerging from global capitalist entanglements. We thank the Per Anders och Maibrit Westrins Stiftelse for generous funding to assist with the design and production of the volume, and ANU Press for its unswerving commitment to open-access publishing.