The harm done to millions of civilians in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in recent years is unique yet perfectly familiar.

The crisis is familiar in part because the situation the Chinese Government has created in Xinjiang fits a pattern that has played out dozens of times across the globe over the past century. From Chile to Myanmar, from the United States to North Korea, the phenomenon of the concentration camp has shown itself to be both predictable and universal—and dangerously flexible.

No country preemptively detains the people it values. Instead, nations lock up members of groups they wish to ‘reform,’ defeat, or exterminate. When population categories are rounded up, the group in question is targeted by identity: who they are or the people they associate with rather than any actual crimes they might have committed. A small number turning to violence within a group is enough to brand an entire people as suspect.

But the reason whole groups are implicated is often less about the specifics of their identity and more about the security theatre, controlling demographic shifts, a demand for labour, or a need for a societal scapegoat. In each case, the government is asserting its ability to mistreat part of the population as a display of authority, to maintain its hold on power.

Detained without trial, real evidence, or legal representation, members of the target populations are typically held communally and subject to arbitrary, quasi-legal, or extrajudicial treatment by authorities, mostly out of view of the public—except when a show can be put on to suggest that what is happening is not actually happening.

China is currently targeting Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims. The essays in this book reveal that events in Xinjiang today draw on established traditions, both international and domestic. In the first concentration camps that unfolded as a public spectacle, Spain carried out an imperial genocide in the 1890s in Cuba. During World War I, brutal colonial camp systems were rehabilitated into the more anodyne framework of internment, which lulled the world into thinking that some forms of indefinite detention might be acceptable.
Those internment camps were nonetheless still part of the concentration camp universe and, by the end of the Great War, they had paved the way for camp bureaucracies worldwide. Decades later, when Nazi extermination camps industrialised mass murder, the possibilities of camps had simultaneously evolved and degenerated to include a new possibility: not just isolating and punishing a whole category of people, but erasing them from existence.

In the wake of Auschwitz, countries have avoided the label ‘concentration camp’ while running precisely the same kinds of detention systems that led to the death or torture of millions in locations other than Nazi Germany long before and long after World War II.

Xinjiang is among the most recent of these vast enterprises. Across history, the majority of concentration camps have not been extermination camps. Yet, even systems not deliberately optimised for murder have managed to kill hundreds of thousands of people or more and warp whole societies. From colonial Kenya to the Soviet Gulag, camps devoted to the indefinite detention of civilians without trial are a deeply damaging experience for the individual, the community, and the nation. The threat of being disappeared can poison every human interaction.

Due to Cold War pressure towards a binary distribution of global power, two broad international traditions rose in postwar concentration camp systems: the colonial model and the Soviet model. The Soviet model emphasised the remoulding or reeducation of citizens through forced labour and collective training. The colonial model, adopted more frequently by Western imperial powers, typically targeted specific ethnic or racial groups tied to independence movements in colonial outposts, and often trafficked in the active dehumanisation of people by ethnic or racial identity—a latent, and sometimes active, form of eugenics. In Xinjiang, China has borrowed from both traditions.

What are the common features of both types of modern mass detention? The preemptive warehousing of humans in inhumane settings. The use of propaganda to shape a political narrative that justifies and benefits from the mass detention of a segment of the population. The injection of military language and tactics into civilian society. The assertion that special measures are necessary because of the emergency threat represented by the target group. The alteration or erasure of the identity of a distinct group of people.
Events in Xinjiang incorporate all these horrors. The approach to minority populations in the region repeats many elements we have seen for more than a century. But newer aspects are present as well—elements rooted firmly in the twenty-first century.

Though its long history of building concentration camps was influenced most heavily by the gulag model, in more recent years, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has embraced and bent to its own ends the anti-Muslim rhetoric rooted in Western nations’ response to 9/11 and the ensuing ‘War on Terror’. America’s open justification of torture, black sites for interrogation, and places like Guantanamo Bay encouraged other states less invested in even the public appearance of justice to double down. Counterinsurgency tactics employed in non-battle settings have proliferated. US and European demonisation of Muslim populations leave Western governments opposed to what is happening in Xinjiang unable to denounce China’s actions without facing charges of hypocrisy.

In recent years, the similarities have expanded. The Trump administration’s push for a ban on Muslims entering the country, its criminalisation of asylum-seekers, its willingness to separate immigrant parents and children, and its explicit efforts to limit the expanding minority demographics of the country provide more than enough rationale for a Chinese Government hoping to accomplish parallel goals.

In this sense, Xinjiang is just the nightmare extension of concentration camp tactics already adopted in other parts of the world. Camps in border regions are on the rise around the globe, from the US detentions that exploded into public awareness in 2018 and 2019, to India, Myanmar, and elsewhere. It is no accident that with the disappearance of most colonial possessions, borderlands are becoming twenty-first-century colonial settings. Since 9/11, China has embraced a world vision in which the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region has become an experimental lab in which to preemptively punish civilians.

Technologies for surveillance and detention have likewise evolved in this century. From automatic weapons that allowed a small guard force to control vast numbers of people to barbed wire patented and mass-produced in the nineteenth century, technology has always been the spark that makes mass civilian detention possible.

Advanced tools for twenty-first-century detention operate in their own international economy, without loyalty to any nation. Today, we see surveillance equipment developed in and outside China being used to monitor targeted groups. New technologies project a sense of objectivity
and authority, isolating these groups and formalising bigotry. Networks spread pseudo-scientific propaganda to even remote areas at the speed of light, making dehumanisation both a goal and a by-product of innovation. As with camps throughout their history, technologies for projects of mass detention often cross borders more easily than people.

Following a familiar pattern, the assertion of intellectual, physical, or moral superiority by the dominant cultural group—in this case, Han Chinese—is used to imply that by detaining whole groups of people based on ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, or race, the government is taking on a paternal, civilising role. The project of Han guidance and control over minority groups has a long history and continues to undergird Chinese detention tactics.

If these are the global elements of the Xinjiang project, what are the local ones? Every camp system is a combination of international norms and inspiration combined with cultural traditions and exploitation of the fault lines in a nation.

While conscript labour has existed in China for millennia, Nationalists embraced brutal labour camps in the 1930s, using forced civilian labour for rural land reclamation. In 1941, Nationalist forces established a modern concentration camp at Shangrao in Jiangxi Province. During the Chinese Civil War itself, Nationalist and Communist forces alike made use of detention camps and reeducation efforts for both combatants and civilians.

After winning that war, the CCP’s use of the systems of reform through labour (laogai) and reeducation through labour (laojiao), as well as internal exile, swept millions into a punitive state apparatus that for decades changed and adapted along with Chinese society. Both laogai and laojiao would meet an official end—the first in 1994, and the latter only in 2013. But forced labour and reeducation through labour did not vanish. And other forms of arbitrary detention persist, even outside northwestern China, in a wide range of settings, from ‘black jails’ to rehab centres and psychiatric facilities.

For many nations that have used concentration camps, military defeat or a regime’s fall from power forced an end to their camp systems and occasional accountability for the people behind them. Yet, though the CCP has changed over time, it has never lost power. The government’s willingness in the current era to impose detention on more than a million residents of Xinjiang shows that there has been no hard break with the prior, much larger Chinese concentration camp system. This tool remains available for use by the government. The existence of what are now widely
recognised as concentration camps has become the defining feature of the plight of minority groups in Xinjiang—particularly Uyghur residents—for much of the world. These camps feel like a concrete, discrete, and recognisable thing. We believe we know how to think about them. But observers of camp systems often miss the fact that any nation that has built a camp system is already far down a path on which many other things are happening simultaneously. The camps are only one part of a larger effort.

In China, the local strategies are bound up with a long history of population control. In addition, millions of people never held in detention have nonetheless been forced into reeducation programs. As illustrated in this volume, the destruction of religious and cultural buildings and the reconfiguration of physical spaces down to the level of individual homes extend the government’s project into every aspect of life. Forced labour, family separations, and an inability to speak freely in almost any setting further fracture families and communities. The distinctions between each level of punishment begin to blur, and the concentration camp phenomenon becomes a much larger, more ambitious plan than just the detention of a million or more people.

Yet what China has been doing for some time in Xinjiang should not be denounced as some set of exotic tactics only a communist state might adopt. The roots of Chinese concentration camp policy pre-date the existence of the People’s Republic of China itself, and its branches include strategies and tools grafted on from the West in recent decades.

This kind of detention, this kind of targeting of whole groups based on identity, is part and parcel of a phenomenon that is expanding in dangerous ways around the globe today. Xinjiang Year Zero reveals the specifics of what is happening in the region without falling back on political tropes or generalisations, and makes clear that other countries also have a role to play in ending the space in which nations have the ability and the fig leaf of legitimacy to impose these horrors on generation after generation, both within and outside Xinjiang.