

**INTELLIGENCE BRIEF**

# Coercive Labor in Xinjiang: Labor Transfer and the Mobilization of Ethnic Minorities to Pick Cotton



# Coercive Labor in Xinjiang: Labor Transfer and the Mobilization of Ethnic Minorities to Pick Cotton

By Dr. Adrian Zenz

## Executive Summary

New evidence from Chinese government documents and media reports shows that hundreds of thousands of ethnic minority laborers in Xinjiang are being forced to pick cotton by hand through a coercive state-mandated labor transfer and “poverty alleviation” scheme, with potentially drastic consequences for global supply chains. Xinjiang produces 85 percent of China’s and 20 percent of the world’s cotton. Chinese cotton products, in turn, constitute an important basis for garment production in numerous other Asian countries.

Previously, evidence for forced labor in Xinjiang pertained only to low-skilled manufacturing, including the production of textiles and apparel. This report provides new evidence for coercion specifically related to cotton picking. These findings have much wider implications, affecting all supply chains that involve Xinjiang cotton as a raw material.

On Dec. 2, 2020, the United States placed a Withhold Release Order on cotton produced by the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps. However, this entity only produces 33 percent of Xinjiang’s cotton and only 0.4 percent of its highest-quality long-staple cotton. This report provides evidence for coercive labor related to all cotton produced in Xinjiang.

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COVER: A farmer harvests cotton in a field in Hami, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China. (PULATI NIYAZI/Getty Images)

## Executive Summary *Continued from previous page*

The evidence shows that in 2018, three Uyghur regions alone mobilized at least 570,000 persons into cotton-picking operations through the government's coercive labor training and transfer scheme. Xinjiang's total labor transfer of ethnic minorities into cotton picking likely exceeds that figure by several hundred thousand.

Despite increased mechanization, cotton picking in Xinjiang continues to rely strongly on manual labor. In 2019, about 70 percent of the region's cotton fields had to be picked by hand – especially the high-quality long-staple cotton predominantly grown in southern Xinjiang's Uyghur regions, where mechanized picking shares are

low. State policies have greatly increased the numbers of local ethnic minority pickers, reducing reliance on outside Han Chinese migrant laborers. The intensive two- to three-month period of cotton picking represents a strategic opportunity to boost rural incomes, and therefore plays a key role in achieving the state's poverty alleviation targets. These targets are mainly achieved through coercive labor transfers.

Cotton picking is grueling and typically poorly paid work. Labor transfers involve coercive mobilization through local work teams, transfers of pickers in tightly supervised groups, and intrusive on-site surveillance by government officials and (in at least some cases) police offi-

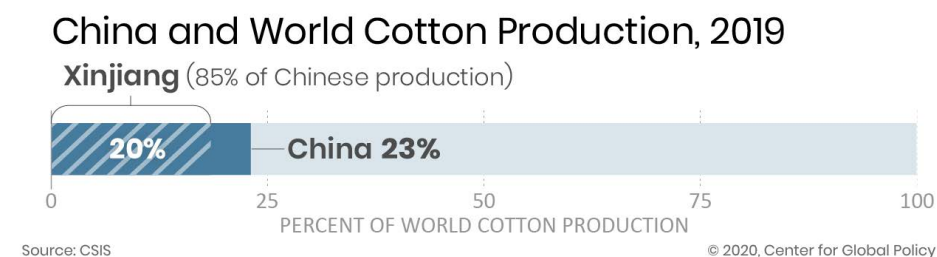
cers. Government supervision teams monitor pickers, checking that they have a "stable" state of mind, and administer political indoctrination sessions. Some regions put Uyghur children and elderly persons into centralized care while working-age adults are away on state-assigned cotton-picking work assignments. While not directly related to the campaign of mass internment, these labor transfers can include persons who have been released from internment camps.

The data presented in this report provides strong evidence that the production of the majority of Xinjiang's cotton involves a coercive, state-run program targeting ethnic minority groups.

## 1. Introduction to Cotton in Xinjiang

### 1.1 Mechanization and Manual Labor in Xinjiang's Cotton-Picking Practices

Xinjiang produces over [20 percent](#) of the world's cotton.<sup>1</sup> In 2019, Xinjiang produced [84.9 percent](#) of all cotton in China. In 2018, China's total raw cotton, yarn, textile, and apparel exports constituted almost [10 percent](#) of the total value of national exports.<sup>2</sup> Some of the world's highest-quality cotton comes from



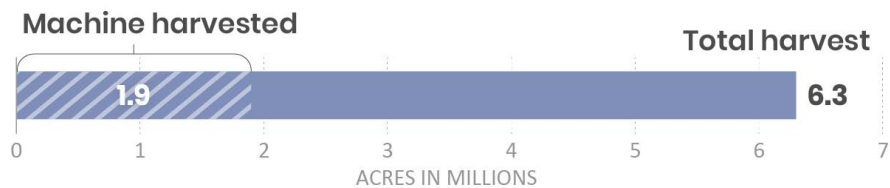
Xinjiang. The Uyghur-majority regions in southern Xinjiang grow much of the region's hand-picked cotton, which is of higher quality than machine-picked cotton. They also produce nearly all of the highest-quality long-staple cotton (cotton with long, silky fibers).

Despite increased mechanization, most of the cotton produced in Xinjiang is still picked by hand. Hand-picked cotton is more expensive to produce than machine-harvested cotton. While the government seeks to make Xinjiang cotton more competitive by lowering production

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.csis.org/analysis/addressing-forced-labor-xinjiang-uyghur-autonomous-region-toward-shared-agenda>, p.5

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.csis.org/analysis/addressing-forced-labor-xinjiang-uyghur-autonomous-region-toward-shared-agenda>, p.4

## Xinjiang Cotton Harvesting, 2019



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costs through mechanized harvesting, it has also implemented a massive scheme to meet ongoing manual labor needs by replacing Han migrant cotton pickers with local ethnic minority pickers.

In recent years, Xinjiang's cost of manual cotton harvesting [increased](#) due to [rising wages](#), resulting in increased production costs and reduced profit margins. In the early 2010s, the cost of producing manually-harvested cotton in regions under the authority of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), a paramilitary entity with a vast economic network that produces over a third of Xinjiang's cotton, was [substantially higher](#) than that of that of fully mechanized U.S. cotton. Much of this cost difference is related to higher labor expenditures due to lower levels of mechanization. In Korla, a cotton-growing region in central Xinjiang, the cost of hand picking in 2018 was estimated at [5,706 RMB](#) (about \$874)

per acre, over five times higher than the 1,093 RMB (about \$167) per acre for machine picking.

Cotton picking is seasonal labor that takes place annually during an approximately two- to three-month period (September to November). While cotton picking is paid work, it is grueling labor from dawn to dusk and requires full relocation for the harvesting months, and average earnings can be below Xinjiang's minimum wage level and below publicly stated wages for low-skilled factory work (see Section 3.3). Notably, cotton pickers in Xinjiang have long been [difficult to find in sufficient numbers](#). As a result, cotton growers have relied on hundreds of thousands of [migrant workers](#) from other Chinese provinces who have to travel over long distances, which further increased labor costs.<sup>3</sup> In addition, Xinjiang has a history of using involuntary labor for cotton picking. The XPCC especially is known to have used

labor from its extensive [prison system](#) for the arduous task. Xinjiang has also for years forced hundreds of thousands of [secondary school students](#) to pick cotton.<sup>4</sup>

Due to Xinjiang's high production costs, its cotton production has been [subsidized](#) with central government funds since 2011. Between 2013 and 2016, Beijing [reduced](#) the state-subsidized target price per metric ton of cotton by 8.8 percent, heightening pressures to reduce production costs (while subsidizing the acquisition of harvesting machines).<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, Xinjiang has heavily promoted mechanized cotton harvesting. However, mechanization shares vary widely by region, and regions with and without substantial mechanization alike continue to rely on large numbers of manual pickers.

In 2019, mechanized harvesting in the XPCC regions reached a share of [83 percent](#).<sup>6</sup> However, in southern Xinjiang the mechanized harvesting share stood at only [20 percent](#) that year.<sup>7</sup> In 2019, 30.2 percent (1.89 million of 6.27 million acres) of cotton plantations in Xinjiang were harvested through machinery, leaving nearly [70 percent](#) to

3 <https://archive.is/qri1Hp#selection-839.83-839.135>; The increased cost of using migrant labor from other parts of China appears to be related at least in part to the fact that cotton growers paid for their round trip train fares, see e.g. <http://web.archive.org/web/20201104204602/http://www.xjdaily.com/c/2018-09-26/2045657.shtml>.

4 [http://www.gov.cn:8080/govweb/jrzg/2006-09/04/content\\_376793.htm](http://www.gov.cn:8080/govweb/jrzg/2006-09/04/content_376793.htm) or <https://archive.is/UHLHi>. Starting in 1994, Xinjiang organized students from 3<sup>rd</sup> grade up to pick cotton every year. In 2005, Xinjiang organized 1 million school students to pick cotton. In 2006, the region forbade schools from sending primary school students to pick cotton. Sources: [http://www.gov.cn/jrzg/2006-08/15/content\\_362624.htm](http://www.gov.cn/jrzg/2006-08/15/content_362624.htm) or <https://archive.is/ZIKcU>; <http://web.archive.org/web/2020112173256/https://www.xzbu.com/2/view-505223.htm>.

5 From 20,400 RMB/ton to 18,600 RMB/ton. [http://jibuan.moa.gov.cn/fwllm/qgxxlb/xj/201410/t20141017\\_4107586.htm](http://jibuan.moa.gov.cn/fwllm/qgxxlb/xj/201410/t20141017_4107586.htm) or <https://archive.is/rIKYh>; <http://www.cj.gov.cn/bmyy/tjj/tjbs/235541.htm> or <https://archive.is/Z9UE5>. English language article on the subject: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-cotton-prices/china-rejigs-cotton-policy-for-top-grower-xinjiang-idUSKBN16OoGo>

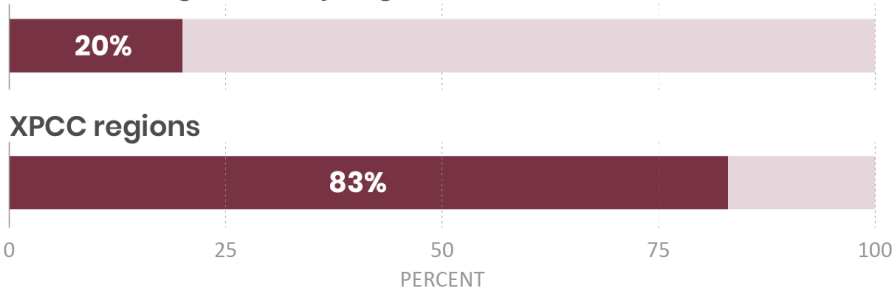
6 <http://info.texnet.com.cn/detail-826115.html> or <https://archive.is/2kYw4>; <http://www.china-cotton.org/app/html/2020/09/25/88174.html> or <https://archive.is/Bmf2F>.

7 <https://www.csis.org/analysis/addressing-forced-labor-xinjiang-uyghur-autonomous-region-toward-shared-agenda>, p.6. Compare [https://archive.is/Kkfsn\\_](https://archive.is/Kkfsn_)

“... the majority of Xinjiang’s cotton is produced in regions with comparatively low levels of mechanized harvesting. This, together with pressures to reduce production costs, incentivizes the systematic deployment of low-paid ethnic minority workers.”

### Machine Harvesting in Xinjiang, 2019

#### Southern region of Xinjiang\*



\* Aksu, Hotan, Kashgar, Kizilsu prefectures

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hand picking.<sup>8</sup> This is because the more mechanized XGCC regions only produce a small share of Xinjiang’s total cotton.

In 2017, the region’s total cotton planting area amounted to 6.07 million acres.<sup>9</sup> Of this, 1.71 million acres (28.3 percent) were planted in the XGCC regions and 2.49 million acres (41.1 percent) in the four prefectures in southern

Xinjiang.<sup>10</sup> When measured by metric tons, the cotton production share of non-XGCC regions in 2017 amounted to 66.7 percent, with southern Xinjiang’s share being 35.2 percent.<sup>11</sup> Importantly, 99.4 percent of the highest quality long-staple cotton was produced in southern Xinjiang.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, the majority of Xinjiang’s cotton is produced in regions with

comparatively low levels of mechanized harvesting. This, together with pressures to reduce production costs, incentivizes the systematic deployment of low-paid ethnic minority workers.

### 1.2 Changes in the Size and Composition of Xinjiang’s Cotton-Picking Workforce

Due to mechanization, the number of workers needed for manual cotton picking in XGCC regions [reportedly fell](#) from around 600,000-700,000 in the late 2010s to between 200,000 and 300,000 in 2016.<sup>13</sup> Even so, Xinjiang’s cotton-picking sector continues to employ large numbers of people.

By Oct. 8, 2018, Aksu and Hotan prefectures alone had sent [210,000 seasonal rural surplus laborers](#) via the labor transfer mechanism to XGCC regions. This indicates that even the highly mechanized XGCC

8 2019 total cotton planting area figure: <https://archive.is/Ktpph>

9 36.82 million Chinese mu. Source: 2019 Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook (XSY), table 12-17. The XSY gives the total planted area as 2,217.45 hectares (33.26 million Chinese mu), whereas a manual adding of each region and the XGCC results in a total of 2,454.82 hectares (36.82 million Chinese mu). The XSY acknowledges this in a note below the data table. The calculations in this report use the manually added total, which also corresponds more closely to the 6.16 million acres given for 2018 (source: [http://www.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2019-02/05/c\\_1124086763.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2019-02/05/c_1124086763.htm) or <https://archive.is/9N2Qo>).

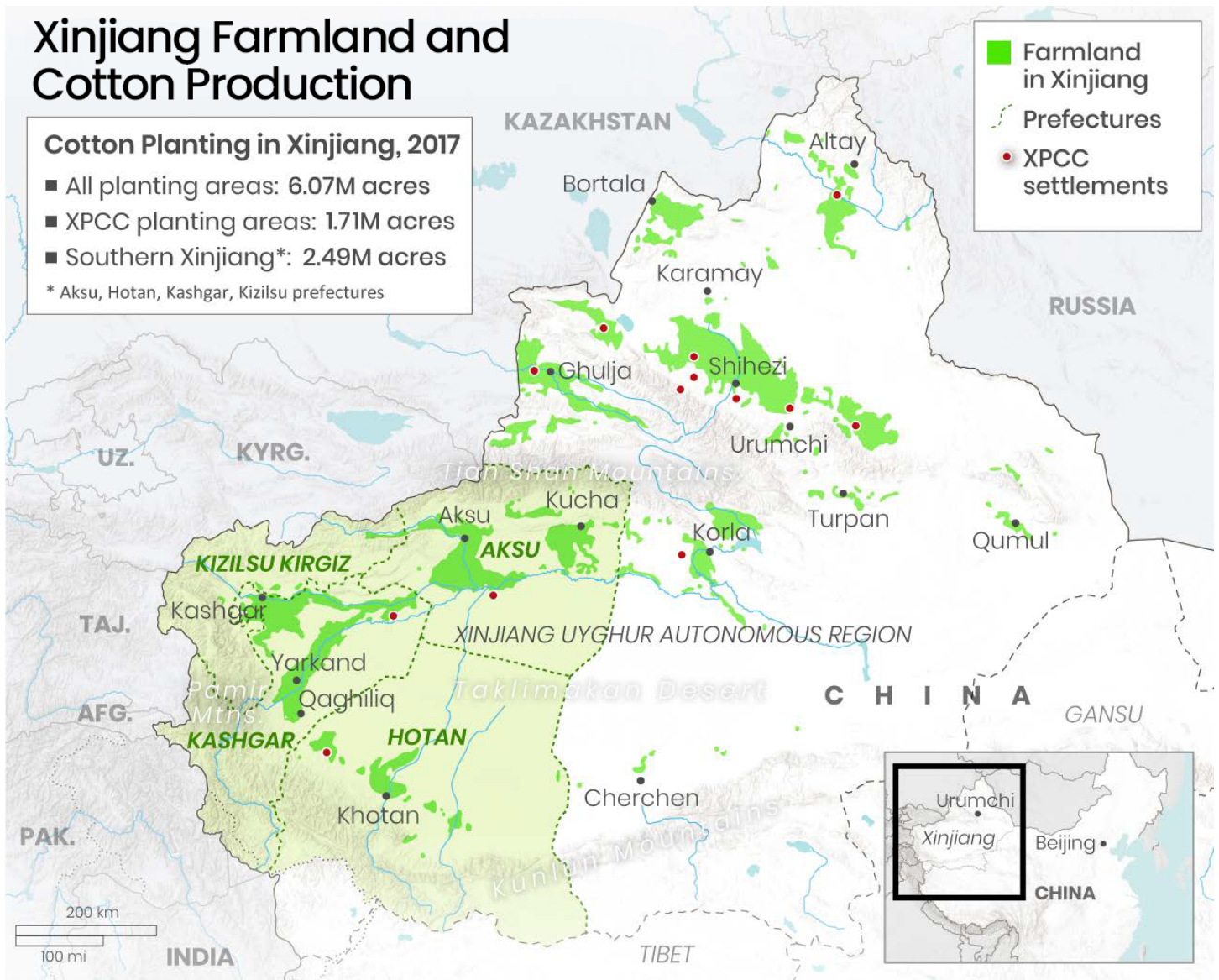
10 Source: 2019 Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook (XSY), table 12-17. Regional shares are computed based on the total obtained by adding all regional figures (see previous note).

11 Source: 2019 XSY table 12-17. The XSY gives the total production as 4.57 million tons, whereas a manual adding of each region and the XGCC results in a total of 5.08 million tons. The XSY acknowledges this in a note below the data table. The calculations in this report use the manually added total.

12 Source: 2019 XSY table 12-17.

13 [http://www.xjass.cn/zxdt/content/2019-11/22/content\\_518044.htm](http://www.xjass.cn/zxdt/content/2019-11/22/content_518044.htm) or <https://archive.is/ZgsvR>; <https://archive.is/clv1S>. A China Daily report from 2016 notes that the number of migrant cotton pickers for all of Xinjiang stood at 400,000; source: [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-10/28/content\\_27199429.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-10/28/content_27199429.htm) or <https://archive.is/uQ12f>.

# Xinjiang Farmland and Cotton Production



**Cotton Planting in Xinjiang, 2017**

- All planting areas: 6.07M acres
- XGCC planting areas: 1.71M acres
- Southern Xinjiang\*: 2.49M acres

\* Aksu, Hotan, Kashgar, Kizilsu prefectures

■ Farmland in Xinjiang  
 --- Prefectures  
 ● XGCC settlements

Sources: NCBI

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cotton plantations (which in that year had a mechanization share of [80.4 percent](#)) still require a large amount of manpower.

Xinjiang’s less-mechanized cotton-growing regions continue to require even more laborers. In 2020, Aksu Prefecture was expected

to need [142,700 cotton pickers](#), and in 2018, Kashgar Prefecture employed about [250,000](#). In the mid-2000s, numbers of cotton pickers needed outside the XGCC regions were variously estimated between [400,000 and 530,000](#).<sup>14</sup> Despite increased mechanization, a [112 percent increase](#) in the cotton

plantation area in these non-XGCC regions between 2006 and 2020 (from 1.91 million to 4.05 million acres) means that these numbers likely have not decreased.<sup>15</sup>

As a result of rural poverty alleviation programs and related labor transfer policies, the shares

14 E.g. <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2006-08-18/03579780664s.shtml> or <https://archive.is/67IkC>; [http://zqb.cyol.com/content/2006-09/14/content\\_1509826.htm](http://zqb.cyol.com/content/2006-09/14/content_1509826.htm) or <https://archive.is/ihUP2>; [http://www.rayvow.com/ws-2002716-c0002\\_7-cn/news\\_22512.shtml](http://www.rayvow.com/ws-2002716-c0002_7-cn/news_22512.shtml) or <https://archive.is/zhd5u>.  
 15 Sources: 2006 - <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2006-08-18/03579780664s.shtml> or <https://archive.is/67IkC>; 2020: [http://www.xinhuanet.com/food/2020-09/30/c\\_1126560723.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/food/2020-09/30/c_1126560723.htm) or <https://archive.is/WRx9H>. Similarly, the sown area of cotton in the four southern prefectures grew by 136.0 percent between 2006 and 2017 (Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 2007, table 11-14, and 2019, table 12-14).

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**“A key goal is to keep minorities occupied and surveilled. Factory workers who work and live on secure compounds with dormitories live in environments that are more easily controlled by the state than pastoralists or farmers. Placing minorities into full-time wage labor has become a cornerstone of the state’s coercive social re-engineering project.”**

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of local ethnic minority laborers among cotton pickers have increased drastically.

In China, the “labor transfer of rural surplus laborers”<sup>16</sup> refers to transferring rural workers such as farmers or pastoralists into full-time wage labor positions – typically in manufacturing but also service sector jobs or paid seasonal agricultural work such as cotton picking, since this results in a measurable wage income. (The government’s poverty alleviation targets require that household incomes exceed an annual minimum figure that officials can measure reliably.) Such transfers frequently but not invariably involve a physical relocation.

Xinjiang’s motivation for coercive labor is [not just economic](#). A key goal is to keep minorities occupied and surveilled. Factory workers who work and live on secure compounds with dormitories live in environments that are more easily controlled by the state than pastoralists or farmers. Placing minorities into

full-time wage labor has become a cornerstone of the [state’s coercive social re-engineering project](#). This scheme of coercive labor is not directly linked to the extrajudicial internment camps. However, persons released from vocational internment camps can end up working alongside those who have gone through the labor transfer scheme.

Traditionally, hundreds of thousands of pickers from other Chinese provinces traveled each year to Xinjiang for the harvesting season. They [supplemented](#) local workers not only in XPCC regions but also in southern Xinjiang. Between 2010 and 2016, only about [100,000 cotton pickers](#) annually in XPCC regions were from Xinjiang’s minority regions.<sup>17</sup> This contrasts with the [210,000 pickers](#) that the Aksu and Hotan prefectures alone sent to the XPCC in 2018.

The replacement of Han labor migrants from eastern China with local ethnic minority laborers who are mobilized through labor transfer

schemes is taking place in all cotton-growing regions in Xinjiang. In 2018, of 250,000 cotton pickers in Kashgar Prefecture, 210,900 were locals (via labor transfer policies), 39,100 came from other regions of Xinjiang, and only 6,219 or [2.5 percent](#) hailed from other parts of China. The report notes the numbers of cotton pickers from other parts of China are declining. In the same year, the number of cotton pickers in Aksu Prefecture who were organized through the labor transfer mechanism increased by [21 percent](#). In 2020, Aksu needed [142,700 cotton pickers](#); of them, 124,500 were locally organized (likewise via state-arranged labor transfers).<sup>18</sup> Karakax County in Hotan Prefecture sent out more cotton pickers mobilized through labor transfer – an increase from [40,600](#) in 2017 to [54,000](#) in 2018, mobilizing 15.7 percent of its population aged 18-59 years to pick cotton in other regions.<sup>19</sup>

A 2020 news article from Aksu [explains](#) that counties with more

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16 Chinese term for “labor transfer of rural surplus laborers”: *nongcun fuyu laodongli zhuan yi jiu ye* 农村富余劳动力转移就业.

17 2016: [http://www.xjass.cn/zxd/content/2019-11/22/content\\_518044.htm](http://www.xjass.cn/zxd/content/2019-11/22/content_518044.htm) or <https://archive.is/ZgsvR>. In 2014, that share likewise stood at about one-third: [http://epaper.21jingji.com/html/2018-10/15/content\\_94554.htm](http://epaper.21jingji.com/html/2018-10/15/content_94554.htm) or <https://archive.is/ti9No>; 2010: <http://www.xcdmw.net/difang/2020101131581.html> or <https://archive.is/8HzLi>.

18 <http://www.sdfzcm.com/a/minsheng/20201013/41477.html> or <https://archive.is/OIU1a>; or <http://www.zgmsjjw.com/newsshow-10-69081-1.html> or <https://archive.is/5qFVO>.

19 In 2018, Karakax County’s population aged 18 to 59 was 345,002. Source: XSY 2019, table 3-9.



*A farm machine harvests cotton in Manas County, Hui Autonomous Prefecture of Changji, Xinjiang, China, on Oct. 17, 2020. (Costfoto/Barcroft Media/Getty Images)*

cotton plantations request labor from those with fewer plantations, stating that as a result the region “no longer needs to attract cotton pickers from elsewhere.” A similar report from Bayingol Prefecture in central Xinjiang [quotes](#) a local cotton grower as saying that by hiring Uyghur pickers from southern Xinjiang instead of workers from eastern China, he saves thousands of yuan in round-trip train fares. The report notes that in 2018, Hotan Prefecture alone sent 25,000 cotton pickers to Bayingol. In yet another account, a cotton plantation owner [says](#) that as a result of the local labor transfer mechanism mobilizing

large numbers of local villagers, he stopped hiring cotton pickers from other regions in 2017.

These changes are directly related to Xinjiang’s expanding push to set up intrusive social control mechanisms and to promote local labor training and transfer mechanisms that target every single rural low-income household. To [quote](#):

*[T]he factors that once prevented the local work force from entering the cotton-picking market no longer exist. This is thanks to the continuous advancement of the work of transferring surplus*

*labor performed by all levels of the Xinjiang government. Especially since 2014, Xinjiang has sent a total of 350,000 cadres to villages for 5 consecutive years to help the masses out of poverty and misery and built strong grassroots organizations. [As a result], southern Xinjiang farmers have been effectively organized and devote themselves to poverty alleviation.*

Specifically, a key policy document for the state management of cotton pickers from August 2016 [required](#) regions to prefer local over external (migrant) workers.<sup>20</sup> The fact that

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.shangyexinzhi.com/article/1656034.html> or <https://archive.is/hnSem>, or <https://archive.is/2MB4E> ([http://pkulaw.cn/fulltext\\_form.aspx?Gid=18054917&Db=lar](http://pkulaw.cn/fulltext_form.aspx?Gid=18054917&Db=lar))



labor transfers mobilize significant numbers of Uyghurs for picking cotton is also acknowledged in a 2020 academic journal paper published by the [Hotan Normal College](#).

When adding up the aforementioned numbers of cotton pickers for both local and external work assignments, we can estimate that Aksu, Hotan, and Kashgar alone mobilized an estimated 570,000 cotton pickers through the coercive labor transfer mechanism.<sup>21</sup> Other ethnic minority regions that operate labor transfer schemes would easily add tens of thousands, more likely [hundreds of thousands](#), to this figure.<sup>22</sup> To this we would also need to add the numbers of [prisoners](#) who are routinely forced to pick cotton, especially in XPCC regions, many of whom would be ethnic minorities. Overall, it is safe to state that Xinjiang's cotton production depends on a coercive labor transfer mechanism that involves well over half a million ethnic minorities.

### 1.3 The Significance of Cotton Picking for Xinjiang's Poverty Alleviation Through Employment Policies

The cotton-picking season provides a key opportunity to increase rural incomes in order to meet state-mandated poverty alleviation targets. Utilizing [seasonal labor](#)<sup>23</sup>



*A farmer checks the quality of cotton in a field in Manas County, Hui Autonomous Prefecture of Changji, northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region in October 2020. (Xinhua/Ding Lei/Getty Images)*

is an explicit part of related policies, and a key component of the entire labor transfer scheme. This strategy relies strongly on cotton picking, a connection that was explicitly [highlighted](#) by a leading government official in Xinjiang in October 2018: "We seize cotton picking and other seasonal labor as a key [opportunity] for increasing labor-derived income."<sup>24</sup> In 2019, Xinjiang's labor transfer [continued](#) the previous year's strategies of local and supra-local employment

transfers, including the ongoing promotion of short-term seasonal labor. In 2020, this [continued despite the pandemic](#).

### 1.4 Implications for Coercive Labor in Cotton Picking

Overall, Xinjiang's coercive labor transfer scheme has significantly increased the numbers of local ethnic minorities involved in cotton picking, creating mechanisms that ensure a high annual share of coer-

21 Calculated based on the following 2018 figures cited in the text: Aksu and Hotan to XPCC regions (210,000), Kashgar local (210,900), Aksu local (124,500; 2020 figure assumed to be broadly commensurate with 2018), Hotan to Bayingol Prefecture (25,000; the 2019 XSY, table 12-14, shows that this region had 3.59 million mu of sown cotton separate from the XPCC). The resulting figure of 570,400 is rounded down to 570,000 to reflect an approximate estimate. This figure excludes an unknown but likely relatively small number of local pickers mobilized to pick cotton in Hotan. Several tens of thousands of pickers who were mobilized to Aksu and Kashgar from other parts of Xinjiang (likely at least in part also through labor transfer) are likewise excluded in order to maintain a fairly conservative estimate.

22 Compare similar labor transfer mobilization efforts in 2020 in other regions with significant ethnic minority populations such as Ili and Changji Prefectures. Source: <http://nynct.xinjiang.gov.cn/nynct/dzdt/202011/1cbf775ed89a4fc5bc49cc26d87816d2.shtml> or <https://archive.is/rYdIX>. Compare also Hotan sending 50,000 cotton pickers to Aksu in 2017, source: <https://web.archive.org/web/20201104223240/http://www.xjpcsc.gov.cn/uploads/20190427/2b5fd3df2a621a31378753cbd5dobfde.pdf>.

23 Chinese term for "seasonal labor": *jijixing laodong* 季节性劳动. Sources: <https://archive.is/9kzXR>; <https://archive.is/kEG6s>; <https://archive.is/32uol>.

24 [http://web.archive.org/web/20201014191625/http://www.moa.gov.cn/xw/qg/201810/t20181012\\_6160671.htm](http://web.archive.org/web/20201014191625/http://www.moa.gov.cn/xw/qg/201810/t20181012_6160671.htm). Compare <https://archive.is/VOABd>

“Chen [Quanguo] set up an unprecedented police state in the region, and then in the spring of 2017 initiated the campaign of mass internment whereby up to an estimated 1.8 million ethnic minorities were detained in a sprawling network of internment camps.”

cive labor in the region’s total cotton production. Coercive ethnic minority labor transfers not only dominate manual cotton picking in southern Xinjiang, which produces over three quarters of the region’s cotton (and nearly all high-quality long staple cotton); they also play a major role in cotton harvesting in the more mechanized cotton-producing regions. Consequently, coercive labor practices affect the vast majority of Xinjiang’s cotton production.

## 2. The Coercive Nature of Xinjiang’s Transfer of Rural Surplus Laborers

### 2.1 History of Labor Transfer

Chinese President Xi Jinping’s goal to eradicate absolute poverty by 2020 has made poverty alleviation an urgent goal in Xinjiang. According to government documents, the region’s “war on poverty” reached a crucial phase in 2019. Poverty alleviation is commensurate with a military command, and “the southern four regions and prefectures are the main battle field” in the [war against](#)

[poverty](#).<sup>25</sup> In this relentless “battle,” [every administrative level](#) is to pressure each successive lower level in order to achieve the set goals at the set time. Since the [primary strategy](#) for achieving poverty alleviation targets is job creation through labor transfer, the pressure on officials to fulfill or exceed the mandated labor transfer quotas is very high.<sup>26</sup>

Xinjiang’s labor transfer program started in the [early 2000s](#). By end of 2010, it encompassed [2.2 million](#) rural surplus laborers, 83.8 percent of them ethnic minorities.<sup>27</sup> However, there were numerous issues. For example, Han officials and academics complained that Uyghur workers [lacked discipline and stability](#), resulting in low retention rates and a general unwillingness of the predominantly Han Chinese bosses to hire minority laborers.<sup>28</sup> Minority women in particular preferred to remain in traditional homemaking roles.

In [2014](#), Xi visited Xinjiang after several violent attacks undertaken by Uyghurs that severely rattled the nation. According to [leaked docu-](#)

[ments published by The New York Times](#), Xi ordered local officials to embark on a much tougher effort to subjugate Uyghur society. Whereas the previous strategy to pacify Xinjiang had centered on economic development, Xi called for an “ideological cure, an effort to rewire the thinking of the region’s predominantly Muslim minorities.”

After Xi’s visit, Xinjiang’s labor transfer efforts soon grew more intrusive and coercive. Levels of coercion rose further when Beijing’s notorious strongman Chen Quanguo became Xinjiang’s party secretary in August 2016. Chen set up an unprecedented police state in the region, and then in the spring of 2017 initiated the campaign of mass internment whereby up to an estimated 1.8 million ethnic minorities were detained in a sprawling network of internment camps.

### 2.2 ‘Precise Poverty Alleviation’: Targeting Every Household

Immediately after Xi’s visit, a Xinjiang policy document from

25 [http://f.china.com.cn/2018-02/07/content\\_50442241.htm](http://f.china.com.cn/2018-02/07/content_50442241.htm) or <http://archive.is/oVSbm>. See the author’s [previous research paper](#) on forced labor in Xinjiang for a detailed discussion of the coercive nature of poverty alleviation in Xinjiang. The oppressive nature of welfare in general and poverty alleviation in particular in the context of China’s current regime has also been document by Jennifer Pan in her [recent book](#).

26 See section 2 in <https://www.jpolorisk.com/beyond-the-camps-beijings-long-term-scheme-of-coercive-labor-poverty-alleviation-and-social-control-in-xinjiang/>

27 [http://web.archive.org/web/20200102035451/http://www.shehui.pku.edu.cn/upload/editor/file/20180829/20180829105607\\_8254.pdf](http://web.archive.org/web/20200102035451/http://www.shehui.pku.edu.cn/upload/editor/file/20180829/20180829105607_8254.pdf), p.33.

28 [http://web.archive.org/web/20200102035451/http://www.shehui.pku.edu.cn/upload/editor/file/20180829/20180829105607\\_8254.pdf](http://web.archive.org/web/20200102035451/http://www.shehui.pku.edu.cn/upload/editor/file/20180829/20180829105607_8254.pdf), p.36.



China Construction Xinjiang Construction Engineering's 2018 intensive training for transferred employees held its opening ceremony on Dec. 17. ([www.sohu.com](http://www.sohu.com))

July 2014 first employed the term “[precise poverty alleviation](#).”<sup>29</sup> The document called for a detailed targeting of poor households via the establishment of a comprehensive digital database system. This database is comparable to the surveillance-oriented Integrated Joint Operations Platform (IJOP) and is likely interconnected with it in some way, but [later documents](#) indicate a distinct term.<sup>30</sup> This document also mandated an intensified evaluation of officials’ progress in poverty alleviation work, along with an expanded system of rewards and punishments for meeting or failing to meet targets. Both aspects are important, because the coercive nature of the labor transfer scheme

is strongly linked to coercive pressures built into the overarching poverty alleviation framework. In the same year, precise poverty alleviation was hailed as a major conceptual change from “sprinkler irrigation” to “drip irrigation” – a precision-oriented approach that prescribes “[targeted therapy](#)” for every single household.<sup>31</sup>

In 2015, a policy document on precise poverty alleviation outlined [concrete numerical goals](#), mandating that by 2020, over 2 million poor persons in 3,029 poor villages (nearly all in ethnic minority regions, especially southern Xinjiang) were to be lifted out of poverty. The primary method of doing so was

the creation of jobs and industrialization. The identification of the targets was to be done through precise poverty alleviation.

The next key adjustments were made in January 2016 and set more precise [target figures](#) for poverty alleviation through employment and labor transfer. By 2020, 2.61 million persons were to be lifted out of poverty. For 1.74 million of them, this goal was to be achieved through labor transfer and industrialization.<sup>32</sup> For comparison, in [mid-2017](#), southern Xinjiang alone reportedly had a rural population of 7.28 million, with 1.59 million of them classified as poor.<sup>33</sup> This same document called for a “strengthening of precise poverty alleviation assault measures.”<sup>34</sup>

This was the first mention of labor transfer in the context of such a policy document, which also outlined a labor transfer action plan. This plan mandated the creation of a comprehensive public employment infrastructure and required full coverage of vocational training for all rural surplus laborers by 2018. Its language had become more urgent; the pressure on officials to achieve poverty alleviation and employment targets kept increasing.

29 [http://web.archive.org/web/20201029154221/http://www.cpad.gov.cn/art/2014/7/10/art\\_5\\_34496.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20201029154221/http://www.cpad.gov.cn/art/2014/7/10/art_5_34496.html). Chinese term for “precise poverty alleviation”: *jingzhun fupin* 精准扶贫. Alternative translations of “precise” include “targeted” or “fine-grained”.

30 This system is likely the one later referred to as the “Xinjiang poverty alleviation assault platform” (*Xinjiang tuopin gongjian dashuju pingtai* 新疆脱贫攻坚大数据平台).

31 [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2014-06/06/content\\_2695419.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2014-06/06/content_2695419.htm) or <https://archive.is/fNYIo>. Chinese: *baxiang liaofa* 靶向疗法.

32 After 760,000 people were lifted out of poverty in 2015, following targets: 630,000 people to be lifted out of poverty in 2016, 590,000 people out of poverty in 2017, 280,000 people out of poverty in 2018, 220,000 people out of poverty in 2019, and 130,000 people out of poverty in 2020.

33 <http://www.xinjiang.gov.cn/xinjiang/gfxwj/201706/15023116ce80428c8d3246c252f2d17f.shtml> or <https://archive.is/Fan2D>, page 6.

34 These “assault” measures (the term can be translated as “to assault” or “to tackle”) refer to the various measures used by the state in the “war” on poverty, including digital databases, measures that target every single individual, income-earning activities through employment creation and labor transfer, etc. This terminology also refers to the “stringent” nature of implementing them, the strictness and intensity surrounding related goals, targets and quotas, and the urgency and pressure placed on officials to achieve them.



Some 442 rural surplus laborers from Kashgar and Hotan prefectures are sent off to work in an industrial park in Korla in a “centralized fashion.” (loulannews.com)

In July 2016, just prior to Chen’s transfer to Xinjiang from Tibet, Xinjiang issued an [action plan](#) that explicitly specified details of the evolving labor transfer policy. This document was the first to specifically mandate thought transformation, calling for the “transformation of views on employment.”<sup>35</sup> It also specified an [“order-oriented” approach](#) to labor transfer, where companies put in orders for employees with certain skills and the state then takes batches of ethnic minorities, trains them accordingly, and delivers them to companies.<sup>36</sup> This approach was later [adopted in Tibet](#). The aim was to increasingly streamline the labor transfer process so that rural surplus laborers would immediately be shipped off to work destinations after their training, precluding a return to their original livelihoods. The document

also spoke of the establishment of labor-intensive industries through “satellite factories,” small workshops designed to provide employment in villages, bringing jobs to those who cannot easily travel to get jobs. It also mandated the further expansion of the digital database system, ensuring that “not one household and not one person is being missed.”

In August 2016, Xinjiang issued a notice about the [state management of seasonal workers](#), including cotton pickers.<sup>37</sup> It prescribed a process of close supervision and intensified indoctrination of these workers in collaboration with the public security agencies, notably “thought education and ethnic unity education” to “lead all ethnic workers to obey the law and to proactively resist illegal religious

activities.” The recruitment and organization of cotton pickers was to be a top-down, state-controlled process by which local counties coordinate labor needs with cotton planting regions and mobilize the required workforce. The implementation of these stipulations is evident from subsequent sources, such as a document from Aksu Pre-fecture from 2020 [mandating](#) that cotton pickers are accompanied by cadres who “must eat, live, study and work with them, vigorously implementing thought education during cotton picking.”

### 2.3 Intensified ‘Battle’: Militarized Training and Thought Transformation

In 2017, the year when the mass internments began, the labor training and transfer process in ethnic minority regions became even more coercive. Training settings for targeted groups of rural surplus laborers became highly militarized, increasingly securitized, and in several ways not dissimilar to the vocational internment camps. Trainings were to adopt a strictly disciplinary management style with an even stronger focus on intrusive political indoctrination and thought education efforts. This included the singing of “red songs,” learning to be grateful to the Chinese Communist Party, education in Chinese language, obeying the law, and so on. [Numerous policy documents](#) mandated that this “basic labor quality education” training component was to be implemented in the form

35 Chinese for “transformation of views on employment”: *tuidong jiuye gainian zhuanbian* 推动就业观念转变

36 Compare this November 2016 policy document: [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2016-12/02/content\\_5142197.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2016-12/02/content_5142197.htm) or <https://archive.is/5MDz1>.

37 <https://www.shangyexinzi.com/article/1656034.html> or <https://archive.is/hnSem>, or <https://archive.is/2MB4E> ([http://pkulaw.cn/fulltext\\_form.aspx?Gid=18054917&Db=lar](http://pkulaw.cn/fulltext_form.aspx?Gid=18054917&Db=lar))

of “[military-style management](#)” in order to maximize “iron-like” discipline, obedience, and the production of “standardized behavior.”<sup>38</sup>

A key aspect is [transforming](#) the minorities’ “backwards” work attitude from “I am wanted to work” to “I want to work.”<sup>39</sup> Depending on the training setting and the target group, this training component, which comes prior to any actual vocational training, can last [between six days and six months](#).<sup>40</sup> In some regions, these vocational training and thought indoctrination efforts were enhanced beyond traditional vocational training settings by making government officials “sleep, live, work, study and unite thoughts” with households.<sup>41</sup>

The main purpose of this intensified coercion is to enable the state to guarantee labor transfer outcomes. This training process sends a strong message that the state is in charge. Surplus laborers might have a choice in what vocational training they receive, but not whether they participate in the labor transfer process. Moreover, it makes the recruitment of Uyghurs and other minorities more attractive for Chinese companies. Through a coercive, militarized vocational training with strong indoctrination components, minority laborers are “transformed from farmers to industry workers,” meaning that



*Rural surplus laborers from Moyu County are sent off to industrial labor in a “centralized” fashion. (news.sina.com.cn)*

hard-working, stable (will not quit and return home), and safe (will not cause problems). This process effectively turns them into a second-class workforce, creating a fertile ground for labor exploitation.

## 2.4 Implications

The available evidence clearly suggests that labor transfers for cotton picking are taking place in an increasingly coercive environment. Especially since the middle of 2016, such transfers occur under high degrees of coercion. This also explains why local minorities have been replacing Han migrants from other parts of China since at least 2017.

## 3. Evidence of Coercion in the Recruitment, Transfer, and Management of Transferred Laborers in Xinjiang’s Cotton-Picking Sector

### 3.1 Overcoming ‘Laziness’: How the State Mobilizes Minority Cotton Pickers

Since cotton picking is hard work, state propaganda accounts of mobilizing pickers have the overarching theme of overcoming workers’ reticence to participate in the scheme. This is unilaterally ascribed to two main factors: their outdated and backward employ-

38 <http://www.kashi.gov.cn/Item/38964.aspx> or <http://archive.is/ZoMgg> (literal Chinese for “raising up standardized behavior”: “行为规范养成”); [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2017-06/01/content\\_5198888.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2017-06/01/content_5198888.htm) or <https://archive.is/MV8PF>; <http://www.xnzye.net/nongjizhishi/zhongzhizhishi/20170418/2906.html> or <https://archive.is/5K9cI>. For the prescription of military drill in the vocational surplus labor throughout various ethnic minority regions in Xinjiang, see: <https://web.archive.org/web/20191127080847/http://www.xjcbcr.gov.cn/info/1200/57613.htm>, <http://m.ylxw.com.cn/particle/91540>, <http://www.xjyl.gov.cn/info/2269/294696.htm>, <https://archive.is/Bkziv>, <http://www.tlffy.net/wap/index.php?c=article&a=show&id=28>, <https://archive.is/Ilc7B>, <https://archive.is/S4yiT> and <https://archive.is/a5aA1>.

39 <http://www.china-cotton.org/app/html/2018/11/09/83019.html> or <http://archive.is/LUw3I>; compare <http://archive.is/AZEAU>, <https://archive.is/Irtas> and <https://web.archive.org/web/20191127080847/http://www.xjcbcr.gov.cn/info/1200/57613.htm>.

40 See sources in previous footnote as well as: [https://www.sohu.com/a/21588112\\_752235](https://www.sohu.com/a/21588112_752235) or <https://archive.is/4KP5Y>; [www.xjgzw.gov.cn/info/1064/7355.htm](http://www.xjgzw.gov.cn/info/1064/7355.htm) (defunct).

41 [www.xjfp.gov.cn/fpjb/131443.jhtml](http://www.xjfp.gov.cn/fpjb/131443.jhtml) (defunct). Archived download at <https://bit.ly/3GrhFT>.

**“The village-based work teams became a key component in the seamless integration of social control and securitization, linking household information with data from surveillance systems and the entire police state.”**

ment views, which are said to cause minorities to be stuck in their traditional ways of making a living; and an ingrained laziness and lack of work discipline, even a lack of valuing work. Conversely, the glorified outcomes of the coercive labor transfer process, which is invariably touted to overcome both of these obstacles, are hard-working teams of Uyghur and other ethnic minority cotton pickers who are no longer passive or lazy, who have become more open-minded, who now cherish work in all its “glory,” and who finally work hard with both hands to raise themselves out of poverty. A related [trope](#) that permeates many poverty alleviation documents is that the minorities are transformed from needing a “blood transfusion” to now “making [their own] blood.”<sup>42</sup>

Such stereotyped portrayals are found in regard to both Uyghurs and Tibetans. They gloss over the fact that many Uyghurs were successful businesspersons prior to the oppressive crackdown, and that their and the Tibetans’ resistance to state-led socio-economic change is

also related to their desire to remain rooted in local communities and to maintain distinct cultural identities.

Since recruitment is the most crucial aspect of labor transfer, the state combines its sophisticated and fine-grained security apparatus with a set of intrusive social control mechanisms in order to maximize the labor transfer mobilization not only of Uyghurs and Kazakhs in Xinjiang, but also of Tibetans in the Tibet Autonomous Region. These mechanisms are a key reason why labor transfer employment constitutes coercive labor.

In November 2011, Chen, then party secretary of the Tibet Autonomous Region, initiated a massive campaign of sending [100,000 cadres](#) organized in village-based work teams to Tibetan villages.<sup>43</sup> This campaign marked the beginning of extremely intrusive new methods of social control, whereby government officials penetrate deep into minority households and obtain personal information that is then fed into the wider security apparatus. The village-based work teams became

a key component in the seamless integration of social control and securitization, linking household information with data from surveillance systems and the entire police state. In February 2014, Zhang Chunxian, then Party Secretary of Xinjiang, [replicated](#) this model in Xinjiang. In the spring of 2017, after Chen took control of Xinjiang, the [village-based work teams](#) became a key mechanism for identifying Uyghur families for detention in re-education camps. Between 2014 and 2018, Xinjiang sent [350,000 cadres](#) to Uyghur and other ethnic minority villages. Their work is aided by a “[precise poverty alleviation smartphone app](#).”<sup>44</sup> The resulting data is fed into the central “Xinjiang big data platform” that records, among other things, incomes and employment status.<sup>45</sup>

In both Tibet and Xinjiang, village-based work teams have played a key role in [mobilizing “reticent” minorities](#) into labor transfer schemes. Since the work of these teams takes place in a [system](#) where the transition between

42 Chinese for “blood transfusion is transformed into making blood”: *bian “shuxue” wei “zaoxue”* 变“输血”为“造血”. Source: e.g. <http://www.xj.chinanews.com/xinjiang/2018-11-29/detail-1fzahrcq0599454.shtml> or <https://archive.is/iabTT>.

43 See [http://web.archive.org/web/20160829154547/http://news.ifeng.com/a/20160829/49857646\\_o.shtml](http://web.archive.org/web/20160829154547/http://news.ifeng.com/a/20160829/49857646_o.shtml) or <https://www.hrw.org/zh-hans/news/2013/06/18/250209>.

44 Chinese for “precise poverty alleviation smartphone app”: *jingzhun fupin app* 精准扶贫 app. <https://www.xjawt.gov.cn/zwgk/zdxqxqtzs/tpgjzxd/20190111/i133466.html>

or <http://archive.is/GoUii>

45 Chinese for “Xinjiang big data platform”: *zizhiqu da shuju pingtai* 自治区大数据平台. This term is very likely an abbreviation of the term “Xinjiang poverty alleviation assault platform” (*Xinjiang tuopin gongjian dashuju pingtai* 新疆脱贫攻坚大数据平台) noted in a previous footnote.



Workers board buses to head out for labor assignments. ([www.xjjsx.gov.cn](http://www.xjjsx.gov.cn))

securitization, surveillance, social control, and poverty alleviation is seamless, there is no telling where coercion stops and where locals may exhibit a degree of consent.<sup>46</sup> Government reports abound with the “[success stories](#)” of village work teams who ceaselessly visit resistant families until they “agree” to work, a process that involves “transformed thinking.”<sup>47</sup>

Numerous government and related media accounts document that village-based work teams who enter every single local home play a key role in mobilizing rural low-income Uyghurs and other minorities into cotton picking. The [earliest accounts](#) are from autumn 2016, which is consistent with the wider

policy picture and the changes that emerged with Chen’s arrival.<sup>48</sup>

One account from [December 2017](#) from Aymak village in Aksu Prefecture notes that the village-based work team was commending outstanding cotton pickers among 77 villagers who had been organized to pick cotton. The account states that through “long-term preaching,” the state is “creating an atmosphere that labor is glorious and laziness is shameful.” Another account from [2019](#) notes that the village work team managed to overcome the villagers’ attitude of “waiting, relying [on others] and wanting [handouts],” their “deep-rooted lazy thinking” and their “lack of inner motivation,” and organized 172 of

them to leave their homes and work through the labor transfer scheme. Many of them have been working as cotton pickers.

A [2019 report](#) from Wensu County in Aksu Prefecture notes that after “getting rid of the old-fashioned, blocked and lazy thoughts of the peasants and herders,” the town has used employment as the “golden key to unlock the poverty-solving problem.” People’s thoughts were “liberated” through “education,” and 9,669 were put through the labor transfer scheme. In the autumn, locals were mobilized to “strive for work” and to pick cotton. Finally, a September 2018 account from Baicheng County in Aksu Prefecture describes how the village-based work team patiently liberated Uyghur villager Er’eli Hekim from his serious thought problems. Thanks to thought transformation work, he followed the call to go and pick cotton once he received the work team’s notification. At the end of the account, he is [cited](#) as saying:

*In the past, my lazy thoughts of ‘waiting, relying, and asking’ were serious. I only knew how to ask for things from the party and the government. Now, I finally understand that the happiest [thing] is to use the money I earn with my hard-working hands and my sweat. In the future, with the support of the party and the government’s policy [...], I will earn more money and make my family’s life better every day.*

46 See e.g. <https://archive.is/e45fj>.

47 See e.g. <http://www.xjdc.gov.cn/info/11388/22911.htm> or <http://archive.is/wzySf>.

48 E.g. [www.xjcz.gov.cn/zxgz/smhdzt/gzdt/201610/t20161025\\_34110.html](http://www.xjcz.gov.cn/zxgz/smhdzt/gzdt/201610/t20161025_34110.html) or <https://archive.is/Fn8og>; or <http://web.archive.org/web/20201016183116/http://www.xjjsx.gov.cn/Item/18498.aspx>

Village-based work teams and other government workers spare no effort in the mobilization process. In a township that annually mobilizes 3,000 cotton pickers, [30 officials](#) were reported to enter households to “mobilize surplus laborers to go out.” In a village in Jiashi County in Kashgar Prefecture, where locals were discovered to be “unwilling to go out to work,” [officials entered every home](#) for a second time and undertook “thought education work” until 60 persons had been mobilized into picking cotton. Many of those shown lining up in front of the labor transfer bus are elderly men and women, because at that time (September 2017) many among the younger population had been sent to internment camps.

The mobilization of minority cotton pickers can involve other [measures designed to “free” them to leave](#) their homes for two months. This includes centralized childcare and elderly care, as well as organizing the remaining villagers into small teams to look after the animals of those who pick cotton. Based on [previous research](#), it is clear that such centralized childcare would take place in either full-time boarding facilities or state-run orphanages, both settings that heavily indoctrinate children and punish them if they don't speak Chinese both in class and outside. Such arrangements that separate parents from children heighten concerns of coercion.

As a result of labor transfer mobilization, propaganda accounts proudly proclaim that cotton grow-



*A precise poverty elimination smartphone app, screenshots from which are shown above, helps government workers collect data on Uyghur households and feed that information into a large database. ([www.jpolarisk.com](http://www.jpolarisk.com))*

ers no longer have to search for workers. Local governments liaise with them well in advance and simply mobilize the needed numbers of laborers. As one grower [says](#):

*In the past ... in order to recruit cotton pickers, we squatted at train stations and long-distance bus stations all day, holding up signs and asking everywhere. Now, the counties and townships plan early to continuously optimize the management of the service of [providing] cotton pickers; the [cotton-growing] villagers no longer worry about finding pickers.*

These and numerous similar accounts raise grave concerns about systemic, state-sponsored coercion in the annual process of

mobilizing hundreds of thousands of local cotton pickers.

### 3.2 Streamlined Process: Efficient Large-Scale Operations with Guaranteed Outcomes

Starting in 2017 and 2018, the labor transfers' increasingly coercive vocational training process was complemented with an increasingly tightly controlled transfer mechanism to further ensure the fulfilment of state-mandated labor transfer quotas. One document spoke of a [“centralized” training and transfer process](#) that adopted a model of “unified organization [of trainees], unified registration, unified boarding, unified teaching materials, unified delivery to enterprises.”<sup>49</sup> Several other documents describe the [streamlined transfer process](#) as

<sup>49</sup> Chinese for “unified organization [of trainees], unified registration, unified boarding, unified teaching materials, unified delivery to enterprises”: *tongyi zuzhi, tongyi baodao, tongyi shisu, tongyi jiaocai, tongyi xiang qiye shusong* 统一组织、统一报到、统一食宿、统一教材、统一向企业输送. <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2018-04-17/doc-ifyfkmth5629825.shtml> or <https://archive.is/ZBESJ>.



“unified organization, unified training, unified delivery.”<sup>50</sup>

Media accounts of labor transfers show groups of [hundreds of workers](#), all dressed in the same work or military uniform, lining up in rows to perform vows to the Party or boarding trains to their work destinations.<sup>51</sup> Various sources [state](#) that these workers may be accompanied by government minders, with one official for each group of 30 to 50 transferred laborers. These groups are further divided into smaller units of 10, headed by group leaders, to ensure high levels of micromanagement and control during both transfer and on-site management at work destinations. By September 2017, Hotan Prefecture had established a network of “service stations” in locations throughout Xinjiang, staffed by Hotan cadres, in order to supervise arriving labor transfer groups.

The transfer of cotton pickers likewise typically follows a [centralized and supervised process](#) that involves accompanying government minders.<sup>52</sup> A 2015 account speaks of the labor transfer of 2,293 workers, mostly couples, for cotton picking and other agricultural work. In one village, 200 laborers were accompanied by a team of seven cadres, a ratio of about 29 workers per cadre.<sup>53</sup> An account from 2019

makes the expectations that come with that arrangement very clear:

*Faced with the strong[-willed] and simple[-minded] villagers, the work team gathered everyone together to state the demands. The first thing is to keep in mind that all migrant workers are a collective. Travel and work must be done in an organized and disciplined manner, and by obeying the arrangements of the accompanying village cadres ...*<sup>54</sup>

An account from [2017](#) from Kashgar Prefecture notes that 129 cotton pickers from two villages were accompanied by more than cadres. Local “work-team cadres and police station guards regularly visit them often and provide them with security services.” Another account from [2018](#) notes that “cadres provide services to cotton pickers 24 hours [per day].”<sup>55</sup> Similarly, a report from Aksu from [2020](#) states that cotton pickers are transferred to their work destinations in a “point-to-point transfer” fashion, which the article also refers to as “nanny-style service.” Cadres have different roles, with some acting as “security staff”:

*Give full play to the front-line [cadres acting as] ‘instructors,’ ‘security staff,’ and ‘service staff.’ Except under special circumstances, these must eat, live,*

*study and work together [with the cotton pickers], actively carry out ideological education during cotton picking, carry out epidemic prevention and control work, and assist in solving issues related to wage [payments] or accidental injuries.*

The account sternly warns cadres that they cannot “sleep in” but must be with the workers at all times. They are to operate like overseers.

Another report from Bayingol Prefecture’s Qiemo County from [2020](#) notes that cadres organize daily competitions for cotton pickers to see who can pick the largest amount, aiming to “continuously mobilize everyone’s enthusiasm and initiative.” In the context of Xinjiang’s coercive, state-sponsored labor schemes and of the strenuous work of picking cotton, such a constant spurring on is arguably highly problematic.

Another aspect of coercion in the labor transfer of cotton pickers is that numerous accounts speak of village-based work teams conducting “comfort visits” to cotton pickers while they are performing hard work away from their homes and families.<sup>56</sup> Officials commonly embark on such [comfort visits](#) and give related presents to family members of persons who are

50 Chinese for “unified organization, unified training, unified delivery”: *tongyi zuzhi, tongyi peixun, tongyi shusong* 统一组织、统一培训、统一输送. [http://www.aksxw.com/aksxw2019/cont/2019-09/24/content\\_1030302.html](http://www.aksxw.com/aksxw2019/cont/2019-09/24/content_1030302.html) or <https://archive.is/4dvNA>.

51 See <https://www.jpolarisk.com/beyond-the-camps-beijings-long-term-scheme-of-coercive-labor-poverty-alleviation-and-social-control-in-xinjiang/>, section 6.2.

52 See e.g. the “*daidui ganbu+cunweihui+huzhu+shihuagong*” “带队干部+村委会+户主+拾花工” scheme (“leading cadres + village committee + heads of households + cotton picking workers”) outlined in <http://www.sdfzcm.com/a/minsheng/20201013/41477.html> or <https://archive.is/OIUla>.

53 [www.xjht.gov.cn/article/show.php\\_itemid=98930.html](http://www.xjht.gov.cn/article/show.php_itemid=98930.html) (defunct). Archived download at <https://bit.ly/3n19iLt>.

54 <http://zrzyt.xinjiang.gov.cn/xjgtzy/hdxx/201910/5ed84a7c549f4f9c877b07ab6e10b3dc.html> (defunct). Archived download at <https://bit.ly/39D5yvV>.

55 <http://web.archive.org/web/20201105025800/https://www.wdzt.com/hjzs/ptsj/20180916/787230-1.html> or <https://archive.is/zxgYA>. Compare similarly tightly organized transfer mechanisms in e.g. <http://web.archive.org/web/20201104204602/http://www.xjdaily.com/c/2018-09-26/2045657.shtml>.

56 Chinese for “stability maintenance”: *weiwen* 慰问

“... it is clear that labor transfers for cotton picking involve a very high risk of forced labor. Some minorities may exhibit a degree of consent in relation to this process, and they may benefit financially. However, in a system where the transition between securitization and poverty alleviation is seamless, and where the threat of extralegal internment looms large, it is impossible to define where coercion ends and where local consent may begin.”

detained in camps.<sup>57</sup> In [late 2019](#), a Kashgar Prefecture law enforcement unit within the Land and Resources Department, organized as a village-based work team, performed such a comfort visit to 150 cotton pickers working in an XPCC region. They gave them presents (mostly food) and carefully inquired as to their state of mind.<sup>58</sup> To their “joy,” the team members found that the pickers’ state of mind was “stable.” The team leader told them, “We hope you will carry forward the spirit of hard work and being willing to suffer, work diligently, and finish the task of picking cotton according to the plan.”

Another [account](#) of a village-based work team conducting a comfort visit to transferred cotton pickers from Kashgar notes that the “villagers are working extremely hard,” they are “very simply, able to obey commands, and obey the

management.”<sup>59</sup> This, of course, is precisely the intended outcome of the coercive labor training and transfer scheme.

### 3.3 Evidence Regarding Average Incomes for Cotton Picking

State propaganda accounts often claim that cotton pickers can earn up to 10,000 RMB or more during their two to three months of hard labor, resulting in an impressive monthly income of 5,000 RMB or more. China’s rural absolute poverty income line in 2019 stood at 4,000 RMB per person per year, meaning that a household of five would need to earn a total of 20,000 RMB or [1,667 RMB](#) per month.<sup>60</sup> To compare, Xinjiang’s minimum wage in 2018 amounted to [1,820 RMB](#) per month. Government and media reports claim that transferred laborers can earn around 2,000 to 4,000

RMB per month from factory work. Witnesses who had been released from internment camps and forced to work in factories reported being promised a monthly wage of only around [600 RMB](#), with actual pay being even less.

One account of transferred cotton pickers claimed an average monthly income of [4,800 RMB](#). Two other accounts, however, give average income figures of only [1,670](#) and [1,805 RMB](#) per month. These averages also are skewed by the fact that especially skilled or able-bodied pickers can earn high amounts, while the majority of workers are left with comparatively mediocre remunerations. While the available data points on this are limited and not representative, it is concerning that these averages are below the region’s minimum wage and below publicly stated wages for low-skilled factory work. Given that

57 E.g. [http://www.xjb.cas.cn/ddjs2016/201710/t20171008\\_4868178.html](http://www.xjb.cas.cn/ddjs2016/201710/t20171008_4868178.html) or <https://archive.is/2SsdT>; [https://www.guancha.cn/politics/2017\\_05\\_18\\_408961.shtml](https://www.guancha.cn/politics/2017_05_18_408961.shtml) or <https://archive.is/y9OFF>; <http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2017-08-30/doc-ifykpuuh9559826.shtml> or <https://archive.is/ps8uE>. Note that persons detained in camps may be referred to as “focus persons” *zhongdian renyuan* 重点人员 or “two types of persons” *lianglei renyuan* 两类人员.

58 Chinese for “state of mind”: *sixiang zhuangtai* 思想状况

59 <http://www.xjgtzy.gov.cn/xjgtzy/ztzl/smzt/smzt2/2019/95324.htm> or <http://zrzyt.xinjiang.gov.cn/xjgtzy/hdxx/201910/5ed84a7c549f4f9c877b07ab6e10b3dc.html> (both defunct). Archived download at <https://bit.ly/39D5yvV>.

60 [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-06/22/c\\_1126144559.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-06/22/c_1126144559.htm) or <https://archive.is/GOC2F>. Compare <https://archive.is/pp6tp>.

cotton picking is difficult and typically requires relocation for months, this level of remuneration may not be attractive to some or many of those subjected to seasonal labor transfer – a factor that increases concerns about coercion.

### 3.4 Implications

The evidence presented in Section 2 showed that the recruitment and deployment of cotton pickers takes place within the general context of a coercive labor transfer scheme. This by itself would constitute sufficient evidence to raise serious concerns over forced labor in cotton picking. The abundance of cases presented in this section strengthens this evidence considerably, given that these cases clearly demonstrate coercion in labor transfer processes specific to cotton picking. Overall, it is clear that labor transfers for cotton picking involve a very high risk of forced labor. Some minorities may exhibit a degree of consent in relation to this process, and they may benefit financially. However, in a system where the transition between securitization and poverty alleviation is seamless, and where the threat of extralegal internment looms large, it is impossible to define where coercion ends and where local consent may begin.

## 4. Conclusions

This report has established three key findings:

1. *The production of Xinjiang cotton continues to heavily rely on manual labor, primarily in cotton picking. This applies even more to the production of high-quality cotton.*
2. *The state's labor transfer scheme mobilizes hundreds of thousands (in 2018, upward of half a million) cotton pickers from ethnic minority regions.*
3. *There are strong indications that the labor transfer scheme is coercive in key aspects (recruitment, transfer, on-site management). Evidence for this exists both for the broader scheme in general and specifically for labor transfer into cotton picking.*

Therefore, it is very likely that a major share of cotton production in Xinjiang is tainted with forced labor. In the absence of the ability to conduct meaningful and independent audits of actual working conditions, it must be assumed that any cotton from Xinjiang may involve coercive labor, with the likelihood of coercion being very high. This has [drastic im-](#)

[plications](#) for supply chains not only within China, but also for countries such as India, Vietnam, Bangladesh, or Pakistan, to which Chinese cotton yarn and fabric is exported and made into clothing.<sup>61</sup>

These implications reach beyond Asia and into global supply chains and related government policies.

The U.S. government should put a Withhold Release Order on any product that contains cotton from any part of Xinjiang, not just [cotton produced in XPCC regions](#). This could be based on a “rebuttable presumption,” similar to the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, shifting the burden of proof to those who seek to use such products in their supply chains. Any product made in whole or part with cotton from China also needs to be closely scrutinized, given that Xinjiang produces about 85 percent of all Chinese cotton. Other governments should establish similar measures.

Companies should be required to thoroughly investigate the role of Chinese cotton in their supply chains, even if any related production takes place outside China, but this by itself is insufficient. Governments must also be proactive in related monitoring procedures. □

61 <https://www.csis.org/analysis/addressing-forced-labor-xinjiang-uyghur-autonomous-region-toward-shared-agenda>, p.7-8.



**Dr. Adrian Zenz** is a Senior Fellow in China Studies at the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, Washington, D.C. (non-resident), and supervises Ph.D. students at the European School of Culture and Theology, Korntal, Germany. His research focus is on China's ethnic policy, public recruitment in Tibet and Xinjiang, Beijing's internment campaign in Xinjiang, and China's domestic security budgets. Dr. Zenz is the author of *Tibetanness under Threat* and co-editor of *Mapping Amdo: Dynamics of Change*. He has played a leading role in the analysis of leaked Chinese government documents, including the “China Cables” and the “Karakax List.” Dr. Zenz is an advisor to the *Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China*, and a frequent contributor to the international media.

## Contact



For media inquiries, email [media@cgpolicy.org](mailto:media@cgpolicy.org)



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