

The Bingtuan:

China's Paramilitary Colonizing Force in East Turkestan



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Cover image: A guide gestures to a depiction of early bingtuan migrants to East Turkestan, from a state media report on the Bingtuan Museum in Shihezi.

1. Executive Summary

The bingtuan (also known as the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) or in Mandarin: *xinjiang shengchang jianshe bingtuan*—(this report will refer to the group as the bingtuan), is a paramilitary organization in East Turkestan that answers directly to the central Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government in Beijing. Its goals are primarily colonial: develop the land in East Turkestan, secure the border, and maintain stability. Its structure reflects its paramilitary organization, with 14 divisions made up of dozens of regiments. Ethnically, the bingtuan is 86% Han, compared to the overall proportion of Han in East Turkestan, which is only 40%. The bingtuan represents one of the foremost institutions of Han dominance, and marginalization of Uyghurs and other indigenous ethnic groups, in East Turkestan.

This report details the bingtuan activity with regard to propaganda, urbanization, prisons, militarization, employment discrimination, and rural policies causing displacement and environmental destruction. The report methodology includes translation of Chinese government documents, interviews with Uyghur people living overseas who witnessed bingtuan policies firsthand before fleeing East Turkestan, and research on academic and media reports in Chinese, Uyghur and English, particularly using the Uyghur Human Rights Project's access to Uighurbiz, the website of Uyghur scholar Ilham Tohti.

Professor Tohti was a Uyghur intellectual who worked extensively to research and provide constructive solutions to economic and political problems confronting the Uyghur people and Chinese government in East Turkestan. Widely considered a moderate Uyghur scholar, Professor Tohti was nevertheless imprisoned by Chinese authorities in January 2014. Among his chief concerns was the bingtuan. Professor Tohti saw the bingtuan as a source of ethnic division and Han colonialism in East Turkestan that reinforced ethnic divisions rather than bringing peace. In 2013, Professor Tohti wrote a series of recommendations to the CCP with regard to the bingtuan. These are reprinted as an Appendix to the report.

Section 2 of the report documents CCP propaganda using the bingtuan to build a historical narrative of Chinese control over East Turkestan. Chinese propaganda depicts the bingtuan as a continuous part of Han colonization efforts in East Turkestan dating back thousands of years. However, the bingtuan is a unique organization founded in 1954. Originally formed from decommissioned soldiers after World War II, the bingtuan has had a turbulent history in the region.

The bingtuan has grown significantly, and today commands a population of 2.68 million, with 14 divisions, an area of 80,000 square km, and 14 companies. The organization is currently a multibillion-dollar business which constitutes 17% of Xinjiang's GDP, manufactures 40% of the region's wool, and exports 17% of the world's ketchup. Its purposes are: 1) development and construction (which includes mandates to vigorously promote urbanization, industrialization, and agricultural modernization); and 2) to safeguard the frontier, maintain stability and promote ethnic unity. The primary means by which the bingtuan is able to accomplish its goal of Sinification is by large-scale migration of ethnic Han Chinese to East Turkestan. The political leadership of the bingtuan is almost entirely Han. Of the 15 top members of the bingtuan's party

committee, only one is non-Han, a Uyghur, and only one of the top 15 is a Han woman. No Uyghur women are included among the top leaders.

Section 3 of the report describes the rapid urbanization of the bingtuan brought about by the large-scale construction of new cities—five in the past decade. Uighurbiz frequently documented the ways that these cities marginalized Uyghurs, including through competing for land and water resources, mineral resources, investment, and administrative resources. The cities serve to absorb thousands of Han migrants from other regions of China. As the CCP continues laying new plans for city construction, it has pledged to direct city-building efforts to southern regions, in order to dilute and control the largest areas of Uyghur population. To support its massive city-building, the CCP invests not only in construction but also in subsidizing housing there for Han migrants; the bingtuan accounts for more than half of all affordable housing in East Turkestan. As the Chinese government develops the bingtuan, the bingtuan in turn has developed international holdings to expand the reach of its investments.

Section 4 reviews ways in which the bingtuan has cracked down on the Uyghur people through its prison system and militarization of its police force. The bingtuan prisons do not generally house Uyghurs. Instead they are another means of colonization, and the Chinese government transfers Han prisoners from interior Chinese provinces to East Turkestan to incarcerate them. Historically, tens of thousands of prisoners have been transferred and prisoners are used as a labor source by the bingtuan; Uyghurs are incarcerated in the XUAR prison system. Nevertheless, the bingtuan police and militia are involved in control of Uyghurs. In times of upheaval the bingtuan prisons have been used to house Uyghurs and the bingtuan militia have been mobilized for the arrest and extrajudicial killing of Uyghurs. The bingtuan has been involved in quashing Uyghur protests throughout history, including after the July 5, 2009 unrest. Today, the bingtuan is actively involved in anti-terrorism and security maintenance, specifically targeting the Uyghur religion, Islam. It has also mobilized to repress Christian religious practice.

Section 5 analyzes the bingtuan treatment of Uyghurs in the bingtuan job economy. Based on testimony from a Uyghur teacher in the bingtuan city of Shihezi (Shixenzi in Uyghur), UHRP documents ways in which Uyghurs experience discrimination in the job market and the education system. Uyghurs face widespread discrimination in the cotton industry, which imports hundreds of thousands of Han Chinese annually as temporary workers harvesting cotton, to the exclusion of local Uyghurs. Finally, UHRP analyzes reports of employment discrimination across industries based on job postings and hiring announcements.

Section 6 documents forcible demolitions, focusing on a 2013 incident documented at length by Uighurbiz involving destruction of Uyghur homes without fair compensation, the arrest of protestors and the harassment of individuals who tried to speak out. Uyghurs have been displaced by bingtuan environmental policies, specifically the large-scale desertification caused by bingtuan draining of the Tarim River and destruction of poplar trees. The bingtuan has also contributed to massive environmental pollution. Finally, the bingtuan's mineral exploitation in East Turkestan has further displaced Uyghurs and contributed to the destruction of the environment.

2. Bingtuan history and propaganda

The bingtuan, also known as the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), is a paramilitary organization in East Turkestan that answers directly to the central Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government in Beijing. Its goals are primarily colonial: develop the land in East Turkestan, secure the border, and maintain stability. Its structure reflects its paramilitary organization, with 14 divisions and under them dozens of regiments. Ethnically, the bingtuan is 86% Han, compared to the overall percentage of Han in East Turkestan, which is only 40%. The bingtuan represents Han dominance, and marginalization of Uyghurs and other indigenous ethnic groups in East Turkestan.

The bingtuan is a vast organization with tremendous reach. The bingtuan website provides statistics current as of 2014, which give an impression of the organization's large population, sprawling area (both urban and rural), vast financial holdings, and various institutions, including municipalities, cultural institutions and corporations under its command:

At present, the Corps involves 2.68 million people, with 14 divisions, seven cities, 175 regiments and over 2,000 companies. It exercises jurisdiction over an area of some 80,000 square km and nearly 1.3333 million hectares of arable land. The Corps has formed a comprehensive economic system, along with sound public security organs and social undertakings such as science and research, education, culture, health, sport, finance and insurance: there are now about 4,000 industrial, transportation, construction and commercial enterprises and 14 listed companies; five economic development areas at the national level and 24 zones at the autonomous region and Corps levels; 15 national-level and 65 Corps-level leading enterprises in terms of agricultural industrialization; seven regular institutions of higher education and institutions of higher education for adults and 556 vocational, technical, high and primary schools and kindergartens; 197 radio and television broadcast stations and 35 newspaper and magazine agencies; 1,349 health organizations and 18 institutions of scientific research and technological development.¹

These statistics all underscore the twin purposes of the bingtuan, outlined in a white paper by CCP in 2014 for the bingtuan's 60th anniversary. These purposes are: 1) development and construction (which includes mandates to vigorously promote urbanization, industrialization, and agricultural modernization); and 2) to safeguard the frontier, maintain stability and promote ethnic unity.² The organization itself is currently a multi-billion dollar business which makes up 17% of Xinjiang's GDP, manufactures 40% of the region's wool, and exports 17% of the world's ketchup.³ These products as well as bingtuan investments globally serve as a vehicle for the bingtuan to interact with foreign companies and governments around the world.

CCP propaganda uses the bingtuan to build a historical narrative of Chinese control over East Turkestan. The bingtuan website outlines its purpose and history. It begins this history in the ancient Western Han Dynasty: "From the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC-25 AD), all the dynasties in Chinese history adopted the practice of stationing troops to cultivate and guard

frontier areas as an important state policy for developing border areas and consolidating frontier defense.”⁴ This assertion of territorial continuity underscores one of the primary purposes of the bingtuan—to legitimize and strengthen Han colonization of East Turkestan.

Chinese propaganda characterizes the bingtuan as historically continuous with Han control in East Turkestan, as illustrated by the bingtuan website. Indeed, the bingtuan history is a frequent subject for propaganda. Yuchao Zhu and Dongyan Blachford, scholars at the University of Regina, Canada, write that the history of East Turkestan “is a battleground for different political interpretations.” They contrast western narratives focusing on East Turkestan’s “difference with China” to Chinese narratives in which “any historical record which can be utilized to demonstrate China’s rightfulness of rule in Xinjiang would become a critical part of the ‘established fact’, and any local ethnic group’s positive interactions such as collaborations with the central government and Han people would be seen as ‘common national building’ efforts.”⁵

Historical recreation is one way the CCP takes command of the colonial discourse. CCP propagandists produced a video about the history of the bingtuan, featuring Nintendo-style graphics and depicting dynastic soldiers marching alongside modern Uyghurs in a show of ethnic harmony.⁶



Image of a woman in the bingtuan museum, © Xinhua⁷

Similarly, the bingtuan museum in Shihezi strengthens the CCP narrative of an uninterrupted history of Han dominance in East Turkestan back to the Han dynasty. The museum underscores the bingtuan's long tradition of patriotism and commitment to its mission of "economic construction, national unity, social stability and the defense of the border areas."⁸ The museum also provides state media an opportunity to deliver a nationalistic history of the bingtuan. One state media article stated: "This garrison corps that wears no military uniform and will never change jobs has become a construction corps for the prosperity of the northwestern border of the motherland, a cornerstone of social stability, and an iron wall safeguarding national defense."⁹

The bingtuan was founded in 1954, a year before the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) established the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Five years after the People's Liberation Army invaded East Turkestan in 1949, the CCP Central Government formed the bingtuan from decommissioned soldiers, to "cultivate and guard border areas." The bingtuan website explains that the Central Government dissolved the bingtuan in 1975 and revived it again in 1981. This new iteration "combines the spirit of the Central Government with actual local conditions."¹⁰ The emphasis on the bingtuan's role as representative of the central government underscores that its accountability lies not in Urumchi with the XUAR government but rather with the CCP Central Committee in Beijing.

The bingtuan was not unique in its origins. In Maoist China (1949–1976), dozens of paramilitary organizations, all known as bingtuan, existed throughout China. But only in East Turkestan has the bingtuan persisted in the post-Mao era.¹¹ Columbia University professor James Seymour writes that, "From the start, the real purpose of the bingtuan was to develop China's 'new frontier' (*xin jiang*), or, as some might put it, to 'sinify East Turkestan.'"¹² This mission is no less vital to the CCP in its ongoing colonization of the Uyghur homeland, and for this reason the bingtuan in East Turkestan has outlasted its peers.

The primary means by which the bingtuan is able to accomplish its goal of Sinification is by facilitating the large-scale migration of ethnic Han Chinese into East Turkestan. In 1949, when the CCP took power in China, individuals of Han ethnicity accounted for only 3% of the regional population, and in order to encourage their conquering army to remain in the region, the CCP under Mao decided to use soldiers already present to cultivate the soil and protect the border, including not only the conquering PLA soldiers, but Kuomintang and even East Turkestan Republic soldiers who had surrendered.¹³

At the time more than half of the bingtuan population were political prisoners imported from other Chinese provinces. Throughout the 1950s and 60s, the bingtuan absorbed Han migrants who were influenced by the CCP's go-west propaganda, with more than a million youths coming by 1967, including women to make its operations self-sustaining.¹⁴ Seymour writes that the bingtuan began with only 104,000 soldiers. By 2014, the CCP reported in its white paper on the bingtuan that its population had reached 2.7 million.¹⁵



*Images of Settlers in the 1960s, Bingtuan Museum, Art of Life in Central Asia.*¹⁶

The bingtuan underwent significant changes in management after its founding. It was accountable to the XUAR government only until 1956, and after it was dually accountable to the central government but enjoyed considerable autonomy. The Cultural Revolution had major effects on the bingtuan beginning in 1966. In 1967, the bingtuan city of Shihezi witnessed insurgents clashing with authorities in what became known as the January 21 Incident; dozens were killed and the bingtuan was subsequently put under military control. Following the dissolution of bingtuan elsewhere in China from 1972 to 1975, on March 25, 1975, the central government dissolved the XUAR bingtuan and reallocated its land holdings to the regional government. The Han population fled and from 1974–5, the bingtuan's total population declined from 2.3 million to 1.77 million.¹⁷

The bingtuan was never a financially profitable organization, but with the fall in workforce, the economic situation of the bingtuan holdings deteriorated even further. Deng Xiaoping quickly recognized that the purpose of the bingtuan, to maintain a Han presence in

Xinjiang, was as vital to CCP goals in the region as it had ever been, and the organization was reinstated in 1982.

Thomas Cliff of Australian National University contends that the 1982 reinstatement of the bingtuan, followed by the official move to reclassify it as a corporation in 1998, marked major change. Not least of these, he writes, was the CCP's granting the bingtuan's management the same bureaucratic status as the XUAR government, making it a "state within a state." By then, the bingtuan had grown its land holdings since the 1950s to occupy a significant and strategic portion of East Turkestan's land, especially key waterways. Thus, the bingtuan is in some ways a separate colonizing force from the XUAR leadership, one that is even less accountable to the Uyghur people.¹⁸

The bingtuan is headquartered in Urumchi, and consists of 14 divisions, subdivided into 174 agricultural farms, 4,391 industrial and commercial enterprises. According to one scholar's explanation of its hierarchy, each subdivision corresponds to a prefecture-level administrative division of the XUAR government and is itself at a subprefectural level. The bingtuan as a whole and each division is headed by two leaders: a commissar and a commander. The role of Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) political commissar is filled by a member of the CCP Xinjiang Standing Committee, and the rank of political commissar of each XPCC division is similar to that of the CCP secretary in each of the corresponding prefecture-level divisions.¹⁹



Headquarter locations of the 14 Divisions of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps
© China Daily

The leadership of the bingtuan is deeply connected with that of the XUAR government and XUAR Party representatives. Chen Quanguo, the XUAR Party Secretary, also serves as the top political leader of the bingtuan: First Political Commissar. Traditionally, the secretary of the CCP Committee of the XUAR is at the same time the secretary of the CCP Committee of the XPCC. Underneath him are two Han men: Sun Jinlong, the bingtuan Party Committee Secretary, and Peng Jiarui, the Deputy Party Secretary. Of the 15 top members of the bingtuan's party committee, only one is non-Han, Mutellip Mettohti, who is Uyghur, serving as deputy political commissar and United Front Department Minister. In addition, only one leader is a woman, deputy commander Li Ping. Only Mettohti was born in East Turkestan, though several others have been involved with the bingtuan or the XUAR government since the 1980s.²⁰

Cliff writes that the leadership of the bingtuan reflects its increasing civilianization, particularly as career diplomats take the upper echelon of the bingtuan positions rather than military figures. "At a societal level, any residual military consciousness that may exist in the population is rapidly declining with the passing-away of the original settlers and the rise of a new generation of bingtuan members who have a very different set of rights, responsibilities and aspirations." Cliff also comments on the trend for bingtuan leaders to simultaneously serve in the XUAR government, writing that "economic and political power in contemporary Xinjiang are on the one hand shared between the bingtuan and the XUAR government structures, and on the other hand concentrated in these senior Party representatives."

Cliff focuses on three policy shifts in 1998 that marked a new era for the bingtuan. First, military ties were severed, limiting the People's Liberation Army's involvement to training the diminishing bingtuan militia and removing the army's political control over the bingtuan. Second, the bingtuan was declared to be a corporation. Third, its courts and prosecution offices were affirmed as legal entities. Cliff writes that the timing of these shifts reflects then-President Jiang Zemin's ground-laying for the subsequent Open up the West campaign, a central government initiative aimed at driving Han migration into East Turkestan, and also a way to give the central government direct control over the economic and political infrastructure in East Turkestan.²¹

Contemporary official rhetoric underscores the CCP's vision of the bingtuan promoting stability in East Turkestan. James Seymour quotes the regional party committee chair stating "[t]he bingtuan is a major, reliable force with the assignment of maintaining Xinjiang's stability and building and defending the country's frontiers."²² In a 2013 article, military commissar Che Jun describing three roles of the bingtuan: "First, Xinjiang military construction; second strengthen stability; third consolidate an impregnable wall of frontier defense."²³

This report will cover these topics in depth. First, construction—specifically the construction of large cities encouraging Han migration. Second, stability maintenance is brutally enforced even as the bingtuan, generally, has shed its military character in favor of a commercial colonizing force. Nevertheless, the bingtuan routinely discriminates against non-Han job applicants, and routinely exploits natural resources in East Turkestan, including water and minerals. Third, the bingtuan brutally suppresses Uyghur voices as it works to construct a society in which ethnic minorities live on the margins.

3. Urbanization and Expansion

When they hear a reference to the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), many people might think of agriculture. However, after some 50 years of endeavor the XPCC has left its pioneering footprints all across the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. And now it is set for a transformation as it grows beyond its agricultural roots and moves on into the building and operation of whole towns and cities.²⁴

From official report: “Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps to Build 38 Townships”

The story of the bingtuan today is, in many ways, the story of building cities. Ilham Tohti, the Uighur intellectual behind the Chinese-language Uighurbiz website, which addressed social and economic news in East Turkestan, prior to his imprisonment in January 2014 described these as “migrant ethnic division” cities [translator’s note: “ethnic division” could also be translated as apartheid]. As one writer wrote on Uighurbiz: “For decades, bingtuan cities have excluded Uyghurs, and the bingtuan has established mono-ethnic cities, and further marginalized Uyghurs. The urbanization of the bingtuan intensifies ethnic division in Xinjiang.” Furthermore, by absorbing Han migrants from inner China the bingtuan has “seriously hindered exchanges between ethnic groups” in East Turkestan.²⁵ Zhu and Blachford write:

It is true that *Bingtuan* was not designed for ethnic intermingling in the first place; thus, *Bingtuan* has always conducted its activities independently. ... This is why the Chinese government preferred to segregate Han immigrants on land not occupied by Uyghur or in new towns adjacent to older Uyghur communities. That is to say, on the one hand, *Bingtuan* provides a politically reliable population base but on the other hand, it maintains an ethnic separation in the region... [T]he Han majority of the *Bingtuan* population has continued to be an important factor in making Xinjiang’s ethnic relations divided, and in gradually tilting the demographic balance in favour of the Han. In sum, *Bingtuan* was not intended for ethnic integration initially... *Bingtuan*’s other intended goals for the state, such as the maintenance of a reliable population base which is ethnically biased, are also key portions of the story which is often mentioned implicitly in Chinese publications.²⁶

Uighurbiz followed the bingtuan city planning closely. In a 2013 article titled, “Xinjiang Bingtuan Proposes 18 Cities or Adding to Ethnic Divisions,” Uighurbiz commentator Anostaf noted that the bingtuan had proposed building 18 additional new cities before 2030, including 7 in the near-term and 11 in the longer-term, bringing the total to 24 bingtuan cities.²⁷ Anostaf noted that the bingtuan competes with Uyghurs for land, soil and water resources, mineral resources, investment and administrative resources. The bingtuan receives a tremendous amount of central government aid. Meanwhile, the bingtuan represents a “basic rejection of the indigenous population.”²⁸ Another Uighurbiz article was about the growth of the largest bingtuan city in East Turkestan: Shehezi, which was established in 1976.²⁹ The article noted that the

bingtuan was increasingly competing for soil and water resources, mineral resources, capital allocation, and even administrative resources.³⁰

Historically, the bingtuan was also responsible for the Sinification of the city of Korla, which is 69.9% Han today, with a population of 487,000 people.³¹ In 1949, Korla was a small agricultural town in which Han people constituted only 1.4% of the population. After rapid Han migration, including over 55,000 Han people after 1955, by 1965 Han people made up a 56.4% majority and the 2nd Agricultural Division of the bingtuan shifted its headquarters there in 1960. This development was supported by a major canal, built by the bingtuan in 1950-51, which replaced the season irrigation deltas used by the Uyghur farmers. This redistribution of resources and particularly water has been typical of bingtuan development.³²

The structure of the bingtuan reveals its paramilitary function. The following is a chart of the bingtuan divisions, the year the division was founded, their general location, the city of their headquarters and its year of founding, and the population in 2010. As the chart shows, since 2011, five new cities have been built beginning with Beitun (2011), then Tiemenguan (2012), Shuanghe (2014), Kokdala (2015) and Kunyu (2016).

Name	Founded	Location (approximate)	Headquarters	Since	2010 Pop.
1st Division	1953	Aksu Prefecture	Aral	2002	284,627
2nd Div.	1953	Bayin'gholin Mongol Autonomous Prefecture	Tiemenguan	2012	190,369
3rd Division	1966	Kashgar Prefecture	Tumxuk	2002	213,329
4th Division	1953	Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture(southern, directly administered portion)	Kokdala	2015	214,077
5th Division	1953	Bortala Mongol Autonomous Prefecture	Shuanghe	2014	113,162
6th Division	1953	Changji Hui Autonomous Prefecture	Wujiaqu	2002	301,438
7th Division	1953	area west of Karamay	Tianbei New Area, Kuytun	2002	213,861
8th Division	1953	area east of Karamay	Shihezi	1976	636,240
9th Division	1962	Tacheng Prefecture of Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture	Emin County		72,889
10th Division	1959	Altay Prefecture of Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture	Beitun	2011	77,608
Construction Engineering Division	1953	N/A	Ürümchi		53,636
12th Div.	1982	Ürümqi	Ürümchi		72,234
13th Div.	1982	Hami	Qumul		85,345
14th Div.	1982	Hotan Prefecture	Kunyu	2016	7,898

In a December 2012 Uighurbiz article titled, “Ilham: Xinjiang has another migrant ethnic division city,” Uighurbiz correspondent Nijatkar wrote: “On the 29th, the Bingtuan second division Tiemenguan City was formally established. Uighur scholar Ilham Tohti believes this will be a migrant city, and Tiemenguan City will deepen the ethnic division in Xinjiang.” Tiemenguan, located just east of Korla, comprises 600 square kilometers (231 square miles) belonging to the 28, 29, 30th regiments.³³

A few months later, the Economist reported on another urban bingtuan construction, this time a town, rather than a city, built by the 38th regiment, with estimates of the population reaching 100,000 by 2015, and 350,000 by 2030.³⁴ The article detailed widespread construction of cities throughout East Turkestan: In the south, a town populated by the 38th Regiment located between the towns of Niya and Cherchen was established in 2010 and grew to 4,800 people within three years, with new residents coming from Henan and families resettled from earthquake hit communities in Gansu.³⁵ By 2013, the 224th Regiment of the *bingtuan*, created near Khotan in 2004, had a population of 12,000 of which 98% were Han Chinese.³⁶

Nine cities administered by the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps



The Corps's development roadmap

	2007	2016	2020
Number of cities	4	9	12
Population	2.6 million	2.8 million	3.5 million
GDP (yuan)	44.1 billion	213.4 billion	303 billion
Total import and export volume (dollars)	5.6 billion	7 billion	13.7 billion
Average annual disposable income of urban residents (yuan)	10,521	34,089	48,360
Poverty population	81,100	50,800	0

Source: Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps © China Daily

UHRP focused on this massive urban growth in its 2016 report, “Without Land There is No Life.”³⁷ UHRP wrote about the government’s announcement that yet another new city, Kunyu, had been constructed 47 miles from Hotan with the aim “to secure the border area, preserve national security and further develop the economy” is demonstrative.³⁸ The 14th Division

of the XPCC, charged with “cracking down on separatism, extremism and terrorism,” will administer the city.³⁹ Indeed, an announcement tied the new city with the state fight against separatism.⁴⁰

The bingtuan is able to achieve construction of massive cities through a unique governing system, referred to in Chinese as “*shi shi tong yi*” or “Unified Division and City” (referred to as “unified cities” for clarity in this section).⁴¹ Under this system, the prefectural government is cut out of the city management; the city is approved by the State Council of the Central Government itself, and administered by a Division of the Corps.⁴² For example, in Shihezi, the first unified city, the Political Commissar of the Eighth Division is also the City Municipal City Secretary, and the Eighth Division Military Commander is the mayor. Thus, bingtuan divisions have taken on special meaning in the context of large-scale city planning within the “unified city” system, which vests power over the cities in the corresponding bingtuan division.

According to Gu Guanghai, a Xinjiang University professor, the unified city system is a model that encourages urban growth and development. The government plans to build 16 additional cities in East Turkestan, including four additional cities in the south by 2020; and the development is further coordinated with the XUAR government as well as State Council planning for the Economic Belt that connects China with its western neighbors, according to a 2014 Chinese official report.⁴³



Areas controlled by the bingtuan, 2013 © the Economist

At the 7th Party Congress of the bingtuan in 2017, Sun Jinlong, bingtuan party secretary, announced a plan to focus bingtuan development in the south.⁴⁴ The “Corps will step up its development in the less developed southern Xinjiang region and create more job opportunities there,” said Sun. In an article discussing the meeting, China Daily printed a new map showing nine cities administered by the bingtuan as well as projected growth for bingtuan population and GDP; it indicated that by 2020, the government estimated the population to reach 3.5 million, a 25% increase over the 2016 level.

As a result of the focus on urbanization, the proportion of the bingtuan population living in cities has increased. According to 2010 census data, 49.68% of the bingtuan’s total population lived in cities, and 50.32% in rural areas. Han made up 91.5% of the population in cities (a 5% higher proportion than Han in the bingtuan overall).⁴⁵ By 2012, the urban rate surpassed 58%.⁴⁶

This has been accomplished by massive investment in construction and in affordable housing. A 2011 Uighurbiz article titled “Xinjiang Bingtuan Accounts for more than half of the region’s affordable housing! How is that fair?” explained that in the first three quarters of 2011, the government built 16.42 million affordable housing units, with plans for 14.45 billion yuan (\$2.29 billion USD) of investment in housing construction. The article reported that with plans to build 18 million units in 2011, the bingtuan would control 53% of affordable housing in the region.⁴⁷

In fact, there is vast government investment in the bingtuan, and reports that at least 80% of the bingtuan’s budget has been supplied by the central government since the early 1990s, with that figure approaching 100% in 2010. “For the past 50 years, the economically inefficient bingtuan system has been more or less on the verge of collapse, yet it has to date always been resuscitated by central government subvention,” writes one scholar.⁴⁸

The central government has developed different ways of supporting the bingtuan. The State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC) a special commission of the People’s Republic of China directly under the State Council, announced it would “vigorously support” the Corps.⁴⁹ Corporatization and investment have also required resources and enabled the bingtuan’s expansion. The bingtuan owns eleven publicly traded companies.⁵⁰ With all this investment, corruption has also resulted, including an official who was found by a Korla court of embezzling 140 million yuan (\$22 million USD), including money for affordable housing.⁵¹

As the bingtuan has grown, it has absorbed more natural resources in East Turkestan and served as a vehicle for Chinese investment in the region, it has in turn directed its resources internationally. The bingtuan has invested in livestock breeding and precision irrigation with Pakistan,⁵² in livestock technology with New Zealand,⁵³ in partnering with Ukrainian agribusiness for food production,⁵⁴ and large-scale irrigation in Mozambique.⁵⁵ The bingtuan has trade relations with 135 countries.⁵⁶

4. Cracking Down: Prisons, Anti-Terrorism and Stability Maintenance

The Bingtuan Prison System

Another means by which China has bolstered the bingtuan economy and encouraged population transfer to East Turkestan is through the bingtuan prison system. In East Turkestan, there exist two prison systems: the bingtuan system and the XUAR government system. More Uyghur people are imprisoned in the prison system that is run by the XUAR government. The majority of the prisoners housed in bingtuan system are ethnically Han. This population is not limited to bingtuan members, however; the bingtuan prisons have imported prisoners from other provinces throughout the history of the People’s Republic of China. The prison system has been an important tool of the colonization of East Turkestan, as well as a source of labor and financing the bingtuan.⁵⁷

Historically, East Turkestan has been a destination for Chinese prisoners even before the Communist government achieved power in 1949. In a book documenting Chinese prison practices, historian James Seymour explains that although the Qing dynasty generally restricted Han migration to East Turkestan, political dissidents and officials were exiled and imprisoned in the region. In 1794, “no fewer than 445 former officials were exiled to East Turkestan, as well as criminals, and political dissidents,” and the prisoners “entered a life of virtual slavery in the service of the local Qing military authorities.”⁵⁸

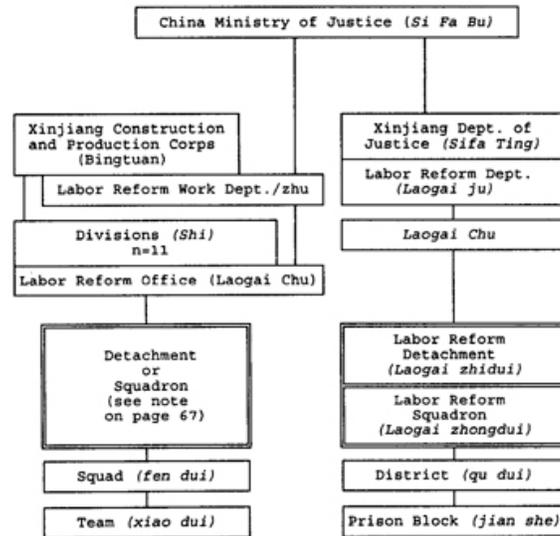


Diagram: Bingtuan and XUAR Prison Systems and Prison Labor, James Seymour⁵⁹

The Communist government has similarly relied on East Turkestan to manage the country’s vast number of political prisoners. In 1951, pursuant to a declaration by Chairman Mao Zedong that political prisoners would “constitute a considerable labor force,”⁶⁰ the government transferred 20,865 prisoners, mostly political, to East Turkestan. In 1955 there were 160,000 prisoners in East Turkestan, which declined to 120,000 by 1965 and continued to decline. During the Mao era, the bingtuan received mostly political prisoners. The Cultural Revolution marked a

turning point. By 1975, most of the prisoners who had arrived in the 1950s had been released, and new prisoners came from places like Southern Mongolia and Tibet.⁶¹

The next real influx of prisoners to East Turkestan did not come until around 1984 due to a nationwide crackdown on crime. In 1983, Beijing paid the bingtuan 500 million yuan (\$79 million USD) to assume responsibility for transporting prisoners from the east and incarcerating them in East Turkestan. From 1973–1986, 37,000 male prisoners were sent to East Turkestan; James Seymour reports that the actual total may be twice as high. By the early 1990s, there were nearly 100,000 prisoners in the bingtuan prisons.⁶² In general, only prisoners with at least five-year sentences have been transferred to the bingtuan system. The sending province draws up a list and arranges with a division of the bingtuan.⁶³ The transfer of so many prisoners from China has become a sensitive political issue among Uyghurs and other indigenous people resentful their land is being used as a dumping ground for China’s unwanted.

Most Uyghur prisoners are not kept in the bingtuan justice system. Instead, prisoners indigenous to East Turkestan are sent to the nearest city. “The number of prisoners used to be less than half that in the bingtuan. However, the bingtuan’s prisoner population has been declining, while the non-bingtuan prisoner population has been on the increase.”⁶⁴

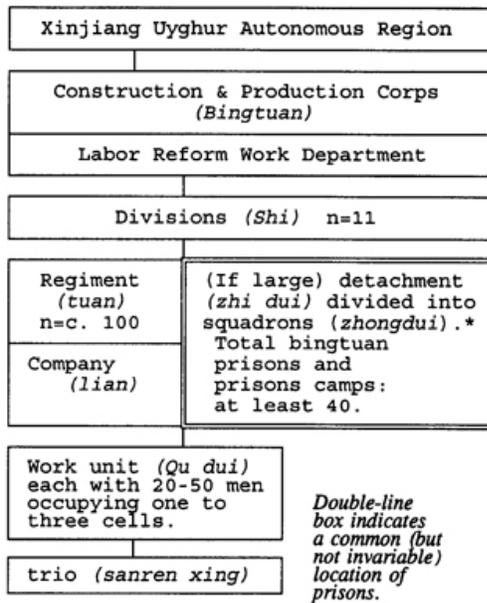


Diagram: Bingtuan Prison System Organization, James Seymour⁶⁵

Today, the bingtuan runs its own prisons, including 24 jails (*kanshousuo*), and its own public security bureau, court system and justice (*sifa*) department. The bingtuan’s “police and courts have generally had full authority to mete out justice.” Most of the bingtuan’s prisoners are housed by the first division in Aksu, second division in Korla, third division in Kashgar, fourth division in Ghulja, seventh division in Kuitun and eighth division in Shihezi. Ten regiments run prison farms; and there are 36 agricultural prison farms maintained by the bingtuan, including

305 squadron level units. The 8th division based in Shihezi runs the largest agricultural division, and its prisoners also perform some manufacturing, in a total of 22 prison labor squadrons.⁶⁶

Life in the prisons is difficult. Official misconduct is pervasive and institutionalized. All sorts of “dubious” means have been devised for cadre enrichment in the bingtuan prisons and the immediate superiors are generally aware and tolerant of the corruption. In the earliest days of labor prisons, prisoners lived in holes in the ground. But prisoners were soon put to work building the prison camps. Most of these camps have no bathing facilities. Large or small teams are housed together in a large or small room, and living is cramped. Despite a requirement that the prison provide educational opportunities, they do not do so. Health problems in the prison are endemic, and prisoners struggle even having enough food to eat.⁶⁷

The bingtuan has also used prison labor to support the militia. Bingtuan prisoners have played a role in China’s nuclear development in East Turkestan, which is further documented in UHRP’s report “Without Land there is No Life.”⁶⁸ In the 1950s and 60s, bingtuan prisoners helped to build infrastructure for missile and nuclear installations. The Second Division was involved in construction of a nuclear test base. The 34th Bingtuan regiment was responsible for supplying personnel at Lop Nur, a site of China’s nuclear testing in southeastern East Turkestan. Southwest of Ghulja, the bingtuan’s 72nd regiment prison laborers worked in the 731 mining complex, a secretive uranium mine. This unit of 2,000 workers experienced the grimmest work and inhumane conditions. Bingtuan prisoners engage in coal mining outside Ghulja, which is also deadly work. Finally, Seymour writes that the 36th regiment has been rumored to use prisoners from Malan prison for asbestos mining, which is even more hazardous work.⁶⁹

Anti-Terrorism and Stability Maintenance: Bingtuan Role in Repression of Uyghurs

The [bingtuan] was initially established to serve three main functions: military, political, and economic. In today’s environment, the Corps’ military role has all but disappeared, while its political role has been bolstered. The political functions of the Corps can be outlined as follows: (1) maintain social stability and deter separatism; (2) promote ethnic interaction and national unity; (3) effectively manage the continued existence and development of the Corps itself.

Truly, only the first two functions have any value or inherent meaning. Yet judging by the current state of the Corps, those two functions have long since ceased to exist. Various official publications repeatedly cite the same example of the Corps’ role in maintaining stability and deterring separatism: quelling a 1990 “counter-revolutionary armed rebellion” in Baren Township, Akto County, in Xinjiang’s southwest. In fact, although the nearby Corps militia was called up, it played no substantive role in putting down the rebellion.

Ilham Tohti, “Present Day Ethnic Problems.”⁷⁰

The analysis of Uyghur scholar Ilham Tohti regarding the bingtuan’s military role indicates that the military function is not nearly as important as the organization’s economic purposes. But since he wrote his essay in October 2013, China’s securitization approach to East

Turkestan has continued to evolve. As security has taken a more pervasive and all-encompassing role in the lives of Uyghurs in East Turkestan, the bingtuan has emerged as one tool in the government's campaign to control Uyghur lives.

1962 was perhaps the zenith of the bingtuan's military function. As the rift between China and the Soviet Union led to the Sino-Soviet conflict, local police in Ili accused Uyghur people who were Soviet nationals living in Chinese territory in East Turkestan of "anti-Chinese" sentiment, and in April 1962, an exodus of Uyghurs fled for the Soviet Union. A major conflict erupted between the bingtuan and local Uyghurs at this time, and in May 26, 1962, the Uyghurs in Ghulja protested the government's efforts to prevent Uyghurs from returning to the Soviet Union, and the bingtuan violently suppressed the demonstration. The Chinese authorities urgently dispatched several armed battalions from the Fourth Division, headquartered in Ghulja, surrounding the demonstrators with armed battalions. Bingtuan soldiers indiscriminately shot into the crowds with rifles and machine guns and eyewitnesses said that many demonstrators were killed. China "has never given details of the death toll of the May 29 incident, and it described this incident as an antirevolutionary riot instigated by foreign forces."⁷¹

The bingtuan played a major role in repressing the Baren incident in 1990. According to historian James Seymour, "Another major disturbance broke out in Aksu in April 1990, following clashes between local Uyghurs, XPCC members and groups of demobilized Red Guards who were predominately Han... On April 5, 1990 in the town of Baren, Akto County, demonstrators called for the independence of East Turkestan and once again the XPCC was involved in putting down the demonstration."⁷² As Professor Tohti indicated, the bingtuan is frequently cited as quashing the protest in Baren in April 1990, but its role may be exaggerated, and the brutal response instead inflicted by the People's Armed Police.

Reports indicate that the bingtuan was also extensively involved in the government's brutal response to peaceful protests. On February 5, 1997, Uyghur people in Ghulja demonstrated against China's religious restrictions against Uyghurs. Once again, the government summoned the bingtuan's 4th division, headquartered in Ghulja. After the incident, the bingtuan and army soldiers patrolled the streets, enforcing a strict curfew, Amnesty International estimates that authorities detained three to five thousand people, and after it began housing them in the prison facilities of the Bingtuan's 4th Division, located in Ili, to detain protesters and other people arrested in Ghulja.⁷³ Writer Nick Holdstock writes that the 4th division prison was so full of people arrested in the crackdown that prisoners had to be taken to black jails.⁷⁴

Amnesty reports that even after February 5, 1997 and its immediate aftermath ended, bingtuan prisons continued to be used to detain suspected government opponents. Abduhelil Abdumejit, a Uyghur leader of the *meshrep* movement in Ghulja, as well as one of the protest organizers, was moved from a city prison to the bingtuan prison. Amnesty reported that he was tortured in detention.⁷⁵ In 2000, the Uyghur American Association reported that Abduhelil had died in detention as a result of torture and called for an international investigation.⁷⁶

In addition, Amnesty reported several Uyghurs who were part of bingtuan regiments were executed by the government following the Ghulja Massacre. They were publicly sentenced

to death for separatism in a mass trial on October 20, 1998 and executed the same day. These included Tursun Reveydullah, 26, from the 29th Regiment, Helimhan Hesem, female, 22, from Korla and the 30th Regiment, and Asim Yaqup, 40, from the 29th Regiment.

The Chinese government's 60th anniversary White Paper cites the bingtuan's role not only in Baren in 1990, and in Ghulja in 1997, but also in July 5, 2009, in another incident of massive violence and widespread arrest in Urumchi. The White Paper reports that, "in rapid response to the July 5 Urumqi riot of 2009, the XPCC sent militias to patrol the city and guard key districts from possible attacks." Another state media source indicated that bingtuan soldiers were called in after the July 5 riots and were stationed in Urumchi in the aftermath.⁷⁷

Since 2009, China has reported on efforts to bolster bingtuan police power. In 2013, a state media report noted that East Turkestan hosts the greatest number of anti-terrorist police units in China under the command of the bingtuan, including an entire brigade in Urumchi.⁷⁸ In 2012, the bingtuan established an internal National Security Agency to "exercise its power of administrative enforcement and criminal investigation in accordance with the law and undertake the duties of preventing, deterring and punishing criminal activities that endanger national security and interests."⁷⁹ A state media article from June 2012 reported the bingtuan controlled several anti-terrorist armed police force units including in Aksu and Bachu counties.⁸⁰ In October 2012, state media reports indicated that the government had upgraded bingtuan armed police to a deputy military rank to "safeguard the important decisions made in the long-term peace and stability" of East Turkestan.⁸¹ And in May 2013, Uighurbiz reported the bingtuan organized cross-border security training to "strengthen emergency unit special warfare."⁸²

The bingtuan continues to play a role in repressing Uyghurs, if not through deploying soldiers, then instead through security measures. In October 2017, a University of Pennsylvania blog posted an image attributed to the 45th regiment. The announcement stated the bingtuan would confiscate any tools unless they were registered with the Public Security Bureau, including "kitchen knives, axes / hatchets, shovels / spades, hoes, pitchforks, steel pipes, leather jacket knives."⁸³

Radio Free Asia (RFA) reported in April 2017 the 47th regiment bingtuan police were closely monitoring Uyghurs in the Hotan region. The heightened scrutiny came after an alleged attack by a Uyghur man in February 2017, in response to government restrictions on the individual's ability to pray with his family. The bingtuan subsequently required Uyghurs to attend meetings in local village offices every two or three days. RFA quoted a bingtuan member, who was Han, saying the authorities are "interfering in every aspect of their existence, but the Uyghurs have to have a life as well." He added that in spite of greater government policies some Uyghurs agreed with, "the lower level of government's way of doing things is really different."⁸⁴

In another incident that took place in 2008, Radio Free Asia reported that the bingtuan police were involved in the response to a bombing in Kucha.⁸⁵ An RFA report from 2013 indicated that three Uyghur students from the bingtuan's Tarim University in Aksu prefecture were detained. One student, Ibrahim, was accused of having overseas contacts, but no charges

were known in connection to the two others, Alimjan and Dilshat, as well as five additional students whose identities were unknown.⁸⁶

Another major focus of bingtuan repression has been the Uyghur religion. James Seymour wrote that in the 1990s, “[t]he bingtuan’s public security departments have dismantled and closed down many unsanctioned mosques and religious schools.”⁸⁷ In a 2013 article, Uighurbiz reported that a Uyghur baker was forced to shutter his business after 11th division bingtuan authorities in Aral City discovered him praying; he was ordered to return to his hometown of Kashgar.⁸⁸

Aside from its repression of Muslim Uyghurs, the bingtuan has also been involved in religious control of Christians. Radio Free Asia and the Christian advocacy group China Aid have reported extensively on the campaign targeting Christians:

- In February 2017, authorities from the 31st agricultural regiment ordered two house churches to close, local sources told RFA.⁸⁹ In a June 2010 report, RFA wrote: “Christians in China’s northwestern Xinjiang region said unofficial Christian church members in the Tarim area are under constant surveillance by police.” The report quoted Kong Lingrong, a Han Chinese Christian in the 2nd Division in Tarim, who said: “Sometimes police came to our congregation place, threatening old worshipers by saying that their social welfare might be terminated or their salary might be lowered.”⁹⁰
- In another incident, a Han Chinese high school student was expelled from his bingtuan high school in the 2nd agricultural division on October 20, 2009.⁹¹ Commenting on the incident, Christian rights advocacy group China Aid leader Bob Fu said, “The bingtuan are in breach of China’s Constitution.”
- In March 2015, China Aid reported on a church raid in Wujiaqu, the 6th division headquarters. Wujiaqu police raided a church gathering of 90 Christians, and several church members were administratively detained for 12 days. The ethnic and religious affairs bureau later called the gathering an “illegal underground religious activity.”⁹²

5. Employment Discrimination

First Hand Experience: Discrimination in the Education Sector

The ethnic composition of the bingtuan overall as well as the top leadership reflect the primacy of Han people within the organization. The lived experience of Uyghur people in cities controlled by the bingtuan reflects patterns of discrimination and prejudice. In an interview with a Uyghur teacher who lived and worked in the bingtuan's largest city, Shihezi for a decade beginning in 1988, UHRP learned more about the first-hand experience of discrimination faced by Uyghur people within the education sector. The interviewee described not only the prejudicial treatment he received, but also the prejudice facing his Uyghur students. His experience is described in this section.

The disparate treatment he faced as an employee included a lower salary, "lower than anyone else in the college, I was the lowest in the school for three years." People frequently used discriminatory language when talking about Uyghurs; they would call the teachers "barbaric." Because he spoke Chinese, they would tell him he was civilized, unlike other Uyghurs. The Uyghur language was discouraged in the bingtuan school. The Uyghur teacher recalled one conversation in which he was speaking in Uyghur with another colleague when a Han teacher requested he speak the "official language," meaning Chinese.

This attitude was also reflected in the bingtuan school's administrative structure: although the school, of 500 students, was about 40% Uyghur, the entire administration was Han and only 8 of about 100 total teachers were Uyghur. Uyghur teachers were denied opportunities available to the other staff, such as training courses. In addition, even after coming in first in a 6-month televised competition hosted by the municipal propaganda bureau, the Uyghur teacher was passed over for a promotion by a Chinese teacher who did not even make it past the first round. He was told it was because he is a minority.

When cultural and language differences caused misunderstanding or arguments between Han and Uyghur students, the Han always had the upper hand. The same was true for career opportunities. All high school students had to do one or two-month internships, mostly in factories, and for Uyghur students, getting selected for an internship was always difficult. The Uyghur teacher confronted a factory manager about the discriminatory selection. Outside the factory was a statue of a minority boy holding a traditional Uyghur instrument, the dap. The Uyghur teacher had asked the factory boss to give an internship to his student, but once the boss heard the student's ethnicity, he refused. He reasoned that he couldn't arrange halal food for the student, then added that minorities are not disciplined and don't listen or obey. The Uyghur teacher countered that adding halal food was not impossible, the boss could even simply allow the students to eat outside, and if the students were not disciplined, the purpose of the internship would be to train them. The factory boss put his foot down: he simply would not hire minorities.

Discrimination in the Agricultural Sector: Cotton

UHRP and other international groups have documented the widespread and systematic discrimination Uyghurs face in the job market throughout East Turkestan. Most recently, UHRP discussed labor rights in the report, "Discrimination, Mistreatment and Coercion: Uyghurs Face Severe Labor Rights Abuses in China and East Turkestan," in which UHRP documented

endemic discrimination across industries, including agriculture, civil service, public security and police roles.

One of the main concerns UHRP identified was in the cotton industry. Both Uyghurs and Han face further labor rights violations in the form of forced child labor through a program of mandatory cotton-picking for schoolchildren, employed by the bingtuan, according to reports by the Congressional Executive Commission on China (CECC), a Congressionally appointed research organization with a mandate to research human rights in China. Some of CECC's reporting on child labor in the cotton industry in East Turkestan led by the bingtuan revealed:

- In 2006, CECC reported that secondary school and university students were forced to pick cotton, beginning in the second year of junior high, for a total of 14 days a year. Parents and students complained about the requirements.⁹³
- In 2008, CECC reported that children as young as the third grade were forced to participate in the program, following a 2006 directive that students in the second grade or younger would not be conscripted. State media reported that over a million students participated in 2008, a reduction from previous years.⁹⁴
- In 2011, CECC again reported on the practice of mandatory cotton picking for students, sometimes in excess of official limits on hours students were supposed to spend picking cotton due to a labor shortage for cotton picking.⁹⁵

UHRP noted that although CECC did not provide ethnic statistics, “because the practice is employed by the XPCC, which discriminates against Uyghurs in its recruitment, it is likely a majority of Han and minority of Uyghur students are enlisted. Nevertheless, this program has implications for Uyghurs, because the children’s unpaid labor represents jobs that Uyghur farmers might voluntarily work, if given the choice, to supplement farming wages.” UHRP cited a 2016 RFA report on Uyghurs who elect to pick cotton to supplement their income; a police officer, speaking anonymously, told RFA: “The local labor force is forced to move to other regions such as Aksu and Korla and even to the [XPCC]’s cotton fields in the northern part of Xinjiang because the local farmers have no other income aside from being able sell their physical labor.” Evidence that this practice is widespread comes from Guma county’s Mokuyla township, which RFA found loses about half its population of 21,000 people to the XPCC’s cotton fields each year as farmers travel to sell their labor picking cotton.⁹⁶

Nevertheless, the bingtuan brings in tens of thousands of temporary workers, labeled *shihua* or flower-picking workers, from Chinese provinces, arranging transportation and logistics. The Chinese website Baidu gives the following description of *shihua* workers: “The rapid rise of cotton industry in Xinjiang has attracted a surge of large numbers of migrant workers from Gansu, Shaanxi, Sichuan, Chongqing, Henan, Shandong and Jiangsu in Xinjiang and which has become a unique social phenomenon in Xinjiang. Every autumn when the cotton has matured in the cotton production area in Xinjiang, farmers themselves cannot complete the task of picking and harvesting. They need to recruit a lot of outsiders to participate in the cotton harvest.”⁹⁷ Baidu does not address the question of why the bingtuan recruits workers from inner Chinese provinces, rather than hiring the local Uyghur population.



Bingtuan cotton workers © Getty Images.

Uighurbiz reported on the massive scale of the *shihua* hiring program. In July 2012, the government detailed the bingtuan's plans to coordinate a special train to return the massive influx of *shihua* workers to their hometowns in interior Chinese provinces.⁹⁸ The report put the number of *shihua* workers at 250,000. In total, the bingtuan labor and social security division indicated that in 2012, the bingtuan planned to employ 800,000 people, including 400,000 in agriculture, and aside from 250,000 *shihua* workers, an additional 120,000 seasonal workers, 30,000 long-term workers, 250,000 in industry (including construction), and 150,000 in the service industry. In 2011, the bingtuan employed 371,800 *shihua* workers, and paid over 2.227 billion yuan (\$360 million USD); it arranged over 106 special trains and returned 235,000 *shihua* workers (individually they received about 5,990 yuan or \$957). The report noted that the *shihua* program dated back to 2003.

In a 2013 report, Uighurbiz investigated the *shihua* program's unequal treatment of Uyghurs. The report noted that because of increasing wages and cost of accommodations for the *shihua* workers, profits were actually reduced; the per capita income reached 6,300 yuan (\$1,006 USD) and in total, the bingtuan paid them 2.5 billion yuan (\$400 million USD), and arranged 210 trains. The report noted that the XUAR government had also arranged for Uyghurs to pick bingtuan cotton as part of its "rural labor transfer" program. The Uyghurs were paid a lower wage compared to the Han migrants, and in addition their food and lodging were much worse in comparison. As a result, the Uyghurs suffered major disadvantages in doing the work. A Uyghur cotton picker in Aksu told them that the Uyghur pickers were dissatisfied with the unequal treatment but as a result of poverty and unemployment, they had no choice but to do the work to feed their families.⁹⁹

A 2013 Uighurbiz report said that in total the bingtuan would import 800,000 workers in 2013, including 280,000 *shihua* cotton-pickers, 150,000 other seasonal workers, 70,000 long-

term workers, and 200,000 industrial and construction workers, and 100,000 service workers. The report noted that as the bingtuan urbanizes, it requires more and more workers, but it only recruits them from inner China, and does not recruit minorities from East Turkestan.¹⁰⁰

The Uyghur teacher UHRP interviewed described a conversation he had once with a line leader from the cotton fields about the treatment of his Uyghur students. The line leader told him said that minorities are poor workers because they eat a lot and don't work well. The teacher asked why cotton farmers don't hire Uyghurs from the south for the harvest and the line leaders replied that Uyghurs are barbaric, don't understand Chinese and are lazy, bad workers. The teacher understood that because of the lack of communication, Han employers will not hire Uyghurs even for the cotton harvest. Inside an office these attitudes are the same as the cotton fields.¹⁰¹

Employment Discrimination – Other Industries

As these reports indicate, the bingtuan is extremely active in recruiting Han workers in a number of industries, not just cotton. In 2013, the government announced that 3,764 jobs would be awarded to college graduates from Henan Province, in industries ranging from agriculture and livestock, construction, teaching, medicine and sanitation, economics, journalism and secretarial industries, including 37 masters students, 1,851 undergraduate and 1,876 technical school graduates.¹⁰² Uighurbiz described massive hiring from Xinyang Normal University in Henan Province, and in general, wide-scale hiring of recent college graduates from provinces like Henan as “one of the major new models for attracting immigrants” to East Turkestan and increasing the number of Han people.¹⁰³ Another Uighurbiz report from 2013 described a training program developed by the bingtuan in Gansu to attract Han workers with not only a job, but also skills training.¹⁰⁴

The Congressional Executive Commission on China (CECC) has highlighted a number of discriminatory job postings for bingtuan positions:

- In 2006, CECC reported on a bingtuan announcement to hire 840 positions, only 38 of which would be ethnic minorities, including 26 Uyghur, and the rest Han. These included 197 jobs with the public security police, 480 with the prison police, 37 in the court system, and 41 in the justice bureau, as well as positions at other offices within the bingtuan.¹⁰⁵
- In 2009, CECC reported the bingtuan announced plans to recruit for 894 positions, of which 744 were reserved for Han Chinese, according to rosters of available job openings. Of the remaining positions, 137 were unrestricted by ethnicity and thus are open to applicants of all ethnic groups including Han, while only 11 positions were reserved for Uyghurs and two positions for Kazakhs. CECC noted that all candidates must take the job recruitment exam in Mandarin Chinese.¹⁰⁶
- In 2010, CECC reported that bingtuan would hire 1,131 civil servants, consisting of 53 positions in the bingtuan, 497 in several agricultural divisions, 177 public security positions, and 404 positions in the prison system. Based on CECC analysis of the roster of open positions, 882 positions total were reserved for Han (78% of open positions), 45 for Uyghurs (4%), two for Kazakhs (0.27%), one for an unspecified “ethnic minority” (0.09%) and 200 were unrestricted by ethnicity (18%), leaving them open to all groups including Han. Adding in positions unrestricted by ethnicity or open to an unspecified “ethnic minority,” 96% of the positions were available to Han, 22% to Uyghurs, and 18% to Kazakhs, while 18% remained

open to other ethnic minorities. The announcement of the positions noted that all 404 positions in the prison system were reserved for Han, and that members of the Hui and Manchu ethnic groups could apply for jobs designated for Han, but other groups could not.¹⁰⁷

- CECC reported that the bingtuan demonstrated a shift in 2011, in which almost all its positions were unreserved by ethnicity—marking a change from past practice of formally reserving a majority of positions for Han, though CECC also noted that the bingtuan continued restrictions based on gender.¹⁰⁸

Notwithstanding the 2011 CECC report that there were no ethnic requirements in that year's bingtuan hiring quotas, Uighurbiz reported in 2013 that civil service announcements once again discriminated against Uyghurs. Of 1,085 total jobs, only 42 were reserved for Uyghurs. Analyzing the posts, Uighurbiz correspondent Nijatkar noted that the positions specifically targeting Uyghurs are concentrated in the third and the fourteenth divisions in southern Xinjiang, and most of them are public security posts. There were very few positions earmarked for Uyghurs. He noted: "Although most of the jobs in the job listing have no restrictions on ethnicity, these positions may eventually still be monopolized by Han applicants," and civil service recruitment of Uyghurs had been low for many years.¹⁰⁹

Discrimination outside of hiring also occurs in the way the bingtuan has managed residency for Uyghurs. Contrary to a policy stating that any worker over 16 who lives in a bingtuan residence for more than a month would qualify for a residence permit, a Uyghur woman who lived in the 13th division five years and married a Han worker was still unable to attain a permit.¹¹⁰

6. Displacement and Environmental Destruction

Forcible Demolitions

Bingtuan officials have further marginalized Uyghurs by outright taking possession of their homes. Uighurbiz published a series of reports in 2013 documenting demolitions carried out by authorities from Tumxuk, the headquarters of the bingtuan's third division. The authorities not only destroyed Uyghurs' homes without regard to their legal rights, but also arrested and harassed protestors of the mistreatment.



A tractor demolishes Mehet Imin's home, Uighurbiz¹¹¹

In April 2013, Uighurbiz reported on protestors being arrested for speaking out against forced demolitions.¹¹² In the name of expanding the city, the Tumxuk 44th division forcibly destroyed residential housing without any subsidy or financial remuneration, then arrested many protestors. Uighurbiz learned from the local residents that on April 20th, approximately 50 people including police from the Tumxuk Public Security Bureau, the city planning office manager, line manager, and militia conducted the forced demolitions. They targeted houses located within an area marked for city expansion, and the local government officials did not indicate that they would offer compensation or financial remuneration. Instead they threatened the residents whose homes they destroyed.

The forcible demolitions led to protests and arrests. When a group of farmers protested, the authorities threatened them and a verbal fight erupted. Soon after, more farmers gathered to

protest that their homes were their own private property in their legal possession and the forcible demolitions were illegal. The police caused a disturbance in the crowd in order to arrest them and used tear gas to disperse the protestors. The police arrested Tursun Memet (吐尔逊·买买提) and knocked his wife unconscious. Angry and helpless, Memet pursued the division leader and asked for an explanation. Instead of reasoning with the demonstrators, the police arrested 18 from the crowd protesting the demolition. Although later the police released four minors, they continued to hold 14 of the protestors and forced them to sign a housing demolition agreement. On April 23, 2013 the police arrested five more people in connection to the forcible demolition resistance.

Several teachers were also punished for protesting forcible demolitions in Tumxuk. Authorities from the same bingtuan regiment also forcibly demolished the teachers' homes. Eight teachers protested these demolitions, including Tursun Hesen and Kadeer Dawut. The authorities terminated their employment, providing the as reason their "uncooperativeness with government work." In addition, Kadir Yusuf, another teacher, was suspended from work because his father-in-law did not demolish his house. Seyit Kar and Kerim Osman were also detained after protesting demolition of their homes.



Mehet Imin's home on fire, Uighurbiz¹¹³

Another conflict took place when the 44th regiment authorities in Tumxuk targeted farmer Mehete Imin (买海提·衣明) for the forcible demolition of his home. Uighurbiz called Imin who explained that he owned only 10 mu (1.6 acres) of land and his house was only 117 square

meters (1,259 square feet). In 2011, the government forcibly possessed 2 mu (.32 acres) of his land to build a highway. Then on March 14, 2013, while Imin was away, officials shredded more than 500 grape saplings planted on his property with an excavator and constructed temporary construction housing. Soon after, government personnel promised compensation for the damage. When they went to calculate it, they only recorded 50 destroyed plants and offered a very low price for the home as well as for his land. Imin refused to sign.

On May 14 while Imin was having guests over, more than 100 state personnel came to demolish his home, including armed police and government officials who ordered him to evacuate. As they demolished the home, police prohibited anyone from resisting or even photographing the demolition. After the demolition, they burned the ruins. Imin reported that in his home was 100,000 yuan (\$16,000 USD) cash as well as more than 60 gold pieces—all destroyed. The government only offered 60,000 yuan (\$9,583 USD) total in compensation. The crew used an excavator to knock down the homes and set the ruins on fire. Uighurbiz reported that after the houses were forcibly demolished by burning. The government sent a large group of police to maintain stability at the site.¹¹⁴



Mehet Imin and his family, Uighurbiz¹¹⁵

On June 26, Uighurbiz reported news that Imin had been further harassed for speaking out about the forcible demolition. The Tumxuk Public Security Bureau police found Imin and questioned him about whether he had divulged information about the forced destruction of his house to the media. Police threatened Imin that he had broken state secrets laws. They told him

he would be sentenced, and also required him to cooperate with social stability work by abandoning his appeal rights. Moreover, the assistant 44th regiment commander who was responsible, Abdureshid Bake (阿不都热西提·巴克) threatened Imin multiple times.¹¹⁶

The type of reporting Uighurbiz conducted on the bingtuan's forcible demolitions was rare, and since the website is no longer active, it is unlikely that this type of information will be reported due to strict management of journalism and restrictions on freedom of the press. Nevertheless, the work Uighurbiz has done to document forced demolitions in Tumxuk could demonstrate the general treatment that Uyghur people face from the government authorities with regard to forcible demolitions of their homes.

Ecological Destruction and Rural Displacement

State land grabs fit within a historical narrative of bingtuan appropriation of land in East Turkestan. James Seymour, documenting the history of the bingtuan, writes that the bingtuan served as the means by which millions of Han Chinese migrated to East Turkestan in the 1950s and 1960s.

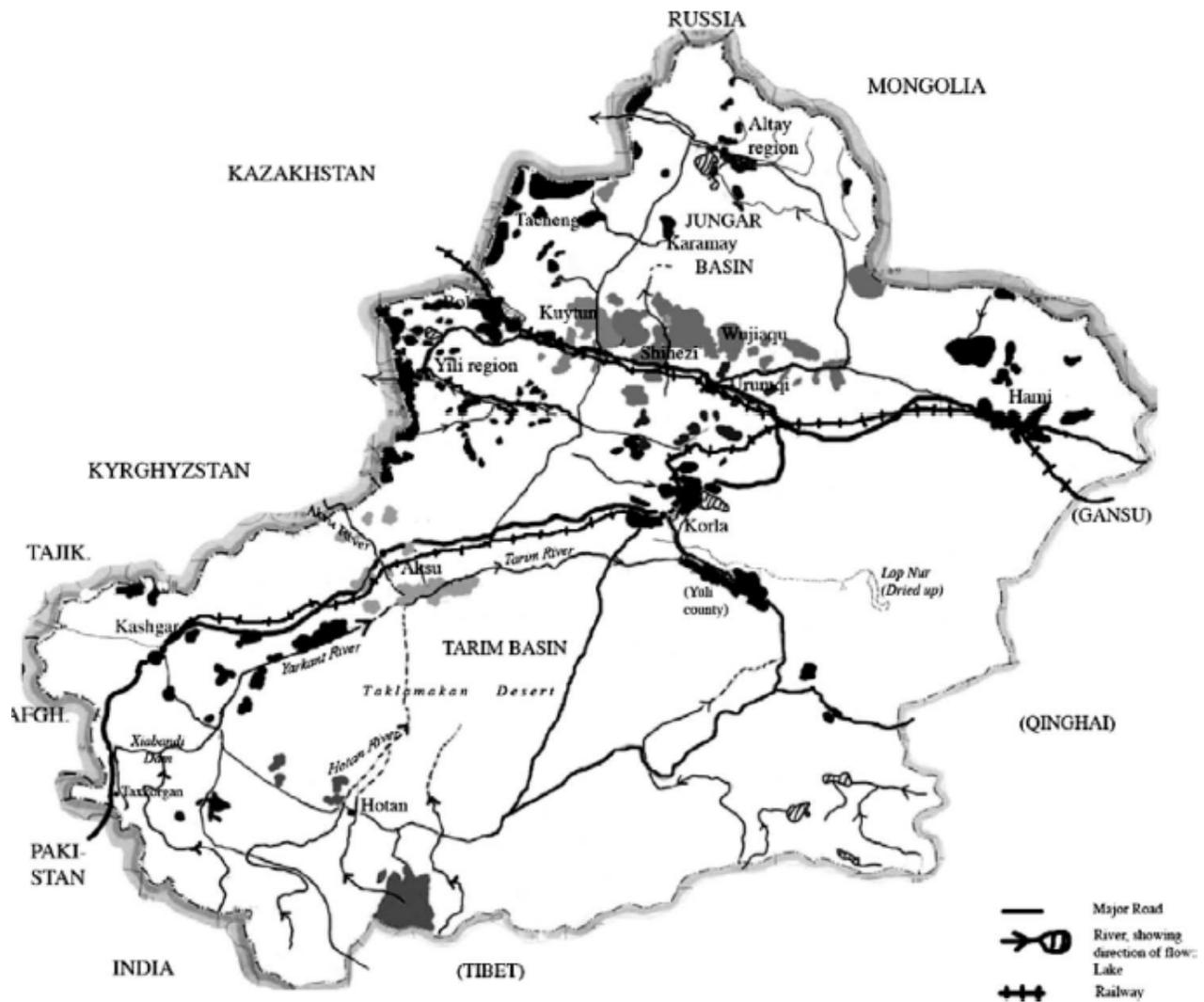
It is said that by 1967, more than a million youths from eastern cities moved to Xinjiang as part of this 'support the border' campaign. Some had left their homes spontaneously, some were government organized. When they arrived in Xinjiang they usually joined the bingtuan. When more land was needed, the bingtuan simply appropriated it, if necessary incorporating some local Uyghurs into the organization at the same time... By the 1960s, the bingtuan was farming over 700,000 hectares, or almost a third of the region's arable land, and it also accounted for a third of the economic output.¹¹⁷

Rural areas in East Turkestan have a long history of conflict with the bingtuan. Anwar Rahman, a dissident Uyghur scholar who was once a member of the Chinese diplomatic service, documented this conflict in the early 1980s. At that time, serious conflicts took place in Ili Prefecture when the bingtuan attempted to expand its cultivated farms in this area. Local authorities and residents sent petitioners to Beijing to prevent the bingtuan expansion. To ease the tension, the bingtuan sent its vice political commissar, Tursun Atawula, to negotiate with the local authorities. After the negotiation ended in favor of the local authorities, Atawula was dismissed. Atawula was a Uyghur expert who had studied animal husbandry in the former Soviet Union. He suggested to bingtuan officials that they should maintain pastureland in East Turkestan to protect the environment. His tenure as vice political commissar lasted only from May 1982 to April 1983, with no official reason for his dismissal.¹¹⁸

In a 2016 report, "Without Land There is No Life," UHRP described a number of bingtuan activities that resulted in displacement of rural Uyghurs or destruction of land to the point that rural Uyghurs were effectively unable to continue living on their land. The most significant change in East Turkestan wrought by the bingtuan has been the depletion of the Tarim River, which has caused lakes and rivers flowing from the river to be similarly depleted.

In addition, as a result of the Tarim River's depletion, thousands of acres of poplar trees have been decimated. Called *tohgrak* in Uyghur, these desert trees grow by riverbanks and prevent desertification. They are considered sacred by the Uyghur people.¹¹⁹ Finally, UHRP's report detailed the government policy to provide subsidies to bingtuan cultivation of long-grain cotton, even though the crop is excessively water-intensive to grow, which has resulted in a massive drain on water resources as well as required additional fertilizers.¹²⁰

One scholar describes the bingtuan as being "chiefly responsible for the destruction of natural pastureland and water resources in Xinjiang." Since it was founded, the bingtuan has built up 105 reservoirs along the main riverbanks in East Turkestan. Three of the biggest reservoirs along the upper reaches of the Tarim River are responsible for its diminishment, and the destruction of Lop Nur and Taitema Lakes downstream.¹²¹



Map from "Neo Oasis: The Xinjiang Bingtuan in the Twenty-first Century."¹²²

Thomas Cliff writes that the bingtuan positions its farms at the headwaters of most of the major rivers in East Turkestan, giving it effective control over the surface water throughout the region, and consequently the lands and people in downstream areas. The control of waterways in the Tarim Basin is also part of CCP colonization scheme. Although the bingtuan occupies only 30% of arable land in East Turkestan, “it controls the viability of most of it through control of the water supply.” One of the main elements of the bingtuan’s push into the southern region of East Turkestan is the move to rehabilitate and more effectively “harness” the Tarim River, into which the government had budgeted 10.7 billion yuan (\$1.7 billion USD), according to Cliff, the most expensive restoration project ever in the region. Cliff explains that in a later phase of its plan, the bingtuan aims to control and regulate the flow of water in the Tarim by damming the Tashkorgan River south of Yarkant, enabling it to appropriate more land for reclamation and more Han settlers and temporary migrant laborers. These water resources further enable urbanization.¹²³

In 2006, Radio Free Asia published an interview with a bingtuan official who described the environmental degradation in East Turkestan, including the depletion of the Tarim River, the massive destruction of *toghrak* leading to desertification, excessive land use and overall degradation of the environment. The reporter asked if after so many years of degrading the environment, whether the bingtuan considered the local people affected by their policies, including 300,000 people who had been displaced by the bingtuan. The bingtuan official replied that the bingtuan never needed special permission from the government, suggesting that the local people need to talk to the government.¹²⁴

UHRP’s report also documented how the bingtuan’s policies resulted in displacement of rural Uyghurs. In the village of Deryabuyi, situated along the Keriya River near Keriya city, diversion of river water for specific use by bingtuan settlements has been a major contributor to increased desertification of an already extremely arid outpost village. The lack of consultation with Uyghurs on policies affecting the town is particularly concerning, given that environmental changes threaten the town’s existence.¹²⁵

Another result of bingtuan development is massive pollution. In October 2013, the Ministry of Environmental Protection announced that while national emissions declined, in East Turkestan the bingtuan industry had caused a number of pollutants to increase including nitrogen oxide, ammonia emissions, and sulfur dioxide.¹²⁶ UHRP’s report described specific instances of bingtuan policies destroying the environment. For example, in 2006 industrial factories in the bingtuan city of Shihezi polluted industrial waste into the Mogohu Reservoir, according to a Uyghurbiz report.¹²⁷ Meanwhile, the government has poured billions of dollars in funds into bingtuan agricultural projects, according to a 2013 report in Uyghurbiz.¹²⁸

In addition to displacing Uyghurs for agricultural development, bingtuan activities related to mineral extraction have also resulted in displacement of rural Uyghur communities. A 2012 report from Uyghurbiz described displacement of hundreds of herders for the construction of coal mines.¹²⁹ The 104th regiment of the bingtuan 12th division requisitioned 840,000 mu (216 square miles) in Guolebuyi Village, Toksun County. As a result, 560 herders were displaced. Uyghurbiz reported that as the bingtuan and Urumchi’s population grew, herders from Toksun County were

gradually displaced.

The bingtuan interest in mineral extraction in East Turkestan has been on the rise. In 2013, Uighurbiz reported on the transfer from the XUAR government to the bingtuan of six gold, copper and iron mines in Hotan, Kumul, Kashgar and Altay. In addition, the XUAR government transferred mineral rights for coal mines in Mori Kazakh autonomous county as well as Yiwu County in Kumul Prefecture.¹³⁰

7. Recommendations

For the Chinese Government:

Instead of growing the bingtuan as a corporate entity, create long-term plans to dismantle the bingtuan. Immediately cease migration of Han Chinese recruited by the bingtuan. Create longer-term plans to redistribute bingtuan land assets and mineral rights to the people of East Turkestan. Publish information about the value of land and mineral resources that have been taken without or with inadequate compensation and reinvest bingtuan resources in remedying ecological destruction which has resulted from bingtuan development.

The bingtuan activities to destroy Uyghur culture, religion and traditions carried out by armed bingtuan forces must be ceased immediately. Demilitarize the bingtuan military and police force. All law enforcement officials in East Turkestan must be accountable to the community, and in particular, ethnic minorities including the Uyghur people.

The bingtuan must be brought under the jurisdiction of the broader political structure of administration in East Turkestan, and should no longer exist as a parallel government, with its own judicial and law enforcement systems. This is the first step to making the bingtuan accountable and, in the long run, to eliminate the organization so that resources it uses can be better put to use to benefit the population in East Turkestan, especially Uyghurs in rural areas.

Involve Uyghur people in all activities and decisions related to the bingtuan's future. Even as the role of the bingtuan is reduced in East Turkestan, Uyghurs must fully participate in its final stages in order to ensure equitable solutions to the long-term problems the bingtuan has created.

Cease propaganda about the bingtuan's role in opposing and deterring separatism, because this only serves to increase distrust among Uyghurs and Han Chinese in the bingtuan. Recognize the true role of the bingtuan: as a source of ethnic division, and a vehicle for the unmitigated extraction of resources and locus of colonial power in East Turkestan. Acknowledge Uyghur concerns that the bingtuan was devised to eliminate Uyghur culture and identity. Revise the official narrative of China's benevolent colonization of East Turkestan and recognize the brutal and exploitative role that the bingtuan has played in 60 years of existence.

Immediately cease the practicing of hiring temporary cotton harvest workers from other provinces, and instead, create employment opportunities for under-employed Uyghur and other minority people in East Turkestan, with the same level of state investment in transportation and compensation. Create systems to ensure Uyghur people are not only eligible but also hired without discrimination in East Turkestan and throughout China.

For International Governments

Leverage business with the bingtuan to demand the bingtuan abandon its secretiveness, particularly with regard to its role in violating Uyghur human rights domestically and suppressing Uyghur dissent.

Countries that receive bingtuan investment should scrutinize bingtuan information regarding its domestic policies, and should call for Uyghur representation in business dealings with the bingtuan.

Ketchup brands should monitor the source of their ketchup and reinvest ketchup profits in programming in East Turkestan to reverse ecological damage caused by the ketchup industry as well as to fund vocational or other educational programs to support indigenous communities including Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in East Turkestan.

8. Appendix

In Ilham Tohti's 2013 paper, *Present Day Ethnic Problems in XUAR*, translated by China Change after Tohti's arrest in 2014, he issued a series of recommendations regarding the bingtuan.¹³¹ The translation is reprinted in full here:

The Xinjiang Production & Construction Corps (XPCC) The XPCC is a throwback to six decades of centralized economic planning, a redundant bureaucracy propped up by vested interests and extolled by political propagandists. Han Chinese Corps members complain of growing impoverishment and backwardness; Uighurs, who are excluded from the Corps, complain that it fuels ethnic antagonism. Recommendations: make plans for the eventual dissolution of the Corps; dial down the political propaganda about the Corps; initiate reforms designed to decouple localities from the XPCC; enact land reforms to counter population drain in XPCC areas; cease funding XPCC shortfalls through the transfer of mineral resources; promote ethnic exchange and ethnic unity; share Corps knowledge and resources with local communities.

Thoughts and Recommendations

1. For both practical and technical reasons, it would be difficult to disband the Corps in the short run, and this would probably breed more problems than it would solve. Nonetheless, it is necessary to begin discussing and making arrangements for the Corps' gradual withdraw from the historical stage.
2. While recognizing the Corps' contributions to land reclamation and border security during a unique period in history, it is now appropriate to dial down the propaganda about the role of the Corps in opposing and deterring separatism, because this only serves to undermine national unity—the Corps is distrusted by the Uighur community, while Uighurs are distrusted by Han Chinese in the Corps.
3. Assuming that the Corps remains fundamentally intact, move forward with urbanization based on local conditions and considerations. In places where the process of urbanization is complete, pilot programs should be initiated to integrate Corps and local government;
4. Resolving the problem of population drain must begin with the land policy. A systematic plan is needed to sort out institutional conflicts about the long-term allocation of land, usage rights, income and shares between the state, the Corps, its divisions, regimental farms, and individual workers. Only by establishing a clear-cut, permanent relationship between land and individuals can we resolve the problem of population drain; otherwise, the cost of maintaining the Corps will become too exorbitant.
5. The transfer of high-quality local mineral resources to the private sector is not a lasting solution to the Corps' financial predicament. Given the institutional rigidity of the Corps, this seems to run counter to the spirit of reform and may not be sound economic strategy.
6. The Corps should exercise its political function, as the state propaganda proclaims, of promoting ethnic exchange and ethnic unity. When addressing the issue of population drain, the Corps should remain open to outside perspectives, and maximize the benefits of local and

regional labor surpluses by encouraging these workers to migrate to under-populated Corps areas.

7. In comparison to Uighur rural communities, the Corps has unparalleled advantages in agricultural production technology and techniques. The central or local government could appropriate special funds to create and broadcast, on Corps television stations, Uighur language programs and public-service-style broadcasts designed to share this wealth of knowledge. By sharing and spreading its agricultural knowledge and experience with a Uighur audience, the Corps can help transform traditional, insular production methods and mindsets, and make an important contribution to fostering communication and cohesion between different ethnic groups.

9. Acknowledgments

UHRP is grateful to all the individuals who contributed to this report, including interviewee Ilshat Hassan, and Amy Reger at the Congressional Executive Commission on China. UHRP is also grateful to the brave Uyghur individuals who have written about the bingtuan in various media relied upon in this report.

The author would like to UHRP Director Omer Kanat, for his invaluable guidance and human rights expertise, Senior Researcher Henryk Szadziewski for research guidance and helpful suggestions throughout the revision process, UHRP Chinese Outreach Coordinator Zubayra Shamseden for her instrumental Chinese and Uyghur language research support, and Nicole Morgret for assistance with research and editing.

Finally, UHRP extends a special appreciation to the National Endowment for Democracy, whose unwavering support for freedom, democracy and human rights in East Turkestan ensures that Uyghurs will always have a forum to voice their concerns and issues.

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April 2018.

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