

Neo Oasis: The Xinjiang *Bingtuan* in the Twenty-first Century

THOMAS MATTHEW JAMES CLIFF*

The Australian National University

Introduction

Military-agricultural colonies have long been a feature of Chinese frontier policy, but in the late twentieth century the *bingtuan*¹ underwent an unprecedented transformation of form, function and rhetorical justification that raises questions regarding the contemporary *bingtuan*'s motives, mechanisms and role models. By examining these questions, this article sets out to determine the role that is being played by the twenty-first century *bingtuan*, and how it diverges from the military-agricultural colonies of the past.

In 1982 Deng Xiaoping declared that the *bingtuan* “should be different from military farms” (Seymour, 2000, p. 182), and in 1998 the *bingtuan* (which translates as Corps) officially became a corporation (a move that I shall term Incorporation). These changes were not simply rhetorical. The *bingtuan* had by 1999 undergone a series of major structural changes. Whereas in 1954 the organisation was subject to the authority of the XUAR² government, by 1999 it had been gradually promoted to the same bureaucratic status as the XUAR government. The *bingtuan* has occupied expanding areas of Xinjiang since 1954, and the bureaucratic promotion of 1998 effectively made it a “state within a state”.³

Despite these changes, Chinese and Western authors continue to refer to the twenty-first century *bingtuan* as little removed from Dynastic era forms of military-agricultural colony. Within this discourse, there is an assumption that the *bingtuan* of 1954 is the same organisation as the *bingtuan* of 2005. James Seymour says that the *bingtuan* “should be thought of as an institution designed to carry on a two-thousand year-old policy in central Asia” (2000, p. 188). The State Council issued a White Paper on Xinjiang in 2003, stating that the *bingtuan*'s historical origins are Han dynasty policies of stationing troops to reclaim wasteland and defend the

*Correspondence Address: Contemporary China Centre, Australian National University, Acton, ACT, 2601, Australia. Email: tom.cliff@anu.edu.au

frontiers, and that these remain its roles (State Council, 2003, pp. 31–32). Even Incorporation failed to change the way the *bingtuan* is viewed. The Deputy Commander of the *bingtuan* at the time of Incorporation dismissed the change as superficial: “To the outside it is a business group; internally, it is still the Corps” (Becquelin, 2000, p. 80). Clearly, however, the structural changes of the late twentieth century reflect (at the very least) a new set of aspirations for the organisation. What are the twenty-first century *bingtuan*’s role models?

The *bingtuan* and the militia⁴ institutions that influenced its establishment have been the sites of a continual interplay between ideal and pragmatic approaches. These two approaches were at odds with one another, to a greater or lesser degree, until at least the late 1970s. A major point of debate was the “level of militarisation” – that is, the degree to which the militia member is either a soldier or a civilian (Kuhn, 1970, p. 13). Idealists drew on Zhou dynasty political theory that favoured “the merging of civil and military roles on all levels of society” (ibid, p. 30), while the pragmatic approach advocated separation of the two roles: “the people support the soldiers and the soldiers protect the people” (ibid, p. 24).

The ideal/pragmatic debate remains important to the twenty-first century *bingtuan*. The *bingtuan* was formed and existed for over two decades under a Maoist doctrine that had “politics in command”, but Deng’s pragmatic reforms put “economics in command”. This transition can be seen as a contemporary manifestation of the historical dialogue between idealised and pragmatic approaches to policy formation among the Chinese elite. It is incorrect, however, to assume that there is consensus among Chinese policy-makers on how to approach any issue, much less one with such a long history of debate as the military-agricultural colony. I seek here to describe and analyse to what extent the twenty-first century *bingtuan* is influenced by each of these approaches.

The Mao era *bingtuan* was similar in many ways to Dynastic era forms of the military-agricultural colony: an insular and militarised society that was agriculturally based. However, *bingtuan* society in the era of the campaign to Open Up the West is becoming increasingly civilianised and urbanised. The most recent academic studies that concentrate specifically on the *bingtuan* were published in 2000,⁵ and were consequently not in a position to examine the effects of these changes. This article hopes to make a contribution by addressing the twenty-first century gap in the research.⁶ As the daily tasks of urban members drift steadily towards industrial and commercial pursuits and away from military and agricultural ones, contact with non-*bingtuan* members is increasing. At the same time, *bingtuan* urban centres are merging with those administered by the XUAR government. One key result of these developments is that the organisation as a whole is becoming progressively less insular. A second key outcome is that, in combination with the recentralisation of control over the *bingtuan* by the Party at the expense of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), the power and influence of the *bingtuan* is now second to none in Xinjiang: the organisation is once again one of the primary tools with which the central government shapes development in Xinjiang. Thirdly, all of the above factors collude to integrate these developed *bingtuan* areas with the core region of China, and mean that these areas can no longer be conceptualised as frontier zones. The *bingtuan*’s expansion into Southern Xinjiang means that this outward movement of the frontier appears set to continue.

The latter section of this article consists of a case study on the *bingtuan* showcase city of Shihezi. No other administrative area of the *bingtuan* represents so clearly the distinction between military-agricultural colonies prior to the Reform era and the ideal form of frontier settlement in the twenty-first century. The physical and rhetorical changes described in this article have accelerated since the beginning of the twenty-first century, at the same time as China's political and economic aspirations move increasingly beyond its own borders, and their co-incidence signals the geopolitical importance of this new phase in the *bingtuan*'s development. The convergence of the Shihezi ideal with certain contemporary economically and politically-driven pragmatic objectives of the *bingtuan* means that the recent past, the present, and the possible futures of this organisation cannot simply be attributed to a consistent and continuous set of Chinese policies towards the periphery.

The frontier

Conceptualising the frontier is important because the distinctive and dynamic nature of China's Northwest frontier both influences and is influenced by the form and function of the *bingtuan* and its predecessors. The nature of China's Northwest frontier over time has three key elements. Firstly, throughout the history of the Chinese Empire, the Northwest frontier has been continually in flux (Gaubatz, 1996, p. 20). Secondly, the frontier has always been a region, not a line, and as such formed a transitional buffer zone around inner China (Waldron, 1990, p. 42). The third point is that the "Chinese conception of the heartland was ethnic as well as spatial...[so] regions of largely non-Chinese population remained consistently outside the perceived core area, regardless of their proximity to the heartland" (Gaubatz, 1996, p. 24). Thus the innermost parts of the Western Regions, those closest to the core area, may have been in effect integrated with the core area and consequently not frontier zones, but not characterisable as core either because of their low Han population. Turning this around, we can see that a high Han population helps transform a frontier zone into a part of the core.

Gaubatz distinguishes between "frontiers of control" and "frontiers of settlement". The former is characterised by settlers staying close to a fortified urban centre, perceiving the surrounding environment as too harsh and/or too dangerous to sustain them. The role of frontiers of control is to provide a buffer zone and keep trade routes open. Trade, rather than production or resource extraction, is also the economic base of frontiers of control. Frontiers of settlement arise when "settlers from the core penetrate and increasingly occupy an area, residing not only in the cities but in the rural areas as well. In such situations it is common for the settlers to displace, or at least disrupt, local settlement and subsistence" (Gaubatz, 1996, p. 21). Economic development of the frontier zone by the settlers (was and) is a major factor in shifting the emphasis from control to settlement.

In effect, then, there are four different states that a contested area on the edge of an empire (an area such as Xinjiang is to China) can be in. In terms of imperial occupation, the area can be unoccupied (i.e. by the empire, which leaves open the possibility that it may be occupied by non-Chinese), it can be a frontier of control, it can be a frontier of settlement, or it can be occupied and integrated into the empire. The way in which a frontier area moves through these states, not necessarily one

after the other, characterises the frontier process as linear or cyclical. As the names suggest, a linear frontier process occurs when a frontier region progresses from being unoccupied to being an occupied frontier, and eventually becomes integrated with the core of the occupying empire. A cyclical frontier process, on the other hand, occurs when a frontier region progresses from being unoccupied to being an occupied frontier but reverts to being unoccupied (in an imperial sense). The integration of parts of Xinjiang with the core region of China – largely through the actions of the *bingtuan* – has caused a linear frontier process to emerge in the Northwest, replacing the cyclical one that had persisted for millennia.

Military-agricultural settlements

Settlements that combine military and agricultural functions have been deployed since at least the Han dynasty, and are frequently cited by Western and Chinese authors alike as the historical basis of the twentieth-century *bingtuan*. At the end of the Mao era, Donald McMillen wrote that “the role of the [*bingtuan*]... was reminiscent of that played by the military colonists sent to the region in the eighteenth century by the Manchu emperors”, and went on to reiterate the important function that the *bingtuan* played in colonising Xinjiang during the period 1954–81 (1981, p. 75). Millward supports this view, calling the *bingtuan* “a direct descendant of Qing-era state farms” (2004, p. 90) and stating that “the settlement of soldiers and civilians on reclaimed land to grow their own food has long been a staple element of Chinese frontier strategy” (Millward, 1998, p. 50). Chinese government publications assert that “China has a centuries-old tradition of developing and protecting its border areas by stationing troops to cultivate and guard the frontier areas” (State Council, 2003, p. 19). Nowhere in the literature is there any dissent from this view; it is accepted as fact and applied equally to the twenty-first century *bingtuan* as it is to the 1954 *bingtuan* and all the forms of military-agricultural colony since the Han dynasty.

The Mao era bingtuan and its precursors

Military-agricultural settlements during the Dynastic era took many different forms and performed various functions, but were essentially restricted to certain parameters and as such displayed common attributes. Foremost among these attributes were their operation by, and/or in support of, the formal military, and their farming of the land with the aim of self-sufficiency. Their constituency was sometimes soldiers who were engaged in farming to support themselves and other professional soldiers, and sometimes peasantry who were militarised by the state or worked under a military administration. The populace was thus made up of soldiers and peasants, and these roles were often combined in the individual. The leadership invariably held military titles, and although they were often civilian office-holders as well, they were never exclusively civilians. While some settlements were production-focused and others were militarily focused, production was in general limited to grain for food, and was always for explicitly military purposes. Despite this, military-agricultural colonies of the Dynastic era were rarely, if ever, directly engaged in power projection. Some played a colonising role, while other

military-agricultural settlements were not necessarily colonial in nature. All of the military-agricultural settlements on the Northwestern frontiers during the Dynastic era, however, can be viewed as colonies due to their geographic, ethnic, and political context.

The Mao era *bingtuan* fits into the general terms described above in relation to military-agricultural colonies during the Dynastic era. The organisation took shape over the years 1949–54, and initially consisted of 200,000 demobilised soldiers from both the Communist and Nationalist armies. It was arranged in a military structure and the top leadership was dominated by ex-military men. Members of the *bingtuan*, both former soldiers and settlers⁷ transported in from other areas of China during the 1950s and 1960s, engaged in military training at least one day per week. These “Reclamation Warriors” held a gun in one hand and a hoe in the other, and lived in constant fear of a Soviet invasion. The “desert-to-farmland” mythology of the *bingtuan* was created by the labour, and in many cases the sacrifice, of these pioneers.

Structural change: empowering (the Party through) the bingtuan

Three key policy announcements were made in late 1998 that collectively marked the start of a new phase in the way the *bingtuan* is imagined and deployed. These were: the July directive for the PLA and People’s Armed Police Force (PAPF) to sever their commercial ties by the end of the year (Xinhua, 2002a); the renaming of the *bingtuan* as a corporation in August (*Ming Pao*, 1998); and the affirmation of *bingtuan* courts and prosecution offices as legal entities in December (Xinhua, 1998a; 1998b).

These significant changes, particularly the renaming of the *bingtuan* as a corporation, form the point of departure for this article. They came as the ascendant Chinese leadership under Jiang Zemin was preparing for the launch of a policy that would come to be known as the campaign to Open Up the West (西部大开发), and I contend that the two are inextricably linked. Versions of this campaign had been brewing since Mao Zedong’s time, but Jiang Zemin spent much of the late 1990s talking it up, and Jiang’s version was officially announced at the Xian conference on SOE reform and development in June 1999 (Liu, 2001, pp. 11–12). It was officially to begin in January 2000, apparently in preparation for China’s accession to the WTO. Thus, the general atmosphere of “opening-up” and global economic integration pervaded all the decisions regarding the *bingtuan* that were taken during this time.

The first broad policy announcement, the severing of military ties to commerce, affirmed the central leadership’s intention to fully professionalise the military and thus the move set clear boundaries for PLA involvement in the *bingtuan*⁸ and Xinjiang. The PLA would be restricted, as it already was in practice, to training the diminishing *bingtuan* militia. Secondly, the army’s sole focus on military affairs for the first time in the PRC’s history created a vacuum in the political economy of Xinjiang to which the *bingtuan* was not only suited but which it was actively being nurtured to fill.

Initially *bingtuan* leaders denied that Incorporation would change anything, and Western journal articles published in 2000 did not dispute this claim to inertia.

Nicolas Becquelin writes that the *bingtuan* is “described as a ‘Party-government-army’ unit” (2000, p. 78), although within the year *bingtuan* journal articles were referring to the organisation as a “Party-government-army-enterprise unit” (Jin, 2001, pp. 13–14). James Seymour pays only passing attention to the Incorporation that created the “world’s largest enterprise group” out of *bingtuan* companies’ unification⁹ (2000, p. 186). In other words, it was taken to be merely a veneer that allowed the *bingtuan* more freedom to conduct foreign business while carrying on its militia and prison activities.

However, the granting of corporate status to the *bingtuan* and the recognition of its legal system were closely connected to the larger overall plan for China and Xinjiang in the early twenty-first century. In 1998, Xinjiang was in every respect still undergoing a process of integration with the rest of China. The level of ethnic, socio-economic, and political stability was at a low ebb in a decade characterised by increasing unrest in the region. Party leaders felt that it was necessary not only to retain direct control over Xinjiang’s political and economic infrastructure but to actively extend this control. The *bingtuan* was the perfect tool with which to pursue this aim. The Chinese leadership recognised that economic power was crucial to the future ability of the *bingtuan* to carry out central objectives and that, in the late twentieth century, economic power was accepted as a legitimate form of control and power projection in a way that military force was not.

Expansion and Integration: 1998–2005

The campaign to Open Up the West, and the opening up of the bingtuan

The cluster of political events that culminated in the campaign to Open Up the West¹⁰ signalled a significant extension of the *bingtuan*’s mandate, and these newly-heightened powers were accompanied by expectations that the organisation would play a renewed and escalated role in carrying out central objectives in Xinjiang. I argue that these objectives include the de facto recentralisation of Xinjiang’s political structure and the Autonomous Region’s complete and final integration into the core, and that they are being pursued by further increasing the power of the *bingtuan* and expanding the geographic area in which the organisation operates. To facilitate these objectives, the *bingtuan* is undergoing a gradual transformation from a rural, military organisation that is obliged to provide costly non-profit-making social services and pursue contradictory objectives¹¹ into an urbanised and civilianised corporation with few or no social and military responsibilities. The ultimate aim is to create a stable and compliant social, political and economic environment in Xinjiang – a strong foothold in Central Asia.

Stability and development

In contrast to the Mao era concerns over Soviet invasion and late twentieth-century fears of ethnic uprising, the focus of stability in Xinjiang shifted during the early years of the twenty-first century towards the socioeconomic security of the Han population. The Han leaders of Xinjiang are becoming increasingly aware of the potential for unrest from within their own ethnicity. Consequently, the internal

security role of the *bingtuan* is now being superseded by the task of economic development of Xinjiang.

This trend has been driven primarily by the growing power and influence that the centre exerts in Xinjiang. Wang Lequan, Party Secretary of both Xinjiang and the *bingtuan* and currently the most powerful man in Xinjiang, expressed the growing confidence of the centre in early September 2001, stating that “By no means is Xinjiang a place where violence and terrorist accidents take place very often” (Amnesty International, 2002). He backed this up in December 2004 – “Compared to the early and mid-1990s, the threat of separatism has diminished” – despite China’s appropriation of the “War on Terror” to combat dissent in Xinjiang in the meantime. Wang was an original proponent of the “Strike Hard” campaign, seen as primarily targeting ethnic Minorities who often did no more than critically comment on discriminatory Han policies in Xinjiang (Amnesty International, 2001a; 2001b). His declaration therefore signals that ethnically-oriented internal security is seen by at least some in Beijing as no longer being the primary role of the *bingtuan*.¹² It is largely irrelevant whether there is increased dissatisfaction among ethnic Minority groups, who by many accounts are being sidelined both economically and politically (Bachman, 2004; Gilley, 2001) and are seeing their cultural heritage diluted and destroyed (Gladney, 2002; McCarthy, 1997; Raman, 2007; World Uyghur Network News, 2003). The Han authorities clearly feel confident about dealing with problems among the Minority groups should they arise. The centre is now turning its attention towards securing complicity and support among the Han peasants and workers who may feel that their livelihood is threatened by the restructuring associated with the market economy.

Opening up

The campaign to Open Up the West was of monumental significance for the previously relatively insular *bingtuan*. The announcement of the campaign coincided exactly with the start of an accelerated push to increase the *bingtuan*’s level of regional, national and international engagement.

The opening up of the *bingtuan* at a regional level is an attempt to dissolve the once rigid and in most places (township level and below) still extant boundary between XUAR and *bingtuan* spheres of governance. I term this “merging” to distinguish it from the integration of Xinjiang into the core area. The proposed model incorporates aspects of both the horizontal *bingtuan* structure and the vertical structure of the Autonomous Region (Fan, 2001, p. 2). Despite the vertical re-orientation of these *bingtuan* areas, there is no loss of power for the *bingtuan*. Indeed, quite the contrary. Under this model, *bingtuan* areas will merge with contiguous XUAR government-administered ones, but far from being subsumed by its former master, the *bingtuan* will retain a disproportionate amount of influence over a now expanded jurisdiction. Because the *bingtuan* hierarchy takes its orders directly from Beijing, the result will be increased direct Party control over the affairs of Xinjiang without orders having to go through the XUAR government structure, and will thus constitute an effective reversal of the decentralisation that took place throughout China during the Reform era (Lieberthal, 1995, p. 149).

In order for the *bingtuan* to enact this expansion of its political power in Xinjiang, the organisation is extending its reach into marginal areas of the Autonomous Region, further heightening its involvement in the construction of infrastructure that acts as a centripetal force, and intensifying development in urban centres to contribute further gravitational pull to this force. Not coincidentally, these are all measures that facilitate the integration of peripheral regions into the core (Becquelin, 2000, p. 75). The *bingtuan*'s strong and growing political connections to Beijing serve to accelerate (and fortify) this process.

Urbanisation and administrative restructuring

A series of developments relating to urban *bingtuan* areas emerged or accelerated after 1997/98 that together constitute a fundamental shift in the spatial form of the organisation and the interaction of its parts. In terms of form, the *bingtuan* intensified its efforts at urbanisation (*Xinjiang sheng chan jian she bing tuan nian jian*, 2003, p. 17). This was in some ways a reaction to the existing situation of rural depopulation (Jiang, 2003) and the natural growth of the cities, and in others a proactive policy to promote urban growth and the creation of strong urban centres to achieve political and economic objectives. The urban centres that have experienced the greatest growth are those associated with the *bingtuan*, and in general the closer the association, the more spectacular the growth (Toops, 2004b, p. 251; p. 254). The internal organisation of the *bingtuan* is becoming more vertically oriented as these changes take place. Combined with the industrialisation of the cities, the consistent swing towards cash crops by *bingtuan* farmers has meant a concurrent growth in the mutually dependent economic relationship between city and country.¹³ Urbanisation, and the merging outlined above, are also serving to raise the status and influence of the *bingtuan*, and thus the centre, in Xinjiang. This power-shift from simple XUAR government jurisdiction is already far more advanced in the Northern region, and it is the means by which integration of Southern Xinjiang into the core is to occur. The realisation of these goals will entail increased Han in-migration into the region and continued efforts to "civilise" the local Minority population along Chinese lines (Harrell, 1995, pp. 3–36), as well as the infrastructure projects outlined above.

The location of *bingtuan* farms during the 1950s in the lands surrounding the existing major settlements of that time, as well as the urban areas created by the *bingtuan* since then, means that many of the areas naturally in line for urban development are *bingtuan*-administered. Xinjiang, like the rest of China and indeed much of the world, is undergoing rapid urbanisation, creating demand for space, building materials and water resources. It is clear from the high proportion of Xinjiang's prime real estate that is *bingtuan* controlled that the organisation is key to Xinjiang's future development.

The emergence of a linear frontier process

Recentralisation and the expansion of the *bingtuan* into Southern Xinjiang mean that for the first time in the history of Chinese conquest of the region, the Northwest frontier is exhibiting signs of being part of a linear process of outward expansion

rather than one stage in a continually expanding and contracting cyclical process. Nicolas Becquelin argues that “Xinjiang . . . has moved from a phase of accelerated assimilation and national territorial integration by the centre, which typified the decade of the 1990s, to a phase essentially of consolidation of the advances made during this period” (2004, p. 358). It follows that any area for which this is true cannot be considered a frontier zone, as territorial integration takes place in frontier zones, whereas consolidation can only come after frontiers have disappeared or moved on.

Piper Gaubatz wrote in 1996 that “The regions that can be categorized as frontiers today have never been fully integrated into the national system and are nearly as much ‘frontier,’ in both cultural and economic terms, as they were during the Han dynasty” (1996, p. 20). Within a decade, an entirely new trend has emerged. Most of Northern Xinjiang and the large urban centres of Southern Xinjiang are now engaged in the consolidation drive referred to by Becquelin, and these areas are no longer frontier zones. In general the frontier can be seen as having moved beyond places where *bingtuan* farms have created a frontier of settlement in the past. The *bingtuan* and the frontier move in close alignment, the latter being swept along by the former.

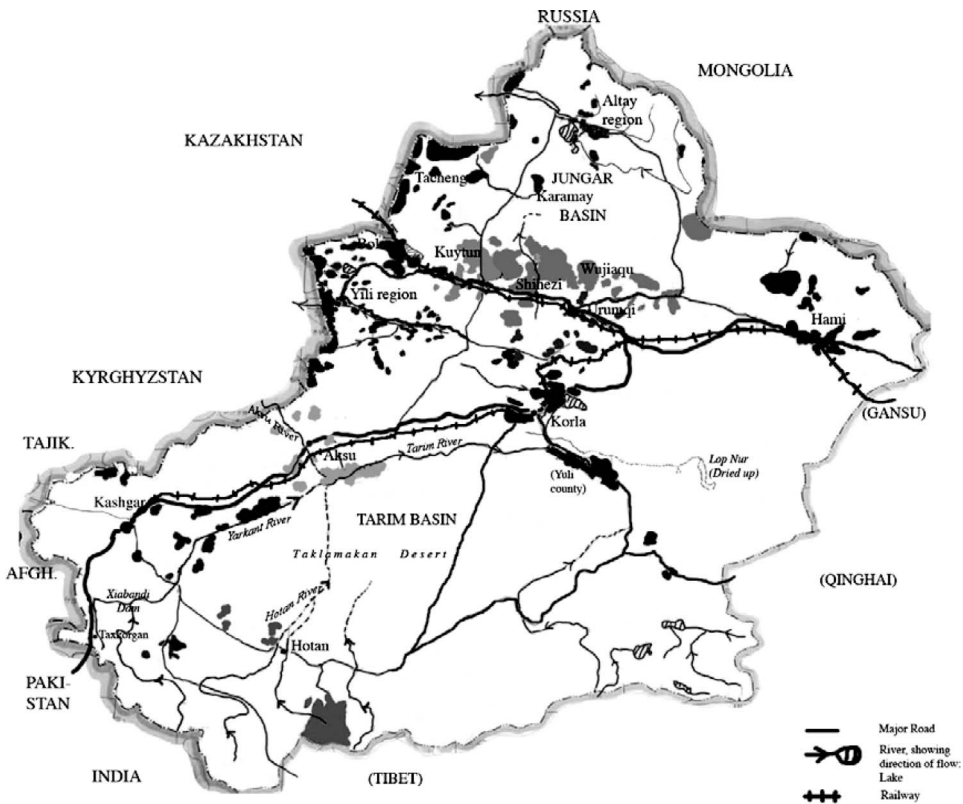


Plate 1 Map. Roads, Rivers, and Railways – and the distribution of *bingtuan* Divisions in Xinjiang. Solid shaded areas denote different *bingtuan* Divisions. Map by Tom Cliff

Infrastructure

Infrastructure that is associated with urbanisation – roads, railways, waterworks, telecommunications, and so on – can be likened to a network of ropes that serve to tie peripheral regions to the core. Developed areas thus tend to be more highly integrated than underdeveloped rural areas. The existing infrastructure in Xinjiang is heavily biased towards the North, where the vast majority of the region's Han population live. The distribution of both infrastructure and the Han population in Xinjiang is closely associated with *bingtuan* reclamation areas¹⁴ (Bachman, 2004, p. 165). Given that the major civil functions of the *bingtuan* are production, construction and in-migration, this is clearly a causal relationship. These areas can be considered integrated. In concert with the *bingtuan*'s expansion into not yet integrated areas of Southern Xinjiang are a number of large-scale infrastructure projects that are serving to rapidly integrate this Minority-dominated region. These include mobile telecommunications, the cross-Tarim Highway and the 1999 extension of the rail line from Korla to Kashgar (Ingram, 2001). Crucial to the success of this integrative project is control and regulation of the water supply, and the *bingtuan* is now engaged in cementing its already dominant position in this regard.

Water resources – the key to control

Water is a key to national economic and social development throughout China, but it is the absolute lifeblood of desert regions (Toops, 2004a, p. 272).

The positioning of *bingtuan* farms at the headwaters of most of Xinjiang's major rivers means that the organisation has effective control over the surface water of the XUAR, and consequently of the lands and people in downstream areas. Apparently, the organisation also takes a degree of responsibility for these people, although many of them may not be *bingtuan* members or live or work on *bingtuan* farms. The 2004 Statistical Yearbook of the *bingtuan* states that there are 1.9 million people who do not have access to good drinking water, and that the *bingtuan* has "already solved" this problem for an additional 1.14 million (section 17–18). As this total (3.04 million) exceeds the *bingtuan*'s population by 600,000 people, and many *bingtuan* areas did not face this problem in the first place, the Yearbook's area of reference is thus likely to be the whole Autonomous Region. At the very least, this is a recognition that although the *bingtuan* occupies only 30 per cent of Xinjiang's arable land (Becquelin, 2000, p. 78), it controls the viability of most of it through control of the water supply.

One of the main elements of the *bingtuan*'s renewed push into Southern Xinjiang is the move to rehabilitate and more effectively "harness" the Tarim River, a comprehensive plan budgeted at 10.7 billion yuan. This is deemed to be the most expensive environmental restoration project ever undertaken in Xinjiang (Xinhua, 2002b), but Urumqi residents described the project in early 2001 as an attempt to save the *bingtuan* settlements from redundancy, as well as from the encroaching Taklamakan desert.

The second phase of the overall plan for the Tarim Basin has a longer-term goal that goes beyond restoration. The aim is to control and regulate the flow of water in

the Tarim by damming its major tributaries, perhaps most significantly the Taxkorgan River at Xiabandi in the mountains South of Yarkant. This eventually becomes the Tarim River, and is the major river system in Southern Xinjiang. If the proposed dam, or a similar project, is successful in its goals, it is believed to have the potential to permit major settlement and resettlement of many areas of the Southern Tarim fringe, a goal that dovetails perfectly with the expansion of the *bingtuan* into the region. The *bingtuan* is the most effective organ for appropriating land for reclamation, and is able to import Han settlers and temporary migrant labourers without needing to apply to the XUAR authorities for residency or work permits. The increased water and energy security that is anticipated as a result of the dam would also allow intensified settlement and industrial development of urban areas. Even if diminishing meltwater makes the *bingtuan*'s expansion plans less successful than projected, completion of the proposed dam and associated infrastructure would mean a redistribution of controllable water resources – and thus influence – on the Southern edge of the Tarim Basin. In turn, this acceleration of the economic and demographic transformation of Southern Xinjiang would serve to guarantee its eventual integration with the North, and with the Han core.

Civilianisation

The *bingtuan* is becoming increasingly civilianised, and this is being brought about by a number of interrelated but separate factors. The reduction of the *bingtuan* militia and its increasingly professional profile mean that the differentiation of civilian and military roles that occurred in the military-agricultural colonies of the Dynastic era is now quite distinct in the twenty-first century *bingtuan*. Certain Companies (连队) are now entirely military, while others are in effect simply villages that still retain the military title (Annals of the Xinjiang *Bingtuan*, 1997). At a societal level, any residual military consciousness that may exist in the population is declining rapidly 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.

Civilianisation is even more conspicuous at the upper level: today's leaders of Xinjiang are career bureaucrats – political and economic managers rather than military men. Civilians now hold the top three positions in the *bingtuan*: Party Secretary (Wang Lequan), Political Commissar (Nie Weiguo) and Commander (Hua Shifei). Wang also holds this top post in the XUAR government, while Hua is also the General Manager of the *bingtuan* in its corporate form, the XCC, and Nie is the Chairman of the corporation's board. Further, Nie and Hua both hold high positions in the XUAR government and Wang is a prominent member of the central Politburo (Bingtuan Web, 2007). This “wearing of two [or three] hats” is by no means unprecedented. Indeed, it was the norm when the *bingtuan* was closely connected to the PLA for the leaders to hold both military and *bingtuan* posts. Thus, 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. This facilitates the governing (including resource allocation or denial) of different areas and different social groups according to different sets of rules and regulations.

The PLA's only involvement with the *bingtuan* is in training and supervising the relatively small and poorly-equipped *bingtuan* militia. Authority over the *bingtuan* militia is shared between the *bingtuan* itself and the PLA, but the PLA cares little about the *bingtuan* militia – it tends to be ignored if serious trouble arises either externally or internally (Seymour, 2000, p. 183). For the *bingtuan*, the militia's major use is as leverage to procure increased funding from the central government.¹⁵ Other than that, it is simply an administrative and financial burden that detracts from the urban civilian image that the *bingtuan* is promoting of itself (Neo Oasis, 2007). Thus, the *bingtuan*'s militia can be expected to continue to separate, at least in functional terms, from the organisation, perhaps eventually merging with another of Xinjiang's security forces.

In sum, the *bingtuan* is currently experiencing a significant growth in power as it intensifies urban and industrial development, asserts further control over Xinjiang's water resources, and transfers some of its costly social responsibilities to the Autonomous Region government. This latter is part of the process of merging *bingtuan* areas with parts of Xinjiang, with the ultimate goal of this strategy being to create a centrally-controlled governance structure in the region that is not subject to the standard rules and regulations that relate to provincial-level governments.¹⁶ Effectively dispensing with the Autonomous Region government as an intermediary in this way has provided a compliant and streamlined political environment in Xinjiang and, combined with the social and economic transformations that are an intended consequence of the *bingtuan*'s expansion into Southern Xinjiang, will create a stable platform from which China can project influence into Central Asia. The form of organisation that is able to most effectively act as a conduit for central power in Xinjiang and carry out large construction projects in the Autonomous Region is a state-controlled corporation that has a high degree of coercive¹⁷ control over a civilian labour force but is unencumbered by social responsibilities to these people. The *bingtuan*'s movement towards this form of organisation means that it is becoming less insular and less military but no less controlled. The next section deals with the most advanced example of these changes in form and function – Shihezi.

Case study: Shihezi: twenty-first century *bingtuan*



"A place filled with hope"



"A place of expansive greenery" (Huaxia, 2005)

Shihezi represents the ideal form of the future *bingtuan*. The city is imagined and constructed as a place of abundance, a patch of green on the edge of the harsh desert, a place of deep tradition, of modernity, and of limitless hope for the future. As such, Shihezi sees itself as an updated version of the desert-fringe settlements that fed, watered, traded with and owed their existence to merchants and travellers on the Old Silk Road – it sees itself as a Neo Oasis. An official *bingtuan* website, www.neoasis.com,¹⁸ which bears that name identifies itself strongly with the city of Shihezi. Conceptually, the city is a piece of the Han core transplanted to the periphery, and like a species divided by continental drift, it has taken on a unique hybrid form that combines elements of tradition and modernity.

The “blank slate” that the Manas River reclamation area presented to the early *bingtuan* pioneers has been shaped into what is undeniably viewed as the greatest triumph in the history of Chinese reclamation. Chinese sources paint the story thus: 50 years of arduous struggle and selfless personal sacrifice by *bingtuan* pioneers have brought civilisation to this barbarian landscape, and now new in-migrants can reap the benefits of this prosperous modern industrial city (Neo Oasis, 2007; SinoFile, 2002). Such are the perceived success and future prospects of Shihezi that the idealised city now plays a key part in the process of merging *bingtuan* urban areas with areas administered by the XUAR government. The ultimate intention is for all of Xinjiang’s urban areas to emulate the social, political, economic and spatial characteristics of the *bingtuan*’s “showcase city”.

With Shihezi as its model, the persistent image¹⁹ of the *bingtuan* as a low-tech paramilitary organisation little removed from the military-agricultural colonies of the Mao era and before is being actively revised on the *bingtuan*’s web sites, in its publications, and in the Chinese media. A rhetorical shift has occurred, and the *bingtuan* now promotes itself as a civilianised corporation, focused on the creation of an “all-round well-off society” through Shihezi-style urbanisation and industrialisation of resource-rich Xinjiang. Further, this is not simply empty rhetoric, and *bingtuan* decision-makers now take an increasingly pragmatic approach to the future development of the organisation. Shihezi’s rapid rise as a model of idealised urbanity in Xinjiang shows that the expressed intentions of *bingtuan* leadership, backed up as they are by political and financial support, are accurate signposts of future developments.

However, Shihezi’s urban industrial ideal stands out in sharp relief against the backdrop of the less developed *bingtuan* settlements that are distant from major urban centres and struggle to farm increasingly marginal land. The *bingtuan* as a whole is far from being socioeconomically homogenous. In fact, it is highly stratified. There are still many *bingtuan* members, even those in the close suburban farms, who do not share in this urban prosperity. Although this rural-urban disparity presents a problem for the *bingtuan* as a whole, the net balance of constraints and advantages on the *bingtuan*’s successful pursuit of the Shihezi ideal is positive for the organisation. The rise of the *bingtuan* as a social, political and economic force in Xinjiang and Central Asia looks set to continue.

The Shihezi ideal

The city of Shihezi, and its relationship with the surrounding 8th Agricultural Division reclamation zone, provide the model that *bingtuan* expansion and Xinjiang's urban development is based on. Shihezi combines traditional and modern Chinese ideals of city building, and the city has socio-cultural, spatial, political, economic and historical attributes that are distinctly different from those of cities administered solely by prefectural governments. Traditional ideals are reflected in Shihezi's layout and spatial organisation, and are generally elite in nature, whilst ideals that can be thought of as having more recently arisen (modern ideals) tend to be more functional, and are of necessity inclusive of non-elites. In other words, they are concerned with the social and political economy of the city.

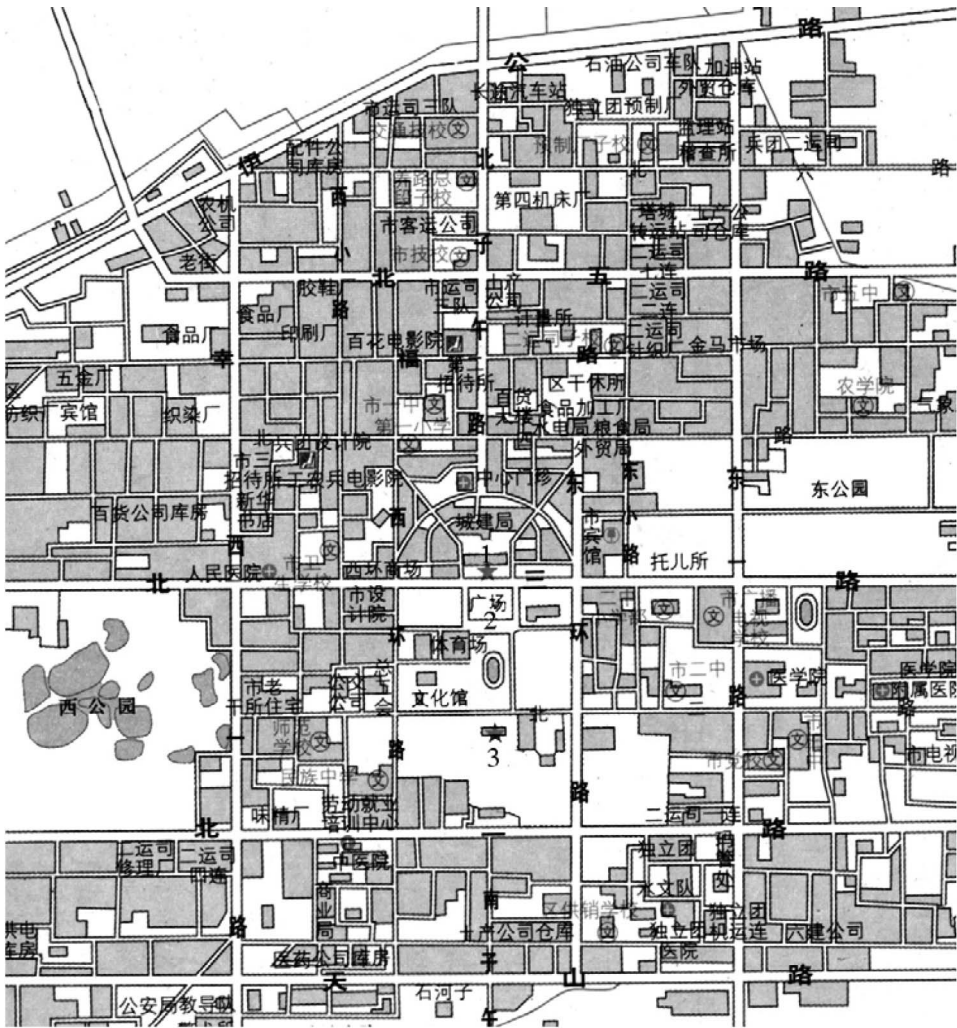
Traditional ideals in contemporary Shihezi

Adherence to the traditional Chinese urban ideal meant constructing square walls and main thoroughfares that were aligned with the cardinal directions and were "as straight as possible". The width of these thoroughfares signified the city's status within the Imperial administrative hierarchy, and they passed by the gates to the city's most important structures, "such as the administrative centre and the temple to the town god". These key symbols of authority were centrally located, often along an imaginary North-South axis. In the traditional ideal of Imperial times, spatial divisions marked out and perpetuated class and ethnic demarcations (Gaubatz, 1996, p. 127).

Having the advantage of starting with a flat and completely undeveloped site, Shihezi's planners and builders were able to directly apply these traditional ideal guidelines. The city is built on a grid of uniform size that is oriented to the cardinal directions. The shape of the city is basically square, and at its dead centre are the offices of the city government. These offices are located in a large park that contains the monument to Wang Zhen and the human plough statue (plate 3), and this park is bounded on the North and South by Shihezi's two main East-West boulevards. The central North-South axis is roadway only in the Northern area of the city, the commercial district. Were this roadway to continue, it would pass directly through the office compound of the Shihezi city Party Committee and then the statue of Wang Zhen.²⁰ The two East-West boulevards mentioned above both pass by the gates of these two most important administrative compounds. The only roads that are not aligned with the cardinal points are a semicircular one that marks the boundary between the commercial district and the administrative district, and two 45° radial arms of this semicircle that would intersect at the circle's absolute centre – inside the building that houses Shihezi's Party Committee²¹ (see plate 2). As for Shihezi's position in the administrative hierarchy, all of the city streets are extremely broad, and there are very few outdoor spaces in Shihezi that are less than 25 metres wide.

Modern ideals

Shihezi also exhibits modern Chinese ideals of city building and management, which, in contrast to the geomantic and hierarchical concerns that governed



1. Party Offices
2. Statue of Wang Zhen
3. City Government

Plate 2 Map. Shihezi city (Wang, 2001, p. 39)

traditional ideals, are primarily socio-political and economic. Shihezi was among the first cities in Xinjiang to construct multi-storey residential apartment buildings, and at least one of Xinjiang's richest men made his fortune in Shihezi developing these privately-owned housing complexes (Interviews, 2001–03). Housing development by private individuals and sale to private individuals represented a significant step towards the marketisation of the urban economy, as well as permitting a higher population density and the partial devolution of social control from work units to residential committees. It also means that workers employed in Shihezi's growing



Plate 3. Surprisingly well-built and Caucasian-looking “reclamation warriors” immortalised in the centre of Shihezi. Photograph by Tom Cliff/www.anthropix.net. Copyright 2002

industrial sector no longer have to be provided with housing by their employers, a definite plus in the eyes of the private or part-private enterprises that the city is trying hard to attract. Shihezi’s leaders are at pains to point out the city’s relatively high average per capita income of 11,289 yuan, high average life expectancy, status as Xinjiang’s number one “Garden City” (*Shengchan jianshe bingtuan zhi*, 1997, p. 48), and the United Nations title of “A model of improving human living conditions and environment” (Neo Oasis, 2005). All of these positive benefits, however, are to be enjoyed by Han people exclusively. Indeed, one of the benefits of Shihezi that is cited by many of its residents, and clearly evident in the planning and operation of the city, is the invisibility of Minority peoples.

The model economy

The nature of Shihezi’s socioeconomic model is crucial to the city’s identity and the ideal form that it represents. Like other aspects of Shihezi, this socioeconomic model is being promoted for implementation throughout the *bingtuan*. Through the website www.neoasis.com, Shihezi aims to attract tourists, skilled workers and light industrial companies – all inputs necessary to the development of what the city’s mayor describes as Shihezi’s “new form of industrial development” (Neo Oasis, 2005). In terms of industrial structure, Shihezi has already begun the transition from a planned to a market economy, one that is not solely reliant on state investment but utilises private funds, technology and know-how from both Chinese and foreign companies. The next stage is to “synthesise [these] market reforms, knowledge, technology, capital, and selected natural resources to develop a special economic combination” (Fan Renyuan, 2000, p. 8). In practice, this means continuing to shift to a more vertically-integrated agri-industrial structure with an increasing proportion of high value-added production (egate2china.com, 2001). By replicating this strategy *bingtuan*-wide, the organisation’s economic leadership hopes to take

advantage of the agricultural produce and expertise already at its command while also developing higher levels of skill and technology. Shihezi is, and will continue to be, “the leading force for economic development of the Corps [and] an important showcase of opening up” (Xinjiang Government, 2002).

Merging

In the terms described above, Shihezi is already “merged”. Firstly, in principle the city government is separate from the *bingtuan*’s 8th Agricultural Division, which administers the surrounding reclamation area. In practice, however, the “strutting attitude” of the *bingtuan* cadres (Seymour, 2000, p. 186) towards representatives of the XUAR government in Shihezi reveals that the *bingtuan* retains effective control of the city. Secondly, while many of the *bingtuan*’s outlying rural townships and villages are socially insular places where only *bingtuan* members live, the social boundaries between Shihezi and the surrounding parts of Xinjiang are highly “porous”: many of the city’s residents are not *bingtuan* members. In this way, management decisions taken by the *bingtuan* leadership affect far more people than the 2.5 million who are official members of the organisation. As this merging broadens and devolves to smaller urban centres, an increasing proportion of Xinjiang’s population will become a part of the Shihezi ideal.

Rhetorical shift

The *bingtuan* is now promoting itself as primarily economic and civilian rather than military, as this is more in line with the interests of the groups that the organisation is now seeking to attract: foreign and private domestic capital, and a skilled “high-quality” labour force (Neo Oasis, 2005). Revamped terminology now frames the *bingtuan* as a “corporation” rather than the military-sounding “Corps”; “Divisions” are translated as “Prefectures”; and “reform through labour” camps are now “prisons” in English (*Xinjiang bingtuan tongji nianjian*, 2004, Introduction). Most importantly perhaps, the *bingtuan*’s new description as a Party-Government-Army-Enterprise organisation is not simply an attempt to disguise the “real” military nature of the *bingtuan* behind a thin shroud of corporate civilianisation for the consumption of Western observers, governments and potential investors. The involvement of foreign companies as far back as 1979 (*Shengchan jianshe bingtuan zhi*, 1997, p. 500), when the *bingtuan* was still very closely connected to the military, has already shown that the placation of international human rights lobby groups is not necessary to secure foreign capital. It is at least as important to promote the *bingtuan* as a progressive civil organisation to investors and in-migrants within China. Potential investors and in-migrants who possess the power to decide whether or not to become involved with the *bingtuan* (and thus provide the capital investment and technical skills that the *bingtuan* needs most to attract) tend to view a civil corporation more favourably than a militaristic Corps. There are two primary reasons for this. The first is that the priority of a corporation – profit – is more closely aligned with that of the investors and in-migrants, as they too are seeking profit and/or enhancement of their personal status. Military duties are costly and do not produce profit. The second main reason relates to the level of power that the

newcomers enjoy. Investors wish to be seen as equals, or even “special guests” who receive preferential treatment, while voluntary in-migrants do not wish to reduce their social capital by becoming soldiers or even associating with what James Seymour once termed an “essentially Maoist organisation” (2000, p. 186).

With these changes in rhetoric, the *bingtuan* can no longer be viewed as “an essentially Maoist organisation”. There is a growing sense of pragmatism among *bingtuan* leaders and policy-makers, and at a rhetorical level it is economics, rather than purely politics, that is in command. Top *bingtuan* leaders and policy-makers recognise that for the *bingtuan* to pursue and achieve its objectives – including most immediately expansion into Southern Xinjiang and its role as the guardian of Han socioeconomic stability in the entire region – the organisation must not just pay lip service to market reform and civilianisation, but must also change in actuality. Former *bingtuan* Commander Zhang Qingli stated that “We are the last aircraft carrier of the planned economy. If we do not change, we will become an isolated island in the ocean of the market economy” (O’Neill, 2004). Zhang was echoing similar sentiments expressed by policy-makers in various *bingtuan* journals immediately after the announcement of the campaign to Open up the West (Fan Deguang, 2001, p. 1; Fan Renyuan, 2000, p. 7; Jin, 2001, p. 13). The ideal *bingtuan* member is now an urban technologist, supplanting the Mao era soldier-farmer just as economic competition was once touted to supplant military conflict under the rubric of globalisation (Weinstein, 20 October 2004).

Let the world know the bingtuan!

Let the bingtuan know the world! (Animated banner on Neo Oasis, 2005)

The population of the *bingtuan*, both relatively recent and original, is supportive of further rapid reform towards a skilled urban civilian society and the related “opening up” that pervades the rhetoric.²² Most see this as the way to “a better life”, one of greater prosperity. Now that this desire has arisen it will continue to grow, and one of the challenges facing *bingtuan* planners is managing the expectations of the rural population, who see themselves as increasingly marginalised by the growing income gap.

The actuality of the bingtuan: Disparity and diminishing constraints

There is a massive disparity between the urbanising and industrialising *bingtuan* areas such as Shihezi and the more rural and/or distant *bingtuan* settlements. This is reflected in the amount of money spent on developing the respective regions. In 1988, Shihezi’s 8th Division accounted for over 21 per cent of investment in urban construction *bingtuan*-wide, and together with the 1st Division at Aksu and the 6th Division at Wujiaqu, constituted a massive 56 per cent. The effect of this policy of uneven development is still clearly visible today, both between and within Divisions: there are *bingtuan* areas that still do not have a guaranteed supply of drinking water, and where most of the farmers live in low earth-floored huts and do not have access to modern agricultural technologies.

However, some of the demographic problems that the *bingtuan* is currently, and has been increasingly, facing are expected to decline in the medium term. The ageing

workforce and the related growing pension burden will at some time within the next decade begin to reverse, as the older members of the *bingtuan* die out. The *bingtuan* is taking on fewer new members as it shifts further into the industrial and service sectors, significantly scales down land reclamation, and implements new work practices that, among other things, do not guarantee lifetime tenure or pensions.

The *bingtuan* has shed its social responsibility downwards: certain farmers in the 2nd Agricultural Division (农二师) rent *bingtuan* land at a fixed price per *mu* (0.0667 hectares) and are told what they must grow by the Regimental leadership. They then sell this crop at a non-negotiable price to the *bingtuan*-owned factory that processes it. They must invest their own capital and labour in the entire production process. Thus, they take all of the risks associated with a market system but have none of such a system's freedom of choice. These ordinary rural members are the locus of a collision between planned and market economic systems, exacerbated by inefficiently-run factories and corruption among their Regimental leaders (Interviews at farm centre 2, 2007).

In this way, the overlapping internal structures of the *bingtuan* – corporation on one hand, (overt) organ of the state on the other – serve to condense the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in the “Socialist Market Economy with Chinese Characteristics”. At one level, the *bingtuan* can be seen as a corporation that operates within a polity where it makes the rules itself. The advantages that this parallel structure grants, and the level of ongoing financial and political support from the centre demonstrated by the *bingtuan*'s rapid rise in bureaucratic status over the past decade, are the primary elements responsible for the organisation's continuing growth in power.

Shihezi's spatial, social, political and economic form provides an example on which other *bingtuan* Divisions model themselves, and it is a distinctly different model from that of 1954. Although the transformation of the *bingtuan* into a civilianised and urbanised corporate entity that is not burdened with the social responsibilities of other large primarily state-owned enterprises in China is far from complete, Shihezi represents a determined thrust to bring this about, leading by example and promoting pursuit of the ideal *bingtuan*-wide.²³

Conclusion

The transformations of form, function and rhetorical justification that the *bingtuan* underwent during the later years of the twentieth century represent a schism between the twenty-first century *bingtuan* and the military-agricultural colonies prior to the Reform era. The motives, mechanisms and role models have all changed. Whereas the Dynastic and Mao era organisations were operated in support of the formal military – supplying food grain and/or backup forces – the twenty-first century *bingtuan* retains only the slightest connection to the PLA. The former military or dual military/civilian leadership has been replaced by an entirely civilian one, and at the societal level the ideal of merging the roles of soldier and farmer has given way to that of the skilled professional. Instead of engaging in agriculture and militia activities, this idealised urban civilian is involved in industrial, commercial and service work. Economic imperatives have displaced purely military and ideological ones as the primary concern of political leaders in the *bingtuan*. The organisation has

been the driving force behind the replacement of the formerly cyclical frontier process, under which the extent of core influence and its integration of the periphery expands and contracts over time, by an outwardly expanding linear frontier process that in 2008 shows little sign of reversing. With much of the Autonomous Region's infrastructure, economy and even culture now integrated with the core region of China, the era of colonisation has all but passed in Xinjiang. This is a post-colonial context. The *bingtuan* is no longer a military-agricultural colony.

Whereas at one time the "failure to reconcile pragmatic and idealised visions of the world" had a deleterious effect for Chinese ambitions on their Northwest frontiers (Waldron, 1990, p. 172), these once-opposing approaches are converging in the twenty-first century *bingtuan*. For a start, traditional ideals complement rather than contradict modern ideals in cities such as Shihezi, and these modern ideals are themselves pragmatic. Secondly, the centre's primary objective in Xinjiang – the achievement and maintenance of "stability and development" – encompasses an idealised Han civilising project in its pragmatic socioeconomically based approach to political control. Finally, the reassertion of full Party control over the *bingtuan*, in combination with the organisation's ability to operate flexibly as a corporation and/or as an organ of the central state in parallel with the XUAR government, means that the Party in Beijing now has at its disposal a selection of different tools with which to mould the socio-political economy of Xinjiang. The situation as a whole is an example of an idealised institution being used to pursue idealised ends through pragmatic means.

It may be noted that these trends – opening up, civilianisation, urbanisation, and the convergence of the ideal and the pragmatic – are exactly those that China as a whole is exhibiting, and that they are therefore nothing remarkable. On the contrary, this is precisely the point. Drawing a parallel between the *bingtuan* and the Chinese nation-state emphasises the extent to which the contemporary *bingtuan* is significantly more open, or "porous", than the insular organisation of previous eras. Secondly, the *bingtuan* has many structural similarities to a nation-state or province, and is thus affected in similar ways. The critical difference is that the *bingtuan* is also a corporation, and the resulting "corporate state" is answerable to a higher power, the Chinese Communist Party. The growing power of this "corporate state" means that CCP control over and governance of Xinjiang is becoming increasingly direct.

The *bingtuan* is also of increasing importance on a global scale. Although the *bingtuan's* current increase in power is within Xinjiang, the Autonomous Region itself is of increasing relevance to the PRC's plans for the future – as both a source of and passageway for energy resources, and as a strong base in Central Asia. This is enhancing the *bingtuan's* position in a national context. Similarly, as China grows in power internationally, the *bingtuan* is set to become ever more prominent in the region and the world.

Although there is some disjuncture between what the *bingtuan* empirically *is* and what it *wants to be* (the ideal being held up for it), the gap between the rhetoric and the reality is closing fast. In the midst of the *bingtuan's* unfinished transformation, contrasts and contradictions remain. In terms of its economic structure, the *bingtuan* is stretched between Plan and Market. Socio-politically, the organisation retains aspects of militarisation even as it pulls further and further in the direction of being a solely civil society. Finally, while many areas of the *bingtuan* are urbanising and

merging with non-*bingtuan* areas at a rapid pace, others remain rural and relatively isolated. However, the changes in the *bingtuan* over the past two decades have been more dramatic than any of the transformations undergone by the military-agricultural colony in its 2,200-year history. From an historical perspective, the Neo Oasis is just around the corner.

Notes

1. The organisation's full title is the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps [新疆生产建设兵团, *Xinjiang shengchan jianshe bingtuan*] – a military-agricultural colony founded in 1954 with the responsibility to “open up wasteland and defend the frontier” (O'Neill, 2004).
2. Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.
3. The *bingtuan* has since its inception been responsible for a land-area and for governing the people within that land-area. In 2008 the organisation had its own courts, universities, police and so on, and reported an annual GDP.
4. Philip Kuhn defines “militia” as “those institutions in which the civil and military roles of the participants are in a substantial degree interconnected”. This interconnection extends to every aspect of their legal, psychological and economic existence (1970, pp. 13–14).
5. Seymour (2000) and Becquelin (2000). Becquelin broadened his scope in an article published in 2004, which contributes substantially to the current article. However, Becquelin's 2004 article concentrates on the campaign to Open Up the West rather than on the *bingtuan* per se.
6. The initial observations and interviews for this article were carried out during 9 months in Xinjiang over 2002–03. I visited – as an English teacher, a tourist, or a personal guest of a resident – a number of *bingtuan* farm centres [团场] and villages [连队] in both North and South Xinjiang and talked in an informal manner with my hosts and other residents. I also interviewed “ex-*bingtuan*” residents now living in Urumqi, Shihezi or Korla. The new textual sources are primarily Chinese-language articles published by Party and/or *bingtuan* research and teaching institutes in Xinjiang – see bibliography for full details. I conducted further interviews, did additional fieldwork, and made the final revisions to this article whilst in Korla, Xinjiang, in 2007–08.
7. Peasant farmers, “sent down” urban youth, prostitutes and other minor criminals were coercively or forcibly relocated from Eastern China in order to populate the *bingtuan*.
8. The PLA ran the *bingtuan*'s immediate progenitor, the Xinjiang Wilderness Reclamation Army, until the *bingtuan* was itself officially formed in October 1954. For the next 15 years, the PLA controlled only the (still significant) military affairs of the *bingtuan* (McMillen, 1981, p. 71). However, in 1969, growing Sino-Soviet tensions and the decimation of the *bingtuan* leadership during the early Cultural Revolution caused the central authorities to restore military control over the entire organisation. PLA troops took over leadership positions throughout the hierarchy, fitting directly into the *bingtuan*'s existing military structure. The PLA, however, was taking over a dysfunctional organisation that continued to exist only because of its security role. In 1975 the economic imperative prevailed: the *bingtuan* farms were dispersed into Xinjiang's state farm system and the army officers acting as *bingtuan* cadres made civilian (Seymour, 2000, p. 179). These civilianised cadres carried their personal and economic links to the PLA into the Reform era, but their passing marks the passing of their military mindset: aspiring new *bingtuan* officials are now required to pass a competitive exam before taking up positions in the hierarchy (Neo Oasis, 2007).
9. *Bingtuan* companies were grouped together in a corporate structure [集团], rather than being dispersed entities belonging to units within the military structure of the organisation. Both the new name – Xinjiang Construction Corporation [新建集团公司; XCC] – and the new structure operate in parallel with those that previously existed. Unification also means that all of these smaller companies ultimately answer to the General Manager of the XCC – who is simultaneously the *bingtuan* Commander.
10. That is, the PLA divestment order, the Incorporation of the *bingtuan* and the granting of legal status to its courts and prosecution offices, and the campaign to Open Up the West itself.
11. For example, making a profit *and* continuing to support settlements in marginal border regions.

12. This concurs with Nicolas Becquelin's claim that central control in Xinjiang is now advanced enough to meet any separatist threat (2004, p. 374).
13. Although this rural-urban link has been strengthening for some time, an ever-increasing dependence on non-labour agricultural inputs such as fertiliser, pesticides and machinery, the demise of subsistence or semi-subsistence farming as a mode of existence, and the need for markets for cash crops are all factors that have come to bear most strongly in the post-Mao era.
14. The next major infrastructure project in North Xinjiang is a railway line linking the important *bingtuan* urban areas of Kuytun, the biggest transportation hub West of Urumqi, and Beitun, a recently promoted town [镇] within the administrative area of Altay city.
15. James Seymour points out that the authors of a 1994 article that read in part "...the border areas are the frontiers of the motherland...the construction there should have the whole nation's support..." were in fact issuing a sort of ultimatum to Beijing: "If you want us to defend China against the forces of central Asian nationalism, you should be willing to pay for the service"(2000, p. 185).
16. Nicolas Becquelin notes that "Beijing has by-passed the provincial and local administrations by giving the Corps greater autonomy" (2000, p. 80).
17. Along with primary and middle-school students from the region (both urban and rural schools, grades two to nine), teachers conscripted from Eastern China to "support the border areas" must participate in the harvest of *bingtuan* crops – including sugar beet, cotton, tomatoes and chilli peppers. They must fulfil a quota each day (eg. 10 year-old grade 4 children must take in 50 kilograms of tomatoes), and are fined according to the amount that they fall short. If they go over quota, their school gets paid extra by the crop owner. If they refuse to attend, they or their families must pay the fine for the full quota.
18. The title of this article, Neo Oasis, is adopted from an informational and promotional website, www.neoasis.com, which aims to promote the *bingtuan* to prospective investors and in-migrants, as well as to provide a portal for those inside the organisation who are able to access it. In the brief term, Neo Oasis, is reflected the self-image of the *bingtuan* – of a proud past and bright future.
19. This image is held by both Western and Chinese people, scholars and non-scholars.
20. If there is any deity (or "town god") for Shihezi, and the *bingtuan* in general, it is Wang Zhen. His inscription reads "Han Warrior".
21. The traditional Chinese conception was that the earth was square, and heaven was round. Perhaps, then, the existence of a crescent-shaped road around the offices of the Party Committee – the only road in Shihezi with any curvature whatsoever – is somehow significant.
22. It is important to note that, like elsewhere in the Chinese polity, there is structural resistance to full market reform – not least among members of the established patronage networks at the lower levels of the *bingtuan* hierarchy, who rely on their power to plan and allocate "public" resources to build their personal wealth (Interviews at farm centre 2, 2007). Market rhetoric, although empty at this level, is a valuable instrument of control.
23. It must be noted that replicating Shihezi over and over throughout Xinjiang is not possible, not least because many other Divisions occupy far less favourable environmental and economic positions than that of Shihezi.

References

- Amnesty International (2001a) *China: 'Striking harder' than ever before*, [Internet] Updated 6 July 2001. Available from: <<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/engASA170222001!Open>>, accessed 13 May 2004.
- Amnesty International (2001b) *Human rights in China in 2001 – a new step backwards (An Amnesty International Briefing)*, [Internet] Updated 3 September 2001. Available from: <<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/engASA170282001!Open>>, accessed 13 May 2004.
- Amnesty International (2002) *China's anti-terrorism legislation and repression in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region*, [Internet] Updated 22 March 2002. Available from: <<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engASA170102002?open&of=eng-CHN>>, accessed 8 March 2005.

- Bachman, David (2004) Making Xinjiang safe for the Han? Contradictions and ironies of Chinese governance in China's northwest, in Morris Rossabi (ed.), *Governing China's multiethnic frontiers*, pp. 155–85 (Seattle: University of Washington Press).
- Becquelin, Nicolas (2000) Xinjiang in the nineties. *The China Journal* 44, pp. 65–90.
- Becquelin, Nicolas (2004) Staged development in Xinjiang. *The China Quarterly* 178, pp. 358–78.
- Bingtuan Web (2007) The Xinjiang production and construction corps, [Internet] *Shihezi, Xinjiang Shengchan Jianshe Bingtuan*, Available from: <www.bingtuan.gov.cn>, accessed 10 November 2007.
- egate2china.com (2001) *Shihezi economic technology development zone*, [Internet] Available from: <http://www.egate2china.com/english/service/zonedetail.asp?messageid=281>, accessed 29 July 2005.
- Fan Deguang, Wu Xiaofeng and Gao Gangcang (2001) Bingtuan should challenge the western development by active marketing economical strategy (*dui tuan ying yi jiji de shichang jingji zhanlue tiaozhan da kaifa*). *Journal of Bingtuan Education Institute* 11(3), pp. 1–4.
- Fan Renyuan and Zhou Gousheng (2000) Thoughts on the question of bingtuan carrying out 'Develop the West' (*dui bingtuan shishi xibu da kaifa zhanlue zhong ji ge wenti de sikao*). *Bingtuan Dangxiao Xuebao* 56 (2000: 2), pp. 7–10.
- Fan Yali (2001) Characteristics of bingtuan reclamation area small cities and township construction and a proposed model for the future (*bingtuan tunkenqu xiaochengzhen jianshe de tedian ji weilai moshi gouxiang*). *Bingtuan Dangxiao Xuebao* 61 (2001: 1), pp. 30–33.
- Gaubatz, Piper Rae (1996) *Beyond the Great Wall: Urban form and transformation on the Chinese frontiers* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press).
- Gilley, Bruce (2001) China – 'Uighurs need not apply'. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 23 August, p. 26.
- Gladney, Dru (2002) Xinjiang: China's West Bank? *Current History*, September, pp. 267–70.
- Harrell, Stevan (1995) Introduction, in Stevan Harrell (ed.), *Cultural encounters on China's ethnic frontiers*, pp. 3–36 (Seattle: University of Washington Press).
- Huaxia (2005) [Internet] Available from: <http://www.huaxia.com.cn/>, accessed 28 January 2005.
- Ingram, Ruth (2001) *A new 'shining' Kashgar*, [Internet] Central Asia – Caucasus Analyst. Updated 6 June 2001. Available from: <http://www.cacianalyst.org/view_article.php?articleid=290>, accessed 8 March 2005.
- Interviews at farm centre 2 (2007) *Bingtuan farmers*. Conducted by Tom Cliff, 3 November 2007.
- Jiang Leiwen (2003) *Water resources, land exploration and population dynamics in arid area - The case of Tarim River basin in Xinjiang of China*, [Internet] Asian MetaCentre for Population and Sustainable Development Analysis. Available from: <http://www.populationasia.org/Research/Population_Changes_and_Land_Degradation.htm>, accessed 1 December 2004.
- Jin Yonggang, Huo Yuhua, Shen Hong and Du Qingjiu (2001) Thoughts on the question of preferential policies for the bingtuan in carrying out 'Develop the West' (*dui bingtuan shishi xibu da kaifa youhui zhengce wenti de sikao*). *Bingtuan Dangxiao Xuebao* 59 (2000: 5), pp. 13–15.
- Kuhn, Philip A. (1970) *Rebellion and its enemies in late imperial China: Militarization and social structure, 1796–1864* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Lieberthal, Kenneth (1995) *Governing China: From revolution through reform* (New York: W.W. Norton).
- Liu Xiaozhong and Song Xienuo (2001) Regarding the form and development of the Western Development Strategy Theory (*lun xibu da kaifa zhanlue lilun de xingcheng yu fazhan*). *Bingtuan Dangxiao Xuebao* 62 (2001: 2), pp. 9–12.
- McCarthy, Terry (1997) *Kashgar: On the restless perimeter; Resentment and rebellion fester on the Silk Road*, [Internet] Time Media. Updated 27 September 1999. Available from: <http://www.time.com/time/asia/magazine/99/0927/kashgar.html>, accessed 13 May 2004.
- McMillen, Donald H. (1981) Xinjiang and the Production and Construction Corps: A Han organisation in a non-Han region. *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 6, pp. 65–96.
- Millward, James A. (1998) *Beyond the pass: Economy, ethnicity, and empire in Qing Central Asia 1759–1864* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press).
- Millward, James and Nabidjan Tursun (2004) Political history and strategies of control, 1884–1978, in S. Frederick Starr (ed.), *Xinjiang: China's Muslim borderland*, pp. 63–98 (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe Inc).
- Ming Pao (1998) *Xinjiang corps to found world's "largest enterprise group"*, [Internet] BBC Monitoring Service: Asia-Pacific. Updated 31 August 1998. Available from: <http://global.factiva.com.virtual.anu.edu.au/sb/default.aspx?NAPC=S&fcpil=en>, accessed 9 February 2005.

- Neo Oasis (2005) *xin lu zhou*. [Internet] *zhongguo jingji xinxi wang xinjiang bingtuan zhongxin*, Updated 2003. Available from: <<http://www.neoasis.com/>>, accessed 23 August 2004.
- Neo Oasis (2007) *xin lu zhou*. [Internet] *zhongguo jingji xinxi wang xinjiang bingtuan zhongxin*, Updated 2007. Available from: <<http://www.neoasis.com/>>, accessed 22 October 2007.
- O'Neill, Mark (2004) *Corps values endure on the mainland's wild west frontier*, [Internet] Hong Kong, South China Morning Post. Available from: <http://www.uhrp.org/issues/economic_segregation_cultural_assimilation/news/corps_values_endure>, accessed 10 December 2004.
- Raman, B. (2007) *Fresh reports of Uighur unrest in Xinjiang – Paper No. 6*, [Internet] Chennai, South Asia Analysis Group. Available from: <<http://www.saag.org/%5Cpapers21%5Cpaper2091.html>>, accessed 7 February 2007.
- Seymour, James D. (2000) Xinjiang's Production and Construction Corps, and the Sinification of Eastern Turkestan. *Inner Asia* 2(2), pp. 171–93.
- Shengchan jianshe bingtuan zhi* (1997) *Xinjiang Weiwu'er Zizhiqu di fang zhi cong shu, Xinjiang tong zhi*, (Urumqi: Xinjiang renmin chubanshe).
- SinoFile (2002) *Using the spirit of the military forces that cultivate unexplored lands to accelerate modernization*, [Internet] SinoFile Information Services. Updated 13 August 2002. Available from: <<http://www.sinofile.net>>, accessed 3 February 2005.
- State Council (2003) *History and development of Xinjiang* (White Paper: Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China: Beijing), pp. 1–24.
- Toops, Stanley (2004a) The ecology of Xinjiang: A focus on water, in S. Frederick Starr (ed.), *Xinjiang: China's Muslim borderland*, pp. 241–63 (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe Inc).
- Toops, Stanley (2004b) The demography of Xinjiang, in S. Frederick Starr (ed.), *Xinjiang: China's Muslim borderland*, pp. 264–75 (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe Inc).
- Waldron, Arthur (1990) *The Great Wall of China: From history to myth* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- Wang Yuanjie and Shi Ying, eds (2001) *Xinjiang weiwuerzizhiqu dituce* (Xian: Xian ditu chubanshe).
- Weinstein, Michael A. (2004) *An era of instability in world politics*, [Internet] Power and Interest News Report (PINR). Updated 20 October 2004. Available from: <<http://www.pinr.com>>, accessed 20 October 2004.
- World Uyghur Network News (2003) *Classic area in Kashgar city will be destroyed by Chinese government with the excuse of development*, [Internet] Spark, Uyghur Press on Eastern Turkestan, accessed 13 May 2004.
- Xinhua (1998a) *National People's Congress discusses wide-ranging bill*, [Internet] Xinhua News Agency. Updated 23 December 1998. Available from: <<http://global.factiva.com.virtual.anu.edu.au/sb/default.aspx?NAPC=S>>, accessed 9 February 2005.
- Xinhua (1998b) *China's legislature to review eight draft laws*, [Internet] Xinhua News Agency. Updated 23 December 1998. Available from: <<http://global.factiva.com.virtual.anu.edu.au/sb/default.aspx?NAPC=S>>, accessed 9 February 2005.
- Xinhua (2002a) *Chinese agency praises Jiang Zemin's achievements in modernizing armed forces*, [Internet] BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific – Political. Updated 1 August 2002. Available from: <<http://global.factiva.com.virtual.anu.edu.au/sb/default.aspx?NAPC=S>>, accessed 3 February 2005.
- Xinhua (2002b) *Reservoir revives dry river*, [Internet] Urumqi, China.org.cn. Updated 27 November 2002. Available from: <<http://www.china.org.cn/english/environment/49786.htm>>, accessed 27 January 2005.
- Xinjiang bingtuan tongji nianjian*, (2004) (Beijing: Zhongguo tongji chubanshe).
- Xinjiang Government (2002) *Shihezi economic and technological development zone*, [Internet], Shihezi. Available from: <<http://www.xjdc.gov.cn/english/environment/k-Shihezi.htm>>, accessed 29 July 2005.
- Xinjiang sheng chan jian she bing tuan nian jian* (2003) (Urumqi: Xinjiang da xue chubanshe).

Copyright of *Asian Studies Review* is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.