

Deception, Pressure, and Threats: The Transfer of Young Uyghur Women to Eastern China

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A new People's Republic of China (PRC) policy recruits young Uyghur women from majority Uyghur areas of East Turkestan¹ (also known as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region or XUAR) and transfers them to work in factories in urban areas of eastern China.

Though official propaganda slogans promote the program as an overwhelmingly positive experience for these women, less than two years after the initiation of the policy, it has already left a history of broken promises and shattered families. Local leaders, who are subject to intense pressure from higher levels of the PRC government, have used deception, pressure, and threats in order to



recruit women to participate in the program. Under the policy, thousands of Uyghur women have been removed from their families and placed into substandard working conditions thousands of miles from their homes.

The PRC transfer policy:

- Focuses on southern East Turkestan, a majority Uyghur area that remains a center of traditional Uyghur culture and where the percentage of inhabitants who are Uyghur is presently the highest in the PRC.
- Targets marriage-aged women between the ages of 16 to 25.
- Intimidates the women and their families to compel them to participate in the program.
- Threatens local leaders who do not comply with the policy with removal from their posts.
- Places the young women into inhumane work conditions and with employers that do not honor work contracts.

¹ Use of the term 'East Turkestan' does not define a 'pro-independence' position. Instead, it is used by Uyghurs wishing to assert their cultural distinctiveness from China proper. 'Xinjiang', meaning 'new boundary' or 'new realm', only came into official use in 1884, and reflects the perspective of those in the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) who gave it this name. This use of terminology, whether 'Xinjiang' or 'East Turkestan' is often compared by Uyghurs to use of the term 'Tibet' by Tibetans. That is, Tibetans use the name they choose, and not a translation of the Chinese 'Xizang' meaning 'western treasure-store'.

Photo: Young Uyghur women preparing for transfer to Eastern China, (www.kashi.gov.cn).

This government-sponsored transfer of young Uyghur women must be placed in

the broader context of the PRC's ongoing cultural attacks and human rights abuses against the Uyghur people. Uyghur religion, a moderate form of Sunni Islam that is a vital part of their ethnic identity, has been fiercely suppressed.² The legal system is used as a tool of repression, with arbitrary detentions and torture commonly employed against any Uyghur who voices discontent with the government.³ Charges of "political crimes" and the death penalty have been shown to be disproportionately applied to Uyghurs.⁴ Uyghur women suffer from forced sterilizations and abortions, and corvée labor is still used in East Turkestan's rural areas.⁵

In addition, at the same time that PRC authorities are implementing a transfer policy of young women out of East Turkestan in the name of providing economic opportunities, they are also supporting the movement of huge numbers of Han Chinese economic migrants into the region.⁶ In light of these facts, the transfer policy can be seen as another aspect of Beijing's effort to forcibly assimilate the Uyghur people and undermine the distinct Uyghur culture of East Turkestan.

² Human Rights Watch and Human Rights in China, *Devastating Blows: Religious Repression of Uighurs in Xinjiang*, Human Rights Watch, Vol. 17, No. 2, April 2005.

³ Amnesty International, *Gross Violations of Human Rights in the Uighur Autonomous Region*, London: Amnesty International, 1999.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Ildikó Bellér Hann, "Work and gender among Uighur villagers in southern Xinjiang," in: *Les Ouïgours au XXème siècle. Cahiers d'Études sur la Méditerranée Orientale et le Monde Turco-Iranien*, F. Aubin and J.-F. Besson, eds. (1998) pp. 93-114.

⁶ Stanely Toops, "The Demography of Xinjiang," in *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*, ed. S. Fredrick Starr (M.E. Sharpe: Amrmonk, NY, 2004).

I. Content and Scope of the Policy

In recent years, the PRC central government has directed all levels of the XUAR government to promote rural to urban migration as a solution to the poverty of the region.⁷ According to PRC statistics, in 2007 around 100,000 people from East Turkestan were working outside of the Autonomous Region, with most of these migrants located in Zhejiang, Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, and Shandong.⁸ Since the spring of 2006, a significant portion of these migrants have been made up of young Uyghur women recruited into a government program that provides workers for factories in eastern China.⁹

The policy specifically targets women between the ages of 16 and 25 from the heavily Uyghur-populated areas of southern East Turkestan, a region that retains a strong and distinct Uyghur culture.¹⁰ Local leaders, sometimes joined

⁷ See, for example, Urumqi Evening News, *300 Rural Young Women from Xinjiang's Shache County Leave to Work in Shandong*, April 5, 2007. [乌鲁木齐晚报, 新疆莎车县300名农村女青年前往山东务工, 2007-04-05], available at http://www.chinaxinjiang.cn/news/xjxw/shjj/t20070405_224973.htm

⁸ Xinhua Net, *A Large Number of Minority Farmers from Xinjiang Go Inland to Work*, April 2, 2007. [新华网, 大批新疆少数民族农民赴内地务工“淘金”, 2007-04-02], available at http://www.chinaxinjiang.cn/news/xjxw/shjj/t20070402_223834.htm and Xinhua Net, Xinjiang Division, *In 2007 there will be 100,000 people from Xinjiang working to earn money in the Interior*, March 23, 2007. [新华网新疆频道, 新疆2007年将有十万人次到内地务工挣钱, 2007-03-23], available at http://www.chinaxinjiang.cn/news/xjxw/shjj/t20070323_221297.htm

⁹ Xinhua Net, *Xinjiang's First Group of Female Uyghur Workers Return*, April 27, 2007. [新华网, 新疆首批政府组织赴内地务工维吾尔族女工返乡, 2007-04-27], available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/local/2007-04/27/content_6035082.htm

¹⁰ Northern Economic Times, *Hanji gives preferential treatment in work to Xinjiang girls*, September 22, 2006. [北方经济时报, 汉沽优待务工新疆姑娘, 2006-09-22],

by factory officials, offer the women Chinese language and skills training, and promise attractive salaries and transportation to the factories.¹¹ The official Chinese press has supported the program through a series of articles that cast the program in a positive light, as a way to provide income for rural people and incorporate the women into the “great socialist family” of the Chinese motherland.¹² These types of reports also stress that the program improves the “thinking and consciousness” of the women, improves their manners, and teaches them to be civilized.¹³

Southern East Turkestan’s Kashgar Prefecture, an administrative district with a population of around 3.5 million people, more than 89 percent of whom are Uyghur, has been specifically targeted with the transfer policy. Exact numbers are difficult to ascertain, but reports in the state media and from independent investigations reveal the large scale of the program.

Payzawat (Jiashi) County, one of Kashgar Prefecture’s 12 administrative sub-regions, is a rural area with a population of 320,000 people, the vast

majority of whom are Uyghur. The PRC transfer policy first publicly appeared in this county in April of 2006 with the transfer of 212 Uyghur women to a factory in Haiyan, Zhejiang.¹⁴ In September of 2006, under the same program, another 121 Uyghur women from Payzawat County, all aged from 18 to 20 years old, were transferred to Hangu District of Tianjin.¹⁵ In the first three months of 2007, the number of young Uyghur women transferred out of Payzawat County had already reached 3,000.¹⁶

Transfers of this kind can be documented for nearly every county in Kashgar Prefecture. In March of 2007, 186 Uyghur women were taken from Yengishahar (Yingjisha) County by a standing member of the county’s Communist Party Committee to a factory in Pinghu, Zhejiang.¹⁷ Kargilik (Yecheng) County transferred 400 women to Tianjin in March and April of 2007.¹⁸ Kona Sheher (Shufu) County has sent six groups totaling more than 770 people to six different businesses in Tianjin.¹⁹ At

available at

<http://news.sohu.com/20060922/n245477720.shtml>

¹¹ Kashgar Prefecture Economic News Center, *Xinjiang Kashgar Speeches at the Tianjin Labor Leading Cadres Symposium (Excerpts)*, April 17, 2007. [廖邱鹏, 新疆喀什在津务工领队干部座谈会上的发言 (节选), 喀什地区经济信息中心, 4-17-2007], available at

<http://www.kashi.gov.cn/Article/200704/2026.htm>

¹² See Xinjiang Economic Report, *Rural Xinjiang Uyghur Girls in Tianjin*, May 15, 2007. [新疆经济报, 新疆维吾尔族农村姑娘在天津, 2007-5-15], available at <http://www.kashi.gov.cn/Article/200705/2619.htm> and D.T., “Uyghur Culture Faced with Endless Campaigns,” *China Rights Forum*, No. 4, December 2007, pp. 100-101.

¹³ Kashgar Prefecture Economic News Center, *Xinjiang Kashgar Speeches at the Tianjin Labor Leading Cadres Symposium (Excerpts)*, April 17, 2007. [廖邱鹏, 新疆喀什在津务工领队干部座谈会上的发言 (节选), 喀什地区经济信息中心, 4-17-2007], available at <http://www.kashi.gov.cn/Article/200704/2026.htm>

¹⁴ Xinhua Net, *Xinjiang’s First Group of Female Uyghur Workers Return*, April 27, 2007. [新华网, 新疆首批政府组织赴内地务工维吾尔族女工返乡, 2007-04-27], http://news.xinhuanet.com/local/2007-04/27/content_6035082.htm

¹⁵ Northern Economic Times, *Hanji gives preferential treatment in work to Xinjiang girls*, September 22, 2006. [北方经济时报, 汉沽优待务工新疆姑娘, 2006-09-22], available at

<http://news.sohu.com/20060922/n245477720.shtml>

¹⁶ Radio Free Asia, *Last Year Labor Force Transfer from Kashgar Reached 240,000*, Mar. 19, 2007.

¹⁷ Jiaxing Online, *186 Xinjiang Girls Become Clothing Workers*, April 19, 2007. [嘉兴在线, 186名新疆姑娘当上服装工, 2007-4-19], available at <http://gxxw.zjol.com.cn/jiaxingdaily/2007/0419/39658.htm>

¹⁸ Kashgar Prefecture Economic News Center, *Xinjiang Kashgar Speeches at the Tianjin Labor Leading Cadres Symposium (Excerpts)*, April 17, 2007. [廖邱鹏, 新疆喀什在津务工领队干部座谈会上的发言 (节选), 喀什地区经济信息中心, 4-17-2007], available at <http://www.kashi.gov.cn/Article/200704/2026.htm>

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

the end of March 2007, Yarkand (Shache) County sent 300 people to Qingdao, Shandong.²⁰ Early in 2007, 500 young women from Yarkand County were transferred to work in Qingdao and Zhejiang, as part of an official plan calling for the transfer of 6,000 Uyghur women during the course of the year.²¹

II. Deception, Pressure, and Threats

*Most of (the young women) were forced to come, but some of their parents were convinced that their daughters would get 2000 yuan (280 USD) a month, and the girls' rooms would be like a hotel, etc. etc... after they came, they learned that everything is totally different.*²²

Local officials are under great pressure from higher levels of the PRC government to enforce the transfer policy. Awut Teyip, the head of Number Nine Village in Yarkand county, indicated that the policy originated in Beijing, saying of his efforts to recruit young women from his village, "Our job is to follow central directives without asking any questions."²³ Many officials were told they would be removed from their posts if they refused to recruit women for the

²⁰ Urumqi Evening News, *300 rural young women from Xinjiang's Shache County leave to work in Shandong*, April 5, 2007. [乌鲁木齐晚报, 新疆莎车县300名农村女青年前往山东务工, 2007-04-05], available at <http://www.chinaxinjiang.cn/news/xjxw/shjj/t20070405224973.htm>

²¹ Radio Free Asia, *500 Uyghur Girls Transferred to Chinese Provinces*, Mar. 30, 2007.

²² Interview with transferred Uyghur woman number 3, Tianjin, 2007. The interviews used in this report were collected in Tianjin between May and July of 2007 under a joint project organized by the East Turkestan Information Center (ETIC) and the International Uyghur Human Rights and Democracy Foundation (IUHRDF).

²³ Radio Free Asia, *Revealed Secrets: Real Stories of Uyghur Girls Forced to go to Chinese Provinces—Part I and II*, June 21 and 22, 2007.

program.²⁴ As a result, PRC leaders have used deception, pressure, and threats in the process of recruiting the young women for transfer.

Local leaders tout the program as a means of "providing employment opportunities and generating income" for rural Uyghur families.²⁵ However, reports from these women and interviews with their family members reveal that the financial benefits from the transfers are far less than what is promised.

*When they brought us here they said we would receive a fixed payment of 500 yuan (70 USD) per month. But after we came they said we would be paid according to our work. We had to finish the work they gave us to receive that payment. But it was impossible to finish it on time.*²⁶

Further problems with earnings include salaries that are withheld for months as a 'deposit'; garnished wages for medical problems developed on the job; and money deducted for expenses that were to be paid for by others, as promised to the women during recruitment.²⁷

The company said they paid the government officials for the trip, but they cut the money from the girls salary. I don't know who took that money. The first month, they cut 50 yuan, the second month 10 yuan and

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Kashgar Prefecture Economic News Center, *Xinjiang Kashgar Speeches at the Tianjin Labor Leading Cadres Symposium (Excerpts)*, April 17, 2007. [廖邱鹏, 新疆喀什在津务工领队干部座谈会上的发言 (节选), 喀什地区经济信息中心, 4-17-2007], available at <http://www.kashi.gov.cn/Article/200704/2026.htm>

²⁶ Interview with transferred Uyghur woman number 2, Tianjin, 2007.

²⁷ Interviews with transferred Uyghur women, Tianjin, 2007.

*they will cut this month, too. They will cut until they get a full refund for their payment.*²⁸

Another method used to recruit young women into the program is to pressure people close to the women to convince them to participate in the program. One woman who entered the program explained,

*I came here because my teacher begged me, because the government sent my teacher to convince me.*²⁹

Interviews with several young women transferred under the policy indicated that local officials have often resorted to force in order to recruit women into the program. In an interview with Radio Free Asia, Tursun Barat, the head of Number Eight village in Yarkand County admitted, “We did force the girls to go.”³⁰ One such woman was transferred to Tianjin:

*I did not want to come. My parents also did not agree, but government officials forced my parents.*³¹

In another example, the father of Aynisa Tohti, who was transferred by village officials along with 212 other young women in March of 2007, stated in an interview that he was forced to allow his daughter to leave, a decision for which he feels deep regret.³²

²⁸ Interview with supervisor and translator for transferred Uyghur women, Tianjin, 2007

²⁹ Interview with Uyghur woman number 5, Tianjin, 2007.

³⁰ Radio Free Asia, *Revealed Secrets: Real Stories of Uyghur Girls Forced to go to Chinese Provinces—Part I and II*, June 21 and 22, 2007.

³¹ Interview with Uyghur woman number 1, Tianjin, 2007.

³² Radio Free Asia, *Revealed Secrets: Real Stories of Uyghur Girls Forced to go to Chinese Provinces—Part I and II*, June 21 and 22, 2007.

Rural families are threatened with various types of punishments by local officials for resisting the program. For example, leaders of Number Nine Village in Yarkand County threatened farmers with the confiscation of their farming lands and the destruction of their houses if they refused to allow their daughters to participate. In the same village, young women were threatened with the confiscation of their resident registration cards and the denial of marriage certificates if they chose not to enter the program.³³

Opposition to the program is not tolerated. In April 2007, at a government conference that brought officials involved in the program together, Shi Dagang, Communist Party Secretary of Kashgar Prefecture, stated, “Transferring the rural labor force is an all-inclusive and major directional policy, closely tied to the future development of our region... Whomever obstructs the Uyghur public from working in the exterior will become the criminal of Kashgar and the criminal of the Uyghur people.”³⁴ In July 2007, Uyghur parents peacefully protested against the forced transfer policy in Kucha County of Aksu Prefecture. The protest was forcibly dispersed and local authorities are still searching for its organizers.³⁵

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Kashgar Prefecture Economic News Center, *Xinjiang Kashgar Speeches at the Tianjin Labor Leading Cadres Symposium (Excerpts)*, April 17, 2007. [廖邱鹏, 新疆喀什在津务工领队干部座谈会上的发言 (节选), 喀什地区经济信息中心, 4-17-2007], available at <http://www.kashi.gov.cn/Article/200704/2026.htm>

³⁵ Radio Free Asia interview with official in Kucha County, Aksu Province, July 19, 2007.

III. Workplace Reality

*We call this place a prison. I think that there is no difference between here and a prison.*³⁶

When the Uyghur women arrive at the factories they discover work hours in violation of their contracts, harsh conditions, and severe limitations on their freedom.

*We worked over ten hours every day, and most days we had to work extra. Usually we got off work at 5:00, and then at 6:00 we went back to work again for another shift and worked until 2 or 3 in the morning.*³⁷

On some occasions the women are made to work 24 hours straight, with no overtime given.³⁸

Food and housing, both promised in the recruitment process, are substandard. A woman describes the situation in one factory:

*In the morning they boiled a little bit of rice with water to give us, and in the evening, one day they would give us just fried cabbage, another day just fried potatoes. It was very dirty, with insects showing up in the food, making it impossible to eat.*³⁹

Housing conditions are not much better:

Did you see our dormitory? No roof, no door, anyone can enter at any time.

*There is no safety, and it is difficult for us to change clothes because everywhere it is open.*⁴⁰

The heavy workload and unsanitary working conditions have caused kidney problems, skin diseases, and other health problems for the young women.⁴¹

Many local governments have instituted large fines against the families of women who leave their work contracts. These fines are reported to range from 3000 to 5000 RMB (420 to 700 USD), a huge sum for a rural Uyghur family.⁴² Even without these types of fines, women who wish to leave the factories find themselves without any support and facing the challenges of a great distance, a language barrier, and lack of funds.

IV. Uyghurs Out, Han In: The Context of the Transfer Program

At the same time that young Uyghur women are being transferred out of East Turkestan, the PRC government continues to support thousands of Han Chinese economic migrants who are flowing into the region in search of jobs. This Han Chinese in-migration has been responsible for dramatic demographic changes that threaten Uyghur culture. In 1955, Uyghurs made up 74.7 percent of the total population of East Turkestan and Han Chinese accounted for 6.1 percent.⁴³ Today, Uyghurs make up 45 percent and Han 41 percent of the population, a number that excludes PLA soldiers,

³⁶ Interview with Uyghur woman number 6, Tianjin, 2007.

³⁷ Interview with Uyghur woman number 2, Tianjin, 2007.

³⁸ Radio Free Asia, *A Uyghur 'Worker' Girl's Story who was Forced to Flee from China*, Jun. 28, 2007.

³⁹ Interview with Uyghur woman number 2, Tianjin, 2007.

⁴⁰ Interview with Uyghur woman number 6, Tianjin, 2007.

⁴¹ Interviews with Uyghur women, Tianjin, 2007.

⁴² Interviews with Uyghur women, Tianjin, 2007.

⁴³ Stanely Toops, "The Demography of Xinjiang," in *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland* ed. S. Fredrick Starr (M.E. Sharpe: Amrmonk, NY, 2004).

Chinese security forces, and much of the migrant population.⁴⁴

In 2006 alone, more than 500,000 farmers from Gansu Province participated in a government-sponsored transfer, many earning more in ten weeks than a Uyghur farmer earns in an entire year.⁴⁵ In order to facilitate these type of huge population transfers, PRC leaders recruit workers from rural areas, organize special trains, provide stipends, print informational brochures, and give logistical support at sending and receiving train stations.⁴⁶ With this huge influx



of migrants, the Uyghur language is being pushed out of the public sphere, Han businesses are replacing Uyghur shops, and, in only a few decades, PRC-style development has completely altered the layout of Uyghur urban centers which evolved over centuries.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* and Department of Population, Social, Science and Technology Statistics of the National Bureau of Statistics of China [国家统计局人口和社会科技统计司].

⁴⁵ Xinhua Net, *Gansu and the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps Formalize a Contract to Transport More than Five Hundred Thousand People to Pick Cotton*, June 8, 2007. [新华网, 甘肃与新疆建设兵团正式签约输送50余万拾棉工, 2007-06-08], available at http://xjds.gov.cn/News_Show2.asp?NewsID=5047

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Photo: Han Chinese migrant preparing to board a government-organized train in Chongqing, on his way to work in East Turkestan, from the article: *Chongqing Evening News, Laborers Board a Special Train to Work in Xinjiang*, March 16, 2007. [重庆晚报, 民工乘专列赴新疆务工, 2007-03-16] available at <http://news.sohu.com/20070316/n248760344.shtml>

Uyghurs find themselves at an economic disadvantage with respect to East Turkestan's newly arrived Han population. A study of the 2000 census found that "there is a very strong correlation between areas of Han majority and high per capita income" and that this finding "is not just a correlative

relationship, but a causal one."⁴⁷ The 1995 industrial census showed that just 2 of 191 managers of large and medium sized businesses in East Turkestan were

minorities, and that only around 11 percent of these businesses were located in areas with a majority of ethnic minorities.⁴⁸ Civil service hiring has been shown to be biased against Uyghurs, with the majority of opportunities reserved for Han Chinese.⁴⁹ In other employment areas, such as "professional and technical" jobs, minority employment figures have shown only modest increases, despite East Turkestan's high rate of economic growth.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ David Bachman, "Making Xinjiang Safe for the Han?: Contradictions and Ironies of Chinese Governance in China's Northwest," in *Governing China's Multiethnic Frontiers*, ed. Morris Rossabi (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Congressional-Executive Commission on China, *Xinjiang Government Says Ethnic Han Chinese Will Get 500 of 700 New Civil Service Appointments*, April 7, 2005.

⁵⁰ Linda Benson, "Education and Social Mobility," in *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland* ed. S. Fredrick Starr (M.E. Sharpe: Amrmonk, NY, 2004): 190-215.

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

The connection between the transfer of young Uyghur women out of southern East Turkestan and the transfer of Han Chinese into the region does not appear to be coincidental. As already noted, the head of the Communist Party in Kashgar Prefecture views the transfer of young Uyghur women to eastern China as a “major directional policy, closely tied to the future development of our region.” Kashgar Prefecture is currently the focus of substantial “re-development,” and has recently been linked to the regional capital, Urumchi, by a train connection that has brought thousands of Han Chinese migrants to the area.

As the percentage of Uyghurs in East Turkestan’s population decreases annually, it becomes less characteristically Uyghur. While much of this dynamic is facilitated by the immigration of Han Chinese, the transfer of large numbers of young Uyghur women of child-bearing age out of the region exacerbates the process considerably.

At present, local and central government authorities in the PRC continue to aggressively implement this transfer policy, despite Uyghur resistance to, and resentment of, the program. Continuation of the policy will only further marginalize the Uyghur people and deepen Uyghurs’ mistrust of PRC officials, leading to even greater social tensions in East Turkestan.

The Uyghur Human Rights Project recommends that the government of the People’s Republic of China:

- Immediately stop the transfer of young Uyghur women out of East Turkestan and allow the return of these women to their homes.
- Compensate the women according to their contracts for work performed and for travel expenses.
- Implement policies that create local employment opportunities for Uyghur women.
- Punish officials who forced women to be transferred against their will.



The Uyghur American Association (UAA) works to promote the preservation and flourishing of a rich, humanistic and diverse Uyghur culture, and to support the right of the Uyghur people to use peaceful, democratic means to determine their own political future in East Turkestan.



The UAA launched the UHRP in 2004 to promote improved human rights conditions for Uyghurs and other indigenous groups in East Turkestan, on the premise that the assurance of basic human rights will facilitate the realization of the community's democratic aspirations.

UHRP also works to raise the profile of the Uyghur people and the plight of all “minority” peoples in East Turkestan by:

Researching, writing and publishing news stories and longer reports covering a broad range human rights issues involving civil and political rights, through to social cultural and economic rights;

Preparing briefings – either written or in person – for journalists, academics, diplomats and politicians on the human rights situation faced by the Uyghur people and others in East Turkestan.

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