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Conclusion

The fundamental question considered in this book is how processes of capitalist frontier making have built contemporary colonial relations in Northwest China. When I first began researching and writing this book in the early 2010s, I was primarily interested in understanding how migrants lived meaningful lives in the city despite conditions of dispossession. Initially, my research centered around the minor politics that Chen Ye was enacting in Uyghur traveler settlements such as Heijia Shan and the positive ethics that Ablikim and many other young men were building with their "life and liver" friends. Over the course of my research as the People's War on Terror intensified, I saw too that these novel forms of sociality were not enough to cradle the lives of those who were being dispossessed from rural ways of life. Over time, dozens of my contacts and friends were banished from the city by the enclosure system,

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detained in the mass internment camps, and forced to work under unfree conditions. The space for disobedience and desire that the broader new digital media development seemed to promise to culture producers such as Mahmud and travelers like Hasan was undermined by its entanglement with older and newer forms of surveillance and detention. When my informants began to disappear near the end of my fieldwork in 2015, it became clear that the kind of antiracist politics fostered by contemporary artists like Chen Ye or the friendship networks that Ablikim and Batur exemplified could not adequately protect Uyghurs from the forces subtracting their sociality.

The targeting of Uyghur social reproduction led me to widen my focus to consider the way material dispossession and desire elicitation had motivated Uyghur migration to the city in the early 2000s. Spaces of autonomy in the city could not be separated from older colonial impulses and Maoist multiculturalism. These entanglements were intensified by the rise of new forms of Islamic piety in the 2010s when 3G networks and social media apps enabled Uyghurs to connect with the larger Muslim world and global religious movements. The promise of greater autonomy in the city became a form of further dispossession in 2014 when the arrival of the People's War on Terror hardened the new sequence of racialization that was associated with the perceived threat of young Uyghur travelers as so-called preterrorists. New spaces where cultural production was fostered increasingly became spaces of technology-enabled entrapment. Novels of urban alienation, short films and commercials with ethno-nationalist connotations or linkages to the wider Muslim world, and pious messages shared on WeChat were all used as evidence to "disappear" (Uy: *yoq*) Uyghur young men in indefinite detention.

As these processes intensified, young Uyghur women and men were increasingly forced to make a choice between working for state authorities as policing contractors, reeducation instructors, and intelligence workers under close supervision of the state police or be sent into the camp and factory system. As I noted in chapter 1, as many as ninety thousand young women and men chose private police work as an alternative to life in detention (Greitens et al. 2019). Once they joined the system as "data janitors" (Irani 2015), however, they quickly realized that they were being tasked with tearing apart families, interrogating neighbors, and surveilling their friends. After they joined the digital enclosure industry, they realized that police work in the People's War on Terror was a lifelong choice. They were not permitted to quit. Those who did were arrested and sent into detention under suspicion of disloyalty to the state. Young men who began to work as police were being forced to spend a

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lifetime policing themselves. When I visited the region in 2018, rumors were widely circulating of young Uyghur contractors committing suicide.

The People's War on Terror created its own forms of political and economic productivity. Every young Uyghur found a place and a role within it. This human engineering project centered on the vast population of military-aged bodies that found themselves being retrained in the camps, but it also implicated a vast army of young Uyghurs who enforced the subtraction of those bodies from the general population, enforced the rules of the camps, and monitored those who remained in the Uyghur neighborhoods of the city. The Uyghurs who lived outside of the camps and joined the Uyghur and Han police forces were asked to mediate their lives through the digital enclosure. They enacted their patriotism in public through social media, their physical appearance, and their attendance at political ceremonies. Those who remained outside of the camps became culture workers performing their reeducation through their everyday life. They were asked to perform their desire for state ideologies and for Han culture on a daily basis (A. Anderson and Byler 2019). In this way the People's War on Terror created roles for everyone: detainees, police, and the relatives of detainees. Everyone participated in the project.

The economy of the People's War on Terror normalized confrontation between the police contractors and the general population. Every day was filled with encounters that reproduced acts of submission to authority. Young Uyghurs were expected to have their ID cards checked as many as ten times a day at random checkpoints. The routinization of these confrontations and detentions had the effect of turning the violence of the human engineering project into a system of standard operating procedures that masked the shattering of families and lives. The decision to send people into the camp system appeared to be both systematic and arbitrary. It felt systematic in that the confrontations and disappearances always followed the same trajectory. Because of the sweeping nature of the technical and human assessments of criminality, the detention of any person identified as Uyghur was always a possibility. As a result, detentions often appeared to be arbitrary. As local authorities in Xinjiang have noted since the beginning of the project, the majority of those who had been detained did not know what crime they had committed prior to their detention and reeducation (Qiu 2015). At first one's personal relationship to local police could make the difference between someone being sent into detention or not. But later, guilt was often assumed and perpetrated by the "black box" of the digital enclosure programming; so making the case for why one should not be detained hinged on one's perceived compliance and the way extenuating

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circumstances—such as poor health, old age, or disability—required mercy on the part of the interrogator. Since there was no judicial process in place for determining guilt or innocence, officials had a great deal of power in deciding whether or not someone was sent to a detention camp. As a result, the absolute authority of police contractors was fixed in the minds of people who had not yet been detained. The Uyghurs I spoke with said that these logics of vulnerability and subtraction had the effect of further "breaking the spirit" (Uy: *rohi sunghan*) of the general population (Byler 2020b).

This vulnerability was further amplified by the way cultural works—which told the stories of Uyghur collective history—began to be subtracted by state authorities as signs of extremism. In 2017, as Perhat Tursun—whose novel I discussed in chapter 4—and dozens of other public intellectuals were swept up in a wave of detentions of public figures, state authorities began a project to retroactively assess Uyghur-language publications that had been published by state publishing houses over the past several decades. Based on interviews with Uyghur writers in April 2018, approximately 30 percent of all Uyghur-language publications were removed from the shelves as a result of this process (see figure C.1). Famous sagas of Turkic heroism and historical novels about the autonomous Uyghur participation in the Maoist Revolution were banned as promoting ethno-national separatism. Books that discussed state-approved forms of Islam and Uyghur cultural festivals were also targeted for promoting religious extremism or ethnic separatism. All television productions, music, and digital media were also reassessed through the digital enclosure. Many musicians, poets, artists, actors, and filmmakers were taken in as a result of this delayed censorship. The intellectuals I spoke with described it as a process similar to the Hundred Flowers Campaign in the late 1950s when Mao Zedong encouraged intellectuals to offer criticism of the Communist Party and they were subsequently purged. Uyghur writers said that, in the 1990s and 2000s, they were often asked by the state Culture Ministry to write about Islam or ethnic issues in a way that would moderate discussions of religious piety or ethnic pride. Now they were being punished for having done this state-mandated work.

Simultaneously, the state workers with the help of private social media firms—such as WeChat and Douyin—began an unabashed effort to promote political dogma and reified Chinese cultural traditions as examples of permitted culture (Wang Xiuli 2018). In a policy statement, Wang Xiuli, a researcher at the Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences, noted that culture workers "must confidently carry out face-to-face propaganda" for "China's modern culture" (Wang 2018). She argued that this was essential to closely integrating "the

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FIGURE C.1. Empty shelves in the Uyghur-language section of the Xinhua Bookstore on Yan'an Road in Ürümchi in 2018. Image by author.

practical achievements of modernization and the personal feelings of the masses with an . . . ideology that goes deep into people's hearts" (2018). In addition, she posited that culture workers must pay close attention to "unconscious education":

> First, ideological propaganda must be used wisely to take advantage of the readable and visible advantages of literature and art, television and film. It must be sensitive to and absorb our . . . ideology. Second, ideological propaganda must emphasize the tremendous achievements made by the country's reform and opening up . . . so that people have the empathy to improve and recognize the value of the Party and the . . . system from the depths of their heart.

Wang stated that, to begin this process, the first step was to "clean up and rectify" the existing media market. The second step was to subsume all aspects of life with ideological media and education. She wrote: "We must use scientific theories, advanced culture, and beautiful hearts to occupy all ideological and cultural positions and *truly do it*" (2018). This last line "truly do it" speaks to the way Uyghurs described the digital enclosure project more broadly as a

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process of "breaking their spirits." They said that something was being done to them. Uyghurs were passive actors in the matter who had no choice but to rewrite their aesthetic sensibilities in patriotic red. They hung posters of Xi Jinping in their homes and posted videos of their children kissing the image of "Uncle Xi" (Uy: *Xi Dada*). Uyghurs held dance parties where musicians improvised lyrics thanking Uncle Xi for teaching them how to be "modern" Chinese citizens. Human engineering and the culture work that supported it was being imposed on them. Their spirit of autonomy was being eliminated and replaced by a new sycophantic spirit. People like Wang were "truly doing" the human engineering; they had the technologies, the camps, and the factories to back them up. Uyghurs who remained began to feel as though they had no choice but to participate in the affective and cultural work of producing their own contemporary colonization.

The strategic long-term logic of terror capitalism centered on what Wang Xiuli (2017) referred to as "permanent" (Ch: *changzhi*) stability. She described the People's War on Terror as a "protracted war" that would target the generation of young Uyghurs born in the 1990s and 2000s. This implied that an entire generation of Uyghurs would be held in place by the mass detention system and the workforce that regulated it (see also Cha 2020). Her thoughts echoed with broader declarations from the regional development commission, which declared the camp system to be a "carrier of economy stability" because it had attracted so many textile and garment manufacturers from localities across China. It also mirrored the marketing pitches from private technology industry leaders that figured Xinjiang as a space with "unlimited market potential" to develop automated assessment and enclosure tools—creating docile, yet productive, populations.[1]

Yet, when I walked the streets of Uyghur districts in towns across the Uyghur homeland in April 2018, neither those who were targeted by the system nor those who ran it seemed happy. The sadness of what was happening was palpable, even as it was being differentially distributed. Many of the Uyghurs I spoke to in snatches of conversation in taxis and in parks said they were "without hope" (Uy: *umidsiz*). When I went to our spot in the Turkish teahouse for the last time, I thought about how much had changed since I first met Ablikim. The song mix had changed a bit and the teahouse was nearly empty, but it was close enough to bring back memories of our conversations and evoke the horror of what has happened to him since then. His deepest fear has come true; he is no longer in control of his life. His story has entered a process of subtraction. In order not to be the foreigner crying in the corner, I went outside and smoked two Hong He cigarettes, one for him and one for me.

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Running Away

The programming of the digital enclosure failed to fully capture what motivated new Uyghur forms of piety and resistance to colonial domination. As this book has shown, new Uyghur social formations were not catalyzed by ideology. Instead, resistance and refusal were motivated by acute forms of social loss and a desire to protect Uyghur social reproduction. The violence of the new sequence in racialized dispossession that confronted Uyghurs in the 2000s and 2010s was in fact the trigger that forced them to turn to new ways of making their lives matter. Many Uyghurs would prefer to respond to loss or the threat of loss not with reactive violence but with other forms of refusal to concede their autonomy. If given a chance, they would prefer to leave and try to escape the reach of the techno-political engineering project. This is precisely what Mahmud, the central figure in chapter 3, has done. In October 2016, with the help of some well-positioned friends and a sponsor in the United States, Mahmud was permitted to obtain a passport and a visa to come to the United States as a language student. Over the next several months, Mahmud applied for political asylum in the United States and began to imagine a new life as an immigrant. For him, taking flight to the United States was an act of freedom and autonomy. It felt like a dream come true. For the first time in his life, he felt as though his life was his own.

Leaving, becoming a permanent traveler, carried with it its own forms of dispossession. By applying for asylum, Mahmud committed to possibly never returning to the Uyghur homeland. He severed many ties with other Uyghurs and distanced himself from his "life and liver" friend. As the People's War on Terror tightened its grip and detained his brother, it was increasingly difficult for him to contact his family. Because contact with people in foreign countries was closely monitored, they told him not to call often. They were no longer able to support him financially. In his new community in the United States, he found a job as a dishwasher in a restaurant cleaning Texas-style barbeque pork off plates. He said he did not mind the work even though it was not halal, because it allowed him to continue to go to school and pay his rent. He said the other immigrants who worked in the restaurant treated him with respect. They did not care where he was from. He began to feel he had a social role, a kind of "runaway agency" that becomes available to people in exile (Faier 2008).

Mahmud's action as a permanent traveler was an example of life making that both supported and weakened Uyghur social reproduction. By running away, Mahmud entered into a realm of actions that were again autonomous and at least partially outside of the purview of Chinese techno-political surveillance

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enclosures. In the United States, Mahmud could pass as Japanese, Mexican, or South Asian. Looking at him, no one assumed he was a Chinese subject or potential Islamic extremist. Most of the time, the Chinese-specific sequence of racialization lost its hold on him in public life. In the United States, he was able to sustain his life through practices of autonomy and personhood both despite and because of his illegibility as a Chinese racialized subject. His masculinity was no longer read as threatening. Instead, he began to find a place among black and brown people from elsewhere. His knowledge and "quality" (Uy: *sapa*) as a Uyghur urbanite was transmuted into a practice of immigrant living.

Mahmud started imagining new forms of culture work. He wanted to narrate the Uyghur story of survival in film. He began writing a screenplay that centered on his flight from the state in China and the digital enclosure that supported it. Yet he could never fully escape. In his language classes, Han international students were surprised to find out that Mahmud was from Northwest China. They asked him if it was true that many Uyghurs were terrorists. He felt that they always strove to remind him of his place in the world. In the American space, the microclues detected by the IJOP system and its intelligence workers became banal microaggressions, constant reminders of deeply embedded Han prejudices. They did not seem deeply threatening though. In the context of the United States, they became a kind of brown-on-brown ethnic bias—a type of "disidentification" that is so deeply entrenched in American society (Reddy 2011). Like all forms of racialization, Chinese Islamophobia is location specific. It works most fully in the colonial context of the Uyghur and Kazakh homelands.

Living in Subtraction

Human engineering projects—building a Chinese frontier city, enacting a People's War on Terror—are global capitalist projects. They are linked to other spaces, infrastructures, and technologies that circulate elsewhere in the world. For instance, Ürümchi technocrats drew inspiration from the rhetoric of the Global War on Terror, American war economies, and Silicon Valley experiments in artificial intelligence to build what eventually would become a China-specific form of terror capitalism. Despite their specificities, the scale of dispossession and the intimacies of their cruelty, the central argument of *Terror Capitalism* is that the subtraction of Uyghur society is one frontier of a global social system.

Such projects—whether they occur in Kashmir, Palestine, or the Uyghur and Kazakh homelands—are built on the dispossession and subtraction of ethno-racialized others and they benefit dominant systems of wealth and power.

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There is an expropriative logic to them, a form of original accumulation, that builds productive value into particular objects. These objects—land, groups of people, hard infrastructure, spaces of desire—are made productive through a transformation of value. Uyghur and Kazakh lands were made productive for the extraction of natural resources, industrial farming, real estate development, and tourism. Uyghurs as a collective were made productive as the object of digital enclosure and devaluation, policing, reeducation, and monitored, unfree labor. Their perceived threat to the nation was catalyzed by an enormous flow of money and jobs, and research and development, from state capital to private technology firms. Terror capitalism, a new instantiation of capitalist-colonial frontier making, transformed the economy across the region. The product made by the new economy was social control in the form of reeducated minds, an army of young Uyghur, Kazakh, and Han police contractors, and Han settlers mobilized as Islamophobic proxies for state capital and the expansion of the capitalist frontier. As this system is normalized, people adapt; they find ways to live and make meaning. But a global project also has global consequences; it shifts the frame of what is permitted and what it is possible to imagine. There has been a radical expansion of power and knowledge over Uyghur life through its transformation into data. Through this expansion, Uyghur life, and by extension life itself, is subtracting.

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