

# Smart Camps: The Digital Revolution's Dark Creation

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## Abstract

Within the history of penal systems, China represents a special case that initially adopted western penal models in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century but subsequently diverged onto a separate and unique path. Upon Mao Zedong's victory in 1949 over the ruling Nationalist government, the focus on a western prison reform model shifted to one based on ideological purity and correct political thought, resulting in re-education camps known under the blanket term "laogai." This change in penal practice occurred during the embryonic stages of the digital revolution, where humanity discovered ever more powerful methods of computation and data processing. The fixation on punishing incorrect thought led the People's Republic of China (PRC) to adopt data collection and observation methodologies that could be easily digitized, allowing for exponential growth in oppressive systems. This comingling of laogai camp practices with computing power harnessed by the digital revolution has resulted in a new system of penal camps that is a stark break from traditional models. Using the PRC as a historical case study, this paper will explore the history of re-education camps, contextualizing the evolution towards the modern "smart camp" that is unique within the history of penology.

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Correcting the deviant amongst society has long been a goal of western prison systems, where reforging an individual into a model citizen is the ideal outcome. While this system was exported globally by Europe during the 19th and 20th centuries, many nations, including China, have adapted it for their own purposes. With a special emphasis on correcting political thought, the Chinese carceral model evolved across the 20th century, initially incorporating aspects of the Soviet Gulag in its Mao-era systems of "reform through labor camps" (or "laogai"), and eventually utilizing digital age technologies to reforge suspect populations like the Muslim minority Uyghurs of western Xinjiang province. This development represents something wholly unique within the history of penology. For those subjected to their violence, modern camp systems, like their 20th century predecessors, encompass a disregard for human life, which, in the words of Harry Wu, a laogai survivor, has "no more importance than a cigarette ash flicked in the wind."<sup>1</sup> However, the smart camp is a stark departure that incorporates vast digital processing power to convert neighborhoods into miniature surveillance states. Tahir Hamut Izgil, a Uyghur poet and exile, recounts the oppressive nature of this revolutionary surveillance, and his constant fear of being swept into the camps. He "spent hours cleaning [his] phone of pictures, videos, audio records, and even instant-message records – anything that authorities might seize on as 'evidence.'"<sup>2</sup> Such drastic methods of omnipresent surveillance are an

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<sup>1</sup> Hongda Harry Wu and Carolyn Wakeman, *Bitter Winds: A Memoir of My Years in China's Gulag* (New York, New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1994), 129.

<sup>2</sup>Tahir Hamut Izgil, "One by One, My Friends Were Sent to the Camps," *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, July 14, 2021), <https://www.theatlantic.com/the-uyghur-chronicles/>.

evolution from traditional surveillance and carceral models, which will be explored in this paper through China's smart camp system in Xinjiang.

Tracing roots from western prison models, the history of China's modern prison system shares many commonalities with western style reform-based prisons. However, since the construction of Beijing No. 1 prison, a model prison based on Benthamite panoptic principals first proposed in 18th century Britain, China's penal history has diverged onto a unique path all its own. The panopticon envisioned by Jeremy Bentham, which was applied in Europe and the Americas throughout the 19th century, incorporated a tower in the center of a prison where a single guard would be able to view open facing cells, imbuing inmates with the anxiety that they could be observed at any moment. This model was seized upon by Nationalist China, where the reformatory Benthamite system was seen as an ideal method in aiding modernization by converting deviant citizens into productive industrial workers. This trajectory radically changed in 1949 when Mao Zedong's People's Liberation Army defeated the ruling Nationalist government, ushering in a new communist state that drastically upended the penal system. With the victory of the communists, a renewed interest in rooting out potentially subversive elements took hold, resulting in vast expansions of the scale and scope of Chinese camp networks. This moment is a significant historical inflection point as the western style of panoptic observation and reform was applied to political thought, encompassing a return to traditional methods of physical punishment meant to break resistance and expedite re-education. Such tactics had the singular purpose of emphasizing political purity and correct thought in alignment with party mandates, resulting in a culture of permanent struggle aimed at singling out those perceived as politically impure, condemning them to persecution and eventual incarceration.

This era of mutual recrimination exploded the prison population, straining prison capacities well beyond their limits, resulting in an ad hoc camp system that would eventually become known under the blanket term *laogai*, or re-education through labor. It's this slice of time where the People's Republic of China (PRC) branched off onto a separate carceral path that incorporated some western panoptic theories while instantiating entirely new systems of oppression. The entrenchment of state power within the PRC government allowed a budding prison bureaucracy to coalesce, further expanding the camp system, and incarcerating millions of people during the cultural revolution. Harry Wu, who spent 19 years in the *laogai* system, describes the carceral structure of China as "a system designed to physically and spiritually destroy human beings."<sup>3</sup> Over the past 70 years, this basic system has been refined and strengthened as state bureaucracy entrenched itself and new technologies emerged from the digital revolution that streamlined the process of observation and control. This evolution culminated in the modern smart camp that has been used, since China's declaration of the "People's War on Terror" in 2014, to oppress Muslim minority groups in the western province of Xinjiang. Marrying familiar camp tactics that involve separation, isolation, torture, and re-education with exponentially increasing data processing capacities has set a new precedent in the history of incarceration that cannot be ignored. This convergence of traditional *laogai* era camp practices with the computing power harnessed by the digital revolution has synthesized a

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<sup>3</sup> Hongda Harry Wu, Ted Slingerland, and Li Zhi Fang, *Laogai: The Chinese Gulag* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1992), xi.

new form of camp that escapes physical boundaries, invading and surveilling suspect communities, and representing a significant break from Mao-era camp systems.

Within Xinjiang, Muslim minority communities including Uyghur, Kazakh, and Hui exist in a listless state, unable to exercise even the most basic of human freedoms. To stray beyond the boundary of the Neighborhood Watch Committee is to invite suspicion and subsequent disaster. Tahir Hamut Izzil recounts his interaction with the watch committee where he was summoned to provide fingerprints and told “that they would also be taking blood samples, voice samples, and facial images.”<sup>4</sup> Such unnerving methods of data harvesting are used to feed the insatiable desire for metadata that trains various facial, speech, and emotional recognition software, creating a racialized set of algorithms whose sole purpose is to oppress a minority population. The scale of data collection and oppression is something wholly unseen in the modern era, especially in the west where there exists an expectation to the right of privacy, regardless of whether such expectations are honored. Once in the system, minority groups find themselves unable to escape, constantly hounded by the ominous threat of being taken to “study,” a euphemism for entering the network of re-education camps. The anthropologist Darren Byler provides insight into the concept of “pre-crime” that permeates all aspects of Uyghur life, noting that nearly 7,700 People’s Convenience Police Stations provide surveillance hubs tracking various Muslim groups, searching for any activity an algorithm deems abnormal, which is the only pretext needed to detain someone. Byler elaborates that this is a “digital enclosure system that held Muslims in place,”<sup>5</sup> with the security checkpoints staffed by “more than ninety thousand private security contractors.”<sup>6</sup> This practice of enclosing entire communities is the first stage of dispossessing and marginalizing minority groups. Caught in a vicious cycle, victims are more likely to be suspected of “pre-crime,” and thus eligible to be detained and sent to “study” at the re-education camps. Minority Muslim groups are corralled through their neighborhoods by both physical checkpoints and racialized security software that scrutinize their every gesture for micro hints of so-called “terrorist” attitudes, all in the service of a shadowy concept of security espoused by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in their own version of a post 9/11 war on terror.

The physical space smart camps occupy are rooted in “Soviet experience and the theorizing of Soviet penologists,”<sup>7</sup> whose theories on the gulag model were incorporated into Xinjiang as an ideal location for exile. However, the modern camp incarnation is a departure from the diffuse system of camps that dotted the countryside in Maoist-era China as the CCP focused on concentrating the smart camp around individual communities. While incorporating the familiar barriers of barbed wire, cell blocks, and torture devices, this modern camp utilizes

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<sup>4</sup> Izzil, “One by One, My Friends Were Sent to the Camps.”

<sup>5</sup> Darren Byler, *In the Camps: China’s High-Tech Penal Colony* (New York, New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2021), 11.

<sup>6</sup> Byler, *In the Camps*, 11.

<sup>7</sup> James D. Seymour and Richard Anderson, *New Ghosts Old Ghosts Prisons and Labor Reform Camps in China* (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1998), 17.

cutting edge technology that is “designed to eliminate the ideological problems of prisoners.”<sup>8</sup> This includes the installation of video and audio capture devices that vastly increase the ability to surveil and manipulate prisoners so that “thought change is carried out in a subtle way.”<sup>9</sup> The purpose of this physical space is to enclose all captives inside a system designed to observe their every movement, control their actions, and systematically reprogram their minds. Tahir Hamut Izgil recalls that a sweep of arrests in 2017 overwhelmed various prison structures such that “schools and government offices [were] repurposed as ‘study centers’ and hastily outfitted with iron doors, window bars, and barbed wire.”<sup>10</sup> The frequent euphemistic references to study and education amongst CCP rhetoric attempts to paper over the sinister practice of re-education, including physical, psychological, and emotional torture. To study is often associated with the ability to exercise one’s freedom of thought, to distinguish oneself as an individual deserving of rights. However, a cruel irony is inflicted upon prisoners of the smart camps, who are forced into menial classroom routines aimed at stripping them of their cultural identity. Indeed, the mantra of the camp is to divorce Muslim prisoners from their religious beliefs: “Fight against religious extremism thoughts and prevent the entrance of religious ideas.”<sup>11</sup> This slogan is all encompassing, assuming anyone in the camp must be a religious extremist of some kind and enunciates the CCP’s desire to close the minds of prisoners to any teaching other than a pro-Chinese political message.

The smart camp retains physical torments inherited from the previous laogai system, where electric shocks or torsion devices like the tiger chair are used to inflict maximum suffering. Harry Wu’s account of the “jet plane position,” a similar form of torture to the tiger chair, illuminates the intense physical pain felt as “all the time they stretched my arms high behind my back and jerked my head backward.”<sup>12</sup> Such spasms of pain are meant to erode the resistance inmates might have to their re-education and force an adoption of a self-regulating attitude to avoid being tortured. The process of enclosing suffering within a delineated space separate from the civilian world is in line with the western-style system of separated correctional institutions. Such western systems are littered with their own tortures and cruelties; However, Chinese punishments are unique in the 21st century for their continued emphasis on physical torture, which is meant to coerce confessions. Such practices recall those of Ancien Regime Europe, where the criminal confession, and the “spectacle of the scaffold,” to quote Michel Foucault, “came to play the role of living truth.”<sup>13</sup> Yet while such practices died out in Europe after the French Revolution (even as they may have continued in European colonies overseas), confession and corporal violence played a central role in 20th century laogai camps and they

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 79.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 79.

<sup>10</sup> Izgil, “One by One, My Friends Were Sent to the Camps.”

<sup>11</sup> Byler, *In the Camps*, 65.

<sup>12</sup> Wu and Wakeman, *Bitter Winds*, 225.

<sup>13</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York, New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 38.

remain central to modern smart camps, where inmates must provide written confessions of their “crimes” under physical and psychological duress.

While starvation rations were a feature of the laogai camp system, the smart camps utilize a system of coerced re-education, where nationalistic rituals must be performed before being fed. With the process of receiving starvation rations being “tied to singing patriotic songs or chanting prescriptive phrases,”<sup>14</sup> the simple process of eating becomes tied up in a perverse game of coerced praise of the nation unjustly incarcerating the prisoner. Such methods of re-education are analogous to Hannah Arendt’s discussion of “Pavlov’s dog,” where a person’s individuality is deconstructed to “elementary reactions.” Such “is the model ‘citizen’ of a totalitarian state; and such a citizen can be produced only imperfectly outside of the camps.”<sup>15</sup> Those that fail the daily ordeals of the camp are not only deprived of food, but are forced to squat for hours on end, further degrading physical capacity to resist re-education. The classroom “study sessions” are grade school level mental drudgery targeted at instilling love for the CCP and eroding individuality amongst prisoners. The cruelty of this twisted relationship with education cannot be understated. As the Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi laments, “if I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image,” it would be “an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of a thought is to be seen.”<sup>16</sup> The routine of the smart camp is designed to facilitate exactly this outcome amongst prisoners. Indeed, according to Arendt, the subjects of a totalitarian state do not think, they have been conditioned not to, they have no capacity for critical thought. Erbaqyt Otarbai’s chilling experience in the smart camp emphasizes this pattern of systemic destruction of thought and the insidious process of automated subjection. Coerced by “life teachers” to criticize himself and profess admiration for the ruling party, he parroted political slogans learned from the camps, recalling feelings that he “was not a full person” and was “like their pet.”<sup>17</sup> Study sessions are only interspersed with routine beatings, starvation, and a cruel system of pervasive observation that removes the possibility for rare private moments and individual thought. Inmates are reduced to an animalistic state whose only concern are the day-to-day necessities of survival.

Those who manage to survive the mental drudgery, starvation, and torture of the smart camps, are eventually released back into their communities under strict surveillance and subject to conscription into a system of forced labor. Xinjiang has a history of receiving migrants from other Chinese regions who serve as settler colonists after exile from the camp system. Dating back to 1965, the CCP implemented a policy to offer prisoners the opportunity to join the Xinjiang Production Construction Army and “become a glorious land reclamation warrior in the

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<sup>14</sup> Byler, *In the Camps*, 93.

<sup>15</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism. New Ed. with Added Prefaces* (New York, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1973), 456.

<sup>16</sup> Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault On Humanity* (New York, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 90.

<sup>17</sup> Byler, *In the Camps*, 108.

construction of our nation's border regions."<sup>18</sup> This policy instantiated a gradual process of migration where Han Chinese displaced and dispossessed minority Muslim groups in Xinjiang province. The dark legacy of this settler colonialism is found in the policy of coercing ex-prisoners from the smart camps into a system of forced labor that extracts the value of their labor with little compensation in return. Byler notes that the garment industry alone has seen a boom in Xinjiang due to government subsidies, access to convict labor, and a system of forced dispossession that has freed up farmland for cotton plantations, resulting in China sourcing more than 80 percent of its cotton from Xinjiang.<sup>19</sup> Although forced dispossession was a prominent feature of Maoist China, this new system is unprecedented in that it's directed entirely at a minority population and utilizes technology and methods of surveillance that are entirely new within the history of penal camps. Foucault's conception of the panopticon is a useful device to analyze this new camp system. While the original panopticon was conceived as a physical structure that would impose reflection and reform upon inmates caught within its gaze, China's implementation of surveillance webs, facial recognition software, and GPS tracking creates an entire society of inmates fearful of being surprised and possessing an "anxious awareness of being observed."<sup>20</sup> Foucault's observation that "a real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation"<sup>21</sup> is disturbingly prescient given the relationship between the physical and digital camp spaces. Confined to their local communities, "inmates" are subjected to the constant anxiety of being observed at all times, never knowing a private moment, and living under what could only be considered a "digital panopticon." The devices used to facilitate this observation are infinitely more complex than Bentham's architectural monument, creating an intangible and ubiquitous form of surveillance where it is impossible to discern what level of scrutiny one lives under.

Within the modern smart camp there exists many familiar features inherited from previous camp iterations in Chinese penal history. However, several new technologies developed as a direct result of the digital revolution have augmented and evolved the smart camp into something different and unique. It remains to be seen what the historical implications of the smart camp will be beyond the routine suffering it inflicts on Uyghur and other Muslim minority populations. The architects of these camps clearly envisioned a system of complete and total control, where the individual is subsumed into the camps, dispossessed, and exploited for their labor. Foucault's theory that "the ideal point of penalty today would be an indefinite discipline"<sup>22</sup> has clearly been seized upon in modeling these camps as its prisoners are victims of "an interrogation without end."<sup>23</sup> Yet while panoptic prisons, as per Foucault, aimed to

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<sup>18</sup> Wu, Slingerland, Fang, *Laogai*, 116.

<sup>19</sup> Darren Byler, *Terror Capitalism Uyghur Dispossession and Masculinity in a Chinese City* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2021), 57.

<sup>20</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 202.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 202.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 227.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 227.

manufacture pliant and “docile bodies,” they developed, in the west, within a political culture that celebrated autonomy, volition, and the private, rational individual (even as these ideals were routinely violated throughout western penal history). As the digital revolution continues its steady progression of processing power, there lies a dark yet vital question as to how much of that power should be given over to the state apparatus. Emerging data harvesting and surveillance technologies will only further feed the digital panoptic model, making a slide into omnipresent observation more likely to occur. Harry Wu’s critique that “if the people mean no more than dust, then the society is worthless and does not deserve to continue”<sup>24</sup> still resonates in this modern age as societies that are currently developing their own forms of digital surveillance and enclosure must consider the impacts these technologies have on their legitimacy. Both the United States and United Kingdom utilize a comparatively embryonic system of surveillance to fight crime and corral suspect populations; The post 9/11 era has seen both nations gradually strengthen their surveillance apparatuses and obfuscate legal protections to make surveillance and torture easier to justify. Indeed, such obfuscation has allowed for smaller scale penal experiments, including the United States' detention facilities at Guantanamo Bay, where prisoners were held in similar conditions to those in the smart camp systems. Both models facilitate Foucault's conception of indefinite discipline, and western experimentation with smart camp technology demands further exploration. The smart camp system initially developed in China is a terrifying precedent that offers a stark warning and insight into the dark paths that could be tread should a nation slide into authoritarianism, which is a serious possibility given the destabilizing impact the digital age has had on western democratic norms.

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<sup>24</sup> Wu and Wakeman, *Bitter Winds*, 129.

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