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NEWS DESK

## The Uyghurs Forced to Process the World's Fish

*China forces minorities from Xinjiang to work in industries around the country. As it turns out, this includes handling much of the seafood sent to America and Europe.*

By Ian Urbina

October 9, 2023



On a cloudy morning this past April, more than eighty men and women, dressed in matching red windbreakers, stood in orderly lines in front of the train station in Kashgar, a city in Xinjiang, China. The people were Uyghurs, one of China's largest ethnic minorities, and they stood with suitcases at their feet and dour expressions on their faces, watching a farewell ceremony held in their honor by the local government. A video of the event shows a woman in a traditional red-and-yellow dress and *doppa* cap pirouetting on a stage. A banner reads “Promote Mass Employment and Build Societal Harmony.” At the end of the video, drone footage zooms out to show trains waiting to take the group away. The event was part of a vast labor-transfer program run by the Chinese state, which forcibly sends Uyghurs to work in industries across the country, including processing seafood that is then exported to the United States and Europe. “It’s a strategy of control and assimilation,” Adrian Zenz, an anthropologist who studies internment in Xinjiang, said. “And it’s designed to eliminate Uyghur culture.”



Source: Kashgar Integrated Media Center

The labor program is part of a wider agenda to subjugate a historically restive people. China is dominated by the Han ethnic group, but more than half the population of Xinjiang, a landlocked region in northwestern China, is made up of minorities—most of them Uyghur, but some Kyrgyz, Tajik, Kazakh, Hui, or Mongol. Uyghur insurgents revolted throughout the nineteen-nineties, and bombed police stations in 2008 and 2014. In response, China ramped up a broad program of persecution, under which Muslim minorities could be detained for months or years for acts such as reciting a verse of the Quran at a funeral or growing a long beard. By 2017, the government was collecting DNA samples, fingerprints, iris scans, and blood types from all Xinjiang residents between the ages of twelve and sixty-five, and in recent years it combined these biological records with mass surveillance data sourced from Wi-Fi sniffers, CCTV, and in-person visits. The government has placed millions of Uyghurs in “reeducation” camps and detention facilities, where they have been subjected to torture, beatings, and forced sterilization. The U.S. government has described the country’s actions in Xinjiang as a form of genocide.

In the early two-thousands, China began transferring Uyghurs to work outside the region as part of an initiative that would later be known as Xinjiang Aid. The region’s Party secretary noted that the program would promote “full employment” and “ethnic interaction, exchange and blending.” But Chinese academic publications have described it as a way to “crack open” the “solidified problem” of Uyghur society in Xinjiang, where the state sees the “large number of unemployed Uyghur youths” as a “latent threat.” In 2019, researchers at Nankai University in China, who were given privileged access to information about the program, wrote a report that was inadvertently published online, describing the transfers as “an important method to reform, meld, and assimilate” the Uyghur community. Julie Millsap, from the Uyghur Human Rights Project, noted that, through the program, the state can “orchestrate and restrict all aspects of Uyghurs’ lives.” (Officials at China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not respond to questions about the program, but Wang Wenbin, a spokesperson, recently said that the allegation of forced labor is “nothing but an enormous lie propagated by people against China.”) Between 2014 and 2019, according to government statistics, Chinese authorities annually relocated more than ten per cent of Xinjiang’s population—or over two and a half million people—through labor transfers; some twenty-five thousand people a year were sent out of the region. The effect has been enormous: between 2017 and 2019, according to the Chinese government, birth rates in Xinjiang declined by almost half.

In 2021, Congress passed the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, which declared that all goods produced “wholly or in part” by workers in Xinjiang or by ethnic minorities from the region should be presumed to have involved state-imposed forced labor, and are therefore banned from entering the U.S. The law had a major impact. Since June of last year, U.S. Customs and Border Protection has detained more than a billion dollars’ worth of goods connected to Xinjiang, including electronics, clothing, and pharmaceuticals. But, until now, the seafood industry has largely escaped notice. The U.S. imports roughly eighty per cent of its seafood, and China supplies more than any other country. As of 2017, half of the fish that have gone into fish sticks served in American public schools have been processed in China, according to the Genuine Alaska Pollock Producers. But the many handoffs between fishing boats, processing plants, and exporters make it difficult to track the origin of seafood. Shandong Province, a major seafood-processing hub along the eastern coast of China, is more than a thousand miles away from Xinjiang—which may have helped it evade scrutiny. As it turns out, at least a thousand Uyghurs have been sent to work in seafood-processing factories in Shandong since 2018. “It’s door-to-door,” Zenz said. “They literally get delivered from the collection points in Xinjiang to the factory.”

Foreign journalists are generally forbidden from freely reporting in Xinjiang. In addition, censors scrub the Chinese Internet of critical and non-official content about Uyghur labor. I worked with a research team to review hundreds of pages of internal company newsletters, local news reports, trade data, and satellite imagery. We watched thousands of videos uploaded to the Internet—mostly to Douyin, the Chinese version of TikTok—which appear to show Uyghur workers from Xinjiang; we verified that many of the users had initially registered in Xinjiang, and we had specialists review the languages used in the videos. We also hired investigators to visit some of the plants. These sources provided a glimpse into a system of forced Uyghur labor behind the fish that much of the world eats.

The transfers usually start with a knock on the door. A “village work team,” made up of local Party officials, enter a household and engage in “thought work,” which involves urging Uyghurs to join government programs, some of which entail relocations. Officials often have onboarding quotas, and representatives from state-owned corporations—including the Xinjiang Zhongtai Group, a Fortune 500 conglomerate, which is involved in coordinating labor transfers—sometimes join the house visits. Wang Hongxin, the former chairman of Zhongtai, which facilitated the “employment” of more than four thousand workers from southern Xinjiang in the past few years, described his company’s recruitment efforts in rosy terms: “Now farmers in Siyak have a strong desire to go out of their homes and find employment.” (The company did not respond to requests for comment for this piece.)

The official narrative suggests that Uyghur workers are grateful for employment opportunities, and some likely are. In an interview with state media, one Uyghur worker noted that she and her husband now made twenty-two thousand dollars a year at a seafood plant, and that the factory provided “free board and lodging.” But a classified internal directive from Kashgar Prefecture’s Stability Maintenance Command, from 2017, indicates that people who resist work transfers can be punished with detainment. Zenz told

me about a woman from Kashgar who refused a factory assignment because she had to take care of two small children, and was detained as a result. Another woman who refused a transfer was put in a cell for “non-coöperation.” And the state has other methods of exerting pressure. Children and older adults are often sent to state-run facilities; family lands can be confiscated. According to a 2021 Amnesty International report, one former internment camp detainee said, “I learned that if one family [member] was in a camp you have to work so father or husband can get out quickly.”

Once people are recruited, they are rounded up. In February, 2022, for example, thousands of Uyghurs were taken to a “job fair” next to an internment camp in southwestern Xinjiang. A video of a similar event shows people in neat lines, signing contracts while monitored by people who appear to be officials in army fatigues. Many transfers are carried out by train or plane. Pictures show Uyghurs with red flowers pinned to their jackets—a common symbol of celebration—boarding China Southern Airlines flights chartered by the authorities in Xinjiang. (The airline did not respond to requests for comment.)



Source: Government of Tierenkebazha Town / TikTok

Sometimes, transfers are motivated by labor demands. In March, 2020, the Chishan Group, one of China’s leading seafood companies, published an internal newsletter describing what it called the “huge production pressure” caused by the pandemic. That October, Party officials from the local antiterrorist detachment of the public-security bureau and the human-resources-and-social-security bureau, which handles work transfers, met twice with executives to discuss how to find additional labor for the company. Several months later, Chishan agreed to accelerate transfers to its plants. Wang Shanqiang, the deputy general manager at Chishan, said in a corporate newsletter that “the company looks forward to migrant workers from Xinjiang arriving soon.” (The Chishan Group did not respond to requests for comment.)

An advertisement aimed at factory owners, posted on a Chinese online forum, promises that, when workers arrive, they will be kept

under “semi-military-style management.” Videos from seafood plants show that many workers from Xinjiang live in dormitories. Workers are reportedly often kept under the watch of security personnel. A worker in Fujian Province told *Bitter Winter*, an online magazine, that Uyghur dorms were often searched; if a Quran was found, he recalled, its owner could be sent to a reeducation camp. In a Chishan newsletter from December, 2021, the company listed the management of migrant workers as a “major” source of risk; another newsletter underscores the importance of supervising them at night and during holidays to prevent “fights, drunk disturbances, and mass incidents.”

For workers who come from rural areas of Xinjiang, the transition can be abrupt. New workers, yet another Chishan newsletter explains, are not subject to production quotas, to help them adjust. But, after a month, factory officials begin monitoring their daily output to increase “enthusiasm.” One factory has special teams of managers responsible for those who “do not adapt to their new life.” Sometimes, new Uyghur workers are paired with older ones who are assigned to “keep abreast of the state of mind of the new migrant workers.” Many Xinjiang laborers are subjected to “patriotic education.” Pictures published by a municipal agency show minority workers from Xinjiang at Yantai Sanko Fisheries studying a speech by Xi Jinping and learning about “the party’s ethnic policy.” (Yantai Sanko did not respond to requests for comment.) Companies sometimes try to ease this transition by offering special accommodations. In an effort to boost morale, some large factories provide separate canteens and Uyghur food for transferred workers. Occasionally, factories hold festive events that include dancing and music. Footage from inside one plant shows Uyghurs dancing in the cafeteria, surrounded by uniformed security guards.

Workers from other industries who have escaped the labor-transfer programs are sometimes explicitly critical about their treatment. One Uyghur man was released from a reeducation camp only to be transferred to a garment factory. “We didn’t have a choice but to go there,” he told Amnesty International, according to its 2021 report. A woman from Xinjiang named Gulzira Auelkhan was forced to work in a glove factory. She was punished for crying or spending a couple of extra minutes in the restroom by being placed in the “tiger chair,” which kept her arms and legs pinned down—a form of torture. “I spent six to eight hours in the tiger chair the first time because I didn’t follow the rules,” she said. “The police claimed I had mental issues and wasn’t in the right mind-set.”

But the Uyghurs still at factories are monitored closely, and one of the few ways to get a peek into their lives is through their social-media posts. After arriving in Shandong, they sometimes take selfies by the water; Xinjiang is the farthest place on earth from the ocean. Some post Uyghur songs with mournful lyrics. These could, of course, simply be snippets of sentimental music. But researchers have argued that they might also function as ways of conveying cryptic messages of suffering, while bypassing Chinese censors. As a 2015 analysis concluded, “Social commentary and critique are veiled through the use of metaphors, sarcasm, and references to traditional Uyghur sayings and cultural aspects that only an insider or someone very familiar with the Uyghur culture and community would recognize.” In more recent years, government surveillance and censorship have only increased.

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One middle-aged Uyghur man, who went on to work in a Shandong seafood plant, filmed himself sitting in an airport departure lounge in March, 2022, and set the footage to the song “Kitermenghu” (“I Shall Leave”). He cut away just before a section of the song that anybody familiar with it would know, which includes the line: “Now we have an enemy; you should be careful.” Another Uyghur worker, who had spoken glowingly of the programs in official media reports, one of which featured a photo of him by the sea, posted the same image to Douyin alongside a song that goes, “Why is there a need to suffer more?” A young woman posted a selfie taken in front of a Shandong seafood plant and added an excerpt from an Uyghur pop song: “We’re used to so much suffering,” the lyrics say. “Be patient, my heart. These days will pass.” One slideshow features workers packing seafood into cardboard boxes. A voice-over says, “The greatest joy in life is to defeat an enemy who is many times stronger than you, and who has oppressed you, discriminated against you, and humiliated you.”

In some videos, Uyghur workers express their unhappiness in slightly less veiled terms. One worker posted a video showing himself gutting fish at Yantai Longwin Foods. “Do you think there is love in Shandong?” the voice-over asks. “There is only waking up at five-thirty every morning, non-stop work, and the never-ending sharpening of knives and gutting of fish.” (Yantai Longwin Foods did not respond to a request for comment.) Another video shows a fish-packing line, and includes a sound used commonly on Douyin:

“How much do you get paid in a month?” one man asks.

“Three thousand,” a second responds.

“Then why are you still not happy?”

“Because I have no choice.”

Seafood supply chains are notoriously difficult to penetrate. International nonprofit watchdog groups and journalists have highly limited access in China. To detect forced labor, companies tend to rely on firms that conduct “social audits,” in which inspectors visit a factory to make sure that it complies with private labor standards. The problem, according to Scott Nova, the executive director of the Worker Rights Consortium, is that the auditors themselves and the methods they are following are not set up to detect state-imposed forced labor. Audit preparation usually requires factories to fill out questionnaires disclosing the presence of migrant workers from other provinces or abroad, and the languages spoken on site, as well as to provide auditors with lists of workers, some of whom are selected for interviews. But factories trying to conceal the presence of workers from Xinjiang often simply fail to list them in so-called self-assessment questionnaires. Social audits are typically announced ahead of time, which allows managers to hide minority workers from Xinjiang during inspections. Even when workers are interviewed, they are often reluctant to be candid, for fear of retribution. Sarosh Kuruvilla, a professor of industrial relations at Cornell, analyzed more than forty thousand audits from around the world and found that almost half were unreliable. “The tool is completely broken,” he said. “It’s a tick-box exercise on the part of the auditor, but it’s also a tick-box exercise on the part of the brand.”

This year, I hired private investigators in China to visit two large seafood factories in Shandong Province—one called Shandong Haidu and the other called Rongcheng Haibo—which together handle roughly thirty per cent of all squid processed in China. At one, an investigator was told that it would be impossible to enter the processing area. The investigator took a video from outside, which showed workers wearing white uniforms covering their entire bodies, like the scrubs that surgeons wear in an operating room; their features were concealed by face masks. Without being able to speak to them, it was impossible to tell for sure whether any were Uyghur.

Empty audits allow companies to claim that they are in compliance with corporate standards. Lund’s Fisheries, a leading U.S. squid supplier that works with Haibo, requires all its vendors to complete audits designed by Sedex, the author of the most widely used auditing rulebook. In May, 2022, social auditors from S.G.S., one of

the top auditing firms, completed an inspection of Haibo, and American companies continued to import its products. But, when we investigated the matter, we found that more than a hundred and seventy people from Xinjiang worked at Haibo in 2021, and a half-dozen Uyghur workers posted regularly to Douyin at Haibo throughout 2022. On the same day that the auditors toured, a young Uyghur worker posted pictures of herself near the plant’s loading bays and what seem to be its dormitories. (Wayne Reichle, the president of Lund’s, told me, “Our suppliers are meeting our company’s supplier standards, which exceed U.S. import regulations.” A spokesperson said that the company has begun to investigate the matter.) At Haidu, according to a company newsletter, a special canteen was set up to serve migrant workers from Xinjiang. When pressed, an S.G.S. representative said that the auditors had done what was required of them by Sedex’s methodology. (A representative from the Haibo plant said in an e-mail that the company “has never employed any Xinjiang workers.” A representative from the Haidu plant said, “There is no use of illegal workers from Xinjiang or other countries, and we recently passed human rights audits.”)

This auditing failure was not an isolated incident. In our research, we found other examples of Uyghur workers who posted videos within weeks of audits. Half the Chinese exporters that we identified as tied to Uyghur labor had passed audits by leading global inspection firms. Even many of companies that are certified as sustainable are implicated. All of the seafood plants that we found to be using forced labor from Xinjiang were certified by the Marine Stewardship Council. (Jo Miller, the M.S.C.’s head of public relations, acknowledged that the organization is reliant on social audits, which have “significant limitations.”) When we pressed officials from Sedex, they told us that it “may be difficult and risky for auditors themselves to explicitly recognise state-imposed forced labour” that “may have been covered up.” The organization said that it would update its guidance on the matter. Advocacy groups have long argued that audits are ineffective. In 2019, Human Rights Watch reported that social audits were failing to detect rampant cases of sexual abuse in the garment industry in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. Still, their use is expanding. S.G.S. now also markets a service to audit fishing vessels, which operate on the open sea, where regular monitoring is exceedingly difficult. “Audits and certifications have not uncovered forced labor in seafood-processing sites on land,” Johnny Hansen, from the International Transport Workers’ Federation, said. “So how could they possibly be any better at identifying forced labor at sea?”

The result of these failures is that thousands of tons of seafood imported from factories using forced labor continue to enter the U.S. We found that at least ten large seafood companies in China have used more than a thousand Uyghur workers since 2018. During that time, those companies shipped more than forty-seven thousand tons of seafood—including cod, pollock, shrimp, salmon, and crab—to the U.S. Seafood from these plants was bought by major U.S. and Canadian importers, including High Liner Foods. (A spokesperson for High Liner Foods said that its supplier, Yantai Sanko, had undergone a third-party audit in September, 2022.) Because seafood can get commingled at each stage of shipping, it is difficult to know for sure where any given batch ends up. But these importers sent their products to supermarkets across the country, including Walmart, Costco, Kroger, and Albertsons. (A

spokesperson for Walmart said that the company “expects all our suppliers to comply with our standards and contractual obligations, including those relating to human rights.” A spokesperson for Albertsons said that it would stop purchasing certain seafood products from High Liner Foods. Costco and Kroger did not respond to requests for comment.)

The importers also sent seafood to Sysco, the global food-service giant that supplies more than four hundred thousand restaurants worldwide. (A spokesperson for Sysco said that its supplier, Yantai Sanko, had undergone audits, and denied that it had ever “received any workers under a state-imposed labor-transfer program.”) In the past five years, the U.S. government has spent more than two hundred million dollars on seafood from importers tied to Uyghur labor for use in public schools, military bases, and federal prisons. (A spokesperson for the Department of Agriculture noted that its agencies are required to source seafood from the U.S. However, according to researchers, local-level buyers for federally supported programs sometimes use exemptions to purchase food and other products from abroad.) The U.S. is not the only country importing seafood tied to workers from Xinjiang. Importers linked with Uyghur labor supply the largest fish-processing factory in the world, owned by the British-American giant Nomad Foods, in Bremerhaven, Germany. The plant supplies leading frozen-fish brands to grocery stores across Europe, including France’s Carrefour, the U.K.’s Tesco, and Germany’s Edeka. (Carrefour’s press office said that the company “strongly condemns the use of forced labour in its supply chain” and has opened an investigation, which, the company says, has not found evidence of forced labor thus far. Tesco declined to comment on its connections to suppliers sourcing from plants using Uyghur workers. Edeka’s public-affairs department said that it was not responsible for compliance issues related to “branded products,” like those from Nomad Foods.) In total, we identified seafood imports tied to labor from Xinjiang in more than twenty countries.

In the U.S., experts say that, to address this situation, adjustments need to be made to the federal Seafood Import Monitoring Program. The program, designed to detect and combat illegal fishing, requires importers to keep detailed records about their products. But several key species, including squid and salmon, are not included in the monitoring, and the law doesn’t require companies to disclose information about workers or their conditions. Judy Gearhart, who works for the Accountability Research Center at American University, argues that the law behind the program should be expanded to force companies in China, and their U.S. buyers, to provide detailed labor information. “Accepting the word of producers or the seal of a voluntary certification is clearly not sufficient,” she said. Robert Stumberg, a law professor at Georgetown University, explained that the law on Uyghur labor is “distinctly powerful.” Rather than primarily relying on advocates or journalists having to prove the existence of forced labor tied to a certain product, the law mandates that suppliers and importers

prove that they have no connection to Uyghur labor. The U.S. government, he notes, has already investigated the working conditions in a variety of other industries, including those for solar panels, auto parts, computer chips, palm oil, sugar, and tomatoes. To Stumberg, it’s obvious what has to happen now. “Seafood should be next,” he said. ♦

*This story was produced in collaboration with the Outlaw Ocean Project, with contributions from Daniel Murphy, Joe Galvin, Maya Martin, Susan Ryan, Austin Brush, and Jake Conley.*

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## MORE ON CHINA'S SEAFOOD INDUSTRY

*For more about China’s seafood industry, read “[The Crimes Behind the Seafood You Eat](#),” an immersive investigation into the human cost of China’s maritime expansion.*

*Watch “[Squid Fleet](#),” a film that offers a close look at the gruelling work of squid fishing.*

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