



INTERNATIONAL UYGHUR STUDIES 2025

Land, Life and Labour: Narratives and Infrastructures in the Service of Colonial and Capitalist Development of the New Frontier

Date:

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Location:

Jagiellonian University, Reymonta 4, 30-059 Krakow, Poland

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What do I mean by a colonial—or more precisely, settler-colonial relationship? A settler-colonial relationship is one characterized by a particular form of domination; that is, it is a relationship where power—in this case, interrelated discursive and nondiscursive facets of economic, gendered, racial, and state power—has been structured into a relatively secure or sedimented set of hierarchical social relations that continue to facilitate the *dispossession* of Indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority.

Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014, p.6-7.

Taking this definition of a settler-colonial relationship as a starting point, how can we productively think domination into our analyses of Chinese colonialism in East Turkestan? What can intersectional inquiries into *land*, *life* and *labour* within post/de/anti-colonial theory and practice bring to our understanding of this colonial encounter? Conversely, what light can the latter shed on other colonialisms past and present? Considering the symbolic violence contained in the toponym “Xinjiang” (Er’uyghur, 2024; Bovingdon, 2010; Wang, 2007), how can we name the realities and institutions behind this term without reproducing such violence through our work? Does systematically translating “Xinjiang” as “New Frontier” enable us to underline the colonial genealogy of the term without reinforcing the colonial domination inherent to it? In what ways do narratives of social, economic and cultural “development” work with, as well as upon, spaces, places, practices, and infrastructures to imbricate forms of power? How do processes of dispossession and appropriation operate under contemporary Chinese colonialism? To what extent are these processes inextricable from global capitalism, and what forms does local resistance to them take?

Important work has already begun in this vein, offering both insight and a new critical vocabulary. Guldana Salimjan’s ‘eco-capitalism’, for example, describes the “inscri[ption of] racial differences to land and people native to that land in order to naturalise and justify expropriation, dispossession, labour injustice and the removal of certain bodies in the name of the region’s development” (2023: 93). Salimjan describes state-led enclosure of Kazakh pastures, where indigenous peoples are displaced and their lands are then sold to development companies which build tourist attractions, where Kazakhs carry out forms of unfree, gendered labour (2023; 2022). Her work offers an invaluable critical framework that can serve to underpin other explorations of how the development of tourism in the region plays an active role in the erasure of local cultures and customs (Harris, 2024; Kobi, 2024; Brown & O’Brien, 2022; Szadziewski et. al., 2022).

An essential companion to Salimjan’s work is that of Darren Byler. Focusing on urban rather than rural spaces, Byler conceptualises ‘terror-capitalism’ in the region as a new form of frontier-making, one where indigenous Muslim subjects are produced as potential ‘terrorists’,

justifying state violence as well as private capital investment in data-harvesting and labour-intensive industries (2022; 2021). According to both Salimjan and Byler's work, the carceral and camp-detention system or military-industrial complex is key to capitalist development in East Turkestan/the New Frontier: the state relies on the threat of detention in camps to suppress resistance to land expropriation and labour exploitation. Both scholars explore the interlocking systems of oppression and exploitation at work in the region by drawing heavily on Marxist, feminist and decolonial theory, and each make important theoretical contributions which go beyond the field of Kazakh and Uyghur studies. For both scholars, state narratives on modernity, development, poverty alleviation, and environmental issues are central to enabling dispossession and exploitation.

Such narratives often gain traction as part of political campaigns and politico-economical programs, such as the Open up the West campaign or the Xinjiang Pairing Assistance Program, carried out to secure Han settlement and investment in the New Frontier (see also Joniak-Lüthi, 2015). These campaigns set up partnerships between the State and private enterprises to exploit conquered, occupied land and to extract riches from its soil. As evidenced in Judd Kinzley's work, the extraction of natural resources by colonial actors consolidates state power over the region, shaping its social and political geographies in the process (2018). Extractive industries have, furthermore, allowed for the creation of a wealthy Han middle class and remodelled cities such as Korla, the economic and administrative centre of the oil industry in the Tarim Basin (see also Cliff, 2013).

Building on earlier work by Tom Cliff on the New Frontier Production and Construction Corps, or *Bingtuan* (2021; 2016; 2009), several recent reports are essential to discussions of extractivism in East Turkestan/the New Frontier. Amongst these, special mention goes to Laura Murphy and Nyrola Elimä's report on Uyghur forced labour, particularly in the solar energy industry (2021), as well as the report these two researchers co-authored with David Tobin (2022). The latter shows how the *Bingtuan* benefits from forced labour and incentivizes companies to engage in forced labour programs, while facilitating dispossession, "leaving Uyghurs landless and unemployed, and thus subject to transfer" (2022: 47).

It is important to note that the above processes are facilitated by law under the People's Republic of China but also, to a certain extent, by international law. Focusing on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Vincent Wong (2022) calls for scholars to "*think infrastructurally*" about international law, to purposefully trace the ways in which abstract and physical structures are co-implicated in the process of dispossession. Wong argues that racial capitalism in East Turkestan/the New Frontier functions as a strategy of rule, which creates social hierarchies in the work force. The system structurally privileges the Han, and although Wong doesn't use the term himself (unlike Salimjan (2023: 103)), his work opens space to

think about Han supremacy. Like Salimjan and Byler, he situates the case of East Turkestan/the New Frontier as part of global capitalism, enriching his understanding by drawing on theory produced in different colonial and postcolonial contexts. The extent to which global supply-chains, international brands, and everyday consumer products, as well as green energy in the face of climate crisis, depend upon forced labour draws our attention to the *transnational scope* needed to think about the reach of infrastructures and narratives serving colonial and capitalist development (see also Hayes 2023).

This conference seeks to invite critical as well as ethical engagement with post/de/anti-colonial theory and practice. How can Uyghur and Kazakh studies engage with Native and Black studies to better understand the interrelated processes of land theft, resource extraction, forced labour, and genocide without collapsing the specificities of different histories and presents? What further understanding could the recent ‘colonial turn’ in Jewish studies bring to these questions? Can Han supremacy serve as a useful tool to conceptualize current processes of racialization? How does thinking about racial capitalism and exoticisation beyond the white-black and western-oriental divide allow us to explore parallels between the New Frontier and other contexts? For example, between the racialization of Turkic peoples in East Turkestan and the branching racialisation of Slavs, Jews, Roma people and Poles under the Third Reich? While scholarship on East Turkestan has mostly stayed away from exploring parallels with the Holocaust, what could be gained from engaging with the literature on the labour camps which underpinned Nazi colonial order, and with our colleagues working in countries once occupied by the Third Reich?

Moreover, how do Nazi, Soviet and modern-day Russian discourses on Ukraine, the ‘breadbasket of Europe’, or those on Aotearoa/New Zealand, the ‘land of milk and honey’, resemble or differ from those concerning, for instance, the fertile Ili valley? What resemblances are there between Israeli and Han Chinese depictions of ‘developing the frontier’, and ‘making the desert bloom’? Finally, considering that we are all implicated in both global racial capitalism and colonialism (past and present), how can and should we think ourselves and our work into our critiques of domination?

Interested participants are invited to submit their CV and a 500-word abstract by April 30, 2025. Notification of paper acceptance will be provided by May 31 at the latest. All correspondence should be directed to uyghur.studies@uyghur-institute.org. Participants who cannot rely on institutional funding for their accommodation and travel expenses are invited to state this explicitly in their application. Due to budget restrictions, conference funding for travel and accommodation will be allocated on a case-per-case basis.

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