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THE XINJIANG PROCEDURE

To figure out what is taking place today in a closed society such as China, sometimes you have to go back a decade, sometimes more.¹

One clue might be found on a hilltop near southern Guangzhou, on a partly cloudy autumn day in 1991. A small medical team and a young doctor starting a practice in internal medicine had driven up from Sun Yat-sen Medical University in a van modified for surgery. Pulling in on bulldozed earth, they found a small fleet of similar vehicles—clean, white, with smoked glass windows and prominent red crosses on the side. The police had ordered the medical team to stay inside for their safety. Indeed, through the side window of the van, its occupants could see lines of ditches—some filled in, others freshly dug—suggesting that the hilltop had served as a killing ground for years.²

Thirty-six scheduled executions would translate into seventy-two kidneys and corneas divided among the regional hospitals. Every van contained surgeons who could work fast: fifteen to thirty minutes to extract. Drive back to the hospital. Transplant within six hours. Nothing fancy or experimental; execution would probably ruin the heart.

Right after the first shots the van door was thrust open and two men with white surgical coats thrown over their uniforms carried a body in, the head and feet still twitching slightly. The young doctor noted that the wound was on the right side of the chest, as he had expected. When a third body was laid down, he went to work.

Male, forty-ish, Han Chinese. While the other retail organs in the van were slated for the profitable foreigner market, the doctor had seen the paperwork indicating this kidney was tissue-matched for transplant into a fifty-year-old Chinese man. Without the transplant, that man would

die. With it, the same man would rise miraculously from his hospital bed and go on to have a normal life for twenty-five years or so. By 2016, given all the immunosuppressive drug advances in China, they could theoretically replace the liver, lungs, or heart—maybe buy that man yet another ten to fifteen years.

The third body had no special characteristics save an angry purple line on the neck. The doctor recognized the forensics. Sometimes the police would twist a wire around a prisoner's throat to prevent him from speaking up in court. The doctor thought it through methodically. Maybe the police didn't want this prisoner to talk because he had been a deranged killer, a thug, or mentally unstable. After all, the Chinese penal system was a daily sausage grinder, executing hardcore criminals on a massive scale. Yes, the young doctor knew the harvesting was wrong. Whatever crime had been committed, it would be nice if the prisoner's body were allowed to rest forever. Yet was his surgical task that different from an obstetrician's? Harvesting was rebirth; harvesting was life, as revolutionary an advance as antibiotics or steroids—*or maybe they didn't want this man to talk because he was a political prisoner.*

Nineteen years later, in a secure location, the doctor laid out the puzzle. He asked that I keep his identity a secret.

The first experimental organ transplants were carried out in China during the 1960s. Organ harvesting of criminals condemned for capital offenses began on a small scale in the late 1970s.³ Beginning in the mid-1980s, Chinese medical transplant expertise accelerated with the help of new immunosuppressive agents that could effectively tamp down the new host's tendency to reject foreign tissue.⁴ Suddenly organs once considered scraps no longer went to waste. It wasn't public knowledge exactly, but Chinese medical schools taught that many otherwise wicked criminals volunteered their organs as a final penance.

Chinese medical authorities admit that the lion's share of transplant organs originate with executions, but no mainland Chinese doctors, even in exile, will normally speak of performing such surgery.⁵ To do so would remind international medical authorities—the World Health Organization, the Transplantation Society—of an issue they would rather avoid—

not China's horrendous execution rate or the exploitation of criminal organs, but rather the systematic elimination of China's religious and political prisoners. Yet even if this doctor feared consequences to his family and his career, he did not fear embarrassing China, for he was born into an indigenous minority group, the Uyghurs.⁶



A typical execution ground in China. The weapon appears to be a Type-81-1 assault rifle, suggesting that the photo was taken after 1986; because the weapon is aimed at the woman's head, it is likely that the execution took place before the advent of live organ harvesting.

Behind closed doors, the doctor (and practically every other Uyghur witness I spoke with) calls this vast region in China's northwest corner (bordering India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia) "East Turkestan." The Uyghurs are ethnically Turkic, not East Asian. They are Muslims with a smattering of Christians, and their language is more readily understood in Tashkent than in Beijing. The importance of "East Turkestan" is that the name references a future independent

nation. Uyghurs have had different ideas about the composition of such a state over the years, with the possibilities ranging from an Islamic republic (following the Cultural Revolution when the Red Guards literally turned mosques into pigpens) to a Soviet protectorate (until the Soviet Union collapsed) or, most promising, a “Uyghurstan” that would take its place among the new Central Asian nations. At the top leadership level, Rebiya Kadeer speaks about a Western-style democracy.

By contrast, Beijing’s name for the so-called Autonomous Region, Xinjiang, literally translates as “new frontier.” The Chinese conflict with the Uyghurs over that land is China’s longest running territorial war. When Mao invaded in 1949, Han Chinese constituted only 7 percent of the regional population. Following the flood of Communist Party administrators, soldiers, shopkeepers, and construction corps, Han Chinese now constitute the majority, the mass migration creating a rationale for suppressing Uyghur language and culture, most vividly seen in the bulldozing of vast historic centers of ancient Silk Road cities such as Ghulja, Karamay, and Kashgar. Originally driven by cotton, Maoist modernization principles, and countering the Soviets, the Chinese expansion is now fueled by the party’s calculation that Xinjiang will be its top oil and natural gas production center by the end of this century.⁷

To protect this investment, Beijing traditionally depicted all Uyghur nationalists—violent rebels and nonviolent activists alike—as proxies for the US Central Intelligence Agency.⁸ Shortly after 9/11, that conspiracy theory was tossed down the memory hole. Suddenly China was, and always has been, at war with al Qaeda–led Uyghur terrorists. No matter how transparently opportunistic the switch, the American intelligence community saw an opening for Chinese cooperation in the war on terror, and they signaled their acquiescence by allowing Chinese state security personnel into Guantánamo to interrogate Uyghur detainees.⁹

While it is difficult to know the strength of the claim that detainees were connected to al Qaeda, the basic facts are these: During the 1990s, when the Chinese drove the Uyghur rebel training camps from neighboring countries such as Kazakhstan and Pakistan, some Uyghurs fled to Afghanistan, where a portion became Taliban soldiers.¹⁰ Nor is there



"The mother of all Uyghurs": Rebiya Kadeer, president of the World Uyghur Congress. Photo by Alim Seytoff.

little question that the level of violence within Xinjiang, and indeed within China, has increased in recent years. Both Uyghur separatists and the Chinese internal military apparatus play a part, yet because the party bureaucracy controls the Web (the internet in Xinjiang was shut down for six months following the Urumqi riots of July 2009) as well as Western reporters' physical access to Xinjiang, the Chinese narrative is dominated by lurid—and unverifiable—stories such as that of the 2014 Kunming train-station massacre, while hundreds of enforced disappearances of young Uyghur males—verifiable but relatively dull from a Western editor's perspective—rarely penetrate the Western consciousness.

The party intends to frame the Uyghurs as international terrorists. And yet, even as the Chinese government claims that Uyghurs constitute an Islamic fundamentalist threat, the fact is that I've never met a Uyghur woman who won't shake hands or a man who won't have a drink with me. Nor does my Jewish-sounding name appear to make anyone flinch. In one of those *vino veritas* sessions, I asked a local Uyghur leader if he was able to get any sort of assistance from groups such as the Islamic Human Rights Commission (where, as I found during a brief visit to their London offices, veiled women flinch from an extended male hand, drinks are forbidden, and my Jewish surname is a very big deal indeed). "Useless!" he snorted, returning to the vodka bottle. So if Washington's goal is to promote a reformed China, then taking Beijing's word for who is a terrorist is to play into the party's hands.

Xinjiang has long served as the party's illicit laboratory. In the mid-sixties, the Chinese military conducted atmospheric nuclear testing in Lop Nur that resulted in a significant rise in cancers in Urumqi, Xinjiang's capital.¹¹ In several tests, live prisoners were apparently placed at varying distances from ground zero to measure the effects of the blasts and fallout.¹² At some point during the last decade, the Communist Party authorized the creation in the Tarim Desert of another grand experiment—the world's largest labor camp, roughly estimated to hold fifty thousand Uyghurs, religious prisoners, and hardcore criminals.¹³ In between these two ventures, the first organ harvesting of political prisoners was implemented. And again, Xinjiang was ground zero.



The fifty-yard stare: "Little brother" Nijat Abdureyimu played the good cop in Chinese Public Security Bureau interrogation of Uyghur dissidents. Photo by Jaya Gibson, 2009.

Every Uyghur witness I approached over the course of two years—police, medical, and security personnel scattered across two continents—related compartmentalized fragments of information to me, often through halting translation. With the exception of the surgeon who opened this chapter, who is still an active medical professional in China, those who asked me to conceal their identities by using a pseudonym in my writing ultimately agreed to my request that they openly testify if the United States Congress called upon them to do so—and they did this even while they acknowledged risks to their careers, their families, and, in several cases, their lives. Their testimony reveals not just a procedure evolving to meet the lucrative medical demand for living organs, but the genesis of a wider atrocity.

In 1989, not long after Nijat Abdureyimu turned twenty, he graduated from Xinjiang Police School and was assigned to a special police force, Regiment No. 1 of the Urumqi Public Security Bureau. As one

of the first Uyghurs in a Chinese unit that specialized in “social security”—essentially squelching threats to the Communist Party—Nijat was employed as the good cop in Uyghur interrogations, particularly the high-profile cases. I first met Nijat—thin, depressed, and watchful—in a crowded refugee camp on the outskirts of Rome.¹⁴

Nijat explained to me that he was well aware that his Chinese colleagues kept him under constant surveillance. But Nijat presented the image they liked: the little brother with the guileless smile. By 1994 he had penetrated all of the government’s secret bastions: the detention center, its interrogation rooms, and the killing grounds. Along the way, he had witnessed his fair share of torture, executions, even a rape. So his curiosity was in the nature of professional interest when he questioned one of the Chinese cops who had come back from an execution shaking his head. According to his colleague, it had been a normal procedure—the unwanted bodies kicked into a trench, the useful corpses hoisted into the harvesting vans, but then he heard something coming from a van, like a man screaming.

“Like someone was still alive?” Nijat remembers asking. “What kind of screams?”

“Like from hell.”

Nijat shrugged. The regiment had more than enough sloppiness to go around.

A few months later, three death row prisoners were being transported from detention to execution. Nijat had become friendly with one in particular, a very young man. As Nijat walked alongside, the young man turned to Nijat with eyes like saucers: “Why did you inject me?”

Nijat hadn’t injected him; the medical director had. But the director and some legal officials were watching the exchange, so Nijat lied smoothly: “It’s so you won’t feel much pain when they shoot you.”

The young man smiled faintly, and Nijat, sensing that he would never quite forget that look, waited until the execution was over to ask the medical director: “Why did you inject him?”

“Nijat, if you can transfer to some other section, then go as soon as possible.”

“What do you mean? Doctor, exactly what kind of medicine did you inject him with?”

“Nijat, do you have any beliefs?”

“Yes. Do you?”

“It was an anticoagulant, Nijat. And maybe we are all going to hell.”

* * *

I first met Enver Tohti—a soft-spoken, husky, Buddha of a man—through the informal Uyghur network of London. I confess that my first impression was that he was just another émigré living in public housing. But Enver had a secret.¹⁵

His story began on a Tuesday in June 1995, when he was a general surgeon at Urumqi Central Railway Hospital. Enver recalled an unusual conversation with his immediate superior, the chief surgeon: “Enver, we are going to do something exciting. Have you ever done an operation in the field?”

“Not really. What do you want me to do?”

“Get a mobile team together and request an ambulance. Have everyone out front at nine tomorrow.”

On a cloudless Wednesday morning, Enver led two assistants and an anesthesiologist into an ambulance and followed the chief surgeon’s car out of Urumqi going west. The ambulance had a picnic atmosphere until they realized they were entering the Western Mountain Execution Grounds, which specialized in killing political dissidents. On a dirt road by a steep hill the chief surgeon pulled off and came back to talk to Enver: “When you hear a gunshot, drive around the hill.”

“Can you tell us why we are here?”

“Enver, if you don’t want to know, don’t ask.”

“I want to know.”

“No. You don’t want to know.”

The chief surgeon gave him a quick, hard look as he returned to the car. Enver saw that beyond the hill there appeared to be some sort of armed police facility. People were milling about—civilians. Enver sarcastically commented that perhaps they were family members waiting to

collect the bodies and pay for the bullets and the team responded with increasingly sick jokes to break the tension. Then they heard a gunshot, possibly a volley, and drove around to the execution field.

Focusing on not making any sudden moves as he followed the chief surgeon's car, Enver never really did get a good look. He briefly registered that there were ten, maybe twenty bodies lying at the base of the hill, but the armed police saw the ambulance and waved him over.

"This one. It's this one."

Sprawled on the blood-soaked ground was a man, around thirty, dressed in navy blue overalls. All convicts were shaved, but this one had long hair.

"That's him. We'll operate on him."

"Why are we operating?" Enver protested, feeling for the artery in the man's neck. "Come on. This man is dead."

Enver stiffened and corrected himself. "No. He's not dead."

"Operate then. Remove the liver and the kidneys. Now! Quick! Be quick!"

Following the chief surgeon's directive, the team loaded the body into the ambulance. Enver felt himself going numb: Just cut the clothes off. Just strap the limbs to the table. Just open the body. He kept making attempts to follow normal procedure—sterilize, minimal exposure, sketch the cut. Enver glanced questioningly at the chief surgeon. "No anesthesia," said the chief surgeon. "No life support."

The anesthesiologist just stood there, arms folded—like some sort of ignorant peasant, Enver thought. Enver barked at him. "Why don't you do something?"

"What exactly should I do, Enver? He's already unconscious. If you cut, he's not going to respond."

But there was a response. As Enver's scalpel went in, the man's chest heaved spasmodically and then curled back again. Enver, a little frantic now, turned to the chief surgeon. "How far in should I cut?"

"You cut as wide and deep as possible. We are working against time."

Enver worked fast, not bothering with clamps, cutting with his right hand, moving muscle and soft tissue aside with his left, slowing down only to make sure he excised the kidneys and liver cleanly. Even as

Enver stitched the man back up—not internally, there was no point to that anymore; all he could do was make the body look presentable—he noticed the blood was still pulsing.¹⁶ He was sure the man was still alive. I am a killer, Enver screamed inwardly. He did not dare to look at the face again, just as he imagined a killer would avoid looking at his victim.



First confession: Dr. Enver Tohti extracted the liver and kidneys from a living human being on a Xinjiang execution ground. Photo by Simon Gross and Jaya Gibson.

The team drove back to Urumqi in silence.

On Thursday, the chief surgeon confronted Enver: “So. Yesterday. Did anything happen? Yesterday was a usual, normal day. Yes?”

Enver said yes, and it took years for him to understand that live organs have lower rejection rates in the new host and that the bullet to the chest had—other than that first sickening lurch—acted like some sort of magical anesthesia. He had done what he could; he had stitched the body back neatly for the family. And fifteen years would elapse before Enver revealed what had happened that Wednesday.

* * *

As for Nijat, it was 1996 when he put it all together.

It happened just about midnight, well after the cell block's lights were turned off. Nijat found himself hanging out in the detention compound's administrative office with the medical director. Following a pause in the conversation, the director, in an odd voice, asked Nijat if he thought the place was haunted.

"Maybe it feels a little weird at night," Nijat answered. "Why do you think that?"

"Because too many people have been killed here. And for all the wrong reasons."

Nijat finally understood. The anticoagulant. The expensive "execution meals" for the regiment following a trip to the killing ground. The plainclothes agents in the cells who persuaded the prisoners to sign statements donating their organs to the state. And now the medical director was confirming it all: Those statements were real. They just didn't take account of the fact that the prisoners would still be alive when they were cut up.

"Nijat, we really are going to hell."

Nijat nodded, pulled on his beer, and didn't bother to smile.

* * *

On February 2, 1997, Bahtiyar Shemshidin began wondering whether he was a policeman in name only. Two years before, the Chinese Public Security Bureau of the Western city of Ghulja recruited Bahtiyar for the drug enforcement division. It was a natural fit because Bahtiyar was tall, good-looking, and exuded effortless Uyghur authority. Bahtiyar would ultimately make his way to Canada and freedom, but he had no trouble recalling his initial idealism; back then, Bahtiyar did not see himself as a Chinese collaborator but as an emergency responder.¹⁷

For several years, heroin addiction had been creeping through the neighborhoods of Ghulja, striking down young Uyghurs like a medieval



Working for the Public Security Bureau after the Ghulja massacre, Bahtiyar Shemshidin was aware of wide-scale atrocities and the presence of medical vans at executions. Photo courtesy of Bahtiyar Shemshidin.

plague. Yet inside the force, Bahtiyar quickly grasped that the Chinese heroin cartel was quietly protected, if not encouraged, by the authorities cartel—typified by a Chinese dealer who got caught with six hundred grams yet received only a two-month sentence. Even Bahtiyar’s recruitment was a bait-and-switch. Instead of sending him after drug dealers, his Chinese superiors ordered him to investigate the *Meshrep*—a traditional Muslim get-together promoting clean living, sports, and Uyghur music and dance. If the Meshrep had flowered like a traditional herbal remedy against the opiate invader, the Chinese authorities read it as a disguised attack on the Chinese state.

In early January 1997, on the eve of Ramadan, the entire Ghulja police force—Uyghurs and Chinese alike—were suddenly ordered to surrender their guns “for inspection.” Now, almost a month later, the weapons were being released. But Bahtiyar’s gun was held back. Bahtiyar went to the Chinese bureaucrat who controlled supplies and asked after it. “Your gun has a problem,” Bahtiyar was told.

“When will you fix the problem?”

The bureaucrat shrugged, glanced at his list, and looked up at Bahtiyar with an unblinking stare that said: It is time for you to go. By the end of the day, Bahtiyar got it: Every Chinese officer had a gun. Every Uyghur officer’s gun had a problem.

Three days later, Bahtiyar understood why. On February 5, approximately one thousand Uyghurs gathered in the center of Ghulja. The day before, the Chinese authorities arrested (and, it was claimed, severely abused) six women, all Muslim teachers, all participants in the Meshrep. The young men came without their winter coats to show they were unarmed, but, planned or unplanned, the Chinese police fired on the demonstrators.

Casualty counts of what is known as the *Ghulja Incident* remain shaky. Bahtiyar recalls internal police estimates of four hundred dead, but he didn’t see it; all Uyghur policemen had been sent to the local jail “to interrogate prisoners” and were locked in the compound throughout the crisis. However, Bahtiyar witnessed Uyghurs herded into the compound and thrown naked onto the snow—some bleeding, others clearly suffering from internal injuries. Ghulja’s main Uyghur clinic was overwhelmed with casualties; then it was effectively shut down when a squad of Chinese special

police arrested ten of the doctors and gratuitously destroyed the ambulance. As the arrests mounted by late April, the jail became hopelessly overcrowded, and Uyghur political prisoners were selected for daily executions. On April 24, Bahtiyar's colleagues witnessed the killing of eight political prisoners, accompanied by doctors in "special vans for harvesting organs." The bodies were then encased in cement and buried in secrecy.

* * *

On the continent of Europe, I went to the home of a nurse who worked in a major Ghulja Hospital following the incident. Nervously requesting that I provide no personal details, she told me that the hospitals were forbidden to treat Uyghur protesters. A doctor who bandaged an arm received a fifteen-year sentence, while another got twenty years, and hospital staff were told, "If you treat someone, you will get the same result." Silence between the Uyghur and Chinese medical personnel deepened and then became a chasm.¹⁸

In that separation, little things started to happen: If it was a long weekend, the Chinese doctors would stockpile prescriptions for three days rather than allow a Uyghur doctor to have a key to the pharmacy. On her daily rounds, the nurse picked up that Uyghur patients were only receiving 50 percent of their usual doses—out of Chinese meticulous habit, it was even showing up in their charts. The forced abortion and sterilization policy had been in full swing since 1986, but Uyghurs had always been given a partial dispensation. No longer. If it was a Uyghur couple's second child, Chinese maternity doctors administered an injection (described as an antibiotic) to Uyghur babies; the nurse could not recall a single instance of the same injection given to a Chinese baby. She observed a pattern—within three days the infant would turn a grotesque shade of blue and die shortly thereafter. She witnessed Chinese staffers offering the same explanation over and over to Uyghur mothers: Your baby was too weak; your baby could not handle the drug. At the end of March, the nurse resigned. The hospital had been split in two, the doctors too passive, the crimes too great, the guilt too intense. There was nothing left to heal.



The eternal face of execution. The man on the left, an enlisted People's Armed policeman, takes pains to look "official." His comrade to the right (the mustache hints that he is Uyghur) seems to suggest it's all a big joke. Wearing a white glove to protect against the inevitable back splatter of blood, the man in the foreground appears to be a Supreme Procuratorate officer. He meets our gaze defiantly. This photo was taken in the last fifteen years, yet if we blur the racial features and uniforms we can recognize the same uneasy postures we've seen for well over a century in most authoritarian states; over time, the psychological toll on the executioners becomes obvious. In the last ten years, the Chinese state has transferred its traditional dependence on armed policemen to military surgeons.

Shortly after the Ghulja incident, a young Uyghur protester's body returned home from a military hospital. Perhaps the fact that the abdomen was stitched up was just evidence of an autopsy, but it nearly sparked another round of riots. After that, the corpses were wrapped, buried at gunpoint, and Chinese soldiers patrolled the cemeteries (one is not far from the current Urumqi airport). By June, the nurse was pulled into a new case: A young Uyghur protester had been arrested and beaten severely. His family paid for his release, only to discover that their son had kidney damage. The family was told to visit a Chinese military hospital in Urumqi, where the hospital staff laid it out: One kidney, 30,000 RMB (roughly \$4,700). The kidney will be healthy, they were assured, because the transplant was to come from a twenty-one-year-old Uyghur male—the same profile as their son. The family paid, the operation failed, and the nurse was briefly brought into the family's attempt to obtain some sort of justice. There was a problem though. Although the source of the kidney was indeed a twenty-one-year-old male, it turned out he was not a murderer or a rapist but a young man who had protested for the rights of Uyghurs. Compensation was impossible. The donor, indeed the transplant, didn't exist in any official record.¹⁹

* * *

In the early autumn of 1997, fresh out of a blood-work tour in rural Xinjiang, a young Uyghur doctor—let's call him Murat—was pursuing a promising medical career in a large Urumqi Hospital. Two years later he was planning his escape to Europe, where I met him some years after.²⁰

One day Murat's instructor quietly informed him that five Chinese government officials—big guys, party members—had checked into the hospital with organ problems. Now he had a job for Murat: "Go to the Urumqi prison. The political wing, not the criminal side. Take blood samples. Small ones. Just to map out the different blood types. That's all you have to do."

"What about tissue matching?"

"Don't worry about any of that. We'll handle that later. Just map out the blood types."

Clutching the authorization, and accompanied by an assistant from the hospital, Murat, slight and bookish, found himself facing approximately fifteen prisoners, mostly tough-guy Uyghurs in their late twenties. As the first prisoner sat down and saw the needle, the pleading began.

“You are a Uyghur like me. Why are you going to hurt me?”

“I’m not going to hurt you. I’m just taking blood.”

At the word *blood*, everything collapsed. The men howled and stampeded, the guards screaming and shoving them back into line. The prisoner shrieked that he was innocent. The Chinese guards grabbed his neck and squeezed it hard.

“It’s just for your health,” Murat said evenly, suddenly aware that the hospital functionary was probably watching to make sure that Murat wasn’t too sympathetic. “It’s just for your health.”

Murat said it again and again as he drew blood.

When Murat returned to the hospital, he asked the instructor, “Were all those prisoners sentenced to death?”

“That’s right, that’s right. Yes. Just don’t ask any more questions. They are bad people—enemies of the country.”

But Murat kept asking questions, and over time, he learned the drill. Once they found a matching blood type, they would move to tissue matching. Then the political prisoner would get a bullet to the right side of the chest. Murat’s instructor would visit the execution site to match blood types. The officials would get their organs, rise from their beds, and check out.

Six months later, around the first anniversary of Ghulja, five new officials checked in and the instructor told Murat to go back to the political wing for fresh blood. This time there was far less pretense about it. Murat was told that harvesting political prisoners was normal. A growing export. High volume. The military hospitals are leading the way.

By early 1999, the officials stopped coming and Murat no longer heard about the harvesting of political prisoners. Perhaps it was over, he thought. Perhaps the Xinjiang Procedure had been an experiment, like those inexplicable blood tests of rural Uyghur schoolchildren that he had been ordered to do just before he started in the Urumqi Hospital. Or

perhaps, *Tian gao, huangdi yuan*—Heaven high, emperor far—and what happens in Xinjiang, stays in Xinjiang. It was all just a local official's idea of revenge for the Ghulja uprising. The procedure wouldn't go national. Murat knew from first-hand experience that the party believed in a racial firewall, a genetic border between Uyghurs and Han Chinese. Perhaps they wouldn't cross it.

A few months later, the Uyghur crackdown would be eclipsed by Chinese security's largest-scale action since Mao: the elimination of a Chinese religious movement named Falun Gong.

* * *

This book is not intended to be a textbook on Chinese organ harvesting. In fact, none of us who have investigated this topic has the capability to write such a book until the party allows a comprehensive, transparent, on-the-ground investigation into the harvesting of political and religious prisoners—Uyghurs, Falun Gong, Tibetans, and House Christians—from 1997 to the present. That will never occur until many voices join us in that demand. Yet, quite understandably, few will do so until they begin to grapple with the scale of the crime. The twist is that the first step toward achieving that support is to admit how provisional our findings are and to explain the severity of the limitations under which we operate. Back in 2008, before I began interviewing the Uyghurs, I put it this way:

Indeed, the entire investigation must be understood to be still at an early, even primitive, stage. We do not really know the scale of what is happening yet. Think of 1820, when a handful of doctors, scientists, and amateur fossil hunters were trying to make sense of scattered suggestive evidence and a disjointed pile of bones. Twenty-two years would pass before an English paleontologist so much as coined the term “dinosaur”—“terrible lizard”—and the modern study of these extinct creatures got seriously underway. Those of us researching the harvesting of organs from involuntary donors in China are like the early dinosaur hunters. We don't work in close consultation with each other. We are still waiting for even one doctor who has harvested organs from

living prisoners of conscience to emerge from the mainland. Until that happens, it is true, we don't even have dinosaur bones.²¹

The main point is still relevant—trying to see into the unmarked compounds of China is like examining a star. Any light we can see may have already occurred years ago. Our assumptions about the present hinge on faint radio signals over time. Yet I am also repeating my statement to suggest how far we have come. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, we now have bones, and as new defectors emerge from the Tibetan and Uyghur communities, we have a broader landscape for excavation. The problem for this investigation actually lies elsewhere.

Let me explain exactly why I say that. Although the BBC investigative team periodically rediscovers the fact that British women apply the collagen of executed prisoners to their faces every night, the Chinese medical establishment admitted seven years ago that they routinely strip executed prisoners of organs that are subsequently transplanted into wealthy Chinese and foreigners.²² Aside from the ethical considerations, the only real distinction between the organ harvesting of common prisoners—murderers, rapists, and so on—and the organ harvesting of prisoners of conscience is that the Chinese authorities still deny the latter has ever taken place at all. The first charges of harvesting the organs of Falun Gong practitioners emerged in the *Epoch Times* and was followed by the seminal *Bloody Harvest* report of 2006.²³ The evidence has built considerably since then, in the recently published *State Organs* and on the website of the World Organization to Investigate the Persecution of Falun Gong.²⁴

Collectively, we are at the midpoint of our investigation, and yet there are still many worldwide who prefer not to think about the issue. If forced to comment, the allegation might even be dismissed as a sort of urban legend, a kidney in the bathtub story, a conspiracy theory gone mainstream. While I don't care for intellectual laziness—one ought to read some of the actual material before dismissing it—I don't begrudge anyone their right to initial skepticism. These are serious allegations, toxic allegations. The reader should start from a safe intellectual base before exploring further.

In 2006, when the first allegations of organ harvesting of Falun Gong emerged, there was no question in my mind that the conflict between the Chinese state and Falun Gong was the number one issue in China, and that a comprehensive account was long overdue. So I was open-minded about harvesting—I had to be, knowing what I already knew about the atrocities committed in labor camps—but I confess that I, too, wore a heavy coat of skepticism on one of my first moon walks in 2007.

It was an interview with an elderly woman fresh out of forced-labor camp.²⁵ She wasn't particularly articulate, but she had an appealing salt-of-the-earth quality. At one point she mentioned a "funny" physical exam in passing. I asked her to explain. She did not consider the matter important and continued on with her story. I dragged her back. Had she been hunger-striking? No. Was anyone else examined? Yes, some other Falun Gong. What were the tests?

What she described was terrifying and inexplicable—rather than the doctor administering a normal physical examination, it was more like he was already picking over a fresh corpse. She had no idea of these implications. In fact, she was growing increasingly irritated by the entire interview, by my Western inability to see the woods for the trees—the woods, in this case, being her spiritual battle. While I don't believe that she had been seriously considered as a candidate for organ harvesting—too old, really—she did mention that some of the younger women had disappeared following the examination, and I remember feeling an unfamiliar chill as my safe, hedging cloak of skepticism fell away for a moment.

As you may have gathered, I like evidence like that, evidence I can put my arms around. Whenever possible I anchor my work in witness testimony. And the witnesses will add—quite significantly, I hope—to the growing pile of evidence surrounding harvesting. But another key contribution is what I have just shown you in this chapter: That the organ harvesting of prisoners of conscience did not begin with Falun Gong but evolved organically from the practice of criminal executions and organ harvesting in China. In fact, one could say that the central decision to start exploiting prisoners of conscience on a mass scale was little more than a sort of legal blurring around the edges, a technical triviality.

Yet the implications were far from trivial; tens of thousands of people by my estimate, people who had committed no capital crimes under Chinese law, would be slaughtered on the operating table. And why would the Chinese Communist Party, so rich in resources and power, so eager for international acclaim, take such a wild risk? Thus the investigative problem starts to become one of motive, of plausibility. It is not just the *how*, but the *why*.

As we move into organ harvesting of scale, and indisputably that means Falun Gong, the *why* question becomes the central task of the next six chapters. Evidence can actually be relatively simple. Human motivation—assuming one rejects cartoon figures of pure good and evil and accepts that, even in China, the God of Mammon only rules conditionally—can be an exceedingly complex matter. And that is why I interviewed well over one hundred witnesses in depth across four continents. The witnesses trusted me, sometimes with their own safety, and even more important to most of them, with the safety and welfare of their families. They worried that I was getting it all wrong at times—I was clearly not the shiny Western knight they had prayed for—but they went ahead and filled in the critical pieces anyway. And, like the Uyghurs, no individual possessed the entire Rosetta Stone. If a witness had claimed that he or she could supply the entire organ-harvesting story from arrest to the grim disposal of what remained of the corpse—well, as the Zen saying goes: If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him. Spies know everything; humans miss stuff. Credibility is a human attribute; it can't be created in a lab so easily because it comes with limitations and prejudices and failings that are hard to reproduce. And of all the humans I have met, refugees from Chinese labor camps in particular carry a great deal of pain and expectation and need.

As I sit here alone in my flat in north London, on a late night in early December, I feel them when they breathe. My account—so long in coming yet so trivial an effort compared to the struggle that has been waged, so inadequate for the families across China that have lost loved ones—cannot fully answer everything about this terrible chapter in modern Chinese history. But I pray that, after seven years of trying, I have finally come up with the right questions.