Tainting Xinjiang Cotton cannot be Tolerated: The Research Report on Whether There Exists “forced labor” in Cotton Production in Xinjiang

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In March 2021, a joint research group of Human Rights Institute and Non-traditional Security Institute of Southwest University of Political Science and Law set off to Aksu, Kashgar, Hotan and other regions in Xinjiang to conduct field study on the social development of Xinjiang. During this period, the “Better Cotton Initiative” (BCI) suspended its assurance activities in Xinjiang indefinitely based on the accusation of “forced labor” in the local cotton production chain. The statement was followed by boycott measures undertaken by fashion brands including H&M, Nike, etc., and soon sparked media uproar on national and international internet. During the incident, some western media accused Xinjiang, especially southern Xinjiang, of using "forced labor" to produce cotton on a large scale. In view of such allegation, the research team immediately assigned a sub-group to carry out field research with some large cotton farmers and cotton pickers in Aksu, Kashgar and other places in southern Xinjiang. The research was primarily based on in-depth interviews. Through the analysis of relevant data, the following report is formed, hoping to assist the international publics to understand the real picture of cotton picking in Xinjiang.

I. The Mechanization of Cotton Production in Southern Xinjiang

Through the research, the researchers found that in recent years, in order to improve production efficiency and reduce production costs, cotton farmers in southern Xinjiang have begun to introduce new technologies into the industry, and have been purchasing new machinery and equipment to assist the production process. Cotton farming in Xinjiang has realized large-scale mechanized operations throughout the entire chain of production including precision sowing, water and fertilizer integration, soil testing and formulated fertilization, and efficient cotton harvest. Mechanical cotton harvesting has become the tendency of development. For instance, in Aksu area, in 2020, the number of cotton-picking machines has reached 834, covering 71.3% of the cotton planting area in the whole region. Taking Yuepuhu County in Aksu as an example, the proportion of cotton harvested by machines has reached over 50%. Many large cotton farmers told the researchers in the interviews that their cotton production has been fully mechanized. Mr. Ning Zuofu, a large cotton farmer in Tianhai village of Liuyuan District Management Committee in Aksu, emphasized the cotton production business of his family has not only been fully mechanized, but has also adopted intelligent operations such as unmanned seeding.

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UAV intelligent identification of diseases, pests and weeds.

Mr. Qin Jinzhong (interviewee): I'm a villager of Yongxing village of Liuyuan District Management Committee in Aksu area. I started to plant cotton in 2005, and I've been planting it up to now. Now the level of mechanization of cotton has been improved, including cotton sowing and picking. To a great extent, mechanization has been realized, and fewer manual pickers are needed now.²

Mr. Yumiti (interviewee): I'm from Tianhai village, Liuyuan District Management Committee, Aksu. I contract more than 10,000 mu (unit of area) of land and plant 2,000 mu of cotton myself. The rest of the land is sub-divided and contracted to more than 20 families, each covering an area of 200-300 mu, or 1,000 mu. The cotton field I plant is fully mechanized. There are four high-powered tractors at home, each of which cost more than 1 million yuan.³

Mr. Ibrahim Yasen (interviewee): I'm a farmer in group 3, No.4 Village, Akekashi Township, Kashgar City. Our company (Kashgar Hengfei Construction Labor Co., Ltd.) provides all kinds of mechanized operations for cotton farmers. Our company owns complete sets of mechanized equipment for cotton production, such as multifunctional tractors, mulched planters, harrowers, plowers, loaders, generators, spillers, cotton pickers, etc.⁴

Mr. Ning Zuofu (interviewee): At present, I plant cotton in Tianhai Village, Liuyuan District Management Committee, Aksu. I have 2,000 mu of cotton land. Now cotton growing is mechanized, also the ploughing, drip irrigation and fertilization, and the integration of drip irrigation and fertilization has been realized. In the process of cotton planting, we use unmanned tractors to sow 300 to 500 mu of land. Because of the use of satellite navigation, the sowing is straight.⁵

² Place of interview: in Mr. Qin Jinzhong's home.
³ Place of interview: in Mr. Yumiti's home.
⁴ Place of interview: in Mr. Ibrahim Yasen's home.
⁵ Place of interview: in Mr. Ning Zuofu's home.
(Picture 1: Mr. Ning Zuofu’s Unmanned Seeding Machine, Tianhai Village, Liuyuan District Management Committee, Aksu)

(Picture 2: Mr. Azitical Sawur’s UAV, Ahonglukumu Township, Yuepuhu County, Kashgar)
(Picture 3: Mr. Aziticali Sawur’s mulched planters, Ahonglukumu Township, Yuepuhu County, Kashgar)

(Picture 4: Mr. Aziticali Sawur’s 2 million yuan cotton picking machine, Ahonglukumu Township, Yuepuhu County, Kashgar)
(Picture 5: Mr. Ibrahim Yasen’s multi-function tractor, Akekashi Township, Kashgar)

(Picture 6: Mr. Ibrahim Yasen’s harrows, Akekashi Township, Kashgar)
(Picture 7: Mr. Ibrahim Yasen’s plowers, Akekashi Township, Kashgar)

(Picture 8: Mr. Ibrahim Yasen’s spillers, Akekashi Township, Kashgar)
In fact, the mechanization of cotton production in Xinjiang has always been in the leading place of the country, and the mechanization rate has increased significantly in recent years. When sowing in spring, multi-functional tractor drags
harrow or plow to carry out tillage and preparation, and different types of plastic mulched planters carry out precision sowing. In summer, the wide application of water and fertilizer integration under mulch drip irrigation and the use of plant protection UAV realized the precision irrigation, precision fertilization, defoliation and ripening of cotton production, as well as the monitoring and control of diseases and pests. In autumn, three or six rows of picking and packing machine are used for harvesting. After that, the residual film recycling machine will start operation. In the majority areas of Xinjiang, cotton production has achieved full-process mechanization of ploughing, sowing, managing, harvesting, combing and so on, and is further progressing towards high-efficient, automated and intelligent operation.

II. Analysis on the Causes of Increasing Cotton Production Mechanization

The increasing mechanization level of cotton production in Southern Xinjiang can be attributed to multiple factors. The emergence of cotton cooperatives and commercial services of cotton production expanded the use of machinery and equipment, and the governmental subsidies significantly reduced the purchase cost of agricultural machinery. More importantly, through mechanization the large cotton farmers try to reduce the labor cost of cotton production.

i. Mechanized production significantly lowers the labor cost

Research found that reducing cotton production costs, especially the labor costs of cotton-picking, is a very important factor for large cotton farmers to choose mechanized production. The following is part of the interview conducted by the research group regarding this issue:

Mr. Ning Zuofu (interviewee): Now there is very little manual labor use. The main manual job is to check if there is any water leakage during drip irrigation. When fertilizing, just pull the fertilizer to the ground and put it on the machine. It used to be manual picking, but now it's machine picking. Last year, the price of machine picking was 120-130 yuan per mu. When using manual labor, if the output of one mu is estimated 500 kilograms, it will cost 1000 yuan on picking payment. When using machines, one mu of land will save 700 to 800 yuan. The benefit of using machines is obvious, anyone would like to vigorously promote machine picking cotton. Now you can see no people in hundreds of thousands of mu of cotton fields.

Mr. Yumiti (interviewee): Before mechanization, 700-800 cotton pickers were needed every year, but now only 60-70 people are needed to take charge of the daily management of cotton fields. Before, because we needed more cotton pickers, we had to publicize the recruitment information everywhere. We needed to pay hundreds to thousands of deposits in advance so that people would come. We also needed to organize a team to pick up the pickers, and cover their daily expenses. After the cotton pickers come, they would first look at the living conditions, whether we plant vegetables and fruits. If we have melons and fruits and vegetables, they’d do the work, and if we
don’t, they’d go work for other families. The cotton pickers would also see if the cotton in the field is good. If the cotton is bad and the pickers don’t want to do the job, they would go to other families. The salary of cotton pickers was very high. At that time, cotton pickers often said, ‘two of the six cotton blossoms you plant are for us cotton pickers.’ Sometimes, in the face of natural disasters or fluctuations in cotton prices, we will lose money, but cotton pickers can still take tens of thousands of yuan stably and they become the boss. After gradually realizing the whole mechanization process of cotton growing, the labor demand decreased significantly. Now it’s the cotton pickers calling us to ask how many mu of land can be managed and how many mu can be used for cotton-picking.

Mr. Iztiali Sawur (interviewee): Our family has contracted more than 2,000 mu of land and planted more than 600 mu of cotton. Other land has been subcontracted to other people. In the past, when it came to the cotton-picking season, we needed 100 to 200 pickers. Now we only need 10 to 15 pickers. With 100 to 200 cotton pickers, the annual labor cost is about 1.6 million yuan, and now 300,000 yuan is enough.

Normally the payment for cotton-picking in Xinjiang is calculated according to the amount of the cotton picked. In the areas the researchers visited, the payment of upland cotton ranges from 1.5 to 2.2 yuan per kg, and that of long staple cotton is 2.5 to 2.8 yuan per kg. Many respondents said that the high labor costs have significantly affected the profits generated in cotton production, and the statement "two of the six cotton blossoms belong to the pickers" is a typical embodiment of such situation. Compared with manual picking, mechanized picking can reduce cost and increase income for cotton farmers by 500-600 yuan per mu.

ii. Cotton cooperatives have been widely established

The research found that in Aksu area, cotton cooperatives in the model of “cooperative + farmer household” have been widely established in different regions, and greatly improved the level and scale of the organized cotton production. Through the “cooperative + farmers household” model, farmers with less land can use the land contracted management right to exchange shares in the cooperative to obtain dividends, and participate in the production of cooperatives to obtain labor income. Farmers can also directly transfer the land to the cooperative, and go out to work for themselves, and obtain two benefits of land and labor.

Mr. Aizemaiti Tuerson (interviewee): I am a villager of Gulewati Village, Gulewati Township, Wensu County, Aksu Prefecture. There are more than 12,000 mu of cotton fields in our village. There are two cotton planting cooperatives in our village, one is called Jinfengyuan Farmers’ Professional Cooperative in Wensu County, and the other is called Innovative Agriculture Service Farmers’ Professional Cooperative in Wensu county. The person in charge of the latter is Mr. Imar Munsur, a Uygur, in his 40s. There are more than 10 cotton workers in this Cooperative, two of them are Han nationality, and the rest are Uygur nationality. More than 4,000 mu of land was
transferred to this Cooperative, and more than 1,000 mu of land was transferred to Jinfengyuan Cooperative. The land of these two Cooperatives was mainly transferred by more than 50 farmers, whose land was small and scattered. After the transfer, the land has been uniformly leveled. Every year the Cooperative will pay dividends to the farmers who transfer the land. If the farmers are willing to go out to work, they can transfer the land to the Cooperative and go out to work by themselves. If the farmers don’t want to leave, they can work for the Cooperative in their own land, get their wages every day, and get dividends at the end of the year. Our dividend is in accordance with the cotton production, 100 kg of cotton per mu as the land dividend.6

(Picture 11: Business License, Innovative Agriculture Service Farmers’ Professional Cooperative in Wensu county)

Mr. Keimu Wushur (interviewee): I am a villager of No. 13 Village in Yekexianbai Bazzar Town, Yuepuhu County. Cotton planting in our village mainly operates in the form of cooperatives. The name of our cooperative is “Congyekexianbai Bazzar Town Breeding Professional Cooperative”. Such organizational-type of cooperative is beneficial to our mechanical operation. My brother and I are responsible for 1,500 mu of land, consisted by 100 mu of wheat and 1,400 mu of cotton. The land of

6 Place of interview: in Mr. Aizemaiti Tuerson’s home.
our cooperative is mainly contracted from the village collective, and the contract price is 350 yuan per mu, which means that the village collective sets aside a piece of land for our own reclamation, and turns it into land suitable for mechanized operation through land leveling and other methods. There are not many small areas of cotton planting. In addition to growing grain, small farmers mainly grow fast-growing economic crops, such as fennel, which can be planted on March 15 and harvested in June. They can be harvested in about 70 days, and they don’t need much water during the process. There are no cotton pickers in our cooperative. We have three tractors for plowing and sowing. One cost 380,000 yuan, one 250,000 yuan and the other 160,000 yuan. There are also two loaders and two wheat combine harvesters. My life has changed a lot since the set-up of the cooperative to grow cotton. We have 3 cars, 1 pick-up truck, 1 Great Wall SUY and 1 BYD sedan; we also have 750 sheep and 40 cattle. My daughter is studying in a high school in Shenzhen, and my youngest son is studying in No.1 Middle School in the County. I also bought a house for my father in the County. I am satisfied with my life. Some people hate seeing us becoming wealthy and living a good life. They just talk nonsense.

In today's southern Xinjiang, the rapid advancement of high standard farmland construction provides the possibility for agricultural mechanization production, and the establishment and perfection of land circulation system provides system guarantee for large-scale production. On this basis, the development model of “cooperative + farmer household” has gradually solved the problem of land fragmentation in the Four Prefecture areas of Southern Xinjiang, and has improved the level of mechanization production and the quality of cotton production.

iii. Commercial service has been widely accepted by cotton farmers

The research found that with the continuous advancement of mechanization in cotton production, many commercial service providers emerged in the market in Southern Xinjiang. Those enterprises focus on providing various kinds of cotton production services for cotton farmers, such as plowing, sowing, cultivation, plant protection, harvesting, etc. It not only improves the level of planting specialization, but also effectively reduces the cost of cotton production, and improves the production efficiency and the quality of cotton.

Mr. Ibraine Yasen (interviewee): I am a farmer in Group 3, No. 4 Village, Akekash Township, Kashgar City. I founded the Kashgar Hengfei Construction Labor Co., Ltd. together with Mr. Li Guangqiang from Yanjin County, Yunnan Province. The business of our company includes leveling of cotton land, cotton management and picking, and leasing of machinery and equipment. In the case of land leveling, usually the farmers are responsible for preparing fuel, and our company provides workers and machines. According to different land conditions (mature land or wasteland), the price we charge of working one day is 730 yuan to 750 yuan. In terms of cotton management

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7 Place of interview: in Mr. Keimu Wushur’s home.
and picking, from March to November, we are responsible for the planting, fertilizer distribution, and picking. For some places we need to send people to the ground every day, for some places we need to re-pump water on the ground; some bigger places are cheaper, the smaller ones consume more fuel when machines move around. According to the cases, the labor cost varies from 300 yuan to 350 yuan each person per mu. We can also send large trucks to help large cotton farmers carry cotton to the market for sale. Generally speaking, we charge 1 yuan for a ton of cotton from a distance of 20 to 30 km.

Mr. Iztiali Sawur (interviewee): I not only grow cotton myself, but also rent tractors and other mechanical equipment to help others plow, fertilize, weed and pick cotton. There are eight tractors in my family, each of which is worth 1.2 million yuan with its supporting appliances. Every year, I can earn about 500,000 yuan by renting cotton pickers and other equipment.

Mr. Abdurexiti Imiti (interviewee): I am a cotton buyer in Bayiawati Township, Yuepuhu County, Kashgar region. I have been engaged in cotton purchasing for 20 years. As far as I know, there are one or two cotton buyers like me in every township of Yuepuhu county. When it’s the season of cotton harvest, I will hire workers to collect cotton at the house of the cotton farmers as requested, and then send the cotton to the ginning factory. My income mainly comes from large cotton farmers. Usually, when I buy 1 kg of cotton, I earn about 10 cents. I can earn 300,000 yuan a year. For the cotton farmers who are old, weak, sick or disabled, I never charge any money and would send the cotton to the ginning factory for free.\(^8\)

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\(^8\) Place of interview: in Mr. Abdurexiti Imiti’s home.
Through the research, the researcher found that many villages and towns in Southern Xinjiang have similar commercial service providers as Hengfei Construction Labor Co., Ltd. Operating under market rules, they offer services ranging from land preparation, plowing, sowing to harvesting for cotton farmers or cotton cooperatives. The existence of such service providers not only improves the level of cotton planting specialization and saves operating costs, but also further impels the realization of large-scale mechanized production.

iv. Governmental subsidies for agricultural machines have been fully implemented

In recent years, the government has been increasing subsidies for cotton-picking machinery in Xinjiang. For example, Iztialili Sawur, an interviewee of No.4 village in Ahonglukumu Township, Yuepuhu County, Kashgar, had owned many tractors for ploughing, soil preparation, sowing and pesticide spilling in his household. However, due to the high price, he did not purchase any cotton-picking machine. It was until 2019, receiving 500,000 yuan subsidies from the government, he finally bought a 2-million yuan 5-line cotton picking machine. According to Iztialili, he can earn back the cost in just four years through providing cotton picking services to the neighbouring cotton farmers. In addition, in September 2020, he also bought a UAV which worth 50,000 yuan, to be used for defoliation, pesticide spilling and plant
Data show that 1.034 billion yuan has been released by the government of Xinjiang Autonomous Region in the first four months of 2021 as agricultural machinery subsidies, in order to promote agricultural mechanization in the Region comprehensively. According to the List of Subsidies for Agricultural Machinery Purchase in the Autonomous Region from 2021 to 2023 as published by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Areas of the Autonomous Region, since 2021, Xinjiang government has further increased the subsidies for cotton farmers to purchase cotton-picking machines. The subsidies for cotton harvesters (3-line self-propelled, with packaging) have increased from 300,000 yuan/set last year to 400,000 yuan/set, and the subsidies for cotton harvesters (5-line and above, self-propelled, with packaging) have increased from 530,000 yuan/set last year to 600,000 yuan/set. The above measures effectively stimulated social investment and enhanced the popularization and application of relevant agricultural machinery and technology.

III. Research on manual cotton-picking in southern Xinjiang

i. The income of manual cotton-picking

Every year from September to November, cotton pickers from all over the country, including Shandong, Henan, Gansu and of course Xinjiang, would come to Xinjiang to work in cotton-picking. The high income is undoubtedly the primary motivation for them to engage in cotton-picking. At present, there are three main types of manual cotton-picking. The first is commonly applied in cross-regional cotton-picking, in which the farmers or managers of cotton fields provide food and accommodation for full-time long-term cotton pickers. The second type is when the cotton pickers work full-time for cotton field in their own village or township during the season period, the farmers or managers do not provide food or accommodation. The third type is part-time picking, that is, as the pickers have their own job, they work as cotton picker only during the season period to earn extra income. No matter which of the above-mentioned type is adopted, the payment of cotton-picking is calculated by amount. Normally, full-time cross-regional cotton pickers can pick 100 kg to 160 kg cotton each day, and some can go up to 200 kg. Taking the 70-day cotton boll blossom period of upland cotton as an example, even if a cotton picker only works for 50 days, he or she can earn at least 10,000 yuan of income, and some can earn more than 20,000 yuan. The full-time cotton pickers in the same village or township, even with the commuting time and housework taken into consideration, can often pick more than 2,500 kg of cotton in one picking period. Part-time cotton-picking can also bring in thousands of yuan for the entire season. In addition, in terms of the payment method, cotton pickers can choose from daily settlement, weekly settlement, monthly settlement and other methods. According to the Statistical Bulletin of National Economic and Social Development of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region in 2019, the per capita disposable income of residents in...
Xinjiang in 2019 is 23,103 yuan, the *per capita* disposable income of urban residents is 34,664 yuan, and the *per capita* disposable income of rural residents is 13,122 yuan. Evidently, for cotton pickers, the income generated during the cotton-picking season (September to November) can easily reach or even exceed the annual *per capita* disposable income of rural residents. It is clearly one of the major reasons why Xinjiang minority cotton pickers choose to work in cotton-picking.

(Picture 14: Mr. Keimu Wushuerti’s cotton picking account book in 2020, No. 13 Village, Yekexianbai Bazzar Town Yuepuhu County, Kashgar)

As shown in Picture 14, the account book records the daily and total amount of cotton picked by the cotton pickers employed by Mr. Keimu Wushuerti. In the upper right corner of the picture is the name of the cotton picker. The rightmost column is the working date of the worker and the corresponding daily amount in kg. For example, 62 kg on September 18 and 151.4 kg on November 8. The lowest left corner on the right page is 2,627-11.28, which is the total weight of 2,627 kg of cotton picked by the picker up to November 28. It can be seen from the data in the picture that the worker didn’t pick cotton for 5 days from September 26 to October 2, and didn’t pick cotton for 2 days from October 14 to 17. The working hours were entirely decided by himself. Moreover, the daily cotton-picking quantity of the picker is not fixed. On November 8, the picker picked 151.4 kg of cotton, while on October 14, the picker picked only 50 kg.
Picture 15 shows the daily amount of cotton picked by a cotton picker employed by Mr. Keimu Wushuerti. According to Keimu, the worker is a cotton picker living in the same village with him. Sometimes the worker would come and leave after working for less than two hours.

(Picture 15: Mr. Keimu Wushuerti’s cotton picking account book in 2020, No. 13 Village, Yekexianbai Bazzar Town, Yuepuhu County, Kashgar)

(Picture 16: Cotton picking account book collected in Ahonglukumu Township, Yuepuhu County, Kashgar by the Research Group, which shows that the book belongs to Ayiguli Maimaiti, No.41, group 3, No.13 Village)
As shown in Picture 17, the account book records part of the cotton harvest income of group 3, No. 13 Village, Ahonglukumu Township, Yuepuhu County, Kashgar region. Because of the different payment time and workload, the income of some cotton pickers is 7,000 yuan, and that of others is several hundred yuan. In particular, in line 9, the daily income of the cotton picker is 80 yuan, which is highlighted in the account book.

**Mr. Qin Jinzhong (interviewee):** I now have 800 mu of cotton field, which was contracted in May 2020. Now the whole process is mechanized, only the corners needed to be picked by hand. Now the labor is too expensive. For upland cotton, it costs 2 yuan to 2.2 yuan for 1 kg, for long staple cotton, it costs 2.7 yuan for 1 kg. Together, it costs at least 800 yuan to 1,000 yuan to pick one mu of land by hand. I rent a cotton-picking machine, and the cost of one mu of land is only 180 yuan at most.9

**Mr. Yumiti (interviewee):** I have more than 10,000 mu of cotton field now, and there are more than 20 households managing it, each covers from several hundred mu to more than 1,000 mu each. I also planted more than 2,000 mu of cotton. I don’t have to worry about planting. I have four high-powered tractors, one of which worth more than 1 million yuan. I have my own machines, and I can save a lot of costs. It costs nearly 2.2 yuan for 1 kg if using manual picking of upland cotton, and 800 yuan for one mu of land. If by machine, it only costs 140 yuan for one mu of land. Now I lose 1.8 yuan per kg for

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9 Place of interview: in Mr. Qin Jinzhong’s home.
picking one mu of land using manual pickers. They are not happy if I don’t let them pick cotton. Most of them come from Kashgar and Hotan, and we have known each other for a long time. One picker has been working with me for 17 years, and we are all like brothers.

Mr. Tuxun Hezi (interviewees, a villager of Tianhai Village, Liuyuan District Management Committee): I now have more than 800 mu of cotton fields. Most of the people who pick cotton are middle-aged, and fewer young people. Many of them worked here are from the same village and same family, some have been working for me for 7 and 8 years. When they come here, two people share a room, and I prepare meat and vegetable for them, they cook by themselves. The income is all counted by workload. If they work overtime voluntarily, I’ll pay by the amount. They can decide their working time freely. Those who manage the land for me, I will give them 10 mu more for picking as bonus. When picking season ends, these people can easily make tens of thousands yuan.\(^\text{10}\)

Mr. Mutailifu Awuti (interviewee, a farmer of group 7 in No. 5 villages of Akekashi township): I have 7 people in my family now. My wife is seriously ill and bedridden. My family has three people working (myself and two sons). I myself have 10 mu of cotton field. Every April the cotton planting season starts, by working for large farmers I can earn 35,000 yuan a year for cotton-related work. I usually manage 150 mu of land by myself, 175 yuan per mu. When it comes to cotton-picking season, I can earn another 7,000 to 8,000 yuan. Now the money for picking the entire cotton branch is 1.8 yuan each kg, picking only the easy blossoms on the top of the branch is 1.5 yuan each kg, the difficult bottom blossoms is 2.5 yuan to 2.8 yuan each kg.\(^\text{11}\)

ii. Industrial workers ask for leave to pick cotton

In addition, the research group noticed a peculiar phenomenon – stimulated by the high income of cotton-picking, many factory workers in southern Xinjiang will ask for leave to pick cotton during the cotton-picking season. The owners of many cotton textile enterprises mentioned that every September and October, workers would rather give up the full attendance reward and ask for leave to go home to pick cotton. The factories would be considerate and permit such requests. In the interest of those workers, the earnings generated through cotton-picking is significant, as it is often 2-3 times of the monthly wage at the factory. Thus, it has become a common situation for factory employees to choose to take leave to pick cotton in September and October. Rejecting employees to do so will lead to a large number of employee losses. In order to reduce the turnover rate of employees, the factories usually would agree to their requests. However, some business owners pointed out that with the improvement of cotton-picking mechanization in Xinjiang, the demand for cotton-picking labor is decreasing, and the cases of workers asking for leave to pick cotton is also reducing.

\(^{10}\) Place of interview: in Mr. Tuxun Hezi’s home.

\(^{11}\) Place of interview: in Mr. Mutailifu Awuti’s home.
Picture 18 shows the annual attendance forms collected by the research group in a textile enterprise in Kashgar, Xinjiang. The x indicates an employee’s absence during the month. From the picture, we can find that most of the absences happen from September to December. It corroborates with the statement that workers are free to ask for leave to pick cotton. At the same time, it can be seen in the form that the factory provides corresponding support to such employees and reserves their jobs. The workers can continue to work in the factory after the cotton-picking season (December). On the other hand, with the advancing mechanization and the incentive of full attendance reward, the workers who ask for leave to pick cotton account for only a small proportion of the total number of workers.  

Mr. Zubaidai Abdurexiti (interviewee, a textile enterprise employee in Kashgar): My living condition at home is much better now. I usually work in the factory, and the factory often gives us welfare. Full attendance reward is such a case. Reward for a month’s full attendance is flour or cooking oil. If you achieve full attendance for an entire quarter, you can get an reward of 300 yuan besides the salary. If you achieve full attendance for a whole year, apart from the bonus mentioned above, you can also go on a company tour. During the two and a half months of cotton-picking season, you can ask for leave and the factory will keep the job for you. The factory is overall being supportive. After all, picking cotton makes a lot of money, isn’t it? However, many of us think that the full attendance reward is quite considerable, so the

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12 Affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the Spring Festival holiday, the company had a holiday break in February.
number of people going is not particularly large. 13

iii. The decreasing demand for manual cotton pickers intensifies competition in cotton-picking

In Aksu region, the cost of manual cotton-picking is about 800-1000 yuan per mu, while the cost of mechanized cotton-picking is only 120-180 yuan per mu, far lower than that of manual work. Therefore, more and more large cotton farmers are beginning to adopt mechanical tools, which leads to a significant reduction in manual demand. In Aksu, Kashgar and other regions, manual cotton-picking mainly exists in the few following cases: First, supplementary picking after mechanized cotton-picking. For some corner spaces of the field the machine cannot cover when turning due to its large size, or the blossoms at the bottom space that are missed by the machine, manual picking is required. Second, the long staple cotton planting plots can only be harvested by hand. Third, some scattered small cotton fields should be picked by hand, as some small fields without boundary leveling would obstruct the machine from entering, and in some cases the farmers can serve the cotton-picking needs by themselves. The reduction of labor demand for cotton-picking has brought great pressure to cotton pickers.

First, the reduction of labor demand leads to change in contract. In Aksu, large cotton farmers usually employ assistants to oversee the daily management of cotton fields. Cotton field management usually lasts from mid-March to early-September. One person can manage around 100 mu of cotton field. If the land is relatively fertile with few weeds, the management cost of one mu is about 160-180 yuan. If the land is relatively barren with many weeds, the management cost of one mu can reach 200-210 yuan. Most land managers can generate about 16,000 yuan of management income. Due to the reduction of labor demand for cotton-picking, in order to ensure that they can obtain income in the cotton-picking season, many land managers would request the large cotton farmers to reserve them certain amount of cotton land for manual picking, or they must be given priority in picking the bottom cotton after mechanical picking, otherwise they will not sign the land management contract.

Second, more and more land managers are beginning to take the role as cotton-picking intermediary agents. For the agents, organizing collective cotton-picking can not only improve their social status, reputation and influence in the villages and towns, but also gain the trust of contract owners and large cotton farmers, so as to ensure that they can continue to manage and collect in the field next year.

13 Place of interview: in a textile enterprise in Kashgar.
(Picture 19: The message of a cotton-picking intermediary agent on his Wechat account in Aksu, 2020)

(Picture 20: The message of a cotton-picking intermediary agent on his Wechat account in Aksu, 2020)
The pictures above (19, 20, 21) are the “Moments” post of a cotton-picking intermediary agent in Yongxing Village of Liuyuan District Management Committee in Aksu region. The posts demonstrate the way the agent recruited cotton pickers from 2018 to 2020. He released information through Wechat App, and call for interested cotton pickers to contact him. The date in Picture 19 is August 17, 2020, and the date in Picture 20 is July 30, 2019. It can be observed that as early as before the cotton-picking season, the agents had begun the recruitment of cotton pickers to fulfill the labor demand of the upcoming season.

Mr. Ibraine Yasen (interviewee, a farmer in group 3, No. 4 Village, Akekash township): I have four people in my family now, with 20 mu of arable land and 300 mu contracted cotton land. I have worked more than 8 years in planting and picking cotton. In the past, the income was low, we only had 50 mu of land. When I was a child, I never imagined to buy a car or an agricultural equipment. Later, I followed the large cotton farmers in my village. At the beginning, we managed the land for him. We managed 120 mu for 175 yuan per mu in total. Later, I gradually improved myself, and then I organized people to collect cotton together while managing the land. In 2016, I started to organize cotton pickers by phone and Wechat App, basically pickers from the same town all enjoy a unified payment, we can get a month’s income as much as 9000 yuan.14

Mr. Mutaifili Awti (interviewee, group 7, No. 5 Village, Akekash Township,

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14 Place of interview: in Mr. Mr. Ibraine Yasen’s home. The cotton picker agent picks cotton with cotton pickers in picking season.
cotton picker agent): Last year, I organized nearly 200 cotton pickers from my village to pick more than 2000 mu of land for large cotton farmers. All of them came after they completed the farm work in their own village. All of them were ethnic minorities, mainly those not holding a job outside of Xinjiang. They were picking cotton to make money to subsidize the household. They were all my acquaintances, we always have each other’s contact, either telephone number or Wechat. I would just send a message to them. The boss trusts me very much, he comes to the ground less than once in two months to check out the management. It’s like this every year, we are in good relation.

The contract of land management is usually signed from March 20 to September 5, and then switch to the cotton-picking contract. I usually go to the ground at 7 a.m. and come back at 6:30 in the evening, it’s about 2 km away from my home. After November, I would have a fixed break for a month, and in January of the coming year, I will get some farm manure, and I will wait for the seeds to be sown in March. After the cotton-picking contract is signed, you can basically decide the payment frequency by yourself, can be once a week or once a day, for the longest long-term picker, they are usually paid at the very end.

IV. Conclusion

Through this research, we found that there is serious lack of factual basis for Western accusations targeting at cotton-picking in Xinjiang, and there is no sign of forced labor in any process of cotton production in Xinjiang. Today's Southern Xinjiang has achieved large-scale mechanization of cotton production through high-standard farmland construction, land transfer and national agricultural machinery subsidies. The demand for labor has been greatly reduced. Now, compared with other occupations, the high income of cotton-picking makes it a very attractive job for people in Southern Xinjiang. Particularly under the increase of mechanized picking, cotton-picking jobs are becoming more and more scarce and competitive. Many cotton pickers would have to work in other industries. In the course of cotton-picking, the right to free choice of profession, the right to remuneration for labor, the rights to rest and leisure, the right to enjoy occupational safety and health, and other rights of the cotton pickers are guaranteed. Western countries’ malicious interpretation of Xinjiang cotton pickers is illogical. Their imagination of today's Xinjiang cotton pickers is still absurdly stuck in the historical scene of the 19th century American Southern slaves picking “blood cotton” in tears under the whip.

15 Place of interview: in Mr. Mutaillifu Awti’s home.