

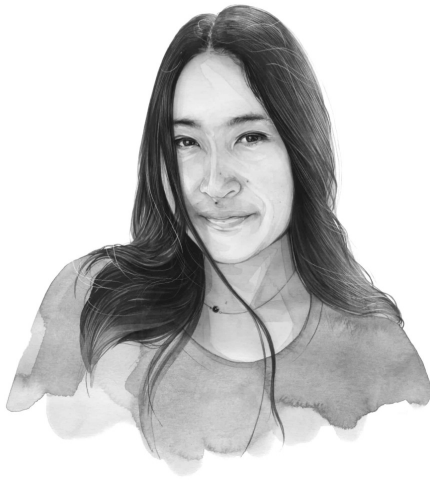
Q & A

Amelia Pang on Consumer Demand and Uyghur Labor

The journalist discusses her new book, “Made in China,” and the realities of China’s Laogai system.

BY KATRINA NORTROP — MARCH 28, 2021

Amelia Pang is a journalist who has been published in The New Republic, Mother Jones, and The New York Times Sunday Review, among other publications. She is also the author of [Made in China: A Prisoner, an SOS Letter, and the Hidden Cost of America’s Cheap Goods](#), which documents China’s forced labor system. Her book was shortlisted for the [J. Anthony Lukas Work-in-Progress Award](#) co-administered by Columbia Journalism School and the Neiman Foundation for journalism at Harvard University. In this lightly edited Q&A, we discussed an SOS note found in Halloween decorations that were made in China, the past and present realities of China’s Laogai system, and steps every consumer can take to impact the global labor system.



Amelia Pang

Illustration by Kate Copeland

Q: Your book opens with a woman in Oregon, opening up Halloween decorations to find an SOS message from a political prisoner in a Chinese labor camp. How did you come across that story and what first made you want to write this book?

A: There have been a lot of SOS letters like these covered over the years. They usually make some headlines whenever a consumer finds one of these in a western product. But rarely does anyone look at the factors that made it really easy for something that was manufactured in a forced labor facility in China to end up being sold in our stores, and then end up in our homes. So I really wanted to explore the problems in our supply chain, the problems with the way that our companies are auditing their Chinese factories, and also the problems with how our companies are actually sourcing from these factories. All these different factors make it possible for so many forced labor

goods to end up being sold in our stores.

That one really went viral because it was in Halloween decorations. And it was just such a chilling product — the fact that it was made in a labor camp, where there were a lot of people who were buried, it was literally a kind of graveyard. And there they were making decorative gravestones to sell to consumers and the outside world. I thought that was a particularly powerful way to start. In terms of storytelling, it had that detail that just stays with you.

Can you introduce Sun Yi, the prisoner who wrote the SOS note, and explain why you decided to tell a lot of the book through his story?

Sun Yi was a Falun Gong follower. He was an incredibly intelligent individual and a really interesting and curious character. When he was in college, he took an interest in Western philosophy; he liked reading Hegel, for instance. But when he went to the labor camp, he described how he emotionally, mentally and spiritually died. I wanted to tell his story because it was easy to humanize him, and I wanted to humanize the people who were detained in these camps to show western readers and western consumers that the people that are trapped in these camps are not so different from us. They are human beings with love lives, with families, with hopes. And unfortunately, they're stuck in these camps making our cheap goods.

Why is the system of forced labor in Chinese prisons — the 'Laogai' system — important for the world to understand?

The reason why the Laogai system has been able to expand so much since it first started in the 1930s is intricately

connected to global consumers and the way that we shop. A lot of us are always looking for the latest trends, for the cheapest prices, which is rewarding the companies that can offer these things for the lowest prices. And that, in turn, pushes our companies to shorten the time between design, production and distribution in a way that's really unsustainable. To the point where a lot of Chinese factories feel like they actually have no choice but to illegally subcontract work to some really shady places like labor camps, because they cannot actually make the products in house. A lot of companies will talk about sustainability, ethical consumption, and ethical sourcing. But rarely do they actually have standards for their factories and rarely do they help their factories meet those standards, because the prices they offer are low and the production deadlines they give the factories are really tight. In order to meet the latest trends, especially fast fashion trends, companies often make last minute production changes without giving the factory enough time to actually make the change. There are all these factors that are tied to the way that our companies are sourcing and the way that we support these companies that really compels a lot of foreign companies to inadvertently use Laogai labor and inadvertently lead to the success of these labor camps.

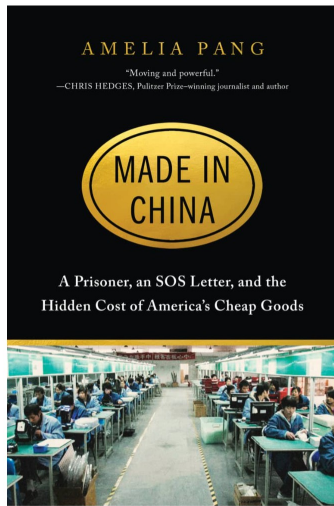
So what is the solution?

I bring up fast fashion because it's something that has received a lot of criticism, and it's easy for people to grasp. But it's not limited to the fashion industry. And every industry at this point could be involved with Laogai labor. For example, in Uyghur reeducation camps, which is an extension of the entire Laogai system, detainees are making raw materials for solar panels, hair extensions, PPE equipment. The products that are made in these facilities are so widespread. I don't think there's a single industry that is really safe from this.

We're never going to be able to completely end the Laogai system — we don't have that power. There's always going to be a demand domestically in China for those goods and that's a huge market for these types of products. So I don't think there's any realistic hope for policy change that would actually end the Laogai system there.

BIO AT A GLANCE

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Pang's new book delves into the factors behind forced labor in Chinese prisons.

But I think there's a lot that our companies can do to significantly reduce the amount of Laogai products that are entering their supply chains. And that starts with being transparent about their sourcing practices. Right now, transparency is a huge marketing buzzword. A lot of companies have completely branded themselves around transparency. They will list their factories, the addresses of their factories, maybe even show pictures of what the workers in the factory look like, maybe they'll even go so far as to publish a summary or a score of their factory audits. But even those so-called sustainable and transparent companies, who have made a lot of money branding themselves this way, don't really go into detail about how they're auditing their factories and what prices they are offering those factories to make those products. Are those prices realistically able to support the local wage and the cost of living for that area? The wage hasn't grown that much in China, and a lot of things in China are really expensive these

days. They also rarely go into detail about how much time they give their factories to make products. What's their process and policy if they make a production change? What kind of fines do they give to the factory if they don't meet the deadline? All of these details are really important for true transparency, to truly have our companies helping Chinese factories source ethically.

It bothers me that a lot of right-wing publications have picked this up and say, 'Oh, this is a sign that everything made in China is bad. And we need to make America great again and bring manufacturing back to the United States.' I don't think the solution is to completely get out of China — I don't think that's even possible at this point. Even if factories are moving out of China, they're still moving to other countries where working conditions are pretty poor, and the wages are really poor, and the labor laws are really weakly enforced. It doesn't really solve the issue by moving our companies outside of China, or avoiding made in China labels. In order to create fundamental change, we have to start being actually transparent about the way that we source and that starts with consumers demanding companies do that.

I do feel hopeful that that can happen because there's a precedent for this. When a bunch of college students were protesting Nike in the '90s, when it was first widely publicized that Nike was using sweatshops, that was pretty effective. Maybe it didn't harm Nike's bottom line in the long run, but it scared a lot of companies to have this target market refuse to buy from them and get so much bad PR. It scared them so much, that they actually made a pretty significant change to the way they source and the way they do business by conducting audits and releasing some of the audit information. Before these consumer led protests, that was pretty uncommon, but now it's standard for everyone to try to do as many audits as they can, even if they are very superficial audits that can't detect forced labor. But they do detect some things that are helpful. So that that was a big step. And I think we need to pick up that momentum.

“ In order to create fundamental change, we have to start being actually transparent about the way that we source and that starts with consumers demanding companies do that. ”

You said that auditing often doesn't even detect forced labor, so how can we make the auditing process better?

The auditors do what the corporations want them to do. There are basic audits that might only look for the quality of the product, the quality of the equipment, how clean the factory is, and whether the factory looks safe or not. They can't really detect something complicated, like hidden subcontracting to labor camps. Then there are really expensive audits, which take longer to do. Those auditors look extensively at the wage documents of multiple departments and cross analyze everything to try to detect unauthorized subcontracting. But how many companies are actually using those kinds of audits? Not a whole lot. It's quite expensive to do audits all the time for all of your factories.

One solution that we can start with, as consumers, is to demand that companies rewrite contracts to allow auditors to show up unannounced — to really emphasize that they're going to take this seriously. Companies can also let factories know that they will be sending people to follow the trucks that leave their factory to see exactly which other factories they have relationships with.

I get that companies won't be able to do that for all of their factories. But just maybe doing it for some and letting the factory know that you're taking this really seriously, that sends a powerful message. Right now the message that companies are sending to their factories is, 'We say we don't want you to outsource to forced labor, but we're not really going to check.' Just addressing that messaging problem can help a lot.

What else can consumers do to stop these labor practices?

There's been a lot of great reporting on profits that are made by Uyghur forced labor in recent years. But unfortunately, from what I've seen, companies don't even drop those suppliers unless there is significant pushback. In the beginning, one of the first facilities we found out about that was connected to a Western company was Badger Sportswear. They made athletic wear for colleges. There were a lot of media [reports](#) covering it. A lot of consumers and a lot of people on social media were calling them out. And they were forced to act quickly and drop that supplier and take action. That was great. If more companies dropped suppliers, it won't be so lucrative for them to use forced labor. Chinese policy makers may have to revise whether it's actually lucrative to use Uyghur forced labor. But right now, that momentum has died down.

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute released that pretty damning [report](#) last year that listed 82 major global brands using factories that were associated with the Uyghur labor transfer program. Those companies took a long time to take action, and some of them still haven't taken any action. And for consumers, it just felt so overwhelming. There's 82 of those companies. I think if there's not enough publicity shaming of specific individual companies, then they're not going to feel obligated to drop the supplier.

Are there differences between the Uyghur forced labor program and the broader Laogai system?

I think it's a worsening of the previous Laogai factories. It is an ethnic cleansing, and it's been officially [called](#) a genocide. It's associated with a policy that has led to a significant [decrease](#) in Uyghur populations. So the significance of that is more disturbing. I think there are different ways to address the Uyghur camps. The Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, for example, could be a really powerful way to push the government to rethink its policies and push the Chinese government to rethink its policies. Xinjiang is extremely important to the Chinese government in terms of trade. It's a huge transportation hub for the Belt and Road initiative, which is this trillion dollar economic development strategy. It's too big to fail. China really wants to protect it. And if a major trading partner like the U.S. bans all products from Xinjiang, then that's really going to hurt. That's really going to hurt the Belt and Road in a way that might push China to finally let go of the Uyghurs in the reeducation camps.

“ If a major trading partner like the U.S. bans all products from Xinjiang, then that’s really going to hurt. ”

But it’s a multifaceted problem that requires not just the government, but consumers and corporations as well. Because even if the U.S. bans those products, most global corporations won’t actually pull out because they have all these markets globally where they would not be banned. They can continue sourcing from Xinjiang, no problem, then nobody is going to actually pull out in a significant way.

Should companies be considering pulling out of China altogether given the forced labor issues and Uyghur detentions?

Pulling out of Xinjiang, yes, even if it’s only temporarily. I do think that there’s a strong moral imperative to do that. Pulling out of China would be powerful, but I don’t know if it’s possible. There are a lot of things that are only made in Chinese factories. It’s going to take a long time for the factories and other countries to retool and even be able to make some of the products they’re making there. I don’t know how that would happen. It would be great if that could happen. But I think a more realistic goal would be to leave Xinjiang. Even that alone is pretty hard for a lot of companies.

You recently wrote a *New York Times* opinion [piece](#) about rediscovering your own Uyghur roots. Could you talk about that piece, and why you wanted to write it?

I didn’t have the word count in *The New York Times* piece to include this, but in 2015, Rebiya Kadeer [a Uyghur businesswoman and activist] just looked at me when I first met her and she said, ‘You are Uyghur. How can you not know that? How do you not know anything about the culture or language? That’s a huge problem that you only identify as Chinese-American.’ And I looked at her and I was quiet. That was the first time I was told that it’s problematic that my family and I don’t identify as Uyghur.

It really hit home because I did look more like her than I did other Chinese Americans that I had grown up with. We had a similar nose, similar facial structure, the texture of our hair was similar; I don’t have the sleek, straight Chinese hair that most East Asians have. And that comment kind of stayed with me.

Unfortunately, I got busy, and I didn’t really make any efforts to actually get in touch with my Uyghur relatives that we’ve lost contact with in Xinjiang or really try to connect with other Uyghurs or learn more about this heritage until I saw that infamous picture of the rows of men in that reeducation camp that first went viral. Then again, it was that experience of seeing faces that looked like my own in a camp. It really hit home that my lack of awareness and recognition of my heritage is complicit in cultural genocide, and maybe even an actual genocide.

Did members of your family already know about your Uyghur relatives or did it come as a surprise?

We always knew that my grandmother was Uyghur. She was born and raised in Ürümqi. She knew the language and the culture, but within one generation that was kind of completely lost. And then my mother and her siblings don’t really have that identity at all. And it wasn’t passed on to me.

What was the most challenging thing about reporting, researching and writing this book?

Some of the torture discussions were really hard to hear and to read, and to write and edit and read over and

over again. But I thought it was important to show just how horrific these places can be. They were based off of Soviet gulags, so it's not a surprise. China has always maintained that their prisons are not so different from American prisons. And for sure, America has a lot of big issues with our prison system. But the scale of the tortures is incomparable. I wanted to highlight that.

Your central argument is that the world's extreme level of consumption allows this system of prison labor to persist. Did you expect that to be your argument, or did you stumble upon it?

That wasn't there in the beginning. I was surprised to learn more about the role that we've played as consumers. I've talked to factory owners who say that a lot of factories outsource work to prisons. It's nothing new. It's not even really hidden or kept secret. The way they look at it is very different, because ultimately, our companies and our consumers have not really cared or pushed for factories to do better to help them do better.

What do you hope readers come away with?

I hope readers don't feel overwhelmed by how terrible this issue is and how big the scale is. There are small steps that everyone can take as just a normal, average consumer, that can be quite impactful if we all do it together. Like, next time you feel an urge to buy something just because it's trendy, or cheap, just take a moment to think, do I really need this? Or do I have enough of these things? And if we really start buying on a need basis rather than a want basis, we could make it less profitable for companies to constantly ask for the trendiest products with the cheapest prices from their factories. We can make it less profitable for factories to outsource work to labor camps; if the risk the factories are taking is so high that they could potentially lose the contract with the major global brand, then they won't do it. But that's not going to change until consumers ask for it.

MISCELLANEA

BOOK REC	Random Family by Adrian Nicole LeBlanc
FAVORITE MUSICIAN	Camille Michelle Gray
FAVORITE FILM	<i>Last Train Home</i> , a deeply moving documentary that humanizes migrant factory workers in China
PERSONAL HERO	Merdan Ghappar, the young Uyghur model who sent re-education camp footage to the outside world, despite knowing he would likely face grisly consequences



Katrina Northrop is a journalist based in New York. Her work has been published in *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *The Providence Journal*, and *SupChina*. [@NorthropKatrina](#)

COVER STORY



Pole Position

BY EYCK FREYMAN

In public, Chinese diplomats and climate negotiators deny that they see any link between climate change and geopolitics. But there is a deeply cynical consensus within China's academic and policy communities that climate change creates geopolitical opportunities that China can exploit — and must exploit before its rivals do. Greenland was the proof of concept for this strategy. And it caught the U.S. flat-footed.

THE BIG PICTURE



Transsion's Triumph

BY GARRETT O'BRIEN

A look at Transsion's monumental growth, unique marketing strategies and future growth potential.

Q & A



Jörg Wuttke on China's Self-Destruction

BY ANDREW PEAPLE

The EU Chamber of Commerce in China president talks about China's self-inflicted problems; how he gets away with being so outspoken; and why he believes in China's comeback gene.



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