

Uyghur Heritage under China’s “Antireligious Extremism” Campaigns

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Rachel Harris

*By the forest side, there was a river bed
The tomb was a wonderful place
Those who lay there were all martyrs
Heroes and men of God*

.....

*Flag poles were set out everywhere
This day, at the time of afternoon prayer
They played marches and tambourines
They shouted through the desert plain*

—Zalili, eighteenth-century poet

If one were to remove these . . . shrines, the Uyghur people would lose contact with [the] earth. They would no longer have a personal, cultural, and spiritual history. After a few years we would not have a memory of why we live here or where we belong.

—Rahile Dawut, scholar and Uyghur folklorist

Over the past few years, government authorities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China have destroyed large swathes of the religious heritage of the Turkic Muslim Uyghurs. This campaign of destruction has proceeded in tandem with the heavy

securitization of the region, mass incarcerations, and attacks on Uyghur language and other aspects of cultural identity.¹ An estimated 1.8 million people have been arbitrarily detained in a system of “political education” camps, pretrial detention centers, and prisons. Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims have been given long prison sentences simply for sharing religious recordings or downloading Uyghur language e-books. Numerous testimonies have reported that detainees in the camp system are subjected to systematic torture and rape, cultural and political indoctrination, and forced labor. Outside the detention facilities, Xinjiang’s Turkic Muslim citizens are subject to a pervasive system of mass surveillance, controls on movement, forced sterilization, and family separation.²

Although China has denied, downplayed, and sought to justify these moves as necessary to counter terrorism, its actions demonstrably constitute what the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) calls “strategic cultural cleansing”: the deliberate targeting of individuals and groups on the basis of their cultural, ethnic, or religious affiliation, combined with the intentional and systematic destruction of cultural heritage. This attempt to remodel the region’s ethnic and cultural landscape is impelled by China’s wider strategic and economic objectives under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), President Xi Jinping’s cornerstone policy introduced in 2013. Its aim is to secure access to the region’s natural resources and transform it into a platform to expand China’s influence and trade across Asia.

On the international stage, the destruction of immovable cultural heritage has become strongly associated in public discourse and government policy with groups that are reviled as Islamic extremists and terrorists, such as the looting of sites by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as ISIL or Da’esh) and the Taliban’s demolition of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan. In Xinjiang, to the contrary, we find the large-scale destruction of Muslim heritage by a secular state that capitalizes on these prevailing international perceptions, reformulating its destruction as an essential security measure against terrorism and thus aligning its moves with the US-led Global War on Terror. It is important to note that these moves reflect a hardening of policy in the region rather than a post-conflict situation. Although the region has suffered from a spate of violent incidents in recent years, this has not taken the form of organized resistance to Chinese rule. Long-term observers of the region argue that the impression of violent conflict has been largely manufactured by the state in order to enable and justify its acts of cultural erasure.³

Heritage with Chinese Characteristics

Over the past three decades, China has become a key player in the international heritage sphere and has developed its own unique heritage discourse. The starting point for this “heritage turn” can be traced to an ideological shift within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the 1990s and its search for new forms of legitimacy beyond communist ideals. Cultural heritage in contemporary China fulfills many functions.

Heritage is linked to political goals and serves as a resource for political legitimacy and soft power. It is also treated as an economic asset, utilized to boost local economic development. But heritage in China is not a purely top-down government initiative. The nationalistic rhetoric surrounding Chinese heritage and the rediscovery of heritage sites and practices has also found deep resonance among large sections of the population.⁴ The government's heritage regime, then, reflects domestic concerns, but its global aspirations and heavy involvement in UNESCO have also left their mark on the global heritage regime: China's leading role in the international heritage system makes its approach hard to challenge.

The country's increasing dominance and explicitly political use of heritage make it compelling to analyze the underlying power relations: issues of governmentality, negotiation, and resistance.⁵ Key questions revolve around the identities, memories, and traditions of place-making associated with items of heritage and the ways in which they are privileged, downplayed, or suppressed in regimes of heritage management. China's huge geographic and ethnic diversity is an important variable in these questions. It is self-evident that the international heritage system creates special problems for minority and Indigenous populations, since the designation of a recognized "cultural property" can only be proposed by a state. The position of Uyghur heritage within the Chinese system is especially instructive.

In Xinjiang, the management of Uyghur cultural heritage has been tightly linked to government attempts to deepen control over this minority region through a center-led economic development campaign and assimilationist agenda. China argues that government management of Uyghur culture is necessary to preserve it from threats posed by religious extremism and hostile foreign forces. In practice, policy is highly focused on the use of Uyghur heritage as a cultural resource to develop the tourism industry, which is an important part of the central government's economic development plans for Xinjiang and is used to present heavily stage-managed images of normality in the region. Its economic growth facilitates the movement of Han Chinese into the region, both as short-term visitors and as permanent settlers, justifying and whitewashing the ongoing repressive securitization of the region.⁶

No Uyghur monuments have been entered on UNESCO's heritage lists despite the record number of World Heritage Sites now listed in China, many of which are recent designations. Items of Uyghur religious heritage, including mosques and shrines, do appear on China's own national and regional heritage lists, and fall within the purview of China's huge bureaucratic system for designating and managing heritage sites.⁷ As such, they are protected by a range of national laws on heritage and ethnic autonomy, but these legal protections seem to have had little impact on protecting sites from the unprecedented destruction of mosques and shrines since 2016. Arguably, the inclusion of Uyghur religious sites on UNESCO's lists would not have afforded them much greater protection. Uyghur culture is strongly represented on the Intangible Cultural Heritage lists in the form of the Muqam musical repertoire and Meshrep community gatherings.

The subsequent folkloric promotion of these items has served primarily to cement the long-standing designation of the Uyghurs as a singing and dancing minority people.⁸ In the same way that Uyghur mosques and shrines are closed to local communities but open for tourist business, community gatherings are transformed into glamorous stage shows purveying messages of interethnic harmony within the framework of Chinese nationhood, while local communities are terrorized and torn apart.

China's leading role in inscribing the Silk Road on UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites in 2014 provides a clear demonstration of how the government positions itself as an international heritage leader and how it uses heritage to support its economic and political goals. Strategic interests and heritage policy are both underpinned by research. The huge upsurge of Silk Road research in recent years is directly linked to the BRI, and research findings typically serve to support current government narratives. Ubul Memeteli's 2015 study, *The Construction of the Xinjiang Section of the Silk Road*, for example, funded by the Chinese Administration of Cultural Heritage, makes (somewhat tenuous) claims of close associations between the structure of Uyghur mosques and ancient Buddhist monasteries.⁹ Studies like this underscore China's territorial claims on the region by selectively emphasizing its cultural links. In contrast, Yue Xie notes the similarities in architectural style between the mosques of Xinjiang and those of the neighboring Fergana Valley in eastern Uzbekistan.¹⁰ These continuities are rooted in more recent history: the mid-nineteenth-century rule of Yakub Beg, a military leader from Fergana who led an uprising against rule by the Chinese Qing dynasty in 1865 and controlled the region until 1877. During this period, he commissioned the renovation and expansion of many important mosques and shrines that survived into the early twenty-first century. Central Asian histories and cultural continuities such as these are rarely foregrounded in China's own heritage narratives.

Mosques, Shrines, and Cemeteries and the Transmission of Uyghur History

At the time of the CCP takeover in 1955, religious institutions—mosques, madrasas (religious schools), and shrines—were central to Xinjiang's social and economic life. The mosque community (*jama'at*), comprised of respected senior men led by the imam, formed the main source of authority in the village or neighborhood (*mahalla*). In the early 1950s, Kashgar Prefecture had 12,918 mosques, and those of Kashgar city alone employed 180 muezzins to give the call to prayer and 190 imams to lead prayers and deliver sermons (fig. 7.1). The major mosques were the site of mass celebrations at the festivals of Eid and Qurban. Mosques and shrines often also formed part of a pious foundation (*waqf*) established by donations in the form of money or land, which provided income for the imams, income for charity, and support for pilgrims to go on the hajj. Some of the larger foundations amassed large amounts of money and power. In 1950, the Kashgar Idgah Mosque controlled three thousand *mu* (nearly five hundred acres) of farmland and sixty commercial premises within the city. Madrasas provided the main source of formal education for Uyghur boys into the early twentieth century.



Figure 7.1 Kashgar's Idgah Mosque in 2013. Image: Ivan Vdovin / Alamy Stock Photo

The most distinctive and significant aspect of religious life in the region centered on the shrines—tombs of martyrs and saints—which were popular pilgrimage destinations and held their own festivals celebrating the saints.¹¹

The spread of Islam into the region started in the tenth century with the conversion of the rulers of the Turkic Qarakhanid dynasty and their conquest of neighboring Buddhist kingdoms. Introduced by merchants and missionaries from Central Asia and Persia, the new faith gradually replaced shamanic beliefs, Nestorian Christianity, and Buddhism. Throughout the history of Islam in the region, believers have venerated the heroes and heroines of this religious heritage: convert kings and religious teachers, warriors and martyrs, scholars and mystics. Sufi orders and mystics also played an important role in the spread of Islam in the region. Sufi sheikhs were respected as community leaders and venerated for their healing powers. Revered in death as well as in life, these historical leaders and saints have shrines that became important sites of pilgrimage.

These saints and their shrines have played a crucial role in the culture and history of the region. Historical documents show that the shrines retained their religious authority and socioeconomic importance until the mid-twentieth century.¹² The region boasts seven major pilgrimage sites and numerous smaller shrines visited by local people. Many shrines were associated with fertility and used mainly by women. Most of these are not major architectural monuments like the beautiful (and heavily restored) Timurid madrasa complex of Samarkand, Uzbekistan, or the huge shrine of Ahmad Yasawi in southern Kazakhstan, both designated World Heritage Sites. In Xinjiang, some of the most important shrines are simple mud-brick constructions, distinguished

visually by the huge temporary structures made up of “spirit flags” (*tugh alam*) brought by pilgrims and attached to the shrine or tied together into tall flag mountains.

Shrine worship and pilgrimage are important aspects of religious practice across Central Asia and are central to Uyghur faith traditions, sustained through early twentieth-century wars, communization from 1949, and the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–76). While the modernization and urbanization beginning in the 1980s has distanced many Uyghurs from these practices, people in rural southern China sustained their traditions of pilgrimage, and the major shrine festivals continued to attract tens of thousands of people until the closure of the last shrine in 2013. Work by Rahile Dawut and Rian Thum has eloquently described the region’s sites of shrine pilgrimage and the routes through the desert traversed by Uyghur pilgrims carrying handwritten copies of *tazkirah*—stories of the saints, kings, and martyrs to whom these shrines were dedicated (fig. 7.2). The repeated retreading of these routes and retelling of these stories formed a collective and sacred history etched into the landscape.¹³

While some of the major shrines lay in remote locations, in many places they were central to community life. Sometimes the neighborhood mosque was also attached to a shrine, thus ensuring daily visits from the surrounding community. Shrines located in towns with weekly bazaars were connected through patterns of trade—people combined trips to both. Cemeteries often grew up around the tombs of saints. People would combine a visit to the family grave with a visit to the shrine, where they would circle the tomb, speak with the sheikh about their problems, sit to weep and pray, and leave offerings. On certain holidays, people would pray through the night, and the sheikh told stories of the saints. They brought fried cakes as offerings for souls of the



Figure 7.2 Pilgrims at the shrine of Imam Aptah. Image: Photo courtesy of Rahile Dawut

dead, and the cakes were distributed to beggars. The provision of food and clothing to the poor, enabled by the donations of pilgrims, was historically an important part of the social role of the shrine.

The major shrine festivals were on a much larger scale. Until its closure in 1997, tens of thousands of people gathered annually at the Ordam Padishah Mazar, which lies in the desert between the cities of Kashgar and Yarkand. The three-day festival was begun on the tenth day of the month of Muharram. Curiously, among the Sunni Uyghurs this festival had many echoes of Shia commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn ibn Ali, grandson of the Prophet, at the Battle of Karbala in 680. Uyghur pilgrims at the Ordam shrine often wept, mourning the death of their own saint, Ali Arslan Khan, who was martyred in the wars to convert the region to Islam. Central to the festival was the ritual of the meeting of the flags (*tugh soqashturush*). Groups of people processed from their villages holding spirit flags, playing *sunay* and *dap*, traditional Uyghur musical instruments, and reciting the names of God.¹⁴ Another important aspect of the festival was the ritual communal meal, cooked from pilgrims' offerings in a huge pot and shared among the crowd.¹⁵

Until its closure in 2013, the other major shrine festival of the region was the annual pilgrimage to the shrine of Imam Asim. Situated deep in the desert, north of the village of Jiya in Lop County, it is a long and dusty walk through sand dunes to reach the shrine. From Wednesdays to Fridays throughout May each year, the shrine was surrounded by bazaar booths and food stalls, and a wide range of activities occurred, including camel riding, wrestling, tightrope walking, and magic shows.¹⁶ Pilgrims arrived at a series of burial mounds topped with spirit flags, thickly tied with women's headscarves and other offerings such as rams' horns and tiny knitted dolls. They knelt before the wooden fence that surrounded the tombs, reciting prayers and reading the Quran. Inside the *khaniqa* (Sufi lodge), groups of *ashiq* (mystics) gathered to sing poetry by the Central Asian mystic poets Yasawi, Mashrab, and Nawa'i.¹⁷ In the shade of the mosque, pilgrims listened to the sheikh telling the story of Imam Asim's heroic role in the defeat of the Buddhist kingdom of Khotan in 1006.

The early twentieth-century archaeologist Aurel Stein identified several shrines that overlaid former Buddhist sites in Xinjiang. The shrine of Imam Shakir, for example, which lies in the desert near Khotan, was built on the site of a Buddhist temple mentioned by the seventh-century Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang. It is important to note that while such shrines are frequently held up as examples of syncretism by scholars outside the tradition, within the local traditions of worship the shrines are considered wholly Islamic, and the histories they tell are those of the Islamic conversion and subsequent thousand years of history that tie the region into the wider Muslim world.¹⁸

Staging Uyghur Heritage

In his studies of Uyghur architecture, Jean-Paul Loubes notes China's piecemeal approach to heritage. Isolated monuments, which are significant because of their symbolic or tourist value, are not so much preserved as "staged" to suit Chinese tastes.¹⁹ The transformation of the city of Kashgar remains the most notorious of these projects of architectural staging. A gradual process of destruction and reconstruction of Kashgar's old city began in the 1990s and was completed in 2013. The key heritage site of Idgah Mosque was preserved, but several other less well-known historical sites were destroyed along with large swathes of residential areas. The majority of the old city's inhabitants were rehoused elsewhere, and it was reopened in the form of a largely depopulated tourist destination, with former mosques repurposed as tourist bars.

Dawut, an internationally prominent Uyghur academic who has dedicated her life to documenting the shrines, has described the transformation of some of the region's shrines into tourist destinations, often in tandem with the effective exclusion of local people from the sites where they formerly worshipped.²⁰ In the late 1990s, mass tourism companies, often based in inner China, began to exploit the region's natural and cultural resources. Dawut traces the debates among local governments and commercial interests around the preservation and exploitation of local religious sites. Local authorities worried that supporting religious sites would promote "illegal religious activities." Business interests desired to exploit religious sites for their own economic purposes, and local people were concerned about the effects of tourism on their social and religious life. In general, the voices of local people were not privileged in these debates. The shrine of Sultan Qirmish Sayid in Aqsu Prefecture, for example, is situated by an ancient forest and a natural spring whose water is believed to have healing properties. Formerly a major pilgrimage site, it was designated a county-level protected cultural heritage site in 1982. Dawut describes the local discontent when the site was taken over by a tourist company, which introduced an entry charge that was prohibitively expensive for Uyghur pilgrims and permitted Han Chinese tourists to have picnics and consume alcohol on the sacred site. Such forms of exploitation have been hugely exacerbated by the recent campaigns, while the possibilities for critique are greatly reduced.

At the same time that some of the region's shrines were designated as heritage sites and opened to tourism, local authorities moved to disrupt the religious activities and cultural meanings associated with the shrines, as policy toward pilgrimage practice became caught up in official narratives of Uyghur religious extremism. The links made by the authorities between Islamic extremism and shrine worship might seem ironic given the strong opposition to such practices by Islamists, who regard them as heterodox, but such perceived connections are expressive of the lack of knowledge of local religious practice among Xinjiang officials. The Ordam festival was one of the first shrine festivals to be banned, in 1997. At other sites, shrine visits continued in the 2000s, but reciting the histories of the saints was suppressed and texts were confiscated. This

served to weaken the connection between popular historical knowledge and the shrines.²¹ The Imam Asim shrine in Khotan was the last to be closed, in 2013.

The Mosque Rectification Campaign

In the wake of the Cultural Revolution, with the relaxing of controls on religious life, people began to return to their faith, and new forms of piety began to permeate Uyghur society. These trends played out in very similar ways to the revival movements that developed across Central Asia and further east in Hui Muslim Chinese communities. Many Uyghurs returned to family traditions of prayer, fasting, and modest dress. They sent their children to study the Quran. Those with sufficient funds took the hajj or went to study in Turkey or Egypt, often returning with reformist ideas about “correct” religious practice, and people hotly debated the true nature of Islam. Sometimes local revivalist groups sought to counter social problems such as alcoholism or drug abuse, and frequently engaged in organized charity.²² An important aspect of the religious revival was the building or reconstruction of community mosques. These drew clearly on Central Asian models, rejecting any hint of Chinese influence. Local communities and individual donors sometimes raised considerable amounts of money, and in some places large new gatehouses, minarets, or domes were added to the historical structures. These impressive buildings reflected a renewed pride in the faith and new community confidence and prosperity (fig. 7.3).

By the 1990s, the Xinjiang authorities were viewing these developments with deep suspicion. A series of “strike hard” campaigns was implemented, targeting a wide range of religious practices that lay outside the sphere of the officially controlled mosques.



Figure 7.3 Qaghiliq Mosque in 2013. Image: Ivan Vdovin / Alamy Stock Photo

Numerous ordinary aspects of Muslim observance, such as abstinence from pork, daily prayers and fasting, and veiling or growing beards, were criticized as antisocial. Activities that involved groups of people gathering together—including shrine pilgrimage, religious instruction of children, and home-based healing rituals—were designated as “illegal religious activities.” They were in turn conflated with Uyghur “separatism.”

Soon after the American announcement of a Global War on Terror in late 2001, China began to adopt the rhetoric of religious extremism and terrorism to explain and justify internal security policies.²³ “Illegal religious activities” were now dubbed “religious extremism.” State media began to designate local incidences of violence as “terrorist incidents,” although the specific reasons underlying local violence were more often related to local power struggles, official corruption, and police brutality. As police intervention into daily life grew more invasive, the number of violent incidents increased. In July 2009, an initially peaceful demonstration in the Xinjiang capital Ürümqi was met by police violence, and the city fell into a night of terrible interethnic violence. The incident was followed by mass arrests and still tighter social controls.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, these measures, 2013 and 2014 saw a spate of bombings and knife attacks on civilians, and in May of the latter year the recently appointed Chinese president, Xi Jinping, called for the construction of “walls made of copper and steel” to defend Xinjiang against terrorism. This heightened rhetoric signaled the territorial nature of this new phase of the campaign and the degree to which the region and its people would be isolated and immobilized. Uyghurs’ passports were confiscated and they had to apply for special passes to travel outside their hometown. A tight net of surveillance drew on techniques from the high-tech to the humanly enforced. Security cameras, spy apps, tracking devices, and retina recognition software were deployed at checkpoints, and local residents were mobilized to conduct regular antiterrorist drills, wielding stout wooden poles.

Rather than targeting the small number of people who might reasonably be judged vulnerable to radicalization and violent action, the antireligious extremism campaign in Xinjiang targeted all expressions of Islamic faith and removed large swathes of Islamic architecture and imagery from Uyghur towns and cities. During 2015 and 2016, the Xinjiang authorities destroyed thousands of the mosques constructed by local communities since the 1980s. Under a “Mosque Rectification” campaign launched by the Chinese Central Ethnic-Religious Affairs Department and overseen by the local police, numerous mosques were condemned on the grounds that they were unsafe structures that posed a safety threat to worshippers. The demolitions were rolled out in tandem with the development of the program of mass incarceration.

Given the heavy securitization of the region and the “walls of steel” shielding it from international attention, it has been hard to verify the scale of destruction, but a series of investigations suggest that some ten thousand mosques have been demolished.²⁴ A local official confirmed in 2017 that of a total of eight hundred mosques in the Qumul region,

two hundred had already been demolished with a further five hundred planned. Those that remained had their distinctive architectural features, such as domes and minarets, removed as part of the campaign to “Sinicize” Islam.²⁵ A 2019 investigation by Bahram Sintash provided case-by-case evidence of the demolition or modification of a hundred Uyghur mosques.²⁶ A 2020 investigation by the *Guardian* newspaper used satellite imagery to check the sites of a hundred mosques and shrines, and found that forty mosques and two major shrines had suffered significant structural damage. Around half appeared to have been fully demolished, while others had gatehouses, domes, and minarets removed.²⁷ The same year, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute conducted a larger-scale survey of religious sites, again drawing on satellite imagery to assess the types and scale of destruction. Their report estimates that around sixteen thousand of the region’s mosques (65 percent of the total) had been destroyed or damaged since 2017, with an estimated 8,500 demolished outright (fig. 7.4).²⁸

One of these demolitions caused a minor international controversy. The Idgah Mosque in the Xinjiang town of Keriya is believed to date back to the thirteenth century. Expanded in 1665, it was reconstructed with community donations in 1947 and again in 1997, when an enormous gatehouse was constructed in front of the older prayer hall. It became the largest mosque in the Uyghur region, measuring over thirteen thousand square meters, and was designated a national-level protected historical site. Up to twelve thousand men would pray inside or in front of the mosque on festival days and perform the whirling *sama* dance to the sounds of drums and shawms played from the top of the gatehouse.



Figure 7.4 Friday prayer at a local mosque in southern Xinjiang in 2012. Image: Photo courtesy of Aziz Isa

The mosque's imam, Imin Damollam, was trained at the Xinjiang Islamic Institute and officially appointed to the role in 1992. This long-serving cleric was detained early in the crackdown and received a life sentence in 2017. The mosque's huge gatehouse was demolished in March the following year, causing a Twitter storm when the independent researcher Shawn Zhang drew attention to its disappearance. Official sources and numerous individuals attacked Zhang on social media, forcing him to retract his original claim that the whole mosque had been demolished and acknowledge that the small and older prayer hall had been left intact, thus enabling the authorities to claim that they had respected heritage law.²⁹ The imam's sentence was attributed to religious extremism (under China's broad definition), and the disappearance of this towering monument from the landscape was justified by building safety regulations.

Interviews with Uyghur exiles conducted by Bahram Sintash reveal something of the human impact of the demolitions. Abide Abbas, a young woman now residing in Turkey, responded in 2019 to the destruction of her local mosque: "Seeing an image like this is like the feeling one gets when losing a mother, so tragic, painful and traumatizing. . . . I wept looking at the 'Mosque-less' image with a history spanning more than a hundred years. . . . I did not realize the value of this mosque until it was taken away from me."³⁰

Reengineering Uyghurs

By 2017, the so-called antireligious extremism campaign had spread beyond the religious sphere. No longer simply branding everyday religious activity as terrorism, its scope had expanded to target all signs of Uyghur nationalist sentiment, foreign connections, or simply insufficient loyalty to the state. Official statements suggested that the whole Uyghur nation was now regarded as a problem in need of an aggressive solution. One government official said in a public speech in late 2017: "You can't uproot all the weeds hidden among the crops in the field one by one—you need to spray chemicals to kill them all; re-educating these people is like spraying chemicals on the crops . . . that is why it is a general re-education, not limited to a few people."³¹

Over the course of 2017, news began to leak out of Xinjiang of the construction of a huge, secretive network of internment camps, dubbed "transformation through education centers" in official Chinese sources. By mid-2018 international organizations were raising concerns that 1.5 million Muslims—primarily Uyghurs but also Kazakhs and other groups, constituting over 10 percent of the adult Muslim population of the region—had been interned for indefinite periods without formal legal charges. Reports by former detainees, teachers, and guards, corroborated by investigation of government construction bids and satellite imagery, described a network of over a hundred detention facilities, heavily secured with barbed wire and surveillance systems and guarded by armed police; some of these facilities were large enough to hold up to a hundred thousand inmates.³²

Among those taken into the internment camps have been hundreds of prominent Uyghur intellectuals, writers, and artists, whose crimes, although not formally stated,

seemed to be that their work had in some way promoted Uyghur language, culture, or history. Increasingly the term “religious extremism” appears to serve as a gloss for Uyghur culture and identity, now regarded as a “virus” in need of eradication. As part of these new initiatives, Uyghurs across Xinjiang were expected to attend regular Chinese language lessons, and officials made speeches suggesting that speaking Uyghur in public was a sign of disloyalty to the state. This has all suggested that it was now no longer sufficient to reject Islam: a wholesale adoption of Chinese cultural identity was required of Uyghurs. As commentators began to suggest, this was a project to “reengineer” Uyghur society.³³ The children of detainees were taken to orphanages, where they were educated to regard the religion and identity of their parents as backward and dangerous. Men were detained in larger numbers than women, and the Xinjiang authorities began to promote ethnic intermarriage, offering cash incentives to Han men willing to marry Uyghur women. By 2019, the reengineering project had extended to the innermost bodily aspects of Uyghur identity, targeting halal eating practices and enforcing sterilization of large numbers of Uyghur women.³⁴ Such radical efforts to break down core aspects of faith and identity across the broad population have only been possible because of the regime of terror enforced by the system of detention camps.

Territorial Moves

An official with the Religious Affairs Department, Maisumujiang Maimuer, speaking on state media in late 2018, acknowledged that China intended to “break their lineage, break their roots, break their connections and break their origins.”³⁵ And as Rian Thum remarked the following year, “Nothing could say more clearly to the Uighurs that the Chinese state wants to uproot their culture and break their connection to the land than the desecration of their ancestors’ graves, the sacred shrines that are the landmarks of Uighur history.”³⁶

According to a detailed survey carried out by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 30 percent of the region’s sacred sites (shrines, cemeteries, and pilgrimage routes, including many protected under Chinese law) have been demolished since 2017, and an additional 28 percent damaged or altered in some way.³⁷ The tomb of Imam Jafari Sadiq and surrounding buildings were destroyed in March 2018. The mosque and *khanqah* (a building for Sufi gatherings) at the Imam Asim shrine also disappeared in the same month, leaving the tomb as the only structure at the site. The local authorities also transported bulldozers over fourteen kilometers of sand dunes to obliterate the Ordam shrine.³⁸ Not only the built heritage was targeted: Rahile Dawut was detained in November 2017 not long before the demolitions, and she remains in an internment camp at the time of writing.³⁹

In addition to the demolition of the shrines, numerous Uyghur cemeteries were destroyed or relocated during this period (fig. 7.5). Drawing on testimony from Uyghur exiles, satellite images, and government notices, CNN revealed in January 2020 that



Figure 7.5 A local graveyard in southern Xinjiang in 2012. Image: Rachel Harris

more than a hundred cemeteries had been destroyed since 2018.⁴⁰ Typically the destruction or relocation of cemeteries was justified by the demands of urban development, but the extremely rapid program of removing human remains and bulldozing structures left local people (even if they were not incarcerated in the camps) scant time to reclaim the bones of their family members. Moreover, numerous important historical shrines were destroyed along with the rest of the cemeteries.

Khotan's Sultanim Cemetery, for example, is believed to have a history of over a thousand years, stretching back to the period when Satuq Bughra Khan introduced Islam into the region. Four of his commanders are said to have died during the conquest of Khotan and were buried at this location. The four tombs of the sultans still stood at the center of the cemetery at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and they remained an important pilgrimage site. Many religious leaders, scholars, and other significant figures in Khotan's history were also buried in the cemetery.

In March 2019, disinterment notices appeared around the city of Khotan, warning that the cemetery would be demolished within three days. "We worry that my grandfather's grave will end up as an unclaimed grave and that the government will treat his remains as trash," said one Uyghur exile. According to CNN's analysis of satellite images, the site had been completely flattened by April 2019, and part of the cemetery appeared to be in use as a parking lot.

Conclusion

In framing its campaigns in Xinjiang as a struggle against religious extremism and terrorism, the Chinese government has attempted to obfuscate and obscure what is better understood as an ongoing struggle over the landscape, in which state projects of development—which do not equally benefit the Uyghurs—attempt to remodel the cultural landscape and to reengineer the desires and actions of its subjects—that is, to shape the ways in which they inhabit that landscape. As one young Uyghur exile, Marguba Yusup, aptly commented in 2019: “In a totalitarian regime . . . architectural decisions are never random. Architecture [becomes] a tool of propaganda, a pure product of the regime. It is for this reason that the Chinese government does not want to leave any trace of Uyghur cultural heritage. They are destroying not only Uyghur architecture, but also the Uyghur language [and] religious belief.”⁴¹

In spite of its own numerous laws addressing the protection of religious and cultural heritage, rights to religious worship and belief, and rights to ethnic autonomy, China has implemented unprecedented processes of cultural erasure in Xinjiang since 2017, seemingly without redress or consequence. International responses to its actions have been mixed and piecemeal. While several governments have condemned its actions as genocide, China has strongly refuted all criticism, conducted a campaign of harassment of Uyghur exiles and activists, and orchestrated statements of support from its allies, including many Muslim majority countries that are recipients of BRI development loans. Observers have long noted UNESCO’s apparent incapacity to counter or even protest abuses of the heritage system by state partners, and a direct response to this case is all the more difficult given China’s prominence in the international heritage regime.

Ultimately, perhaps, hope for the survival of the unique culture surrounding this religious heritage lies in the very transient nature of its architecture. These humble mud-brick structures have survived wars, changing governments, and the shifting desert sands for nearly a millennium through constant renovation and rebuilding, just as the histories of their saints have been retold and passed down to the present day. In this long history of resilience lies hope that the current campaigns will not result in their final erasure from the collective memory of the people they have served for so long.

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NOTES

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