

Uyghur Heritage under China's "anti-religion extremism" campaigns

In *Cultural Heritage and Mass Atrocities: Human and Security Costs*, edited by James Cuno and Thomas G. Weiss.

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Abstract:

Over the past few years, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region has been transformed into a high security police state, with an estimated 1.5 million of its Turkic Muslim citizens incarcerated and subjected to abusive regimes of indoctrination and forced labor. China explains its actions as a necessary response to extremist terror, while international observers suggest that its policies may amount to cultural genocide. This chapter argues that China's approach to heritage in this region is fully subsumed to its political and economic goals. It highlights the demolition of Uyghur religious heritage: mosques, cemeteries, and shrines, whose principal value lies in the complex of historical meanings and forms of cultural expression which surround them. Their destruction represents a fundamental attack on Uyghur culture and identity, and is part of a push to pacify the region in pursuit of the economic and strategic goals of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Introduction

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 plain¹

If one were to remove these ... shrines, the Uighur 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.²

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 demolition has proceeded in tandem with the heavy securitization of the region, mass incarcerations, and attacks on Uyghur language and other aspects of cultural identity. Although China has justified these moves as necessary to counter terrorism, I suggest that its actions constitute what 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 cultural landscape is impelled by China’s wider strategic and economic objectives under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), 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.

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 the “heritage turn” can be traced to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s ideological shift in the 1990s, and its search for new forms of legitimacy beyond communist ideals. Cultural heritage in contemporary China fulfils many functions. Heritage is linked to political goals and it serves as a resource for political legitimacy and soft power. It is also treated as an economic asset and used 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 China’s population.³ China’s heritage regime, then, reflects domestic concerns, but its global aspirations and heavy involvement in UNESCO have also left its mark on the global heritage regime.

China’s explicitly political use of heritage makes it compelling to analyze the underlying power relations, issues of governmentality, negotiation and resistance. 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 regional and ethnic diversity is an important variable in these questions. It is self-evident that the international heritage system creates special problems for minority or indigenous populations since the designation of a recognized “cultural property” can only be proposed by a state.

In Xinjiang, the management of Uyghur cultural heritage has been tightly tied 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, heritage policy is highly focused on the use of Uyghur heritage as cultural resources to develop the tourism industry, which is an important part of Xinjiang’s economic development plans. Its growth facilitates the movement of Han Chinese into the region, both as short-term visitors and permanent settlers, and provides additional justification for the repressive securitization policies which are deemed necessary to stabilize the region.⁴

China’s leading role in inscribing the Silk Road on the list of World Heritage Sites in 2014, provides a clear demonstration of how its 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.⁵ 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 Ferghana Valley in eastern Uzbekistan.⁶ These continuities are rooted in more recent history: the mid-nineteenth-century rule of Yakub Beg, a military leader from Ferghana who led an uprising against Qing rule in 1865 and controlled the region until 1877. During this period, he commissioned the renovation and expansion of many important mosques and shrines which survived into the early twenty-first century. Histories and cultural continuities such as these are rarely foregrounded in China's own heritage narratives.



The Juma Mosque in Kucha, photographed in 2016, courtesy of Yue Xie

No Uyghur monuments have been entered on UNESCO's heritage lists. Uyghur culture is strongly represented on the Intangible Cultural Heritage lists, however, 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 longstanding designation of the Uyghurs as a singing and dancing minority people.⁷ Items of Uyghur religious heritage—mosques and shrines—do appear on China's national and regional heritage lists, and they are

thus protected by a range of national laws on heritage and ethnic autonomy. Notwithstanding this, since 2016, large numbers of mosques and shrines including some protected sites have been fully or partly demolished.

On the international stage, the destruction of immovable cultural heritage has become strongly associated in public discourse and government policy with groups which are reviled as Islamic extremists and terrorists (Da'esh's looting of sites in Syria and Iraq; Al-Qaida's demolition of the Bamiyan Buddhas). In Xinjiang, we find the large-scale destruction of Muslim heritage by a secular state which capitalizes on these international perceptions, reformulating its destruction as an essential security measure against terrorism, aligning its moves with the US-led Global War on Terror. It is important to note that these moves reflect a shift or a hardening of policy in the region rather than a post-conflict situation. Although the region has suffered from a spate of violent attacks in recent years, this has not taken the form of organized resistance to Chinese rule. The impression of violent conflict in this region is manufactured by the state in order to enable and justify its acts of cultural erasure.

Mosques, Shrines and Cemeteries, and the transmission of Uyghur history

At the time of the CCP takeover, religious institutions—mosques, madrasahs (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, the city of Kashgar had 12,918 mosques, which employed 190 imams, and 180 muezzins. The major festival mosques were the site of mass celebrations at the festivals of Eid and Qurban. Mosques and shrines often formed part of a pious foundation (*waqf*) established by donations, in the form of money or land, which provided income for the imams, 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 3000 mu of farmland and sixty commercial premises within the city. Madrasahs—religious schools attached to the mosque—provided the main source of formal education for Uyghur boys into the early twentieth century. The most distinctive and significant aspect of religious life in the region centered around the holy shrines—tombs of martyrs and saints—which were popular pilgrimage destinations and held their own festivals celebrating the saint.⁸

The spread of Islam into this 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 this 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 played an important role in the spread of Islam in this region. Sufi sheykhs were respected as community leaders, and venerated for their healing powers. Revered in life as well as in death; the shrines of these historical leaders and saints 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.⁹ The region boasts seven major pilgrimage sites, and numerous smaller shrines which were visited by local people. Many shrines were associated with fertility, and used mainly by women. Most of these shrines are not major architectural monuments like the beautiful (and heavily restored) Timurid madrasah complex of Samarkand, or the huge shrine of Ahmad Yasawi in southern Kazakhstan, both designated World Heritage Sites. In Xinjiang, some the most important shrines are simple mud brick constructions, distinguished visually by the huge temporary structures made up of “spirit flags” (*tugh alam*), which are brought by pilgrims and attached to the shrine or tied together into tall flag mountains.



Flag Mountain. Image courtesy of Lisa Ross

Shrine worship and pilgrimage is an important part of religious practice across Central Asia, and it is central to Uyghur traditions of faith, sustained through early twentieth century wars, communization, and the Cultural Revolution. Whilst the modernization and urbanization beginning in the 1980s has distanced many Uyghurs from these practices, people in the rural South 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. The

repeated retreading of these routes and retelling of these stories formed a collective and sacred history etched into the landscape.¹⁰



Pilgrims arriving at the Ordam Festival, photo courtesy of Rahile Dawut

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 shrine visits with their trips to the bazaar. 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 sheykh about their problems, sit to weep and pray, and leave offerings. On certain holidays, people would pray through the night, and the sheykh told stories of the saints. They brought fried cakes as offerings for souls of the 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 held on the tenth day of the month of Muharram. Curiously among the Sunni Uyghurs, this festival had

many echoes of Shi'a commemoration of the martyrdom of Ali. Uyghur pilgrims at the 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, and reciting the names of God.¹¹ Another important aspect of the festival was the ritual communal meal, cooked from pilgrims' offerings in a huge pot and shared out amongst the crowd.¹²

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 Jiya village in Lop County, it is a long and dusty walk through sand dunes to reach the shrine. From Wednesdays to Fridays throughout the month of May, the shrine was surrounded by bazaar booths and food stalls, and a wide range of activities including camel riding, wrestling, tightrope walking and magic shows.¹³ 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 Qur'an. Inside the *khaniqa* (Sufi lodge), groups of *ashiq* (mystics) gathered to sing poetry by the Central Asian mystic poets, Yasawi, Mashrab, and Nawa'i.¹⁴ In the shade of the mosque, pilgrims listened to the sheykh 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 which overlaid former Buddhist sites. 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 which tie the region into the wider Muslim world.¹⁵

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.¹⁶ 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 its inhabitants were rehoused elsewhere, and the old city was re-opened in the form of a largely depopulated tourist destination, with former mosques repurposed as tourist bars.

Rahila Dawut 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.¹⁷ 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 who introduced an entry charge prohibitively expensive for Uyghur pilgrims, and permitted Han Chinese tourists to have picnics and consume alcohol on the sacred site.

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 towards 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 they are expressive of the lack of knowledge of local religious practice amongst Xinjiang's 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.¹⁸ 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 in Uyghur society played out in very similar ways to the revival movements that developed across Central Asia and further east in Hui Muslim Chinese communities. Many returned to family traditions of prayer, fasting and modest dress. They sent their children to study the Qur'an. 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 issues such as alcoholism or drug abuse, and they frequently engaged in organized charity.¹⁹ An important aspect of the religious revival was the building or reconstruction of community mosques. The newly renovated mosques drew clearly on Central Asian models, rejecting any hint of Chinese influence. Local communities and individual donors raised sometimes considerable amounts of money, and in some places large new gatehouses, minarets or domes were added to the historical structures. These impressive structures reflected a renewed pride in the faith, and new community confidence and prosperity.

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. Numerous ordinary aspects of Muslim observance, such as abstinence from pork, daily prayers and fasting, 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.” Illegal religious activities were in turn conflated with Uyghur “separatism.”

Soon after America’s announcement of a “Global War on Terror,” China began to adopt the rhetoric of religious extremism and terrorism to explain and justify its internal security policies.²⁰ Activities previously designated “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 to do with 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 capital Urumchi 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, the years 2013 and 2014 saw a spate of bombings and knife attacks on civilians, and in May 2014, the recently appointed 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 anti-terrorist 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 anti-religious extremism campaign in Xinjiang targeted all expressions of Islamic faith, and it 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 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 for 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 observers have estimated that thousands of mosques may have been demolished.²¹ A local official confirmed in 2017 that of a total 800 mosques in the Qumul region, 200 had already been demolished and a further 500 demolitions were planned. Those that remained had their distinctive architectural features, such as domes and minarets, removed as part of the

campaign to “Sinicize” Islam.²² A 2019 investigation by Bahram Sintash provided case-by-case evidence of the demolition or modification of a hundred Uyghur mosques.²³ A 2020 investigation by the Guardian newspaper used satellite imagery to check the sites of 100 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.²⁴

One of these demolitions caused a minor international controversy. Keriya Idgah Mosque is believed to date back to the thirteenth century. It was expanded in 1665, and 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 13,000 square meters, and was designated a national level protected historical site. Up to 12,000 men would pray inside or in front of the mosque on festival days, and perform whirling sama’ dance to the sounds of drums and shawms played from the top of the gatehouse.

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 on in the crackdown, and received a life sentence in 2017. The mosque’s huge gatehouse was demolished in March 2018, 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 has been demolished, and acknowledge that the small and older prayer hall had been left intact, thus enabling the authorities to claim that it had respected heritage law.²⁵ The life sentence of the mosque’s respected Imam could be attributed to religious extremism (in China’s broad definition), and the disappearance of this towering monument from the landscape could be justified by building safety regulations.



After an Islamic holiday prayer at Keriya Idgah Mosque. © Cultural Relics and Museums Online

Interviews with Uyghur exiles conducted by Bahram Sintash reveal something of the human impact of these mosque demolitions. Abide Abbas, a young Uyghur woman now resident 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.”²⁶

Re-engineering

By 2017, the so-called “anti-religious 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.”²⁷

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 Muslim groups, over 10% of the adult Muslim population of the region—had been interned for indefinite periods of time without formal legal charge. 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, surveillance systems, and guarded by armed police, some of them large enough to hold up to 100,000 inmates.²⁸

Among those sucked into the internment camps were hundreds of prominent Uyghur intellectuals, writers and artists whose crimes, although they were not formally stated, seemed to be that their work in some way promoted Uyghur language, culture or history. Increasingly the term “religious extremism” seemed to serve as a gloss for Uyghur culture and identity, which was now regarded as a “virus” in need of eradication. 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. These new initiatives suggested that it was now no longer sufficient to reject Islam; what was required of Uyghurs was a wholesale adoption of Chinese cultural identity. As commentators began to suggest, this was a project to “re-engineer” Uyghur society.²⁹ 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 who were willing to marry Uyghur women. By 2019, the re-engineering project had extended to the innermost bodily aspects of Uyghur identity, by targeting halal eating practices.³⁰ Such radical efforts to break down these core aspects of faith and identity across the broad population were only possible because of the regime of terror enforced by the system of detention camps.

Territorial moves

“Break their lineage, break their roots, break their connections and break their origins.”³¹

“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.”³²

According to research carried out by the Guardian, two major shrines were among the sites demolished in 2018. The tomb of Imam Jafari Sadiq and surrounding buildings were demolished in March 2018. The mosque and khaniqa at the Imam Asim shrine also disappeared in the same month, leaving the tomb as the only structure at the site. Not only the built heritage was destroyed. Rahile Dawut, the internationally prominent Uyghur academic who had dedicated her life to documenting the shrines, was detained not long before the demolitions, in November 2017, and she remains in an internment camp at the time of writing.³³

In addition to the demolition of these shrines, numerous Uyghur cemeteries were destroyed or relocated during this period. Drawing on testimony from Uyghur exiles, satellite images, and government notices, CNN revealed in January 2020 that more than a hundred cemeteries had been destroyed since 2018.³⁴ 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 1,000 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 this cemetery. In March 2020, 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 was completely flattened by April 2019, and part of the cemetery appeared to be in use as a parking lot.

The ways in which the Chinese government frames its campaigns in Xinjiang, in terms of a struggle against religious extremism and terrorism, serves 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 re-engineer 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, like the one organized by Stalin, architectural decisions are never random. Architecture should be 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, religious belief.”³⁵

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 subdued; China has strongly refuted all criticism, conducted a campaign of harassment of Uyghur exiles who speak out, and orchestrated statements of support from its allies, including many majority Muslim countries who happen to be recipients of BRI development loans. Observers have already noted UNESCO’s apparent incapacity to counter or even protest abuses of the heritage system by state partners, and given the importance of China in the international heritage regime, UNESCO sanctions seem a very distant possibility. In this situation, perhaps the only course of action is to do what we can to document and archive the culture, and try to keep the issue in the public eye, hoping that international attention will persuade China to moderate its actions. Ultimately, though, hope for the survival of the unique culture surrounding this religious heritage lies in the transient nature of its architecture. These humble mudbrick structures have survived wars, changing regimes, 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.

¹ From the travelogue of the eighteenth-century poet, Zalili, translated in Alexandre Papas, “A Sufi Travelogue as a Source for the History of Mazars in the Tarim Basin,” in *Mazar: Studies on Islamic Sacred Sites in Central Eurasia*, eds. Jun Sugawara and Rahile Dawut (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies Press, 2016), 253-274.

² Rahile Dawut, a leading scholar of Uyghur shrine culture, in interview in 2012, quoted in Lily Kuo, “Revealed: new evidence of China’s mission to raze the mosques of Xinjiang,” *The Guardian*, 7 May 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/07/revealed-new-evidence-of-chinas-mission-to-raze-the-mosques-of-xinjiang>.

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- ³ Marina Svensson and Christina Maags, “Mapping the Chinese Heritage Regime: Ruptures, Governmentality, and Agency,” in *Chinese Heritage in the Making: Experiences, Negotiations and Contestations*, eds. Christina Maags and Marina Svensson (Amsterdam University Press, 2018).
- ⁴ *Extracting Cultural Resources: The exploitation and criminalization of Uyghur cultural heritage* (Washington DC: Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2019).
<https://docs.uhrp.org/pdf/CulturalResourcesIntangibleHeritage.pdf>
- ⁵ Wubuli Maimaitiali, *Sichouzhilu Xinjiang duan jianzhu yanjiu* (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 2015), 122-31.
- ⁶ Yue Xie, *Reconstructing a Reference Point: the Eidgah Mosque in Kashgar*. MA Dissertation (SOAS, University of London, 2017).
- ⁷ Rachel Harris, “A Weekly Meshrep to Tackle Religious Extremism: Music-making in Uyghur Communities and Intangible Cultural Heritage in China,” *Ethnomusicology* 64, no.1, (2020), 23-55.
- ⁸ Ildikó Bellér-Hann, *Community Matters in Xinjiang, 1880-1949: Towards a historical anthropology of the Uyghur* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2008), 316 -318.
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