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The aesthetics and imaginaries of Uyghur heritage, Chinese Tourism, and the Xinjiang dance craze

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ABSTRACT

In parks and town squares across China in 2023, amateur dance enthusiasts engaged in a nationwide ‘Xinjiang dance’ craze, a phenomenon reflected and amplified on social media. For outside observers this might seem a bizarre development following the Chinese media discourses of terrorism, and the intense securitisation of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region which so recently preceded it, but it aligned neatly with new initiatives across Chinese government, media and heritage to promote the region’s burgeoning tourism industry, to fundamentally shift perceptions of the region in the national imagination, and to counter revelations of mass incarceration and cultural erasure in international media. This article highlights the ways that Uyghur heritage, music and dance have been harnessed in government projects to remodel the region’s history and situate its peoples more firmly within the sphere of the Chinese nation, thinking through the ways in which the aesthetic formations and imaginaries of Uyghur heritage articulate the links between tourism and territory, colonialism and desire.

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Introduction

In this article I explore issues in heritage and cultural tourism relating to minority/indigenous/native peoples in China, with special reference to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (hereafter ‘the Uyghur region’) at a time of intense securitisation and repression. I draw on forms of digital ethnography to support my analysis, paying particular attention to social media items circulating among the Uyghur and Chinese diaspora, along with official Chinese media accounts, and existing historical and ethnographic research on the Uyghur region. Since 2014, this region has suffered under the mass incarceration (officially termed ‘re-education’) of Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples (Human Rights Watch 2020), the systematic destruction of built religious heritage (Ruser et al. 2020), and sweeping restrictions on freedoms of association, religious, and cultural life (OHCHR 2022). All these measures have been implemented in conditions of tight secrecy under the guise of a campaign to counter religious extremism and terrorism (Roberts 2020). This emphasis in state media shifted in 2019 towards a discourse of normalcy, alongside massive promotion of domestic tourism and international cultural diplomacy initiatives (Brown and O’Brien 2023; Szadziwski, Mostafanezhad, and Murton 2022). In both spheres we can observe heavy messaging concerning the region’s history and its peoples’ identity

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(Brophy 2021; Millward 2022). Internationally recognised items of the region's cultural heritage have featured prominently in this new phase of the campaign (Harris and Isa 2023).

Two aspects of these new policies are noteworthy. One is the use of heritage in the project of rewriting the region's history with the aim of tying it more tightly to the Chinese sphere. The other is the promotion of ethnically undifferentiated 'Xinjiang' cultural forms in the national arena, and the ensuing enthusiastic adoption of 'Xinjiang dance' by people across China. With due attention to the economics of heritage and tourism, this article considers the links between tourism and projects of state territorialisation; colonialism, desire and mimesis; and racialised and gendered forms of affective labour. My focus is on the embodied and affective aspects of heritage, tracing the ways in which experiences of heritage can foster new imaginaries, how they can be instrumentalised in the service of projects of dispossession and erasure, and used to fundamentally redraw a people's cultural identity.

I draw on three strands of theoretical literature to think through these developments. The first is Darren Byler's (2022) exposition of 'terror capitalism' in the Uyghur region, which he describes as a political and economic configuration characterised by settler capitalist expansion and new sequences of racialisation. Byler draws on the body of academic literature which addresses the experience of indigenous and marginalised peoples under settler colonialism in Europe, Australia and the Americas, and writings on the politics of contemporary Islamophobia and wars on terror in the West. He argues that the consequences of terror capitalism for the indigenous or native (*yerlik*) peoples of the Uyghur region can be understood as a form of dispossession:

The dispossession of a Native people's way of life involves forcing them into a new social order, transforming their land into a commodity, their traditional labor into wage labor, their consumption into a new regime of value, and their thoughts into imposed ideological frameworks. It means that their lives must be integrated with the market; their desires must be routed through the cultured thought of the metropole. (Byler 2022, 100)

In his book, Byler provides detailed insights into the economics of the new order imposed on the Uyghur region, and the ways in which capital flows overwhelmingly back into central China. This article is concerned with the processes through which these new ideologies are imposed, and new forms of desire are routed within contemporary political and economic frameworks. To this end, I draw on Noel Salazar's (2014) discussion of 'tourist imaginaries': the images and fantasies central to forms of tourism in which the essentialised, exoticised Other is prominent. For Salazar, imaginaries are socially transmitted assemblages that serve as devices for meaning making and world shaping. Of particular interest to this article is his emphasis on how the personal imaginings of tourists interact with institutionally grounded imaginaries implying power, hierarchy, and hegemony (Salazar 2014, 2).

Questions of world shaping are also prominent in recent discussions of heritage. Meyer and van de Port (2018) highlight the entanglements between heritage formation and the culturalisation of politics and citizenship. Moving beyond the easy observation that the human-made worlds presented through heritage and tourism are mere fabrications, they emphasise the question of how (imagined) traditions, communities and identities may come to be experienced as 'really real'. For Meyer and van de Port, fabrication does not necessarily stand in opposition to the real but brings it about through an 'aesthetics of persuasion'. Aesthetic practices are historically situated and enmeshed with power; they operate within specific regimes that shape subjects sensorially, emotionally, and mentally. When they are enveloped in political-aesthetic regimes, forms of cultural heritage cease to be merely objects on display, and become embodied parts of lived experience with the power to shift perceptions and identifications:

As heritage is not given naturally, persuasion is a necessity. This involves both the mobilization of all kinds of devices, narratives and material forms on the part of heritage builders to persuade its addressees and indulgence in self-persuasion – the preparedness to identify with such forms emotionally and mentally – on

the part of those addressees ... Persuasion operates partly on a conscious level but also through repetitive exposure, in the sense of a pervasion of people's senses and bodies by virtue of being part of a particular political-aesthetic environment. (Meyer and van de Port 2018, 23)

As I argue below, recent developments in the Uyghur region provide a striking case study in the uses of heritage in the radical reshaping of a people and their culture, and the speed with which such reconfigurations can apparently be absorbed, embodied, and reproduced.

The political context: from terror to tourism

China's policies of mass incarceration and securitisation in the Uyghur region have been conducted under high levels of secrecy and official denial. An ongoing problem with talking about the region known alternately as Xinjiang (in Chinese sources) or East Turkestan (among Uyghur exiles) is the schizophrenia of the narratives. On the one hand, from media, NGOs, academics and activists based outside China, we have seen copious evidence of the construction of a network of high security internment camps, the mass incarceration of over a million Turkic Muslims, intense high-tech surveillance (Human Rights Watch 2020), forced labour (Murphy and Elimä 2021), the destruction of religious heritage, and the criminalisation of many aspects of religious and cultural life (Harris 2022). In response, Chinese official sources have maintained a narrative of necessary counter-terrorism measures and re-education programs in what it dubs 'vocational training centres', supported by a stream of individual testimonies and 'proof of life' videos (Upson 2021) by individuals expressing gratitude to the Communist Party for their incarceration and denying the now substantial evidence of crimes against humanity (OHCHR 2022).

Inside the region's camps and prisons, musical heritage plays a key role in disciplining Muslim bodies as well as presenting a palatable narrative to international observers. Excerpts from the Uyghur Twelve Muqam, the prestigious musical repertoire included on UNESCO's list of the Masterpieces of Humanity in 2005, were performed – apparently by camp inmates – for a delegation of selected international journalists in 2019, alongside a rendition of the English-language song, 'If you're happy and you know it clap your hands', performed by smiling young women in leotards.¹ The daily camp routine featured other aspects of Uyghur musical experience. One song is ubiquitous in testimonies of former camp detainees: the mid-twentieth century Chinese revolutionary song, 'Without the Chinese Communist Party there would be no New China' (*meiyou gongchangdang, jiu meiyou xin zhongguo*). This song was featured in the 2019 National Day Parade in Beijing, part of a grandiose display of revolutionary nostalgia and hard weaponry. It has also featured prominently in accounts of the camps by former detainees. Detainees were required to sing this song in chorus, and were urged by guards to sing repeatedly, louder, and with more enthusiasm before being given their meagre food rations. Good musical performance was one criterion of good behaviour and submission to the camp regime which, alongside self-criticism and memorising the writings of Xi Jinping, might eventually permit release into the less rigorous though still unfree context of forced factory labour (Harris 2020).

In stark contrast to these testimonies and smuggled images of life inside the camps, a countertrend swiftly appeared in Chinese media: the apparent transformation of the Uyghur region into a huge tourist theme park purveying interethnic harmony, happiness, and copious amounts of song and dance. According to official statistics, domestic tourist numbers in the Uyghur region doubled between 2017 and 2019, from 100 million in 2017 to 200 million in 2019 (Szadziwski et al. 2022). In 2021, Xinjiang received 191 million domestic tourists, contributing an income of 141.6 billion RMB.² The numbers bounced back after Covid lockdowns: from January to April 2023, the region received over 51.19 million tourists, a year-on-year increase of 29.56%.³ International journalists were invited to admire the post-Covid lockdown transformations in 2023. Gilles Sabrié wrote insightfully for *Der Spiegel* about three separate worlds co-existing in the Uyghur region:

A wonderland full of orientalist kitsch that has been concocted for tourists. A shadowy world of continuing repression, although it is harder to see than it was a few years ago. And an in-between world in which most Uyghurs probably live, no longer in an absolute state of emergency and yet far from normality. (Sabrié 2023)

China officially declared at the end of 2019 that all those detained in the internment camps had ‘graduated’, suggesting that they had been released. However, this did not mean the end of mass incarceration and forms of unfree labour. While some but not all the camps were closed after 2019, many Uyghurs were moved into conditions of forced labour working in factories linked to the camps or sometimes transferred to factories in inner China (Urbina 2023), and many others were transferred into jail, given lengthy prison sentences for crimes such as studying the Quran (*xuejing*) or ‘splittism’ (*fenlie zhuyi*; Harris and Ayup 2024).

A major new musical titled *Wings of Song* (*gesheng zhi chibang*) was released in 2021, signalling the intensification of the tourism drive in the Uyghur region in the aftermath of national lockdowns. The musical was loosely themed on the story of a group of young people from Beijing who arrive in the Uyghur region in search of musical inspiration for their entry into a national song competition TV show (CGTN 2021). Spanning the food markets of Kashgar’s newly remodelled and depopulated streets (Rippa and Steenberg 2019), and the northern grasslands of the Tengri Tagh mountain range, similarly cleansed of its Kazakh inhabitants (Salimjan 2021), the film showcased a sensorially rich, exotic but welcoming experience for tourists. It featured the song ‘Come, come, friends’ performed by the film’s co-director Abdukerim Abliz, a popular Uyghur comedian and singer who, unlike many of his fellow celebrities, was lucky enough or smart enough to have escaped the camps. Abdukerim sang in comical accented Chinese, following a well-worn model of Uyghurs welcoming Chinese friends into the region, essentially performing themselves for the colonial gaze. Interestingly, *Wings of Song* barely made a mark in box office takings across China, but it was compulsory viewing in educational settings across the Uyghur region, serving not only as tourist promotion material, but also teaching Uyghurs about their place in the new order.

In fact, there is no contradiction between these different images of the region; they are better understood as two phases of an overarching campaign to thoroughly pacify and integrate the region more tightly into the Chinese polity. Mass incarceration, mass tourism, and the careful management of Uyghur heritage are not mutually exclusive; they are carefully coordinated aspects of the same campaign. As other scholars have argued (O’Brien and Brown 2022; Szadziwski, Mostafanezhad, and Murton 2022), tourism is a technology of state territorialisation, a mode of social and spatial ordering, which is now being used to organise the Uyghur region and its peoples just as the tools of incarceration and surveillance were previously deployed. Uyghurs rendered docile by the threat of the camps have now become objects of the tourist gaze, performing a sanitised revisioning of their culture, history, and religion, and delivering state-sponsored scripts for mass consumption through the tourism industry.

The instrumentalisation of tourism is by no means unique to China, and it is a long-standing practice within China, in ‘minority’ regions and elsewhere. Tim Oakes (2006), for example, discusses the ways in which Li minority villagers in Hainan Island in the 1990s opened their homes and self-consciously displayed themselves to tourists, performing song and dance or staging cock fights according to models of ethnic culture promoted by urban theme parks. Oakes describes this phenomenon as part of a translocal imaginary in which villagers came to view themselves as objects or sites within the broader canvas of the Chinese nation (Oakes 2006, 167). A similar model is now being rolled out in the Uyghur region, where tourist groups are brought to the homes of village musicians, newly refurbished and labelled as a ‘Music Family Home’, where they are treated to song-and-dance performances of local cultural heritage, often highlighting regional forms of muqam, the Uyghur musical repertoire proclaimed by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2005.⁴ In Hainan Island, Oakes describes a process of self-commercialisation by villagers followed by co-option by larger tourism companies. In the Uyghur region, larger companies operating out of inner China typically control the tourism industry in

collaboration with local government officials (Dawut 2008; Salimjan 2021). In the context of the ongoing securitisation, a degree of coercion seems inevitable.

Uyghur Heritage in China

The starting point for China's rapid embrace of heritage in the 1990s can be traced to the ideological shifts of the late twentieth century, and the CCP's search for a new form of legitimacy (Svensson and Maags 2018, 14). But this 'heritage turn' was by no means a top-down imposition on an unwilling public. The nationalistic rhetoric and rediscovery of heritage sites and practices found deep resonance across Chinese society. The embrace of heritage has been variously attributed to a sense of a lack of values in society, large-scale displacements due to migration and urbanisation, growing inequalities in the wake of the economic reforms, nostalgia for an imagined past. These sensibilities have been harnessed by actors at all levels of government, and by numerous commercial players. As Kuah and Liu note (2017), China uses participation in the heritage domain to exert soft power on the national and international stage; county governments see heritage as economic capital especially in its potential to attract tourism; and local actors invest in heritage for their own social and cultural capital.

A key aspect of China's approach to heritage is its use as a tool of governance. As Svensson and Maags (2018) have argued, heritage management is a selective process that leads to hierarchies and exclusion. In China, heritage is used as a soft tool of governance to control and manage history, and to steer people's memories, sense of place, and identities in particular ways. Since the late 1990s, China has developed an extensive heritage management system including national and regional inventories of heritage sites and cultural practices. Europe-based ethnomusicologist Kai Tang has made a detailed study of these inventories. She argues that they are specifically designed to raise consciousness about the inseparability and historical continuity of China's shared national culture, citing the 2011 Intangible Cultural Heritage Law which specifies that the protection of the heritage should strengthen cultural identification with the Chinese nation and should facilitate national cohesion, interethnic solidarity, and social harmony (Tang 2021). This has particular implications for China's minority nationalities. We can see the way that this political project is mobilised in the Uyghur region through numerous examples where the history and meaning of items of cultural heritage are being radically reshaped and promoted as tourist experiences. Uyghurs are multiply dispossessed, in both economic and cultural terms, denied the right to profit and the right to interpret and represent their cultural traditions. One of the key sites of resignification or erasure is the sphere of Uyghur religious heritage, Islamic faith and practice.

The Pluralistic Unity of Kucha Mosque

The Friday Mosque of Kucha is one of the largest in the region, dating back to the fifteenth century. It has been linked to Khoja Muhammad Ishaq Wali, younger son of the noted Naqshbandi leader Ahmad Kasani. It was rebuilt in the 1920s in the Central Asian style, with a prayer hall containing 64 hexagonal pillars which could hold up to 3000 worshippers on festival days. Until 2017 it was open for worship during daily prayers five times a day. It included a minaret where the muezzin gave the call to prayer, and in its courtyard lie the remains of a judicial court which was active up to the 1950s (Fan 2015).

In early 2023, a Chinese-language tourist promotional video was shared on exile Uyghur social media networks (Ingram 2023). In the video, a single, bare-headed young woman climbs the steps of the historic mosque and enters the prayer hall. There she encounters a scantily clad female dancer modelled on the nearby Kizil cave murals, which are linked to the early Buddhist kingdom of Kucha, Qiuci in Chinese, and were inscribed in 2014 on the UNESCO World Heritage List as part of the Silk Roads Network. In the video, a voiceover describes this 'veiled beauty of Qiuci' as the meeting point of Chinese civilisation and the culture of the Western Regions, bringing together the

gentleness and elegance of China's central plains and the martial spirit of the Western regions. They are combined in 'Kucha Temple' (*kuche dasi*; translated in Ingram 2023) through centuries of 'pluralistic cultural integration' (*duoyuan wenhua ronghe*).

As a designated national-level heritage site, Kucha Mosque has not been bulldozed, unlike thousands of other mosques across the region (Ruser et al. 2020), but the right to regular worship has been curtailed, and its five centuries of Islamic history have been effectively erased in the re-imagining of the site as somehow linked to the ancient Buddhist kingdom of Qiuci. Ingram's translation of *kuche dasi* as 'temple' highlights the ambiguity of the Chinese term, and the possibility of reimagining this important Islamic centre as part of the region's ancient Buddhist heritage. Two things are striking about this promotional video. One, highlighted by Uyghur exile responses, is how offensive it was to Muslims to see the naked arms of the female dancer in a Muslim place of worship. The other was its adaptation of what has become an important government slogan: *duoyuan yiti* or 'pluralistic unity'. The appearance of this concept in a tourist video attests to the ways in which tourist initiatives and government policy converge.

The term 'pluralistic unity' was coined by the pre-eminent anthropologist Fei Xiaotong in 1988. Since then, it has provided the framework for successive revisioning of nationality policy in China (Wei 2023). Fei Xiaotong used the term to characterise a multi-ethnic modern China, but in more recent official usage the term has been used to suggest that all the diverse nationalities living within the current borders of the PRC have been mutually assimilating and interdependent over thousands of years, forming a 'pluralistic-unitary' (*duoyuan yiti*) Chinese nation (*zhonghua minzu*). Anthropologists Barnett and Seher (2023) argue that it is important to pay attention to the social life of such official formulations, looking beyond government statements to trace their effects on the ground. By tracing the emergence of this rhetoric in cultural, heritage and tourist initiatives in the Uyghur region, we can see how the ideology becomes embedded in and enlivened by new aesthetic formations and emotional relations which are harnessed by government and media to influence and direct its citizens' sense of themselves and their place within the Chinese nation.

The recent uptick in the use of the phrase 'pluralistic unity' in relation to the Uyghur region and its heritage can be traced to July 2022, when Xi Jinping embarked on an inspection tour of the Uyghur region. This was his first visit to the region since 2014 and the roll-out of the policies of securitisation, mass incarceration and cultural erasure of which he was arguably the principal architect (Ramzy and Buckley 2019). During his visit, Xi Jinping emphasised the need to utilise history and culture to tie the Uyghur region and its peoples more tightly to the Chinese nation:

Chinese civilization is broad, profound and has a long history. It is necessary to strengthen research into the history of *Zhonghua minzu gongtongti* 中华民族共同体 (the shared consciousness of the Chinese nation) as well as studies on the pattern of the *duoyuanyiti* 多元一体 of the Chinese nation, and to fully excavate and effectively use historical facts, archaeological objects and cultural relics of the exchanges between various ethnic groups in Xinjiang, and to make it clear that Xinjiang has been an inseparable part of our country and a multi-ethnic area since ancient times. All ethnic groups in Xinjiang are important members of the big family of the Chinese nation, connected by blood and sharing a common destiny. It is necessary to strengthen the protection and inheritance of [our] intangible cultural heritage and carry forward the excellent traditional culture of all ethnic groups. (Liu 2022)

Historian James Millward (2022) identifies in this speech a shift away from the long-standing opposition between Han majority and *minzu* (ethnic) minority towards the apparently more inclusive formulation of *Zhonghua minzu* (the Chinese nation). In this new formulation, the inseparable relationship between the Uyghur region and China's Central Plains is dated back to around the start of the common era, during the Han or even the Qin dynasty. Thus, the thousand years of Islamic civilisation, and the close cultural ties with the wider Islamic world that characterised the Uyghur region from the tenth to the twentieth centuries are rendered irrelevant.

Underlining the message of his speech, Xi's inspection tour included a staged performance of the Kyrgyz epic poem *Manas* (inscribed by China in 2009 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity), signalling the role that heritage was now intended to

play in promoting the ‘pluralistic unity’ version of the region’s history and culture. As we have already seen, this highly politicised role for heritage is enshrined in China’s laws. Kai Tang argues that:

The Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection campaign allows the state to more efficiently manage the historical narratives of individual ethnic groups and the construction of national memory about each group. The multilevel nomination, evaluation, and preservation procedure thoroughly filters out what the state wants a group to forget. (Tang 2021, 21)

Projects of rewriting the history of the Uyghur region, and the promotion of these reformulated histories through tourist experiences, are not new. Gardner Bovingdon (2001), for example, discusses the 1990s development of Pan Tuo City near Kashgar, a tourist site and ‘base for patriotic education’, newly built to commemorate the brief presence in the region of the Han dynasty General Ban Chao. Three things mark a step change in this ongoing project in recent years: firstly, the use of national and international heritage regimes to support it; secondly, the sophisticated and multi-faceted promotional campaigns which accompany its dissemination, and thirdly, the concerted efforts to erase alternative historical narratives and forms of Uyghur cultural heritage that do not fit the approved narratives.

Filtered out

Tourist groups entering the city of Kashgar in 2022 were greeted by young women wearing folkloric Uyghur costumes, dancing in front of the recently constructed ancient city wall. Along their route stood young men wearing the costumes of Qing Imperial Chinese soldiers, while a Uyghur *naghra-sunay* (drum and shawm) band played music from the top of the wall. This ahistorical assemblage serves to convey a sense of timeless Chinese rule over a city which served as the capital of the tenth-century Qarakhanid rulers, the home of the warring Khoja factions of the seventeenth century, and the Qoqandi general Yaqub Beg in the nineteenth century; until the mid-twentieth century a centre of Islamic learning, and home to powerful Sufi orders (Zarcone 2017). Drum and shawm bands like these certainly did welcome victorious armies and newly enthroned rulers into the Uyghur region’s cities, however this was not derived from Chinese tradition, but was part of the Muslim military tradition of *naqqarakhana* which stretched from the Ottoman empire to Central and South Asia (Poché 2001). The practice is documented by the late nineteenth-century Uyghur historian, Musa Sayrami:

The [Khoja’s armies] rode with great pomp and traveled the roads to Yarkand. When they were three stages from it, Yarkand’s nobles and commoners, its *Hażrats* and *Ishans* and *Dungan* imams, its low and high officials, all came out in groups to receive them with gifts. . . . With a great display of pomp and ceremony, [Khatib Khoja] was established upon the throne in Yarkand . . . The sound of royal pipes and trumpets, and of drums beating out the *shadiyana* rhythm, and the voices of the peoples who had come all around to celebrate rang out across the indigo dome. (Sayrami 2023, 119)

This military musical tradition is also deep rooted in embodied and oral practices of remembering Uyghur histories which are deeply rooted in Islamic culture. The spread of Islam into the Uyghur region started in the tenth century with the conversion of the rulers of the Turkic Qarakhanid dynasty and their conquest of neighbouring Buddhist kingdoms. 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. Revered in life as well as in death; the shrines of these historical leaders and saints became important sites of pilgrimage.

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, but their significance in terms of Uyghur history and identity is equivalent. In the Uyghur region, some the most important shrines were simple mud brick constructions, distinguished visually by the huge temporary structures made



Figure 1. Worshippers at the shrine of Imam Aptah, near Khotan. Courtesy of Rahile Dawut.

up of ‘spirit flags’ (*tugh alam*), which were brought by pilgrims and attached to the shrine or tied together into tall flag mountains (see [Figure 1](#)).

Shrine worship and pilgrimage are important aspects of religious practice across Central Asia, and they are central to Uyghur traditions of faith, sustained through early twentieth-century wars, communisation, and the Cultural Revolution. Since the 1980s, modernisation and urbanisation have distanced many Uyghurs from these practices, but 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 the jailed Uyghur ethnographer Rahile Dawuti (2011) and UK-based historian Rian Thum (2014) 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 re-treading of these routes and re-telling of these stories formed a collective and sacred history etched into the landscape.

Until its closure in 1997, tens of thousands of people gathered annually at the Ordam Padishah shrine, 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, the first month in the Islamic calendar. 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 spirit flags (*tugh soqash turush*). At festival time, groups of people processed from their villages across the desert to the shrine, holding spirit flags to place above the tomb, playing drums and shawms as they walked (Harris and Dawut 2002).

Between 2012 and 2014, Rahile Dawut, Professor of Folklore at Xinjiang University, and her students, collected interviews with these Uyghur pilgrims. Their accounts attest to the power of the shrine in local imaginaries, and its embodiment of histories antithetical to the narrative of pluralistic unity.

My mother used to make hundreds of flags before the Ordam festival. She organised a very good team of seven or eight dap [frame drum] players, three or four naghra [kettle drum] players and few good sunay [shawm] players. I remember once we had a team of twenty, and we all marched from Terim Village to the Ordam. It was magnificent. That music made our blood boil, our drummers’ hands were bleeding, my throat was dry, but we never wanted to stop.

... Ordam is different from other shrines. In this place a great battle was fought to the sound of the naghra drums ... we re-live the battle through this music.

... Shadiyana is the only piece that belongs to the Ordam, it is a sacred piece of music that we play to join the spirit. (Dawut and Kadir 2016)

This musical piece, Shadiyana, which is also mentioned in Sayrami's history, forms a direct and raucous sonic link between the military campaigns and leaders of the past, the transmission of Islam into the Uyghur region, and lived experiences of pilgrimage. These practices of pilgrimage and shrine worship, the scholars who documented them, and the shrines themselves have been comprehensively erased under the 'anti-religious extremism' campaigns. The Ordam Padishah shrine, along with other major pilgrimage sites in the region, was demolished between 2018 and 2020 (Thum 2020). These shrines were sites where Uyghur pilgrims underwent powerful embodied experiences of identity and history which situated them in a radically different historical tradition from that promoted by the Chinese state. Listening to the drum and shawm bands, the sung prayers of the ashiq, and the stories of the saint retold by the sheykh, Uyghur pilgrims inhabited histories in which they were central to the narrative. As exile Uyghur scholar Musapir has argued (2023), the ways in which they listened to and embodied these histories were antithetical to the aesthetics and sensibilities promoted by the state.

The shrines have been bulldozed; we can assume that many of the pilgrims have been subjected to re-education or imprisonment; and even the academics who documented the traditions have been sentenced to long terms in jail. Professor Rahile Dawut was detained in 2017, and in 2023 an official source confirmed that she was serving a twenty-year prison sentence on the charge of 'splittism' (Anonymous 2023). Dawut was one of many Uyghur intellectuals imprisoned in recent years for reasons relating to research and publications relating to Uyghur history and culture which had previously been regarded as legitimate. The purging of government officials and academics, typically labelled as 'two-faced people' who showed insufficient loyalty to the regime, is an important aspect of the recent campaigns in the Uyghur region. Prominent among them were the publishers and editors of Uyghur language textbooks who were given long prison sentences and suspended death sentences after the textbooks were retrospectively judged to be promoting understandings of history that did not adequately support the narrative of 'pluralistic unity'. Historian David Brophy has argued that the fate of these Uyghur intellectuals provides a window on to the precarious position of Uyghur historical narratives in contemporary Brophy (2021). Prior to 2017, Uyghurs enjoyed 'certain limited space in which to cautiously cultivate national pride'. Under Xi Jinping's renewed emphasis on the 'correct' use of history: that is, the view that the boundaries of the PRC represent a natural, historically justified state of national unity, the space for alternative readings of history is now as tightly circumscribed as the lived experience of the heritage that they documented.

The "Xinjiang dance" craze: colonialism, mimesis and desire

While Uyghur academics experienced the blunt end of Xi Jinping's directives, a rather different aspect of the same campaign was being rolled out across China, one that brought together Uyghur heritage and revisionist views of the Uyghur region's history into a new aesthetic formation which would become a nationwide craze. During Spring 2023, in town squares and parks across multiple Chinese cities and towns, thousands of Han Chinese enthusiasts were dancing to 'Xinjiang music' and attending 'Xinjiang dance' classes, while 'Xinjiang dance' was sparking huge interest online. How did this nationwide craze for the region's cultural heritage come about? What lay behind this extraordinary rehabilitation of the region's reputation in the national imagination, a region so recently tarred by images of violence and extremism? Just a few years earlier, in 2018, at a talk on the mass incarceration of Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples held at London's School of Economics, a Chinese student thundered at me, 'Don't you understand? I'm a Chinese from Xinjiang, and I'm

scared!’ And indeed, the images of seized weapons and accounts of foiled terrorist plots which filled Chinese media in the early stages of the campaign were blood-curdling. This new wave of harmonious dancing was a remarkable shift in emphasis in the national discourse.

Chinese media reports suggest that the Xinjiang dance craze was to a large degree orchestrated by government organs, and it formed part of a concerted effort to shift national perceptions, to kickstart the region’s economy, to counter international criticism, and to align with the centrally dictated vision of the region’s cultural heritage and history (Xiao 2023). In 2022, Xu Ruijun, head of the Xinjiang Department of Culture and Tourism, called for the region’s culture and tourism work to ‘firmly grasp the central theme of forging the shared consciousness of the Chinese nation (*zhonghua minzu gongtongti*)’.⁵ Cultural and tourism work in the region should be regarded as ‘an important political task to be persevered in for the long-term’, said Hu Heping, China’s Minister of Culture and Tourism, on an inspection tour of the region. His tour included watching the premiere of a music and dance spectacular titled ‘Lift up Your Hijab – Xinjiang Is a Good Place’.⁶

According to its director, Gasul Tursun, this musical spectacle combined elements of the region’s multi-ethnic intangible cultural heritage, including a recreation of the music and dance of the ancient Buddhist kingdom of Qiuci, the (Uyghur) Twelve Muqam, and the (Mongol) Sawurdeng dance style (Abibai 2023). Like the concept of ‘Xinjiang dance’, these diverse cultural elements and historical imaginings were incorporated, devoid of ethnic identifiers, into a regionally themed confection very much within the tradition of professional ‘minority’ song and dance in China. The production’s title incorporated two well-known Chinese language songs; one of them (*Lift up your hijab/xianqi nide gaitoulai*) by the twentieth-century song collector Wang Luobin, whose mildly salacious and exoticising lyrics are probably the most widely recognised signifiers of the Uyghur region for Chinese listeners (Harris 2005).

Chinese influencers joined the craze. In a choreographed display of multi-ethnic digital harmony, Wan Qian (a Han Chinese actress), Tong Liya (an actress and dancer of Sibe heritage), Jin Chen (an actress of Hui Muslim heritage), and Ayanga (a singer and actor of Mongolian heritage), released a social media video showing off their own Xinjiang dance moves and calling for a national tour of ‘Take off your Hijab’.⁷ As part of a national ‘Xinjiang is a Good Place’ promotion held in March 2023, Xinjiang dance events were organised in city squares in Guangzhou, Xiamen, Hangzhou, Nanjing, and Shanghai, attracting hundreds of people to join in each city, according to a Chinese media report (Abibai 2023). The same report claimed that the term ‘Xinjiang Dance’ had attracted over 1.6 billion views across social media networks. The autonomous region cultural centre launched online teaching of Xinjiang dance, and dispatched Xinjiang dance ambassadors to cities around China. Uyghur dancer Aniwar Aini reported that she visited Sanya, a city in Hainan Island, for three months every winter, and held a 15-day class which could train more than 4,000 people (Abibai 2023). Tourists arriving in the Uyghur region could experience ‘Xinjiang dance pools’ where smiling Uyghur locals apparently spontaneously invited their ‘Han friends’ to join them in informal group dance sessions. ‘Everyone looks so happy’, commented one Chinese vlogger visiting Yarkand, ‘You can see it in their face’.⁸

In her breathless account of the craze, Xinjiang journalist Abibai did not forget to reference the theme of ‘pluralistic unity’, noting that ‘Xinjiang dance is rooted in the fertile soil of China’s excellent traditional culture. Based on traditional dance, it has continuously grown new branches and reaped fruitful results’. Underpinning the use of this national promotional campaign as a tool to rebrand the region’s reputation and shift the nation’s emotional engagement with the place, she also noted that, ‘Xinjiang dance is like a key, opening the door to joy, allowing people to dance into Xinjiang slowly with brisk dance steps, fall into her arms, and fall in love with this land’ (Abibai 2023). The resonance between this account, notions of ‘aesthetic persuasion’, and the embodied experience of heritage, is easily apparent.

However manufactured, the craze was experienced as real, as evidenced by a slew of videos and traveller accounts of people across China enjoying themselves in town parks and squares by

performing ‘Xinjiang dance’, even dressing themselves in folkloric Xinjiang dance costumes. Observers familiar with international media reports from the Uyghur region in recent years were unsettled by the sight of so many Chinese people were dancing Xinjiang dances at a time when the region was emerging out of a brutal period of mass incarceration, and Uyghurs were still so unfree. ‘Doesn’t it feel strange to them? Can’t they see how fake those smiles are? Don’t they know what’s been going on?’ asked one of my students.

People in China had indeed been largely shielded from the more punitive aspects of the campaigns due to the selective Chinese media coverage and careful censorship of international news sources, but in fact the Xinjiang dance craze is the kind of phenomenon that should be familiar from other situations of colonial rule. Anthropologists have even coined a name for it. Renato Rosaldo writes of ‘imperialist nostalgia’, where majoritarian communities mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed (1989, 108). Rosaldo discusses nineteenth-century British tourists and their orientalist fantasies of Indian cultures under a period of British colonial rule characterised by extraction of resources and the violent suppression of popular uprisings. In nineteenth-century America the popular imagination glorified the indigenous peoples of America as ‘noble savages’ at a time when the enclosure of their ancestral lands was nearing completion. Imperialist nostalgia, says Rosaldo, uses a pose of innocent yearning both to capture people’s imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination. Such fantasies and yearnings are not specific to conditions of settler colonialism; they can be observed in contexts of internal marginalisation.

Other scholars have already noted the relevance of the writings of feminist theorist bell hooks (1992) to the Uyghur context (Anderson and Byler 2019; O’Brien and Brown 2022), drawing particularly on her 1992 concept of ‘eating the (hooks 1992)’. Hooks uses this notion to reflect the ways in which the desire for the Other, and fantasies of Otherness are exploited to uphold racial hierarchies and the political status quo in the US context, but such majoritarian fantasies and desires are also central to Han imaginaries of the Uyghur region. Hooks’ analytical frame points to the central role of gender in understanding the aesthetics of persuasion in this region.

Gendered, racialised hierarchies and Uyghur women’s affective labour

Let’s return to the title of the song and dance spectacular, ‘Take off your Hijab’. The title is drawn from a set of lyrics penned by the famous Chinese song writer Wang Luobin in the mid-twentieth century: ‘Take off your hijab, let me see your eyes; your eyelashes are long and fine, like moonbeams on the treetops . . .’ This popular song, alongside other enduring favourites like *Girl of Dabancheng* (‘Don’t marry anyone else, you have to marry me; bring along your dowry, and your little sister . . .’) have been staples of Chinese imaginings of the region for decades. Today, they are endlessly reproduced for Chinese tourists, often performed by Uyghur drum and shawm groups as tourists arrive at a new destination. These cheery songs perfectly evoke the colonial gaze and the sexualised fantasies of Muslim women which echo Western orientalist traditions but are in fact deep-rooted in Chinese visions of the ‘Western Regions’ (*xiyu*). Arguably, Chinese fascination with the region’s dance culture can be traced back to the Tang dynasty fashion for the Sogdian ‘barbarian whirling dance’ (*huxuanwu*; Hansen 2016).

Its modern incarnation certainly pre-dates the founding of the Peoples Republic of China. Wang Luobin set his exoticising Chinese lyrics, including ‘Take off your Hijab’, to melodies collected from Turki carters in Lanzhou during the 1930s, and they were performed at Lanzhou’s Anti Japan Theatre (*kangri juchang*) to popular acclaim (Harris 2005, 383). Another Xinjiang dance craze took Chinese media by storm in 1947, when the newly formed Xinjiang Song and Dance Troupe, featuring the star performer Qemberkhan, toured Beiping and Shanghai (Jacobs 2008). However, the decision to highlight the phrase ‘Take off your Hijab’ in 2023 has a particular resonance in the context of the recent campaigns which have entailed bans on the widespread custom of wearing the

hijab amongst Uyghur women, and in light of the long prison sentences awarded to so many religious Uyghur women for the ‘crime’ of wearing a hijab (Harris and Ayup 2024). Nothing could speak more clearly the demand for Uyghur women to make themselves fully available to the majoritarian gaze. Nothing, perhaps, except the campaign to promote ethnic intermarriage which seemed to exclusively feature Han men and Uyghur brides, or the ‘Becoming Family’ campaign which compelled Uyghur women to welcome Han officials into their homes (Human Rights Watch 2018).

Young Uyghur women in folkloric costumes are not only the principal form of advertising for the region’s tourist industry; the young women who perform Xinjiang dance for tourists make up a significant proportion of workers in the region’s tourism industry (see Figure 2). They perform in grand song-and-dance spectacles, and they also perform in more intimate settings: as after dinner entertainment at privately owned restaurants, or in the many encounters where tourist groups are invited to dance with performers in intimate contexts such as the Yarkand dance pool described above.

Gendered, sexualised encounters between ‘minority’ women and Han men have long been a staple of tourism in China’s southwest, and heavily implicated in regional development programmes (Schein 2000; Walsh 2005). In this context, Ana Hofman’s (2015) notion of ‘affective labour’ is useful for the way it impels us to think about economics and power, and the way that music and dance performances function as forms of labour, work which is intended to offer emotional experiences such as joy or desire. Whilst previous scholarship has emphasised the symbolic capital of these performances, it is important that we understand Uyghur dancers not only as disembodied signifiers but also as a marginalised and exploited group who shoulder much of the weight of government campaigns, capitalist development, and mimetic desire in the Uyghur region.

In the rich history of song and dance in the People’s Republic of China, many researchers have written about how ‘minority’ dancers perform belonging, especially through their smiles (Gladney 1994). We can trace the heavy promotion of this trope by national and



Figure 2. A Uyghur dancer rests in the shade while tourists purchase souvenirs near Turpan (Wack 2021).

regional governments into the sphere of tourism, where close-up encounters between tourists and local women have produced a special class of vulnerable and devalued workers. In southwest China, both Schein (2000) and Walsh (2005) have noted the economic pressures which impel women to provide emotional and sexual services to tourists. In the aftermath of the re-education campaigns, the smiles and affective labour performed Uyghur women are not only impelled by economic pressures, but are also underpinned by structural and physical violence. Even if the tourists have forgotten all about the internment camps, they are still very much part of the reality that these Uyghur women inhabit, even as they dance and smile.

Conclusion

As the barriers to conducting independent research in the Uyghur region are currently so high, it is hard to see beyond the overt processes of policy-driven identity construction through which the region is being remade. Will these state-sanctioned performances come to be experienced as the only possible mode of reality for Uyghurs? What other possibilities of expression, what alternative sensibilities or modes of apprehending the world can flourish in the tightly policed spaces of the Uyghur region? What is the impact of the policies on Uyghur lives? What opportunities exist for agency within these frameworks in terms of personal freedoms, economic rights, and identity formation? Digital ethnography provides clues, however fragmented and fleeting, not only to the official statements surrounding history and identity, culture and heritage, but also to the aesthetic practices which express them, and to the ways in which the whole assemblage seeps into lived experience and emotion.

Through these brief case studies, we can see how certain aspects of Uyghur culture and heritage are being actively erased, while other aspects are privileged and promoted in ways that reflect government-led narratives of cultural convergence and pluralistic unity (*duoyuan yiti*). These case studies highlight the relationships between tourism and heritage, colonial desire, gendered and racialised exploitation, and dancing. They show how tourism and government initiatives converge, so that majoritarian Han fantasies of the exotic Other are aligned with government campaigns. Across many spheres of this multifaceted programme, heritage is used to foster new forms of emotional engagement between Chinese citizens and the Uyghur region, promoting local culture for economic gain, and legitimising government efforts to control and remodel local communities. Uyghur culture is economically and politically exploited while Uyghurs have extremely limited agency in their interactions with government officials and tourist companies, essentially constrained by the ongoing threat of the camps to act out roles that have been thrust upon them. Xinjiang dance is a mimetic process. Uyghurs perform Chinese spectacles of themselves, and Han Chinese embody Uyghur performances of Chinese imaginaries of Uyghurs, while alternative expressions of identity, religious and cultural practices are criminalised. At a time of radical cultural remodelling, it is important to keep recalling Uyghur histories and imaginaries that hail different orientations and different publics as they are forcefully repressed in favour of the state-imposed national imaginary.

Notes

1. Öz erkimen kelgen tärbielenwşiler jäne lagerdegi ömir. *Azattyq Radiosi*. https://www.azattyq.org/a/world-china-camps/29695682.html?fbclid=IwAR04xii8XeVhgG82qEkHTfnRLWA_h1XOLEw68Z3Qu5sDqqIy_RBEHC2CgFA
2. Xinjiang: Market Profile. *HKTDC Research*, 25 August 2022. <https://research.hktdc.com/en/data-and-profiles/mcpc/provinces/xinjiang>. To place these enormous figures in context, the same source gives the figure of 529 million domestic visitors to Yunnan in 2020. <https://research.hktdc.com/en/data-and-profiles/mcpc/provinces/yunnan>

3. Xinjiang sees booming tourism in first four months. *Peoples Daily Online*, 3 June 2023. <http://en.people.cn/n3/2023/0603/c90000-20027280.html>
4. US-based academic, Mu Qian described a visit to a ‘Dolan Muqam Home Theatre’, in a 2023 talk given at Palacky University, Olomouc. After her release from detention, the eminent Uyghur singer Sanubar Tursun promoted the ‘Tursun Family Home’ as a heritage tourism destination via her WeChat channel.
5. New Successes in Culture and Tourism integration. *Renmin wang, Xinjiang xiangdao*. 4 April 2023. <https://web.archive.org/web/20230511155906/http://xj.people.com.cn/n2/2023/0204/c186332-40288615.html>
6. Opening Night of “Lift up your Hijab.” CCTV, 19 March 2023. <https://news.cctv.com/2023/03/19/VIDEdziUuaTFDnQxEBwqMWJX230319.shtml>
7. ‘Call for a nationwide tour of Lift up your Hijab’. *Transform Starfruit*, 19 April 2023. <https://youtu.be/JOkWdUyZsOE>
8. ‘UYGHUR Dance-Pool in Yarkant, Xinjiang – Real Uyghur life’. *Little Chinese Everywhere*, August 23. https://youtu.be/bzpVXJWzA_M?feature=shared

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