Religion, Repression, and Traditional Uyghur Culture in Southern Xinjiang: Kashgar and Khotan

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Abstract

Islam remains central to the identity of the Uyghurs of southern Xinjiang. This article focuses on the cities of Kashgar and Khotan in the early twenty-first century and, on the basis of fieldwork, examines aspects of religious practice and tensions between the Uyghurs and the Chinese state. In Kashgar the old Uyghur Town has been physically destroyed, historical religious monuments have been secularized but smaller mosques have active congregations. In the Khotan region, the annual Imam Asim shrine festival takes place openly and active worship continues in village mosques. In an increasingly violent region, tension will continue between the religious requirements of the Uyghurs and the Chinese state's insistence on associating all Islamic practice, particularly independent practice, with extremism and terrorism.

Keywords

Xinjiang – Uyghurs – Islam; Sufism – shrines – Kashgar – Khotan – Eastern Turkestan – Appak Khoja shrine – Imam Asim festival – Heytgah Mosque – separatism – political violence

Although the contemporary Chinese state, like its predecessors, has attempted to control the practice of Islam in Xinjiang and to minimize its impact on social and political life, for the Uyghurs who live in the region it remains a central part of their identity and their everyday lives. Chinese Communist Party (CCP) policy has not been consistent on the matter; it has varied from severe repression to limited toleration. In more liberal periods, religious practices that are important to Muslims such as prayers, visits to shrines, and festivals, take place

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openly. When these are repressed, Islam is practiced discreetly and even covertly, but this need for subterfuge generates resentment, increases tensions between the Uyghur community and the local agents of the Chinese state, and can even fuel violent confrontation.

This article examines the cases of Kashgar and Khotan in southern Xinjiang and the attitude of the contemporary Chinese state toward Islam and Uyghur culture. Kashgar and Khotan are the most important urban centers in the south of Xinjiang. They lie 325 miles (520 kilometers) apart on the portion of the old Silk Road that runs along the edge of the Taklamakan Desert. Historically they have been important, and at times rival, centers of both Uyghur culture and the Central Asian forms of Islam that took root in this region from the eleventh century onward. They remain important to Uyghurs today despite— and because of—the region's commercial and industrial development and predominantly Han Chinese administration. Observations of current living conditions in these two towns and the surrounding rural areas, particularly the acceptable level of religious activity, permit some tentative conclusions about the restrictions under which Uyghurs are obliged to operate and to what extent their history, including the often clandestine history of local Islamic organizations, continues to play a role in the politics of the region.[1]

Xinjiang's Long-Standing Tensions Over Uyghur Culture

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, on China's northwest frontier, shares borders with the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. It also has a short, relatively inaccessible, border with Afghanistan, and it is close to Pakistan. It is a strategically significant region of the People's Republic of China and, because the Uyghur community has a long-standing claim to its own independent state, it is also a highly sensitive area. The Uyghurs, after whom the region is named, were once the majority population of Xinjiang but now comprise less than 50% of the total: they are citizens of China but they are not ethnically Chinese. Rather, they are related to the Turkic peoples of Central Asia and, more distantly, to the Turks of Turkey; their language is part of the

1 In addition to the documentary sources cited, this article is based on observations and inter- views in Urumqi, Kashgar, Yarkand, Khotan, and other towns and villages of southern Xinjiang in the spring and summer of 2010 as part of a long-term research project on the modern his- tory of Xinjiang and contemporary political and social developments. Observations and material gathered during previous visits to Xinjiang, including the towns of Kashgar, Ghulja, and Turpan as well as many rural areas during the 1990s, have also been used.

Turkic family and is close to Uzbek. They are also Muslims with a tradition of cultural and social independence, but their political system has been subordinated to successive Chinese governments since the eighteenth century: Xinjiang was formally incorporated into China as a province in 1884.

Many Uyghurs regard the current Chinese control of Xinjiang as an illegal occupation, and the most politically aware reject the name Xinjiang, which means "New Dominion" in Chinese, preferring to call it *Sharqi Turkistan* (Eastern Turkestan), although in practice the name Xinjiang (Shinjang) is used in everyday conversation by people of all backgrounds in the region. The conflict in Xinjiang continued after the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. In 1954 resistance to CCP rule was organized by Uyghur members of Muslim Sufi orders in the Khotan region. A prison camp, a farm run by the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps and local government offices were attacked by armed groups but the attempted insurrection was put down by troops and local police. Serious conflict erupted again in Xinjiang during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), but that was also short-lived. There was a resurgence of conflict in the 1980s, but the current level of violence dates from the 1990s when the Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union gained their independence and China advanced a new development policy for the region.

Since the 1980s much of the conflict has been in the form of demonstrations against government policies on, for example, religious observance, the implementation of the "one child" policy as it affected the Muslim Uyghurs and, more recently, against bans on outward symbols of religious observance such as veils or beards. Such demonstrations have been ruthlessly repressed by the Chinese state. Groups that actively promote independence have used these local grievances to raise Uyghur national and religious consciousness. Thousands of Uyghurs have been detained in police and military raids to find "separatist" sympathizers, some briefly but many for long periods of time. Violent confrontations have arisen when relatives have attempted to release those held in police stations and the Chinese authorities characterize these confrontations as part of a terrorist insurgency.

Southern Xinjiang shares much of the history, culture, and problems of the wider Xinjiang region, but because of its distinctive history, its greater distance from the centers of power in northern Xinjiang, greater rural poverty, and the higher proportion of Uyghurs in the population, it is useful to treat it as a separate entity.2 When serious disturbances and street fighting led to at least 200

2 The distinctive history of southern Xinjiang and the impact of the People's Liberation Army after its occupation in 1949 are discussed in Michael Dillon *Xinjiang and the Expansion of Chinese Communist Power: Kashgar in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 2014).

deaths in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, in July 2009,3 Kashgar remained relatively quiet. Some Uyghurs gathered outside the main mosque in Heytgah Square4 to voice their anger at the treatment of Uyghur workers in Shaoguan in Guangdong province—mistreatment that had triggered the Urumqi unrest. The state media chose to present this response as a separatist demonstration. The authorities had prior knowledge of the protest; the high modern buildings con- structed on the south side of Heytgah Square since 1992 are equipped with surveillance cameras. The police moved in to disperse the demonstrators and were joined by mobs of Han Chinese civilians who were armed with batons (allegedly supplied by the police). There was virtually no foreign media presence and few tourists, so there is little first-hand information about the demonstrations.5

Most accounts of religious activity in contemporary Xinjiang concentrate on the restrictions on worship and mosque attendance set out in orders issued by the local government and local branches of the state Religious Affairs Bureau. These restrict attendance at prayers and other mosque activities to those over the age of eighteen and specifically prohibit CCP members and government officials from taking part in prayers or other acts of worship.6 Evidence from Kashgar and other parts of Xinjiang, based on fieldwork carried out in the spring of 2010, suggests that it is unwise to assume that these regulations have had the permanent effect of curbing religious activity. A more refined and differentiated analysis is necessary to take into account the variations in practice between the north and south of Xinjiang, as well as between urban and rural areas and at different times. Religious activities continue outside the major urban centers of Kashgar and Khotan, but also within those cities, subject to a number of restrictions which have been tightened in the light of subsequent violent incidents.

Kashgar and the Destruction of the Old Town

Kashgar (Kashi 喀什 is the name commonly used by Han Chinese) is home to the celebrated Heytgah (Id Gah) Mosque and the Appaq Khoja *mazar* (shrine),

3 For the protests in Urumqi, see, *inter alia*, James A. Millward, "Does the 2009 Urumqi Violence Mark a Turning Point?" *Central Asian Survey*, 28, no. 4 (December 2009): 347–360.

4 Also commonly written in English as 'Id Gah', which is a combination of Arabic and Persian terms and means 'the place of festivals',

5 For eyewitness accounts of the Kashgar protests of July 2009, I am indebted to personal communications from JX in Kashgar and Angelos Rallis in Athens.

6 A selection of these regulations, which are rather more complex than often usually reported can be found in the appendices to Wang Wenheng 王文衡(ed.) *Xinjiang zongjiao wenti yan-jiu* 新疆宗教问题研究[*Religious Issues in Xinjiang*] (Urumqi: Xinjiang People's Press, 1995), 158–193.

both of which were traditional centers of Islamic authority.7 The government has sought to neutralize these sites by turning them into tourist attractions, but this has not been entirely successful. Local residents still use the Heytgah Mosque for prayers on a daily basis, and tourists and obvious non-Muslims are turned away at prayer times, but when the *mäzin* (muezzin) calls the faithful to prayer on normal working days, only a few men respond at what is the most important mosque in the city. Government activity targeting elite Sufi organizations associated with the Appaq Khoja *mazar* has reduced the religious significance of its tombs but not their importance in the minds of local adherents. Overt religious activity persists in Kashgar, but it is low-key and centered on the mosques in the poorer neighborhoods; some of these are disappearing as a result of the ongoing government urban renewal program. Although a number have been replaced, it is not clear whether this will be on a one-for-one basis. Nevertheless, there are still many active smaller mosques and attendance at prayers on normal days appears to be high, in contrast to the Heytgah mosque, and especially on Fridays.

Military and Police Patrols

Kashgar has all the characteristics of a city under occupation. On one level, daily life continues almost as normal, even in the devastated remains of the Old Town, largely demolished between about 2006 and 2010 in what was officially a slum clearance project, but which the Uyghurs have, with considerable justification, interpreted as an attack on their communities, their religion, and their culture.

There is very little overt resistance, largely because of the heavy, very visible presence of the military and People's Armed Police (pap, *wujing*) in the city. The pap units are based in the center of Kashgar, close to the government and party headquarters buildings and in the shadow of an enormous, anachronistic statue of Mao Zedong that overlooks People's Square. If the Old Town in the north of the city is an almost exclusively Uyghur neighborhood, the center of the city is increasingly a Han area in terms of design and planning, even though many of the shops, hotels, and offices are staffed by Uyghurs.

Regular, deliberate patrols of the city are carried out by two covered military trucks containing pap members dressed in full riot gear, wearing helmets with visors, armed with light machine guns, and holding shields in front of them as they stand behind the tailgates of the trucks. The trucks crawl along at an almost walking pace; some days a military ambulance follows behind. The

7 The name of Xinjiang's largest mosque has appeared in several different English spellings. It appears to originate in the Arabic-Persian compound *Id Gah*, "festival place." In Uyghur it is written in a spelling that can be transliterated as Heytgah, and this form is used here. *Mazar* can be translated as either "shrine" or "tomb."

patrols around People's Square are intended to reassure the Han Chinese population who are concentrated in that area.

There are also armed foot patrols around the Uyghur old town in the evenings; comprised of 10–12 young pap troops on foot, helmeted, carrying riot shields, and fully armed with automatic weapons. Uyghurs greet these expressions of Chinese dominance with studied indifference, but they create an intimidating and chilling atmosphere.8

Appaq Khoja Shrine

The Appaq Khoja shrine complex is 5 kilometers to the northeast of the Kashgar city center in an attractive tree-lined estate just off the main road. It was once a separate village called Haohan (浩罕) in Chinese and Ayziret in Uyghur; the road from the center of Kashgar out to the northeast is still called Ayziret Road. The Appaq Khoja shrine is the largest and probably the best- preserved tomb in Xinjiang, and it is an impressive monument from both an architectural and religious point of view.

The tomb, which is protected by the Chinese state as a major historic and cultural relic, was built to commemorate Appaq Khoja, who was the temporal ruler of Kashgar and the spiritual leader of the White Mountain Khoja sect of what would later become known as Naqshbandi Sufism in the second half of the seventeenth century. When Kashgar was controlled by the Muslim insurgent forces of Yakub Beg during the 1860s and 1870s, the shrine was enlarged and became a symbol of non-Chinese and Islamic authority in the city.9

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8 The long-standing active and passive resistance by Uyghurs to their Han masters is shown clearly in Gardner Bovingdon, "The Not-So-Silent Majority: Uyghur Resistance to Han Rule in Xinjiang," *Modern China*, 28, no. 1 (January 2002): 39–78.

9 Reyila Dawuti 热依拉．达吾提 [Rehilä Dawut], *Weiwuerzu mazha wenhua yanjiu* 维吾尔族麻扎文化研究 [Uyghur Mazar Culture] (Urumqi: Xinjiang University Press, 2001), 162. The detailed history of the shrine and the elite Sufi orders associated with it can be found in Alexander Papas, *Soufisme et Politique entre Chine, Tibet, et Turkestan* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 2005); Thierry Zarcone, "Quand le saint légitime le politique: le mausolée de Afaq Khwaja à Kashgar," *Central Asian Survey*, 18, no. 2 (1999): 225–241; and "Sufi Lineages and Saint Veneration in Twentieth- Century East Turkestan and Xinjiang," in Hasan Celal Guzel et al. (eds), *The Turks* (Istanbul: Yeni Turkiye, 2003), 534–541; *Xinjiang lishi jiaocai bianxie zu* 新疆历史教材编写组 Xinjiang lishi jiaocai bianxiezu (Compilation group for teaching materials on Xinjiang history ed.), 新疆地方史 [Local History of Xinjiang] (Urumqi: Xinjiang University Press, 1993); James A. Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang* (London: Hurst, 2007), 83–88 and passim. For the leg- end and reality of the life of Iparhan/Xiang Fei, see James A. Millward, "A Uyghur Muslim in Qianlong's Court: The Meaning of the Fragant Concubine," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 53, no. 2 (1994): 427–458; Edmund Waite, "From Holy Man to National Villain: Popular Historical Narratives about Apaq Khoja amongst Uyghurs in Contemporary Xinjiang," *Inner Asia*, 8, no. 1 (2006): 5–28.

The Chinese state regards the continuing veneration of the descendants of Appaq Khoja by the Naqshbandi Sufi orders as a potential threat to its control of Kashgar. A veil has been drawn over this aspect of the shrine's past, an effort assisted by the sentimental legend of the Uyghur "fragrant concubine" of the Qianlong emperor, Iparhan, after whom the street leading from the main road to the *mazar* is named—in Chinese, not Uyghur.

In May 2010 on almost every blank wall of buildings close to the shrine, there were posters in Uyghur exhorting people to remember the need for national unity and warning against nationalist and separatist activity. Similar posters could be seen in other parts of the city, but there was a much greater concentration in the area around the Appaq Khoja shrine. Unlike those in other parts of the city, where such posters had been defaced or damaged, these were pristine.

Although the area is important because it attracts visitors to the Appaq Khoja tomb complex, informed sources maintain that it is a particular target of anti-separatist propaganda by local Communist Party representatives because of the public cemetery adjacent to the tomb. Local Uyghurs pay their respects at the graves of their relatives on a regular basis, usually on Thursday mornings, and during the festivals of Ramadan and Korban many more travel to the cemetery from further afield. The cemetery is also reputedly the site of the grave of Yakub Beg, who remains one of the key symbols of Uyghur independence. However, there is some confusion about the precise whereabouts of his grave or whether it is really in the Appaq Khoja cemetery at all.10

Destruction of the Old Town

The most traditional Uyghur neighborhood in Kashgar, known generally as the Old Town, is in the north of the city. Some maps use the term Old Town only for the area to the east of Jiefang beilu (解放北路, Liberation Road North), which runs through the city from north to south, but this would exclude the area around the Heytgah Mosque, the largest and, in the eyes of many Uyghurs, the most important mosque in Xinjiang. Local people generally take a broader view of the Old Town boundaries and include the whole of the northern part of the city from Seman Road, close to the old Russian consulate, down to the mosque and then across Jiefang beilu to the east.11

10 Papas, *Soufisme et Politique entre Chine, Tibet et Turkestan*, 228. I am grateful to a scholar, formerly resident in Kashgar and who prefers to remain anonymous, for information.

11 Although they are outside the main part of the Old Town, the traditional Uyghur areas also include the back streets close to the Dongmen Bazaar (Sunday Bazaar), where there had been no demolition by the summer of 2010. However, the Uyghur courtyards in the north- east of the city close to the Appaq Khoja shrine, although also traditional, are a different type of community.

There is a degree of continuity in the style of construction, type of housing and shops, and nature of the communities that justifies this broader definition of the Old Town. It is an integrated and close-knit community that has evolved over many centuries, rather than a modern planned urban area in the Chinese style. This distinctive architecture and atmosphere is at the root of the dispute about its fate. The most important public expression of the community is the array of shop fronts, and these are of vital significance as the whole area depends on commerce and handicraft production for its livelihood. Local industries include wood, tin, and copper working and other small manufacturing businesses such as tailoring, hat making, and, to a lesser extent, carpet manufacture and restoration. Commerce and crafts have enabled many Uyghurs to earn their living with- out having to work in government-run organizations, and many are proud of that fact.12 Teahouses, cafes, restaurants, bakers selling traditional *naan* breads and halal butchers are located at regular intervals along the streets. Merchants and their extended families crowd into apartments behind and above the shops. Children attend nearby primary schools, and families the local mosques.

The local government took the view that many of these living quarters were filthy and potentially dangerous slums that needed to be cleared. But as a whole, these buildings and institutions cater to virtually every need of the local Uyghur community. This is their strength, but it also makes them vulnerable: their self-sufficiency and self-reliance enable the Uyghurs to limit the contact that they have with the Han-dominated local government and afford them a degree of de facto autonomy which is viewed as problematic by the authorities.

The demolition of the Uyghur Old Town between 2006 and 2010 was not a unique event. Nor was it the only major development in urban construction and redevelopment that has taken place in Kashgar in recent decades, although it is the most controversial and damaging in terms of the relationship between the Uyghurs and the local government. Most recent development in Kashgar has taken place on the outskirts of the city, which has its fair share of offices, factories, hotels, and other modern buildings. The area around People's Square in the central and southern part of the city is almost entirely modern. It has a public park, hotels, shops, and administrative buildings that are indistinguishable from similar constructions elsewhere in China. Until about 2006, most of the Old Town had remained untouched although buildings on the periphery, such as the Seman and Chinibagh Hotels, had been modernized.13

12 Author's interviews in Kashgar, September 1992 and May 2010.

13 These were, respectively, the sites of the Russian and British Consulates from the late nineteenth century until 1949.

In 1992 the authorities in Kashgar produced a 120-page illustrated book in Chinese, Uyghur, Russian, and English to celebrate 40 years of urban development. The book was published under the name of the deputy mayor of the city, Kang Yuanzhang. In his preface, Kang extolled the:

> zigzag streets and unique layout of the city. Its architecture inherited the tradition of ancient western area [sic] mixed with that of Han Dynasty and Tang Dynasty in Central China, yet it has its own characteristics. The local architecture of Kashi City can without any exaggeration be considered a gem in Chinese treasure-house.

Maps of the city printed in the book, including one showing development projects scheduled to take place from 1983 through 2000, do not refer to the demolition of the Old Town. Indeed, references in the book to the "Grand Plan for City Construction" are couched in terms of protecting the ancient city, particularly its places of historic interest and scenic beauty, with an eye toward the tourist trade. Photographs of traditional Uyghur housing on Kumuderwaza, Ustangboy, and Ordashiki Roads are included to illustrate this heritage. The houses on Ustangboy, in particular, are generally regarded by architectural historians as fine examples of classic Uyghur architecture and interior design.

These images are outnumbered, as might be expected from a Chinese administration, by photographs of modern industrial and commercial buildings. However, at that time the city master plan apparently made provision for "many modern buildings yet with the taste of the Uyghur nationality, and conspicuous features, unique and beautifully shaped, with their own characteristics." The book contains far more illustration than text, and its approach is one of propaganda rather than analysis, but the implication is that as far as the city government and planning authorities were concerned, development would proceed with due regard for local Uyghur cultural sensitivities.14 That was not to be.

The idea that it was necessary and desirable to demolish the Old Town of Kashgar did not begin to take hold until the early part of the twenty-first century and it is not clear precisely when the demolition work began. The real reasons for embarking on the wholesale destruction of the traditional Old Town were not publicly articulated, although local people complain of fortunes being

14 Kang Yuanzhang (ed.), *Jinri Kashi: Kashi shi chengshi jianshe sishi nian* 喀什市城市建设四十年 [*Forty Years of Urban construction in Kashgar City, 1952–1992*], [English title: *Urban Construction in Kashi*] (Hong Kong: New Century, 1992), 9, 5–6, 29–30, 86; *Xinjiang Weiwuer jianzhu zhuangshi* 新疆维吾尔建筑装饰 [Decoration of Xinjiang's Uyghur Buildings] (Urumqi: Xinjiang People's Publishing House, 1985), 28–31.

made by the local élite from building projects. Official slogans on posters and banners refer to the replacement of old and unhygienic houses—a slum clearance program—but local Uyghurs claim that they were told that their homes were being demolished because they were at risk of collapse in the event of an earthquake. The hygiene argument is understandable on one level. Drainage was poor, houses were crowded together, and the standard of hygiene maintained by some of the shops and street food stalls would not satisfy the more fastidious officials. However, some of the houses slated for demolition were examples of classic Uyghur architecture, and in other countries they would probably have been preserved as an important part of the cultural heritage. In terms of earthquake proofing, southern Xinjiang is indeed subject to earth- quakes—several have struck in the area in the past decade, notably a strong quake in the Maralbashi (Bachu) region in February 2003 that cost at least 250 lives. There have been many others of varying magnitude in the Pamir region.

Local opinion is not swayed by either of these arguments, however, and the prevailing view is that they were excuses to enable the authorities to eliminate a concentration of Uyghurs whose retention of their traditional language, culture, and religious practices encourages, or at least permits, the persistence of an independent Uyghur separatist tradition. The Old Town was largely self-contained, and, because housing, businesses, schools, and mosques were tightly integrated, Han Chinese have never lived and worked there in any significant numbers. As a result, the authorities found it extremely difficult to exert control and influence over the community and have long regarded its existence as a problem and a threat to their authority.15 There was no genuine consultation with local people: those who protested to the authorities complained that they were visited by police, bullied, and intimidated into retracting their complaints, with threats that they would lose their jobs if they did not comply.16

Wang Lixiong, the writer, explorer, and democracy activist best known for his critical writings on Tibet, took one of his many extended trips across Xinjiang in 2006 and arrived in Kashgar in time to record his impressions of the Old Town at what he considered to be on the brink of demolition (*zheng zai bei chai de Kashi laocheng* 正在被拆的喀什老城). His lyrical description of intact historic houses is supported by a wide-angle photo- graph of the roofs of the Old Town seen from his hotel window and an image of local people watching the flattening of one of the houses being

15 Author's interview, former Kashgar resident, January 2011. There are some Han Chinese living and working in the area surrounding the Old City where some of the small shops are owned by Han people.

16 Author's interviews, Kashgar, May 2010.

razed.17 Demolition has continued across the whole of the Old Town area and, by the summer of 2010, the landscape to the east of Jiefang Beilu had been so flattened that in places it was not possible even to determine precisely the original outline of the streets. Reports since 2010 suggest that demolition is almost complete and rebuilding is well advanced although no comprehensive accounts of the progress are available to date. To the west, around Norbish Street, which stretches from the Chinibagh Hotel down to the Heytgah Mosque, the demolition was patchy in 2010: demolished houses were being replaced on an individual basis although there was still rubble from other demolished houses surrounding them. Here the original street outline was essentially maintained, although the character of both the replacement houses and the neighborhood had changed profoundly. Many of the replacement buildings are designed and constructed in a style that is reminiscent of traditional Uyghur buildings to some extent, but their "faux Uyghur" appearance is not popular with local people.

The Heytgah Mosque has not suffered any major damage, and some of the smaller buildings inside the complex have actually been restored as part of a preservation program and in the anticipation of vastly increased tourism. However, the atmosphere around the mosque has changed completely since the early 1990s with the construction of high-rise shops and offices to the south, and the expansion of Heytgah Square to create a much larger open space. In the 1990s there was already a lively trade in carpets, musical instruments, and other local products in central Kashgar, but there were few shops or stalls offering souvenirs for tourists. Since then the number of shops aimed at an anticipated tourist bonanza has increased considerably, particularly in the streets to either side of the Heytgah Mosque. The products on sale are varied, but generally of poor quality and, in the long term, this may have a detrimental effect on the quality and the reputation of traditional Uyghur crafts, although there are still stalls that provide for the daily needs of local Uyghurs.

Khotan and the May 2010 Imam Asim Mazar Festival

Khotan (Hetian 和田), which lies to the east of Kashgar, is a large town at a strategic point on the main east-west trade route that runs south of the

17 Wang Lixiong, *Wode Xiyu, nide Dongtu* 我的西域，你的东土 [My Western Regions, Your Eastern (Turkestan) Lands] (Taipei: Locus, 2007), 127–131. There may have been some demolition before this. Andrew Chung, reporting for the *Toronto Star* and quoted in the Uyghur online newsletter *Spark*, speaks of "hundreds of traditional buildings" having been demolished as early as spring 2004.

Taklamakan Desert. Now designated National Route 315, it was part of the Southern Silk Route, while the Northern Silk Route followed the northern limits of the Taklamakan. Khotan lies north of this great desert and south of the Kunlun mountain range (*Kunlunshan* 昆仑山), which separates southern Xinjiang from Tibet.18 Khotan is also the southern terminus of the Second Desert Highway that is being constructed across the Taklamakan to Alar (Alaler 阿拉尔), a town built by the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (*bingtuan* 兵团). The First Desert Highway, completed in 1995, lies further to the east and links Minfeng (民丰) with Luntan (轮台). Much of Khotan has the appearance of a thoroughly modern Chinese town, although the villages that surround it remain traditional in appearance and in lifestyle. The economy of the region was traditionally based on the pasturing of sheep, forestry, fruit and nut growing, and small handicraft operations, and these are still important: the most renowned local products were—and still are—silk, jade, and carpets.19

The inhabitants of the Khotan region are almost entirely Uyghurs, although there is a small population of Han Chinese and other ethnic minorities, notably in the town itself and in the *bingtuan* farms along the N315 east-west high- way, which are ethnically mixed but effectively islands of Han culture.20 There is a permanent and visible Chinese military presence: units of the People's Armed Police make their presence felt in the town by carrying out drill exercises and demonstrating their martial arts

There is little overt religious activity in the town but worship at mosques and *mazars* (shrines) in the surrounding rural areas continues. An interesting example is the annual Imam Asim *mazar* festival, which takes place inside the Taklamakan Desert to the north of Khotan. On Thursday, May 20, 2010, thou- sands of Uyghur Muslims from the towns and villages of southern Xinjiang participated in this festival, the largest for many years, probably because of what proved to be a temporary relaxation of local government restrictions onreligious activity.

Some sources close to the local government dismiss the festival as merely an example of local tourism, but observations made by the author suggest that it

18 Personal observation, spring 2010 and *Zhongguo fensheng gonglu congshu: Xinjiang Weiwuer Zizhiqu* 中国分省公路丛书：新疆维吾尔自治区 [Road Atlas of China: Xinjiang] (Beijing: Xingqiu ditu chubanshe, 2010), 18*ff*. Despite the modern designation as a major national route, the condition of the road is mixed, to say the least. Miles of clear road give way suddenly to patches of rubble, and parts are still under construction and impassable in the dark even to experienced local drivers.

19 Liu Yusheng 刘宇生 (ed.), *Xinjiang Gailan* 新疆概览 [*Xinjiang: an outline*] (Urumqi: Xinjiang sheying yishu chubanshe 新疆摄影出版社, 1988), 91–198.

20 Visit to *bingtuan* farm, May 19–20, 2010.

remains a major religious occasion. In villages alongside the road between Khotan and Kashgar, people attending the mosques and social activities after Friday prayers were relaxed and there was no obvious police presence. However, the situation in the Khotan region became much more volatile following violent demonstrations and clashes between local Uyghurs and security forces between 2011 and 2014. Reports emerged of police raids on the homes of Uyghur families, numerous detentions, the suppression of "illegal" mosques and *madrasas*, and the imposition of heavy prison sentences for the possession and distribution of "illegal religious material."21

Although mosques are the best known religious institution in Xinjiang, as in the rest of Islam, the parallel religious system based mainly on the tombs of *shaykhs* (sometimes translated as "saints") who are recognized as the founders of Sufi orders and suborders is particularly influential in Xinjiang Islam. The mosques and *mazars* are not entirely separate from each other, and adherents of Sufi orders who worship at a *mazar* usually also attend their local mosques for regular *namaz* prayers. The *mazars* are generally located outside the towns or villages, often in remote settings. In the north of Xinjiang *mazars* are typically stone or clay structures with a dome on the top: in the desert and semi- desert regions of southern Xinjiang, where most *mazar* activity is concentrated, they are wooden and often in the sand dunes, including the *mazars* at the shrine of the Imam Asim. Attendance at the *mazars* fulfills spiritual needs that are not provided for by the formal prayers and sermons at regular mosques. As Rehilä Dawut succinctly puts it, "The main reason for worshipping at *mazars* is to take part in the prayers and other activities in order to obtain the blessing and the help of the shrine devotees."22 *Mazar* worship is particularly popular with women who are prevented by religious and cultural conventions from participating fully in worship in the mosques.

There is almost no publicly available documentary evidence of the history of the Imam Asim *mazar* or of the *shaykhs* whose lives and deaths are commemorated there.23 Local traditions trace its origins back to victorious Muslims

21 *Radio Free Asia* (June 20, 2012); *South China Morning Post* (June 20, 2012).

22 Dawuti, *Weiwuerzu mazha wenhua yanjiu*. This short but useful book, in Chinese by a Uyghur scholar, is based on both documentary sources and fieldwork on the *mazars* of Xinjiang. It does, however, adopt a Han Chinese perspective on certain matters related to religion and Uyghur culture.

23 It can be assumed that the *shaykhs*, the shrine authorities, preserve documentation and other historic tokens of their spiritual lineage, but these are not made public. They are essential for the maintenance of the spiritual authority of the shrine and its *shaykhs* and the secrecy that surrounds them adds to this authority.

from western and central Asia who died in the battles with the Buddhist kingdom of Yudian in the eleventh century.24 It is a desert shrine situated in the northern part of Jiya Township (Jiya xiang 吉亚乡) in Lop County (Luopu xian 洛浦县), 9.5 kilometers from the town of Lop. There are two main tombs, and, according to local traditions, they are the burial places of Imam Asim (阿斯木) himself and Imam Ashim (Aximu 阿西木), his younger brother. The graves are surrounded and protected by wooden fencing, which marks the boundary of the *mazars* and prevents pilgrims from approaching any closer. Outside the fencing are circular walls constructed with sun-baked earth. The outside of the burial chamber is covered with cloth banners and branches and twigs from which are hung oxtails and other offerings. To the southeast of the *mazar* lies the mosque, which is sizeable and is flanked by two huts for night watchmen. There also is a well some 50 meters northwest of the tombs. The annual festival takes place in April or May, always on a Thursday, and attracts Muslims from adistance of hundreds of kilometers.

> The numbers of people attending are of the order of 20–30,000 and it is an occasion for worship, social interaction, music and dancing on an enormous scale. There are wrestlers, music and singing, a country fair or market, crowds of people and a lively and exciting atmosphere.25

Rehilä Dawut has addressed the argument that local authorities in Xinjiang have allowed the revival of *mazar* pilgrimages and festivals primarily because they are a form of tourism and contribute to the economic growth of the region.26 Observations by the present author, while attending the Imam Asim *mazar* festival, indicate strongly that to view such festivals as simply serving commerce or tourism is erroneous and underplays the religious aspect of *mazar* attendance. The long-standing official discourse in China considers religious activities to be outdated and irrelevant and, especially in Xinjiang, a potential threat to stability and order. Like most religious festivals, the Imam Asim *mazar*

24 Xinjiang lishi jiaocai bianxie zu 新疆历史教材编写组, *Xinjiang difang shi* 新疆地方史 [*Local History of Xinjiang*] (Urumqi: Xinjiang University Press, 1993),113–115. 《宋史》于 dian 传.

25 Dawuti, *Weiwuerzu mazha wenhua yanjiu*, p. 156. Personal observations at the festival in 2010 support this evidence. Thursday is the traditional day of the week for Uyghurs to visit shrines, and a small bazaar near the car park provides for their needs on a weekly basis.

26 Rehilä Dawut, "Shrine Pilgrimage and Sustainable Tourism among the Uyghurs: Central Asian Ritual Traditions in the Context of China's Development Policies," in Ildiko Beller Hann et al. (eds), *Situating the Uyghurs Between China and Central Asia* (Aldershot, uk: Ashgate, 2007), 149–163.

festival is a complex phenomenon: it is a social occasion and an opportunity for family and friends to meet; it has commercial aspects, notably in the catering and the sale of both sacred and secular merchandise; but at its core there is a religious impulse without which the festival would not take place.27

For the vast majority of the pilgrims, the visit begins at a large car park in a wooded area just off the main road from the city of Khotan. Most arrive by bus or car, but many, especially those living closest, travel by horse-drawn or motorized carts. From the car park it is a short walk to the first section of the festival area, which is reached by crossing a low fence into a collection of tents and stalls that provide refreshments for the pilgrims before they commence the long walk in the oppressive heat into the desert where the *mazars* and the mosque are situated. These tents and stalls sell everything from snacks, tea, and cold sherbet drinks up to full-scale meals including the traditional Uyghur whole sheep that is always popular at festivals. The next stage follows a well- trodden graveled path, along which sit the poor and needy ready to receive *zakat* (charitable donations) from the pilgrims—another indication of the essentially religious nature of the festival. Many of the recipients are elderly or obviously disabled, and the contributions of the pilgrims include money and food, although wrapped sweets that can be exchanged for money or food are also donated. On the left-hand side of the path are entertainments, including wrestling, singing, and recitals on the *duttar*, a two-stringed lute, and other traditional Uyghur instruments. The next section begins where the line of the *zakat* recipients ends, at another fence beyond which a variety of horses and horse-drawn carts and carriages are mustered to convey those who cannot ordo not wish to walk up the hill toward the shrines.

The final segment leads past smaller *mazars* to the main shrine at the top of the hill next to the mosque. Ahead of the mosque is an open area where pilgrims wash in preparation for prayer. The crowds attending the festival are mixed and include many families of three or more generations, but there are many more women than men.

Continuing Conflict in Southern Xinjiang

Official restrictions on the level of religious activity in Xinjiang have been inconsistent. Even in the south the situation varies from city to city, and the

27 Comparisons could be made with the much larger Kumbh Mela in India and the crowds that flock to Buddhist shrines in Japan, such as the Asakusa Kannon in Tokyo, but more relevantly with the annual Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca.

experience of Uyghurs in the rural areas is not the same as those in urban areas. In 2010 there was more overt repression of religious activity in Kashgar than in the rural areas around Khotan: the concentration of people and mosques in Kashgar is perceived as a greater threat to social stability and the authority of the CCP and the state. In addition, the state has placed a high priority on the modernization of Kashgar in order to drive the future economic development of the whole of southern Xinjiang.

Both Kashgar and Khotan experienced violent conflict in the summer of 2011. On July 18, 2011, a group of Uyghurs armed with knives and explosive devices attacked a police station in Khotan and took hostages. During a rescue operation, at least one police officer, two of the hostages, and some of the attackers were killed. Among the grievances of these Uyghurs were: the detention of many young male family members without trial around the date of the anniversary of the July 2009 Urumqi riots; attempts to ban women from wearing black headscarves and robes; and the confiscation of their farmland for redevelopment. As many as 20 people died in this incident.

In Kashgar violence broke out on July 30, 2012, just before the Ramadan fast. There were two explosions, and a hijacked car was driven into pedestrians on a crowded street where Han Chinese workers regularly gather at food stalls. Six or seven people died and almost 30 were injured. On the afternoon of July 31, a restaurant in Kashgar was set on fire and the owner and a waiter were killed.[28] Since 2011 the number of prosecutions for separatist or illegal religious activities has increased too. In Kashgar 12 people were sentenced to death in October 2014 following attacks in Yarkand in which 37 died. On November 11, 22 imams and other "Muslim preachers" in Kashgar were sentenced to 5–16 years in prison for "inciting ethnic hatred and disturbing public order."[29]

To deal with the escalating violence, new legislation "was approved unanimously by the Standing Committee of the Xinjiang People's Congress" in Urumqi on Friday, November 28, 2014. It came into force on January 1, 2015, and its avowed aim is to "protect legal religious activities" and "target religious extremism." Ma Mingcheng, the deputy director of the Xinjiang People's Congress and director of its legislative affairs committee, explained that "the old regulation, which was passed 20 years ago, just cannot handle new situations, such as the spreading of terrorist or extreme religious materials via the Internet or social media, and using religion to interfere in people's lives."

28 BBC News, July 18, 2011; *South China Morning Post*, *Global Times*, Xinhua, July 19, 2011, and July 31, 2011.

29 *South China Morning Post*, November 12, 2014.

The regulations include a prohibition on wearing "clothes or logos associated with religious extremism" or forcing others to wear them. The regulations do not specify the precise types of clothing and logos that are meant, although the main targets are clearly the burqa, the hijab and other forms of Islamic dress. The Standing Committee of the Urumqi People's Congress voted on December 11, 2014, to ban the wearing of the burqa, although the report about this vote was later deleted from the *Tianshan* website on which it had appeared. In any case, the proposal would have to be ratified by the Standing Committee of the Regional People's Congress. There have been campaigns run by county and district governments throughout Xinjiang to discourage the wearing of the burqa, which is favored by women in the poorer and more isolated parts of southern Xinjiang who belong to the Naqahbandi Sufi orders. In 2011 a campaign of "beautification" against the burqa was launched at the regional level: the regulations are codifying a trend that has been in place for some time.

Other tough local directives that have been reported include threats by the authorities in Khotan to confiscate the "farmland and personal belongings of individuals found to be engaged in illegal religious activities and their family members." This was backed by threats that the homes and gardens of "suspects' families" [would] be destroyed and "state benefits cancelled." Passports are not being issued to anyone suspected of involvement in banned activities, and in some areas parents of school-age children have been required to sign pledges that they would not allow their children to participate in any religious activities.

The regulation also prohibits the distribution of videos that deal with jihad or anything that is considered by the authorities to be religious extremism or terrorism, whether within or outside a religious location. Religious leaders are also now required to report violations of these regulations to the authorities.

The regulations also specifically forbid religious activities in "government offices, public schools, businesses, or institutions" and must be restricted to registered venues. Religion must not be allowed to "interfere with the judicial system or wedding and funeral traditions." The new legislation applies to the whole of Xinjiang, but it will have the greatest impact in the south where traditional social and religious practices are strongest. It is unlikely to resolve the conflict in Xinjiang. Worse, if it is implemented in as heavy-handed and insensitive a manner as in the past, it could exacerbate existing tensions.30

The experiences of Kashgar and Khotan demonstrate that the conflict in Xinjiang has multiple dimensions. There is a social dimension associated with

30 *China Daily*, November 29, 2014; *South China Morning Post*, November 12, 2014, December 12, 2014; *Radio Free Asia*, October 30, 2014, December 17, 2014.

the speed and unevenness of economic development and Han in-migrations, and a political dimension caused by the limited representation of Uyghur opinion. However, one key element is the tension between the strong religiosity of the Uyghurs and the Chinese state's insistence on associating all Islamic practice, particularly independent practice, with extremism and terrorism.