



Kashgar Coerced

Forced Reconstruction, Exploitation, and
Surveillance in the Cradle of Uyghur Culture

Uyghur Human Rights Project | June 2020



UYGHUR HUMAN RIGHTS PROJECT

About the Uyghur Human Rights Project:

The Uyghur Human Rights Project promotes the rights of the Uyghur people through research-based advocacy. It publishes reports and analysis in English and Chinese to defend Uyghurs' civil, political, social, cultural, and economic rights according to international human rights standards.

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Acknowledgements:

The authors wish to remain anonymous and have used pseudonyms. The authors wish to thank Henryk Szadziewski, the rest of the UHRP team, and all those who trusted us enough to speak candidly on such personal matters.

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Due to its unique earthen construction and lengthy history as the “cradle of Uyghur culture,” the city of Kashgar holds a profound degree of significance for the Uyghurs that is difficult to fully appreciate by outsiders. For this reason, the Chinese state has gone to extraordinary lengths to co-opt the city’s symbolic heritage.
- In Kashgar, the current campaigns of forced labor and re-education camps build upon longer histories of forced reconstruction, economic exploitation, and surveillance that have been systematically reshaping the city since the early 2000s.
- Kashgar’s reconstruction, exploitation, and surveillance have been mutually reinforcing and highly sophisticated, producing a new breed of totalitarian “smart city” optimized for ethnic repression. By staging this unprecedented urban experiment in the heart of Uyghur culture, the Chinese state has been able to coercively reinforce a living vision of Uyghur society in the service of cultural genocide.
- Kashgar can act as a prism through which to better understand a holistic picture of the Uyghurs’ contemporary domination. It also stands as a disturbing portent of the new possibilities for state repression that are emerging. While Kashgar’s model of devastation currently remains unique, the tools and methods that have contributed to its condition are readily available and continue to advance.

INTRODUCTION

Today, it is difficult to say whether Kashgar is more remarkable for its extraordinary historical heritage, or its bizarre dystopian coercion. On one hand, the city is the “cradle of Uyghur culture”; the ancient, remote Silk Road oasis at the nexus of South Asia, China, and the Middle East; and the celebrated meeting point of Buddhist, Islamic, and Turkic influences in Central Asia. On the other hand, Kashgar has been at the front lines of the most aggressive, high-tech surveillance campaign of the 21st century; the target of a vast and totalizing anti-historical “modernizing” reconstruction project; and the new ‘special economic zone’ subjected to a state-induced process of a rapid commercialization of fantastic, destabilizing proportions. The city merits tomes on its remarkable history and on its unprecedented model of oppression. The conjunction of these two realities is, of course, no coincidence: the recent history of Kashgar is an attempt to hijack the city’s exceptional, priceless cultural heritage for exceptional, lucrative assimilation and control.

Accordingly, the study of modern Kashgar holds great significance for a variety of stakeholders, particularly at this juncture of immense repression and change. To historians, anthropologists, area studies scholars, and architects, the irreversible destruction of the city is a tragedy worthy of as much documentation, exploration, and knowledge-preservation as possible. To technologists, ethicists, activists, and students of political science, the novel modes of oppression pioneered in Kashgar at truly unprecedented speeds represent a window into what is possible through new technological modes of domination, as well as the ambitions and methods of the Chinese state to accomplish its aims.

Perhaps most importantly, though, the recent story of Kashgar is one of general relevance for anyone interested in the development of human culture and civilization broadly: here is a storied, 2–3 millennia-old city¹ of precious value for the transmission, confluence, and development of great, ancient traditions—razed, reconstructed, exploited, and surveilled with uncanny speed and unprecedented power, often through technological processes only recently made

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¹ Global Heritage Network, “Site Conservation Assessment (SCA) Report, Kashgar Old City, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region,” January 1, 2010, 3, ghn.globalheritagefund.com/uploads/documents/document_1950.pdf.

possible. Here is the cultural nucleus of a people that has been dramatically re-architected amid a broader campaign of systematic cultural genocide.² Kashgar is a cautionary tale, a human tragedy, and an ongoing cause as the Uyghur people continue to fight for their existence. The city's story exhibits the new limits of oppression that contemporary technological advancements, in combination with a technocratic party-state, make possible.

With this in mind, I aim to write from a perspective of general human interest, seeking to make sense of modern Kashgar. This report aims to detail the nature and meaning of Kashgar's recent history at this historical inflexion point, while the city's transformation is still fresh and memories of its historic character still remain. This report also aims to capture the nature of the oppression and cooptation occurring through Kashgar's plight, unprecedented in its unique combination of features. The study is meant to help anyone seeking to interpret the city today, whether as tourist, academic, reporter, or Uyghur.

To that end, this report has two further aims. First, it seeks to center the Uyghur experience to express the tragedy of Kashgar's recent history. Second, it suggests some conceptual language by which to better understand the unique changes in the city. Whereas various cities around the world are attempting to fashion themselves as "smart cities," interweaving technology, urban planning, and culture towards greater efficiency, connectivity, and human flourishing, Kashgar in many ways has already been made into a pioneering "smart city" itself. However, rather than aiming towards human flourishing, Kashgar's urban "intelligence" has been engineered to be coercive to the freedom and culture of the Uyghur people, becoming something like a "malicious city." Thus, Kashgar's coercion can be interpreted in two related senses. In the more obvious sense, Kashgar has been coerced by the Chinese state through its reconstruction, intense policing, mass internment, forced labor, and cultural exploitation. In the more novel sense, Kashgar as a city has become a coercive agent in its own right, as mechanisms of surveillance and urban planning enmeshed in the new city-scape force its inhabitants into behaviors and systems that instrumentalize the city's heritage in the service of cultural destruction

Kashgar as a city has become a coercive agent in its own right, as mechanisms of surveillance and urban planning enmeshed in the new city-scape force its inhabitants into behaviors and systems that instrumentalize the city's heritage in the service of cultural destruction and control.

² For more on the use of "cultural genocide" terminology see Adrian Zenz, "The Karakax List: Dissecting the Anatomy of Beijing's Internment Drive in Xinjiang," *Journal of Political Risk* 8, no. 2 (February 2020), <https://www.jpplrisk.com/karakax>. As related, "the Karakax List lays bare the ideological and administrative micromechanics of a system of targeted cultural genocide that arguably rivals any similar attempt in the history of humanity,"

and control. To comprehend the novelty of what has occurred in Kashgar, a new vocabulary is necessary, along with careful reflection upon the social, economic, and technological developments that have made it possible.

METHODOLOGY

This report brings together recent reports on Uyghur repression and Kashgar, along with scholarship on urban planning, anthropology, political science, and history. The author has spent a year in China studying state surveillance, including a short stint in East Turkistan in the fall of 2018. During his time in Kashgar, he observed the state of the Old City and came across undocumented evidence of more recent cultural erasure in the Kozichi Yarbeshi neighborhood, as will be presented later in this report. He has conducted several informal interviews with locals in Kashgar, as well as with a variety of tourists who have intermittently visited over the course of 2019. With the assistance of UHRP, the author has conducted formal interviews with several Uyghurs from Kashgar now living abroad.

Admittedly, under ordinary circumstances, one would hope for a more comprehensive or systematic approach to interviews and on-the-ground research. Anyone familiar with the current situation in Kashgar and East Turkistan, however, understands that means of communication are highly limited and risky, even as the importance of speaking out and gathering information is considerable. The author is therefore thankful to all those he has spoken with, knowing that his interlocutors take on significant risk in speaking to him. Therefore, unless explicitly requested otherwise, the author has changed the names and identifying details of all those he has spoken with. Additionally, he writes under a pseudonym for greater protection both for himself and his sources. He speaks neither Uyghur nor Chinese, and is therefore deeply indebted to the help of Joy Liu,* a translator and native speaker of both Chinese and English, who is also working under a pseudonym for similar reasons. Without Joy's inspiration, tireless research, and language support, this report would not be possible. All translations are her own.

This report contributes to now highly developed literatures on both the recent repression in East Turkistan and Kashgar's

reconstruction. In terms of scope, it aims only to better understand Kashgar's recent transformation, roughly covering the period from 2000 until mid 2020. Both the broader history of the city, and the broader ecosystem of cultural erasure at work are beyond the purview of this report and will be referenced only insofar as they contribute to the understanding of contemporary Kashgar.

Accordingly, it is worth noting that many of the trends and developments discussed within this report are at work in other areas of East Turkistan, sometimes to a greater degree than in Kashgar. Turpan and Hotan have seen similar reconstruction initiatives,³ and may have some areas of more stringent surveillance. Indeed, the Chinese government has also allowed or initiated significant uses of space and architecture as a means of social or political control in more far-flung areas, such as the case of the Three Gorges Dam or the 'redevelopment' of a variety of historical Chinese cities.⁴ However, the case of Kashgar is unique for its particular cultural significance within the broader repression of the current time and its uniquely visible manifestations of state policies of economic exploitation, reconstruction, and surveillance directed at the Uyghur culture.

Of course, many of the elements that have made Kashgar what it is today were as directed by market forces as by the state. In this sense, Kashgar's transformation has been the result of a variety of actors with a variety of interests, even if state policy has been a clear guiding force. Accordingly, different changes elicited differing ranges of responses, and a few developments were even supported by some segments of Kashgar's Uyghur population (if generally not the prevailing opinion). Where possible, I will attempt to note those instances. Nonetheless, while a few individual changes may or may not have been welcomed by some at the time of their arrival, these multifarious developments compound and coalesce in contemporary Kashgar to generate a particular sort of domination that is unique: instructive for anyone hoping to understand the final end-product of years of Chinese ethnic policy in combination with new surveillance and "re-education" initiatives for Uyghurs. As an embodied cityscape of immense cultural and historical significance, Kashgar can act as an important symbolic prism through which to view the cumulative effect of ethnic repression

³ Tianyang Liu and Zhenjie Yuan, "Making a Safer Space? Rethinking Space and Securitization in the Old Town Redevelopment Project of Kashgar, China," *Political Geography* 69 (March 1, 2019): 34, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2018.12.001>.

⁴ Liu and Yuan, 40.

at work in East Turkistan today, at a time when assessing the full scope and significance of the Uyghur plight is particularly difficult.

HISTORICAL & ETHNIC SIGNIFICANCE

In part due to the city's unique geographic position, the historical legacy of Kashgar is vast. Trying to recount the city's rich, multi-millennia history would be far too great a task for this paper. A brief sense of the city's lengthy historical significance would include how Kashgar has been the seat of numerous kingdoms, the contested jewel of empires, and the home of Manichean, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, and Nestorian traditions. When Islam entered China (and the Turkic world) via Kashgar, the city was where "the early Muslims encountered strong Chinese, Persian, Turkic, and Indian influences" due to its "natural intersection of ancient pathways leading from the capitals of Rome, Persia, Mongolia and China."⁵ When Marco Polo visited the city in 1272, he marveled at its grandeur and regional prominence.⁶ Centuries of cultural transmission, trade, and religious scholarship shaped the city into an enduring cultural epicenter of Central Asia from ancient times.

Beyond its lengthy historical importance as a crossroads between empires and civilizations, for hundreds of years, the city has also been "the historical heart of Muslim Uyghur Culture.... Remain[ing] both the physical and the symbolic nucleus of traditional Uyghur society."⁷ As one ex-resident told me recently, "If you visit Turkistan and miss Kashgar, you have missed Turkistan." Li Kai, a Han Chinese writer and scholar renowned as an authority on the region, asserts that the city is beyond comparison as the "quintessence of Uyghur culture" with the highest concentration of Uyghurs anywhere in the world and a unique cultural genius.⁸ The city's status as the spiritual capital of the Uyghur people is uncontested, and has been for centuries. Kashgar is at once

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⁵ Dru Gladney, "Kashgar: China's Western Doorway," *Saudi Aramco World*, December 2001.

⁶ Joshua Hammer, "Demolishing Kashgar's History," *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 2010, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/demolishing-kashgars-history-7324895/>.

⁷ Michael Dillon, *Xinjiang and the Expansion of Chinese Communist Power: Kashgar in the Early Twentieth Century*, 1 edition (New York: Routledge, 2014), xviii.

⁸ Li Kai, "Silu mingzhu Kashiga'er", *Kashi* 1:10; quoted in Dillon, 3.

the heartbeat, center, and epitome of Uyghur culture.

The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) inserted itself into this history and cultural significance by entering Kashgar in 1949, claiming “peaceful liberation” for its inhabitants. Since that time, the city has been under Communist rule, posing acute barriers to understanding the city’s history from 1949 to the 1980s. Admittedly, the remote positioning of the city already meant that it had long been seen as distant and mysterious to much of the outside world; nonetheless, Communist rule compounded this inaccessibility by restricting all foreign travel to the city save a “trusted few, who could be relied on to report favorably on the way Xinjiang was developing under the rule of the CCP...[who were] allowed restricted access.”⁹ As such, clear information on how early CCP rule shaped Kashgar until the 1980s is relatively scarce.

What is known—and often overlooked in recent media reports—is the dramatic effect that the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) had on East Turkistan in general, and Kashgar in particular. Although the Cultural Revolution is often thought of as a Chinese affair, from the perspective of Uyghurs in East Turkistan the event ostensibly arrived as a manifestation of severe Han Chinese repression of conquered, occupied lands. Predominantly Han Red Guards invaded East Turkistan on a mission to destroy the “Four Olds:” Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas. In the case of ethnic minorities like the Uyghurs, this meant a concerted, Han-led campaign of sustained ethnic cultural persecution, including the mass burning of books and widespread destruction of cultural artifacts. At the beginning of the campaign, Kashgar was home to 107 mosques; by its end, only two remained open.¹⁰ Men were forcibly shaved in the streets, Muslims were made to raise pigs, and Uyghurs were made to exchange their traditional clothes and adornments for Mao suits. Cultural humiliation was severe, and societal damage was crippling as intellectuals and community leaders were imprisoned and tortured.¹¹

Prior to the 2000s, the Cultural Revolution certainly represented the most severe, though not the only,¹² era of Chinese ethnic repression against the Uyghurs since Communist seizure of power. I highlight the

Kashgar is a cautionary tale, a human tragedy, and an ongoing cause as the Uyghur people continue to fight for their existence that reflects upon how our political systems and technological advancement can go desperately awry.

⁹ Dillon, 1.

¹⁰ Gardner Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land* (Columbia University Press, 2010), 65–66.

¹¹ Bovingdon, 51–52.

¹² Darren Byler, “Ghost World,” *Logic Magazine*, May 1, 2019, <https://logicmag.io/china/ghost-world/>.

event for two reasons: first, to note that some of what has been going on in the city has significant antecedents in history that are under-reported and set the stage for Kashgar’s later repression. Second, and more relevant for our purposes, the Cultural Revolution had a lasting impact on Kashgar itself. For one, the Cultural Revolution altered the architecture of Kashgar’s Old City: in the 1970s, Old City residents “created an even more complex subterranean ‘city’ beneath the already maze-like surface of the old town” to escape attacks during the Cultural Revolution.¹³ Furthermore, with such comprehensive destruction of precious cultural books, manuscripts, artifacts, and art over the course of the Cultural Revolution, the embodied, material culture of Kashgar’s Old City took on heightened cultural significance to the Uyghurs. Their writings and artefacts may have been destroyed, but their ancient city and its distinctive way of life remained as the preeminent bastion of the Uyghur way of life and an enduring symbol of cultural achievement.

This is not to suggest by any means that Kashgar’s contemporary significance is merely reactionary to the cultural erasure of the Cultural Revolution—the latter merely augmented Kashgar’s pre-existent cultural preeminence. Indeed, to an outside observer, it is difficult to fully grasp the extent or nature of Kashgar’s significance to the Uyghur people, which differs significantly from the cultural appreciation that most ethnic groups might have towards their important urban centers. To understand the coercive power of Kashgar, however, understanding the unique relationship between Uyghurs and Kashgar is essential.

The first step in appreciating the cultural import of Kashgar is to attempt to understand just how unique and idiosyncratic its architectural-communal style was prior to reconstruction. The “grandeur” of Kashgar was not, as in the case of many analogues, merely a matter of the city’s architectural wealth or the grandness of its more illustrious buildings. Instead, Kashgar’s centuries-long, interwoven, fractal mud-brick evolution developed a truly remarkable socio-architectural web that is difficult to fully communicate to anyone who has not experienced its unique atmosphere. In the same way that Venice’s unusual water-entwined cityscape intuitively fascinates its visitors with its rare, aqueous structure, so also might Kashgar fascinate the visitor with its highly unusual, multi-layered, and intertwined earthen structure. Both the organic building materials and the intricately entangled structures throughout the Old City created a

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¹³ Liu and Yuan, “Making a Safer Space?,” 34.

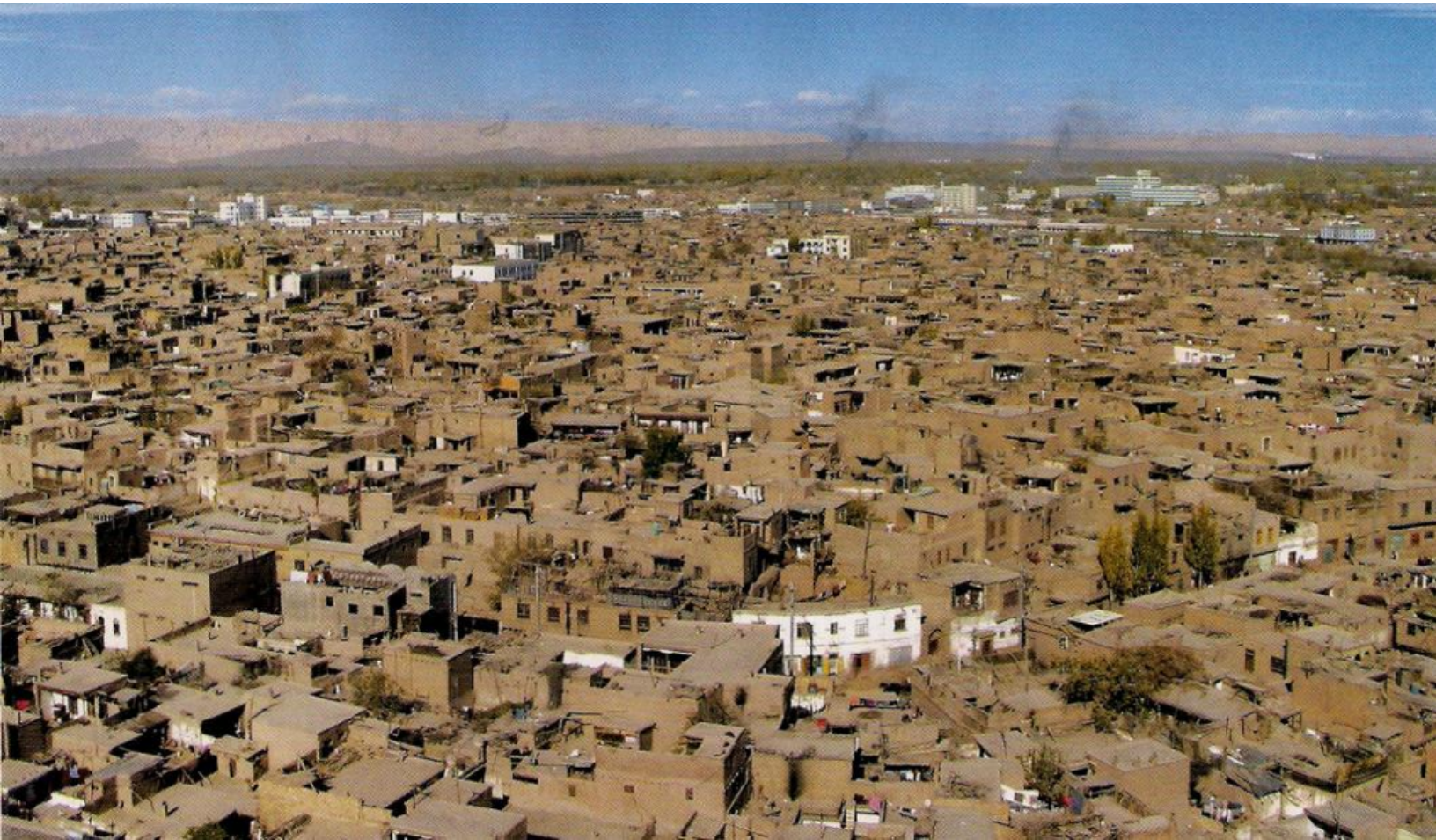
unique, communal burrow-like aesthetic: like a gigantic clay hive bulging out of the earth, acting as the substratum for a highly unique style of communal-religio-cultural life for tens of thousands over the course of centuries.

Liu and Yuan's "volumetric" approach to understanding the Old City does well to describe how the interwoven architecture of the traditional Uyghur *aywan* construction style operates in Kashgar, from the bottom up:

A complex tunnel system (with an estimated total length of 36 km) . . . was built individually, secretly, and often combined with the basement structure of the aywan-style houses . . . connect[ing] the homes of related families living in close proximity. This has created an even more complex subterranean 'city' beneath the already maze-like surface of the old town. Though unorganized in form and hybrid in their functions, these vertical extensions represent the spontaneous, locally determined practices of lived space . . .

. . . [On the surface level] the irregular distribution and the continuous bends in the walls of the aywan house supply the neighborhood with myriad entrance and exit points, visual blind-spots and dead-end streets...It also transforms the neighborhood into a territorial ecosystem of internally-oriented (but externally-alienated) enclaves which, by and large, can only be flexibly accessed and fully utilized by the insiders (i.e. local Uyghur residents). Thus, with its three-dimensional matrix of houses, streets and tunnels, the multi-story structure of the old town provides connectivity between different dwellings and adjoining streets, making the neighborhood an internally-interconnected space. . . .

[B]ridge-houses constructed above the ground [on top of pre-existent dwellings] . . . are built by local families to cope with the lack of residential spaces for fast growing families in the old town . . . [expanding] rooftop connectivity...These bridges transform the old town into a monolithic network and, like blood vessels, support the centuries-old social ecology of the old town. The hundreds of officially unregistered and irregular



[Labyrinthine construction of the Old City](#), pre-reconstruction. © FarWestChina.

bridgehouses provide a vertical solution to the problem of overcrowded dwellings, but simultaneously create (and complicate) the unique vertical spaces of the old town.¹⁴

Reflective of this unique construction style and history, a typical observer would be immediately struck by the way Kashgar's Old City evokes complex, visually impressive webs of interconnected communal life. For Uyghurs, the city at once instantiated and protected their inimitable communal tradition.

¹⁴ Liu and Yuan, 34.



[Traditional Kashgar Old City Courtyards](#), 2005; Gollings, John. "Kashgar Old City". Figshare, September 23, 2016.

Moving beyond the complexity and interwoven-ness of the Old City as a whole, we can consider the construction features of the houses themselves, dense with social meaning and cultural praxis. We first consider the locations of the houses in proximity to the city's mosques. As Liu and Yuan have plotted, the Old City was speckled by 112 fairly evenly dispersed mosques, each of which would serve 10–25 households within a radius of 50–100 meters,¹⁵ creating an ecosystem of embedded religious practice within the community.

The center of the traditional Kashgari home was the courtyard, around which orbited the family's culinary, religious, and leisurely practices—integrating not only Islamic influences, but also many traditions, symbols, and practices that harken back to Uyghurs' prior Buddhist, Manichean, and Nestorian pasts. Old City homes were

¹⁵ Liu and Yuan, 34.



[Interconnected rooftops of the Old City](#), 2005; Gollings, John. “Kashgar Old City”. Figshare, September 23, 2016.

The collective social, religious, and economic institutions of Kashgar’s Old City allowed for a degree of relative insulation from the Chinese state, and, by extension, a place of hope for the freedom and cultural self-determination of the Uyghur people as a whole.

adorned with traditional Uyghur decorative art, woodwork, and pottery, and were often centuries old. Kashgaris were often extremely proud of their homes’ layered history and architectures, and the ways in which their ancestors benefitted from and lived into the intense architectural interconnectedness that they, until recently, also inhabited. Interviewees spoke with pride and warmth about the way that navigating Kashgar’s old, narrow, labyrinthine alleyways was a challenge both directionally and physically, as one had to fight their way through crowded streets amid the sights, sounds, and smells of various shopkeepers and bakers packed into the city’s tight, winding corridors.

More than just a unique urban mass, however, Kashgar also maintained rich societal traditions built into its topography. At the end of Ramadan and Qurban Eid, for instance, thousands would gather in front of the Old City’s Id Kah Mosque—the largest in East Turkistan (and all of China)—to pray. After prayers, Uyghur musicians would climb to the top of the mosque and play traditional music as the crowds broke into the iconic Sama dancing for which the Uyghurs are famous. The rhythms, movement, and majestic Id Kah backdrop are inscribed in the minds of many Uyghurs as the quintessential image of Uyghur cultural brilliance. Also worth noting is the remarkable level of self-sufficiency achieved by Kashgar’s Old City. As Michael Dillon notes, “As a whole, these buildings and institutions [of the Old City] cater to virtually every need of the local Uyghur community. . . . Their self-sufficiency and self-reliance enable the Uyghurs [of Kashgar] to limit the contact that they have with the Han-dominated local government

and afford them a degree of de facto autonomy.”¹⁶ While this autonomy would be viewed with concern by Chinese authorities, the advantages for the Uyghurs of Kashgar and beyond are obvious: beyond housing, facilitating, and preserving Uyghur culture, the collective social, religious, and economic institutions of Kashgar’s Old City allowed for a degree of relative insulation from the Chinese state, and, by extension, a place of hope for the freedom and cultural self-determination of the Uyghur people as a whole.

Thus, the holistic cultural significance of Kashgar can come into clearer focus. Architecturally, the construction of the city was remarkable, historical, beautiful, and unique for its earthen construction and complex interwoven structure. Historian George Mitchell accordingly called Kashgar “the best preserved example of a traditional Islamic city to be found anywhere in Central Asia.”¹⁷ Indeed,



Kashgaris leaving Id Kah Mosque, 1998. © Kevin Bubriski (not affiliated with UHRP).

¹⁶ Michael Dillon, “Religion, Repression, and Traditional Uyghur Culture in Southern Xinjiang: Kashgar and Khotan,” *Central Asian Affairs* 2, no. 3 (May 29, 2015): 253, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22142290-00203002>.

¹⁷ Claire Alix, “Statement of Concern and Appeal for International Cooperation to Save Ancient Kashgar,” *SAFE/Saving Antiquities for Everyone* (blog), July 20, 2009, <http://savingantiquities.org/statement-of-concern-and-appeal-for-international-cooperation-to-save-ancient-kashgar/>.

Kashgar’s significance stretches beyond that of a typical historical city, for it represents not just the legacy of the events that took place within its (now destroyed) walls, but the archetype of a rare form of urban creation, something akin to what Westerners might ascribe to Venice as a ‘floating city.’

“many experts viewed Kashgar as one of the greatest examples of mud-brick settlement anywhere in the world.”¹⁸ For Hollywood director Marc Forster, Kashgar’s beauty and Central Asian authenticity made it the natural site selection for his 2007 adaptation of *The Kite Runner* to represent 1970s Afghanistan.¹⁹ When that architecture came under threat in the late 2000s, a host of international organizations voiced their grave concern at the potential loss of priceless architectural heritage, including (but not limited to) Saving Antiquities for Everyone (SAFE), Global Heritage Network (GHN),²⁰ the European Parliament,²¹ UNESCO,²² and the International Scientific Committee on Earthen Architectural Heritage, which claimed that Kashgar’s Old City was of “unquestionable Universal Value” as one of the largest groupings of mud-brick architecture in Central Asia, and, likely, the world.²³ In this sense, Kashgar’s significance stretches beyond that of a typical historical city, for it represents not just the legacy of the events that took place within its (now destroyed) walls, but the archetype of a rare form of urban creation, something akin to what Westerners might ascribe to Venice as a “floating city,” for example.

More importantly, however, Kashgar’s significance is found in how its unusual cityscape was uniquely refined over centuries to support an extraordinarily integrated community life of Uyghur cultural practice and tradition. As families revolved around their interconnected courtyards, so also ancient neighborhoods revolved around their centuries-old mosques, and the collective imagination of the Uyghur people revolved around the communal life of Kashgar. Not only did the great poets, prophets, and kings of the Uyghur people make their home in Kashgar, the immersive structure of the city also created a living order of robust Uyghur cultural expression, insulated from the state.

To fully explain the significance of Kashgar, then, the words of famed public intellectual Lewis Mumford come to mind:

¹⁸ Nick Holdstock, *China’s Forgotten People: Xinjiang, Terror and the Chinese State*, 1 edition (I.B. Tauris, 2019), chap. 7.

¹⁹ Hammer, “Demolishing Kashgar’s History.”

²⁰ Uyghur Human Rights Project, “Living on the Margins: The Chinese State’s Demolition of Uyghur Communities” (UHRP, April 2, 2012), 58, <https://uhrp.org/press-release/new-report-uhrp-living-margins-chinese-state%E2%80%99s-demolition-uyghur-communities.html>.

²¹ Uyghur Human Rights Project, 61.

²² Uyghur Human Rights Project, 22–23.

²³ Zeynep Aygen, *International Heritage and Historic Building Conservation: Saving the World’s Past* (Routledge, 2013), 79.

The city in its complete sense, then, is a geographic plexus, an economic organization, an institutional process, a theater of social action, and an aesthetic symbol of collective unity. The city fosters art and is art; the city creates the theater and is the theater. It is in the city, the city as theater, that man's more purposive activities are focused, and work out, through conflicting and cooperating personalities, events, groups, into more significant culminations. . . . The physical organization of the city may deflate this drama or make it frustrate; or it may, through the deliberate efforts of art, politics, and education, make the drama more richly significant, as a stage-set, well-designed, intensifies and underlines the gestures of the actors and the action of the play.²⁴

In Mumford's terms, Kashgar has long since ceased to be the most important "stage-set" of the Uyghur drama. To a degree exceedingly rare in cultures across the world, Kashgar has merged with that drama—has *become* a central element of the drama, the "art" of being Uyghur. That is why for many Uyghurs the city has even taken on significance that is quasi-religious. As one report by the Uyghur Human Rights Project notes, Kashgar "is viewed by Uyghurs as Jerusalem is to Christians, Jews, and Muslims."²⁵ As the historical center—and an immersive instantiation—of Uyghur culture, Old Kashgar commanded a respect and reverence difficult to comprehend by outsiders, and, as we shall see, coveted by the Chinese state.

One statement from a native of the Kashgar region particularly drives the point home:

When the reconstruction really started happening, it was felt by *all* Uyghurs. At that time, I was far away, in Ürümqi, but it made no difference, we all felt it. Even the little Uyghur children knew. They knew that something was wrong. . . . When I came back to my home area after the demolitions for the first time in [many] years, I traveled to the Old City. I saw it from a distance—the outside—and I simply could not bring myself to

²⁴ Lewis Mumford, "What Is a City," *Architectural Record*, 1937, <http://jeremiahcommunity.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Mumford-What-is-a-City.pdf>.

²⁵ Uyghur Human Rights Project, "Living on the Margins: The Chinese State's Demolition of Uyghur Communities," 33.

enter in. I don't know why. I have not been back since.²⁶

RECONSTRUCTION

The reconstruction of Kashgar has been an iterative, piecemeal process, the motivations of which are often opaque, overlapping, and impossible to delineate with certainty as the process has unfolded. A good deal of prior research has examined the intentions that went into numerous stages of Kashgar's reconstruction. The most comprehensive study of these questions that this researcher has found comes from UHRP's 2012 report *Living on the Margins*,²⁷ which synthesizes preservation attempts from various international organizations, reporting from residents, the economic feasibility of preserving the Old City, and Chinese manipulation of UNESCO authority to justify its actions. Generally, accounts have variously focused on:

- (1) Chinese state concern over the relative autonomy of Kashgar,²⁸
- (2) real or perceived fear of Old City architecture as conducive for terrorist activity,²⁹
- (3) a general assertion of Chinese state power,³⁰
- (4) an attempt at long-term (forced) ethnic assimilation,³¹
- (5) weakening of Uyghur culture, religion, tradition, and/or family life,³²
- (6) working towards earthquake resiliency/risk mitigation (official government stance for much of the reconstruction),³³
- (7) reprisal for Uyghur-Han ethnic violence,³⁴

²⁶ Mujahit* Hassan*, *Recollections of Kashgar*, February 18, 2020.

²⁷ Uyghur Human Rights Project, "Living on the Margins: The Chinese State's Demolition of Uyghur Communities."

²⁸ Dillon, "Religion, Repression, and Traditional Uyghur Culture in Southern Xinjiang," 253.

²⁹ Liu and Yuan, "Making a Safer Space?," 32.

³⁰ R. Spencer, "Fibre of Silk Road City Is Ripped Apart," *The Telegraph*, July 16, 2005.

³¹ Liu and Yuan, "Making a Safer Space?," 32.

³² Uyghur Human Rights Project, "Living on the Margins: The Chinese State's Demolition of Uyghur Communities."

³³ Uyghur Human Rights Project, 37.

³⁴ Holdstock, *China's Forgotten People*, chap. 7.

- (8) dilution of densely Uyghur-populated areas,³⁵
- (9) a governmental drive towards economic development,³⁶ and
- (10) commercial interests.³⁷

These motivations and interests are interlocking and likely contain various degrees of truth at each juncture of decision-making over what has been a lengthy process.

Today, in light of China's expansive, mass campaign of mosque, shrine, and grave demolition now occurring across all of East Turkistan, the longer process of Kashgar's reconstruction retroactively appears more nefarious as a portent of things to come. Expert Bahram Sintash estimates that 10,000 to 15,000 religious sites have been destroyed across East Turkistan since 2016,³⁸ drawing upon his own research in collaboration with that of RFA, *Bellingcat*, the *Guardian*, and AFP.³⁹ While these events do not bode well for Kashgar's reconstruction projects prior to 2016, that year was very clearly a turning point, due to the installation of Chen Quanguo as the Party Secretary over East Turkistan in August. Thus, the reconstruction projects forced upon Kashgar prior to 2016 were very likely distinct in many ways from the plans that characterize the current era of oppression. That said, there can be no doubt that the cascade of government policies that have reshaped Kashgar since 2000 share with the post-2016 measures common threads of governmental subjugation, disregard for—and cooptation of—Uyghur culture, and severe ethnic suppression.

Rather than walking through the motives and controversies that surrounded each stage of Kashgar's reconstruction, a task that (at least in the early stages) has been well-documented elsewhere,⁴⁰ I will only briefly recount the major developments that have occurred in chronological order, with some notes on their significance, to illustrate the material evolution of Kashgar. Beginning around 2000, I will relay

There can be no doubt that the cascade of government policies that have reshaped Kashgar since 2000 share with the post-2016 measures common threads of governmental subjugation, disregard for—and cooptation of—Uyghur culture, and severe ethnic suppression.

³⁵ Spencer, "Fibre of Silk Road City Is Ripped Apart."

³⁶ Amy H. Liu and Kevin Peters, "The Hanification of Xinjiang, China: The Economic Effects of the Great Leap West," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 17, no. 2 (2017): 267, <https://doi.org/10.1111/sena.12233>.

³⁷ Holdstock, *China's Forgotten People*, chap. 7.

³⁸ Fred Hiatt, "In China, Every Day Is Kristallnacht," *Washington Post*, November 3, 2019, sec. Opinions, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/11/03/china-every-day-is-kristallnacht/>.

³⁹ Bahram Sintash, "Demolishing Faith: The Destruction and Desecration of Uyghur Mosques and Shrines | Uyghur Human Rights Project," October 28, 2019, <https://uhrp.org/press-release/demolishing-faith-destruction-and-desecration-uyghur-mosques-and-shrines.html>.

⁴⁰ Uyghur Human Rights Project, "Living on the Margins: The Chinese State's Demolition of Uyghur Communities."

the major stages of Kashgar up to 2016, at which point the city's reconstruction became inseparable from the broader program of East Turkistan's reconstruction now in full steam. I will then consider Kashgar's reconstruction within that broader context, until the present day in which new areas remain under threat.

Again, it is worth noting that some significant alterations had occurred before 2001. For example, most of the gargantuan, earthen city wall was slowly destroyed prior to the turn of the century, and a paved main street was made to shoot through the Old City.⁴¹ In the 1980s, the moat that surrounded the city was also filled in to create a ring road around the Old City.⁴² Around 2000, however, a series of campaigns—each more dramatic than the last—began to take shape that would irreparably alter the heart of the city.

Early 2000s: The Clearing of Id Kah Square & Early Reconstruction Under the Great Western Development Program

The recent succession of aggressive policies towards Kashgar began with the 1999 announcement of the Great Western Development Program by the Chinese central government, in which the government sought to focus on the development of its western reaches after two decades of coastal development.⁴³ It was under the auspices of this program that the first recent reconstructions of the Old City were enacted, most notably the clearing of Id Kah Square around 2000–2001. The mud-brick bazaar in front of Id Kah mosque had been a center of Kashgar community life, with scores of family shops abutting the market, living quarters adjoined. Abruptly, shops, families, and houses were cleared to make way for a more open, “modern” square,⁴⁴ upending untold years of familial and societal tradition. Demolished family-owned shops and houses tended to be replaced by more commercialized shops, and a gigantic, concrete platform. Unfortunately, Google Earth's satellite imagery only stretches back as

⁴¹ Holdstock, *China's Forgotten People*, chap. 7.

⁴² Michael Wines, “To Protect an Ancient City, China Moves to Raze It,” *The New York Times*, May 27, 2009, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/28/world/asia/28kashgar.html>.

⁴³ Hongyi Lai, “China's Western Development Program: Its Rationale, Implementation, and Prospects on JSTOR,” *Modern China* 28, no. 4 (n.d.): 432–66.

⁴⁴ Christian Tyler, *Wild West China: The Taming of Xinjiang*, First Edition edition (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 218.



Id Kah Square, 12/1/2002, depicting oval rose garden east of the mosque, and houses north and south of the mosque later removed (Google Earth).



Id Kah Square, 3/6/2005, showing new shopping complexes to the north and south of the square, and rose garden removed (Google Earth).

far as 2002, meaning that satellite evidence of much of the initial market clearing does not exist. However, satellite images do recount the subsequent destruction and removal of the iconic rose garden once tightly associated with Id Kah Mosque, and some surrounding homes removed on the north side of the square, replaced by commercialized shops.

It was around this same time that the famed, centuries-old Sunday bazaar was moved out of the city walls and wooden stalls into an ordered, “rectangular concrete expanse under a stainless-steel canopy.”⁴⁵ The accompanying animal market was moved out of the city altogether. Uproar at the hundreds of displaced families, destroyed market, and unilaterally transformed Id Kah square was widespread.⁴⁶

2009–2014: Mass Reconstruction, the “Kashgar Dangerous House Reform” Program, and Beyond

While various reconstructions and displacements continued after the clearing of Id Kah Square, Kashgar’s reconstruction significantly accelerated in 2009, when the government announced a largescale

⁴⁵ Spencer, “Fibre of Silk Road City Is Ripped Apart.”

⁴⁶ Spencer.

project to demolish and rebuild 85% of the Old City under the “Kashgar Dangerous House Reform” program.⁴⁷ According to the Congressional-Executive Committee on China, the plan aimed at resettling nearly half of Kashgar’s overall population (Old City together with outside areas) with a budget of USD\$439 million.⁴⁸ Despite international outrage and concerted efforts to advocate for preservation (rather than demolition and reconstruction) the plan went ahead at speed. In the summer of 2009, Kashgar officials unveiled a plan to relocate and reconstruct the homes of 65,000 households accounting for more than 200,000 people.⁴⁹ Expanded government proposals were announced in 2010 and 2011, suggesting expanded demolitions of tens of thousands of households.⁵⁰



A wooden stall of the type that used to be seen in Id Kah Square; tourist photos in front of the old rose garden. © Kevin Bubriski, 1998 (not affiliated with UHRP).

⁴⁷ Hammer, “Demolishing Kashgar’s History.”

⁴⁸ Congressional-Executive Commission on China, “Demolition of Kashgar’s Old City Draws Concerns Over Cultural Heritage Protection, Population Resettlement,” April 7, 2009, <https://www.cecc.gov/publications/commission-analysis/demolition-of-kashgars-old-city-draws-concerns-over-cultural>.

⁴⁹ Uyghur Human Rights Project, “Living on the Margins: The Chinese State’s Demolition of Uyghur Communities,” 34.

⁵⁰ Uyghur Human Rights Project, 35–36.

The early stages of this reconstruction process were well documented by photographer Stephen Geens, who mapped the reconstructions through November 17, 2011. He notes that by that time, around two thirds of the Old City had been demolished, with the 85% goal seemingly persisting. He also recounts how the demolition-reconstruction process is often completed with such speed that satellite images do not easily show that a reconstruction has occurred at all due to the gap of time between aerial snapshots.⁵¹

Geens's work has been extremely helpful in showing how reconstruction progressed over time. However, much of the reconstruction occurred after his documentation ended, further enveloping the city in more new architecture. Although much of said



Mapping the time/area of Kashgar reconstructions through Nov. 17, 2011. © Stefan Geens (not affiliated with UHRP).

⁵¹ Stefan Geens, "The Last Days of Old Kashgar — an Update," *Ogle Earth* (blog), February 24, 2012, <https://ogleearth.com/2012/02/the-last-days-of-old-kashgar-an-update/>.

reconstruction would be imperceptible from satellite photos, some indicative shots do shed some light on the transformations after 2011. Take, for instance, the following photos of an area un-documented by Geens. Although many more of the buildings than are depicted here likely had already been—or soon would be—destroyed, the image captures something of how reconstruction was evolving:



Left: 10/25/2009, right: 8/21/2012 (Google Earth).

Notice also that even one of the two areas listed as “protected” in 2011 experienced significant reconstruction in 2012—again, likely including much more than is clearly depicted by the satellite data:



Left: 3/6/2005 | Right: 8/21/2012 (Google Earth).

Where satellite data gives some loose indication of the breadth of demolitions, on-the-ground photos can give a clearer view of the nature of the destruction:



Child playing in ruins of Old City, July 30, 2012. © [Brett Elmer](#) (not affiliated with UHRP).



Woman entering Old City Ruins, July 30, 2012. © [Brett Elmer](#) (not affiliated with UHRP).



Kashgari woman standing on the site of her former home, August 2011. © [Edith Roux](#), Les Dépossédés.



Kashgari man standing on the site of his former home, August 2011. © [Edith Roux](#), Les Dépossédés.

Though it would be difficult to verify, indications suggest that the government was successful in demolishing its planned 85% of the Old City, and likely more, given that it even reconstructed some areas initially slated to be preserved. Indeed, the Global Heritage Network's (GHA) Site Conservation Assessment Report of Kashgar estimates that 90% of the Old City was destroyed.⁵² Atmospherically, the effect was totalizing. Not only did the inhabitants go through the devastation of seeing their (sometimes centuries-old) ancestral homes destroyed, those who were able to return saw the city rebuilt in a performative, tourist-friendly shadow of its former self. The process unfolded

⁵² Global Heritage Network, "Site Conservation Assessment (SCA) Report, Kashgar Old City, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region."

without any meaningful consultation with the locals affected.⁵³ Although the Old City did benefit in terms of improved plumbing and electricity, and a small minority did prefer their new relocation apartments, Kashgar's former way of life and layered architectural history was gone—as were the many who could not afford to return, forced into apartments on the outskirts of town.⁵⁴ Moreover, much of what was demolished was not replaced: aside from (at least) one local community mosque, the famous Islamic college, *Hanliq Madrassa*, renowned for its illustrious history stretching back into the 11th century, was seemingly torn down to make room for an athletic field, for example.⁵⁵ Journalist Nick Holdstock related the new atmosphere this way:

By the end of 2010 more than 10,000 houses in the Old City had been destroyed. When I visited the city in 2013 it was barely recognisable. Bright ten- and 15-storey buildings lined the eight-lane roads. There were shops selling gourmet cakes, Apple phones and computers, expensive bottles of wine. . . . there were still some landmarks that had been unaffected, like the Id Kah mosque. But in 2000 the mosque had been the hub from which noisy, chaotic streets of traders radiated. Now the shops near the Id Kah are housed in new buildings whose architectural style could be described as Islamic Lego: blocky, light-brown structures graced with ornamental arches. Above their doors are wooden signs saying 'Minority Folk Art' or 'Traditional Ethnic Crafts' in English and Chinese. . . .

It was not until climbing Yar Beshi, a hill in the east of the city, that I understood the scale of the destruction. The path leading up was thick with dust, dust that had been houses, homes: despite being one of the two main sections designated for protection, large areas of Yar Beshi have been completely razed. From the top I could see a panorama of clay- and white-coloured six-storey

Indications suggest that the government was successful in demolishing its planned 85% of the Old City, and likely more, given that it even reconstructed some areas initially slated to be preserved.

⁵³ Uyghur Human Rights Project, "Living on the Margins: The Chinese State's Demolition of Uyghur Communities," 16–17.

⁵⁴ Michael Sainsbury, "Uighur Tensions Persist as Old City Demolished," *The Australian*, January 6, 2010, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/uighur-tensions-persist-as-kashgars-old-city-demolished/news-story/724e1652965d0f8ecd0e57515d59e6d2>.

⁵⁵ Uyghur Human Rights Project, "Living on the Margins: The Chinese State's Demolition of Uyghur Communities," 69.



[Labyrinthine mudbrick alley, pre-reconstruction](#), 2005; Gollings, John. "Kashgar Old City". Figshare, September 23, 2016.



'Islamic Lego' style architecture post-reconstruction, widened and squared streets with Chinese flags. Author's photo, 2018.

buildings, more of which will probably fill the huge area—around ten city blocks—that have been cleared at the foot of the hill. It was strange to see such a vast open space in the heart of a city; it was as if there'd been some kind of disaster. . . .

The most finished houses were the ones on the streets behind the Id Kah, which resemble a kitsch fantasy of a southern-European street. The houses and the road bricks were complementary shades of terracotta; the balconies

and doors were made from wood that had a plastic sheen. . . . The houses on the fantasy street looked to have been built using the construction style common all over China. Quickly laid brick is smoothed over with concrete and then a skin of white (or terracotta) tiles applied. The aim isn't to make a durable building, just to make a building fast.⁵⁶

Holdstock's words paint a valuable picture of the far-reaching effects of Kashgar's reconstruction, which not only destroyed the irreplaceable, world-class mud-brick architecture of the city, but also (and more fundamentally) ripped apart the socio-cultural ecosystem facilitated by that architecture—built on long centuries of tradition. Community life in the Old City became fundamentally transformed, and the pivotal role that Kashgar had played in Uyghurs' inter-generational cultural transmission was absolutely crippled, with a devastating prognosis for the future of Uyghur society.

2014–present: Re-education Camps and Continued Demolitions

From documents leaked to the *New York Times*, we now know that the seeds of the current cultural genocide campaign being exacted on the Uyghurs were sown in April of 2014, around the time Xi Jinping made a visit to East Turkistan in the wake of the 2014 Kunming attack. In a now-leaked internal speech, Xi called for the state to use “the organs of dictatorship” to show “absolutely no mercy” in the “struggle against terrorism, infiltration and separatism” in East Turkistan.⁵⁷ The results have been catastrophic, unleashing a campaign of ubiquitous cultural destruction; extrajudicial mass internment, indoctrination, and torture; gulag-style forced labor camps; and the birth of a truly unprecedented surveillance state. The bulk of these developments began in earnest around 2016, when Tibet's Party Secretary, Chen Quanguo, was transferred to East Turkistan, though the pressure had already been on the rise since Xi's 2014 visit. From that point on, much of what has been exacted on Kashgar can be seen in the context of this broader, concerted campaign. However, this campaign can also be seen for many of its many continuities with what had gone before in

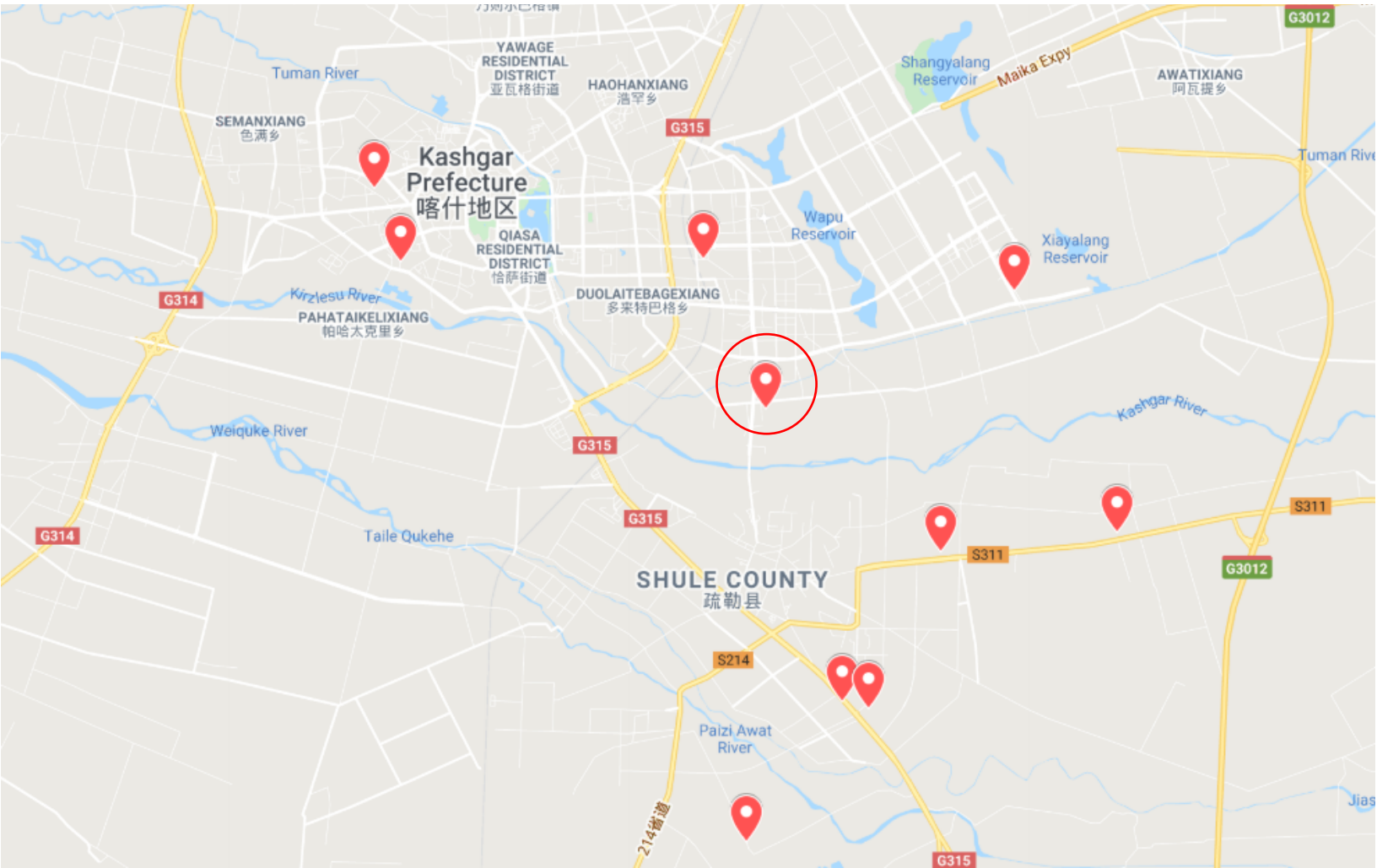
⁵⁶ Holdstock, *China's Forgotten People*, chap. 7.

⁵⁷ Austin Ramzy and Chris Buckley, “‘Absolutely No Mercy’: Leaked Files Expose How China Organized Mass Detentions of Muslims,” *The New York Times*, November 16, 2019, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/16/world/asia/china-xinjiang-documents.html>.

Kashgar. Thus, for the purposes of this report, I will examine the various facets of the 2014–present campaign in the context of what had gone before in Kashgar—particularly as it relates to construction and reconstruction of the city itself.

Between 2014 and 2016, the screws of state oppression were already tightening in significant ways. Incarceration rates for minorities in East Turkistan were rising, as was surveillance and securitization, with devastating effects. When considering the reconstruction of Kashgar, however, it is fair to say that the construction and refurbishment of buildings as re-education camps can be seen as another sort of “reconstruction,” the next step in changing the face of the city. The open-source research work of Shawn Zhang shows approximately 10 known re-education camps in the area of Kashgar (including adjacent Yengishaher [Chinese: Shule] County).⁵⁸

⁵⁸ For more information, see Shawn Zhang, “Satellite Imagery of Xinjiang ‘Re-Education Camp’ №17, 18, 19 新疆再教育集中营卫星图 17, 18, 19,” Medium, September 22, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2XWGVtT>; Shawn Zhang, “Satellite Imagery of Xinjiang ‘Re-Education Camp’ №2 新疆再教育集中营卫星图 2,” Medium, September 29, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2MoP5yE>; Shawn Zhang, “Satellite Imagery of Xinjiang ‘Re-Education Camp’ №35 新疆再教育集中营卫星图 35,” Medium, September 9, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Bsce0T>; Shawn Zhang, “Satellite Imagery of Xinjiang ‘Re-Education Camp’ №51 新疆再教育集中营卫星图 51,” Medium, September 22, 2018, <https://bit.ly/3dsVk0f>; Shawn Zhang, “Satellite Imagery of Xinjiang ‘Re-Education Camp’ №40 新疆再教育集中营卫星图 40,” Medium, September 12, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2XQWiwJ>; Shawn Zhang, “Satellite Imagery of Xinjiang ‘Re-Education Camp’ №15 新疆再教育集中营卫星图 15,” Medium, September 25, 2018, <https://bit.ly/3gQftj0>; Shawn Zhang, “Satellite Imagery of Xinjiang ‘Re-Education Camp’ №13 新疆再教育集中营卫星图 13,” Medium, October 19, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2U2yYL4>; Shawn Zhang, “Satellite Imagery of Xinjiang ‘Re-Education Camp’ №3 新疆再教育集中营卫星图 3,” Medium, October 19, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Xpt3lo>.



[List of Re-education Camps in Xinjiang](#) 新疆再教育集中营列表. © Shawn Zhang.

Zhang’s impressive work demonstrates how old schools and factories were transformed and expanded with watch-towers, barbed wire, and new living facilities to facilitate the mass internment of East Turkistan’s Uyghur (and other Turkic) peoples. Though some may have been abandoned, or only constructed with temporary use in mind, the map (above) shows the positioning of the known camps around Kashgar. One particularly well-documented camp (circled in red above) is shown below (p.33) with wired fences and watchtowers highlighted.



[Satellite Imagery of Xinjiang “Re-education Camp” №2 新疆再教育集中营卫星图](#). © Shawn Zhang.

The external appearance of the camp can be seen depicting watchtowers, barbed wire, and bars over windows (p.34).



[Satellite Imagery of Xinjiang “Re-education Camp” №2 新疆再教育集中营卫星图](#). © Shawn Zhang.

The secrecy surrounding these camps has made understanding what goes on in each particular facility a challenge. As a collective, however, a combination of first-hand accounts and open-source journalism has begun to piece together a more comprehensive picture in what continues to be a highly dynamic and evolving situation.⁵⁹ Between 1–3 million (likely at least 1.8 million)⁶⁰ Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities have been detained in extrajudicial centers—excluding the large number already incarcerated. The most recent estimate of 1.8 million would equate to about 15.4% (or almost one-sixth) of the adult Turkic and Hui population, and probably includes far more camps than are currently known.⁶¹ In the second half of 2018,

⁵⁹ For an impressive and continuously updated bibliography, see Magnus Fiskesjo, “Bibliography of Select News Reports & Academic Works” (Uyghur Human Rights Project), accessed February 22, 2020, <https://uhrp.org/featured-articles/chinas-re-education-concentration-camps-xinjiang>.

⁶⁰ Joshua Lipis, “Expert Says 1.8 Million Uyghurs, Muslim Minorities Held in Xinjiang’s Internment Camps,” *Radio Free Asia* (blog), November 24, 2019, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/detainees-11232019223242.html>.

⁶¹ Lipis.

Within the camps, reports confirm a systematic attempt to erase Uyghur (and other minorities’) culture in favor of aggressive Chinese assimilation. The camps represent brutal centers of coercion and cultural genocide.

there seems to have been a movement from detention camps into forced labor programs that maintain significant continuities with the camps (to be discussed in the next section).⁶² Within the camps, reports confirm a systematic attempt to erase Uyghur (and other minorities’) culture in favor of aggressive Chinese assimilation,⁶³ including mandatory Mandarin language study, forced indoctrination, torture,⁶⁴ severe sexual violence,⁶⁵ involuntary sterilizations,⁶⁶ deaths, and mass organ harvesting.⁶⁷ The camps represent brutal centers of coercion and cultural genocide.

As we consider the camps in the context of Kashgar as a whole, it is notable that they are dispersed around the periphery of the city, removed from its literal and symbolic center. Similarly, save their barbed-wire, the buildings tend to be relatively discreet, fenced, and in less-populated areas. Nonetheless, the threat of the camps hangs over the city: an unspoken, hidden reality that literally and figuratively frames the life of the city. Without warning, individuals and even whole neighborhoods have been known to silently disappear into the camps, leaving behind an absence—and a warning—that is palpable.

The development of the camps themselves has progressed in tandem with increased camp-like practices of indoctrination and surveillance throughout East Turkistan (to be further elaborated in the next sections). As these practices relate to the physical reconstruction of the city, however, it is important to note how they have been implemented alongside continuing alterations to the material architecture of the city. Since 2014, for instance, the Chinese government deployed 200,000 Party cadres to regularly visit and surveil Turkic groups throughout East Turkistan; since December 2017, the program expanded to include a “Becoming Family” initiative, a

⁶² Lipes.

⁶³ Christian Shepherd, “Fear and Oppression in Xinjiang: China’s War on Uighur Culture,” *Financial Times*, September 12, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/48508182-d426-11e9-8367-807ebd53ab77>.

⁶⁴ Rob Schmitz, “Ex-Detainee Describes Torture In China’s Xinjiang Re-Education Camp,” *NPR* (blog), November 13, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/13/666287509/ex-detainee-describes-torture-in-chinas-xinjiang-re-education-camp>.

⁶⁵ David Stavrou, “A Million People Are Jailed at China’s Gulags. I Managed to Escape. Here’s What Really Goes on Inside,” *Haaretz*, October 17, 2019, <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/.premium.MAGAZINE-a-million-people-are-jailed-at-china-s-gulags-i-escaped-here-s-what-goes-on-inside-1.7994216>.

⁶⁶ Elizabeth M. Lynch, “China’s Attacks on Uighur Women Are Crimes against Humanity,” *Washington Post*, accessed February 22, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/10/21/chinas-attacks-uighur-women-are-crimes-against-humanity/>.

⁶⁷ Adam Withnall, “China Is Killing Religious and Ethnic Minorities and Harvesting Their Organs, UN Human Rights Council Told,” *The Independent*, September 24, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/china-religious-ethnic-minorities-uighur-muslim-harvest-organs-un-human-rights-a9117911.html>.

compulsory program through which more than a million cadres spend at least five days every two months in the homes of East Turkistan's Turkic residents.⁶⁸ Though these specific programs are more directed at rural Uyghurs, similar practices of more invasive government intervention and surveillance extended into Kashgar. The result is that just as some communal practices and rhythms were necessarily destroyed with the traditional architectures of the Old City, the reconstructed "new" Old City arrived in lockstep with new, state-induced rituals of Chinese allegiance and Han engagement. Between 2014 and 2018, Uyghur attendance at local, weekly flag-raising ceremonies throughout the city and at Chinese language and culture classes swelled, as mosque attendance plummeted. Likewise, a tradition of periodic "Red Song" contests has taken root, with troupes of Uyghurs being recruited to participate in officially staged cultural activities aimed to publicly display state allegiance.⁶⁹ As the Old City was forcibly reconstructed, so were community practices.

Indeed, many of these new practices were further reinforced through continued changes to the architecture of the city since 2014. In a shockingly swift and under-reported process, the 2016 "Mosque Rectification" campaign of Kashgar demolished nearly 70% of mosques in Kashgar over the course of just three months, by the government's own admission. A Radio Free Asia investigation suggested that more than 5,000 mosques were destroyed in the process.⁷⁰ Reports suggest that many, perhaps most, of the remaining 30% of mosques have fallen into disuse. As researcher Joanne Smith Finley recounts, in June of 2018 the Old City's "neighborhood mosques were empty, their ornate doors padlocked, their boundaries decked in razor wire. Residents confirmed that the doors had been permanently closed for over a year. Some mosque walls sported framed copies of the 'Regulations on De-extremification' adopted on March 29, 2017, or the 'Clauses on Work to Improve Ethnic Unity' of May 3, 2016." Many mosques had crescents removed, and one was even transformed into a bar for Han tourists

Just as some communal practices and rhythms were necessarily destroyed with the traditional architectures of the Old City, the reconstructed 'new' Old City arrived in lockstep with new, state-induced rituals of Chinese allegiance and Han engagement.

⁶⁸ Human Rights Watch, "'Eradicating Ideological Viruses' | China's Campaign of Repression Against Xinjiang's Muslims" (Human Rights Watch, September 9, 2018), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/09/09/eradicating-ideological-viruses/chinas-campaign-repression-against-xinjiangs>.

⁶⁹ Uyghur Human Rights Project, "Extracting Cultural Resources: The Exploitation and Criminalization of Uyghur Cultural Heritage" (Uyghur Human Rights Project, June 12, 2018), 24, <https://uhrp.org/press-release/extracting-cultural-resources-exploitation-and-criminalization-uyghur-cultural>.

⁷⁰ Shohret Hoshur, "Under the Guise of Public Safety, China Demolishes Thousands of Mosques," trans. Brooks Boliek (Radio Free Asia, December 19, 2016), <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/udner-the-guise-of-public-safety-12192016140127.html>.

named “The Dream of Kashgar,” as if to mock Kashgar’s legacy, Han-Uyghur exploitation, and the Islamic prohibition against alcohol in one fell swoop.⁷¹

Rather than neighborhoods radiating out from organically dispersed mosques, Kashgar’s neighborhoods now radiate out from systematically planned “convenience police stations,” parts of the “grid-management system” that divides each city into squares of 500 people to be monitored by these hubs of surveillance and social control.⁷² In this sense, the new network of police stations replace the old mosques both geographically and functionally as spatial



Typical “Convenience Police Station” in Urumchi. © Darren Byler, April 2018.



Giant LED scrolling through images of Xi Jinping at Id Kah Square. Author’s photo, October 2018.

⁷¹ Joanne Smith Finley, “‘Now We Don’t Talk Anymore’: Inside the ‘Cleansing’ of Xinjiang,” *ChinaFile* (blog), December 28, 2018, <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/viewpoint/now-we-dont-talk-anymore>.

⁷² “China Has Turned Xinjiang into a Police State like No Other,” *The Economist*, May 31, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2018/05/31/china-has-turned-xinjiang-into-a-police-state-like-no-other>.

representations of community order: the former according to principles of community religion and tradition, the latter around principles of state coercion and compliance. A similar displacement and reordering are also mirrored in the symbolic community heart of Uyghur culture, Id Kah Square. Opposite the centuries-old face of the iconic mosque is a towering LED screen scrolling through gigantic images of Xi Jinping.



Kashgar's Old City, Kozichi Yarbeshi / Gaotai Minju, outlined in red (Google Earth).

The situation continues to develop, with new changes to the city every day. In a recent, disturbing development, the last remaining traditional neighborhood of Kashgar's Old City seems to be under threat. Known in Chinese as Gaotai Minju, the Kozichi Yarbeshi neighborhood rests on a hill outside the old city wall and was left as the single remaining vestige of traditional Old City architecture.

Upon visiting Kashgar in October of 2018, this author visited the neighborhood during the day to find guards covering all entrances, and at night, at which time he was able to gain access. Though the site was formally closed to tourists between 2016–2018, early morning and night visits were common practice for tourists hoping to see the last preserved section of the Old City. Locals I spoke with were certain that I would find a vibrant night market and community past hours, as

online travelers' blogs confirmed. Upon entering, I discovered disturbing signs of recent eviction, including large X's spray-painted on doors, missing electrical boxes, refuse in the streets, padlocked doors, and a complete absence of people:



Night shots of Kozichi Yarbeshi abandoned, with dilapidated houses, electrical boxes removed, padlocks, and X's on doors. Photo by author, October 2018.

Recent photos by one tour guide from the region confirm the presence of heavy demolition machinery near the neighborhood:



Historic neighborhood at risk. Photo credit: [Josh Summers](#) (not affiliated with UHRP).

The neighborhood in question was famous for housing stalwarts of Uyghur culture who resisted Old City reconstruction with notable fervor. While getting any reliable information out of Kashgar is a

challenge today, indications do not look promising. At a time when whole neighborhoods have been known to disappear into detention camps, the sudden and unreported desertion of the historic neighborhood suggests a likely forced removal into camps. The deteriorating condition of the neighborhood in combination with nearby demolition equipment also suggests that the last remaining holdout of Kashgar's traditional architecture may not last long.

Taken as a whole, the ongoing process of reconstruction in Kashgar represents a totalizing campaign of literal and symbolic cultural destruction and cooptation. Not only has the world lost an irreplaceable city of immense historical significance, the Uyghur people have lost their spiritual capital and the socio-cultural ecosystem that it sustained for centuries. More than simple destruction, the vestiges of Kashgar have been symbolically reconstructed into a new socio-cultural ecosystem, complete with new edifices and community practices that approximate what came before for legitimacy, but which are ultimately directed towards forced assimilation and control. The life of the city as a whole has become framed geographically by a network of hellish "re-education" camps constructed around the city, supporting the aggressive campaign of sociological and urban transformation the Chinese government has pursued. Unlike the long-since destroyed city walls that once protected Kashgar from external invasion, this new encirclement holds Kashgaris hostage to the processes of cultural genocide. This process is ongoing, as seen in the case of the Kozichi Yarbeshi neighborhood, and also has been replicated in other historic neighborhoods in East Turkistan.⁷³ As we shall see, it has also been intertwined with powerful mechanisms of economic exploitation and surveillance that have further contorted the life and history of the city.

ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION

Until recently, the processes of commercialization and economic exploitation at work in Kashgar have in many respects paralleled trends of commercialization that have plagued many historic cities and

⁷³ Clément Bürge and Josh Chin, "After Mass Detentions, China Razes Muslim Communities to Build a Loyal City," *Wall Street Journal*, March 21, 2019, sec. World, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/after-mass-detentions-china-razes-muslim-communities-to-build-a-loyal-city-11553079629>.

ethnic minority groups, albeit in a particularly aggressive form. The demolition of the Old City, intertwined with these trends, certainly elevated the severity of this cultural exploitation to an extreme. Recent reports of forced labor from detainees, however, suggest a final, distinct state of China's economic exploitation of East Turkistan: abject extraction.

The factors that have contributed to Kashgar's economic exploitation are manifold. For one, East Turkistan's geographical features and natural resources are particularly coveted by the Chinese state. Natural oil (20% of China's overall oil intake) and coal (40%)⁷⁴ across East Turkistan have made the region important to the Chinese government and its state owned enterprises, creating in many areas of East Turkistan a state-owned, company-led mass migration of Han Chinese into traditionally Uyghur lands, and domination over Uyghur economies.⁷⁵ China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is predicated on effective westward economic expansion, making East Turkistan a huge national economic priority as an important nexus of trade and commerce between China and the rest of Eurasia. Kashgar, with its unique proximity to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, is thus a priority for China's long-term economic strategy, and, for individual investors in China, a city of significant economic opportunity. Compounding this "opportunity" is the unique cultural heritage of Kashgar at a time in which Chinese domestic tourism—particularly "ethnic-minority tourism"—has been on the rise, laying the groundwork for a massive operation of cultural commodification. As Chen Quanguo's devastating campaign of cultural erasure and mass detentions has progressed, the allure of forced labor for profit from Kashgar's Uyghur-heavy urban context has produced an additional form of economic coercion and extraction that is unprecedented within the city.

The results of these processes have been manifold and mutually reinforcing. First, Kashgar has seen significant demographic shifts, with influxes of Han Chinese residents that local Kashgaris estimate to be in the hundreds of thousands—not reflected in official government

Compounding this [economic] "opportunity" is the unique cultural heritage of Kashgar at a time in which Chinese domestic tourism—particularly "ethnic-minority tourism"—has been on the rise, laying the groundwork for a massive operation of cultural commodification.

⁷⁴ Zachary Torrey, "The Human Costs of Controlling Xinjiang," *The Diplomat*, October 10, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/10/the-human-costs-of-controlling-xinjiang/>.

⁷⁵ Edward Wong, "China Invests in Region Rich in Oil, Coal and Also Strife," *The New York Times*, December 20, 2014, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/21/world/asia/china-invests-in-xinjiang-region-rich-in-oil-coal-and-also-strife.html>.

statistics.⁷⁶ Second, East Turkistan as a whole has seen soaring economic inequality along ethnic lines and a rising cost of living, especially in areas like Kashgar. Third—now undoubtedly severely exasperated by practices of forced labor—a vicious cycle of economically based inter-ethnic resentment has emerged. Fourth, despite some improvements to basic infrastructure, the Uyghur population has endured a brutal loss of human dignity through the combination of economic marginalization in their homeland, Han-managed cultural commodification, and systematic economic exploitation.

Whereas the story of Kashgar's concerted architectural reconstruction began around 2000, the economic exploitation of Kashgar had earlier roots, linked to Chinese state attempts to gain demographic advantage in the region. In some ways this process dates as far back as 1830, when the Qing dynasty began encouraging Han Chinese to set roots down in East Turkistan in order to give the empire greater power in the region.⁷⁷ The Republic of China attempted various schemes of economic incentivization for Han settlers, with limited success, just as the early Communist regime sent thousands of "volunteers" at various junctures to settle in East Turkistan,⁷⁸ along with approximately 800,000 famine refugees between 1959 and 1960 from the disastrous Great Leap Forward campaign.⁷⁹

Prior to 1999, however, the primary flag-bearer of Han migration to East Turkistan was the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, or *Bingtuan*, a curious hybrid of a state-owned enterprise and paramilitary force founded in 1954 with a stated mission to "reclaim land and garrison the frontier, populate the . . . borders of Xinjiang . . . with a Han population engaged in economic activities in times of peace."⁸⁰ The unusual threefold purpose of the *Bingtuan*—military "security," Han settlement, and economic development—speaks volumes to the government's unabashed manipulation of economic development to exploit and coerce East Turkistan and its inhabitants. As of 2018, the *Bingtuan* alone accounted for 2.68 million residents of Xinjiang and 17% of GDP, with an increasingly dominant role in state

⁷⁶ Spencer, "Fibre of Silk Road City Is Ripped Apart."

⁷⁷ Tyler, *Wild West China*, 186.

⁷⁸ Tyler, 168.

⁷⁹ Susan Wong-Tworek, "China's Economic Development Plan in Xinjiang and How It Affects Ethnic Instability" (Naval Postgraduate School, March 2015), 10, <https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/45276>.

⁸⁰ Liu and Peters, "The Hanification of Xinjiang, China," 266.

law enforcement and terror.⁸¹

In the 1980s, waves of Han migrants began taking up residence in East Turkistan, particularly in the more industrialized north of the region.⁸² In 1999, after several decades of increasing *Bingtuan*-pioneered Han migration, a new stage of Han emigration began under the Great Leap West campaign, a massive government initiative of Chinese state investment in western provinces—East Turkistan chief among them.⁸³ Airports, railway lines, and telecommunications were expanded with a budget of approximately 100 billion RMB (just over USD\$12 billion in 1999) in the first year alone, accompanied by a narrative of modernizing remote and backwards ethnic minorities and utilizing untapped natural resources.⁸⁴ Many locals felt as though the program brought a veritable deluge of Han migrants to the region,⁸⁵ infamous for a culture of transactional exploitation of local land, people, and economic systems.⁸⁶ Whereas China's 1953 government census found that Han Chinese made up 6% of East Turkistan's population, the 2000 census listed the Han population at 40.57%. By the same censuses, Uyghurs had declined from 75% to 45.21% of the population (though absolute population numbers increased).⁸⁷ The Great Leap West naturally only intensified these trends. While the region's GDP has risen significantly alongside migration, it has largely risen along ethnic lines, with Han Chinese dominating high-skilled and well-paying jobs, and Uyghurs left predominantly in low-skilled, rural jobs. Naturally, the influx of new, unequal wealth has also raised the costs of living, often making it more difficult for Uyghurs to continue their lifestyles on the same budget. Ethnic-based job discrimination has been severe, and resentment has accordingly grown.⁸⁸

It is within this broader context that we must consider Kashgar's economic situation. Though Kashgar is situated in the more Uyghur-

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⁸¹ Uyghur Human Rights Project, "The Bingtuan: China's Paramilitary Colonizing Force in East Turkestan" (Uyghur Human Rights Project, April 26, 2018).

⁸² Wong-Tworek, "China's Economic Development Plan in Xinjiang and How It Affects Ethnic Instability," 39.

⁸³ Liu and Peters, "The Hanification of Xinjiang, China," 267.

⁸⁴ Liu and Peters, 267.

⁸⁵ Spencer, "Fibre of Silk Road City Is Ripped Apart."

⁸⁶ Wong-Tworek, "China's Economic Development Plan in Xinjiang and How It Affects Ethnic Instability," 36–40.

⁸⁷ Congressional-Executive Commission on China, "Xinjiang Reports High Rate of Population Increase," February 28, 2006, <https://www.cecc.gov/publications/commission-analysis/xinjiang-reports-high-rate-of-population-increase>.

⁸⁸ Wong-Tworek, "China's Economic Development Plan in Xinjiang and How It Affects Ethnic Instability," 41–45.

majority southern side of East Turkistan (most Han migrants have settled to the north), it has long been home to a slightly higher proportion of Han inhabitants than its immediate surrounding areas due to its key strategic position.⁸⁹ That said, in 1952, of the 97,160 inhabitants of Kashgar recorded in the first PRC census of the city, the vast majority were Uyghur. By the 1980s, due in part to many of the aforementioned policies, the population of 190,000 had shifted to 73% Uyghur and 26% Han—a dramatic change, partially facilitated by Kashgar’s designation in 1984 as a grade-two open city because of its key strategic position near the Soviet Union.⁹⁰ Through the 1990s, immigration to Kashgar intensified, further encouraged by the construction of a new railway line that opened Kashgar to more Han settlers, who were allured by the profits and strategic location awaiting development in the far west.⁹¹ The jobs and industry they founded were generally dominated and almost entirely staffed by Han workers,⁹² especially in the better-paid industries of construction, resource extraction, and manufacturing.⁹³

Thus, migration patterns throughout the 1980s and 1990s had already begun to change the shape of Kashgar—Old City reconstruction aside. As Nick Holdstock relates, by 2000, the city “was already two places. . . . Walking between tall white-tiled buildings, past shops selling engine parts, steamed dumplings and fireworks, was like being in a small town in Hunan province, 5,000 kilometres to the east.”⁹⁴ Nonetheless, turning off the main streets would still take one away from commercialized Han Kashgar, and back into a more organic Uyghur atmosphere.⁹⁵ Driven by a government seeking greater ethnic assimilation and free-market forces, Han settlers to Kashgar effectively began building a parallel economy that would slowly transform the city, enveloping its culture, architecture, and traditional economy.

Naturally, the reconstruction of the city accelerated this process profoundly, as we have seen. Looking at the reconstruction through an economic prism, however, there are important additional elements not to be missed. For one, the reconstruction effectively amounted to a

⁸⁹ Dillon, *Xinjiang and the Expansion of Chinese Communist Power*, 3.

⁹⁰ Dillon, “Religion, Repression, and Traditional Uyghur Culture in Southern Xinjiang,” 2–3.

⁹¹ Hammer, “Demolishing Kashgar’s History.”

⁹² Hammer.

⁹³ Tyler Harlan, “Private Sector Development in Xinjiang, China. A Comparison between Uyghur and Han,” *Espace populations sociétés*, no. 2009/3 (December 1, 2009): 407–18, <https://doi.org/10.4000/eps.3772>.

⁹⁴ Holdstock, *China’s Forgotten People*, chap. 7.

⁹⁵ Holdstock, chap. 7.

significant government-induced gentrification of the Old City, such that many Uyghurs could not afford to move back to their homes. The Uyghurs who were wealthy enough to return after reconstruction “tend[ed] to be the wealthier ones, government employees and successful merchants whose economic well-being depends on their cooperation with the Han-dominated authorities,”⁹⁶ skewing the culture and ethos of the Old City. Likewise, interviews with locals suggest many of those who were moved out from the Old City were also moved far away from their means of economic livelihood, creating a dependency on government benefits, for which demonstrated submission to state policies of assimilation and community reporting were prerequisite—further eroding the cultural and community norms of the Old City. In this way, multiple methods of governmental economic coercion have tended to operate in lockstep with reconstruction policies, subtly reinforcing the methods of state economic control alongside the more obvious reengineering projects of



Traditional Uyghur instruments and wooden store front in 1998 Kashgar. © Kevin Bubriski (not affiliated with UHRP).

⁹⁶ Dan Levin, “China Remodels an Ancient Silk Road City, and an Ethnic Rift Widens,” *The New York Times*, March 5, 2014, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/06/world/asia/china-remodels-an-ancient-silk-road-city-and-an-ethnic-rift-widens.html>.

the symbolic heart of Kashgar.

Immediately following the reconstruction of Kashgar, the neighborhood Communist Party committee of the Old City leased the reassembled heart of Uyghur culture to the Beijing Zhongkun Investment Group, a Han company which began marketing the area as a “living Uyghur folk museum.”⁹⁷ The corporation established a “near-monopoly” over Kashgar’s tourism,⁹⁸ with the few surviving original homes often designated with signage and agreements of being a “family especially for visiting” by tourists.⁹⁹ Indeed, the Old City as a whole seems to have been redesigned with an eye to better conditions for surveillance on one hand, and tourism on the other,¹⁰⁰ and in many ways has become a gigantic theater for extracting wealth from commodified Uyghur tradition. So aggressive was the commercial tourist interest in the city that it even occasionally butted up against state policies of religious repression. In the case of Id Kah mosque (and others), for instance, a charge for entry is levied on both Han tourists and Uyghur worshippers—but only after a debate by local authorities as to whether to define all such worship as “illegal religious activity and feudal superstition” or as a potential opportunity to be “exploited as a tourism resource following the model of the commercialization of Tibetan religious culture.”¹⁰¹ It is equally worth noting that many cultural traditions and activities have been forcibly fused with state propaganda or Han traditions.¹⁰² A full exploration of Uyghur cultural exploitation can be found in UHRP’s “Extracting Cultural Resources” report,¹⁰³ but suffice it to say that the dynamics are clear, and particularly exaggerated in the case of Kashgar: Uyghur culture is a resource to be commodified and extracted, for profit *and* for social control. Kashgar’s Old City today has become a menagerie of performative Uyghur cultural traditions largely in the service of Han wealth production and state social control—from its synthetic ‘Islamic lego’ architecture, to its cultural performances, to its ownership.

Uyghur culture is a resource to be commodified and extracted, for profit *and* for social control. Kashgar’s Old City today has become a menagerie of performative Uyghur cultural traditions largely in the service of Han wealth production and state social control.

⁹⁷ Levin.

⁹⁸ Uyghur Human Rights Project, “Living on the Margins: The Chinese State’s Demolition of Uyghur Communities,” 65.

⁹⁹ Uyghur Human Rights Project, 38.

¹⁰⁰ Uyghur Human Rights Project, “Extracting Cultural Resources: The Exploitation and Criminalization of Uyghur Cultural Heritage,” 39.

¹⁰¹ Uyghur Human Rights Project, 28.

¹⁰² Uyghur Human Rights Project, 3.

¹⁰³ See Uyghur Human Rights Project, “Extracting Cultural Resources: The Exploitation and Criminalization of Uyghur Cultural Heritage.” For a more thorough treatment of the issue.



A commercialized traditional dance periodically performed for tourists outside of the Old City's (reconstructed) main gate. Source: UHRP report "[Extracting Cultural Resources](#)."

Outside of the Old City, the broader economic transformation of Kashgar continued and accelerated. In May 2010, Kashgar was designated a new special economic zone, and paired with Shenzhen, the fishing village turned high-tech metropolis as a development partner.¹⁰⁴ In a bid to attract capital and settlers to Kashgar, the Chinese central government afforded the city a slew of tax breaks, investment incentives, and lighter regulations to start new businesses. Shenzhen contributed USD\$1.5 billion in the program's first year to support the project, as Kashgar radically expanded its industrial parks, including a

¹⁰⁴ Bill Chou and Xuejie Ding, "A Comparative Analysis of Shenzhen and Kashgar in Development as Special Economic Zones," *East Asia* 32, no. 2 (June 1, 2015): 117–36, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-015-9235-5>.

Shenzhen-sponsored park.¹⁰⁵ In a particularly dramatic example of the gentrifying effects of such policies, *Xinjiang Business Daily* noted that prices for Kashgar apartments jumped by as much as 30% in just a couple months after the announcement of the special economic zone, and commercial properties jumped by as much as 40%.¹⁰⁶ Unsurprisingly, the process of induced economic development and Han migration continued well into the 2010s.

It is worth noting that the various economic processes and trends here discussed occurred over decades with various overlapping and interlocking motivations. Certainly, there has been an overarching governmental intent to secure power and control in the region, Kashgar in particular. However, within the array of Han settlers, tourists, prospectors, developers, and beyond, any combination of intentions and relations to Uyghur culture could have animated their diverse actions. Like many culturally rich but economically disadvantaged locales, Kashgar's erosion of tradition at points had much to do with the simple dictates of profitability and market pressures. Many outside actors likely had genuine hopes of developing the city, albeit without a full understanding of the government's broader policies in the region or a Uyghur perspective on the trends unfolding in their heartland.

Whatever we might say about the individual elements of Kashgar's economic exploitation, however, there can be no doubt about the end result of these changes taken together: a palpable loss of dignity for the Uyghur people, at a breathtaking pace. Their heartland has been systematically diluted by settlers who have exploited their natural resources, gentrified their historic neighborhoods, and gutted and sold their culture—keeping the profits largely for themselves. One North American tour guide with experience in Kashgar's Old City before and after the reconstruction recounted to me how the Old City was transformed from the heartbeat of Uyghur culture into a “zoo for observing Uyghurs.” One resident of the greater Kashgar area recounted the economic shifts this way:

I remember how when we were young, we were poor.
We had to bring in water from the stream, [we had] no
running water. When I went back [in 2016], they had
running water, but they were still poor. But it was

There can be no doubt about the end result of these changes taken together: a palpable loss of dignity for the Uyghur people, at a breathtaking pace.

¹⁰⁵ Barbara Demick, “China to Turn Silk Road City into Special Economic Zone,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 17, 2010, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2010-nov-17-la-fg-china-kashgar-20101117-story.html>.

¹⁰⁶ Demick.

different: in my time you may be poor, but you would never go out publicly looking disheveled. You had *dignity*. Now you see the children on the street looking completely a wreck. They lost their all their dignity, and their hope.

As in all the coercive practices exacted upon Kashgar, the onset of mass internment camps has severely escalated the stakes of economic exploitation. Initially, this meant that the repercussions of deviating from the reconstructed, commercialized norms of the Old City would carry graver consequences, for instance. Now, however, we know that Chen Quanguo's campaign of ethnic repression has gone so far as to implement the ultimate expression of extractive economic policies: forced labor.

Ascertaining the exact numbers and nature of the recent campaign of forced labor in East Turkistan is difficult for a variety of reasons. Aside from the general secrecy and surveillance that makes any research in the region difficult, the government's forced labor practices make use of several types of labor pools related to detention camps, prisoners, and coerced rural laborers, which may range from varying degrees of involuntary labor to outright forced labor.¹⁰⁷ These pools of labor are often mixed, and companies and the Chinese government alike often use a variety of techniques to obfuscate the details or presence of forced labor in factories.¹⁰⁸

Nonetheless, Chinese government documents have also been forthright in boasting about the way in which the internment camp labor supply has attracted a host of companies to establish production facilities in East Turkistan. They have also been unabashed in offering aggressive subsidies for the use of internment camp labor.¹⁰⁹ The best analyses possible at this point conservatively estimate that a minimum of 100,000 ex-detainees are working in conditions of probable forced labor, not including the campaign directed at pushing East Turkistan's

¹⁰⁷ Adrian Zenz, "Beyond the Camps: Beijing's Long-Term Scheme of Coercive Labor, Poverty Alleviation and Social Control in Xinjiang | Journal of Political Risk," *Journal of Political Risk* 7, no. 12 (December 2019), <https://www.jpolorisk.com/beyond-the-camps-beijings-long-term-scheme-of-coercive-labor-poverty-alleviation-and-social-control-in-xinjiang/>.

¹⁰⁸ Zenz; Amy Lehr and Efthimia Maria Bechrakis, "Connecting the Dots in Xinjiang: Forced Labor, Forced Assimilation, and Western Supply Chains" (Center for Strategic & International Studies, October 16, 2019), 11–13, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/connecting-dots-xinjiang-forced-labor-forced-assimilation-and-western-supply-chains>.

¹⁰⁹ Zenz, "Beyond the Camps."

rural poor into situations of involuntary or forced labor.¹¹⁰ These developments come alongside new reports that the *Bingtuan* is likewise putting overwhelmingly Turkic prisoners to work in its cotton production factories,¹¹¹ at a time when the flow from detention centers into prisons is increasingly porous¹¹² and the incarceration rates of minorities in East Turkistan are skyrocketing.¹¹³

Many factories have been built within or adjacent to the camps, while many others have imported workers from camps.¹¹⁴ Such involuntary labor factories often have camp-like elements, such as high, barbed-wire fences, restrictive dormitories, and “paramilitary style management.”¹¹⁵ They also generally include many elements continuous with camp practices, such as indoctrination techniques, Mandarin classes, and strict restriction of religious practices.¹¹⁶ Various interviews reveal that workers were paid well below minimum wage (if paid at all),¹¹⁷ and coerced into the labor under threat of being put into camps.¹¹⁸ Adrian Zenz’s groundbreaking work on the matter has shown the extent to which numerous government documents focus on “transforming the thinking of women” in Turkic communities in order to push them into the new factory labor sites, leaving children (including infants and toddlers) in full-time or day time state-run education and training settings.¹¹⁹ The upshot of these practices of forced labor is that “both factory and educational settings are essentially state-controlled environments that facilitate ongoing political indoctrination while barring religious practices,” augmenting “intergenerational separation and social control over family life” and

In 2018, Kashgar prefecture announced its intention to put 100,000 “graduates” of internment camps to work in industrial parks as a part of the ongoing campaign, amounting to putting 20% of the entire Uyghur population of Kashgar into coerced labor.

¹¹⁰ Lehr and Bechrakis, “Connecting the Dots in Xinjiang,” 8.

¹¹¹ Lianchao Han et al., *Cotton: The Fabric Full of Lies: A Report on Forced and Prison Labor in Xinjiang, China, and the Nexus to Global Supply Chains* (Citizen Press, 2019).

¹¹² Gene Bunin, “From Camps to Prisons: Xinjiang’s next Great Human Rights Catastrophe · Global Voices,” *Global Voices* (blog), October 27, 2019, <https://globalvoices.org/2019/10/27/from-camps-to-prisons-xinjiangs-next-great-human-rights-catastrophe/>.

¹¹³ Renee Xia, Victor Clemens, and Frances Eve, “Criminal Arrests in Xinjiang Account for 21% of China’s Total in 2017 | Chinese Human Rights Defenders,” Chinese Human Rights Defenders, accessed February 29, 2020, <https://www.nhrd.org/2018/07/criminal-arrests-in-xinjiang-account-for-21-of-chinas-total-in-2017/>.

¹¹⁴ Chris Buckley and Austin Ramzy, “Inside China’s Push to Turn Muslim Minorities Into an Army of Workers,” *The New York Times*, December 30, 2019, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/30/world/asia/china-xinjiang-muslims-labor.html>.

¹¹⁵ Zenz, “Beyond the Camps.”

¹¹⁶ Buckley and Ramzy, “Inside China’s Push to Turn Muslim Minorities Into an Army of Workers.”

¹¹⁷ Lehr and Bechrakis, “Connecting the Dots in Xinjiang,” 11.

¹¹⁸ Australian Broadcasting Channel, *New Evidence China Is Using a System of Forced Labour in Xinjiang | Four Corners* (Four Corners, 2019), https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3&v=iG7oQnXyolg.

¹¹⁹ Zenz, “Beyond the Camps.”

inhibiting intergenerational cultural transmission.¹²⁰

Kashgar has been a relatively well-documented arena of these new governmental campaigns of forced labor. In 2018, Kashgar prefecture announced its intention to put 100,000 “graduates” of internment camps to work in industrial parks as a part of the ongoing campaign, amounting to putting 20% of the entire Uyghur population of Kashgar into coerced labor.¹²¹ The same year, the government announced building a factory within Kashgar’s primary camp, complete with a combination of “worldview education + Chinese language study + skills training” elements in its “paramilitary-style management” for both camp and non-camp workers.¹²² The Kashgar Shenzhen industrial park, built as a flagship initiative of Kashgar’s designation as a special economic zone in 2010, has been heralded for its involvement in involuntary labor programs. Kashgar prefecture also planned to double its rural satellite factories from 490 to 792 by 2020—creating capacity for more than 60,000 more rural “jobs,” of an involuntary nature.¹²³ In addition to the expansion of such factories in Kashgar and its surroundings, there are also documented cases of significant numbers of detainees from Kashgar being transferred to camps and factories in other parts of East Turkistan and throughout China, spending months or years away from family members, further fragmenting Kashgar’s social fabric through the use of forced labor.¹²⁴ With the threat of detention ever-present, and the radical expansion of state-run or state-encouraged labor initiatives, East Turkistan “has become a site of involuntary labor assignments: the level of coerciveness of one’s occupation may vary, but being outside a government-approved work category, or failing to comply with the state’s opinion of what you in particular should be doing, is no longer an option.”¹²⁵

Thus, through policies of forced labor, yet another sector of Uyghur life has been turned into a crucible of social control. Taken as a whole, Kashgar’s economy cannot be described as anything but grotesque: under the auspices of economic development, the Chinese

Under the auspices of economic development, the Chinese state is systematically and forcibly extracting wealth from Uyghur tradition and labor, while simultaneously expanding social control, dismantling social institutions, and denigrating Uyghur culture.

¹²⁰ Zenz.

¹²¹ Lehr and Bechrakis, “Connecting the Dots in Xinjiang,” 8.

¹²² Zenz, “Beyond the Camps.”

¹²³ Zenz.

¹²⁴ Buckley and Ramzy, “Inside China’s Push to Turn Muslim Minorities Into an Army of Workers”; Vicky Xiuzhong Xu et al., “Uyghurs for Sale” (Australian Strategic Policy Institute, March 1, 2020), <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/uyghurs-sale>.

¹²⁵ Zenz, “Beyond the Camps.”

state is systematically and forcibly extracting wealth from Uyghur tradition and labor, while simultaneously expanding social control, dismantling social institutions, and denigrating Uyghur culture. As the city continues to lose its character in a free-for-all of Han investment and migration, the soul of the city is under unprecedented attack. It is an ironic, dual-pronged approach: on one hand, the reconstructed Old City monetizes and displays an artificial reflection of Uyghur culture by turning the historic heart of Uyghur society into an ethnic amusement park; on the other, a vast network of forced labor factories around the city are employed to further extract wealth from the Uyghurs while also dismantling their culture, families, and future.

SURVEILLANCE

When asked about the extension of surveillance into Kashgar, one local compared the process of expanding surveillance to the old boiling-frog parable: put a frog into boiling water, and it will be immediately alarmed. But put the frog into water that you slowly bring to a boil, and it will not notice until it is too late.¹²⁶

The Chinese government has created an unprecedented surveillance state in East Turkistan. As with the frog, it was a slow, incremental process that, once completed, was inescapable and entirely immersive—particularly in urban areas like Kashgar. This paper will not attempt to reproduce the full expanse of impressive work that has been done on surveillance in East Turkistan, but will aim to expound how the ubiquitous surveillance of the city has transformed its atmosphere, and acted as a lynchpin to make the city coerce-able as well as a sort of upside-down “smart city”—an instrument of social coercion in its own right.

Novel and disturbing as recent developments in surveillance are, it is first worth reiterating that older forms of analog surveillance are still at play—and influential—in Kashgar and have been for decades. Intra-community surveillance is a favorite method of social control for the CCP and has been utilized liberally throughout its history. Unlike more recent technologically sophisticated methods, surveillance through intra-community spying can breed more community fear,

To re-engineer an entire ethnic community, then, analog surveillance has unique communal advantages outside of mere information gathering and securitization and cannot be neglected in any assessment of Kashgar’s ongoing coercion.

¹²⁶ Hassan*, Recollections of Kashgar.

compliance, and disintegration by poisoning the relationships within a community. To re-engineer an entire ethnic community, then, analog surveillance has unique communal advantages outside of mere information gathering and securitization and cannot be neglected in any assessment of Kashgar's ongoing coercion.

Interviews for this report indicated that such intra-community surveillance has been an integral part of Kashgar's transformation throughout the time period focused on here. With regards to Kashgar's reconstruction, for instance, one credible source reported that the families cleared out from Id Kah square as early as 2000 were forced into notable, regular exercises of intra-community spying after relocation.¹²⁷ However much such practices of community surveillance were standard procedure prior to 2014, there is no doubt that from 2014 onwards, the degree and frequency of surveillance rapidly escalated. Interviews suggest that even before the installation of Chen Quanguo as Party Secretary, Party cadres had been taking a more aggressive approach to intra-community surveillance, canvassing community members to report any "wrongdoings" or "misdeeds" they had committed—and any that they knew those around them had committed. Any discrepancies between an individual's confessions about his or herself and the confessions of others on his or her behalf would illicit suspicion towards the accused and greater trust in the accuser, creating perverse incentive structures to self-incriminate and distrust others. Children were likewise mobilized in the expanding community surveillance, and unwittingly asked to report on their parents' and elder siblings' religious activities as a part of children's games at school or in clubs.

Other forms of analogue surveillance and community intrusion have also expanded. Beginning in 2014, waves of (mostly Han) Party members were dispatched to visit Uyghur families in long term home stays to both help in the indoctrination process and help in surveillance efforts. This program expanded in 2017, when over a million Party "relatives" were mobilized to conduct regular, forced week-long homestays in which they continued "civilizing" and "teaching" Uyghurs and other minorities state-approved lifestyles, while keeping an eye out for any (broadly defined) signs of "extremism." Use of Uyghur language, expressions of Islamic piety, or state resentment are

Children were mobilized in the expanding community surveillance, and unwittingly asked to report on their parents' and elder siblings' religious activities as a part of children's games at school or in clubs.

¹²⁷ Hamut, Transformations of Kashgar

significant targets of concern.¹²⁸

Alongside such methods of interpersonal community surveillance, truly novel forms of digital surveillance have accompanied the subjugation of East Turkistan. Building upon the impressive work of Darren Byler on this topic, I subcategorize the digital surveillance of East Turkistan into biometric, communicative, behavioral, and spatial dimensions. While the last category is the most directly relevant to Kashgar in particular, the spatial surveillance of Kashgar cannot be fully understood without a prior basic understanding of the biometric, communicative, and behavioral modes of digital surveillance that accompanied it.

Taking in each in turn, we can begin with the multifaceted tools of biometric surveillance unleashed on East Turkistan. A program by the name of “Physicals for All” reported having included 36 million participants between 2016 and 2017 (more than the population of the region). Authorities systematically took DNA samples, iris scans, and other biometric data from Turkic groups in East Turkistan for the initiative.¹²⁹ Another program of “health checks” expected of all adults in East Turkistan has additionally taken fingerprints, voice signatures, and face signatures (for more comprehensive facial recognition capabilities) of vast numbers of Uyghurs under coercive conditions.¹³⁰ By this point, these campaigns are likely to have garnered a wide array of immutable, rich, and unique identifiers tied to every Turkic adult in East Turkistan,¹³¹ making immediate identification inescapable and indelible. Even beyond recognizing the features of individual persons, the Chinese company Hikvision has also advertised tools purportedly capable of identifying Uyghurs merely based on physiological phenotypes—distinguishing between ethnic groups in real time, regardless of whether or not individual profiles are accessed.¹³²

Linked to these biometric identifiers are advanced methods of communications surveillance. In one particularly disturbing

AI-powered systems have learned to transcribe Uyghur speech en masse, translate it, and scan the results for material of “concern.” Chinese surveillance has split open the comfort and protection of even the spoken Uyghur mother tongue into yet another arena of control.

¹²⁸ Darren Byler, “China’s Government Has Ordered a Million Citizens to Occupy Uighur Homes. Here’s What They Think They’re Doing,” *ChinaFile* (blog), October 24, 2018, <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/postcard/million-citizens-occupy-uyghur-homes-xinjiang>.

¹²⁹ Sui-Lee Wee, “China Uses DNA to Track Its People, With the Help of American Expertise,” *The New York Times*, February 21, 2019, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/21/business/china-xinjiang-uyghur-dna-thermo-fisher.html>.

¹³⁰ Byler, “Ghost World.”

¹³¹ Human Rights Watch, “China’s Algorithms of Repression: Reverse Engineering a Xinjiang Police Mass Surveillance App” (Human Rights Watch, May 1, 2019), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/05/01/chinas-algorithms-repression/reverse-engineering-xinjiang-police-mass-surveillance>.

¹³² Byler, “Ghost World.”

Devices and digital communications are scanned for religious imagery, non-compliant speech, or “suspicious” sentiments. *Not* using such a surveilled device can equally illicit concern, making virtually all digital communications beholden to the state.

development that has received relatively little attention outside of Byler’s work, the Uyghur language itself has been penetrated by the Chinese state. AI-powered systems have learned to transcribe Uyghur speech en masse, translate it, and scan the results for material of “concern.”¹³³ In a very real sense, Chinese surveillance has split open the comfort and protection of even the spoken Uyghur mother tongue into yet another arena of control. This is, of course, only where it starts: all internet activity of Uyghurs in East Turkistan today is monitored, as all Uyghurs have been required to download the Clean Net Guard app, which monitors everything said, read, or written on smartphones.¹³⁴ Apps or tools that could connect Uyghurs to the outside world are grounds enough to be sent to camps, isolating East Turkistan from external communications entirely. Even content that was posted and deleted on the internet before 2017, when much of these systems reached full fruition, can be retroactively recovered and used as grounds for suspicion. Devices and digital communications are scanned for religious imagery, non-compliant speech, or ‘suspicious’ sentiments. *Not* using such a surveilled device can equally illicit concern,¹³⁵ making virtually all digital communications beholden to the state—not to mention any speech captured by the thousands of audio-enabled surveillance cameras lining streets throughout East Turkistan.

Building upon these two pillars of surveillance, behavioral metrics have also been integrated into the surveillance technology of East Turkistan. Aside from more obvious signs of religious piety such as long beards or headscarves, which are also digitally recorded, a sophisticated network of interconnected nodes can detect a shockingly wide variety of behaviors for reporting, including indicators like abnormalities in a Uyghur household’s use of electricity, or even leaving a house from a back door too often.¹³⁶ Not socializing with neighbors enough can be suspicious, as can associating with anyone under any form of suspicion.¹³⁷ Movements, vehicle usage, social visits, and religious practices are all meticulously monitored and analyzed, with real-time notifications pushed to investigators for immediate

¹³³ Byler.

¹³⁴ Byler.

¹³⁵ Byler.

¹³⁶ Human Rights Watch, “China’s Algorithms of Repression: Reverse Engineering a Xinjiang Police Mass Surveillance App.”

¹³⁷ Human Rights Watch.

examination of behavioral variations.¹³⁸

Spatial surveillance—the most directly relevant mode of surveillance to Kashgar as an urban space—was the first of these four dimensions to be realized, and the most relevant for our purposes. As China has covered its cities with surveillance cameras, all the more it has carpeted East Turkistan with recording devices. Interestingly, it was around 2008 when many Uyghurs first began noticing cameras crop up around their cities, just as the Old City was being reconstructed. Several studies have suggested that the reconstruction of the Old City was in part designed so as to make the area more surveille-able—and more surveilled it became.¹³⁹ Interviewees described how initially, they did not think of cameras as threatening but as innocuous security measures for petty crime. Only slowly did Uyghurs working in the security apparatus begin warning relatives of the expanding capabilities and reach of the cameras. Gradually, Uyghurs became wearier of speaking around those cameras known to have audio components and avoided those thought to be capable of facial recognition. By the time the suspicion began to creep into general Uyghur society, however, the cameras were already pervasive. As one walks the streets of Kashgar now, it feels as though they are inescapable. The city is under an omnipresent watchful eye.

The spatial surveillance of East Turkistan, perhaps more than any other facet of surveillance, is what makes the atmosphere of the region so viscerally oppressive. As one moves throughout the region, and Kashgar in particular, one can palpably feel the presence of all-encompassing state observation, and with it, control. Part of what makes it so effective is its impressive intertwinement with the aforementioned elements of surveillance: through the AI-enabled Integrated Joint Operations Platform (IJOP), all the other facets of surveillance are merged with the spatial observation of the city. As cameras recognize your face, your movements and actions are linked to your biometric profile including blood type, fingerprints, irises, and DNA analysis; all of your digital communications—spoken, written, or even merely read—are likewise accessible to the system keeping watch over your actions and movements around the city, and even much of what you speak on the streets *without* your phone can be picked up; numerous elements of your behaviors—dress, electricity usage,

Thus it is accurate to assert that “all of Xinjiang has become an open-air prison, with the difference of internment and non-internment being a matter of degree.

¹³⁸ Human Rights Watch.

¹³⁹ Liu and Yuan, “Making a Safer Space?”

socialization, participation in flag-raising ceremonies and evening Mandarin classes—are linked to your profile; and, of course, the insights garnered from intra-community spying and Party ‘relative’ home visit observations are also brought to bear on your tracked, real-time actions throughout the city.

Crucially, you do not need to have been guilty of any crime to be questioned or punished; you will be designated “pre-criminal” if IJOP deems you sufficiently suspicious to be likely to commit a crime in the future by your movements and activities.¹⁴⁰ Naturally, the ambiguity of what contributes to suspicion for *future* crimes in such a comprehensive surveillance state makes any action a matter of careful consideration. Smothered by the ubiquitous camera system blanketing the city, Kashgar and its people have been absorbed into a gigantic observable performance, with hellish camps waiting around the city for those who deviate—purposefully or accidentally—from their prescribed role.

Thus it is accurate to assert that “all of Xinjiang has become an open-air prison, with the difference of internment and non-internment being a matter of degree.”¹⁴¹ However, while the prison analogy works in terms describing the degree of control and surveillance at work throughout East Turkistan, it also must be acknowledged that further, novel dynamics are operative, particularly in Kashgar. A historic, deeply symbolic city—with layers of culture, tradition, economy, and architecture—is a very different thing than a prison, which is built for a very specific function and a particular sector of society. For the first time, new technologies have been able to extend prison-like control more fully into the multifaceted existence of a city. But just as the function and social structures of a city are so much more multilayered than a prison, so also are the effects and significance of this novel form of coercion more complex. No doubt the psychological, anthropological, and sociological repercussions of exerting such unprecedented, pervasive control on a full urban society are sure to be severe, even if the novelty of those repercussions makes it difficult to observe or articulate how that severity manifests. In the case of Kashgar, the layers of cultural, historical, and symbolic significance of the city—in concert with the city’s forced reconstruction and economic exploitation—only compound that complexity.

¹⁴⁰ Darren Byler, “Do Coercive Reeducation Technologies Actually Work?,” *Blog // Los Angeles Review of Books* (blog), January 6, 2020, <https://blog.lareviewofbooks.org/provocations/coercive-reeducation-technologies-actually-work/>.

¹⁴¹ Zenz, “Beyond the Camps.”

Indeed, we can only guess at the *full* ramifications of Kashgar's novel model of surveillance-oppression for the day-to-day life of the city. While it certainly means a constant pressure and fear in the background of one's actions, it also means more. Likely, the influence of surveillance affects different parts of life differently. For example, this researcher remembers marveling at the 20-plus surveillance cameras installed inside the small prayer room at the back of Id Kah Mosque (inordinately more cameras than would be needed to surveil a room of that size) conspicuously pointed towards where supplicants would prostrate. In this case, the preponderance of cameras seemed more directed at dismantling religious intimacy than at actually surveilling individuals or activity. Given that prayer is often such a delicate and personal activity, the surveillance was seemingly geared towards—and better suited for—intimidation and disorientation than actual data collection in the realm of religious practice (though likely achieving both). In other words, while intensive surveillance of prayer may be effective in monitoring the activities of tracked individuals, it may further compromise or negate the ability of individuals to perform certain activities in the first place.

Moreover, supposing a particularly religious society comes to collectively process its trauma through prayer, for instance, a surveillance-induced inability to pray may have knock-on social effects as community trauma must be displaced or internalized elsewhere. As in spirituality so also in all other spheres of life: mass surveillance may not only control but also alter or corrupt a diverse array of human activities found in a city, in myriad ways, and with secondary or tertiary effects difficult to ascertain—in addition to the more obvious implications of data collection and the feeling of being constantly watched. Put differently, if an urban space contains a full human ecosystem of relationships, meanings, narratives, and subjectivities, in addition to economic and power structures, we can expect such a totalizing extension of surveillance to have disruptive, dynamic and profound effects on that ecosystem.

Of course, the unintended dynamics of the panoptic city will likely also evolve additional, unforeseen economic and power structures that are similarly concerning. I was once told by a Han youth in Kashgar that when bored, his friends in the security establishment have taken to using the cameras to “watch the beautiful women” without their knowledge. In a city in which such subtle, untraceable, sexually charged spectatorship is made easy, one wonders how sexual culture

If an urban space contains a full human ecosystem of relationships, meanings, narratives, and subjectivities, in addition to economic and power structures, we can expect such a totalizing extension of surveillance to have disruptive, dynamic and profound effects on that ecosystem.

might develop as security personnel and civilians alike become accustomed to the reality of such systemic potential. One also wonders how interrelated classes of “the observers” and “the observed” might develop new power and economic dynamics in sexuality, economics, and beyond.

I have here only cited very small examples of surveilled religious experience and sexual observation, merely to indicate how countless more areas of life in such a surveilled city might be changing norms, culture, and human experience. Darren Byler’s research corroborates this point. One Uyghur he spoke to related how the “government officials, civil servants, and tech workers who have come to build, implement, and monitor the [surveillance] system don’t seem to perceive Uyghurs’ humanity” beyond the system of quantifiable surveillance they have constructed for them. Uyghurs, he related, now live in a constant state of behavior and thought-adaptation under the watchful eye of surveillance, with “their entire lives . . . behind walls . . . like they are ghosts living in another world.”¹⁴² While it is impossible to understand or even recognize all the dimensions of such pervasive surveillance on the life of a city, it is at least worth recognizing the significance of how diverse and significant those effects likely are psychologically and experientially. In this sense, Kashgar and other cities in East Turkistan are being forced into a truly novel and grotesque form of human existence: constantly contorted to comply with mass surveillance systems and administrators.

Putting aside the totality of that experience, the intended, overarching purpose of Kashgar’s sophisticated system of surveillance can be understood by thinking of Kashgar as a type of “smart city.” Ordinarily, smart cities integrate technology into the infrastructure of a city to achieve greater efficiency, comfort, and convenience for inhabitants in areas like mobility, energy, healthcare, waste management, and security. In this sense, Kashgar’s impressively interconnected system of surveillance is hardwired into the architecture, layout, and processes of the city infrastructure and represents a highly “advanced” smart city for its dynamic, integrated high-tech feedback between inhabitants and urban management.

As in a smart city, the flow of people through various channels of the city is mediated and ordered by technologically enabled processes, as Uyghurs are digitally processed through hundreds of checkpoints,

¹⁴² Byler, “Ghost World.”

The IJOP-powered ecosystem of the city from its foundations aimed towards creating a system of preventative policing, through which real-time indicators can be used to pluck persons off the street as soon as they are deemed sufficiently “pre-criminal.”

while Han Chinese are automatically authorized to glide past facial recognition cameras in “green lanes.”¹⁴³ Some areas of the city are forbidden for certain individuals and not others, arbitrated and mediated automatically through the security system.¹⁴⁴ As previously mentioned, the city has been subdivided into a grid system, through which a network of convenience police stations systematically monitor and respond to the real-time events in their jurisdiction through IJOP’s AI-powered analysis of movements, behaviors, and communications.¹⁴⁵ In much the same way that smart cities aim to be anticipatory of inefficiencies and emerging problems, the IJOP-powered ecosystem of the city is aimed towards creating a system of anticipatory preventative policing, through which real-time indicators can be used to pluck persons off the street as soon as they are deemed sufficiently “pre-criminal.”¹⁴⁶ The system operates efficiently (for the most part), and administrators hope that the city will become still “smarter”: more autonomous, and requiring less human guidance as it continues learning, iterating, and managing its population.¹⁴⁷

The organizing principle of the city’s “intelligence,” of course, is ethnic repression and social reengineering. With regards to repression, the terrorizing pressure of surveillance and restrictions placed upon Uyghurs effectively relegate them to “third-class citizens” in their own cultural capital, creating a high-tech apartheid city.¹⁴⁸ The behaviors and norms that the surveillance systematically enforces strips Uyghurs of their Islamic practice, and forces them into beliefs, habits, and lifestyles dictated by a Chinese state vision of compliant Uyghur assimilation. In this sense, from the perspective of urban studies, the city of Kashgar is not a “stage-set” in which the drama of the Uyghur story plays out, but an active force in its own right, animated by a malicious “intelligence” that coerces and shapes the drama of the Uyghur story.

Given Kashgar’s unique, historical significance for the Uyghur nation, its transformation into a coercive agent is especially pernicious.

¹⁴³ Byler.

¹⁴⁴ Byler, “Do Coercive Reeducation Technologies Actually Work?”

¹⁴⁵ Byler, “Ghost World”; “China Has Turned Xinjiang into a Police State like No Other.”

¹⁴⁶ Darren Byler, “Preventative Policing as Community Detention in Northwest China,” *Made in China Journal* (blog), October 25, 2019, <https://madeinchinajournal.com/2019/10/25/preventative-policing-as-community-detention-in-northwest-china/>; Byler, “Do Coercive Reeducation Technologies Actually Work?”

¹⁴⁷ Byler, “Ghost World.”

¹⁴⁸ “Apartheid, Chinese Style: Dismantling China’s Muslim Gulag in Xinjiang Is Not Enough,” *The Economist*, January 9, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2020/01/09/dismantling-chinas-muslim-gulag-in-xinjiang-is-not-enough>.

Kashgar’s malicious logic does not simply destroy the classical heart of Uyghur culture; enabled by new technology, it also attempts to forcibly coopt it through a city infrastructure of surveillance terror, repression, and control. The genius of the system is its subtlety. Minute actions, movements, and communications are all assessed imperceptibly but constantly. And while the horrors of the camps are hidden behind walls in compounds, they are known to be the repercussions of small deviations. As Uyghurs are thus invisibly forced into new rhythms of seeming normalcy in their cultural center, the city normalizes and reinforces all the coercion that has been unleashed upon it and Uyghur society: forced reconstruction, extreme cultural commodification, systematic sinicization, forced labor, internment camps, and beyond. By simultaneously hiding the weapons of coercion—but extending their reach into every facet of life throughout the reconstructed panoptic city—the Chinese state has achieved a sort of city-wide, forced normalizing ritual. Having absorbed decades of Chinese state coercion, Kashgar now perpetuates that coercion as a “smart,” malicious city. The new, state-sanctioned existence of the Uyghur cultural capital appears natural and therefore legitimate—despite being predicated on an imperceptible, constant threat of brutal internment, forced labor, and cultural genocide.

CONCLUSION

Imagine yourself a Kashgari, returning to your home city after 20 years. The streets are unrecognizable: seemingly “developed” but, on all main streets, overwhelmingly Chinese in character. Passing a gaudy, silver-and-blue police station every couple of blocks, you head to Id Kah Square, to the Old City. The bustling, storied market is gone; the famous rose garden, the great throngs of people; the sounds and smells are absent, all replaced by a huge sanitized concrete slab with a gigantic luminescent screen scrolling through photos of Xi Jinping. You know it would be too risky to actually enter Id Kah mosque itself, but you know it too is empty and thoroughly surveilled. You begin to wander the Old City streets, and your heart begins to ache terribly as you see ordered, wide commercialized boulevards with synthetic, plastic-looking exteriors and gaudy, tourist-friendly signs. It is difficult to tell if there are more bright-red Chinese flags or more surveillance cameras lining the streets—both are overwhelming.

Would anyone ever believe that this place was once the glory of your people? That its famed mud-brick architecture was a treasure of Central Asia, encircling beautiful, centuries-old courtyards, the ornate, wood-framed arena of Uyghur home traditions; that the twisting, narrow alleys once made a gigantic earthen labyrinth, bulging with people, animals, life, music, commerce, and culture that you had to push your way through just to move; that once upon a time you were never far from a mosque, or a call to prayer; that the houses and buildings were once so dense and interconnected that it was difficult to tell where one family ended and another began; that the whole mess and chaos of the Old City was in fact a beautiful, communal dance that nourished and sustained the great Uyghur artists, poets, saints, and warriors of the past millennium? That, having been completely destroyed and reconstructed into a Uyghur theme park, the city is irreplaceably lost to the Uyghurs and the world?

You stop—at a checkpoint. You watch as a gaggle of auto-cleared Chinese tourists thoughtlessly continues on beyond the checkpoint, laughing at taking selfies on their way to see an artificial “Uyghur dance” for money that goes straight back to Beijing. As you notice the locked, dilapidated mosque next to you, with a stabbing pang, you suddenly realize that the Chinese you heard out of the corner of your ear came from the *Uyghur* children behind you.

As you pass the checkpoint, you look more closely at the people. You wonder if you might recognize some from your youth, but in most cases they simply won't make eye contact long enough to find out. They look exhausted, but stolid. They have to. Occasionally, they even have to smile. Many of them stare through you, with unfocused eyes. They stand more aloof from each other than you've ever seen Uyghurs stand from each other. And suddenly, you do that which you did not want to do and think back to earlier in the day when you saw your relatives and friends.

Of course, with everything that has happened you could not communicate with them at all for the last couple of years. You hoped that, seeing them in person, you could at least get some sense of how they were doing. You were wrong, and the experience was dizzying. It was a quiet reunion, and you felt the pressure of trying not to put any of them in compromising situations by asking too much. The talk was circuitous and obscure. At one point, your sister began to cry silently. Her tears were nothing to do with the conversation, and, except for

your brother-in-law putting an arm around her, no one acknowledged her weeping. He, your brother-in-law, was one of the few men who was able to come. Several friends and cousins were serving long prison sentences, several others had disappeared into camps, maybe now forced labor. All the children were gone in their indoctrination schools. For the future of your people, that reality felt like a death sentence, but it had to be better than feeling the absence of those in the camps. You heard the stories of brain washing, humiliation, rape, torture, and death. You know there is no way of knowing what they are facing, if or when they will ever come back. You doubt that you will ever get to see them again. Their absence is palpable in the conversation and is the only prism through which to make sense of the silences, the stares, the body language, and the commodified docility of the new Old City all around you.

You choke back tears, you feel dizzy, but here, in the heart of your own culture, you cannot show any sign of your conscience. The cameras and the people are watching, and you walk calm and stolid to the next check point, hating yourself and wishing the Old City had been left leveled. Better that than trapping you and your society in a habitual, immersive, fear-driven lie that might just become the reality of the next generation.

* * *

This walk is fictitious, based upon my own time in Kashgar, and several interviews with diasporic Kashgaris. Unfortunately, the most unbelievable part is that any Uyghur would try to go back now for a visit, and that they would have such freedom of movement if they did.

Like this report, the above imagined walk through Kashgar attempts to give a holistic impression of the nature of the current plight of Kashgar's Uyghurs. I have attempted to organize the relevant elements of urban oppression into forced reconstruction, economic exploitation, and surveillance, and still I miss much of the ongoing repression. Many of these developments were unplanned, uncoordinated, and executed by an array of actors. At the same time, their overall effects are totalizing, mutually reinforcing, and deeply interwoven: each element feeds into every other element. The forced reconstruction of the Old City (alongside the construction of new factories and camps) facilitated both the forced labor campaigns and the ubiquitous surveillance of the city. The economic exploitation of the city incentivized the reconstruction of the Old City for ethnic tourism,

and, per the coercive requirements of forced labor, made surveillance deeply necessary. Surveillance normalized compliance with the new repressive norms of the newly transformed Kashgar and supplied and disciplined the involuntary labor workforce at work today. Indeed, as Darren Byler points out, Uyghur surveillance has become a multi-billion dollar industry in its own right, with the Chinese state pouring an estimated \$7.2 billion in East Turkistan's technological security industry.¹⁴⁹ Not only are Chinese companies now profiting off Uyghurs by commodifying their culture and extracting forced labor from them, they have also made an industry out of selling the surveillance tools perfected through Uyghur experimentation in places like Kashgar—a process that Byler calls China's "terror capitalism."¹⁵⁰

Certainly, most of these repressive developments are now common across the whole of East Turkistan. However, as we have seen, due to Kashgar's unique historical, cultural, and geographic features, its plight has been particularly severe. Moreover, in Kashgar, reconstruction, exploitation, and surveillance coalesce uniquely, leveraging the cultural value of the city to make the city itself a powerful instrument of coercion.

In this way, Kashgar has become a confounding spectacle and a unique tragedy. Twenty years ago, it would have been impossible to imagine that the remote pearl of the Silk Road would be at the front lines of such futuristic domination. How strange it is that this picturesque, ancient mud-brick treasure of Central Asia would collide so forcefully with a neo-totalitarian ethnic theme park, gulag, and mass detention network.

Cities have been colonized, plundered, exploited, razed, commercialized, commodified, and surveilled throughout history. But never before have these distinct and sometimes contradictory processes merged into such a unique and dynamic form of devastation. Indeed, the conjunction of these events would not be possible without the modern methods and technologies used to accomplish them so quickly—and hold them in tandem.

Appropriately, mass internment and forced labor have attracted the lion's share of media attention related to the Uyghurs' ongoing plight. However, this report hopes to add to that literature by drawing

¹⁴⁹ Byler, "Ghost World."

¹⁵⁰ Byler.

attention to the truly novel form of social coercion that has taken shape in concert with mass internment camps and forced labor practices in the heart of Uyghur culture. Aside from the irreplaceable architectural and historical heritage it has lost, Kashgar needs to be recognized for the advance in repression capabilities that it represents: the holistic cooptation of a historic city and its inhabitants into a truly unprecedented state of coerced existence.

Because of its uniqueness, finding words to describe the tragic state of Kashgar is difficult. Often, the current campaign of Uyghur cultural genocide has been compared to the Holocaust. In some ways the comparison does not fit, but in other ways the comparison is very apt: East Turkistan is now almost certainly seeing the largest incarceration of people based on religion or ethnicity since the Holocaust,¹⁵¹ and the systematic destruction of Uyghur cemeteries, shrines, and mosques is reminiscent of Kristallnacht.¹⁵² I propose another parallel along the lines of observations by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, who, on reflecting upon the horrors of the Holocaust and World War II noted that despite perceived progress in science, technology, and education, “humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism.”¹⁵³ Horkheimer and Adorno were commenting on how the organizational and technological sophistication of the Nazi state *supported* more sophisticated forms of inhumanity, rather than eradicating barbarism. “Civilization” turned in on itself.

In Kashgar, a similar principle is patently at work. The “modernization” campaign of the government, building upon advanced capitalist investments, infrastructure techniques, and commercialization methods, has been instrumental in grotesque, profitable dehumanization. China’s cutting-edge surveillance technology—perhaps the most advanced in the world—is the engine driving a vicious new form of community existence at the heart of ongoing cultural genocide. As the government hails progress, advancement, and prosperity in Xinjiang, East Turkistan endures a catastrophe of human dignity. Such tech-savvy domination sounds at

¹⁵¹ Peter Apps, “China’s Uyghur Detention Camps May Be the Largest Mass Incarceration since the Holocaust,” *New Statesman*, March 21, 2019, <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/asia/2019/03/china-s-uyghur-detention-camps-may-be-largest-mass-incarceration-holocaust>.

¹⁵² Hiatt, “In China, Every Day Is Kristallnacht.”

¹⁵³ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott, 1 edition (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2007), xiv.

odds with the spirit of technological advancement, but in East Turkistan, they are inseparable.

This reality should illicit reflection and pause from any reader, for the tools at work in East Turkistan are not unique to China, and many outside actors are complicit and entangled still. Kashgar could well be a portent of dangers to come elsewhere, as technological “progress” continues to turn in on itself, much as it did in World War II.

But one more word is in order regarding the significance of Kashgar. At the end of each of my interviews, I asked every diasporic Kashgari what he or she would want the outside world to know about Kashgar, if they could say anything. I expected laments about its destruction, or anger about what has been lost. Instead, each interviewee focused exclusively on how beautiful and unique the culture and city of Kashgar had been—what a treasure it was for the world and the Uyghur people. They all shared a dogged, admirable insistence that if only outsiders could see the splendor of the real Kashgar, they would have been totally astounded, and understood its irreplaceable uniqueness.

At this tumultuous juncture in Kashgar’s history, it is necessary to reflect on the heinous coercion that has razed, exploited, and enveloped the city. But it is equally important to remember the beauty and culture that it embodied for so many centuries.



Kashgar, 1998 © Kevin Bubriski (not affiliated with UHRP).

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Chinese government:

- Immediately cease all demolitions of Uyghur neighborhoods and cultural sites across East Turkistan until a transparent process of genuine consultation has been undertaken with local residents.
- Immediately cease the destruction of all sites of cultural value to the Uyghur people, including mosques, shrines, graveyards, and other sites.
- Implement Article 2 of the Declaration on the Right to Development that establishes “active, free and meaningful participation in development.”

- Abide by domestic legal instruments that protect Uyghurs from arbitrary state interference, such as the Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law, the Property Rights Law (Article 42), and the Regulation on the Protection of Famous Historical and Cultural Cities, Towns and Villages (Article 28).
- The State Administration of Cultural Heritage and the National Commission of the People's Republic of China for UNESCO should add Kashgar's Old City to UNESCO's Tentative List for consideration as a World Heritage Site.
- Shut down the Integrated Joint Operations Platform (IJOP) in the Uyghur region, delete all data collected, and suspend the collection and use of biometrics until the introduction of a comprehensive national law to protect privacy rights.

To the international community:

- The UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights should transmit information concerning the destruction of Kashgar's Old City as well as cultural sites across the Uyghur region to the Chinese government for immediate response.
- UNESCO should take immediate steps to engage with the Chinese government in relation to the current status of Kashgar's Old Town, make recommendations, and develop a collaborative Conservation Management Plan for the site.
- The European Parliament should follow-up on its March 2011 resolution calling on China to end forced resettlement of Uyghurs in Kashgar to declare its concern for continued destruction of cultural sites across the Uyghur region.
- In bilateral and multilateral exchanges, governments should raise private and public concern for the purposeful destruction of tangible cultural heritage of the Uyghur community.
- Impose targeted sanctions, such as the US Global Magnitsky Act, including visa bans and asset freezes, against Party Secretary Chen Quanguo and senior officials responsible for abuses.

- Impose export controls to deny the Chinese government, and companies enabling government abuses, access to technologies used to violate basic rights.

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