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“Making the Past Serve the Present”: The Testimonial Tourist Gaze and Infrastructures of Memory in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), China

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Abstract

In this article, we explore how tourism in Xinjiang is politically weaponised. Commodifying Uyghur cultural heritage for tourism allows the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to insist it is not committing cultural genocide, but actually “conserving” Uyghur culture. This directly bears on the CCP’s internment of Muslim minorities in “re-education” camps, ostensibly to target Islamic “extremism.” We explore how tourism to Xinjiang is presented as a “success” of the camps and conscripted into the “Sinicisation” of the region and the secularising of minorities’ cultures. Places and practices are deconstructed as cultural heritage, and reconstructed to provide tourists with “exotic” experiences of “wonderful Xinjiang.” This transforms the “tourist gaze” into a “testimonial” one: tourists to Xinjiang are made into witnesses that “Xinjiang is beautiful” and Uyghurs are “happy.” In this, touristic development and tourists themselves are key agents in the CCP’s territorialisation of Xinjiang, the sinicisation of Uyghur culture, and the legitimisation of the violence of the camps.

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Keywords

Xinjiang tourism, Uyghur cultural heritage, testimonial tourist gaze, Chinese tourism

To smother a culture ... tour buses are as effective as bulldozers. (Chaguan, 2021)

Introduction

All forms of tourism involve the sculpting of cultures, sites, and stories, and it is well-trodden ground to assert that this is often political in its ramifications. In this article, we seek to explore the ways in which tourism in Xinjiang (Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region [XUAR]) is politically weaponised. Our argument is that tourism is a particularly affective “infrastructure of memory,” one which is being actively used to deconstruct heritage sites’ significance for Uyghurs, and reconstruct them as largely Han-oriented tourist venues evidencing “ethnic harmony.” The significance of this directly bears on the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP’s) policies of “re-education” in Xinjiang, which has seen significant proportions of Muslim minority groups interred in “vocational training” or “re-education” camps (Chestnut Greitens et al., 2020; HRW, 2018), as well as the wider “sinicisation” of Xinjiang (O’Brien and Brown, 2022).

Our focus on tourism in Xinjiang involves exploration of conceptual, emotional, and physical “infrastructures of memory” – the ways real sites are adapted and presented, the stories they are positioned as bearing witness to (or not), the ways in which tourist experiences are put to use to give credence to government narratives, and to evidence abstractions such as “ethnic harmony.” Tourism is being actively encouraged not only so tourists may be presented with versions of history which emphasise Chinese historical claims to the region, but also to encourage tourists to bear witness to the narrative that contemporary Xinjiang is “beautiful,” everyone is “happy,” and everything is “stable” and “safe.” In this, touristic development and tourists themselves are central agents in the CCP’s political project in the region, the sinicisation of Uyghur and other minorities’ cultures, and the legitimisation of the violence of the camps.

We begin this article by contextualising the relationship between tourism in Xinjiang, the “re-education” camps, and the sinicisation campaign. We then discuss our conceptualisation of “infrastructures of memory” within tourism, before moving on to two analysis sections. In our analysis, we largely focus on Kashgar, a trade hub on the ancient “Silk Roads” with a history dating back millennia. An important symbolic centre for Uyghur culture historically, as a centre of trade it has also been a nexus for diverse groups for centuries. In this article, we consider the ways sites and practices are de- and re-constructed, the ways in which places and practices are shifted from being mnemonic devices for Uyghurs and other minorities vis-a-vis their cultural heritage, towards tourists’ “exotic” experiences of “wonderful Xinjiang.” We then explore the ways in which tourists themselves are agents in these processes.

Weaponising Tourism in Xinjiang

Xinjiang is a wonderful land ... friends who are objective and impartial are welcome to visit. (*Xinhua*, 2021)

Xinjiang is an important symbolic centre – a key site on the historic “Silk Roads” traversing Eurasia, and today a key area of development for the One Belt One Road/Belt and Road Initiative project, but also China’s most rigidly controlled region. Though there is a long history of ethnic tension (O’Brien, 2011, 2016), in recent years, Xinjiang has increasingly appeared in international media due to the CCP’s introduction of harsh security clampdowns, which significantly increased from 2017. This includes a mass campaign of imprisonment that has seen in excess of one million Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities imprisoned in “re-education” camps (see Byler, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2018; Roberts, 2020). Alarming allegations of forced sterilisations and mass rapes have also come to light (Hill et al., 2021; Szadziwski et al., 2021), as have allegations of forms of physical and mental torture reinforcing political indoctrination (Jack, 2020; Shih, 2018). Though ostensibly part of a programme combatting “religious extremism,” the mass scale of imprisonment, and the identification of banal aspects of Islamic practice as signs of predilection to terrorism, have led to international condemnation of the camps (Emmerson, 2020: xi). Although the Chinese government initially vehemently denied the existence of the camps, they have shifted towards insisting they are part of an educational training programme designed to combat terrorism/ethnic separatism by improving the lives of impoverished Uyghurs and root out “wrong thinking.” In a number of official statements, work in the tourism sector is described as a key “vocation” internees are being prepared for (Szadziwski et al., 2021).

Alongside this, the “sinicisation” (also called “Rectification”) campaign involves prohibition/destruction of some forms of Islamic culture, alongside promotion of cultural assimilation into “mainstream” Han Chinese culture, leading some to consider it a programme of cultural genocide (see Klimeš and Smith Finley, 2020). In practice, “sinicisation” is varied in its forms and targets. It includes policing physical appearance: men are discouraged from growing beards, and women from wearing “overly modest” clothing (Byler, 2018). Speaking the Uyghur language in public has been discouraged, refusing to smoke or drink alcohol has been rendered suspect, and names such as “Mohammad” and “Aisha” have been banned, on the grounds that these all may be signs of “religious extremism” (Byler, 2017, 2019; Yi Xiaocuo, 2019). As noted by Brophy (2019) the positioning of some forms of Islam as “backwards,” and out of place in “modernity,” has been a central tension in Islamophobia since 9/11; within China, this has served to articulate Islam with propensities to terrorism. In this, Islam is being positioned as inherently problematic: a form of “backwardness” which needs to be abandoned for minority groups to become more “civilised” and “modernise” by adopting “Han secular values” (Byler, 2018), and to “sinicise” by embracing the “China Dream” (O’Brien and Brown, 2022). This operates alongside the threat of internment, making “softer” forms of “sinicisation” part of a spectrum which includes the “harder” forms of physical and mental coercion being practised in the camps.

“Sinicisation” also targets physical spaces, including removal of minarets, domes, and crescents from mosques, and Arabic script from storefronts (Stroup, 2019). Using satellite imagery, Ruser et al. (2020) estimated that 30 per cent of Xinjiang’s mosques and other religious sites such as graveyards or shrines have been destroyed in recent years.

Many of these were ostensibly protected under Chinese law (Kuo, 2019; Ruser et al., 2020). The reconstruction of sites for tourism segues into these forms of destruction, as does the “preservation” of Uyghur and other minorities’ traditions not as lived practices, but as touristic performances. This allows for the CCP to insist that it is not committing cultural genocide, but is in fact conserving and celebrating minorities’ traditional culture. Similarly, under the guise of discourses of “conservation” and “rejuvenating grasslands” to bolster eco-tourism, nomadic minority groups such as Kazakhs have had land appropriated, and those appealing against such policies have often disappeared into the camps (Salimjan, 2022).

It is perhaps striking in this wider context that within Chinese media Xinjiang has been celebrated as a tourist “hot spot”:

The tourism sector of northwest China’s Xinjiang Uyghur [sic] Autonomous Region is seeing a continuous boom as the region has emerged as a popular destination for travellers The stability has benefited tourism, boosted employment opportunities, as well as alleviated local poverty.... (CGTN, 2019)

Terrorism in Xinjiang has gradually been eliminated since these training and education centers were set up.... Peace, economic development and prosperous tourism have been regained.

... How many people in the world will oppose such changes in their own cities and prefer to live in a so-called “democratic and free” society where extremism prevails and terrorism is rampant? (*Global Times*, 2019)

The *Global Times* illustrated articles responding to accusations of human rights abuses with stock images of a smiling Uyghur man selling a *doppa* to a young Han tourist, as though touristic consumption in itself was evidence of the groundlessness of the accusations (*Global Times*, 2019). To varying degrees of explicitness, tourism is a discursively emphasised symbol of peace and prosperity, and is thus “weaponised” as a justification for the camps:

[re-education’ is] to the benefit of local people and ultimately effective. The Xinjiang International Grand Bazaar, the site of the deadly killing spree on July 5, 2009, is now one of the biggest tourist attractions in Urumqi.... In Xinjiang, China has nothing to apologize for. (CGTN, 2021)

Tourism is being made into a potent symbol here, not only of the efficacy of internment, but the legitimacy of the CCP in pursuing such a policy.

This is implicit also in the extent to which articles attribute vast growth to Xinjiang’s tourist industry: official statistics state that tourism has grown from 150 million in 2018 to 200 million in 2019 (prior to COVID-19), and aims to soon attract 300 million tourist visits a year (China Daily, 2020; Szadziewski et al., 2021). These figures, widely reported

in the Chinese media, seem remarkable, if not unrealistic – based on the UNWTO Tourism Barometer (2020), which would make Xinjiang the single greatest tourist destination globally, receiving multiple times the number of tourists than the UNWTO's highest ranked destination (France, with 89.4 million international tourists in 2018; UNWTO, 2020). It should be noted that these news outlets are state-run media, and widely regarded as official mouthpieces (Edney, 2014).

For Winter (2016), the development of tourism to Xinjiang could be a key means, not of evidencing stability, but of building it – if it can foster “mutual respect and trust” necessary for longer-term social stability (p. 10). While we optimistically embrace the idea that tourism could build meaningful “people-to-people bonds” in Xinjiang, what we focus on here are ways this potential is not realised. This is partly because tourism within China – particularly when involving ethnic minority cultures – is heavily politicised.

The ongoing publication of such coverage and statistics evidence that tourism to Xinjiang is being “hyped” in official rhetoric. But this also speaks to political agendas: actively wanting people to “see Xinjiang.” This is made explicit in a *Xinhua* article stating: “Xinjiang is a wonderful land ... foreign friends who are objective and impartial are welcome to visit” (*Xinhua*, 2021). Here, the “tourist gaze” is invited to become a “testimonial” one, on the condition it testifies to how “wonderful” Xinjiang is: “... Xinjiang also firmly opposes anyone who is biased or engages in investigative activities” (*Xinhua*, 2021). The “testimonial tourist gaze” is, we argue, a concrete way in which tourism is being weaponised – not as a symbol, but as a top-down “infrastructure of memory.” Not only sculpting the past to support China's territorial claims to the region, it also projects a simulacrum of the present through which traditional Uyghur culture is delimited within touristic commodification, and tourists are key agents communicating how “wonderful” everything is in Xinjiang, affirming the legitimacy of the government's policies in the region.

Conceptualising Touristic Infrastructures of Memory

Heritage [is] a form of governance... of space, of people, of cultures and natures, of material worlds, and of time. (Winter, 2015: 2)

All cases of developing “heritage” into “tourism” entails forms of “erasure” and “manufacture” (Dearborn and Stallmeyer, 2010: 29). It is the decisions within this and their repercussions which makes heritage “a form of governance” (Winter, 2015: 2). As scholars have shown, tourism development in Xinjiang has been intimately linked with political agendas. This includes using it to justify increased securitisation and surveillance in the region (Fayard, 2021; Szadziwski et al., 2021); with “greenwashing” land dispossession (Salimjan, 2022); with the dissemination of ethnic stereotypes (Brown, 2021); and with territorialisation through historicization, as Xinjiang's history is revised to assert it has been an unambiguous part of “Chinese territory” for the past 2,000 years, obscuring the extent to which Chinese imperial control of the region

significantly ebbed and flowed, and in fact Xinjiang was not formally incorporated until the late nineteenth century during the Qing Dynasty (Mayer, 2018; O'Brien and Brown, 2022).

In this article, we explore on how places and practices are sculpted to support politically correct narratives. Focusing on cultural assimilation, Anderson and Byler (2019) argue that the commodification of Uyghur culture (such as within tourism) is similar to bell hooks' notion of "eating the other": ethnicity becomes, not a complex identity of real people, but exotic "seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream ... culture" (hooks in Anderson and Byler, 2019: 18). While Uyghur culture is commodified as "exotic spice" to be tried out for entertainment in a form of cultural appropriation, in their daily lives (outside of tourist performances) Uyghurs are pressured to culturally assimilate – what Anderson and Byler refer to as "eating Hanness" (2019: 17). It is the unequal agency between these two forms of "eating the other" that is the crux of their critique – as one of their interviewees stated: "If it was any other time, it would be a cool thing to [enjoy] a neighbouring culture... but when it comes at the price of not being allowed to [have] your own ... it is just devastating" (2019: 23). The re-construction of heritage sites into tourist sites or cultural traditions into tourist performances does not simply make them into simulacra: a façade or replica, rather than the "real" thing. This process of recreation creates a break with the past, because they no longer preserve ethnic minority traditions as lived ways of life in the present (with a stake in the future). But there is also significance in the ways tourists are interpellated as viewers of such (re)creations, because in being made into "witnesses," their "testimony" is made meaningful.

Rowen (2018), focusing on tourism to Hong Kong, Taiwan, as well as the Paracels (South China Sea), has argued that tourism is an under-appreciated "technique of territorialisation" used by China. Consider the following promotion of tours to the Paracels:

The southern islands have been part of China's territory since ancient times. They are a sacred territory that cannot be divided. Please join us, step on the sacred (神圣, *shensheng*), miraculous (神奇, *shenqi*), mysterious (神秘, *shenmi*) national territory (国土, *guotu*) with your two feet, and witness and participate in history! (Translated by Rowen, 2018: 68)

This text was flanked by the national flag, both visually and textually "claiming" the space as "Chinese"; but it also invites tourists to imagine that they themselves help make it so through their act of bearing "witness." The "tourist gaze" becomes both a territorialising and testimonial one here, appropriating through spectatorship. While this text explicitly territorialises via gestures to "history," the "participatory" nature of such tourism should be attended to for the ways it implicates tourists as active vectors of political agendas.

The tourist gaze is not simply being catered to here, it becomes complicit in politics (see Brown, 2021). Tourists have "a key role in normalizing [stereotypes] through their ability to make and disseminate images that directly parallel 'official propaganda' ... [but] in being 'ordinary citizens' they provide an aura of authenticity" (Brown and

O'Brien, 2021). In this, tourists' photographs or comments are able to dissociate themselves from official discourses: being disseminated by "ordinary people," they are supposedly "neutrally" conveying "real experiences."

We believe that these inter-related processes of re-constructing minority traditions, severing them from being meaningful mnemonic forms for their originating group, and reconstituting them for a Han tourist gaze, as well as the "witnessing" role of that gaze, is central to understanding the "infrastructures of memory" at work in contemporary tourism to Xinjiang.

It is important to highlight that "memory" here both refers to the *past* as it continues to exist in the present, and to articulate that tourist experiences also create "memories" – "souvenirs" – that capture the present and preserve a particular version of it. Urry and Larsen (2011) caution against belittling the power of the "tourist gaze," despite the fact that tourism often creates clearly "staged" performances or simulacral spaces. Such representations are "a technology of world-making.... Rather than mirroring or representing [other spaces, they] partly *create them, culturally, socially and materially*" (Urry and Larsen, 2011: 67 – emphasis added). This is a dynamic process, made almost instantaneous now thanks to the ability to upload both images and anecdotes onto social media. Such "technologies of world-making" and "infrastructures of memory" are the focus of our following analysis.

De/Constructing Infrastructures of Memory in Xinjiang

If one were to remove these [places], the Uighur people would lose contact with earth. They would no longer have a personal, cultural, and spiritual history.

After a few years we would not have a memory of why we live here or where we belong. (Rahilä Dawut, interview 2012, quoted in Kuo [2019])

[There is] no need to hear your voice, when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. (hooks, 1990: 241)

In our following analysis, we consider a variety of examples to explore how tourist sites in Xinjiang are being reconstructed. In many of these examples, Islamic history and culture are elided, so that their historic meaningfulness and legacies in the present can be ignored. Often done through commodification, this is a process of "hollowing" sites so they may carry politically correct messages. In this, these infrastructures are purposed not towards those whose historic traditions they are, but instead work symbolically and affectively to produce particular experiences for those who consume them. We then discuss ways tourism provides an opportunity to see a contemporary "real Xinjiang," which is "beautiful" and "stable," and evidence the continuity of "ethnic harmony" from "ancient times" to the present. In this, it interpellates Chinese tourists into the official narrative that the camps are successful, and conscripts various participants into this performance of the "ethnic harmony" that is supposed to be seen in Xinjiang.

Methodologically, we offer visual ethnographic analysis of tourist sites for their mediation of Xinjiang's historic culture, as well as thematic analysis of tourists' online posts to get a sense of how such sites are perceived. Drawing on our own ethnographic work in Xinjiang, we also include Uyghurs' perspectives on these processes. This includes interviews conducted by David O'Brien, and fieldwork carried out by both authors. All Uyghur names are pseudonyms, using common Uyghur personal names (which are less identifiable than family names, which tend to be patronyms). Our study of tourism in China was subject to research ethics review and approval, and ethical procedures regarding participant consent, confidentiality, and anonymity have been followed. For online material, comments are in all cases posts from adults, on publicly accessible websites, where participants have no expectation of privacy and would anticipate their words being read by others.

In the following sections, we explore how the development of Kashgar for tourism has served to displace most of the residents and reconstruct the old city in a new securitised form, and the ways in which commodification serves to stereotype Uyghur cultural traditions, and to secularise historic sites. We situate this within the broader sinicisation of Xinjiang.

Destructive-Construction: Stabilising and Sinicising the Silk Roads City

The city of Kashgar has a history as a trade hub on the ancient "Silk Roads" dating back over 2000 years, predating significant Chinese imperial presence in the region. In 2009, the Chinese government announced its intention to demolish and rebuild 85% of Kashgar's historic centre. The government's narrative was that 65,000 buildings would be rebuilt and 220,000 Uyghur residents would be resettled, ending the poverty the government blamed for social unrest (Levin, 2014). The residents were relocated to sprawling developments of high-rise apartment blocks at the edge of the city which would include shopping centres and other facilities (Patience, 2012). According to the government, such a massive programme was necessary to improve residents' quality of life and protect them from earthquakes (Levin, 2014). Kashgar does experience earthquakes, but the argument on this point was undermined by the fact that many of the buildings destroyed had survived for hundreds of years. The concern with the "stability" of the region was perhaps symbolically appropriate.

The redevelopment was also central to turning Kashgar into a major tourist destination. The Old City, once a densely populated area of Uyghur courtyard houses, narrow lanes, small stores, and workshops, was almost completely demolished and replaced with new buildings, shops, and tourist attractions, built in "traditional Uyghur style."

Many of the reconstructed buildings certainly evoke the architecture they replace (see Figures 1 and 2). However, the reconstruction did not strictly follow "what Kashgar was" but "what it needed to become." As noted by Steenberg and Rippa: "security and tourism considerations have shaped much of the actual reconstruction. Small alleyways and cul-de-secs have been eliminated to make access and maneuvering much easier for non-



Figure 1. Old Kashgar street, with a grocers' store, 2014. Though weathered, the ornate carvings and use of bright colours are characteristic of Uyghur traditional styles. © David O'Brien and Melissa Shani Brown.

residents (both police and tourists), while thousands of surveillance cameras have been put into place" (2019: 10). A wall – in an “old style” with crenellations but also swivelling cameras – has been built around the Old City, so entering and leaving the site can be controlled (Figure 3).

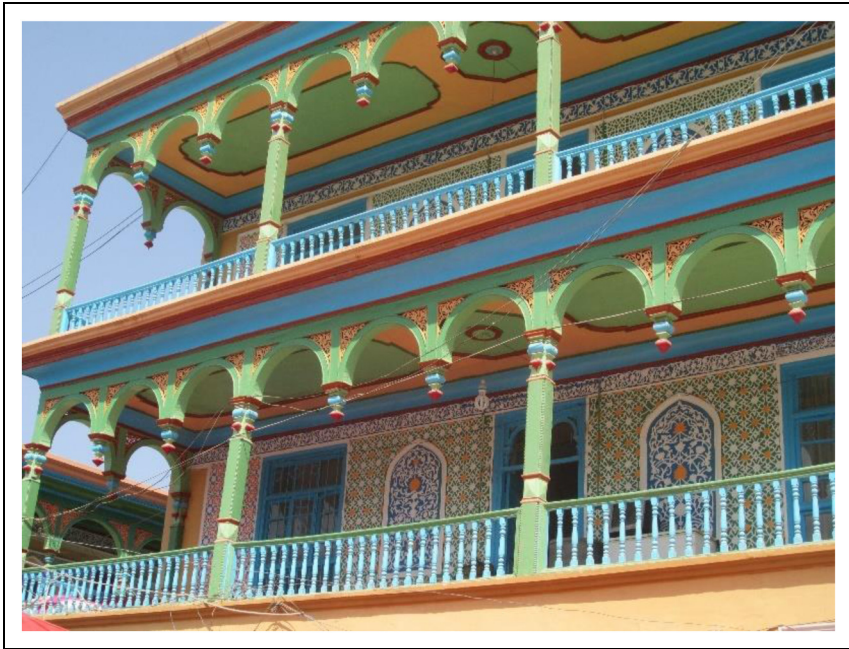


Figure 2. Newly reconstructed buildings in the Old City, Kashgar, 2014. © David O'Brien and Melissa Shani Brown.

As argued by Szadziwski et al. (2021), this intertwines “touristification” with “securitisation”: the proposed need for police, security barriers, and cameras, much like the camps, assures the safety and stability desired by tourists, but is part of the wider expansion of invasive surveillance across Xinjiang. These are forms of re-creation: what is constructed is a new “old city,” where its age and embodiment of Uyghur traditions are largely symbolic, surface level.

Ildikó Bellér-Hann (2013) coined the metaphor of a “bulldozer state” to refer to China’s urbanisation, the bulldozer representing both destruction and construction simultaneously. This is part-and-parcel of the “modernisation” entailed in “the self-image of the Chinese state as carrier of a *mission civilisatrice* in frontier regions inhabited by backward minorities” (Bellér-Hann, 2013: 188). The bulldozer becomes symbolic of the CCP’s “mission” to destroy the “backwards,” “un-sanitary,” “un-safe,” and construct in its place the “advanced,” “safely-consumable,” and “modern.” As regards Kashgar, this “destructive-construction” places tourism and conservation at odds (Figure 4). The old town is not “conserved” as an “authentic artefact”: most of the historic buildings have been completely destroyed so that “earthquake-proof” new buildings can take their place. But it is also deconstructed as a lived environment and reconstructed as a tourist site, gesturing to what Kashgar once looked like, but minus any architectural features (or residents) inconvenient for the police or tourists in golf carts.



Figure 3. Newly constructed Old City wall with security cameras. Kashgar. © David O'Brien and Melissa Shani Brown.

A striking visual feature of reconstructed Kashgar is it is decked in the contemporary Chinese flag (Figure 5). The flags hang in front of storefronts, and along both sides of the streets. Since 2018, the national flag must be raised outside all religious venues across China, though they have been required outside of mosques in Xinjiang and monasteries in Tibet for far longer (Brown and O'Brien, 2019: 8). The flags are a polyvalent symbol in these contexts: "The 'flagging' of national identity at religious sites is explicitly aimed at inculcating a nationalist consciousness, but it also inversely flags religious sites – and the religious – as those in need of such reminders" (Brown and O'Brien, 2019: 9). At tourist sites such as Kashgar, the ubiquitous flags also become a symbol of political power, a form of visual territorialisation. Criss-crossing overhead along streets, they literally overlay the symbol of the Chinese nation over public spaces and those traversing them. Their ubiquity also translates into "flagging" the space in photographs: though online reviews may state "The most exotic place in the country is Kashgar, Xinjiang! ... Friends say it looks like Morocco!" (Trip.com reviews, 2021), the flag acts as a symbolic reminder that this "exotic place" is unequivocally "China." Alongside the ubiquitous security cameras, their visual foregrounding speaks to contemporary politics: a symbolic emphasis on the "stability," and almost over-emphasised "Chineseness," of Kashgar.



Figure 4. New “old” buildings being constructed from scratch, Kashgar 2014. What can be seen at this stage is that though the window frames are carved in the traditional style, the buildings have concrete internal structures, and modern chrome and glass front doors. Officially to make them more earthquake-proof, this reconstruction is not a “conservation” of the original buildings, but a creation of a simulacrum of historic styles around/above a “modern” commercial building. © David O’Brien and Melissa Shani Brown.

The “destructive-construction” of Kashgar puts two forms of “memory” at odds. The city has been largely emptied of those who lived there, and the buildings completely rebuilt. This creates a break with the past. Former residents no longer live in the midst of “their” history – either personal, familial or that of their broader ethnic community. Most in fact now live in newly built high-rise apartments at the edge of the city –

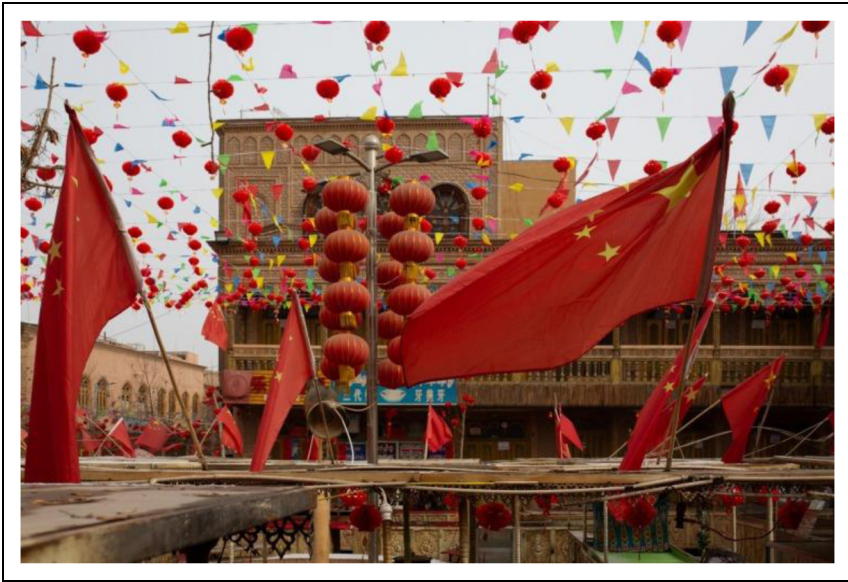


Figure 5. “Flagging” the nation. Local food market redeveloped for tourism. The national flag and red lanterns are ubiquitous in the Old City, overlaying symbols of “Chineseness” over public spaces. Kashgar, January 2019. © Patrick Wack.

buildings which do not incorporate traditional Uyghur aesthetics, but which are emphatically “modern” and tacitly “Han” (see Figure 6). So too are the new “old buildings” stripped of particular histories they held, even in their bricks and mortar, and instead, simply symbolise “Uyghur history” for the tourist gaze.

This break with the past is positioned as a form of social “progress”: what is being razed is the old and unsafe, and what is being built, even if in “the traditional style,” is “modernity” – Kashgar-with-security-cameras-and-shops-with-aircon-and-Alipay. The removal of most of the Uyghur residents from the old city is part of this – the town has not been reconstructed for them. Though some Uyghurs we spoke to noted that the reconstructed buildings were beautifully painted and intricately carved in the traditional style, this sense of appropriation remained. These new structures, rather than a lived environment, are a space for tourist experiences, to be photographed, enjoyed, and used to sell souvenirs. Here, predominantly Han tourists can see the “real Xinjiang” and “beautiful Uyghur girls,” who sit in costume to take tea or perform dances. The reiteration that this offers “authentic experiences” of Kashgar (see *Xinhua*, 2018) obscures the “staged” nature of not only these performances but the wider setting.

It is important to recognise that this is not unique to China. No tourist site is simply “found” but must be actively “made” – something which is at times in tension with issues around conservation (Dearborn and Stallmeyer, 2010: 29). The development of whole cities or neighbourhoods for tourism faces particular challenges:



Figure 6. “New Kashgar.” Scale model for new housing developments. Architecturally “modern,” with blonde models depicted on the billboards for the shopping centre at the base of the buildings, and with all script in Mandarin, there is an absence of anything symbolically “Uyghur.” “Economic development” is also “social development” here, symbolised by conflating “becoming modern,” “becoming consumers of international brands”, and “becoming Han.” © David O'Brien and Melissa Shani Brown.

When the historic built environment is remade for the present, restoration can erase signs of decay, augment the physical environment to increase its romantic appeal, and focus on an idealized image of the past. Such restorations may recall an earlier age ... without unpacking the baggage of that age and what it means for the present. (Dearborn and Stallmeyer, 2010: 40)

This is very clear in Kashgar. Tourists are given a limited understanding of history, despite gazing upon the (supposedly) “historic.” The reconstruction of sites for tourism often renders them images of a romantic idea of the “past,” their new purpose is re-oriented away from being “living spaces,” and re-purposed towards tourist consumption. Vegetable sellers and shoemakers are replaced with souvenir shops and cafes.

It is the perceived appropriation of Kashgar which is a source of resentment for some Uyghurs. Some acknowledged that “It is easy to view them [traditional houses, without running water] as tourists, but it [was] much harder to live in them” (Rosingul). But for others this process is linked to the “erasure and manufacture” of Uyghur culture generally:

...this is where our people lived for hundreds of years and they [the old buildings] are very beautiful and very important to us...

It is not about improving the lives of Uyghurs, it is about pushing them outside of the city. Kashgar is an ancient city and very important to the Uyghurs but they want to destroy it and make their own city.

Soon [modern] Kashgar will be no different from Ürümchi, looking like any other Chinese city and full of Han. (Yakupjan)

They will keep some of the old buildings for the tourists but it will not be real. The government say they want to protect and preserve minority ways of life but in fact they don't want to preserve the real ways, just their own safe versions of them...

They will change Uyghur culture to make it more appealing to Han tourists and then charge them to view it. (Bore)

The fact that this is taking place alongside forced incarceration means it is embedded in wider anxiety that “being-Uyghur” is being “lost.” As articulated by a Uyghur Hotan resident, referring to the splitting of families when parents have been sent to “re-education centres” alongside the destruction of Uyghur shrines: “If the current generation, you take away their parents and on the other hand you destroy the cultural heritage that reminds them of their origin ... when they grow up, this [culture] will be foreign to them” (Kuo, 2019). This resentment is also interwoven with the sense that minority groups are not the primary economic beneficiaries in this process either, meaning that “touristification” is taking from them while giving little in return (see Salimjan, 2022; Steenberg and Rippa, 2019).

The Dream of Kashgar: Commodification as Sinicisation

For hooks (1992), though there is great potential in inter-cultural encounters to foster empathy, interest, and understanding, such encounters are not the kind mediated by capitalistic consumption: “The commodification of difference ... denies the significance of that Other’s history through a process of decontextualization... Consumption is a social relationship – [but] one that makes it harder and harder ... to create community” (1992: 376). There is always a hierarchical relationship which privileges the consumer, the “spice of difference” must cater to their tastes. This inhibits encounters with “others” which are mediated through consumption of their ability to foster more meaningful intercultural understanding, because the relationship is inherently unequal, and the forms of culture encountered are those which can be or have been commodified.

Clear in Kashgar is a commercial catering to the tastes of middle-class Han consumers. The buildings now hold restaurants and shops, enabling tourist consumption of “exotic” souvenirs, but also providing the comfort of “familiar” preferences such as Han cuisine, for example seafood, pork, and alcohol. The “new” “old Kashgar” was likened by some of our interviewees to a Uyghur “Disneyland” – certainly, it is neither the lived-in neighbourhood it once was, but more like a theme park, with courtyards perpetually filled with

tables of sweet snacks and draped in atlas silk and young women dancing beneath grape-vines.

Linked to this is a tacit “secularising” of Uyghur cultural traditions, rendering them generic “folkways.” This fits within a broader pattern, where official depictions of ethnic minorities’ cultures tend to be simplistic stock images (Brown, 2021; Gladney, 1994). In *Xinhua*’s (2018) description of an “authentic Kashgar” homestay experience – “How do people live? What do they eat? What is a normal day like? Today’s traveller is no longer content with being shown something – they want to live it.” (*Xinhua*, 2018) – there is no mention of religious practice in the “immersive travel” experience:

Born and raised in Old Town, Guli ...wants to share her hometown with the rest of the world.... “We Xinjiang people are very hospitable. When there are guests from afar, we always invite them to our homes and treat them with a big meal,” said Guli... Guli hires local dancers and a band to perform while the guests enjoy their tea. ... “I have a house. I have money. Please marry me!” Guli bursts into fits of laughter as she explains the male dancers’ hand-to-chest movements.... Another treat for the guests is the home-made Xinjiang food – pilaf, meat skewers, noodles, and samsa.... When night falls, people feast, sing, and even dance in the street. (*Xinhua*, 2018)

Here, Uyghur music, dance, and food, or traditions of hospitality, are stripped of any Islamic cultural significance. There is no mention of prohibitions on pork, for example, or the importance of music and dance in Sufi worship (see Anderson and Byler, 2019 for the secularising of religious music at public galas). The “normal traditional Uyghur day” is an idyll of feasting and dancing in the street, without any mention of diurnal prayer.

In the wider context, Islam is being represented as an incursion into Xinjiang – consider a recent government statement that:

In the case of Xinjiang, Islam entered mainly through ... forced acceptance through cultural conflict.

... This caused serious damage to the cultures and arts of the various ethnic groups in Xinjiang created in earlier periods when Buddhism was popular in the region.

...The Uighur conversion to Islam was not a voluntary choice made by the common people, but a result of religious wars and imposition by the ruling class. (The Information Office of the State Council, White Paper, 2019)

The secularised depictions of historic daily life such as those described above serve to normalise an idea that Uyghur culture was “originally” this folkloric idyll until Islam brought conflict to the region. In this, it decontextualises the tensions of the present as though they were external to the history of the region, rather than a complex part of it.

Decontextualising traditions into tropes also allows for easy re-inscription of buildings: as noted by Okudera (2020), a number of mosques in Kashgar have been turned into souvenir stores, or in the case of “The Dream of Kashgar,” a bar. Many of these were originally closed between 2015 and 2017 on the grounds that they were not earthquake proof, and based on official reports that mosques could “become bases for separatists and radicals” (Okudera, 2020). Ones re-opened as tourist shops have had Islamic script and crescents removed, and are generally run by Han individuals, renting the space from the local government (Chaguan, 2021; Okudera, 2020). “The Dream of Kashgar” is an excellent illustration of the reduction of Uyghur culture to the merely aesthetic (the “exotic look”), the appropriation of this by Han entrepreneurs for Han consumption, but also the false advertising of this offering meaningful insight into other cultures or ways of life.

“The Dream of Kashgar” aptly embodies many of the issues we are interweaving here. The name speaks to an “exotification” of Kashgar – it is rendered generically “romantic” and “mysterious,” but also gently sexualised. It represents an abstraction of culture and history, indeed, a “fantasy” of it. Particularly when these mosques’ religious histories are elided this becomes a form of erasure. The name also speaks to the propaganda slogan of Xi’s “China Dream” – a “dream” which braids together middle-class economic aspiration with narratives of China’s re-assertion of its presence on the world stage as a return to a historic Chinese golden age, “restoring China to the original glory and hegemony which is its due” (Omran, 2021). As a mosque reinscribed as a bar, it embodies both the delimiting of cultural difference to aesthetics, as well as the forms of symbolic destruction such de-consecration of Islamic religious sites entail.

Sinicising Sacred Spaces

There are other examples where such sites have been developed for tourism, where their Islamic history has been obscured. This means that the memories tourists take from these sites are not of their religious history or significance – indeed, hollowing these sites of their religious histories is what enables them to communicate other, more politically expedient, stories. For example, the mausoleum of Afaq Khoja, originally built in 1640 as the tomb of his father Muhammad Yūsuf, often credited with bringing Sufi-ism to China. Afaq Khoja himself was both a political and religious leader. The mausoleum of Afaq Khoja has not been destroyed, but is now linked to Iparhan/Xiang Fei, the “Fragrant Concubine.” She is a figure in Chinese apocryphal history who was taken as a consort by the Qianlong Emperor, but who may be based on a woman from Xinjiang who entered the imperial harem in 1760 (Rong Fei, Consort Rong). This story is presented as allegorical for “ethnic harmony” in China, despite its problematic gendered power politics. The story is a point of contention: in Uyghur versions, she resisted the emperor, and even tried to kill him; in contemporary Han versions, the emperor doted upon her until she returned his love (Millward, 1994). However, the historical Rong Fei is not buried in Kashgar, but in

Beijing. This has not prevented the Afaq Khoja mausoleum from being billed as the “Fragrant Concubine Tomb.”

The Afaq Khoja mausoleum has been incorporated into a park called “Xiang Fei Gardens,” symbolically subsuming it to the apocryphal story. The enclosing of the mausoleum within the Xiang Fei Gardens also serves to regulate pilgrimage to this site, since access is controlled through a security checkpoint and ticket barriers. Within the park, the mausoleum is signposted as “Abakh Hojam Tomb (Iparhan Tomb).” Signs at the mausoleum provide limited information on Afaq Khoja, instead providing a romantic retelling of the Xiang Fei story, described as “expressing the good wish for unity and mutual love between different nationalities since ancient times ... Love between this Uyghur maid and the emperor is an evidence for great unity among different ethnic groups in china [sic]” (sign at Afaq Khoja mausoleum). In the Xiang Fei Gardens, performers re-enact the story of the Fragrant Concubine with song and dance. Such performances are common at sites associated with ethnic minorities (e.g., the Beijing Ethnic Cultures park also has staged



Figure 7. “No trip to Kashgar, No experience in Xinjiang” poster, Kashgar. The Afaq Khoja Mausoleum is the backdrop to the Uyghur dancers. Along with the “natural beauty” of its mountains and fruit, these are presented as some of the “sights” of Xinjiang. © David O’Brien and Melissa Shani Brown.

“ethnic dances”), which ties into more widespread exotification/eroticisation of minority groups. As online reviews of the Xiang Fei Garden highlight, “There are so many beautiful Uighur girls there” (Trip.com, 2021) (Figure 7).

The gardens actively reframe what the tomb-shrine is, not only whose tomb it is, altering it from a holy site to a tourist venue. This symbolically empties the mausoleum of one “body” and places another, made to embody historic “ethnic harmony,” symbolically in its place. Entrance signs at the Xiang Fei Gardens state that:

The Fragrant Imperial Concubine Scenic Spot is filled with love and happiness.... Here, you will have a deep understanding of the love story of Fragrant Imperial Concubine, feel the unique regional custom without any distance and experience the Uyгур people’s folk [ways].

While the mausoleum is preserved, such inscriptions alter its meaning by overlaying different stories about “whose” mausoleum it is, and what history it is made to tell. Afaq Khoja himself is described as a supposed ancestor of Xiang Fei. This is a complex example of elision, one which foregrounds the Fragrant Concubine story because it can more easily be made to tell a particular narrative, unlike Afaq Khoja who does not lend himself to this inscription.

Another, similar, example is the “Park of Mysterious Trees,” a tourist site near Aksu. The park is publicised as a site where trees which are up to 1000 years old have been bent by the desert winds into bizarre shapes. The mostly Han visitors are given tours in Mandarin, where:

Tourist guides tell stories about what one can reportedly identify in the twisted trunks: the head of Mao Zedong, the profile of Deng Xiaoping.... Groups of Han tourists visiting the park drink from the water spring and hang strips of cloth with Chinese wishes, like “Bon voyage” (一路平安, *yu lu ping'an*) or “Let everything go smooth” (一切顺利, *yiqie shunli*), on the surrounding trees. (Joniak-Lüthi, 2015: 10)

There is also an “Ethnic unity tree,” where two trees have grown together. However, the “Park of the Mysterious Trees” is in fact a graveyard surrounding the Mazar (tomb-shrine) of an early Islamic missionary, Qirmish Ata, and each of the trees marks a grave. Absenting history here both obscures Uyghur cultural practices and Islamic history, but also misleads the mostly Han tourists who would likely be uncomfortable, taking selfies in front of the “Lovers Tree,” to realise they are standing on a grave. Here, the emptying of the park of its religious history – a shrine and a graveyard – allows it to represent the “mysterious”, “natural” beauty of Xinjiang.

But it is also in this context of “secularising” Islamic sites that the construction of a Taoist temple at Tianshan’s Bogda Lake should be considered. Until relatively recently, the land around the lake was Kazakh pastureland, only a few Kazakhs still remain to rent yurts to overnighting tourists (Salimjan, 2022: 147). Given that Kazakhs were displaced from the land so that it could be “ecologically conserved” and to “return the pastures to the grassland” (p. 145), the construction of the temple and pavilions is striking. The lake

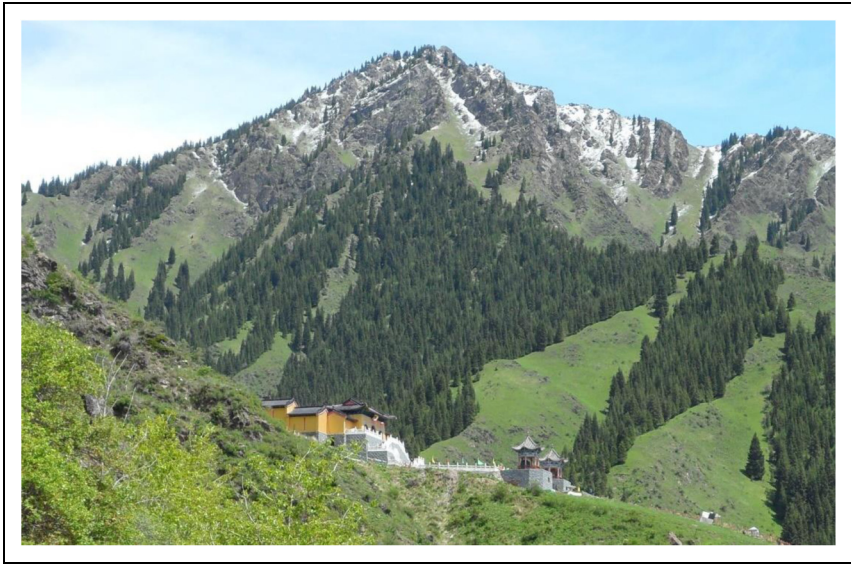


Figure 8. Newly constructed Taoist temple, Tianshan. Along with Chinese-style pavilions at the edge of the shore, the temple aesthetically sinicises the landscape which was until recently Kazakh pastureland. © David O'Brien and Melissa Shani Brown.

has been renamed “Flying Dragon Pond,” and signs state the lake is “the foot-bathing tub of the mythical Taoist goddess Xiwangmu” (Salimjan, 2022: 146). Along with the construction of the temple, this dissociates the lake and the mountain from being Kazakh pastures – instead, it represents an “empty,” “pristine” wilderness, and rather than being “exoticised” this site is made “familiar,” resembling sites in Eastern China (Salimjan, 2022: 146), or traditional scroll landscape paintings. This overlays Taoist invented traditions over the lake, linguistically, mythically, and visually sinicising the site (Figure 8). In the wider context where Islamic sites are being secularised, and Muslim ethnic minorities are being encouraged to embrace “Han secular values,” it is worth noting the contradiction here that traditional Han religious practices are not being troubled as inherently “backwards,” because they are seen to signify “Chineseness.” Conversely, Islam is being represented as something “... imposed on Uyghurs by foreigners” (Ruser et al., 2020: 33). At Bogda lake – now Flying Dragon Pond – the new temple illustrates that much of the inherent tension here is not religion per se (as it was during the Cultural Revolution [Anderson and Byler, 2019]), but the fraught tension of whether Islam is permitted to be an equally authentic way of being “Chinese,” both historically and in the present.

The absencing of Islamic religious histories in Xinjiang is not simply a revision of the past. Since most of these sites have been provided with forms of “security” which monitor

access or are restricted via ticket barriers, this ties into the wider “securitisation” of the region through which Islamic practices are either discouraged, punished, or pushed strictly into the private sphere. Smith Finley conducted ethnographic observations of mosques in Xinjiang in 2018, noting that many were “eerily empty”; the only way to enter was through security checkpoints where electronic “data doors” with iris-scanners took biometric data (Klimeš and Smith Finley, 2020). Turning some of these spaces into tourist sites actively removes them from religious use: not only are Muslims discouraged from visiting these sites to worship, but with the level of surveillance (including the presence of Han tourists), such practice is not possible. As noted earlier, a significant number of mosques, graveyards, and shrines have been razed (Kuo, 2019; Ruser et al., 2020). But “preservation” as tourist sites also operates as a form of destruction through de-consecration. As articulated by Professor Rahilä Dawut, whose research focused on Uyghur pilgrimage traditions: “If one were to remove these [shrines], the Uighur people... would no longer have a personal, cultural, and spiritual history” (interview in 2012, quoted in Kuo, 2019). Professor Rahilä Dawut was highly regarded within mainstream Chinese academia. However, she was detained in 2017 and has not been heard from since, presumed to have been taken into the camps.

This is part of a broader trend through which re-inscribing sites for tourism side-lines Islamic religious histories in favour of something ostensibly “more marketable” but actually clearly political, making commodification for Han tourists a distinct form of sinicisation. The cumulative effect is to naturalise a secularised image of Uyghur traditions, and historic “ethnic harmony,” which serves to frame tensions around religion in the present as though they are not a historical legacy. As an infrastructure of memory, the deconstruction of these sites serves to disrupt their places in Uyghur or other minorities’ living culture, and reconstruct them as simulacra of the past for tourists.

We can see in the examples discussed here a particular type of “destruction” of the “backwards,” “un-sanitary,” “un-safe,” and the construction of the “advanced,” “safely-consumable,” and “modern.” The mosque is transformed from a potential site of “dangerous radicals,” into a modern cocktail bar. The Mazar and its surrounding graves are no longer a place where Uyghur families gather for shrine worship or to tend family graves, but where Han tourists can see Mao Zedong in the trees and muse on the natural beauty of Xinjiang. Uyghurs are not allowed to engage in Sufi religious songs and dance practices (such as *muqam*), but in Xiang Fei Gardens, they dance in the role of the “Fragrant Concubine.” Here, becoming “touristified” makes Uyghur culture “safe” and “modern,” even when representing Uyghur traditionality, because it is not oriented towards Uyghurs but towards Han consumers. As infrastructures of memory, such places (e.g. the mosque/bar or shrine/park) and practices (e.g. Uyghur music and dance), cease to be mnemonic forms for those whose culture they represent, because the memories they are meant to be producing reside in the tourist spectators.

“Most of all They Smile”: The Testimonial Tourist Gaze

They sing, they dance, they twirl, they whirl.

Most of all they smile, showing their happiness to be part of the motherland.

(Drew Gladney, referring to representations of China's ethnic minorities, 1994: 95)

The commodification of sites in Xinjiang positions touristic development as one of the ways that "sinicisation" is being carried out. This is being done through the construction of sites to appeal, generally, to an imagined "Han" audience. But it is also being carried out via interpellating the audience to naturalise official narratives on the situation in Xinjiang.

For example, the Kumtag Desert Scenic Site, which largely caters to Han tourists. Built at the edge of the desert, with opportunities to walk around the dunes, this site features young women in technicolour "Uyghur costume" for tourists to take photographs with, and also motorised miniature tanks (Figure 9).

The tanks are a polyvalent plaything: on the one hand, they represent an abstract fantasy of desert warfare, harkening to wider media tropes of Middle-Eastern wars present in global imaginaries, but also specifically within China to the ongoing large military presence in the Xinjiang region over many decades. But this also renders militarism playful, and allows for imaginative enactment of "conquest" and "control" by the tourists. In this, it encourages tourists to think of the presence of tanks in positive ways – it invites them to occupy the place of the army and state, to play with militarised power as a "toy," rather than imagining tanks as negative symbols of military occupation or threats of state



Figure 9. Miniature motorised tanks for rent. Kumtag Desert scenic site, Shanshan County. Xinjiang 2019. © Patrick Wack.



Figure 10. Young women in “flashy folklore costumes” pose with Han tourists at the main tourist site near the Gaochang mountains, near Turpan. Xinjiang 2019. © Patrick Wack.

violence. Playing at being “conquering heroes” is part of the fun and games to be had in Xinjiang.

The presence of young women in costume is also significant here, partly because it is so commonplace at Xinjiang’s tourist sites (Figure 10). In this, tourism to Xinjiang affords a chance to see and photograph Uyghur women – they are presented as one of the “attractions” one comes to see (see Figures 7 and 10). In being turned into tourist photographs, such images of perpetually smiling young women come to serve as “participatory propaganda,” whereby tourists’ images replicate official tropes, yet provide them with an aura of “authenticity” as though they were not staged (Brown and O’Brien, 2021). This places tourists – and the photographs they take, the stories they tell – as key agents in representing the contemporary situation in Xinjiang.

Clear in reviews of Kashgar is the extent to which most tourists directly replicate the official narrative. For example, the following review of the Xiang Fei Gardens:

... the scenic spot [of the Fragrant Concubine] closely follows the theme of national unity, fully demonstrating the good story of Kashgar since ancient times, where the various ethnic groups in Xinjiang interact and mingle. The scenic area is full of exotic atmosphere, and the beautiful Xinjiang girls are particularly beautiful in dancing. (Trip.com reviews, 2021)

Kashgar is not simply a place where varied ethnic groups have lived across history, it evidences “national unity” in the present. The “beauty” shifts from the “scenic area” to

the performers, but the “beauty” of Uyghurs, particularly young women in costume, is a recurring trope in many of the reviews:

It's worth a visit to Kashgar. There are many beautiful Uyghur girls. (Trip.com reviews, 2021)

On the eastern outskirts of Kashgar is a harmonious place commonly known as the Tomb of the Fragrant Concubine... At the entrance stands a row of dressed-up Uighur girls ... gaily welcoming visitors and blowing away the solemn atmosphere... (Trip.com reviews, 2021)

Such reviews give a sense of tourists' experiences, their memories of their time in Kashgar – “Uyghur girls” are one of the “sights.”

The “tourist gaze” and the “male gaze” coincide here (see Yi Xiaocuo [2019] for a more detailed discussion of the gendering of Sinicisation). As noted by Harrell (1996), in the predominant depiction of ethnic minorities as young women, they become a two-fold image of those the CCP has “liberated” from feudalism, while also being coded as “passive and possessable” (pp. 10–13). Much as official propaganda depicts smiling ethnic minority women dancing to herald the coming of the CCP, at tourist sites they smile and dance for Han tourists. Indeed, given the wider news media framing of tourism as symbolic of the “peace and prosperity” being brought to Xinjiang, Han tourists and the CCP symbolically converge as bearers of affluence that will “save” Uyghurs from poverty and ignorance, and places Uyghurs as “damsels in distress” whose ongoing gratitude is signified in their “smile[s], showing their happiness to be part of the motherland.”

Uyghur performers are, of course, key participants in these staged experiences. It is worth noting that ethnic minorities at tourist venues in China do not always perform their own ethnicity. Certainly, this was our experience of the “Kazakh village,” where the performers were in fact Uyghurs (see Brown and O'Brien, 2020). Promotional and tourist photographs of Kashgar also often feature other ethnic groups; it is not impossible that some of the many performers are in fact Uyghurs taking on varied roles as required – a question of donning or divesting one “ethnic costume” or another. Such “interchangeability” emphasises the performative nature of “ethnic otherness” at these sites, and the extent to which this is role-play. Their role is to embody their “ethnicity” – as continually smiling, beautiful young people in costume, indefinitely happy, and dancing – so that they simultaneously embody “ethnic harmony.”

For some, this is a source of resentment: “Uyghurs are used as clowns to entertain people” (Uyghur interviewee, Szadziwski et al., 2021). But it should also be acknowledged that for many this is a job, and not an unwelcome opportunity to live and work in Kashgar, where the relocation of most of Kashgar's old community has broken traditions of family employment as well as access to informal monetary funds (see Steenberg and Rippa, 2019). Though the development of Kashgar has certainly led to some greater affluence for some individuals, the level of inequality has actually increased, and with it widespread senses of “alienation, palpable frustration, and loss of trust in the state” (Steenberg

and Rippa, 2019: 16; see also Salimjan, 2022). As a massive tourist site, the old city certainly does offer employment to a significant number of Uyghurs, however, it should be noted that most businesses are not owned by Uyghurs, even if they are employed to staff them, or as tour guides (see Chaguan, 2021; Okudera, 2020; Szadziwski et al., 2021). As noted by Szadziwski et al. (2021) as employees rather than business owners, many Uyghurs involved in the tourist industry are under pressure, and under surveillance, to perform “correctly” – what they say to tourists is recorded, and their physical appearance is monitored; for example, male tour guides with many years experience have been told they will be fired unless they shave their beards. This leads to cynicism alongside resentment, since it erodes the agency inherent in these individuals’ embodiment of their ethnic identity. Even if they choose to take such employment, they are not agents of the role or scripts they are given.

On the one hand, there is an elision of the contemporary reality of ethnic tension and the brutality of the re-education system here – this is partly done through performers representing “traditions,” not the “present,” in clothing, music, and dance. One illusion is the implication that this represents a contemporary way of life for Uyghurs or other minorities, rather than clearly positioning this as a form of re-enactment.

However, tourism is also a vehicle to tell a particular tale about the camps “head on.” Consider the following description of a Kashgar tour guide, from an online travel blog:

[After we walked around the Xiang Fei Gardens, a tourist] from east China sighed with wonder that this beautiful Xinjiang tour guide could skilfully tell story [of the Fragrant Concubine] in perfect Mandarin and asked the girl where she learned it. The girl beamed and answered with a clear voice: “I’m a Chinese girl, and I learned Mandarin at a vocational education and training center.” It turned out that she had graduated from Kashgar vocational education and training center, and chose to become a tour guide as she wished. Our tour was interspersed with her singing and dancing, which was truly a feast for our ears and eyes. She moved on to tell us that she was born into a traditional family of farmers nearby and had a strong liking for sing and dancing since childhood. Forced by her father, she fell under the dark spell of religious extremism several years ago ... She told me that she and her classmates had been spiritually renewed through the training at vocational education and training center.

... Given her elegance, confidence and words full of longing for the future, who can believe that she used to be a housebound peasant girl infected by religious extremism? ... [R]ecognize that when women are beautiful, Xinjiang becomes beautiful too. (Wabuli, 2019)

Though tackling the camps directly, this depiction harmonises with many other tropes: Uyghurs are impoverished “peasants,” “infected” by a religion that was “forced” on them; because they have been “spiritually renewed” by learning Mandarin in a camp, now they can skilfully tell the story of the Fragrant Concubine and sing and dance so that tourists from eastern China can “sigh with wonder” as they “feast” on her beauty and that of Xinjiang.

It should be noted that some tourist blogs or reviews bear witness to absences: Uyghur street markets which have closed or lack the “exciting bustle” of the past, for example. To be clear, these absences are caused by the disappearance of people into the camp system and the increased securitisation of public spaces (see Klimeš and Smith Finley, 2020). Yet, many tourists find ways of explaining or legitimising such absences to their readers: the Uyghur street market is gone, but it is for better security; there are fewer Kazakhs, but they are nomads and it is probably just a “pasture-related phenomenon” (Fayard, 2021: 1145), or because they have been moved to modern housing. Many of these are nostalgic, but not particularly critical, regarding the changes they see in Xinjiang. It is a nostalgia for an already-romanticised but very recent past, through which these “absences” are framed as simply a side effect of development and modernisation. The very nostalgia of this tourist gaze sees the bustling street market of yesteryear wistfully, and thus symbolically pushes these crowds of people into the past.

Such images and stories of tourists’ experiences in Xinjiang are as significant as the reinscribing of the Mazar of Qirmish Ata the “Park of Mysterious Trees” – whereas the latter creates versions of history which elide particular features, so too do such depictions of Xinjiang “here and now.” This is not the tomb-shrine of Afaq Khoja, but of the Fragrant Concubine who represents “the good wish for unity and mutual love between different nationalities since ancient times.” “Re-education” does not entail violence, the separation of families or the fracturing of communities, it is a form of “spiritual renewal” allowing “housebound peasant girls” to fulfil their dreams of “singing and dancing” for tourists – the tour guide said so herself.

Tourist “infrastructures of memory” create personal memories and experiences. From reviews and travel diaries, it is clear that tourists enjoy their time in Xinjiang. The tourist gaze is conscripted to be a testimonial one, with tourists attesting to “the good story of Kashgar since ancient times, where the various ethnic groups in Xinjiang interact and mingle.” But it is not providing more nuanced understandings of minorities’ cultures to Han visitors – who are not always told what particular sites are, or why they are meaningful, nor given an insight into the rich histories of religious life, or historic traditions, either of Uyghurs or other ethnic minorities. It does not clearly facilitate meaningful encounters in a context where there are already serious legacies of stereotyping and mistrust. And, given the extent to which much of the development of Kashgar’s tourism has been led by Han entrepreneurs and businesses (Chaguan, 2021; Szadziwski et al., 2021), it is clear to what extent tourism will address wider issues of economic inequality and resentment. What much of this tourism is doing is legitimising the government’s approach, providing tourists with an experience of how “wonderful” Xinjiang is which derogates accusations of human rights abuses occurring alongside (but just out of sight of) such tourism.

Final Thoughts: “Tour Buses are as Effective as Bulldozers”

This article has explored how tourism to Xinjiang functions as an infrastructure of memory, oriented towards evidencing and reinforcing official government positions

and the sinicisation campaign. Tourism, we argue, has been uniquely placed as a vehicle for sinicisation – allowing for the reconstruction of Uyghur history and culture under the guise of preserving it. While it is unsurprising that, for example, tourist sites should reiterate national history in particular terms, or commodify Uyghur culture, or that tourists' impressions (particularly those which are publicly voiced online) should harmonise with official media, we argue that taken together these illustrate the ways in which tourism is being weaponised in order to “control the narrative” about Xinjiang, to justify its increasing securitisation, and at times to offer a “fig leaf” for the state-organised violence in the region.

In the broader context, it becomes meaningful if significant numbers of tourists from Inner China have personal experiences of a sanitised Xinjiang. It emotively connects them to the government narrative that foreign critics are denigrating their success in combatting terrorism (e.g. *Global Times*, 2019), and lessens their empathy with charges of human rights abuses because that is not the Xinjiang they personally saw, and certainly not what Uyghurs who posed for photographs with them said. It feeds into wider political discourses which reiterate that the camps have been successful and that minority individuals are happy members of the “Chinese family” (Millward, 2007), even when their actual family members have disappeared or died within the camps. Much as Ildikó Bellér-Hann (2013) used the bulldozer as a symbol of destructive construction, the tour bus is also a potent symbol of the way in which the CCP uses tourism to affectively reinforce official narratives. Tourism is thus a complex “infrastructure of memory” being actively used to sculpt Uyghur culture into secular forms, and also to draw both ethnic minority individuals and Han tourists into the process of Xinjiang's sinicisation, and the legitimisation of the CCP's position that “re-education” is the best way of dealing with social unrest.

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