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Revolution and state formation as oasis storytelling in Xinjiang*

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No-one can say the world is ignoring Xinjiang. In October 2019, at the American Association of Christian Counsellors, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo likened China’s treatment of more than a million Uyghur Muslims in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region to George Orwell’s 1984 (Reuters 2019). This was while the Trump White House began placing sanctions on Chinese governmental and business organisations involved with the now infamous reeducation camps in the region. In June 2020, Pompeo went further to condemn alleged mass sterilisations and, the following month, the US Departments of State, Commerce, and Homeland Security issued a joint ‘Xinjiang Supply Chain Business Advisory’ targeted at forced labour in the province (South China Morning Post 2020; US State Department 2020). China has been condemned by representatives from more than 20 countries, with the notable exception of Muslim-majority states that have important trading relationships with Beijing such as Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, and Iraq (AFP 2019; Shams 2019; Kerimkhanov 2019; Liu 2019; Calabrese 2019).

Yet, in the current political climate, with the United States and China engaged in a protracted trade war and the War on Terror evolving into rapidly intensifying Islamophobia and the use of concentration camps the world over, important details about Chinese objectives in Xinjiang have been poorly discussed in the mass media. Academics, journalists, and politicians are right in noting that Beijing is using the camps as a tool for social reengineering, to force Xinjiang’s ‘integration’ into the Chinese political and cultural mainstream. Nevertheless, this analysis, while correct, risks overlooking long-term economic goals in the region—most notably, Xinjiang’s importance to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as well as the CCP’s existential opposition to the ideological threat of Uyghur ethnic,

*A slightly different version of this essay was published in the Made in China Journal (vol. 5, no. 1, 2020), doi.org/10.22459/MIC.05.01.2020.03. The article has been revised and updated for inclusion in this volume.
cultural, and spiritual distinctiveness. Ultimately, what is often left out is that the CCP’s social engineering appears to be creating a new kind of post-communist and post-Islamic society in Xinjiang that will likely be on the cutting edge of similar pushes for mass surveillance and ethnic cleansing all over the world.

**The new frontier**

First, it is useful to give a brief overview of Xinjiang. Xinjiang literally means ‘New Border’ or ‘New Frontier’ and demarcates a territory that was conquered by the expanding Qing Dynasty in the 1760s. The region represents about one-sixth of China’s total land area and includes 5,600 kilometres of international borders with eight countries, including Russia, several former Soviet republics in Central Asia, Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan. Xinjiang has two distinct subregions: Dzungaria, which is north of the Tianshan Mountains, and the Tarim Basin, which is largely a desert to its south. Most Uyghurs live in the Tarim Basin, which has half a dozen major cities on the edges of the Taklamakan Desert—hence the Turkic name ‘Altishahr’, which means ‘Six Cities’ and which will be used stylistically throughout this article as a synonym for indigeneity. After the Chinese Revolution in 1949, 10 ethnic groups were classified as ‘Muslim’ minorities, including the Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

Before the Qing Dynasty, the Altishahri economy prospered from complex trading networks along the Silk Road, with merchant commerce reinforcing highly cosmopolitan and only loosely hierarchical readings of Central Asian Sufism that are difficult to assimilate into modern state institutions without alteration. Following the Qing Dynasty’s conquest, local rulers led frequent revolts against Beijing during a period of Chinese expansion, population growth, and prosperity that would start to decline shortly before the Opium Wars. It was the violent suppression of these revolts that began to shift ruling-class attitudes towards Muslims in China, and Uyghurs in particular. The region’s Muslims were treated with hostility during the Republican era (1911–49), and particularly so due to continued violence from loyalist Muslim members of the Guomindang, who fought in China’s western provinces throughout the 1950s (Jacobs 2016).

Apart from its geopolitical significance, Xinjiang has been cultivated as a major food production centre in China, serving as the country’s second-largest pastureland (including major sheep farming and wool production), and its largest growing base for cotton, hops, lavender, and
other important crops. Xinjiang is also rich in energy resources, with the country's largest oil, natural gas, and coal reserves, in addition to 130 different kinds of minerals. Many of these resources are being exploited by the Bingtuan (兵团), which is shorthand for the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (see Cliff’s photo essay in Chapter 6 and Salimjan’s Chapter 7 in this volume). While the Bingtuan employs about 12 per cent of Xinjiang’s population, more than 80 per cent of its workforce are Han Chinese. The Bingtuan has been operating since 1954 as a paramilitary development organisation, and reports directly to Beijing, rather than the local government. While its original objectives were to ensure the settlement of Han Chinese immigrants, to change the province's demographic balance, to maintain security internally and along international borders, and to project the power of the 'centre', the Bingtuan has developed a complex, multisectoral economy based on food and agriculture. The Bingtuan also controls important technological, cultural, health, and judicial infrastructure and, in many cases, was responsible for building it.

Many of today’s problems in Xinjiang were severely exacerbated by Beijing’s Open Up the West Campaign (西部大开发) in the 1990s, which aimed to increase Han Chinese immigration to Xinjiang through a system of economic and social incentives. It was in the 1990s that the CCP first began to promote people moving to Xinjiang with rhetoric about ethnic unity, national integrity and stability, religious activities being opposed to the state, and anti-separatism, among other things. The campaign resulted in huge wage and labour gaps between Han Chinese and Uyghurs and other local minorities, especially in the professional and managerial class. Uneven access to state institutions and jobs created, and then reinforced, spatial divisions in cities, worsening ethnic apartheid and gaps in living standards. Since the 1990s, China has adopted a policy of ‘creative destruction’, whereby it destroys cultural religious sites, but also funds educational, religious, and tourist infrastructure to integrate the non-threatening remnants of ‘Altishahri’ indigeneity (see Thum’s Chapter 10 in this volume). The global outcry has tended to focus on the more destructive parts of Beijing’s approach—for understandable reasons—but this ignores how the CCP is simultaneously creating a new kind of post-communist and post-Islamic society in Xinjiang that is driven as much by technological advances as by its own conventional and managerial world view.
Altishahri integration

While Beijing often accuses Uyghur political agitators of separatism (though it has steadily updated this rhetoric over the past 20 years to be more about ‘fighting terrorism’), ‘separatism’ as a term is very reductive and does not fit the complexity of Altishahri spiritual and political thought. Indeed, its unique reading of Islam, legends, and history reflects a dynamic cosmopolitanism produced in part by Silk Road merchant commerce that is often hard to define for bureaucratic and managerial purposes. This is largely the reason ‘Islam’ often means so many different things with respect to the Uyghurs. It is common to hear Beijing, or workers in the Bingtuan, label anything from language to ethnicity to diverse spiritual rituals as ‘Islamic’. Xinjiang is unique, with multiple sources of Muslimness and seemingly ‘non-Islamic’ markers like the Turkic language that are nevertheless attached to Islam in popular and institutional consciousness. It is important to fully appreciate this cosmology and understand it within the local context rather than from the standpoint of conservative and statist ideologies—if only to avoid unintentionally reinforcing the CCP’s efforts to brand ‘Uyghur’ as a neatly bounded identity that is essentialised for administrative and bureaucratic ease. Indeed, even Uyghur exiles and political activists risk adopting the language of separatism, nationalism, and even Islamism, in a manner that reshapes local understandings of politics and struggle while sidelining a properly Altishahri approach.

Altishahri ideas about resistance are rooted in a blend of Silk Road cultural traditions shaped by the active veneration of Sufi saints and community-authored manuscripts. It is this tradition that China seeks to crush in favour of ideas that are more compatible with a centrally managed approach to religion and identity. The local vocabulary is heavily influenced by Sufi Naqshbandi Islamic orders that arose in Central Asia in the fourteenth century, with Semitic, Iranian, and Turkic influences (Thum 2014). By the 1930s, this mixture became roughly equal to a ‘Uyghur’ identity strongly affected by Sufi cosmology. Traditionally, local history is taught at the tombs of important figures (‘shrines’) where shaykhs tell pilgrims different stories about them. This storytelling has a great deal of spiritual legitimacy, often because it is literally about the same ground on which these figures walked. There are also political consequences because, when pilgrims go to the shrines and remember these figures, they go over the historical record and meditate on the ‘higher’ values associated with them. This puts them in the position of noting the gap between
these values, such as freedom and justice, and the world around them, which can potentially lead to utopian thinking that is represented in the memory of the figures themselves. Important manuscripts, written by the local community, also encourage utopian thinking in a similar process. It is useful to consider Altishahri thought as a kind of ‘active mysticism’ through which meditation and worship start to blend with political activity, without strict distinctions between the secular and the religious.

It is important to distinguish ‘active mysticism’ from the kinds of mysticism with which Western observers are normally familiar, which is seen as something a worshipper does in isolation from the rest of the world. Indeed, while local Islamic practice does contain these forms, mysticism can also mean a variety of activities that are explicitly rooted in the ways one deals with society. Mysticism is not only about one’s personal spiritual needs outside the community. It is also explicitly about how those needs are expressed through interactions with the community (which is what makes it ‘active’). Worship can take many different forms, only one of which is private apolitical meditation. In Xinjiang, one person may tell a tale about a Sufi mystic, at their shrine, with that storytelling being an expression of worship in a similar way to a pilgrim hearing that tale. More radically, a pilgrim may hear that tale and be inspired to interact with the community in ways that correspond to the spiritual themes of the story. Such actions could be anything from marrying a suitable partner and treating one’s elderly relatives with respect, to giving money to the poor and waging armed struggle against the Chinese state. Behaviour in the real world reflects the sorts of ideals drawn from the story.

Beijing has shut down shrines and ended Uyghur Islamic practice, but also reshaped activities at other shrines and inserted itself into the regulation of manuscripts, because it is threatened by the political ramifications of this active mysticism. It coopts local spirituality by controlling the shaykhs who lead it and emphasising the kind of storytelling that gives rise to forms of community interaction more aligned with its strategic objectives in the region. As a result, Beijing effectively positions itself to rearticulate the local transmission of knowledge and spirituality, with a significant impact on its political landscape. It is like changing the textbooks students use to make them think a certain way.

Rian Thum (2012) explains this process through the example of Afaq Khojah. Afaq was the founder of a line of rebellious Sufi leaders in the seventeenth century and, over the past three centuries, narratives about him have been occasionally reshaped based on changing politics and
shifting definitions of what is considered properly 'local' to Xinjiang. Starting in the 1930s, Afaq's tale was reconfigured as an ethno-national history of rebellion and independence from China, which is often portrayed as a 'distant city' in the local manuscript tradition. Beijing has made dramatic changes to how Afaq is understood, whether in the manuscripts themselves (CCP officials confiscate or destroy copies of the popular historical novel *Apaq Khoja*) or the oasis history about which pilgrims hear at his shrine. Indeed, CCP-appointed *shaykhs* and the local tourist industry tend to place more emphasis on his descendant Xiang Fei (香妃), who is also buried at his shrine and was known as the 'fragrant concubine'. Legend has it that the Qianglong Emperor was so enamoured with Xiang's beauty that he brought her from Xinjiang to be a consort at the Royal Court. Effectively, therefore, rather than values of liberation and resistance associated with the story of Afaq Khojah, pilgrims and tourists now learn to value the Han–Uyghur cultural fusion at the core of this romance. As such, the shrine has largely been neutralised, with the role of gender in reconfiguring the spiritual tale being particularly significant, since the Uyghurs are now represented by a passive and seductive female who captures the emperor's benevolent attention, rather than her male ancestor who violently pushed back against the Chinese Empire.

Clearly, the takeaway is that Uyghurs need to be seen and not heard. They are allowed to be exotified by middle-class tourists but can never be political subjects in their own right. As Afaq's tale and shrine have always been reformulated based on changing political and economic forces, they have now morphed in respect to Beijing's new regional and global ambitions. For their part, Chinese officials often say they are attempting to guard Xinjiang from foreign influence and are seeking to prevent Islamic extremism. Yet, the reality is that Beijing often seeks to redesign Uyghur Islam to make it more compatible with the needs of modern China. Prominent Uyghur activists, as well as international observers, often participate in this redesign by simplifying Altishahri resistance as separatism by a culturally distinct population, a nationalistic backlash to human rights violations, or an internal problem of Islamic extremism and terrorism. These framings often reflect the intricacies of the foreign powers and institutions being lobbied, whether in Ankara, Washington, Geneva, or at the United Nations. These interpretations of the province's cultural and political landscape are often more about the observers and their need to impose certain historical and geopolitical narratives on
the situation. Ultimately, the Uyghurs are the ones who lose the most, as Altishahri cosmology is largely deleted and reorganised to fit within the authoritarian requirements of China’s emerging imperial model.

**Communism as forced baptism**

Integration is necessarily a process of deletion and substitution as the target population is shaped to be more manageable by the ruling class. The War on Terror has created a global climate in which Muslim minorities face unprecedented scrutiny—including in long-established democracies like France, the United States, and the United Kingdom—and in which government agencies root out ‘extremists’ and appeal to moderate Muslims who profess loyalty to the state. Yet, it would be misleading to characterise Beijing’s conduct as the latest chapter in a period of worldwide Islamophobia. Rather, the integration of Xinjiang is a heavy-handed push to wipe out all but a sliver of the Altishahri backdrop that preceded the current period, while leaving fragments that can be assimilated into state administration (in addition to important tourist and cultural production industries in the province).

Like other post-communist states, China does not ban Islam outright. Indeed, such a move would be counterproductive, given its ambitions as a global actor and its strategic partnerships with majority-Muslim countries. Instead, Beijing pushes to create a distinctly ‘Chinese Islam’ that trims perceived Altishahri excess, at the same time as wiping out the basis for its independent existence as a social form. Xinjiang’s surveillance and concentration camp infrastructure serves both purposes—simultaneously crushing and reorganising the Uyghurs—to create a new human landscape in the area. While not anti-Muslim, this landscape will confine Islamic practice to a few tolerated spaces and forms, with a new, implicitly Han Chinese and CCP-controlled, secular culture dominating the region.

Since 2017, hundreds of thousands of Uyghur Muslims (out of a population of about 11 million) have moved through holding cells in the Xinjiang prison system before being handed long sentences or indefinite internment in concentration camps that push ‘transformation through education’. The camps effectively function as medium-security prisons, with ‘vocational training’ that seems directed at teaching Uyghurs to disavow Islam and embrace secular allegiance to Beijing. Since there is no clear definition of what ‘Islam’ even means with respect to the Uyghurs,
the word ‘allegiance’ should be understood as a euphemism for the forced adoption of irreligion under duress. When the CCP or institutions linked to Beijing speak of ‘integration’ and ‘fundamentalism,’ they are referring to this process of rooting out beliefs and practices. The approach parallels that of other major powers in previous centuries—the assimilation policies of the United States, Canada, and Australia towards their indigenous populations immediately come to mind—with the notable addition of huge technological advances.

Speaking at the Left Forum 2019, Darren Byler cited a spokesperson from Leon Technology—an information technology company providing services to the government in Xinjiang—to show how this tension projects a racialised desire for control on the issue. Byler said the spokesperson, who was at the Ürümqi security trade fair in 2017, noted: ‘Anyone who has been to Kashgar will know that the atmosphere there was really thick and imposing’ (Zhang 2017). The words ‘thick’ and ‘imposing’ mean ‘Uyghur’ in this context, and Leon Technology was building an artificial intelligence (AI) project to learn from this ‘thick and imposing atmosphere,’ to make it more manageable and legible to Beijing. Indeed, the spokesperson went on to say: ‘Through the continuous advancement of the project, we have a network of 10,000 video access points in the surrounding rural [Kashgar] area, which will generate massive amounts of video. This many images will bind many people.’ It is difficult not to see what is really going on.

Leon Technology is one of many firms working with Beijing on the mass surveillance and incarceration projects that have been set up in Xinjiang at an accelerated rate since the declaration of the People’s War on Terror in 2014 (see also Byler’s Chapter 14 in this volume). Reports from the camps themselves—officially called ‘Vocational Education and Training Centres’ (职业技能教育培训中心)—often shock audiences with descriptions of how Beijing’s goals are enforced by state-of-the-art technology. TV monitors are used to deliver the state curriculum in cells and classrooms, while detainees are closely monitored. They are disciplined via speaker systems if they sleep at the wrong times, express what are seen to be Islamic traditions, speak Uyghur, or otherwise behave ‘improperly’. Technology is also used to terrorise the Uyghurs outside the camps, with transnational corporations like Google, Huawei, Facebook, and Hikvision interlinking with venture capitalists from the major powers—including the United States—to build a sprawling AI-based policing infrastructure for the Chinese state. Millions of people in the region are now subjected
to smartphone scans, wiretaps, location tracking, and regular 3D facial and voice scans at local police stations that create biometric databases for Chinese intelligence agencies (see also Loubere and Brehm’s Chapter 13 in this volume). It is very likely that as President Xi Jinping pushes China towards becoming a ‘cyber superpower’, the slow erasure and rewriting of Uyghur Islamic practice will be touted as a pioneering victory for social control to be repeated elsewhere.

Towards a new Altishahri resistance

While this combination of mass incarceration, the tech sector, ethnic erasure, and discussions of Islamic terrorism and extremism may seem new, it relies on a classical imperial push to control and neutralise difference that has led to concentration camps under every other major global power. Indeed, there is not much difference, in terms of state behaviour, between China’s activities in Xinjiang and the Spanish Empire’s in Cuba, the British Empire’s in South Africa, and so on (Pitzer 2017). The history of concentration camps is one of societal anxieties leading to undesirable populations being caged and then stripped of what is seen as making them threatening. As China builds the military and trading infrastructure to compete with the world’s richest countries, it is also building its equivalents of the migrant detention centres on the Australian, European, and US–Mexico borders and colonial prisons in Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, and Bagram Air Base. The danger is that this is just the beginning, and these versions of the authoritarian policing technology being used in Xinjiang will eventually be exported throughout the BRI, whether in northwestern Pakistan or eastern Europe. Notably, several private Chinese security companies have joined the Frontier Group, which is affiliated with Erik Prince, in Central Asia, making clear the intertwined global reach of both Chinese and US counterterrorism forces—something made possible despite Beijing facing a torrent of popular criticism and international pushback due to its policies in western China.

Beijing is in the process of creating a new kind of Xinjiang, in which Uyghur cultural, spiritual, and political expression are severely limited and placed below the needs of a new secular (and multicultural) polity. While it is tempting to believe that oppression of the Uyghurs will limit its ambitions—particularly considering the international outcry—the likely reality is Chinese internal imperialism and social reengineering will mark the beginning of a new phase of capitalist governance. Certainly,
the technology being used in Xinjiang will become more widespread, but the same goes for the way that local culture and distinctiveness are being destroyed and violently brought in line with the CCP’s ideas about top-down management and social control. One could argue that the techniques on display in Xinjiang are more refined versions of tactics initially fine-tuned during European imperialism, with particularly fruitful comparisons possible with the settlement of Australasia and the Americas. Obviously, the questions of genocide and population settlement are different in the two cases, but the shared point is a new world being built on the colonial frontier that erases its indigenous precursors and serves as an exemplar for future governance.

Left-wing observers of Xinjiang have the chance to use Beijing’s oppressive policies as an excuse to consider Uyghur spiritual and cultural material as a source of political resistance, including outside the region itself. This will likely be a prolonged process in conjunction with Uyghur scholars, and risks being counterproductive due to how academic and governmental requirements are likely to also reshape Altishahri consciousness. As Xinjiang goes global, it is unlikely that one will find a pure form of the complex societal medley that emerged from Silk Road trading across Central Asia. Nevertheless, it is certainly possible to appreciate how the Uyghurs may continue to be subjects of their own history, inspired by the manuscripts, oasis storytelling, and ‘active mysticism’ that alarm Beijing and the CCP. Certainly, this is a helpful approach to countering the War on Terror in general, as David Brophy has written with reference to the simplified rhetoric of ‘good Muslim’ versus ‘bad Muslim’ in his chapter in this volume. Yet even beyond the need for Uyghur agency, as Brophy writes, it is worth considering whether Altishahri resistance in the future can be a source of inspiration for resistance against models of state authoritarianism. Indeed, the reliance on storytelling and religious activity in the mould of Islamic Neoplatonist philosophy is far more likely to hit mass appeal in several BRI countries (especially Pakistan) than established left-wing traditions. It is a question of exploring Altishahri thinking as something that has value outside museums, tourism, and the niche interests of academics—as a source of political understanding that regards history as mythic and inspirational, and storytelling as on the same plane as large-scale insurrection.