Revolution and State Formation as Oasis Storytelling in Xinjiang

Afaq Khoja Mausoleum
Reconstruction.
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Beijing has reacted to Uyghur spirituality and ethnic distinctiveness with a strongly assimilationist policy aimed at creating a new kind of post-communist and post-Islamic society. This essay examines the ways in which Uyghur Islamic indigenous traditions have undergone 'creative destruction' through pressure from Beijing, and considers the potential for alternative traditions, such as mythic storytelling, to form the basis for collective resistance.

No one can say that the world is ignoring Xinjiang. In October, at the American Association of Christian Counselors, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo likened China's treatment of over a million Uyghur Muslims in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region to George Orwell's 1984 (Reuters 2019). This was at the same time that the Trump White House began placing sanctions on Chinese governmental and business organisations involved with the now

infamous reeducation camps in the region. China has been condemned by representatives from over 20 countries, with the notable exceptions of Muslim-majority states that have important trading relationships with Beijing such as Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, and Iraq (The Guardian 2019; Shams 2019; Kerimkhanov 2019; Zhen 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 mass media. Academics, journalists, and politicians are right in noting that Beijing is using the camps as a tool for social reengineering, in order 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, as well as the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) existential opposition to the ideological threat of Uyghur ethnic, 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 will be useful to give a brief overview of Xinjiang. Xinjiang literally means 'New Border' or 'New Frontier', and indicates a territory that was conquered by an expanding Qing Dynasty in the 1760s. The region is 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. The vast majority of 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 will be used in the possessive throughout this article as a synonym for indigeneity). After the Chinese Revolution in 1949, ten ethnic groups were classified as 'Muslim' minorities, including the Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

Prior to the Qing Dynasty, the Altishahri economy prospered from complex trading networks on 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 to 1949), and particularly so due to continued violence from loyalist Muslim members of the Kuomintang, 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, as well as 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* which is shorthand for the Xinjiang

Production and Development Corps (Yi 2019). While the *bingtuan* employs about 12 percent of Xinjiang's population, its workforce is over 80 percent Han Chinese. The *bingtuan* has been operating since 1954 as a paramilitary-development organisation, and directly reports 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 multi-sector economy based on food and agriculture. The *bingtuan* also controls important technological, cultural, health, and judicial infrastructure, and in many cases actually built 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 moving to Xinjiang based on a rhetoric of 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 in order to integrate the non-threatening remnants of 'Altishahri' indigeneity. 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 its own conventional and managerial worldview.

Altishahri Integration

While Beijing often accuses Uyghur political agitators of separatism (though it has steadily updated this rhetoric to be more about 'fighting terrorism' over the past 20 years), '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 that 'Islam' often means so many different things with respect to the Uyghurs. It is not common to hear Beijing, or workers in the *bingtuan*, label anything from language to ethnicity to diverse spiritual rituals as 'Islamic'. Xinjiang is a unique context 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

Kashgar, a modern Uyghur residential area can be spotted through a partially demolished wall.
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favour of ideas that are more compatible with a centrally-managed approach to religion and identity. Altishahri resistance is heavily influenced by Sufi Naqshbandi Islamic orders that arose in Central Asia in the fourteenth century, with Semitic, Iranic, 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 and tales about them. This storytelling has a great deal of spiritual legitimacy, often because it is literally on the same ground that the 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 starts to blend with political activity, without strict distinctions between the secular and 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 withdrawal and 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 of 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.

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* that 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 that 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 the man 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 manuscript tradition of Naqshbandi *maqthe*. 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 *Afaq Khoja*) or the oasis history that pilgrims hear about 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 her 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 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 has always been reformulated based on changing political and economic forces, it has now morphed in respect to Beijing’s new regional and global ambitions. For their part, Chinese officials often say that 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 in order 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 interpretations of the province's cultural and political landscape are often more about the observers and their needs to impose certain historical and geopolitical narratives on the situation. Ultimately, it is the Uyghurs that lose out 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 where Muslim minorities face unprecedented scrutiny—including in long-established democracies like France, the United States, and the United Kingdom—and where government agencies root out 'extremists' and appeal to moderate Muslims that 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).

Similar to other post-communist states, China does not ban Islam outright. Indeed, such a move would be counterproductive, given its ambitions as a world actor and 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 societal form. Xinjiang's surveillance and concentration camp infrastructure serves both purposes—simultaneously crushing and reorganising the Uyghurs—in order 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, as many as 1.5 million 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, with the notable addition of huge technological advances.

Darren Byler recently spoke at Left Forum 2019 and cited a spokesperson of Leon Technology—an IT company providing services to the government in Xinjiang—to show how this tension means that a racialised desire for control gets projected on the issue. Byler said that 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.' The words 'thick' and 'imposing' mean 'Uyghur' in this context, and Leon Technology was building an 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 in 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. Reports from camps themselves, officially called ‘Vocational Education and Training Centres’, 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 of 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. It is very likely that as 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 particular 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 for difference being controlled and neutralised that has led to concentration camps in every other major power. Indeed, there is not much difference, in terms of state behaviour, between China’s behaviour in Xinjiang, and the Spanish Empire’s in Cuba, the British Empire’s in South Africa, and so on. The history of concentration camps is one of societal anxieties leading to undesirable populations being caged and then stripped away of what is said to make 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 migrant detention centres on the Australasian, 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 Belt and Road Initiative, whether in northwest Pakistan or eastern Europe. This is entirely 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 is 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 international outcry, the reality is likely to be that 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 is being destroyed and violently brought in line with the CCP's top-down ideas about manageability 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 being possible with the settlement of the Americas. Obviously, the question of genocide and population settlement is 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 reevaluate Uyghur spiritual and cultural material as a source of political resistance, including outside of the region itself. This will likely be a prolonged process done in conjunction with Uyghur scholars, and risks being counterproductive due to how academic and governmental requirements are likely to reshape Altishahri consciousness as well. 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 alarms Beijing and the CCP. Certainly, this is a helpful approach to countering the War on Terror in general, as David Brophy (2019) has written with reference to the simplified rhetoric of 'Good Muslim' and 'Bad Muslim'. Yet even beyond the need for Uyghur agency, as Brophy writes, it is worth considering that Altishahri resistance in the future can be a source of inspiration for resistance against state authoritarian models. Indeed, its reliance on storytelling and religious activity in the

mold of Islamic Neoplatonist philosophy is far more likely to hit mass appeal in several Belt and Road countries (especially Pakistan) than established left-wing traditions. It is a question of exploring Altishahri thinking as something that has value outside of museums, tourism, and the niche interests of academics—as a source of political understanding that regards history to be mythic and inspirational, and storytelling to be on the same plane as large-scale insurrection. ■

This text is taken from *Made in China Journal: Volume 5, Issue 1, 2020*,
edited by Ivan Franceschini, Nicholas Loubere and Christian Sorace, published 2020
by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/MIC.05.01.2020.03