

**Spirit Breaking:**  
**Uyghur Dispossession, Culture Work and Terror Capitalism in a Chinese Global City**

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A dissertation  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington  
2018

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:  
Anthropology

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**Abstract**

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Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

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This study argues that Uyghurs, a Turkic-Muslim group in contemporary Northwest China, and the city of Ürümqi have become the object of what the study names “terror capitalism.” This argument is supported by evidence of both the way state-directed economic investment and security infrastructures (pass-book systems, webs of technological surveillance, urban cleansing processes and mass internment camps) have shaped self-representation among Uyghur migrants and Han settlers in the city. It analyzes these human engineering and urban planning projects and the way their effects are contested in new media, film, television, photography and literature. It finds that this form of capitalist production utilizes the discourse of terror to justify state investment in a wide array of policing and social engineering systems that employs millions of state security workers. The project also presents a theoretical model for understanding how Uyghurs use cultural production to both build and refuse the development of this new economic formation and accompanying forms of gendered, ethno-racial violence. It argues that the violence of state-directed capitalist dispossession is shown to break the spirit and vitality of Uyghur sociality while linking Han life paths to this new form of domination and exploitation.

## Table of Contents

|                                                                |     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| List of Figures .....                                          | 2   |
| Acknowledgements.....                                          | 4   |
| Note on Language .....                                         | 6   |
| Note on Pseudonyms.....                                        | 7   |
| Introduction: Spirit Breaking .....                            | 9   |
| <br><b><i>Part 1: Desiring the City</i></b>                    |     |
| Chapter 1. New Silk Road Artworlds .....                       | 82  |
| Chapter 2. Dispossession, Aesthetics and Self-Fashioning ..... | 120 |
| <br><b><i>Part 2: Living the City</i></b>                      |     |
| Chapter 3. Figuring Out the City .....                         | 156 |
| Chapter 4. Witnessing Uyghur Migrant Dispossession .....       | 194 |
| <br><b><i>Part 3: Cleansing the City</i></b>                   |     |
| Chapter 5. Relational Autonomy and Uyghur Islamic Piety .....  | 236 |
| Chapter 6. Trajectories of Quality .....                       | 278 |
| Epilogue. Life Subtracted .....                                | 315 |
| Bibliography .....                                             | 339 |

## List of Figures

|                                                              |     |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Figure 0.1 “Rats Crossing the Street” .....                  | 9   |
| Figure 0.2 Men Washing the Feet of Women .....               | 15  |
| Figure 0.3 Map of Infrastructure Development .....           | 21  |
| Figure 0.4 Comparison of Propaganda Images .....             | 31  |
| Figure 0.5 Ban on Beards and Burkas .....                    | 43  |
| Figure 0.6 Uyghur Child Kisses the Image of Her Father ..... | 56  |
| Figure 0.7 Funding for Terror Capitalism.....                | 60  |
| Figure 1.1 Housing Prices in Ürümchi .....                   | 97  |
| Figure 1.2 “Naan” by Ali K. ....                             | 105 |
| Figure 1.3 “Untitled” by Tian Lin.....                       | 111 |
| Figure 1.4 “Bus #1” by Zeng Qunkai .....                     | 113 |
| Figure 2.1 Mahmud’s father Sits Next to the TV .....         | 120 |
| Figure 2.2 Forced TV Watching Mural .....                    | 125 |
| Figure 2.3 Wear Ethnic Costumes Mural .....                  | 142 |
| Figure 2.4 Fight the Three Forces Mural .....                | 147 |
| Figure 2.5 Restrictions on Audio and Video Mural.....        | 152 |
| Figure 4.1 Image of Yamalike by Tian Lin .....               | 194 |

|                                                                                       |     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Figure 4.2 Film Still of Tian Lin’s Practice .....                                    | 216 |
| Figure 4.3 Image of Great Leaders Faces Turned Sideways by Tian Lin .....             | 224 |
| Figure 4.4 Poster for Tian Lin’s Photo Exhibition .....                               | 228 |
| Figure 5.1 The Rubble of Black Shell Mountain by Nicola Zolin.....                    | 236 |
| Figure 5.2 Emir and Bahar’s home in 2015 by Nicola Zolin.....                         | 248 |
| Figure 5.3 Satellite Images of Black Shell Mountain .....                             | 259 |
| Figure 5.4 Piety on Social Media.....                                                 | 264 |
| Figure 7.1 Caricatured Elderly Uyghur Men by Dan Xiumei.....                          | 315 |
| Figure 7.2 A New “Convenience” Police Station.....                                    | 317 |
| Figure 7.3-4 Walls Corral Uyghurs in Black Shell Mountain .....                       | 322 |
| Figure 7.5 Empty shelves in the Uyghur language section of the Xinhua Bookstore ..... | 331 |

## Acknowledgments

Ideas cannot be broken by suppression, writes Ursula K. Le Guin in *The Dispossessed*, “You can only crush them by ignoring them. By refusing to think, refusing to change.” The people who taught me to think beyond the spirit breaking effects of the Chinese state were my Uyghur and Han friends. This dissertation is dedicated to them and the characters they became in this project: Alim, Zeng Qunkai, Mahmud, Aziz, Ablikim, Batur, Tian Lin, Emir, Hasan and Yusup. These men taught me how to think and how to refuse conditions of dispossession. They also showed me how gendered, ethno-racial violence can affect all aspects of social life. They welcomed me into relationships of friendship and a minor politics of care even when doing so made their everyday lives even more difficult. I am honored that they shared their lives and stories with me.

In the Pacific Northwest, I am honored to be surrounded by a community of Uyghur, Kazakh and Han scholars from Ürümchi. This chosen family in Seattle—those whose names I cannot mention in this text—have affected this project and my life in profound ways. My mentors, Sasha Su-Ling Welland, Stevan Harrell, Ann Anagnost, Daniel Hoffman and Yomi Braester have engaged deeply with this text and shown me how to honor the stories I heard. Other scholars in the University of Washington community—Sareeta Amrute, Luke Bergmann, Jean Dennison, Radhika Govindrajan, Jenna Grant, Michael Perez and Chandan Reddy—all taught me to think in new ways in seminars and workshops. My work was given an institutional home on campus through the support of Kathleen Woodward and Madeleine Yue Dong. The funding I received from the Social Science Research Council, the China Studies Program at the University of Washington, the Society of Scholars at the Simpson Center for the Humanities at

the University of Washington and the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation gave me the time and space I needed to research and write.

My writing group at the University of Washington—Roneva Keel, Caleb Knapp, Samantha Simon, Jiwoon Yu-Lee, Kathryn Zyskowski—read many drafts of these chapters and gave me invaluable feedback that sharpened the craft and contribution of this project. My friends Joshua “Griff” Griffington, Stephanie Cruz, Nathan Loggins, Juan Luo, Sarala Puthuval, Leyla Savloff, Lily Shapiro, Alec Sugar, Yiyu Tian, Yingyi Wang, Xiaoshun Zeng and Shuxuan Zhou gave the long process of reading, writing space to develop my ideas. The China Anthropology Seminar gave me a space to try out the ideas in this project.

My partner Jennifer has been in this project from the beginning. She has always been my final editor and closest *jan-jiger dost*. Her sacrifices have kept me going across the years. I could not imagine life without her.

This dissertation is dedicated to the baby girl who helped me write it. Her story will forever be a part of this story.

*After the youthful days of the first-floor sky  
there arose  
beside those carefree trees  
a sad, uneven city  
where a baby girl passed from hand to hand*

—From “Lumberjacks” by Tahir Hamut, March 3, 2018, Seattle (Trans. Joshua Freeman)



### **Note on Language**

This dissertation project is based on ethnographic research conducted in both Uyghur and Chinese. Because of this I have tried to be careful to render the terms used in the language of origin throughout this text. All first mentions of Uyghur and Chinese terms are italicized. In parenthetical glosses of words I translated into English, I identify the language of origin with an abbreviation before the word: “Uy” for Uyghur words and “Ch” for Chinese words. Occasionally I repeat this procedure if the term has not been used for an extended space in the text. For Uyghur I use the standard Uyghur Latinization and for Chinese I use the standard *pinyin* transliteration minus the tone markers. In general, I provide only the Chinese for Chinese origin terms; and the Uyghur for Uyghur origin terms. Occasionally I include both the Uyghur and the Chinese for terms that are directly derived from each other and I think it will be useful for the reader to understand the term in both languages.

### **Note on Pseudonyms**

Throughout this project the names of most of my friends and informants have been disguised to protect their identities. Only the names of the following public figures have been included: Zeng Qunkai, Ali K., Perhat Tursun, Tian Lin, Tahir Hamut. I included these names in relation to interviews I conducted with them regarding their publicly available work. The names of state officials have also been included in relation to their freely available publications.

ئانا يۇرتۇڭ ئامان بولسا،

رەڭگى روھىڭ سۇنغۇن بولماس.

If your mother's home is at peace,

Your vitality and spirit will not be broken.

## Introduction:

### Spirit Breaking: Terror Capitalism and Culture Work in Chinese Central Asia



*Figure 0.1. A painting titled “Rats Crossing the Street” produced as part of a “People’s War on Terror” art competition among rural Uyghur villages in 2014. The representation of “bad Muslims” as rats, which was how Xinjiang party secretary Zhang Chunxian described Uyghurs who protest their capitalist dispossession, is an example of the dehumanizing effect of the terrorism discourse; paradoxically, it also resonates with depictions of capitalist “counterrevolutionaries” during the Cultural Revolution.*

Soon after I arrived in Ürümchi in 2014, I met a young Uyghur man named Alim. He grew up in a small town near the city of Khotan in the deep south of the Uyghur homeland near the Chinese border with Pakistan. He was a tall, quiet young man who had come to the city looking for work as a media producer in the new market economy. He was critical of many of

the rural people with whom he had grown up. He saw them as lacking capitalist ambition, knowledge of new technology and an understanding of the broader Muslim world, but he was even more critical of the systemic, ongoing issues that had pushed Uyghurs into migrant labor and prevented them from presenting themselves as a self-fashioning group of contemporary Turkic people. There were far too few economic opportunities and far too many religious and political restrictions in the rural areas of Northwest China, he explained. Since the beginning of the most recent “hard-strike campaigns” (Ch: *yanli daji cuoshi*) that led up to the implementation of the “People’s War on Terror” (Ch: *renmin fankong zhanzheng*) in May 2014, many people in the countryside had reached a new level of despair and hopelessness.<sup>1</sup> Alim told me: “If suicide was not forbidden in Islam many people would choose this as a way out.” After praying in the mosque he often saw men crying in each other’s arms—the promise of future redemption matched by the brokenness they felt in their own lives. “Have you seen the *Hunger Games*?” he asked. “It feels just like that to us.” But it was hard for him to put into words what exactly this felt like. He was grasping for a cultural script with which to contextualize the devastating feeling of being so powerless. As a young Uyghur male, he was terrified that he would be caught up in the counter-terrorism sweeps which centered on forms of Uyghur masculinity that were read by the state and Han settlers as dangerous. Every day he tried to put the threat out of his mind and act as though it was not real.

As I got to know Alim better, he began to tell me more explicit stories about what was happening to his world. “Most Uyghur young men my age are psychologically damaged,” he explained. “When I was in elementary school surrounded by other Uyghurs I was very outgoing

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<sup>1</sup>The “People’s War on Terror” names the ongoing state of emergency that was declared by the Chinese state in May 2014 following a series of violent incidents involving Uyghur and Han civilians. See ZHANG Dan, “Xinjiang’s Party chief wages ‘people’s war’ against terrorism,” CNTV, May 26, 2014. <http://english.cntv.cn/2014/05/26/ARTI1401090207808564.shtml>.

and active. Now I feel like I ‘have been broken’” (Uy: *rohim sulghun*). He told me stories of friends of his who had been taken by the police and beaten, only to be released after powerful or wealthy relatives had intervened in their cases. He said, “Five years ago [after the protests of 2009] people fled Ürümchi for the South (of Xinjiang) in order to feel safer, now they are fleeing the South in order to feel safer in the city. Quality of life is now about feeling safe.” Uyghurs were searching for a refuge from the violence of terror capitalism. In the anonymity of the city they felt as though there was still a chance that they could make their own lives by narrating their own life stories. In their natal homes, this often felt impossible.

During my fieldwork in 2014 and 2015, the trauma people experienced in the rural Uyghur homeland was acute. It followed them into the city, hung over their heads and affected the comportment of their bodies. It made people tentative, looking over their shoulders, keeping their heads down. It made them tremble and cry. Many Uyghur migrants to the city had immediate relatives who remained in the countryside with whom they stayed in touch over social media. Rumors of what was happening in the countryside were a constant part of everyday conversation. One day when I met Alim in a park he told me that a relative had told him about what was happening at a prison he was stationed at near Alim’s hometown. He said that over the past few months many young Uyghur women who had previously worn pious Islamic coverings had been arrested and sentenced to 5 to 8 years in the prison as religious “extremists” who harbored “terrorist” ideologies. As he spoke, Alim’s lower lip trembled. He said the Uyghur and Han prison guards had repeatedly raped these young women, saying that if they did this “they didn’t miss their wives at home.” They told each other “you can just ‘use’ these girls.” Alim told this story in a very quiet voice, hunched over on the park-bench. His knee was touching mine. His shoe was touching mine. Among young Uyghur men, having an intimate friend means

sharing the same space and sharing each other's pain. Nearby a Uyghur woman was shaking apple trees, while two other women filled bags with small stone-sized apples (Uy: *tash alma*). I looked away from Alim so that I wouldn't cry.

Many Uyghurs repeated the kinds of stories Alim told me. They described beatings, torture, disappearances and everyday indignities that they and their families suffered at the hands of the state. At times these stories seemed to be incomplete or partial truths, but many times the level of detail and the emotional feeling that accompanied these stories made them feel completely true. Part of the widespread psychological damage that Alim mentioned above came precisely from hearing about such things in an atmosphere that made every kind of atrocity possible. Since the state controlled all public discourse and described the practice of state-violence using euphemisms such as “social stability” (Ch: *shehui wending*), the truth of the situation always felt warped and uncertain. Even if individual claims might be false in some instances, the particular type of violence they described was probably occurring nonetheless, or it would soon. As a result the Uyghur present was increasingly traumatic and there was no end in sight. It felt like a slow painful burn with flashes of intense violence. The process of Uyghur dispossession was both slow and fast. Alim's experience of the “People's War on Terror” described something about the way the rhetoric of “terror” undermined the everyday existence of the Uyghurs it targeted (Anderson 2017). What was happening around them was increasingly hard to ascertain; and the fear that this uncertainty generated often became overwhelming. His story was symptomatic of widespread desires to enter the market economy, to mediatize one's persona, and to find a place in the broader Muslim world, and the way these desires were blocked by processes of racialization that accompanied the arrival of terror capitalism.

Alim's experience is indicative of how Muslim masculinity was being produced in contemporary Chinese Central Asia. Since the "People's War on Terror" often forced military-age Uyghur men to choose between life in the prison camp system and life in the police force, it directly shaped their life paths. But it did more than this, the terror rhetoric also mediated their experience of gender. The story of systemic rape that Alim told me demonstrated that one of the forms of violent dispossession that was nested within this process of racialization was an additional violence directed toward Uyghur women. It showed that Uyghur women often became a silent ground on which the state violence directed toward Uyghur men was carried out. Alim, in part, experienced the sexual assault of Uyghur women by state workers as an affront to his authority and autonomy as a Uyghur man. It was a sign of the general powerlessness of Uyghur patriarchy in the face of the state domination. The rape of Uyghur women was experienced as a rape of the Uyghur nation. He also experienced it as an affront to his dignity as a human being, but it was the attacks on Uyghur male authority in their assumed role as "protectors" that moved him the most deeply. The story about the systematic rape of Uyghur women was just one of many stories he told of Uyghurs being beaten and tortured by the police. He also told me of young men who had their hair pulled out in clumps during interrogation; of screaming, terrified children being pulled out of their mothers' arms as they were taken to state orphanages to be raised by the state. In these stories he identified with the young men who were beaten and tortured, but what really moved him, what made him cry, were the stories of violence toward women and children.

As in other colonial contexts Uyghur men were emasculated by the police (see Swarr 2012). The state often labeled Uyghur men as pathologically dangerous, as always potentially "terrorists," and saw its work in removing children from their homes or forcing their wives and



mothers to remove their veils as an act of liberation from Uyghur Islamic patriarchy. This impulse was demonstrated by the way the state mobilized a Han cultural form of feminism to “re-educate” (Ch: *jiaoyu zhuanhua*) Uyghur men in the “saving” of their wives from Islam and native Uyghur gender relations. On March 8, 2018 in a celebration of International Women’s Day, Uyghur men in towns across the Uyghur homeland were asked to wash the feet of their wives as a way of demonstrating their submission to the state’s definition of feminist gender relationships in their domestic life (See Figure 0.2). This sign of gender equality was of course heavily freighted with Han cultural symbolism and in fact antithetical to Uyghur practices of Islamic hygiene and purity. In Uyghur cultural performance it is considered deeply unclean to wash one’s feet, or the feet of another in a bowl, rather than pouring water from a vessel. It is also a violation of the purity of Islamic ablutions in which the hands and feet are washed prior to prayer, something that the state was explicitly attempting to violate. Uyghurs, both men and women, experienced this activity as deeply degrading and shameful.

As a result of the assault on their masculinity, Uyghur men often felt it was their duty to protect Uyghur women and children from the violence of dispossession, but in this process they often further dispossessed Uyghur women by failing to recognize the agency of Uyghur women. They understood the violence associated with Uyghur women first as an attack on male agency. The fact that both Uyghur and Han police officers also participated in the alleged sexual assault of Uyghur women spoke to the way the state permitted a misogynistic form of state violence even as it also used a form of feminism to dominate Uyghur men. The assault of veiled Uyghur women appeared to be a permitted form of “corrective rape” (Nkabinde 2008). It established the state as the ultimate arbiter of masculinity and femininity. Veiling, after all, was a challenge to the sovereignty of the Chinese state over Uyghur bodies regardless of whether it was forced on



*Figure 0.2. A still from a clip posted to WeChat of Uyghur men washing the feet of Uyghur women in a mass public performance on March 8, 2018.*

Uyghur women by Uyghur men or an act of autonomy on the part of the women themselves. In this atmosphere Uyghur men often felt that the state was forcing them toward the only authorized forms of masculinity: within the police force. Not only was joining the police force a way of avoiding detention, it was also one of the only ways to find secure employment in an economy structured around terror capitalism.

What Alim was describing was the way the “People’s War on Terror” shaped dispossession and desire. It authorized certain forms of sexual violence: police and Han settlers were permitted to dominate Uyghur men and women. It created its own affective atmosphere and economic objectives. The bodies first of Uyghur men, but also women and children, became the objects of investment in policing, education, research and development. Uyghur male bodies, as the loci of terrorism, became the reason why millions of people found jobs as Chinese language teachers, police officers, prison guards, construction workers, service sector employees, public

health workers, face-scan machine operators, computer engineers, artificial intelligence developers and culture workers. As I will describe in more detail below, Uyghur bodies became the site of venture investment. The human engineering project of counter-terrorism became a growth industry.

Terror capitalism began to shape life itself. Uyghurs described this to me over and over as a process through which their spirits were broken. This process of dispossession took the vitality of both their individual autonomy and their collective social life. This project began with the epigraph: *“If your mother’s home is at peace, your vitality and spirit will not be broken”* (see page 5). These phrases of common wisdom describe much about Uyghur sociality. What I have rendered here as vitality, in Uyghur is the word *renggi* or “color” which in the context of the word *rohi* or spirit, has the feeling of breath and vitality. The life of a living thing has these two elements: color and spirit. Social reproduction requires them in order to live on in the present and evolve into the future. One variation of these phrases is to replace the verb “to be broken” (Uy: *sulghun*) with the noun “chaff” (Uy: *saman*) a word that rhymes with “peace” (Uy: *aman*) in the previous line. With this phrasing the epigraph becomes a framing of disposability. *“If your mother’s home is at peace, then your vitality and spirit will not become chaff.”* In terror capitalism, both framings are accurate. When the Uyghur homeland was the object of the “People’s War on Terror,” the vitality and spirit of the Uyghur people became disposable, like chaff. Uyghurs became something to be used; something to be broken.

Over the course of this study, the impetus of life in Ürümchi moved from an investment in the global city and competing ideas of global contemporaneity to an investment in the so-called Global War on Terror and an economy structured explicitly around racialized domination and exploitation of Uyghur bodies. Over this period of time, from 2009 to 2018, Uyghur life was

circumscribed. The freedoms, desires and openings that were fostered by the building of the global city were closed. The culture work—experiments with global Islam and ethno-national self-determination—that those changes had inspired was used as justification for “rectification” (Ch: *jiuzheng*) campaigns in the new human engineering project: state-directed terror capitalism. Understanding this process requires an understanding of how Uyghurs as a group of people were incorporated into the Chinese nation through particular forms of multiculturalism, economic development and securitization. In order to do this, I begin in Section 1 by first describing the history of ethnic identification and how these identifications came to be inflected first by state-directed ethno-racial capitalism in the 1990s and 2000s and finally by terror capitalism following the mass violence of 2009. I show how the economic development of global cities on the New Silk Road and the so-called Global War on Terror has resulted in the wide-spread dispossession of Uyghurs. I then turn, in Section 2, to the analytical stakes of this project by addressing the three interrelated general themes that run throughout the project: dispossession and desire production in the global city, positive masculine ethics and minor politics, urban cleansing and the social values of terror capitalism.

### ***Section 1: How did the Uyghurs Become the Object of Terror Capitalism?***

In official accounts of its governance of Chinese Central Asia, (Ch: *Xinjiang*) the Chinese state positions itself as the inheritor of an empire that is over two thousand years old. Although the nineteenth century Chinese name for Chinese Central Asia – *Xinjiang*, or “New Dominion” – belies this history, the state nevertheless describes the Uyghur homeland as an inalienable part of the nation. In official histories, the presence of military outposts administered by the progenitors of the contemporary Han ethnic majority first during the Han Dynasty lends a feeling of

continuity of rule across the millennia. These histories argue that this rule continued for the next 2000 years, despite the fact that in the Tang, Yuan and Qing Dynasties, Turkic, Mongolic or Tungusic peoples were the ultimate authorities in what became the Uyghur homeland. A more accurate rendering of this history would be to note the 1600 year absence of the predecessors of the peoples who today are regarded as Han. State histories do not acknowledge the fact that state-sponsored migration of people identified as Han from Henan, Shandong, Zhejiang and elsewhere did not reach more than 5 percent of the population of the region until the 1950s. It is rarely mentioned that Xinjiang was not named an official province-level territory until 1884, following what in the Uyghur oral tradition is referred to as a large-scale “massacre” (Uy: *qirghinchiliq*) of native Muslims by a general from Hunan named Zuo Zongtang and his armies (Schluessel 2016). These Muslims, the ancestors of contemporary Uyghurs, had attempted to regain their sovereignty in the 1820s and 1860s, much like they would again in the 1930s and 1940s.

Instead of acknowledging the centrality of native sovereignty in the Uyghur homeland throughout its history, in its narration of Xinjiang’s history, the contemporary Chinese state emphasizes “the liberation” (Ch: *jiefang*) of the Uyghurs and other native groups by the People’s Liberation Army in the 1940s.<sup>2</sup> Non-Han groups are often represented as living in “backward” (Ch: *luohou*), “feudal” (Ch: *fengjian*) conditions in “uncivilized” (Ch: *manhuang*) lands prior to the arrival of their socialist “liberators” (Ch: *jiuxing*) from the East. Since the 1949 revolution, so the self-valorizing narrative goes, Uyghur society has entered into a tight “harmony” (Ch: *hexie*)

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this project Uyghurs are referred to as “natives.” This is the closest English approximation to the term *yerliq* which Uyghurs commonly use to refer to themselves. The term could also be translated as ‘local,’ but since *yerliq* also carries with it a feeling of indigeneity or rootedness to the land of Southern Xinjiang I have chosen to use “native” as a descriptor. Occasionally I also use the term “indigenous” (Ch: *tuzhu*) to refer to the knowledge and cultural practices that Uyghurs employ, but since this term is not in wide usage among Uyghurs (there is no translation for this term in Uyghur and in this context, its usage in the Chinese is forbidden by the Chinese state), I do not use the term to describe Uyghurs themselves.

with their Han “older brothers” (Ch: *dage*). Their “unity” (Ch: *tuanjie*) in shared socialist struggle is said to have resulted in ever increasing levels of “happiness” (Ch: *xingfu*) and “progress” (Ch: *jinxing*). Uyghurs and the 10 million Han settlers that have arrived since 1949 are said to share a great deal of equality and “interethnic unity” (Ch: *minzu tuanjie*). Yet only minorities are thought to possess “ethnic characteristics” (Ch: *minzu tese*). Both the sophisticated Han liberators and the “ethnics” (Ch: *minzu*) are described as happy citizens of the thriving nation. Of course, despite this rhetoric of economic liberation and harmonious multiculturalism, all is clearly not well between Uyghurs and the state. In fact, since almost the very beginning of the People’s Republic in 1949, Uyghurs have experienced diminishing levels of power and autonomy relative to Han settlers, and, as Alim’s stories demonstrate, they increasingly experienced high levels of state terror.

What was an ethnographer to do in the face of this structural oppression? The task of telling the stories of young Uyghur friends who anticipated their arrest and were then disappeared by the state and charged as “extremist-separatist-terrorists” became a means of holding on to identity even as it was broken, as Alim and many others described it. It meant conveying the feelings of shame and rage that young Uyghur men felt when they told me about their sisters being raped by the police for failing to dress in non-religious culturally “appropriate” ways. As in Audra Simpson’s work on native sovereignty in North America (2014), it meant attempting to refuse to turn their stories into a kind of pornography or objectification of settler-colonial oppression while at the same time acknowledging its totalizing presence. Simpson argues that one way to avoid participating in the violence of the colonial gaze is by writing the political ethnographically. For me this meant focusing on the way forms of dispossession are lived, rather than dwelling on whether or not the Uyghur case fits the exact parameters of a

colonial metric; or whether or not Chinese forms of ethno-racial violence are better or worse than other racialized contexts (see Sautman 2000; Tao 2018). Writing the political ethnographically means thinking with Alim and the other young men and trying to understand how abstract policies and ways of thinking result in broken spirits. For me it meant sitting side by side with these young men, their knees pressed into mine, and trying not to cry.

As I built relationships with Alim and dozens of other young Uyghur men who were attempting to make a life for themselves in the city over the course of 2014 and 2015, I became more and more aware of how what began as a modernist project of drawing Uyghurs into the multicultural Chinese nation had been transformed into a profit-making project of the Chinese state. As the state intensified its efforts to re-engineer the lives of Uyghurs during the so-called People's War on Terror beginning in 2014, I came to see first-hand the fear and anxiety that came from regular home invasions and large-scale detentions of suspected reformist Muslim Uyghurs. In an attempt to come to terms with what I had experienced, I read through the scholarship on European and American settler relationships toward indigenous others. This reading gave me an understanding of the way the politics of recognition that had been implemented in the 1950s in China was similar to projects in Europe, North America and the Soviet Union. I began to see the way linkages between these earlier processes tied a particular form of socialist original accumulation to the settler capitalist expansion into Chinese Central Asia and a subsequent process of racialization. The implementation of a pass-book system, the building of internment camps, the infrastructure of a police grid system of control, mirrored

attempts in Apartheid South Africa and Israel to systematically control undesired minorities.

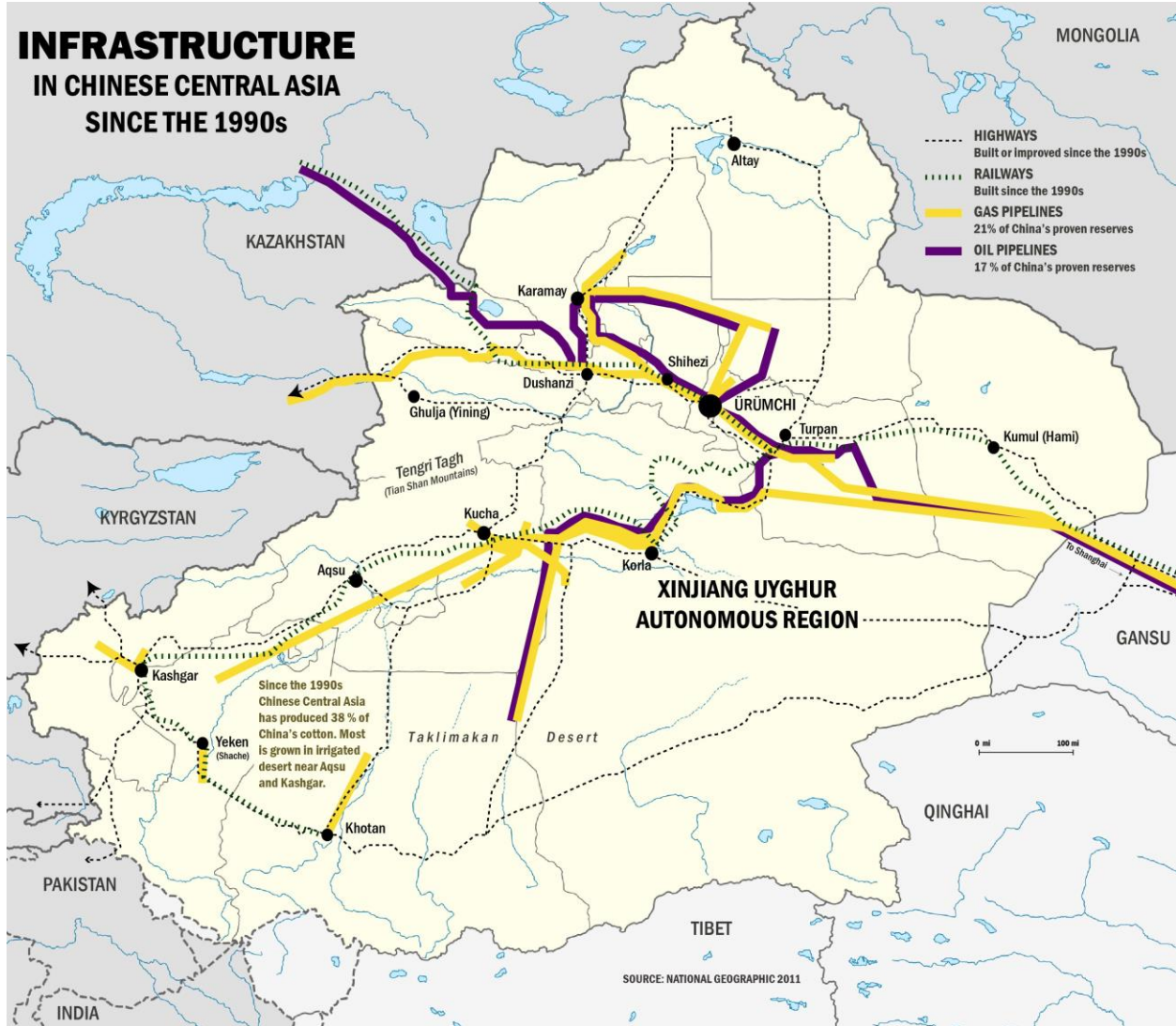


Figure 0.3. A map of recent infrastructure developments prior to 2011 in Chinese Central Asia demonstrates how the Uyghur homeland in Southern Xinjiang has become a major site of resource exploitation as a result of state capitalist development. Map by Darren Byler

Chinese Central Asia or *Xinjiang* is located in contemporary far Northwest China (see Figure 0.3). It borders eight nations ranging from Mongolia to India. The largest group of people native to this large province are the Uyghurs, a Turkic Muslim minority that shares a mutually-intelligible Turkic language with Uzbeks and, to a lesser degree, with Kazakhs and Kyrgyz. Like the Uzbeks, Uyghurs have practiced small-scale irrigated farming for centuries in the desert



oases of Central Asia. At present there are approximately 11 million people identified as Uyghurs according to official Chinese state statistics, though local officials estimate that there may be as many as 13 million. At the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the population of Han-identified inhabitants of the region was less than five percent, with Uyghurs comprising roughly 80 percent of the total population. Today Uyghurs comprise less than 50 percent of the total population and Han more than 40 percent. This shift in demographics began in the 1950s when the Chinese state moved several million former soldiers into the region to work as farmers on military colonies in the northern part of the province. These settlers, members of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (Ch: *bingtuan*), were sent to the borderlands in an effort to secure the frontier against the expansion of the Soviet Union. Initially the primary goal of this project was not to assimilate native populations, but rather to transform Kazakh pastureland into irrigated farming colonies, redistribute the population of former soldiers, and secure the territorial integrity of the nation.

Although Uyghur lifeways were deeply affected by the socialist reforms of this era, Uyghurs continued to live in Uyghur majority areas in Southern Xinjiang. This began to shift in the 1990s when private and public investment brought new infrastructure to the Uyghur homeland. Since these projects began, millions of Han settlers have moved into Uyghur lands to work in the oil and natural gas fields and transform Uyghur oasis cities into centers of transnational commerce. This more recent development has had a strong effect on local autonomy, as it has significantly increased the cost of living for Uyghurs while at the same time largely excluding them from new development projects. The widely held perception of Chinese state occupation of Uyghur lands has prompted widespread protests among the Uyghur population. The state's response to this discontentment has been an increasing effort to force

Uyghurs to assimilate into mainstream Han society by transforming the education system from Uyghur medium to Chinese and implementing ever-tighter restrictions on Uyghur cultural and religious practices. At the same time, new communication infrastructure such as smart phones and region wide 3G networks, gave Uyghurs access to a broader Islamic world that was previously unavailable to them. This produced a widespread Islamic piety movement among Uyghurs. This turn toward new forms of religious practice was linked by Party officials, often quite tangentially, to violent incidents involving Uyghur and Han civilians. Following a series of such incidents from 2009 to 2014 both in Xinjiang and in other parts of China, on May 26, 2014 the party secretary of the province, Zhang Chunxian, along with Party General Secretary Xi Jinping, announced a special state of emergency that they labeled the “People’s War on Terror.”

Since the implementation of this ongoing state of emergency, the situation for Uyghurs became increasingly dire as rising Chinese Islamophobia was joined by rising American Islamophobia and tactical support from private security firms connected to the Trump administration.<sup>3</sup> The widely reported activity of several hundred Uyghurs in the Islamic State has lent credence to Chinese claims of wide-spread “extremism” among the population of 11 million Uyghurs as a whole. As a result, nearly all Uyghurs are now seen as guilty of “extremist” tendencies and subject to the threat of detention and reeducation. Hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs, particularly men under the age of 55, have been detained indefinitely or *subtracted* since 2009 (Human Rights Watch 2017; Zenz Forthcoming).<sup>4</sup> Throughout this study I use the term “subtracted” (Uy: *kimeytti*) to name the process of disappearance that was being

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<sup>3</sup>Chris Horton. (2017). “The American mercenary behind Blackwater is helping China establish the new Silk Road.” *Quartz*. <https://qz.com/957704/the-american-mercenary-behind-blackwater-is-helping-china-establish-the-new-silk-road/>; and Rune Steenberg Reyhe. (2017). “Erik Prince Weighing Senate Bid While Tackling Xinjiang Security Challenge.” *EurasiaNet Analysis*. <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/85571>

<sup>4</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2017). “China: Free Xinjiang ‘Political Education’ Detainees.” <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/10/china-free-xinjiang-political-education-detainees>

experienced across Uyghur society. Since Uyghur families were often not told where their loved one was being held, what he or she had been charged with, how long they would be held, or whether or not they would ever see them again, Uyghurs often described those that had been taken as being in a state of “non-existence” (Uy: *yoq*) or that they have been “subtracted” (Uy: *kimeytti*; see Chapter 5 and the Epilogue). As I argue throughout this project, their absence is calculated as a strategic part of the human reengineering project as a whole in two distinct ways. First, there is numerical calculus in place as to what percentage of the population needs to be “re-educated.” It appears as though the state has implemented quotas that around 10 percent of population will need to be “re-educated” in order to achieve the goals of the project (Zenz: Forthcoming). Second, it held those who had not yet been subtracted in a state of suspension and action. The absence of the missing organized the lives of the remainder mobilizing them in police work and the performative culture work of demonstrating one’s patriotism and loyalty to the state.

### *What is Terror Capitalism?*

What was happening was more than a simple “ethnic conflict” or even “cultural genocide.” The state was calling into existence a process of social elimination of a people native to Northwest China through the development of what I name a Chinese form of “terror capitalism.” This term, which I arrive at from a reading of the Black Marxist scholar Cedric Robinson’s term “racial capitalism,” refers to the relationship of both exploitation and domination of Turkic Muslim minorities at this particular historical moment in the Chinese nation. For Robinson (1983), racial capitalism in Europe and North America is an ongoing process through which capital accumulation naturalizes the production of difference. These ethno-racial differences are used to justify the dispossession, domination and elimination of

minorities through a variety of racialized forms of enclosure and control ranging from property laws and education systems to criminal justice and war. It is important to name the process confronting Uyghurs as more than simply cultural genocide or ethnic conflict, because doing so enables, first, a critique of the way state capitalism is allied with power and domination; and, second, a critique of the way state capitalism follows a logic of exploitation and profitability. Ethnic genocide simply allows me to argue in a culturalist mode that one or more groups of people are bad or evil and dominating another group. It does not allow me to explain why. Explaining the situation as a process of terror capitalization allows me to show the way the Chinese state is linking up with global forces and ideas to develop new products, new forms of labor while at the same time clearing space for new forms of investment and profit. Of course this process has numerous resonances with Maoist historical processes and Han cultural formations, but the driver behind what is happening is not simply a natural outcome of political history or cultural difference. The psychological terror that terror capitalism justifies in the Uyghur homeland is part of the process of establishing dominance and exploiting that dominance by making money.

The “terror” aspect of terror capitalism allows the state to justify both the funding of this new development and the means with which it is carrying out this human engineering project. Because terror signifies a state of emergency and war, it rationalizes a massive investment in policing and security infrastructure and justifies the mass subtraction of hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs (Zenz and Leibold 2017). The bodies of Uyghurs are made the object of this new industry of policing, detention, reeducation and culture work – all of which is bankrolled by the state. Through this the state is able to consistently frame the geographies inhabited by Uyghurs as crucial sites for investment. Because counter-terror requires a terrorist to counter, the mass

detention of Uyghurs is required to make this form of venture capitalism successful. Success is measured not in short term returns of course, but in the research and development that is being fostered by the process. Xi Jinping's administration has declared that by 2030 it will have become a cyber-superpower (Mozer 2017). In 2017 the administration announced a plan to lead the world in artificial intelligence development particularly in the areas of cyber-security and predictive policing by investing \$150 billion in the industry over the next 12 years. Their experiment in terror capitalization is a key element in this development drive. They hope to create exportable policing products that could lead the world in asymmetrical warfare and counter-insurgent policing. In addition, "breaking the spirits" of the Uyghurs will have the added benefit of clearing social space for further infrastructure development and Han settlement along China's other major investment initiative: the New Silk Road.

Thinking about the process of exploitation and dispossession in the Uyghur homeland as "terror capitalism" also allows me to demonstrate the way new sequences in racialization take on valences that are different from older, ongoing forms of racial capitalism. In this context, Uyghurs ethno-racial difference frames them as "terrorists" which allows a state capitalist system to identify them as a site of investment. Unlike the racial capitalism in North American or European contexts, in China, terror capitalism is focused less on labor exploitation (though many Uyghurs have been pressed into low-level police work) and more on the ways that capital comes to imagine the future in terms of racial-ethnic-national-religious homogeneity. In this sense, terror capitalist processes are more about creating the possibility for surplus value in the future than it is about racializing people so as to exploit their labor as was the case in American slavery and Chinese-American coolie labor. Admittedly a case could be made that there are significant

parallels between Uyghur mass detention and the mass detention of African-Americans in that both systems of mass incarceration create profits and jobs at the expense of tax payers.

The venture capitalist orientation of terror capitalism is a marked difference from the way racial capitalism often operates elsewhere. No where else in the vast “Global War on Terror” has a subject, domestic population been marked as terrorists and been subjected to experiments in policing, mass internment and indoctrination processes without recourse to legal protections. The modern Chinese state was also first socialist, a marked difference from European and North American projects of difference making. However, as I will demonstrate below, this difference which initially allowed for permitted differences and limited civil rights no longer appears to hold in a time of terror. Now, despite their recognized slot within a state-directed capitalist nation, Uyghurs are increasingly framed as subhuman under the sign of “terror” much like native “savage” populations in European and North American wars of conquest and accumulation.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Situating Terror Capitalism in a Chinese Colonial Legacy*

In their introductory essay in *Imperial Formations* (2007), Ann Stoler and Carole McGranahan discuss how the lexicon and practice of colonization was shaped by the way French colonists looked to the Russian Empire as a model of conquest and, in turn, the way the Russian imperialists looked to the American conquest of Native American lands as a model for their own colonial efforts in the steppes and deserts of Siberia and Central Asia. The reason Stoler and McGranahan (2007) turn to this genealogy of Russian colonial thinking is to point out how such “untidy connections” decenter the dominance of Western Europe as the progenitor of empire and colonial expansion in Colonial Studies scholarship. Instead, like Stevan Harrell (1995), they

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<sup>5</sup> Darren Byler and Eleanor Moseman. (2017). “Love and Fear among Rural Uyghur Youth during the ‘People’s War.’” *Youth Circulations*. <http://www.youthcirculations.com/blog/2017/11/14/love-and-fear-among-rural-uyghur-youth-during-the-peoples-war>

argue that we should look more carefully at routes through which colonial thinking and practices are generated. They argue that understanding these relations allows them to rethink the idea that colonial empires are an exclusively European domain. Starting from this stance helps them to reconsider the assumption that socialist empires escape the structural violence of settler colonialism by offering forms of limited citizenship to those whom they colonize. In fact, they argue that Chinese colonial projects in the Qing dynasty and Republican-era China were mobilized around “a virulent form of racial nationalism” vis-à-vis other Asian populations precisely out of the comparative process of empire building (Stoler and McGranahan 25).<sup>6</sup> To their thinking, concepts of empire and settler colonialism continue to be crucial to understanding the way structural violence has been couched as domestic or “internal” national policies by China in Tibet and Xinjiang, Russia in Chechnya, Israel in Palestine and elsewhere (Stoler and McGranahan 32).<sup>7</sup> They, along with Harrell (1995), argue that this framing of colonial processes as “domestic disputes” or “ethnic conflicts” as is often the case in popular western media obfuscates the power and violence that is at work in these locations across Asia (Stoler and McGranahan 25). Late-Republican reformers looked to Japan and Russia, their nearest competitors, and the British Empire to the South, as they too built their nation on the scaffolding of dynastic rule.

This argument resonates with Patrick Wolfe’s (2006) reframing of settler-colonialism not as a process of mere exploitation, assimilation or acculturation but rather as relationship of political domination and dispossession. Drawing on examples ranging from Australia, Palestine, South Africa and North America, Wolfe shows that in every case settler-colonialism follows a

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<sup>6</sup> This racism was informed by Japanese and western forms of racism, but was, at least initially, unsupported by the pseudoscientific evidence of eugenics. See Dikötter (2015).

<sup>7</sup> See for example Barry Sautman’s defense of Chinese colonization of Xinjiang on these grounds (Barry Sautman (2000). “Is Xinjiang an internal colony?.” *Inner Asia*, 2(2), 239-271.)

logic of cultural and social elimination premised on ethno-racial difference. In much the same way, the material expansion of the People's Republic of China into Central Asia in the early 1950s was characterized by relationships of domination and projects of human engineering and elimination directed toward native peoples. Often the state instituted sociocultural reengineering under the guise of eliminating "counterrevolutionary" threats. Of course, these accusations of "local nationalism" were in many cases simply a euphemism for ethno-racial difference.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the overall goal of the settler nation is access to land and resources and the elimination of all obstacles that stand in the way. In Xinjiang the fact of native Uyghur existence was thus one of the primary obstacles to this project. This challenge produced multiple outcomes. On the one hand, the state strove to diminish the religious and cultural institutions of Uyghur society while, on the other, it sought to create a new socialist society on native lands. Colonial relations foster both domination and exploitation. A relationship of domination includes within it an exploitation of land and labor, but it is more totalizing than this. A colonial relationship of domination extends beyond labor and land into all forms of knowledge production and practice.

In order to accomplish these objectives, settler colonial projects—the Chinese ethnic minority paradigm included—often produce forms of "permitted difference" in native societies (Schein 2000; McCarthy 2009). As Louisa Schein (2000) has argued regarding the Chinese case, this form of minority recognition serves the purposes of forcing a native group to participate in the narrative of harmonious multiculturalism. It allows them to sell their own culture for the gaze

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that according to J. Kēhaulani Kauanui the concept "settler-colonialism" was first used to describe the processes of Israeli colonization of Palestine in the 1960s when a settler-population began to dispossess and restrict the movements of a native group while at the same time occupying their land. Settler-colonialism is used to describe the large-scale migration of a settler population with the goal of capturing resources and control over land. This term stands in distinction to "franchise colonialism" or "exploitation colonialism" in which a native population is used as the primary labor force to extract resources for the colonizer. India, as a British colony, is often used as an example of the latter type of colonization. See J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, "'A structure, not an event': Settler Colonialism and Enduring Indigeneity," *Lateral* 5.1 (2016).



of tourists who accompany the arrival of settler society, and, importantly, it defines improper forms of difference, opening them to state control. Over the past decade this last facet of the discourse, the ability to define who is a “bad minority,” has now become the dominant form Chinese multicultural domination for Uyghurs (Anderson 2017). As I found through my research with young Uyghur men, the overall impulse in this relation of control and elimination is one of “breaking the spirit” (Uy: *rohi sulghun*) of a minority person while saving the individual as a patriotic Chinese subject. This spirit is rooted in native forms of knowledge that prefigure a Uyghur person’s experience with the modern Chinese state. Once this spirit of epistemic difference is broken, the docile subject will be forced to accept their powerlessness. Through this process the state emerges as a Leviathan; able to crush an individual, a family, a community with impunity. The image that began this introduction signifies this relationship of total domination. It recalls earlier Chinese human engineering projects in the 1950s and 1960s that were pointed at American capitalist imperialists, but now it is a state capitalist apparatus pointed at a single stateless minority group (see Figure 0.4).

What I am describing here is the outcome of a process of “multicultural domination” – a form of ethnic recognition that is assigned by the state in order to better govern and control minority groups of people. This form of human engineering depends on placing people within essentialized ethnic or indigenous ascriptions, without a politics of self-determination. The leaders of these peoples are appointed by the state. The cultural content that is permitted in minority groups is selected and codified by the state workers. Minorities in China, particularly those who are phenotypically marked as racially different – Tibetans, Mongolians, Uyghurs and

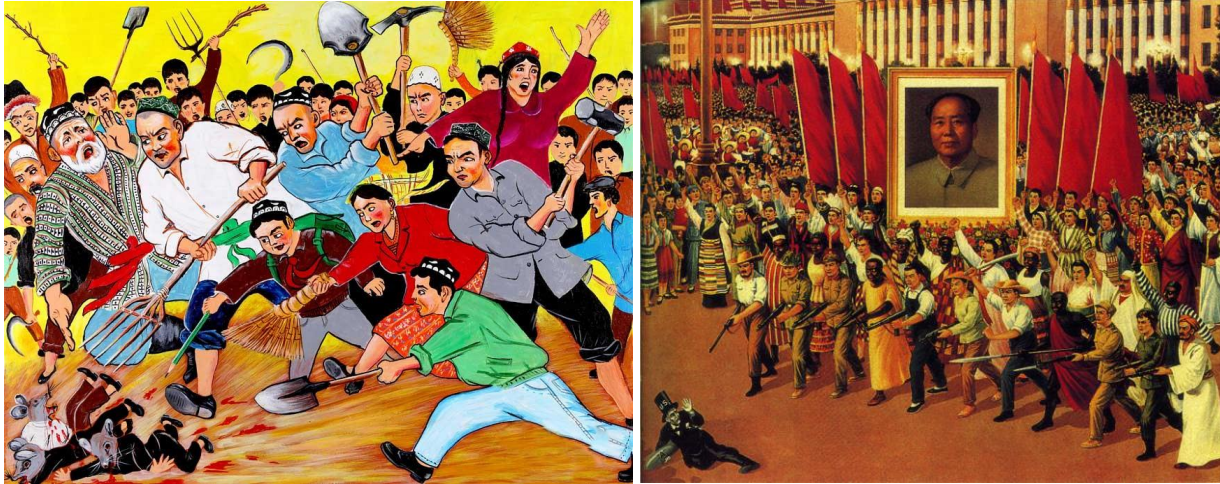


Figure 0.4. Compare the 2015 image on the left to the 1960s image on the right. The American imperialists have been replaced by Uyghur terrorist rats.

Kazakhs, are slotted into particular social roles in the hierarchy of the nation. The Chinese ethnic minority paradigm that was instituted in 1954 laid out particular forms of permitted difference in minority societies.<sup>9</sup> This process was enabled by social scientists who began to use ethnology, particularly linguistic anthropology—borrowed from British and Russian colonialists and shaped by older Han-specific modes of identification—to identify “nationalities” (Ch: *minzu*) on the peripheries of the young People’s Republic (Mullaney 2009). In 1954 the process of identification of China’s multinational demographics broadened certain categories and disintegrated others into a legible index of discrete ethnic minorities. Thirteen groups, including the Uyghurs, were thus codified and given institutional form in Xinjiang.<sup>10</sup> By the late 1950s, many Uyghur cultural and religious institutions—ranging from schools to mosques—had been transformed into institutions of the developmental regime. This form of minority recognition served the purpose of forcing a native group to participate in a narrative of “harmonious”

<sup>9</sup> Schein, Louisa. (2000). *Minority rules: The Miao and the feminine in China's cultural politics*. Duke University Press.

<sup>10</sup> As David Brophy (2016) has shown, the ethnonym Uyghur was the product of a Turkic political movement that began in Tashkent in the 1920s as a way of building a modern nation for the farming communities of Turkic peoples of Chinese Central Asia.

socialist multiculturalism. It also defined improper forms of difference, opening them to state control. This form of human engineering depended on placing people within essentialized ethnic or indigenous ascriptions while at the same time deeply restricting the authority and autonomy of native religious and cultural institutions. After 1957, leaders of Uyghur social institutions, most of whom were Uyghur men, were appointed by the state in order to assure that there was no aberrant forms of local sovereignty.<sup>11</sup> Following this, the content of permitted Uyghur cultural institutions was itself selected and codified by these appointed minority Party officials. Minorities in China who were often seen as “backward” (Ch: *luohou*) in relation to Han society, were slotted into subservient “little brother” (Ch: *xiaodi*) social roles in the hierarchy of the nation. Han “liberators” in the self-valorizing rhetoric of the Maoist revolution described themselves as “big brothers” (Ch: *dage*).

Over the long duration of its inscription process, official state-recognized “ethnicities” (Ch: *minzu*) had the effect of radically constricting the life chances of those it identified. As Thomas Mullaney (2007) has pointed out, this process is not unlike similar processes of “multicultural” identity projects in other parts of the world. As important as examining the hierarchy of power relations or a “civilizing mission” (Gladney 2004) in these identification processes might be, Mullaney (2011) asks us to question the ontological and material basis of national and ethnic identity itself. What does it mean to identify groups of people using structural linguistics—a colonial technology—to presume “natural” boundaries of discrete cultural groups without asking native people how they self-identify?

Drawing on her work with Aboriginal Australians, Elizabeth Povinelli (2002) answers this question by arguing that “multicultural domination” works to coerce minority subjects to

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<sup>11</sup> David Brophy. (2017).

“identify with the impossible object of authentic self-identity” which for Aboriginals became a projected “domesticated nonconflictual ‘traditional’ form of sociality” (2002: 7). In the Chinese case, multiculturalism as a relation of Han domination over minorities did something similar. It resulted in a widespread invention of new cultural categories, new ways of measuring cultural difference and similarity. Under the direction of Premier Zhou Enlai in the early 1950s “teachers, scholars and experts” were sent to teach Uyghurs how to be ethnic (Xinjiang Weiwuer zizhiqu bianjizu 1953; Han 2009). Cultural practices and oral traditions were codified and circumscribed by an imposed ideology; song and dance troupes abounded; ethnic costumes were identified and essentialized; new genres of socialist literature and performance were invented. The decentralized forms of oral tradition and native Muslim sacred space that Rian Thum (2014) identifies as central to the knowledge systems of the people native to the Uyghur homeland were thus shaped into manageable form for the centralized Chinese state. As in the British and Russian colonies, differences were permitted and encouraged as long as they did not conflict with the dominant ideals of the state.

#### *Cultural Transformation in the early PRC*

As Stevan Harrell has pointed out, a major goal of the identification process was a “literizing project” (2001: 28). What Harrell means by this is that minority Maoist social engineers were tasked with introducing knowledge production mechanisms in native languages through which people would codify themselves and through this process make themselves legible to the growth machine of the socialist state. By seeing themselves within the limits of the state through processes of self-ascription, people who were identified as minorities increasingly became a people without a history outside of the definition of the state. Uyghurs as a category institutionalized in 1954 gradually came to see themselves within an ascribed identity

subordinated to the ideals of the Chinese nation. Increasingly they were called on to perform an aesthetics of authentic diversity in exchange for the good feelings of the nation. Catalyzed by the identification process, minorities have come to see themselves as discrete groups, yet by claiming this difference they find themselves alienated from both their historical past and mainstream Chinese and Muslim societies.

It is important to note here that, contrary to Japanese, French, British and United States-based projects to assimilate minority subjects, the initial drive of Chinese and Soviet socialist identification projects was not one of direct assimilation through boarding schools, ascribed practice and forced integration. Armed with self-valorization of Marxist idealism, colonialism under communism took a slightly different tack. In China with the introduction of the Maoist state, minorities were encouraged to develop their own socialist languages, literatures, and cultures. Minorities were thus incentivized to colonize themselves by mirroring imposed forms of socialist progress. Indigenous knowledge systems were shaped by the mechanisms of positivist knowledge; the timing and spacing of Chinese state were built into local epistemes. Forms of knowledge that contradicted this logic were viewed as repugnant and reactive to the goals of socialism. In a refraction of the separation of “rationalized” religion from “superstition” that occurred in Eastern cities during the early years of the Chinese Republic (Nedostup 2009), “ethnicity” (Ch: *minzu*) was institutionalized in a manner that serialized other national identifications: each group needed a literature, a culture, and a people. The Stalinist criteria of ethno-nationality – shared land, shared language, shared economic life and shared social psychology – was championed, but as Mullaney (2011) points out, also subordinated to other nation-wide ideals such as class struggle and social security. Ethnicities were identifications of political efficacy; a way of training discrepant subjects toward the goals of the Maoist social

state. At the same time, as in the Soviet Union, the lands of native peoples were described as a possession of “the people” of the nation as a whole and thus available as sites of socialist “original accumulation.”<sup>12</sup> As Glen Coulthard points out, in communist spaces “the violent dispossession of place-based, non-state modes of self-sufficient Indigenous economic, political, and social activity” was justified by the necessity of achieving a socialist political economy (2014: 11-12). In this manner, Uyghurs were told that their land and ways of life were no longer wholly their own. Their land and ways of life were weighed against the needs of the socialist nation and given an abstract worth relative to their measurable material value and socialist value. Abstract productivity and multicultural socialist fervor were thought to be the metric against which all native land and social practices were measured.

This cultural transformation also directly impacted the organization of Uyghur material life. During the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962), many families in the Uyghur homeland were moved from single family homesteads into village communes in which every building was the same height and daily meals were shared. As in other parts of China, work was collectivized and the surplus not ceded to the state was shared. Although populations of Han workers were moved into state farming colonies in Northern Xinjiang, Uyghurs continued to live in Uyghur dominated areas in Southern Xinjiang. In the early period of the PRC, the state was strongly felt by Uyghurs in terms of an imposed ideology and in forms of production and consumption. Yet, a lack of infrastructure and resources prevented the full assimilation of Uyghur society into the Chinese nation. In fact, during this period Han-identified officials who were stationed in the Uyghur homeland often learned the Uyghur language and became active members of Uyghur

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<sup>12</sup> This term is also sometimes referred to as “primitive accumulation” in Marxian scholarship. Since this translation of the German term *ursprünglich* is usually translated as “original” in English in other contexts (according to Steve Harrell) and because of the colonial resonances of the term “primitive” I refer to this process as “original accumulation” throughout this project.

communities. Young Uyghurs still grew up speaking Uyghur. Many rural Uyghurs did not meet native Chinese speakers until the 1990s when a wide-spread transformation of the Xinjiang economy brought millions of people identified as Han to the Uyghur homeland.

State domination of multiculturalism placed Xinjiang minorities (and often their local Han interlocutors) in the impossible roles of both producing “authentic” socialist cultural diversity while also developing the impossible desire to wholly inhabit the slot they had been allotted as Northwestern Chinese minority ethno-nationalities. Successful human engineering projects require unquestioned belief and practice – both of which are often blocked by life experience. As ethnic markers morphed into essentialized ascriptions, in the Uyghur homeland of Southern Xinjiang, inhabitants marked as “rural” and “ethnic” have found themselves trapped, unable to change their racialized social position while at the same time being unable to live without moving away from modes of production and knowledge that were valued during the Maoist period. Uyghurs found themselves pushed toward fundamentally altered modes of identification through Maoist-era cultural politics. In addition, in the new state-directed capitalist economy, Uyghurs found themselves pushed toward fundamentally altered living conditions. Now when Maoist-era identifications had finally been internalized, they became an impediment to successful self-fashioning in the new economy. Minorities increasingly found their life paths blocked and their lifeworlds at an impasse.

#### *After the Second Liberation: Socialist Legacies and Capitalist Development*

Fulfilling the old model of multiculturalism was further complicated by the emergence of market liberalization in Xinjiang beginning in the early 1980s. As the state moved in fits and starts from socialist development to capitalist accumulation and the accompanying suppression (Cliff 2016a: 91) of “terrorism,” the displacement of native lifeways became more acute. Many

Uyghurs refer to the 1980s as a “Golden Era” when the possibilities of life seemed to open up. The relative economic, political and religious freedom that accompanied the Reform and Opening Period seemed to promise a brighter future. Many Han settlers who had come to the northern part of the region during the Maoist campaigns to secure the borderlands were permitted to return to their hometowns in Eastern China. But with the collapse of the Soviet Union in December of 1991 and the independence of the Central Asian republics, the Chinese state was suddenly faced with rising tensions regarding Uyghur desires for independence. At the same time, the fracturing of the Soviet Union—China’s long-term colonial rival—offered new zones for building Chinese influence. Even more importantly, it created opportunities to access energy resources. A chief concern among state authorities in the region was that the new freedoms which Uyghurs had enjoyed in the 1980s threatened to flower into a full-throated independence movement. As Uyghur trade relationships increased in emerging markets in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan and cultural and religious exchange with Uzbekistan was rekindled, Chinese authorities such as regional Party Secretaries Song Hanliang and Wang Lequan became increasingly concerned that Uyghurs would begin to demand the autonomy they had been promised in the 1950s. They were deeply concerned that the newly independent republics of Post-Soviet Central Asia would serve as allies in the Uyghur struggle for greater autonomy. As a result of these concerns, the underlying goal of the Chinese state’s attempts to control Central Asian markets and buy access to its natural resources became that of ensuring “that these states do not support the Uyghur cause in Xinjiang or tolerate exile movements on their own soil” (Becquelin 2000: 66).

Over the period of time that the Chinese state was extending its control in post-Soviet Central Asia, it also announced in June of 1992 a new policy position that would turn the Uyghur



homeland into a center of trade, capitalist infrastructure and agricultural development capable of further serving the needs of the nation (Becquelin 2000: 71). One of the primary emphases in the new proposal was the need to establish Xinjiang as one of China's primary cotton producing regions. Given the exponential growth in commodity clothing production in Eastern China in the 1980s, the state was determined to find a cheap source of domestic cotton to meet the accelerating demand for Chinese-produced t-shirts and jeans around the world.

As a result of this initiative, infrastructure investment in Chinese Central Asia expanded from only 7.3 billion yuan in 1991 to 16.5 billion in 1994. Over the same period the gross domestic product of the region nearly doubled, reaching a new high of 15.5 billion (Becquelin 2000: 67). Much of this new investment was spent on infrastructure projects that connected the Uyghur homeland to the Chinese cities to the north. By 1995 the Taklamakan Highway had been completed across the desert, connecting the oasis town of Khotan (Ch: *Hetian*) to Ürümqi, cutting travel time in half. By 1999 the railroad had been expanded from Korla to Aqsu and Kashgar, opening the Uyghur heartland to direct Han migration and Chinese commerce. During this time the capacity of the railways leading from Ürümqi to Eastern China doubled, allowing for a dramatic increase in natural resource and agricultural exports from the province to factories in Eastern China.

As infrastructure was built, new settlement policies were also put in place. Like the settler policies from the socialist period, these new projects were intended to both alleviate overcrowding in Eastern China and centralize control over the frontier. But unlike those earlier population transfers, this new settler movement was driven by capitalist expansion as well. For the first time, Han settlers were promised upward mobility through profit in the cash economy and capital investment. Initially this enterprise—formally labeled “Open Up the Northwest” (Ch:

*Xibei kaifa*)—was centered around industrial scale cotton production. The state put financial incentives in place to transform steppe and desert areas for water-intensive cotton cultivation by both native Uyghur farmers and increasing numbers of Han settlers. As part of this process they introduced incentive programs for Han farmers to move to Xinjiang to grow and process cotton for use in Chinese factories. By 1997 the area of cotton production in Xinjiang had doubled relative to the amount of land used in 1990. Most of this expansion occurred in what had been Uyghur territory between Aqsu and Kashgar (Becquelin 2000, 66). In less than a decade, Chinese Central Asia had become China's largest source of domestic cotton, producing 25 percent of all cotton consumed in the nation—a proportion that increased over the following decades (see Figure 0.3).

Yet despite this apparent success, important concerns began to emerge as well. Chief among these was the way the new shift in production and settlement was affecting the native population. Many Han settlers profited from their work in the Xinjiang cotton industry as short-term seasonal workers who received high wages, as settlers who were given subsidized housing and land, and as managers of larger scale farms. But many of the Uyghurs who were affected by the shift in production did not benefit to the same degree. They were often forced to convert their existing multi-crop farms to cotton in order to meet regionally imposed quotas. They were also forced to sell their cotton only to Han-run state-owned enterprises at low fixed prices. These corporations in turn sold the cotton at full market price to factories in Eastern China. In this manner many Uyghur farmers were pulled into downward spirals of poverty, while many (though not all) Han settlers continued to benefit from the shifting economic trends. Labor exploitation coupled with dispossession gave rise to increasing feelings of oppression and

occupation. These feelings continued to increase as the need for cheap sources of energy increased in the rapidly developing cities of Eastern China.

By the early 2000s, the Uyghur homeland had come to resemble a classic peripheral colony. In the context of the nation as a whole, the primary function of the province was to supply the metropolises of Beijing, Shanghai and the Pearl River Delta to the East with raw resources and industrial supplies. Cotton production continued as it had in the 1990s, but by the early 2000s, industrial tomato production had also been introduced as primary export product. By 2012, the region produced approximately 30 percent of world tomato exports (Shao 2012). At the same time, as in most peripheral colonies, the vast majority of manufactured products consumed in Xinjiang came from the factories in Eastern China. The clothes manufactured using Xinjiang cotton were thus purchased from clothing companies in Eastern China at inflated prices. The same was true of the natural gas and oil that began to flow to Eastern China from Xinjiang after the completion of pipeline infrastructure in the early 2000s (Becquelin 2004).

In the 2000s, the buildout of infrastructure for natural resource extraction that followed behind the new road and rail projects in the mid to late 1990s again began to shift the center of Xinjiang's economy. Within a few short years, oil and gas sales came to represent nearly half of the region's revenues. At the same time, given the push to reduce the nation's dependence on foreign cotton, oil and gas and to accelerate the settler-colonization of the Uyghur homeland, the central government continued to provide nearly two-thirds of the region's budget. In the early 2000s, the Hu Jintao administration took the older regional project "Open up the Northwest" to a new level, rebranding it as "Open up the West." Now all of peripheral China, including Inner Mongolia and Tibet, became the target of settlement and development projects, though Chinese Central Asia continued to receive a greater number of new settlers relative to other regions.

Given the way the older “Open up the Northwest” project had resulted in rapid and sustained economic growth of over ten-percent-per-year since 1992, the state was eager to take the development projects further, opening new markets and new sites for industrial production (Becquelin 2004: 363). By the early 2000s, the Uyghur homeland had become the country’s fourth largest oil producing area, with a capacity of 20 million tons per year. Given that the area had proven reserves of petroleum of over 2.5 billion tons and 700 billion cubic meters of natural gas, there is little doubt that the region was thought of as one of China’s primary future sources of energy. (Becquelin 2004, 365).

Between 1990 and 2000, the population of Han settlers grew at twice the growth rate of the native population. By the late 2000s, it had exceeded the size of the Uyghur population, though it was still less than a majority of the overall population of the province and many areas in the Uyghur homeland still had a high majority of Uyghurs. As Tom Cliff (2016a) and Emily Yeh (2014) have demonstrated, the development of fixed capital investments and industrial agriculture export production that accompanied the “Open up the West” campaign had the effect of rapidly increasing the rate of Han settlement in Uyghur and Tibetan areas. New infrastructure – railroads, pipelines and real estate – have vastly benefited the millions of new Han settlers and produced exponential increases in costs of living and widespread dispossessions of Uyghurs from land and housing. The costs of basic staples such as rice, flour, oil and meat more than doubled. Urban housing prices doubled or tripled, while projects to urbanize the Uyghur countryside placed Uyghurs in new housing complexes that were dependent on regular payments for centralized heat and power. The system of small-scale Uyghur mixed-crop farming with small herds of sheep and garden plots was also undermined through this process.

Underemployment was further exacerbated by the widespread consolidation of Uyghur land into industrial farms and, more recently, restrictions on labor migration.

At the same time, the “lucrative chaos” (Cliff 2016b) of rapid development and dispossession produced tremendous opportunities in real estate speculation, natural resource development and international trade for Han settlers.<sup>13</sup> This state-directed capitalist chaos has increased indebtedness among Uyghurs, who were systematically blocked from low interest lines of credit by nationalized banks, which placed restrictions on loans to Uyghurs due to their assumed disposition toward the “three forces” of Islamic reformism, national self-determination, and violent resistance. Uyghur migrants told me that Han landlords or bankers increasingly found ways of evicting Uyghur business-owners or homeowners and replacing them with Han settler tenants. Many Uyghur migrants I interviewed told me they encountered prejudice when seeking loans or authorizations of sales and purchases. Banks and landlords were often quite eager on the other hand to provide Han settlers with loans for purchases of real estate or discounts on business investments.

An insidious ethno-racism is often the driver behind such choices. Uyghurs, unlike Han settlers, are often seen by Han lenders as not possessing the discipline necessary for capitalist development. As the Xinjiang state economic advisor Tang Lijiu put it, “Because of their lifestyle, asking (Uyghurs) to go into big industrial production, onto the production line: they're probably not suited to that.”<sup>14</sup> For many Han businessmen dealing with Uyghurs was just too much “trouble” (Ch: *mafan*). It was for the same reason that Uyghurs are told they need not apply for high-skilled jobs in natural resource development, which was universally controlled by

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<sup>13</sup> Cliff, Tom. (2016) “Lucrative Chaos: Interethnic Conflict as a Function of the Economic ‘Normalization’ of Southern Xinjiang.” in Hillman, B., & Tuttle, G. (Eds.). *Ethnic Conflict and Protest in Tibet and Xinjiang: Unrest in China's West*. Columbia University Press: 122-150.

<sup>14</sup> The Economist, (2011). “Let them shoot hoops.” *The Economist* <http://www.economist.com/node/21524940>

Han settlers. Because of the supposed threat that Uyghurs posed as potential “terrorists” the state also refused to issue legal documents to the vast majority of Uyghurs who applied to travel and trade domestically and internationally. As a result, native minorities frequently found themselves caught in the downward spiral of poverty even as the Han society that was growing around them was increasingly affluent.



Figure 0.5. Posters that depict the appearance of “good Muslims,” upper right, and “bad Muslims,” lower right, that were posted throughout the Uyghur districts of Ürümqi in September 2014. On the left side of the posters rewards were offered to those who informed on Uyghurs who practiced unauthorized forms of Islam. Those that appeared or were reported to be “bad Muslims” were subject to immediate arrest. Image by Nicola Zolin, used with permission.

The rapid corporate development and Han settlement of the Uyghur homeland coupled with the arrival of “terrorism” rhetoric had the effect of pulling older forms socialist multiculturalism into a distinctly capitalist process of racialization. This process became

particularly apparent after the beginning of the United States' "Global War on Terror" in 2001, when nearly all forms of resistance by Uyghurs began to be described as terrorism by the Chinese state and in Han popular culture. The "dark" (Ch: *hei*) bodies of Uyghur men became synonymous with danger and "wild" (Ch: *yexing*) virility. This way of describing Uyghur bodies was institutionalized by the police and government officials through frequent state media reports on Uyghur protests. Many officials and Chinese terrorism experts that I interviewed described Uyghur young men explicitly in these terms. Posters were placed throughout Uyghur districts of Ürümqi in 2014 that depicted and labeled the appearance of rural-origin Uyghur young men and women who had begun practicing new forms of Islamic piety as evidence of terrorism (see Figure 0.5). The police actively profiled low-income rural-origin Uyghur youth at checkpoints. It prescribed gender performance, pathologizing the appearance of young Uyghur men and making the appearance of Uyghur women the grounds of competing forms of state patriarchy and native Islamic patriarchy. In both cases, Uyghur women often became an abstract object "to be saved." Perhaps more significantly the institutionalization of power over the bodies of Uyghurs defined Uyghur masculinity and femininity not simply through a process of ethnic discrimination but through an expansive process of racialization, comparable to similar processes that took place within the US, the British Empire, and places like South Africa.<sup>15</sup>

In general this process of capitalist development and racialization occurs when state institutions that support the economic development of a dominant groups allow the bodies and values of dominant groups to be read as superior to those of minority others. This basic form of racialization allows for the rapid dispossession of minority others through the institutions of the law, police, and the school. Because the bodies of minorities are read as inferior they are not

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<sup>15</sup> See Cedric J. Robinson (1983). *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Univ of North Carolina Press.

granted the same protections as those seen as racially superior. This process of “original accumulation” and racialization is an ongoing part of the logic of capitalist development. In the Uyghur homeland, as this process moved toward terror capitalism it was inflected by Chinese discourses of “achieved quality” (Ch: *suzhi*) and backwardness (Ch: *luohou*), the primary subject of Chapter 6 in this project. Rural-origin migrant and minority bodies were often read as possessing or “achieving” less quality than urban majority bodies.

Despite the way the state was directly involved in directing this process, the social violence that has occurred in this region was described as an “ethnic conflict,” placing it in the same category as internecine violence elsewhere in the “developing world” (see for example Sautman 2000). What such accounts often ignored was the possibility of new sequences of racialization, comparable to the institution of Apartheid in South Africa or the violent segregation of Palestine. Since Han themselves have been the subject of European and American racism, many scholars are reluctant to describe the process of Uyghur dispossession as a product of racialization. Yet this discourse of colonial humiliation directed at China has also become a technology of self-valorization and a way of masking state-directed social violence to a minority other. The Uyghurs do possess an ethnic difference, one that relies on language and a particular place-based epistemology. But since this ethnic difference is now overwritten with the sign of “terrorism” it is also the object of racialization. The ethno-racism that is being produced in the Uyghur homeland through contemporary processes of racialization is unique to this particular moment and this particular place. It is nonetheless important to name such processes as ethno-racial, rather than simply ethnic or cultural, because it enables us to see how economic and political institutions sediment differences among groups. Naming this process as racialization centers the way capitalist exploitation and domination is embodied. Individual workers’ inner



characteristics are framed by legal, economic and educational institutions “through their skin color, dress, language, smell, accent, hairstyle, way of walking, facial expressions, and behavior” (Amrute 2016:14). While Amrute is writing about Indian tech workers in Germany, her argument for why difference should be read as racial rather than simply or only ethnic, holds for Uyghurs as well. The bodies of Uyghurs—the way they dress, their intimate relations, personal hygiene, their accent, their diet, facial expressions and behavior—are the primary object of terror capitalism. Their skin color and hairstyles are primary ways of reading the “terrorist” body. As such Uyghurs are subject to a particular form of racialization, driven by the Chinese state and the Han settlers under its purview. This racialization provides an *a priori* justification for expansive institutions of control and the populations they benefit, even while these institutions are themselves constantly producing and reinforcing the process of racialization itself in the form of direct ethno-racial domination and exploitation of the Uyghur population.

### *The Terror Shift*

The power of the ethno-racial imaginary of inclusiveness or multiculturalism has been both a blessing and a nightmare for minority peoples in China (Bulag 2012). On the one hand, such a politics of inclusion reduces the impulse toward mass physical genocide like that of early North American or Australian colonization. On the other hand, it creates a false sense of “goodness” on the part of the colonizer and a misrecognition of systemic racism. In contemporary China, colonized minorities such as the Mongols, Uyghurs and Tibetans “have often been criticized for loving their own groups too much. Their self-love has been denounced as *minzu qingxu* (Ch: nationality sentiment)” (Bulag 2012, 109). This sentiment or spirit is said to manifest as “separatism,” “terrorism,” and religious “extremism” among Tibetans and Uyghurs. It results in “hate crimes” (Ch: *chouhen zuixing*) by minorities toward members of the

“good” majority who have “liberated” their territories by settling them and bringing them modern economics and Han morality. Crimes of being too native are of course crushed by the state. However, even as the state crushes dissent, many Han, who consider themselves “good people” on the side of socialist inclusion, ask the question “Why do they hate us so much after we have done so many good things for them?” (Bulag 2012, 109). The lack of an independent Chinese press and academia forecloses the possibility of having an open critical dialogue about why only minority-on-Han crime can be categorized as hateful or terroristic.<sup>16</sup> Instead, “good” inclusive Han citizens of the nation feel compelled to teach ungrateful Uyghurs a good lesson in being tolerant of Han moral instruction. Minority claims to the sovereignty of their own land, faith, language, knowledge and being can thus be read as bad, as resistant to Han goodness.

The moral bankruptcy of the Chinese multicultural project came to a head in 2009, when Uyghur protests in Ürümqi over the mob killing of Uyghur factory workers by Han factory workers turned into widespread violence. In the months that followed, state authorities began a process of urban cleansing that directly targeted low-income Uyghur communities.<sup>17</sup> Many Uyghur areas of Ürümqi and other traditionally Uyghur cities were targeted for demolition and over the next few years the Uyghur migrant populations were moved into tightly controlled government housing on the outskirts of cities. Their land was turned into commodity housing for Han settlers and real estate speculators. At the same time, the state intensified a radical shift from Uyghur-medium education to Chinese-medium education throughout the province. In 2010, the state introduced smart phones and 3G networks across the countryside as a way to link Han settlements and extraction infrastructure to the rest of the nation. One of the latent consequences

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<sup>16</sup> This is best exemplified by the lifetime imprisonment of the moderate Uyghur scholar Ilham Tohti.

<sup>17</sup> “Ürümqi plans to complete 36 shantytowns reconstruction projects this year.” *Central People’s Government*. [http://www.gov.cn/jrzg/2012-02/17/content\\_2069917.htm](http://www.gov.cn/jrzg/2012-02/17/content_2069917.htm)

of this new development was that Uyghurs were exposed to new ways of understanding the practice and instruction of Islam. Over the next four years, many Uyghurs became involved in global piety movements that were introduced to them via their new Internet access. A small minority of those who turned to new forms of orthopraxy were drawn into contemporary conservative political or Salafi Islam, but the vast majority simply began to practice mainstream forms of Hanafi Sunni Islam.<sup>18</sup> After four short years of relatively open use of social media to promote the thought of Uyghur Islamic teachers in Turkey and Uzbek teachers from Kyrgyzstan, the state instituted new restrictions on Islamic practice. The state saw this as a way of preventing the “Talibanization” (Ch: *bian de xiang taliban*) of Uyghur society.

In May of 2014, after an increase in Uyghur violence toward Han civilians—first through a mass killing at a train station in Kunming, then a mass killing in a Han street market in Ürümqi and a suicide bombing at the Ürümqi train station—the state declared a “People’s War on Terror” centered on rooting out Uyghur Islamic reformist practices (or “extremism”), national independence (or “separatism”) and violent resistance (or “terrorism”). As in many other parts of the world, the concept of “terrorism” in China was strongly influenced by Bush Era American political rhetoric. Prior to September 11, 2001, Uyghur violence was almost exclusively regarded as nationalist “separatism.” Since 2001, as Gardner Bovingdon (2010) has shown, according to official state reports Han settlers in Xinjiang have become victims of “terrorism” on a regular basis. By 2004, “separatist” incidents from the previous decade were relabeled as “terrorist” incidents (Bovingdon 2010: 120). Everything from the theft of sheep, to a land seizure protest, to

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<sup>18</sup> The Hanafi school of Sunni Islam represents one of the largest populations within the Muslim world. Most Muslims in Turkey, Egypt, Central and South Asia subscribe to this juridical school. Nearly one-third of all Muslims across the world identify as Hanafi. It is typically described as one of the most flexible forms of pious orthopraxy with regard to relations with non-Muslims, individual freedom, gender relations, and economic activity. See Christie S. Warren “The Hanafi School,” *Oxford Bibliographies*. <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195390155/obo-9780195390155-0082.xml>

a fight with knives can now be labeled “terrorism” if there are Uyghurs and Han involved in the conflict. It appears as though “terrorism” (or the “three forces” continuum – separatism, extremism, terrorism which are now understood as manifestations of the same phenomenon) has come to signify Uyghurs who are verbally and physically unsubmitive or “unopen” (Ch: *bu kaifa*) as many Han settlers told me during my fieldwork. As Emily Yeh (2012) has pointed out regarding the way “terrorism” has been attached to Tibetan self-immolators, in China “terrorism” has come to be “any perceived threat to state territorial sovereignty, regardless of its actual methods or effects vis-à-vis harm to others” (NP).

#### *Passbook Systems, Home Invasions and Mass Detentions*

This rhetoric of terror was taken to a new level when the “People’s War on Terror” against the Uyghur population of the country was introduced by regional Party Secretary Zhang Chunxian in May 2014. One of the first things instituted under the emergency provisions of “the war” was a pass-book system that restricted the movement of Uyghur migrants. This system, known as the “People’s Convenient Card” system (Ch: *bianminka*; Uy: *yeshil kart*) required Uyghurs whose household registration (Ch: *hukou*) was not in an urban location to return to their hometowns and obtain a “good citizen” card in order to return. Like the passbook system that was instituted in Apartheid South Africa, the goal of this system was to force the unwanted racial other from locations that were desired by the settler population.

Based on my interviews, the most typical form of the process of obtaining the card was as follows:

1. Applicant asked for a *bianminka* from local police. He or she was told to come back tomorrow when the “holder of the stamp” will be there. That person was often not there the next day or was not receiving visitors. Eventually the applicant was formally denied or gave up on the formal process.
2. Applicant went to the home of the village leader of the local “production brigade” (Ch: *dadui*) at night. Applicant presented all of the documents he or she had proving the

following: (a) from a “5 star” family based on the marks they had been given by the local police on the gate of their house; (b) father and mother had a good peasant background (no religious training etc.); (c) poor economic circumstances necessitate that a member of the family must migrate in order to financially support the family back in the village; (d) from a family with absolutely no “extremist” religious ideas were present in the applicant or in family members of the applicant (including cousins, uncles etc.). Applicant also gave the team leader a “small” (Uy: *kichik*) gift of around 500 yuan, telling him he or she knew it was not enough, but please “accept this humble gift” and so on.

3. If the team leader was convinced, he told the applicant which member of the local government to contact. The applicant was told to go to that officer’s home at night with a gift of 1000-4000 *yuan* (in some places the regular rate was 1000; in others 4000; in others, as much as 10000) in an envelope. The team leader told the applicant that under no circumstances should he or she tell the officer that he sent the applicant to the officer. The team leader also told the applicant to wait one week or more before visiting the officer, so it would not be obvious that the night visits to the people’s homes were related.

4. After visiting the officer and delivering the bribe, the applicant was told that within a certain amount of time they would receive a phone call and they could come in to get their *bianminka*.

Needless to say it was very difficult for Uyghur “self-sent” (Ch: *zifa*) migrants to obtain this card. Only around one in ten were able to do so.<sup>19</sup> This resulted in around 300,000 Uyghur migrants to the city of Ürümqi and hundreds of thousands of majority male Uyghur migrants to regional centers such as Korla, Aksu and Kashgar being forced to leave. Without the card it was impossible for them to rent housing, find a job or even stay in a hotel.

By May of 2016, the system was taken to a new level. Now even if Uyghurs had the card, those without urban household registration were not allowed to leave their home counties without permission. There were checkpoints between every county, and crossing the county line required a letter and with a stamp from local authorities. As a result, even those who previously had legal permission to live in Ürümqi and other urban locations were forced to return to the countryside. Often when they arrived back in the countryside they were subject to detention.

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<sup>19</sup> Based on interviews with state officials and failed applicants.

A police state rapidly took form in Xinjiang. By the beginning of 2017, the state had recruited “nearly 90,000 new police officers” and increased the public security budget of Xinjiang by more than 356 percent to approximately 9.2 billion dollars.<sup>20</sup> These new additions to the special-teams armed police force (Ch: *wujing budui*) were organized in a segmented manner throughout every prefecture and county in support of hundreds of thousands of local Uyghur officers who staffed checkpoints and work as informants at every level of Uyghur society. Because of widespread underemployment Uyghur officers were drawn into the force in large numbers. Because of the stigma of their collaborator position and the tight supervision of their Han superiors, these Uyghur officers often treated Uyghur suspects even more harshly than Han officers. In general, the rising budget for the occupation police force produced tremendous increases in surveillance technology and gridded policing infrastructure made through interlocking systems of walls, gates and “convenient” police checkpoints in cities and towns. Across the province the state also began instituting regular inspections of the homes of Uyghurs.

During these inspections of homes in Uyghur neighborhoods, the police first scanned the QR code that they had installed on the front door of apartments.<sup>21</sup> Images and files associated with the registered occupants of the apartment would then be displayed on the police officer’s smart phone. Following this review of legal occupants, the police then proceeded to search the home for unregistered occupants. They looked in closets and under beds. They would vary the timing of inspection to make sure that the occupants would be unprepared. At times, they would ask to look through the books and magazines of the occupants. Other times they asked to inspect

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<sup>20</sup> Zenz, Adrian and Leibold, James. “Xinjiang’s Rapidly Evolving Security State.” *China Brief*, Volume: 17 Issue: 4, March 14, 2017. <https://jamestown.org/program/xinjiangs-rapidly-evolving-security-state/>; Feng, Emily. (2018). Security spending ramped up in China's restive Xinjiang region. *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/aa4465aa-2349-11e8-ae48-60d3531b7d11>

<sup>21</sup> These inspections were observed by the author during ethnographic fieldwork in Ürümqi in 2014 and 2015.

their phones and computers. Any refusal to comply meant that the person would be detained. If the occupants were not home at the time of the inspection, they would be notified that they were required to appear at the police station within the next 24 hours.

In the countryside these inspections were even more terrifying. There, the armed police were accompanied by groups of Han and conscripted Uyghur volunteers armed with baseball-style wooden bats with metal spikes. They visited people's homes on a regular basis to check their phones and computers for any unapproved religious material and to make sure that they were watching state-approved television. They made sure that the men were not growing beards and the women were not covering their heads. They questioned Uyghur children in order to make sure that they were being sent to school and that their parents were not teaching them about Islam at home. They asked about mosque attendance, prayer times and whether or not they had ever listened to unapproved Islamic "teachings" (Uy: *tabligh*). They asked Uyghurs to attend weekly patriotic education meetings, sing patriotic songs, dance patriotic dances and pledge their undying loyalty to the Chinese state. Every household was responsible to send at least one member of the family to such meetings. Failure to comply with any of these forms of inspection and action resulted in arrest.

Based on the dozens of interviews I conducted with friends and relatives of those that had been detained or arrested as well as interviews with government officials (see also Zenz forthcoming), since 2014 hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs have been placed in indefinite detention. As detainees they were forced to attend political education and Chinese -language education classes in reeducation centers – a Chinese specific form of concentration camp. Thousands more were serving sentences in labor camps for minor offenses (such as not attending political education meetings, praying or studying Islam illegally or wearing illegal clothes) under

the new anti-terrorism and extremism laws. The detentions began in the summer of 2014 when people under the age of 55 who had practiced forms of reformist Islam were taken by the police and held without charge. The disappearance of youth into the depths of the police state was soon being euphemistically referred to as being taken behind “the black gate” (Uy: *qara dereveze*). Many of these initial detainees were still in detention 3 years later.

A new wave of detentions began in February 2017. Now it appeared that any Muslim minority citizen, whether they be Hui, Kazakh or Uyghur, who did not advocate for the repression of religion and the assimilation of the Uyghur population was seen as a threat to the state. In May 2017, a Uyghur intellectual at an institution in Ürümqi told me, “if you wear white shoes, they will arrest you for not wearing black shoes. If you wear black shoes, they will arrest you for not wearing white shoes.” He worried that he himself would be arrested after hearing that the president of Xinjiang University along with around 20 other Uyghur faculty members had been arrested for not teaching their courses on Uyghur literature solely in Chinese. By the autumn of 2017, nearly all Uyghurs had a friend, colleague or family member who had been detained. Even Uyghur Party members were not immune from detention. An estimated 800,000 Uyghurs were taken over the course of 2017 (Philips 2018).

The mass detention of Uyghurs was facilitated by an intensive qualitative data gathering campaign. In the spring of 2017, the local police, with the assistance of over one million village cadre team members who were sent into Uyghur communities, were ordered to begin to rank Uyghurs using a number of metrics of extremist existence or behavior (HRW 2018). Based on interviews with Uyghurs who have been detained and released, the relatives of detainees as well as leaked official documents, the primary categories of assessment were as follows:

1. Between Ages of 15 and 55.



2. Ethnic Uyghur.
3. Unemployed or underemployed.
4. Possesses passport.
5. Prays five times per day.
6. Possesses religious knowledge or has participated in illegal religious activities (often meaning that the individual has studied Arabic or Turkish and/or listened to unapproved Islamic teachings).<sup>22</sup>
7. Has visited one of 26 banned countries (including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia among others).
8. Has overstayed a visa while traveling abroad.
9. Has an immediate relative living in a foreign country.
10. Has taught children about Islam in their home.

Based on my interviews it appeared that any individual whose existence or behavior corresponded to three or more of these categories could be subject to questioning. Since two of the categories were simply being born Uyghur and being between the ages of 15 and 55, for many Uyghurs their very existence made them suspicious. Any individual who passed a threshold of the majority of these criteria could be subject to detention and political reeducation for a minimum of 30 days. Most were detained indefinitely. They were told that their beliefs and way of life were a form of social “cancer” (Uy: *raq*) that needed to be excised. They were told to celebrate the process of having their lives reengineered because it meant that they would be freed from “prejudice” (Uy: *kemsitish*) after they had been taught to despise their religion and lack of

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<sup>22</sup> Based on interviews conducted by the Uyghur intellectual Eset Sulayman and police officers in Kashgar prefecture, one of the main ways in which this religious knowledge is detected is when a Uyghur destroys his or her SIM card or refuses to use his or her phone to communicate with others. The lack of phone activity is read as a sign of deviance and results in an automatic interrogation. See Eset Sulayman “China Runs Region-wide Re-education Camps in Xinjiang for Uyghurs And Other Muslims,” September 11, 2017, *Radio Free Asia*, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/training-camps-09112017154343.html>.

assimilation into Han society. Some among the detained and released Uyghurs and their relatives who I have interviewed with the most depth have exhibited signs of post-traumatic stress. They said that small issues they encounter now result in deep feelings of anxiety. Many now have problems with panic attacks and depression.

After they or their loved ones were released they were often asked to write “vows of loyalty” (Ch: *fasheng liangjian*; Uy: *ipade bildürüş*) to the state.<sup>23</sup> These statements forced Uyghurs to articulate views that were not their own. The statements asked them to re-narrate their personal biographies in a way that places them in complete opposition to reformist Islam and in undying loyalty to the state. They strongly resembled the personal statements that many were forced to publicly declare during the waves of Maoist class struggle and thought reform in the 1950s, but in this case they were racialized (i.e. Uyghur specific) and directly assimilationist

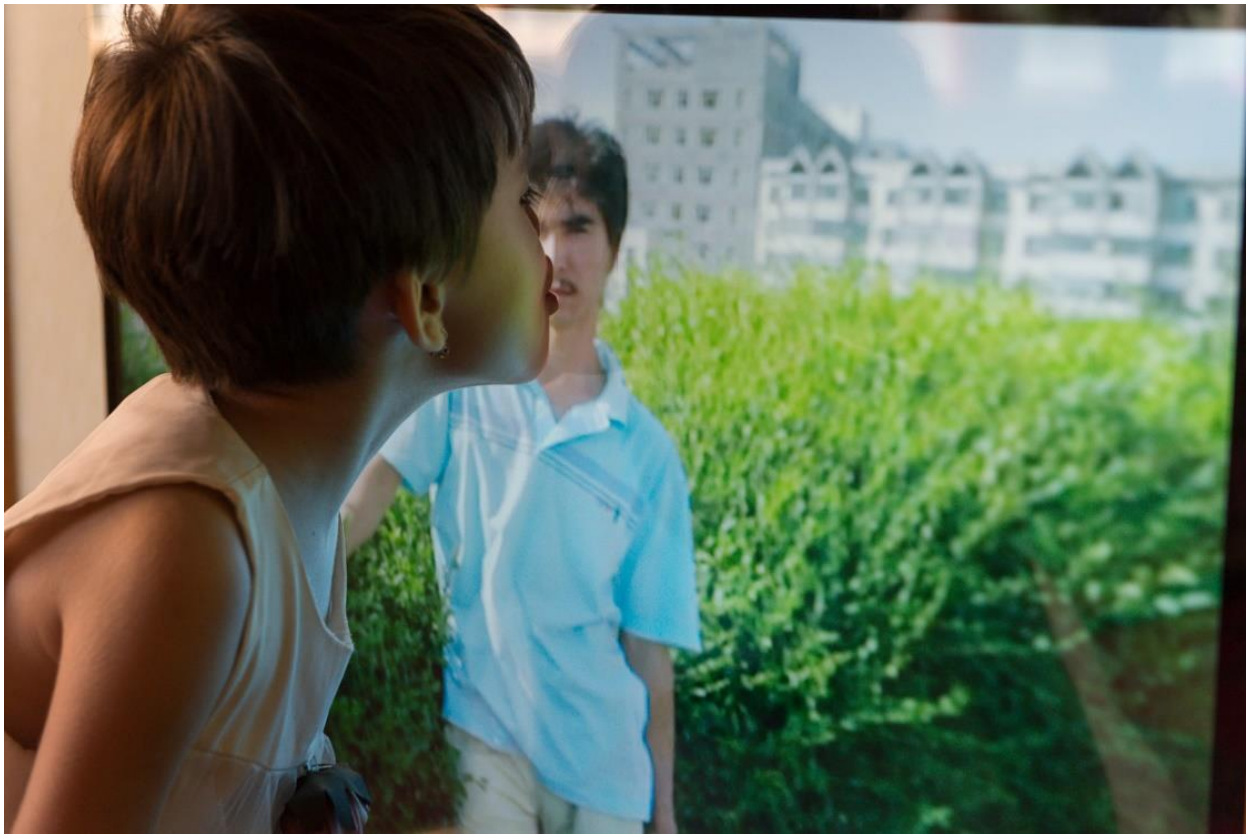
or oriented toward Han state culture. The drive to extract natural resources and experiment on the local population led the state capitalist regime to use the human engineering strategies of Maoist planned economies in service of terror capitalism. The gaslighting effect of the repetition and widespread circulation of these vows (particularly by Uyghur public figures) is one of the most potent tools of the reeducation campaign. It is here that the “thought-work” of human re-engineering is really taking place.

Many Uyghurs, like Alim who I introduced at the beginning of this essay, spoke with me about these processes of inspection, detention and harassment as a process of “breaking their spirit” (Uy: *rohi sulghun*). They said that when their loved ones came back to them they were changed as individuals. They were silent. They submitted to whatever they were asked to do. They were fearful. Something essential to their being was gone. The trauma of knowing that

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<sup>23</sup> Here is an example of such vows from the widely circulated *Xinjiang Communist Youth Party* journal <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/Fy2tcdVgOf8SVhPdNG0PhQ>

their life was in the hands of the police state made many of them lose hope. When they came back they began to parrot things they had been told in their classes. It was as if, per the parameters of the human engineering project, they had been reprogrammed. They said that the part of them that was Uyghur was broken, all that was left was a patriotic Chinese shell. The material effects of capitalist development first forced them into wage labor and exposed them to new ways of being Muslim, and then, in turn, the rhetoric of terror forced them back to their home villages and silenced them. The atmosphere of fear and terror was stifling. It was difficult to aspire to anything more than simply staying alive.



*Figure 0.6. In August 2017 a four-year old Uyghur child kisses an image of her father six months after he was taken to a reeducation camp for praying at a local mosque in rural Southern Xinjiang. Image by Eleanor Moseman, used with permission.*

### *Chinese Framings of Terror Capitalism*

The new framing of minority protests against state domination, Islamic piety movements and violent resistance as each a manifestation of “terrorism” has produced an academic growth industry across China. Centers for Terrorism Studies have sprung up across the country where Chinese academics reemphasize and validate the pronouncements of the state. The activities of several thousand Uyghurs in Turkey and Syria have been used as justification for the detention and re-education of hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs. The state of emergency and state funding that accompanied the People’s War on Terror has allowed for numerous experiments in securitization. As in the United States, new infrastructures of border security, biosecurity and cybersecurity are being introduced to buttress older forms of control. As Joseph Masco has demonstrated (2014), in the United States, counter-terrorism securitization is built on the legacy of Cold War strategy and infrastructure. In China, counter-terrorism targets a specific group of native Muslim citizens and their resources. As such, the implementation of the “People’s War on Terror” is manifested differently in China than the “war on terror” elsewhere.

In China, the terror rhetoric is folded over a settler campaign that is facilitating the ongoing accumulation of natural resources from Uyghur lands. Because of this colonial context the dispossessing effect of the “People’s War” has produced relations of both domination and exploitation in all facets of Uyghur life. Both of these features of Chinese terror capitalism are built in part on the socialist legacies of the past. On the one hand, the “original accumulation” of resources has always been an aspect of China’s socialist ambitions. The new forms of domination, though, mark a turning away from the “permitted difference” of socialist multiculturalism in relation to the Uyghur population. Now, instead, using methods that resemble the thought work and struggle sessions that accompanied land reform campaigns and Anti-

Rightist campaigns, the state is attempting to transform Uyghur society. The mass detention of Uyghur suspects is directed at reengineering their minds and everyday life. The goal here is to force Uyghurs to choose loyalty to the Chinese state over loyalty to their past and the people they love. In North America this type of thought work has not been forcibly implemented on a subjugated population since the 1940s when Japanese Americans were sent to internment camps. Only those who vowed their loyalty to the American state and joined the war against Japan were permitted to leave the camps.

Because of their colonial context, the Uyghur internment camps are also reminiscent of North American boarding schools where native populations that survived genocidal encounters with American pioneers were taught to embrace Christian values and denounce their “savagery.” In Afghanistan and Iraq, the American military has attempted to “win the hearts and minds” of those whose land they have occupied, but that process was never fully institutionalized as it was in contemporary Xinjiang. The American criminal justice system likewise attempted to rehabilitate inmates and turn them toward disciplined behavior while at the same time profiting from their incarceration. But the Chinese “People’s War on Terror” was something different. In effect it was the outlawing of an entire way of life.

This process has been aided by the permissiveness of the world community toward the violent policing of Muslim populations. In particular, the Chinese case found common ground with the Trump Administration’s policies toward Muslims. Many Chinese politicians and “terrorism studies” academics applauded the Trump administration’s ban on Muslim travel.<sup>24</sup> They saw it as validation for the travel restrictions the Chinese administration has imposed on

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<sup>24</sup> See *Al Jazeera*. (2017). “China's Communist Party hardens rhetoric on Islam.” <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/china-communist-party-hardens-rhetoric-islam-170312171857797.html>; and Steenberg Reyhe, Rune. (2017). “Erik Prince Weighing Senate Bid While Tackling Xinjiang Security Challenge.” *EurasiaNet Analysis*. <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/85571>.

Uyghurs. Meanwhile, the Chinese state has hired Erik Prince, the founder of the private mercenary army Blackwater and brother of American Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, to set up training facilities for Chinese security forces in “counter-terrorism” among Tibetan and Uyghur populations (Fisher, Shapira and Rauhala 2018). These direct linkages between American and European counter-terrorism efforts and the Chinese attempts to turn them on their own citizens, demonstrates the ideological and economic linkages that facilitate the mass detention of Uyghurs.

It also signals that China is following the American model of facilitating research and development through a military industrial complex. In addition to reengineering Uyghurs through a system of mass detention and “re-education” or “conversion therapy” (Ch: *jiaoyu zhuanhua*), they are also creating millions of jobs<sup>879</sup> and rationalizing the spending of billions of yuan supplied by state sources on both new infrastructure and technological development. Much of this spending is contracted to private sector companies based in Eastern China. As an IP Video Market Info Incorporated report released by Charles Rollet (2018) has noted, two Hangzhou-based tech companies alone, Dahua and Hikvision, were awarded more than 1.2 billion dollars in contracts to build out the security infrastructure across the Uyghur homeland (see figure 0.7). This report, which addresses security spending in only a handful of counties, towns and cities across the province represent only a fraction of security spending that has occurred since the beginning of the “People’s War.” Over the past four years terror capitalism has become the primary driver of the economy of Chinese Central Asia.

## **“People's War” Surveillance Spending, 2016-2017** (based on available data)

| Project Name                                            | (Amount in Millions of Dollars) |
|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Dahua Safe County Project in Yeken County               | 686                             |
| Dahua Shihezi Safe City Project                         | 94                              |
| HIKvision Ürümchi Hi-Tech Zone Safe City Project        | 79                              |
| Dahua Cherchen Safe County Project                      | 61                              |
| HIKvision Käriye County Safe City Project               | 58                              |
| HIKvision Lop County Social Security Project            | 57                              |
| HIKvision Guma County Facial Recognition System Project | 53                              |
| HIKvision Qaraqash County Social Defence System Project | 46                              |
| Dahua Khotan County Public Security Checkpoint Project  | 49                              |
| Dahua Chira County Smart City Project                   | 30                              |
| Dahua Yopurgha County Safe City Project                 | 30                              |

DATA: IPVM, INFOGRAPHIC: DARREN BYLER

*Figure 0.7. This table demonstrates that state contracts from only 11 Xinjiang cities, towns, and counties with Hangzhou -based private tech firms totaled more than 1.2 billion dollars in 2016 and 2017. Since all 92 localities in the province were tasked with building similar security infrastructure it is likely that this represents only a small fraction of private contracting for terror capitalism securitization.*

The effort of Harrell (1995) and Stoler and McGranahan (2007) to provincialize Europe as the only center of colonial and racialized dispossession fosters an understanding the way power and domination can be deployed in non-western spaces. Understanding the settler drive for resources that undergirds the logic of elimination laid out by Wolfe makes it clear that what Uyghurs are contending with is more than simply structural violence of capitalist development or the latent consequences of systemic racism. Like native groups elsewhere, the Uyghurs were asked to participate in a multiculturalist project whose contents were dictated by the state. They were asked to reengineer themselves along the lines of permitted difference and accept the terms

that were laid out to them by the state. But as market liberalization and the need for natural resources intensified, the desires of the settler state intensified as well. This in turn exacerbated the tensions and contradictions felt by rural Uyghurs as their way of life was increasingly threatened. Protests increased. This was followed by violent reprisals from the state. Uyghurs began to turn to forms of reformist Islam as a way to regain control of their lives. The passbooks were introduced; the home invasions began; and eventually mass detentions were instituted. As the logic of “terror” elimination was added more forcefully to the logic of state-directed capitalist expansion, Uyghurs felt the relationship of state domination in every aspect of their lives. When they failed to do this, they found that the institutions of the state were used to sequester their bodies and destroy their families.

Today Uyghurs speak often of the brokenness they feel as a people. They say they have no words for how they feel. They say they can’t reconcile what is happening and who they are as human beings. When they say they are broken, they are saying they are no longer whole as individuals. Their sense of self has been damaged. Mostly what they are saying is that they are terrified of how this will affect those they love. Stories of the systemic rape of women who have been detained circulate widely. Rumors of organs being harvested from young men accused of terror crimes are a part of daily conversation. Uyghurs worry that these stories are true or may become true. They worry that the biometric data that has been taken from them is part of some sort of systemic elimination process. They feel that they have no way to protect themselves and those they love. They are being terrified by the normalization of terror capitalism and the way it is taking even limited forms of autonomy away from them.



## ***Section 2: What this Dissertation Does: Analytic Frames and Research Methods***

This project began as an attempt to understand the effects of two seemingly incongruent ideas: how did the aspirations of building and living in a global city intersect with the effects of the implementing a “War on Terror”? The history of Ürümchi’s present is shaped by the protests of July 5, 2009 in which hundreds of migrants were killed and thousands injured. Though the protests appear to have been sparked by racialized discrimination against Uyghur factory workers in South China, government officials associated the violence with the “low quality” (Ch: *suzhi di*) population and built environments of Uyghur migrant workers who lived in informal settlements in the southern area of the city. Following a reshuffling of the top Party leadership in 2011, the city government invested 5 billion yuan (\$793.6 million) to begin razing neighborhoods and “building new homes for 60,000 families (250,000 people) in the shantytowns by 2015” (Xinhua).<sup>25</sup>

At the same time, state cultural ministry and private Han philanthropists invested millions of yuan in building “creative industries” and thus producing a “high quality” (Ch: *suzhi gao*) city. These art initiatives were part of an effort to turn Ürümchi into a “global city” (Harvey 2012; Roy & Ong 2011; Sassen 2001) while at the same time fostering the covalent goals of “ethnic solidarity” and “stability.” As I describe in Chapter 1, global cities serialize the development strategies of other cities as a way of building cultural capital and “world-class” distinction. Building the brand of a city depends to a large extent on fostering the production, circulation and spread of the distinction of the city as a desired commodity in itself. Culture industries are central to this impulse to build and represent urban value. Many of the culture workers in Ürümchi—photographers, painters, writers, filmmakers and new media producers—

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<sup>25</sup> See Chapter 5 for a detailed exploration of this process.

who worked in its emerging creative industries are low-income Han and Uyghur migrants from China's interior or who claim rural Xinjiang as their place of origin. Both of these groups of culture workers are confronted with the aesthetic traditions of China's Maoist past and the tight control of official political discourse of its present. Yet, as I demonstrate in Chapters 3 and 4, in some cases the political engagement of the emerging art world came to be considered a means of indirect intervention in public debates regarding migration, interethnic violence and capitalist displacement. In other cases, culture work, defined as the work of producing value by representing cultured thought and practice in public media forms, served to mask Han privilege and the ongoing dispossession of "native" (Uy: *yerlik*) forms of knowledge and the suspension of Uyghur social reproduction. It is important to understand that social reproduction or collective life-making does not simply mean the production of sameness or unchanging traditions. Instead it means the ability for groups to have the wherewithal to make the stories of their lives anew. For Uyghurs it means the ability to bring their native knowledge and practices into the contemporary life of the city. Being native means reproducing a Uyghur persona that finds belonging in the contemporary Islamic world, western world and Chinese world. Social reproduction is about letting the story continue; it also means allowing groups the autonomy to adapt new modes and practices to older forms of sociality. For Uyghur social reproduction to continue, both their spirit and vitality must be existentially secure.

The differential forms of economic dispossession and ethno-racial value production under which migrants lived, simultaneously created novel, but fragile, forms of ethics and politics, while at the same time dispossession created new objects of social violence. In order to address the problems of displacement inherent in urban upheaval and resettlement, I locate the lives of migrants in Ürümchi elsewhere; namely, in the unstable cultural systems that give meaning to

the lived experience of their socially-constructed lifeworlds. “Ontological insecurity” drives people to “relentlessly” recover their sense of personhood “in the face of forces that threaten to reduce them to nothingness” (Jackson 1998: 192). In the absence of a secure “existence” (or ontology), unfamiliar environments and cultural others are “experienced as destabilizing influences or threats” (78). This project builds on a growing body of literature on urban social violence and economic dispossession (Allison 2014; Butler 2009; Coulthard 2014; Feldman 1991; Shaw & Byler 2016), ethics and politics (Al-Mohammad 2010; Mahmood 2011; Hirschkind 2009) and culture work, social value and gender, class and ethnic identifications in China (Anagnost 2004; Azolay 2012; Chumley 2016; Rofel 2007; Schein 2000; Welland 2018; Yeh 2014). In doing so it considers Uyghur and Han migrant life and culture as both a process of material, historical development and as a phenomenological process that requires interpretive responses correlated to the particular position of persons in social collectives. People must perform cultural values in order to make meaning out of their lives and demonstrate their value in society. I name this performative process “culture work” (see also Chumley 2016).

Emphasizing culture values as always a work in progress shows that the life narratives which accompany the structural violence of rapid urban development and securitization are not only an effect, but also a cause of new values, new ethics of success, desire, and friendship, as well as a new politics of seeing, mourning and, at times failure. Many migrants in the city live in a state of anxiety and alienation, but rather than render them in a state of anomie it refocuses the way they see, and how they care for and disregard each other. By highlighting their stories, this dissertation intervenes in discussions of the global city, the experience of the “War on Terror,” and the social violence that accompanies the construction of a global city along the New Silk Road.

## ***Analytic Frameworks***

### *Theme 1. Global Cities, The Production of Desire, Dispossession*

In framing my questions on the lived experience of “urban cleansing” (Appadurai 2000) in Ürümchi, this project focuses on flows of power and the way city life is generated by a confluence of global forces, national histories, material realities and, in turn, the production of desire. In order to recognize the role of urban development in organizing capital, aesthetics and daily activity (Benjamin 2002; de Certeau 1984; Sassen 2001; Simmel 1971), theorists have developed several intersecting approaches to analytics of city-life. One approach is to examine the design of the built environment to understand how planners and investors embed political ideologies, organize economies and generate value in urban space (Caldeira 2000; Larkin 2008; Tadiar 2016). A second approach is to consider how desire production arises from the proximity and contact of disparate elements of an urban “assemblage” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Latour 2007; Roy and Ong 2011; Simone 2004). A third approach centers on the way the everydayness of life in the city means investigating the intimacy of power in human experience (Foucault 1992; Harms 2013; Hoffman 2011; Zhang 2010).

This project is articulated to each of these approaches. It considers how new urban forms and boundaries shaped the lives of Uyghur and Han migrants and generated aesthetics and socialities that were part of the functioning of the city and the production of capitalist value. For instance, in Chapter One it analyzes the way a creative industries art district was imagined as a new urban platform that would bring “world class” quality to the city by creating the illusion of freedom in cultural experimentation. In Chapter Three and Chapter Five it describes how an urban passbook system supported by a complex wall and gate systems radically constrained Uyghur migrant bodies to produce values of safety and expand the real estate speculation in the

city. It discusses the politics of new checkpoints where suspicious bodies were identified, and smartphones and ID cards were checked. It dissects the feelings that emerged when police invaded the homes of Uyghur migrants. The space of the city is thus shown to be a racialized space of innovation and freedom and a space of devaluation and constraint.

The space of the city is a place of life-making where the mediating or culture producing capacities of people themselves become part of creative industries. This meant that both Han and Uyghur migrants participated in processes of valorization and the production of particular forms of cultural capital by performing stories about their lives. Yet, because the city is also a zone of exclusion only certain kinds of values and stories were recognized and permitted. Not all forms of cosmopolitan “achieved quality” (Uy: *sapa*; Ch: *suzhi*) or value are equally valued by state institutions. Thinking in these terms, the seeming openness of the global city and the infrastructures of communication that it fosters are shown to require the service of culture workers. As I show in Chapter 2 and Chapter 6, culture workers serve the needs of conflictual human engineering projects and through this often reproduce the social violence of dispossession and extraction. The city is also the base of the “People’s War on Terror.” As such, it functions as conduit for a new form of violent exploitation and domination—a project I name terror capitalism. The urban cleansing projects that accompanied this new economy allowed only for forms of representation that served the needs of the state. As a result dispossession was often rendered invisible or unrepresented in normative public discourse. Often the only public evidence of the disappearance of hundreds of thousands of Uyghur migrants from the city was the rubble of their neighborhoods and gleaming towers of commodity housing that rose in their place.

## *Theme 2: The Politics and Ethics of Expressive Culture*

As has been widely noted in ethnographies of China, the developmental state has been actively attempting to construct a civility that is both “deeply historical and yet undeniably modern” (Anagnost 1997: 164). As part of this modernization, over the past two decades contemporary arts and new media have become multi-billion dollar industries in China. As in “world class” cities everywhere (Harvey 2012; Florida 2012), many city governments in China have begun to build up their own “creative industries” or urban “art worlds.” These spaces are often contested spaces where sex, gender and class subject-positions are negotiated (Rofel 2007; Welland 2018). Thinking in relation to both ethnographies of contemporary cultural performance in Chinese urban worlds and theories of aesthetics, ethics and politics (Azoulay 2012; Jackson 1998), my project emphasizes the role of culture work in shaping ethical obligations and political relationships for city inhabitants across ethnic lines. In each chapter I argue that culture work—storytelling, filming, writing, watching, and listening among other modes—results in intercorporeal feelings (such as: sympathy and friendship) that both constrain and transcend ethnic boundaries. Since these forms of “being-with” are generated by interpersonal performance (Al-Mohammad 2010; Hirschkind 2009; Nancy 2000), they give deeper clarity and complexity to the political identities and cultural values associated with citizenship, ethnicity, and cosmopolitanism. Asking how people feel they should live and represent their lives allows the project to elaborate on framings of culture work as forms of self-making and political practice. (Chumley 2016; Welland 2018). It also allows for a consideration of the ways culture work can turn social violence (Butler 2009; Allison 2014) into an ethical and political resource. As I show in Chapter 3 the effects of dispossession played an important role in producing a positive ethics of friendship among Uyghur men in the city. I also show in Chapter 4 that Han culture workers

who witnessed Uyghur urban cleansing were able to produce an informal minor politics that promoted decolonization and refused the new sequence of racialization that was associated with terror capitalism.

Often, though, these emergent forms of positive ethics and minor politics, are temporary and fragile. They often fail to enable Uyghur people, and the Han people that care about them, to further Uyghur social reproduction. Instead, the media work done by these migrants often produced forms of servitude to larger goals of value production. As I show in Chapter 1, Han culture workers were asked to be the arbiters of Uyghur history and culture. I show in Chapter 2 that Uyghur culture workers were called to celebrate the terror capitalism that destroyed their religious and cultural values. One aspect of this value production was the new sequence of race-making that emerged in Ürümqi. This human engineering sequence or program produced certain life-projects that were valued as permitted and marketable forms of life-making while marking other lives as expendable. These expendable lives were also valuable as they provided the object for both the production of security and for the personal investment of millions of Han and Uyghur police and officials who structured their lives around “reeducating” them. These expendable lives provided the impetus for linking Han culture instruction and mediation to surveillance systems and mass incarceration—a process that produced the grounds for terror capitalism. As this dissertation shows in Chapter 2, Chapter 5 and the Epilogue, many times new forms of mediation and culture work result in a kind of entrapment. These findings demonstrate that mediation was not only a way of holding on to new forms of ethics and politics but was also a part of the dispossession of Uyghur sociality. Dispossession involves more than simply the processes of material dispossession (Tadiar 2016). The state of capitalist siege that was intensified by the “People’s War on Terror” not only facilitated wide-spread land appropriation

through industrial farming and oil and natural gas development, it also facilitated less spectacular forms of dispossession. As evidenced by the way Uyghur and Han media production was enclosed and re-narrativized by the cultural and educational apparatuses of the state, dispossession also attempted to reengineer basic forms of knowledge and morality and, at its base, sociality itself. It drew energy from preying on the lives of young men, further disenfranchising Uyghur women who were forced to parent and tend to their farms on their own. The fragmenting of Uyghur families that the mass incarceration system encouraged, further damaged Uyghur social reproduction and created widespread forms of state terror as millions of Uyghurs were rendered vulnerable, without institutional support.

*Terror Capitalism, Minority Racialization and Social Violence in Northwest China*

Beginning with Dru Gladney's (1996) and Stevan Harrell's (2001) groundbreaking work, minorities in China have been a major source of anthropological discussion. Yet, with few exceptions, (Gladney 1993; Schein 2001; Gillette 2002; Bulag 2002) these ethnographies have generally focused on minorities in rural and ethnic spaces (Litzinger 2000; Meuggler 2001; Friedman 2006; Hyde 2006; Yeh 2007). Since a foundational element of Uyghur social organization is the urban enclave (Uy: *mehelle*), anthropologists who have conducted research in the region have noted the significance of urban living for Uyghur self-perception (Dautcher 2009; Cappelletti 2015). Yet, the ways in which Uyghurs' responses to Chinese urban cleansing and human engineering projects are shaping the future of urbanism in Xinjiang have yet to be fully considered. Extending analytics of minority politics and ethics (Lionnet & Shih 2005), this project considers the social forms which emerge when marginal members of a society subvert the poetics and aesthetics of a dominant regime and open a space for their own flourishing.



Current scholarship on urban development in China has focused largely on class and gender in Han worker migration to Eastern China. With the exception of studies of the Han presence in Africa (Sautman and Yan 2007), Southeast Asia (Nyiri and Tan 2016) and in minority regions in China (Hansen 2007; Joniak-Lüthi 2015; Cliff 2016a) scholars of contemporary China have not yet fully considered what happens when Chinese migration moves elsewhere or when it displaces marginalized minority populations through state sanctioned native resettlement and reeducation campaigns. This research draws on the analysis of value production expressed through gender and class relations begun by Ann Anagnost (1997) and continued by recent studies of the precarious positioning of urban migrant and professional workers (Pun 2005; Yan 2008; Hoffman 2008; Anagnost, Arai & Ren 2013). It extends their arguments to include the tensions that emerge when migrants are confronted with radical otherness and emergent global discourses such as “terrorism.”

When Han migrants were confronted with minority groups that the state determined were made up of potential “terrorists,” they were often granted the position of rights-bearing citizens. Unlike in Eastern cities, in Ürümqi Han migrants often felt as though the state was there to protect them and enforce their property rights vis-à-vis Uyghur migrants to the city. Uyghurs on the other hand often experienced their lives and their way of life as being at the mercy of the state and Han migrants. What this differential experience of life fosters is a new sequence of racialization. As Neferti Tadiar (2015:136) has noted, contemporary experiences of empire, colonialism and capitalist dispossession are always premised on differential forms of racialization. They may not link up with older forms of racism, nor may they be experienced in the same way, but they are nevertheless premised on the surface of certain bodies being read as subjects worth expending and other bodies worth living and valorizing (2015: 140). What

Tadiar's framework enables is a way of thinking about kinds of racism that do not proceed only from an "unmarked identarian norm (of whiteness)" (2015:139). Instead, she argues, race-making functions as a basic, yet variable, mechanism of capitalism throughout the world. It enables the manifestation of global industries of securitization, biomedicine, and humanitarian intervention by enabling the valorization and protection of certain populations at the expense of others. This project finds that Chinese capitalist development in Ürümchi as a global city was producing a new sequence of racialization as well. These findings do not rest on proving the linkages between western forms of racialization and Chinese understandings of race and ethnicity, but rather on ethnographic evidence of native dispossession, state terror and differential institutional support among Han and Turkic Muslims in the city. Chinese race-making is part of the process of value production. It clears space for new forms of life-making while suspending the life stories of others.

#### *Methods of Research and Modes of Analysis*

This project is supported by 24 months of ethnographic fieldwork in the city of Ürümchi and the sending communities of migrants. Over this period, as a student of both Uyghur and Chinese, I interviewed dozens of both Uyghur and Han migrant culture workers while living near the Uyghur informal settlement of Black Shell Mountain. I also conducted a number of interviews with urban planners, security, and police personnel. Over the course of this fieldwork around 20 differently positioned individuals became key informants. Many of them also became close friends. We met frequently, sharing meals, going to mosques and prayer room spaces, art studios, tea houses and coffee shops while I learned about the stories of their lives and they learned about mine. In addition, I also explored Uyghur and Chinese language media and cultural artifacts concerning the contemporary development of the city, the implementation of systems of

control since 2009 and the policies which motivated forced relocation of Uyghur migrants both in and out of the city. Many of these texts and cultural artifacts became objects which centered conversations I had with differently positioned Han and Uyghur friends. Bringing the same object into conversation with different people brought out interesting responses which allowed me to structure the various chapters of this dissertation around expressions of difference and similarity. It also allowed me to recognize the valence and power of mediation and representation and the way these objects were shaped by state discourses and modes of freedom and control.

With some notable exceptions (Ghannam 2013; Beller-Hann 2016; Dautcher 2009), in much of the scholarly literature on Islamic societies, and Uyghur society in particular, male worlds are often associated with intellectual thought and public life while women's lives are associated with domesticity and emotional care. While this work on normative Muslim life has been extremely valuable, it has resulted in a lack of attention regarding the way young Muslim men embody their masculinity through sensory performance. Instead of seeing Uyghur masculinity as a social product, Uyghur male voices have often been rendered as agendered and normative expressions of Uyghur identity. Likewise in scholarship on Han migrant factory workers and culture workers, few studies have focused on how masculinity is constructed and performed. Clearly scholarship on Han women's gendered performance is an important and essential corrective to the dominance of agendered representations that effectively silenced the role of women's work and knowledge in constructing contemporary Chinese sociality. In Ürümchi, though, the valorization of Han masculinity and the expendability of Uyghur masculinity is a central part of the emergent process of racialization. Because of this, and because of my positionality as a male researcher invested in anti-racist struggles, male voices

emerged as a dominant source of narration. Throughout the text I have attempted to make the stakes in focusing on male voices explicit. Their voices are not representative of the whole of Han and Uyghur experiences in Chinese Central Asia, but they play a central role in the sequence of dispossession and racialization that is analyzed in this project. Uyghur young men were made the primary target of the “People’s War on Terror” and Han men were the primary population sent to build the global city. As young Uyghur men were disappeared by the state and sent into indefinite detention, the weight of life-making, of social reproduction, was carried by Uyghur mothers, wives, sisters and daughters to a greater extent.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, as Han male migrants found new lives in the global city, they pulled their wives and daughters into their masculinist project of dispossessing native peoples by occupying and developing their land. The story of Uyghur and Han men was not theirs alone; it implicated the whole of society in Northwest China.

As this project developed further it became clear that one of the central methods of life-making for male culture workers, both Han and Uyghur, was storytelling, self-representation and media representations of their lives. Not only did they use media forms as modes of expression and ways of understanding and staging larger experiences of social life, but many of our conversations also focused on their own stories in relation to media objects. In order to stay faithful to this ethnographic grounding and evoke the affective labor of my friends and informants, the mode of analysis used in this project centered on the story-telling form as well. In many chapters I found that the stories of single figures and their relationship to cultural objects—photo projects, novels, digital media—enabled an analytic that held in tension the contradictions

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<sup>26</sup> Although young low-income women also migrate to the city and attempt to find work as maids, store clerks and hostesses, the focus of project is on how young men, the primary target of terror capitalism embody their escape from poverty and detention in the countryside. For accounts of Uyghur women’s life in the city see Cindy Huang (2009), Joanne Smith Finley (2015). For accounts of Han women in Xinjiang see Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi (2015).

between the larger social concerns of culture work, the politics of the capitalist nation, and the violence of racialization. Telling these stories from the vantage point of representational figures and representative cultural objects enabled a demonstration of the ways in which larger social forces and identities were lived and mediated by individuals. Telling the stories of single lives helped to weave together different strands of the story of contemporary Chinese Central Asian life.

Through developing this theoretical model of life-making through culture work, I found that constructing narrative portraits of representational figures in tension with cultural objects allowed the project to reach a new level of nuance in a historical situation was complicated and difficult to narrate. For example, the main figure of Chapter 4, Tian Lin is exceptional not so much because he deviates from the norms of Xinjiang life, but because he has consciously expanded his sense of self to include a multiplicity of narratives. This expansiveness and the political perspective it gives him makes him simultaneously intriguing and potentially threatening to Han, Uyghur and western audiences. In the social fabric of Xinjiang, Tian Lin functions as a hinge or point of convergence between the ideals of liberal capitalism and aesthetic practice, and the material realities of settler colonial violence. The figure of Tian Lin mediates and articulates the contradictions between these formations. In this sense, the figure of Tian Lin becomes the location from which we can see these broader systems of social life at play in articulation. Thinking about him in this way, as opposed to a unique individual person exclusively, helps address the tension between attention to the individual and the collectivity which is raised by the ethnographic method. The representational figure of Tian Lin mediates and holds these systems in tension, rendering visible not simply the story of an individual, but more than that—the story of the social structures of Xinjiang life, all of which are relevant to and

affect the experience of the collectivity. More importantly, thinking about an individual self in this way, particularly an unusual figure such as Tian Lin, helps to explore the way ethical questions of how an individual ought to live open up into political questions of how individuals ought to live together.

In many cases, the individual figures represented in this dissertation—Adil, Han Ziyong, Zeng Qunkai, Mahmud, Ablikim, Tian Lin, Emir, Hasan, Yasup—were people I was drawn to because of their social positions in processes of dispossession and racialization in the city and the ways they were attempting to represent these experiences. Often, if our relationship turned into deep and lasting friendship, it was because I was drawn to their political and ethical stance. For example, in the context of Ürümchi, it was extremely rare to encounter Han settlers such as Tian Lin who had fully committed their lives to living with and learning from ethno-racial minorities. His single life seemed to open up a framing of many different forms of sovereignty and subjugation. He was simultaneously a Buddhist, a settler, a photographer, a friend, an advocate. As with most other figures featured in this dissertation, it was his life practice that I was drawn to rather than his artistic work itself. Instead, his work, like the novels, short stories, paintings and short films I describe in other chapters, was more useful as an indication of how dispossession was happening and how culture workers were trying to counteract it or live in spite of it. In this sense, the work of making life itself became the source of new forms of politics and ethics rather than aesthetic objects. I found that the art offered little hope as a means of impacting or solving the deep structural problems in the city, but making art or doing culture work gave migrants a vital way of making sense of their situation as persons.

As Bhrigupati Singh has noted, “once upon a time in anthropology, it would have been an unlikely research quest to write about just a life” (2015: 222). He goes on to write that Durkheim

and Levi-Strauss taught us to search for “elementary forms” of life while Geertz pushed us to examine “local cultures” rather than ontological conditions. In more recent decades, anthropologists have focused on subjectivity and its interplay with sovereignty and control, valorization and expendability (Crapanzano 1985; Behar 1993; Desjarlais 2003; Biehl 2005). Since social life in Xinjiang is filled with feelings of dispossession and racialization, friends like Mahmud, Ablikim, Tian Lin, Emir, Hasan and Yusup offered me ways of plotting the way these forces of control were exerted on individual lives and how they could be refused. Spending time with my friends and sharing their pain drew me to them further. As in Singh’s case with political figures in Rajasthan (2015: 223), this was not a question of logic or social facts but rather one of ethics: what kind of life are we attracted to? As Neferti Tadiar (2016) notes, drawing on her research into state-sanctioned mass-killings in the Philippines, at our current historical moment in the spread of global capitalism it is important to think about “life-sustaining forms and practices of personhood and sociality that ... persist” (151). As a friend and accomplice in the Uyghur struggle to survive it is imperative to note that, despite practices of urban cleansing, disappearances into prison systems, and death, disenfranchised social groups find practices of living and life-making even as racialization and state terror is intensified. These ethical questions, the friendships and the ethnographic portraits they inspired, opened up a further question of anti-racist, decolonial politics. I found that Ablikim, Tian Lin, Emir and Hasan in particular were calling me to a minor politics, a mode of decolonial engagement that results in and arises out of an ethics of friendship and being-with the other.

### *Dissertation Contents*

This project focuses on how causes of migration and urban cleansing are embedded in a complex set of economic and political changes and modes of representation in contemporary

China. It is framed by a discussion of the linkages between racial capitalism, the “People’s War on Terror,” and infrastructures and mediations of desire, control and exclusion:

Section 1: “Desiring the Global City” focuses on how causes of migration are embedded in a complex set of economic and cultural valorizations and dispossessions in contemporary China. Chapter 1 analyzes a series of interviews with the party secretary of the Xinjiang Culture Ministry Han Ziyong and lead curator Zeng Qunkai, it analyzes the impetus behind a state-planned arts district that attempted to pull Han and Uyghur culture workers and consumers into the state project of New Silk Road development while at the same time the city engaged in anti-Muslim urban cleansing projects and the construction of a “global city.” This chapter argues that the goal of “desire production” that was fostered by the material and cultural infrastructure of the creative industries space was countered by older legacies of multicultural domination that tightly constrained the liberatory impulses of the space. Culture production and infrastructure development that appears to be an antidote to structural violence can thus be seen as part of older processes of dispossession. Chapter 2 shows how the emergence of industrial farming in the Uyghur homeland, coupled with the structural oppression of the “People’s War on Terror” and the cosmopolitan desires incited by new forms of media—television advertising and social media networks—created conditions of tremendous pressure on young Uyghur men and their families. This chapter argues that media infrastructure simultaneously provided a means of escape from forms of material and social dispossession and incited new forms of dispossession by forcing Uyghurs to use new media infrastructures which recorded their political subjectivity.

Section 2: “Living the City” extends the narrative of the previous section by turning in Chapter 3 to the experiences of a single migrant named Ablikim and how his dreams were rerouted by the imposed precariousness of structural oppression. Rather than focusing solely on



the trauma of his experience of ethno-racial policing, I demonstrate how his story was symptomatic of an emerging ethics of friendship among young Uyghur migrant men. By sharing the story of his dispossession with his closest friend, a *jan-jiger dost* or “life and liver friend,” Ablikim found a way to keep living on the margins of the city. Drawing on these stories in tension with an emerging body of Uyghur fiction on alienation in the city, this chapter argues that tight-knit friendship networks among young men fostered an emerging positive ethics that responded to infrastructures of control and exclusion. Chapter 4 attends to contentious political relationships between Han and Uyghur migrants by turning to the life practice of one of Xinjiang’s most influential photographers, a Han settler named Tian Lin. The chapter argues that Tian Lin’s life work involved producing an anti-colonial “minor politics” (Lionnet & Shih, 2005) that Uyghur migrants viewed as “almost good enough.” In his role as a “blind wanderer,” a “long-term Xinjiang resident” (Ch: *mangliu; lao Xinjiang*) and a Uyghur “accomplice” or “kin” relation (Uy: *egeshküchi; qarandash*), Tian Lin held in tension the contradictions between political impulses building a global city through processes of dispossession and exclusion.

Section 3: “Cleansing the City” turns to the differential life trajectories of Uyghur and Han migrants when terror capitalism fully transformed the city. In Chapter 5 I focus on the way Uyghur migrants struggled to achieve stability in their lives by contending with the colonial project of the state. By focusing on a tumultuous year in the life of a Uyghur family that inhabited a “nail house” and a young man who is “disappeared” in a Uyghur informal settlement, it shows that migrant life were often comingled with Reformist Islamic practice. It examines how they prepared themselves for the inevitable demolition of their homes or their disappearance by drawing on the *musafir* or “traveler” Uyghur tradition. In doing so it argues that they were forced to choose legal and representational invisibility as a way of maintaining existential

stability. By examining the changing role of the *musapir* in Uyghur social life, the chapter considers how premodern itineracy and Sufi religious practice became a repertoire of Reformist Islamic social organization and fragile, temporary forms of survival. Chapter 6 pulls together the various strands of the project by arguing that Uyghur forms of “quality” or cultural capital were often rejected in the Chinese city, and thus resulted in a failure to achieve the success they seemed to portend. The chapter argues that the global city was in fact structured around particular forms of Han cultural values. This resulted in the wide scale disruption of the work of “native” tradecraft male apprentices and with this a suspension of their life-narratives as self-fashioning subjects. In an epilogue “Life in Subtraction” the project describes how violence became a source of energy that turned the self into a source of refusal, however fragile, as friends and loved-ones were placed in indefinite detention. The epilogue argues that the fracturing of both Han and Uyghur sociality produced life stories that were held by the contingencies of labor in rural infrastructure projects or caught in the magnetism of mass incarceration infrastructure. Through this the violence of state capitalist dispossession was shown to create its own objects and forces.

### *Conclusions*

This project revolves around the interpenetration of the simultaneous rise of new forms of dispossession and new media forms. These forms are worldwide and contemporary: the global city, global Islam, global new media. They were also quite specific in the ways they were experienced in local contexts. For Uyghurs these global forms were entwined with “native” (Uy:yerlik) knowledge and practice, but also Chinese, western, and Islamic systems. These global forms were also locally expressed through new sequences of racialization and policing that were more than simply relational and psychic burdens; these new forms were built out in

space and materially experienced. Because of this range of entrapment and near absolute absence of institutional forms of direct resistance, the dispossession confronting Uyghurs was perhaps more totalizing and rapid than in other instances of colonization. At the same time, the proliferation of media forms and modes of expression offered them more ways to figure out the city. The contradictions that arose from the production of global value are at the heart of each of the chapters that follow. These chapters are made up of stories of violence, but I hope that reading stories of those living with trauma will allow the reader to stay with my friends and share their pain if only for a moment.

**Part 1**  
**Desiring the City**

## Chapter 1:

### **New Silk Road Artworlds: Global City, Desire Development, Multicultural Domination**

The art collective Seven City Blocks (Ch: *qifangjie*) was primarily housed in a decommissioned office building of the city education commission (Ch: *jiaoyu weiyuan hui*), a blocky four-story concrete building paneled with bright red slates. There were dozens of studios and workshops in the complex. Paper-cut artists, painters, photographers, sculptors and calligraphers, the majority of whom were male and Han, filled out the studios, peddling their crafts and practices to each other and those who stopped by. Next door, the two-story Xinjiang Contemporary Art Museum, which was built in 2014, stood gleaming, sheathed in aluminum siding. In the middle of the largest city of Chinese Central Asia, the collective was a space set apart. It housed a dense node of cultural production that, according to the artists who worked there, elicited comparison with older and larger art scenes in global cities such as Beijing, Berlin, Chongqing, New York and Shanghai. The collective fostered partnerships with art institutions in Tehran, Karachi and Dubai and relationships with emerging art scenes in Almaty, Bishkek, Dushanbe and Novosibirsk. In Howard Becker's conceptualization of the term, Seven City Blocks was an "artworld" (Becker 1982). Not only did it produce and solidify aesthetic knowledge in Xinjiang, but it was the material locus of a social network of Uyghur and Han artists and art viewers throughout the region and investors and artists from across East, South and Central Asia. It attempted to differentiate the urbane from the provincial, the global from the local. The art scene was also a part of Ürümqi's global development strategy. Its celebration of desire and contemporaneity stood in contradistinction to the rapid dispossession and containment of the Uyghurs who were native to the same city and region.

The art district was the center of a multi-million *yuan* investment in art projects across the city which addressed an official goal of "ethnic harmony through progress" (Ch: *minzu hexie*

*tongguo jinbu*). This goal-directed development was symptomatic of modernist projects more generally. Beginning in the middle decades of China's twentieth century, such human engineering projects became a dominant means through which Chinese citizens experienced the Chinese social world (Anagnost 2013; Ewen 1988). These projects, which indexed current social positions and future goals along the lines of a machinic, future-oriented aesthetic, were a form of governance that presupposed the development of a modern multicultural socialist nation state. Folding this older history into China's contemporary moment allows for an examination of how the desire to transform a "third-tier" multi-ethnic Chinese city into a "global city" is articulated to cosmopolitan urban developments elsewhere, the forms of lack that comparison to other cities inspires, and the production of sites of desire production themselves. As Lisa Rofel (2007) has shown, the production of "desiring subjects" are at the center of China's new Reform-era economy. As Everett Yuehong Zhang (2015) has also demonstrated, this ethos of contemporary capitalist economies in China produces not only new subjects but new desires for desire itself. In older economic formations, desire was largely trained toward specific ideological goals in service to the nation or "catching up" to other sites of desire production around the globe. Now as the world begins to articulate nation state forms to global cosmopolitan desire, new projects are no longer *only* aimed at fulfilling appropriate needs or comparative lacks in the nation or even in one's being but toward the production of desire itself.<sup>27</sup> The economy is also now motivated by fulfilling material, sexual, and affective desires, some of which are motivated by the desire for desire itself, others that were motivated by mediated feelings of comparative lack.

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<sup>27</sup> Here Zhang is reading Deleuze and Guattari (1983) framing of desire production against a psychoanalytic framing of desire often associated with the work of Lacan (1991) in which desire is posited as simply a lack in one's being. Zhang demonstrates that, in our contemporary global economy, desire is more than simply a lack that must be fulfilled but also a motivating force. We now desire to desire; people often enter art spaces anticipating desire to be triggered. Yet, of course, these desires are also contingent on older forms of desire training. Sometimes the desire to desire is rerouted.

In Ürümqi, cosmopolitan desires for innovation, prestige and the production of desire for the sake of desire are still tied to specific histories of identification projects and the imaginary of the frontier of the nation. As a result, the desired future city was confronted by divergent yet interlocking impulses: the human engineering goals of planners, the development of a cosmopolitan art world, and the containment of Uyghur migrants through the implementation of a “People’s War on Terror.”

The district in Ürümqi was more than a capitalist investment in desire production; it was also a space from which the history and ongoing practice of multicultural domination, an aspect of the Chinese colonial present, could be both produced and contested. In discussing the history of these processes this chapter draws attention to the way the legacy of ideas of ethnic difference and geopolitical marginalization shape contemporary desire production among Han and Uyghur artists in Ürümqi. It sketches out the way contemporary human engineering projects associated with cultural production and economic development were tied to older processes of socialist-legacy forms of governance and Han nationalist desires. In a consideration of Chinese multiculturalism, this chapter argues that cultural production which appears to be an antidote to structural violence and older forms of propaganda work can be seen as still entangled with older colonial processes.

Drawing on a series of interviews with the party secretary of the Xinjiang Culture Ministry Han Ziyong, this chapter demonstrates the way the founding of an arts district in Ürümqi was imagined as way of corralling “disobedient” artists and art viewers into the state project of New Silk Road development. Examining conversations with Han art producers in the district, it shows how crafting a politics and aesthetics of inclusion in the global city was premised on older state projects of ethnic and class identification and cultural production.

Drawing on these accounts, it describes how these visions were simultaneously accepted and contested. It finds that the deployment of these projects interpellated young artists from Eastern China in divergent processes of cosmopolitan desire. In the excesses that emerge from these contradictory processes, creative industry projects such as “Seven City Blocks” can be shown to have indeterminate, unplanned outcomes. By opening a space for ethno-racial intimacy in an emerging global city, art and art practice both destabilized and solidified the slots to which persons had been assigned. It built an intersubjective social interface at a frontier of China projects in terror capitalism and global cities.

### *Locating the Contradictions of Seven City Blocks*

A consideration of the contradictions of human engineering that are associated with the rapid urban development and art world of Ürümqi must start with the question of how such a project could be mobilized around “interethnic harmony through progress.” This question is first a historical and discursive question. Since the inception of Seven City Blocks in the spring of 2009, the party secretary of the Xinjiang Culture Ministry, Han Ziyong, had been overwhelmingly supportive of Ürümqi’s inaugural “creative industries” initiative.<sup>28</sup> As key sponsor of governmental funding in its development and the keynote speaker at the grand opening of the art collective, Han emphasized that contemporary art should be given space to be “disobedient.” Han, a literary critic born in Henan province, grew up in a Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps family and then rose through the ranks to become the party secretary of the Xinjiang Culture Ministry. Although he was not a native of Xinjiang, he had spent much of

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<sup>28</sup> “Creative industries” have become a serial form in Chinese cities of the twenty-first century. Beginning with the cooption of the 798 Art District” by the Beijing city government in the early 2000s, urban planners in Chinese cities have sought to build cultural capital by redesigning spaces for creativity and ingenuity in refurbished and new industrial spaces. This model of creative development can be directly traced to the reinvigoration of the Soho neighborhood in Manhattan in the 1990s. For a parallel account of public-private art and development partnerships in Beijing see Welland 2018.



his life in the Northern Han-dominated part of the province and thought of himself primarily as a “local” (Ch: *bendi*). He was deeply invested in raising the prestige of the city and the province as a whole. To his thinking, only by developing innovative ideas could the true potential of the repertoire of Xinjiang art practices be explored and recognized as “world class.” Shortly before the large-scale protests and violence that shook the city in July 2009,<sup>29</sup> he told an interviewer the following:

We need to support (Seven City Blocks) in all aspects; we need to promote it together; we need to make it a little stronger. It is still a child, frisky, it may cry for help at times, and walk unsteadily. *It might not be too obedient at times*; this is how a child behaves. At this time we need tolerance, inclusiveness and nurturing, so that it can grow strong as soon as possible (Han 2009; my emphasis).

Despite a potential deviance from the “interethnic unity, harmonious society” (Ch: *minzu tuanjie, shehui hexie*) message that had long dominated Xinjiang culture work, Han argued that the prestige of the city could only be fostered through a kind of permissive paternalism. Culture workers needed to have freedom to experiment. He also emphasized that the future of “Xinjiang Culture” rested not just in adaptation to the new and the different but also in clear understanding of the past. He said, “if we relate to the traditional, to traditional culture, without understanding it, if we are indifferent to it, or nihilistic toward it, our culture of innovation will not have a future. *Sometimes the oldest thing and the newest thing are the same thing*” (Han 2009; my emphasis). In saying this, Han was turning away from older Maoist rhetoric of “smashing tradition” and adhering to the Party line and instead advocating that culture work should center on the strategic use of tradition and individual autonomy as a way of producing desire and achieving urban prestige.

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<sup>29</sup> See the introduction and chapters 3 and 4 for more details regarding this social violence.

A little over a year later, after the 2009 protests, much of this openness regarding the coltishness of Seven City Blocks and the importance of cultivating an understanding of native Uyghur traditions was gone. In an interview whose headline proclaimed “Xinjiang to Achieve Breakthrough Innovation and the Rapid Rise of Cultural Industries” Han explained that it was imperative to use “modern culture as a guide” in combating the “relatively closed mentality” which he said still dominated Xinjiang culture (Han 2011). Elaborating further, he explained how projects initiated by artists and intellectuals at Seven City Blocks could “firmly establish the sense of ‘opening-up’ and innovation, and thereby overcome the strength of tradition and old-fashioned sensibilities” (2011). Following this line of thinking in terms of multiculturalism he emphasized the way Seven City Blocks projects such as an upcoming hip-hop contest would employ an “enhanced awareness of integration and inclusion and absorb the outstanding culture of all ethnic groups in order to narrow the gap and achieve a transformation of the cultural industry” (2011). By Han’s lights, it was time for a transformation of both form and content. But what was the social object under transformation? How did a Xinjiang-specific repertoire of art practices and the objects they produce come into existence?

Although Han Ziyong’s official training was in the Chinese literature of the frontier rather than socialist multiculturalism and the liberalization of economic production, Han, like many culture workers, was in fact debating the goals of these human engineering projects. His vision for Ürümchi was built on a long history of colonial encounters, multicultural impositions, and global capitalism. The legacies of these encounters generated a discursive framework that confronted all cultural workers in the city regardless of their ethnicity. It also framed the rupture of the social landscape that began in Ürümchi in 2009 just as the creative industries district was beginning to take form.

## *Twentieth Century Multiculturalism and Human Engineering in Ürümchi*

The young city of Ürümchi is situated at an old intersection on the trade routes of Central Asia. Located in a high valley between the Mountains of Heaven (Uy: *Tengri Tagh*; Ch: *Tian Shan*) and the Mountains of God (Uy: *Boghda Tagh*; Ch: *Bogada Shan*), it has long been a meeting point for differently identified groups of people. The history of Ürümchi cannot be understood without an understanding of the broader social forces that fell within its orbit and drew its inhabitants to it. Ürümchi is young but the ideas that circulate within it are old. Over two-thirds of the three to four million people who live there came to the city in the last 20 years. The people of Ürümchi come from a Socialist past and from rural ways of life. Some of them consider Xinjiang their homeland and some of them do not; all of them are shaped by particular projects of human engineering that accompanied the arrival of China's modern state form. For example, the logic of socialist multiculturalism – which in the 1950s began the process of placing people within essentialized ethnic ascriptions without a politics of self-determination – introduced impossible desires to be fully part of autonomous ethno-racial collectivities in the political fabric of society. In the space of Ürümchi, these desires occasionally felt as though they had been achieved for those who possessed the relative privilege of Hanness; for those who did not have this privilege, these desires were experienced as an intimacy with violence, and as limited by restrictions on movement and circumscribed religious, cultural and political practice.

Ürümchi has long been organized as a differential space. When Ürümchi, previously a small outpost on one of the northern routes of the “Silk Roads,” finally became what G. W. Skinner (1977) would call a dominant center of both administration and economy in the eighteenth century, the Manchu officials of the Qing Dynasty designed the city as three interlocking walled cities stacked along a south-north axis: Turkic-Muslims in the south, Manchu

administrators in the middle, and Han merchants to the north. Local means of administration were unstable until the 1870s when a major Turkic revolt was followed by the mass killing of Turkic peoples by Qing imperial armies and a resignification of the territory as a province and “New Dominion” (*Xinjiang*) under the imposed administration of the Han general from Hunan Zuo Zongtang (Jacobs 2016). Over the long twentieth century the Han settlements in the north of the city began to expand southward – first through Manchu territory in the center of the city and, over the past few decades, around and into the symbolic spaces and built form of Uyghur settlements at the south end of the city.

This process began with a shift from Manchu imperial control to the more authoritarian and direct rule of Han and Sino-Muslim (Ch: *Hui*) military leaders in the cities of Xinjiang in the 1920s. These new leaders brought with them elements of the “centralized and bureaucratic” form of governance of Eastern China (Esherick 2006: 231),<sup>30</sup> but until 1949, the dominance of Turkic nobility and religious leaders still formed the horizon of political action for the majority of Xinjiang residents. The effective structures of the modern state – characterized by a government which prioritized the well-being of a population as an abstract whole – had yet to take their place. With the simultaneous rise of the Soviet Union and the new Republic of China, Ürümqi became home to White Russian imperialists in exile, Bolshevik evangelists, and for several decades, an important stronghold of the Chinese Nationalist Party (Ch: *Guomindang*) (Jacobs 2016).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Given its bureaucratic institutions, an argument can certainly be made for the presence of a “state effect” in Eastern China during the late Qing, but as Prasenjit Duara (2003) argues, the extent to which this political horizon was folded into the everyday life of common people might not have found its expression until the early years of the Chinese Republic.

<sup>31</sup> As Owen Lattimore (1975) and others have argued, for several decades it was unclear whether Xinjiang would become a Soviet republic or remain a province in the nascent Chinese Republic. With the establishment of a Three-Districts Republic (1944-1949) backed by Turkic, Soviet and Chinese Communists in Northern Xinjiang – the tide was turned toward Xinjiang’s inclusion within the People’s Republic of China as an autonomous region.

Although it is no longer possible to understand to what extent the Chinese state was apprehended and inculcated in the lives of the Turkic Muslims who experienced this space as their homeland, what is clear is that, in 1949, the number of Han settlers in the region was less than five percent of the population. The vast majority of residents were Turkic Muslims engaged in high intensity garden farming, pastoralism and caravan trade. Everyday life for the majority of these people in the south of the region was patterned by access to water, by pilgrimages to the graves of those whose spirits continued to haunt Turkic social life and by the agriculture, tradecraft, and consumption necessary for self-sustaining life projects (Beller-Hann 2008). Yet, as recent histories of China have shown us, the social upheaval of political collapse and national imposition was always accompanied by dramatic changes in knowledge production. These changes directly affected the shape of life in China in general and the atmosphere of Ürümchi in particular.

The local social changes in Xinjiang must be read in relation to the way China's colonial encounter with England, France, Germany, Portugal, Russia, United States and Japan restructured earlier forms of knowledge production and created new social institutions. These institutions shaped Chinese values, cultural norms, and human engineering projects which constrained subjects through the imposition of positive and negative sociopolitical sanctions. As Tong Lam (2011), Gail Hershatter (2011) and others have shown, the contingency and variation of Chinese iterations of these new modernist social institutions and the space they opened up produced new subjectivities and moral regimes and life-worlds. To give us a history of Chinese facticity these scholars amplify the way the "epistemic violence" of the Western European colonial gaze (Lam 2011: 39) triggered an affective atmosphere and emotive response among a diverse array of Chinese subjects in Eastern China. These responses to colonial impositions

structured new forms of dominance of minority subjects on the frontier as well. As European, American and Japanese domination forced China to absorb some of their ideas and institutions, Chinese governments modified their social institutions making them more homogeneous and scientific than was the case in the Qing empire that preceded it. This gave rise to a new human engineering project and new models of self-fashioning for Chinese political subjects.

The rise of the Chinese social science in the first half of the twentieth century was related to a similar rise of machinic and positivist engineering in Europe and the United States. Rather than bringing indigenous mechanisms of knowledge production into the present, new social sciences hailed the timing and spacing of industrial science-oriented knowledge systems; they projected the metonymic knowledge of survey subjects onto populations thought of as discrete wholes. During the early socialist period of the 1950s, categories such as “ethnic nationality” and “peasant” thus smoothed over social complexity as the structure of the multicultural, modernizing nation. By rendering the terrain of the state legible and problematizing areas of “lack” through the narratives of survey data, Lam shows, building on Timothy Mitchell’s (1991) work, that Chinese social science began to provide a mechanism for melding society to the state in a way that provided the illusion of a solid, ontologically secure, entity.<sup>32</sup> By 1958 this ontological form had reshaped what had become Uyghur society itself. Xinjiang’s 5,836 producer cooperatives had been distilled to 562 communes or work units (Millward: 260).<sup>33</sup> The

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<sup>32</sup> The state and the disciplining devices it institutionalized – such as “ethnicity” (*minzu*) and urban or rural authorized “residency” (*hukou*) – were thus given seemingly “natural” forms (Lam 2011: 140–41). The imposed values, institutions, spatial-temporal mechanisms of the Maoist social state resulted in a social poetics that profoundly affected the lives of people in China; it produced a state effect (Hershatter 2011: 68). Arguing in concert with Timothy Mitchell regarding the conduction of epistemic shifts, Hershatter tells us that we should not think of a state as an agent issuing the order of society. Rather, she argues that a “state” is produced by an institutional assemblage and coded hierarchy that hails its subjects with an “apparently metaphysical effect of practices that make such structures appear to exist” (Mitchell 1999: 89 in Hershatter 2002: 48).

<sup>33</sup> Under the early Maoist regime, ethnicity was also circumscribed but seen as epiphenomenal to the real task at hand which was building the nation through class struggle.

engine of Chinese developmental state was directed toward a modernity in which the force of family life was routed through the logic of production toward a passionate engagement with public modern *civitas*. In the rural steppes and oases of Xinjiang, this form of governance was a militarized farming system whose mission was to accelerate the industrialization of the city through the production of basic necessities for the urban proletariat. Unlike in other parts of the country, the population of Xinjiang at this time was almost uniformly thought of as rural. The population of Ürümchi was still less than 200,000.<sup>34</sup>

Over the long duration of its inscription process, “ethnicity” (*minzu*), like the 1958 Household Registration Laws (*hukou*), had the effect of radically *constricting* the life chances of those it identified. As Thomas Mullaney (2011) has pointed out, this process was not unlike similar processes of “multicultural” identity projects in other parts of the world, though socialist rhetoric gave the Chinese process a different form of self-valorization. For Western colonizers, Christianity, capitalism and democracy were “the gifts” they bestowed on those they subjugated. For Chinese colonizers, the gift was socialist “liberation” from indigenous traditions through class struggle and cultural assimilation. Over time Uyghurs were asked to present a form of diversity that valorized the modern state and celebrated Han cultural benevolence. What this meant was that, in contrast to the colonial domination confronted by Chinese intellectuals and their “hyper-colonial” response vis-à-vis the West, socialist multiculturalism was often experienced as a form of imposed political domination and economic exploitation by Chinese minorities. This colonial dispossession resulted in a widespread invention of new cultural

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<sup>34</sup> Despite the spatial and temporal weight of modern state formation, one could argue that it is only with the reshaping of the state in 1978 that the force of its human engineering projects was more fully manifested as a constraint to daily life. As I describe in the next chapter, it was only in the flux of market reform, and the new forms of work and consumption, that minority identity began to strongly determine the life-chances of those it circumscribed.

categories, new ways of measuring cultural difference and similarity. As Han Ziyong, put it in 2009 regarding this history in Xinjiang:

For example, where literature is concerned, before Liberation almost no ethnic minorities in Xinjiang had the novel, journal or prose genres of literature. After the liberation these genres were developed, creating the excellent current momentum of cultural development. You could also say that before the Liberation of Xinjiang, although there was singing and dancing, there were no basic standards for stagecraft in Xinjiang. Before Liberation, there may have been a bit in the Ili-style stage performances, but they were not standardized as a stage art. These standards only appeared after Liberation. And now at the level of the Autonomous Region, Prefecture and County we have three levels of art and culture teams. Coupled with our corps and army, we probably have more than 100 arts organizations including the state's arts organizations.

What Han is demonstrating is that ethnicity in the province was institutionalized at least in part by socialist forms of culture work. In this manner native “socialist culture” was separated from a religion and native knowledge and subsumed by the dictates of the socialist developmental state.

The city formed the center of this segmented cultural production. In the city, culture work was staged for politicians, local leaders and workers. The vanguard presses and theaters were in the city. Following the founding of the Xinjiang People's Press on March 5, 1951, Ürümqi became a central node through which socialist progress in Uyghur and settler life was published and disseminated. Under the leadership of the Xinjiang Provincial Culture and Education Commission, the discourse was staged in publications and performances of ethnic solidarity in socialist struggle. When in 1980 the arts were liberalized for commercial consumption, the overall goals of socialist liberation and inter-ethnic solidarity centered on Han dominated socialist liberation continued to dominate government approved aesthetics. Today the Ürümqi-based Xinjiang Culture Ministry continues to give final approval to all cultural production, though production has been semi-privatized and sources of funding are now much more diverse. When it comes to Uyghur culture work, the public sphere is still quite tightly directed and as the “People's War” intensified, increasingly constrained by the propaganda work of state-imposed



multicultural domination. Nearly all Uyghur culture work must promote “interethnic unity” (Ch: *minzu tuanjie*) and opposition to anti-revolutionary, and now “terrorist,” forces.<sup>35</sup>

In the post-Mao era in Ürümchi, the call for an aesthetics of difference and harmony placed Xinjiang minorities (and often their local Han interlocutors) in the impossible roles of both the theatrical production of cultural diversity and global cosmopolitanism while also developing the impossible desire to wholly inhabit (or deny) the slot they have been allotted: Northwestern Chinese ethnic minorities. When Maoist-era identifications were finally internalized, they became an impediment to successful self-fashioning in the new economy. These older human engineering projects stood in tension with the freedom promised by the creative industries imagined by Han Ziyong. How can a city be cosmopolitan when so much of social life is circumscribed by multicultural domination? For example, if the state says interethnic relations are being experienced as harmonious, that society is stable, and that Ürümchi is becoming a prosperous global city, what does it mean for a culture worker to represent poverty and a new sequence in ethno-racial violence in public?

### *Making Ürümchi a Global City*

Reading through Han Ziyong’s initial vision for the art district in 2009 one is struck by the number of times the concept of “innovation” was raised; it was as if by repeating the term he believed he could will it into existence. As in modernist human engineering projects elsewhere in the nation, his anticipatory plan was intended to hail “new kinds of subjects for economic and political transformation” (Anagnost 2013: 8). Han wanted to carve out a cultural space for the “free” experimentation of creative expression. In 2009, the current in Han’s desire subordinated

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<sup>35</sup> See Timothy Cheek (2015) and Lisa Rofel (2007) for discussions of how a turn from the propaganda state to a directed public sphere was fostered by market liberalization. In Chapter 2 I discuss the way Uyghur culture work is increasingly shaped by the propaganda state as part of the war effort.

official ideas of Chinese multiculturalism to a desire for economic “openness.” Han was already indicating that it was time to move beyond ethnic ideologies that were imposed and internalized in the past and allow culture workers the freedom to experiment with desire production. In his human engineering project, Han was calling artists to train themselves and their repertoire of aesthetic knowledge toward the market. There was an urgency in his call: “Xinjiang is now developing very fast and is in the process of becoming modern. In the midst of such a process, culture is also confronting restructuring, upgrading and innovation issues. I say we should on the one hand develop the economy, while on the other hand seize innovation” (2009). Extending the intensity of his call to harnessing the creative potential of the city, he added: “Cultural innovation does not depend on a couple of experts, nor a couple of intellectuals, it depends on the social environment, on the social soil.” Han was calling the inhabitants of the city to pull together with art producers in inter-subjective awareness of their “positioning in a movement out of backwardness, ignorance and tradition, on the one hand, and toward progress, enlightenment, and civilization on the other” (Anagnost 2013: 9).

As Ann Anagnost (2013) has shown in concert with Benedict Anderson and Pheng Cheah, the calling into existence of a modernity project, such as the one invoked by Han, was a serial, “open-to-the-world plurality” which drew on numerous models that were already in motion. This openness names both a lack that needed to be filled and the desire for desire production itself. The art district, a symbol of the imagined global city as a whole, was imagined to be a space in which all restrictions or blockages to desire could be eliminated. The assemblage of Ürümchi’s art world was “haunted” (Cheah 1999:10; Welland 2007: 61-62) by similar counterposable worlds nested within global urban flows of desire. Planners attempted to incorporate those worlds into the structure of its desire production while at the same time

clearing away the unwanted parts of the city. The violent history of conquest and the paternalism of state imposed “ethnic unity” were undesired in the global city in early 2009. Instead Han wanted Ürümchi to be like London.

Throughout Han’s discussion of Seven City Blocks and the future of Xinjiang culture work, he acknowledged that comparison was the catalyst of desire. He said, “I have said that our cultural enterprise is weaker in Xinjiang than in the Eastern China. If our culture is to develop in the future, we will need to close the gap with the mainland, particularly with the southeast coastal areas. Perhaps it is the disparity of our cultural industries which causes this gap to be so pronounced” (2009). Continuing, he said that the ossification of multiculturalism under the developmental state was at least partially to blame—Xinjiang culture must be opened up to market forces. “At present state-owned cultural institutions are being confronted with the serious issue of how to adapt to the market economy environment,” he said. “In such a case, if the culture industry is developed, it will form a ‘mechanism of inverse force,’ forcing our cultural institutions to adapt to the market economic environment more quickly” (2009). Continuing along this line of thinking he told the interviewer about the disjuncture between his experiences reading Charles Dickens’ nineteenth century tales of capitalist exploitation and his recent experience traveling in London. “Now the skies (in London) are blue,” he said, “Why? Because they no longer have manufacturing industry there; instead the economy is completely dedicated to building brands, to design, to using innovation to support the economy” (2009). In an iteration of a common refrain in Xinjiang human engineering (Cliff 2016a: 86), Han was calling on residents to take ownership of their future, to build and explore their desires through a “complete dedication to building brands, to design” in Xinjiang and thus stimulate a new economy of desire, prestige and “world-class” distinction.

乌鲁木齐最高房价: **8729元/平米**

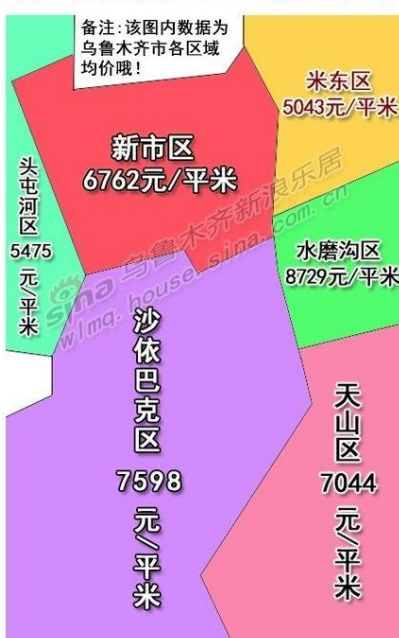


Figure 1.1. The growth rate of housing prices in Ürümchi was ranked second in the nation in 2011 two years after the protests;<sup>36</sup> As this illustration of apartment housing prices in Ürümchi at the zenith of the housing boom demonstrates, the new buildings built in the Shuimogou district around the creative industries collective were the highest priced in the city at 8729 yuan (\$1500) per square meter.

Han was not alone in noting that creative industry brings jobs, wealth and fortune. There was a resonance between Han's rhetoric concerning creativity and the Western neoliberal evangelism of economists and commentators such as Richard Florida (2012) and Thomas Friedman (2005). In fact, workers who engage in cultural ferment, often do bring with them a vibrant atmosphere of desire production. Artists in an urban collectivity can therefore extend and reform discourses of desire such that they produce an affective atmosphere which is itself a commodity (Harvey 2012: 89). The desirability of arts and the art scene itself can thereby be exchanged for collective symbolic capital; the uniqueness of the arts can be exchanged for monopoly rents (see Figure 1.1). By trading in the invention of tradition, the atmosphere of style,

<sup>36</sup> See "China August Home Prices Rise in All Cities, Challenging Government Curbs," Bloomberg News, September 19, 2011, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-09-18/china-august-home-prices-rise-in-all-cities-challenging-government-curbs.html> (accessed on January 10, 2014).

and the theater of desire production (particularly in the age of mass media), creative industries can have significant influence in a society. Ürümqi was turning to a new human engineering project to answer the lingering effects of older ethnic “liberation” projects that had resulted in a process of multicultural domination and resulting widespread Uyghur dispossession on the margins of the nation.<sup>37</sup>

In fact this was precisely what Han was saying when he said that it was time for Ürümqi to learn the lessons of creative industry already taken up by Beijing and Shanghai; it was time for Ürümqi to become a global city. As he put it:

Xinjiang should have a culture of innovation; the first step should be in the city of Ürümqi. I have said, that Ürümqi, seen from Beijing and Shanghai is a frontier city. But if you look west for four or five thousand kilometers Ürümqi is a very big city – *a giant city in the hinterland of Asia*. As such it is fully equipped to be a major source of influence. So, I have said, while it is a border town in our country, it is also the largest city in Central Asia. As such its economic, cultural, social influence should *radiate* throughout its surroundings” (2009; my emphasis).

With radiation on his mind, Han proclaimed Seven City Blocks the guiding light of Chinese Central Asian culture. As a stage for desire it would resolve the effects of the past and the conflicts of the present.

Despite the apparent confidence of this pronouncement of Ürümqi’s arrival on the global stage, each urban assemblage of material, technical, and discursive elements was formed according to different norms of being global, modern, and Chinese (Roy and Ong 2011: 4). It is in social interaction, in what Michael Herzfeld (1997) refers to as the “militant middle ground,” that becoming-in-the-world takes its form. It was through action that the aesthetic repertoires of Ürümqi’s artists demonstrated their potentials. In fact the contradictory implications of past human engineering projects – *hukou* and *minzu* – were what provide the critique of the present

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<sup>37</sup> See the introduction and Chapters 2 and 3 for detailed accounts of this process of dispossession.

project, namely, building a global city. As I will describe in more detail below, after the large-scale protests of 2009, and as new pressures to transform the city into a global node on the New Silk Road took form, some artists in the new arts district began to use their work to critique the urban cleansing projects and imposed multiculturalism itself even though by this time Han was no longer supporting such a “disobedient” effort.

This turn toward critical engagement began in earnest in late 2013 when the Seven City Blocks received over 8,000,000 *yuan* in funding from the state to establish the Xinjiang Contemporary Art Museum. This new surge in investment came in concert with an intensified effort to build Ürümchi into a center of creative industry on the New Silk Road after Xi Jinping announced his new “One Belt, One Road” initiative in 2013.<sup>38</sup> It was around this time the artist collective at Seven City Blocks also hired a young art critic and painter Zeng Qunkai to work as the lead curator of the new museum. Zeng, a Han native of Hubei, who had recently graduated from the Xinjiang Arts Institute with a degree in fine arts, was hired to curate exhibitions, edit exhibition catalogues and work as an art broker in studio spaces of the center. He quickly became a leading figure in the scene after he published an authoritative survey of the Xinjiang contemporary art scene in 2014. Unlike Han Ziyong, a Han man in his 60s who operated for decades from a position of power in the Xinjiang Cultural Ministry bureaucracy, Zeng, a thin young man in his late-20s, who had come to Xinjiang just several years before, quite clearly identified with the precarious position of struggling Xinjiang artists and the disorienting effects

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<sup>38</sup> This initiative sought to link the cities of China and Central Asia via the construction of a new web of infrastructure and commerce. China was planning or constructing high-speed and freight rail lines, oil and natural gas lines as well as urban development projects and aeronautics infrastructure in and around a number of cities throughout Central Asia. The rise of Chinese economic investment and political power in Central Asia was met with a mixture of optimism and fear, as large numbers of Han settlers moved to places like Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan changing the political economy of the nation. Art initiatives, such as the one described in this essay, were part of an effort to exert what is often referred to as “soft power” along this larger regional development push. By moving Central Asian cultural production into the Chinese discursive orbit, artists were, in some cases, shifting their gaze away from Russia and the West toward the Chinese art world.

of mass migration and rapid economic development. To him, the sort of perspective Han Ziyong had posited in earlier years, in which art in Ürümchi was indexed against that of other cities was interesting, but a bit reductive and out of touch with the realities of social violence that Zeng had experienced during his time in the city. Both Han and Zeng came from Eastern China to Xinjiang as adults, but they entered the Xinjiang culture industry from different positions and periods of time; Han in the 1980s and Zeng around 2010. Although they were both Han artists in positions of power in a scene that was and remains dominated by Han artists, their outlook on the future of the art scene was different in nuanced ways. In a 2014 interview Zeng told me:

You can look at the art district we have here in the same way that each city needs to have a Starbucks, McDonalds or a Carrefour. It is about the brand and not being perceived as lacking. Actually here in Xinjiang we don't lack wealthy people, it's just about their cultural level, their cultural "quality" (Ch: *suzhi*), they still haven't developed a taste for art.<sup>39</sup> In more developed cities in the East (of China) they already know how important it is. The first problem in the Xinjiang art scene is that there is not enough real art appreciation. The second problem is that there is not enough art discussion and criticism. At Seven City Blocks 60 percent of the artists are just producing "commercial art" (Ch: *meishu*) the other 40 percent are actually producing "art" (Ch: *yishu*) (2014b).

Yet despite the relative underdevelopment of the scene and the continued role of commercial art (Ch: *meishu*) that trafficked in the tropes of Xinjiang desert landscapes and exotic minorities performing their permitted socialist ethnicity, Zeng argued that there really was something to the "Silk Road" aesthetic style that officials like Han Ziyong championed. He argued that since almost everyone in the city came from elsewhere and because Uyghur artists influenced Han artists to look to places like Russia, Iran, Turkey and Middle East for inspiration, there was an ethos of fusion in the Xinjiang arts. The contradictions inherent in the "rural" and "ethnic" identification projects of migrants in the city, resulted in a particular aesthetic

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<sup>39</sup> Although some Han and Uyghur artists were able to find wealthy patrons who displayed their work in private collections, in general the primary buyers of Xinjiang art are restaurants and hotels who displayed the work as part of their interior decorating design. See Byler 2015b for a description of this aspect of the art world.

sensibility. Like many other artists, both Uyghur and Han, he said that if he had to describe the dominant artistic style in Xinjiang in a single word he would describe it as a form of “hybridity” (Ch: *hunhe*).<sup>40</sup> He said: “It is so easy to understand and appreciate foreign cultures here in Xinjiang – we see them all around us” (2014b). Given the recent influx of money and publicity around the contemporary art institutions he felt that, though the art scene was still nascent, it had a bright future.

He said that from his perspective the biggest problem in the scene was not political censorship, but in getting Xinjiang artists to embrace their unique positionality and produce original work. Of course he failed to note that Uyghur artists were largely excluded from the space. He said the *hunhe* principle that dominated the Xinjiang ethos was what would allow it to take on the New Silk Road imaginary that leaders like Han Ziyong and Xi Jinping envisioned. In doing so, Xinjiang artists had the potential to use their marginal location in the world as a resource and produce an aesthetic of rapid social change on the frontier. Zeng argued:

Actually most of the art in China these days is just really unexceptional – that’s a problem with our artists here (in Xinjiang) as well. Many of the artists here (in Xinjiang) are producing really mediocre work. If you look at the art they are producing around 30 percent is influenced by Western art, the rest is influenced by Chinese art traditions. *Ninety percent* of us are local (to Xinjiang), and 50 percent of us were trained at formal art schools. In China an (Han) artist’s instinct is to “preserve” (Ch: *baocun*). We have so much pressure so we give in to this conservative impulse. But in Xinjiang more generally the impulse is *hunhe*, so that is why I am optimistic about the future of Xinjiang art. Actually it is *wide open*! (2014b; my emphasis)

But what appeared to be a “wide open” future of endless desire for a young Han settler artist, was not what a Uyghur artist saw when observing the way contemporary human engineering projects were affecting Uyghur society. In this statement Zeng was conflating his position and the positions of the “ninety percent local” Han artists with that of minority culture workers –

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<sup>40</sup> In the Chinese this term *hunhe* (混合) describes a mixing or blending.



implying that Han people who claimed a local identity had equal or greater authority as those whose entire knowledge system is centered on the Uyghur homeland. For him, “local” (Ch: *bendi*) means “someone who identifies as a Xinjiang person,” but for Uyghurs, the term for “local” also meant “native” (Uy: *yerliq*). For Uyghurs this term could only be applied to Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Khirgiz or Mongols who could claim this land as their ancestral homeland. Everyone else was not truly “native.” The type of misrecognition that Zeng perpetrated exemplified some of the ways in which cultural production that appeared to be an antidote to structural violence could be seen as part of older colonial processes of multicultural domination and elision. For Han artists, the atmosphere of hybridity and openness that they felt in the Xinjiang art district was often a misrecognition of the processes of dispossession they were enacting by assuming a position of authority as Ürümchi artists.

Many of the Han artists I interviewed noted the freedom and opportunity that seemed wide open to them in the art district. One of them told me:

I think Xinjiang is “the greatest place” (Ch: *zui bang de di fang*) in China. Everyone is so open here. They all come from different places so they are used to difference. You can be anything you want in Xinjiang. It is much different from Anhui. In Anhui everyone is from the same place and everyone knows each other. There are a lot fewer opportunities in Anhui (2015).

Many of the artists embraced a kind of rugged individualism that came from the way the frontier living of settler pioneers was perceived by other Han. At the same time, while they enjoyed this achieved status, they also self-valorized the legacy of Chinese socialist multiculturalism. They were happy to claim both the legacy of socialist liberation which had “freed” both Han and non-Han Chinese citizens from the oppression or “backwardness” (Ch: *luohou*) of pre-socialist societies and their reputation as fearless patriots on the Chinese frontier. Opportunities to fashion

themselves as autonomous, patriotic subjects seemed heightened in Ürümchi. As another Han artist told me:

A lot of people in other parts of China are afraid of Han people from Xinjiang. They think we are really capable people, because we have started new lives for ourselves out here. But society is not as advanced here as it is in Shanghai. Still, though, our philosophy is peace and stability, so we never go to war. *In the U.S. you have problems with war and racism. We don't have that sort of history here.* We like American music and movies, but we want to have our own political and philosophical system (2015; my emphasis).

This ability to pick and choose aspects of whatever identity one desired was part of what made Han artists in the district feel a sense of contemporaneity. They were happy to claim an obvious moral superiority when it came to American racism. As heirs to a socialist project they often felt it was impossible for them to participate in racialization. Yet they still felt they could learn from American culture and work to transform Ürümchi into a global city like Shanghai.

The contradiction in this framing was obvious to Uyghur culture workers. The form of self-fashioning that Han culture workers had was not available to them. As one Uyghur artist told me with regard to Han artists who worked in the district: “I don’t know why they think they can pass themselves off as authorities on minority society. They don’t even speak minority languages. I would never be regarded by (Han artists) as an expert on Han society and I speak Chinese really well.” Uyghur artists could not shed their identities or embrace the narrative of China’s harmonious society, lack of racism, and social violence. For them the space of the art district was experienced quite differently. Contemporary art allowed them to place their own deep history in conversation with Western and Islamic contemporary expressions. Given the intervening presence of Han Ziyong’s Culture Ministry, it did not allow them to articulate antiracism or directly criticize the social violence that was disproportionately felt by minority

culture workers, but it did allow them a space in which to refuse to give up on their nativeness and authority to represent themselves.

Take for example the work of the Uyghur artist Ali K., a middle-aged former painter who had turned to conceptual photography in the mid-2000s. In 2014 his work focused on the dreams of Uyghur children and how they were shifting under global capitalism. Although it was clearly focused on Uyghur subjects—the students at the middle school where he taught—the theme of his work was a commentary on the contemporary world and the endless commodification of everything in the modern city. Even naan, a staple of the Uyghur diet for over 1000 years, was now being commodified and sold on-line (See Figure 1.2). In a series of images that focused on young Uyghurs holding naan that he had spray-painted silver, Ali K. demonstrated his ambivalence regarding the marketization of Uyghur heritage products and the freedom and mixing that was inherent in that new mode of production. The way he mixed native heritage with contemporary art framings highlighted not just a loss of intimacy with food, but, as I demonstrate in the final chapter of this project, a devaluation of Uyghur traditional knowledge and life projects. He was also commenting on the widespread subtraction of master-apprentice modes of social reproduction and knowledge transfer in the city.



*Figure 1.2: Ali K. Naan, 35 x 50cm, 2015. Courtesy of the Artist*

To many Uyghurs, everything about Ali K. appeared to be “hybrid” (Ch: *hunhe*), or, as they would say in Uyghur, *arilash*.<sup>41</sup> His name itself was a pseudonym that he developed through long exposure to Mandarin medium education. Ali K. can be rendered in three characters (*Ali • Ke*) which can be easily pronounced by Mandarin speakers. He said that prior to a visit to Beijing in 2009 he really had little vision for his current work. He had been painting Uyghur vernacular cityscapes; portraying the timelessness of Uyghur culture for commercial buyers. After his exposure to contemporary art in Beijing he had found a way to express his concern with the elimination of Uyghur knowledge systems and the effects of global capitalism. He began to notice all of the changes to his way of life that resulted from the effects of capitalist development on Uyghur lifeways. In addition to his project on the commodification of Uyghur staple foods, he had begun another project in which large grayscale photographs of garbage were combined with painted color images of animals that were no longer alive in Xinjiang. The point here was a haunting of the present grayness of the built environment with the color of the absent past. They provided a commentary of the stratifying networks of material processes that accompany capitalist economies of control. The trash was the refuse of this system.

Ali K.’s greatest inspiration outside of Uyghur modes of representation came from Iranian urban cinema and art. He said that, like Iranian auteurs such as Abbas Kiarostami and conceptual artists such as Shirin Neshat, he was not trying to advocate a “return” to an essentialized ethnic past. Instead he was trying to portray something about the contemporary human condition. He said:

I’m trying to represent broader forces in the world. For example with my ‘fake naan’ project I’m trying to show how the way we produce and consume things is changing and how things we took for granted in the past are being lost. In my project on death and

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<sup>41</sup> As in the Chinese term *hunhe* this Uyghur term *arilash* (ئارىلاش) conveys the feeling of “mixing” or “blending,” but there is a stronger emphasis on the newness of form that arises through hybridity. When Uyghurs use this word they mean something closer to “fusion” or “melding.”

pollution I am showing the dark side of economic development. By trying to make a place better we are killing it. These are broad scales of things that are not specific to Xinjiang and Uyghurs at all.

Yet, although he most identified with the position of Iranian artists and intellectuals as an outward facing secular Muslim, in terms of aesthetic technique he was most influenced by American painters. He noted:

My background itself was in painting. So when I look at the work of David Hockney or Jasper Johns I see something that I am trying to produce on film. But, like I said, I'm also influenced by Iranian artists and filmmakers. They are doing things that are not specific to Islam or ethnicity, but actually a commentary on our current conditions. That is what I want to do too.

He said that he came to this transnational identification through the estrangement he felt when he visited Beijing for a year in 2009. He said that it was during this trip that he came to realize how deeply socialist multiculturalism had influenced his culture work. Because he was Uyghur he had felt compelled to always attempt to represent his Uyghurness for the gaze of the viewer. As an art student he had been trained to paint things that Uyghurs were encouraged and permitted to paint by Culture Ministry supervisors. He was asked to frame Uyghurs as exotic and distinct, but also always as happy and liberated socialist subjects.

That was the first time I really came to terms with myself. Before that I was just kind of unthinkingly painting Xinjiang landscapes and old street scenes. When I went there I really started thinking about where I fit into the world. Was I really a Uyghur? Did I see myself represented in what we considered Uyghur art? Not really. After this I started to really set out on my own and try to find my own voice. Something about being alienated and alone in the city, is what set me off. I also started to see other kinds of art such as Indian art in an entirely new way. Actually before then, I hadn't really noticed it. But suddenly I saw in Indian traditional arts a strong tradition that I could really identify with, or transpose into my own experience. That and Iranian art really spoke to me in a deep way.

What Ali K. was describing was a common experience for many of the Uyghur contemporary artists and writers I interviewed. When Internet technology reached Ürümchi in the 2000s many of them discovered Iranian, Turkish and Indian art and literature and began to translate what they

saw into a Uyghur aesthetic by drawing on the deep history of the Silk Road region. Doing so allowed them a way to refuse the legacy of multicultural domination that asked them to represent and preform their ethnicity in permitted ways in order to valorize the inclusivity of the late-socialist nation while at the same time steering clear of unauthorized forms of piety or ethnic nationalism. Now they were carving out a space that they claim for themselves as native to the Silk Road and as prior to the Chinese state without challenging the state directly. As one of the leading theorists of hybridity James Clifford has argued, hybridity is often “a pragmatic response, making the best of given (often bad) situations” (1998: 366). This being the case, the cultural inventiveness that Uyghur artists claimed was the product of historical and geographical contingencies that have rendered them marginal for centuries. The new artworld thus gave Uyghur artists a space for amplifying the visions of people not usually noticed. It did not however allow them to freely “mix” (Uy: *arilash*) their identities or speak openly about their experiences of colonization. It did not give them a space to examine the processes of dispossession that had pulled them into the city from the rural Uyghur countryside in the first place. Nor did it give them a way of pushing back against the intensification of policing, urban cleansing and disappearances that began after the mass protests of 2009 and further intensified with the implementation of the “People’s War on Terror” in 2014. This lack of Uyghur artist autonomy combined with a lack of self-awareness on the part of Han artists and the fear of reprisals from the state played a strong role in the mixed results of the critique urban cleansing projects that was carried out by Han artists.

### *Black and White Marginality*

On July 5, 2009, Uyghur university students took to the streets of Ürümchi demanding justice as Uyghur-Chinese citizens for the mob-instigated killing of two state-sponsored Uyghur

flex-workers and the wounding of sixty at a factory in Eastern China. This protest, subsequent riots and mass detentions or *subtractions* (which I describe in further detail in the chapters that follow) were immediately associated with the Uyghur migrant population that lived on the margins of the city in informal settlements. By claiming a politics-for-themselves, first as citizens and then as violent protesters, they presented themselves as deviant from the rule of multicultural domination. They were read as deviant from the discipline of this socialist state and therefore they could be targeted for what had happened in the city. In the years that followed, this protest would be officially framed as a mass terrorist event. Beginning in 2010, as the creative industries district began to take form, a number of urban cleansing policies were set in motion.<sup>42</sup>

In a final erasure of the legacy of Qing Dynasty recognitions of difference built into the differential settlement of the city, in 2010 the state began to force an integration of Han settlers in Uyghur sections on the south edge of the city and instituted a number of measures to move Uyghurs out of the city or into new isolated development zones. Many Uyghurs in the neighborhood of the Seven City Blocks art district were forced to leave. As with the global city development project more generally, there was a “spectral politics” at work in the implementation of a global “counter-terror” governance project in contemporary Ürümqi (Appaduri 2001: 26). These specters or hauntings were multiple—moving from different locations across time and space. From the Qing Dynasty, a legacy of built form and social arrangement animated the cityscape; from the Maoist past, the lived experience of ethnic and rural ascription haunted the city; from across the country and globe the specter of “global” cities

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<sup>42</sup> As I describe in the introduction and subsequent chapters urban cleansing was taken up in a number of different ways ranging from the demolition of Uyghur settlements, the implementation of passbook systems, checkpoint systems, home inspections and mass detentions all of which are discussed throughout this study.



– London, Beijing, New York – and their positioning in the “global war on terror” formed a mirage on the horizon. Beneath these atmospheres of aspiration, desire, and now fear, culture workers, both Han and Uyghur, attempted to articulate a place yet to come. As an answer to the impasse of the contradictory projects, the city offered a space to be “disobedient” – the art district of Seven City Blocks. The impulse to build a global city through the arts opened up a space for critique of the very process of urban cleansing and state violence. Yet at the same time, it also extended to Han artists the authority to be the arbiters of Xinjiang history and Ürümqi’s imagined future.

Writing in 2015, the art critic Zeng Qunkai described the way an emerging group of Han artists from Xinjiang were reclaiming their identities as Han on the frontier of the nation. He wrote that for them, “the contemporary urban culture had become something that an entire generation had grown up with” (2015a). This meant that, to these Han artists, the allure of “Uyghur girls, the old streets of Kashgar, desert poplars, and ancient sites in the wilderness had no meaning” (2015a). He wrote that those old symbols of Xinjiang’s permitted exotic otherness had “little bearing on the landscape and desires of their individual lives.... Instead the personal cultural experience of this generation is made up of the *cruelty* of urban youth life” (2015a; my emphasis). This emerging mode of representation of capitalist cruelty could be seen in many places in the scene, but no single artist and project demonstrated this more than the photographer Tian Lin and his “Yamaliq” (*Yamalike*) series discussed in Chapter 4.

Tian Lin’s black and white photography project documented the lives of tens of thousands of Uyghur migrants and their children as they struggled to make ends meet in the informal housing settlements in the Yamaliq hills that surrounded the Ürümqi train station (see Figure 1.3). Following 2009, he documented the way these Uyghur migrants lost their homes and

were forced to leave the city. Tian Lin, who grew up in rural Xinjiang on the same state-run military farm (Ch: *bingtuan*) system as Party Secretary Han Ziyong, began documenting the lives of Uyghur migrants in 2004 after failing to open his own commercial photography business. Over the years since he began his project, Tian Lin became a major figure in the art community. He trained dozens of young photographers and cultivated an emerging passion for “on the spot” (Ch: *xianchang*) representations of Xinjiang realities among local Han artists.



*Figure 1.3. Tian Lin Untitled, 41 x 51cm, 2010. Courtesy of the artist*

The ethos of Tian Lin’s project was very much inspired by recent Chinese cinema and documentary film and photography in other parts of the nation (Byler 2016), but unlike most other visual projects, it created a different awareness of ethno-racial difference. By developing an art practice as a way of living with conscious awareness of radical ethnic differences, Tian

Lin was attempting to reimagine how Han and Uyghurs might live together. He was trying to expose the costs of colonization in the lives of dispossessed Uyghurs.

In his assessment of Tian Lin's photography, Zeng described the project as follows:

Not only does it reveal the barrenness of the natural world, but it also raises questions about the general condition of China's urban change. For example, it draws our attention to the gap between the poor and the rich, the failures of regional development, the forms of the "blind wanderer" (Ch: *liumang*) population and so on. Moreover, they are an examination of an ethnic group whose ancient trade patterns has brought them to the contemporary life of the city (2015a).

In Zeng's thinking, Tian Lin's project and the documentary movement that it inspired were a way of coming to terms with the alienating effect of life in a city of strangers. He felt that the grayness of these black and white depictions of precarious life and the failures of social infrastructures to care for the lives of the people building the New Silk Road did more than simply document the fragility of migrant life—it spoke to the feeling and experience of terror capitalism. In an interview he told me:

Showing (life) is what makes this work become not just as a representation, but an expression of feeling. I also feel this way (about my own work). I want to take a simple scene or figure and use it to express feeling. That is why I like black and white too because ... it fits my mood (2014b).

Zeng himself came to Xinjiang from Hunan as a young college student. As with other Han artists in Xinjiang, making that journey with hundreds of thousands of other Han settlers had a major impact on him. It was the first time he found himself surrounded by strangers and confronted with ethnic difference. He told me:

The first semester I came to Xinjiang I was walking in front of the Arts Institute going to dinner at a Uyghur restaurant when two Uyghur guys held us up at knifepoint. We had to run in order to escape with our lives. It was the middle of the day, but no one stopped to help us. This incident left a big impression on me – especially how no one helped us. Since then my art is often centered on that theme: the grayness and the way no one helps another – or the way friendships can transform an extreme situation (2014b).

This experience manifested itself both in Zeng's painting (see Figure 1.4) and in the direction he took as a curator in the museum. Over the years he has painted a series of black and white cityscapes and figurative paintings that depict the feelings of alienation and fear that he felt as a young student. To Zeng, Tian Lin and many other Han artists, the feeling, or affect, of marginality and insecurity is a common experience in the city. After the mass protests and riots of 2009, many of them witnessed violence first hand. At times the problems confronting Uyghur society seemed insurmountable.



*Figure 1.4. Zeng Qunkai, Bus #1, Oil paint on canvas, 100 x 80cm, 2009. Courtesy of the artist.*

Working in concert with Tian Lin, Ali K.—the only invited Uyghur artist—and a number of other young Han and Hui artists, Zeng mounted a group photography exhibition of what he termed “Black and White Marginality” as one of the first shows of the new Xinjiang Contemporary Art Museum in 2014.<sup>43</sup> The exhibition titled “Xinjiang Time” (Ch: *Xinjiang shijian*),<sup>44</sup> evoked the feelings of temporal and spatial displacement that are felt by many Han and Uyghur migrants on the margins of the city. Despite the heaviness of the theme, the exhibition also highlighted the unique opportunities that life among strangers affords. Since migrants to the city bring with them a diversity of histories, the possibilities to learn and grow are endless. In the catalogue for the exhibition, Zeng noted that Xinjiang and the Silk Road have been the site of temporal and spatial displacement for centuries, and that the emerging social changes that are confronting migrants in Xinjiang offer an entrée into new forms of hybridity (2014a). The emergence of ‘Black and White Marginality’ as a theme in recent contemporary art in Xinjiang can thus be read as a sign of a coming to terms with difference and displacement. For Zeng it was a way of tuning in to emerging forms of life at the margins of the nation, but because of the positioning of the artists in the scene it also resulted in a silencing of Uyghur voices – a process that accelerated as the People’s War on Terror was set in motion.

#### *Multicultural Domination in the Art District*

For all of the possibility of the creative industries project to undermine and problematize the human engineering of the Chinese state, there was still an unrecognized power differential at

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<sup>43</sup> No other Uyghur artists were included in this first early show. But as I describe elsewhere (Byler 2017b), Zeng did facilitate a Uyghur artist group exhibition in 2015. This show was the only time when Uyghur artists were able to use the space. Since that time a number of the Uyghur artists who contributed work to the show have been detained and sent to reeducation camps. The keynote speaker at that opening, Yalqun Rozi, was convicted of “ethnic separatism” and given a 12-year prison sentence in 2017.

<sup>44</sup> This title was a reference to the way people native to the region use “local” time which is two hours behind Beijing standard time. Using this time was outlawed as a sign of ethnic separatism in 2017.

play. In general, only Han contemporary artists were granted the authority to critique the state from this space.<sup>45</sup> Uyghur artists were silenced both by the political restrictions of the state and by the paternalism of Han culture workers. Often Han culture workers saw themselves as sympathetic to the structural problems confronting Uyghurs, but they also saw themselves as the arbiters of Uyghur futures. As one Han artist told me about his assessment of Uyghur society:

I love learning Uyghur. If you learn a language you will find out a lot about a culture. For instance, I have really started to feel as though Uyghurs are a people without a history of their own. Everything seems to come from somewhere else: from Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Mongolia or Russia. I don't think this is just an education problem. I think it is a religious problem. Uyghurs were Buddhists before, but now it is impossible for them to talk about that. So all of that history has become very mysterious. Recently the outside influences have become even stronger, so the mystery is growing deeper.

The way this artist understood that Uyghurs had been positioned as a people without history is a key to understanding the problems inherent in the Chinese multiculturalism project. But his assessment of what needs to happen next is also deeply problematic. “Returning” to the Buddhism Uyghurs practiced prior to the arrival of Islam in the ninth century is in effect an erasure of over a millennium of local knowledge and traditions. It also does not acknowledge the role of the Chinese state in attempting to eliminate Uyghur historical consciousness through the imposition of socialist multiculturalism. Instead, the Uyghur lack of history is attributed to the weakness and assumed “backwardness” (Ch: *luohou*) of Uyghur cultural institutions.

Another phrase that many Han artists repeated to me regarding Uyghur artists was “they are not open-minded” (Ch: *tamen bu kaifang*). By this they meant that Uyghur artists were not “open” to the same desires that they possessed. Not only did they not seem open to desire for the sake of desire, the logic of the market, Uyghur artists were also seen as unopen to Han cultural

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<sup>45</sup> As I show in chapters two, three and six, it is primarily in Uyghur language film, literature, poetry that Uyghurs are able to represent their lived experience; all other forms of media are either too politicized, limited by institutional restraints of galleries and museums, or by the paternalism of Han culture workers.

norms when it came to presenting their work or collaborating with Han artists. Uyghur artists were seen as open only to Western and Islamic desires. Of course the Han artists I interviewed failed to acknowledge that they themselves were not open to Uyghur cultural norms or using Uyghur as the primary language of exchange. In fact, less than five percent of the dozens of Han artists I interviewed had knowledge of Uyghur language or expressed an interest in learning Uyghur; while one hundred percent of the dozens of Uyghur artists I interviewed had at least a working knowledge of Chinese.

Many of the Han artists I interviewed felt as though the problems that confronted Uyghurs were not the result of bad policies or structures of power, but simply a result of misapplication of the policies and corruption in the management of the system. They saw themselves in the position of victims of this corruption as well. For instance, Zeng Qunkai told me:

You could say that the contemporary art scene is getting better and better here in Xinjiang. But mostly it is just that the local leaders in the government (and culture ministry) are getting fatter and fatter while we are getting skinnier and skinnier. The only reason the art scene is growing here is because we are working hard at it. There is no real support from the government. I know that artists' lives everywhere in the world are tough, but here it is extremely hard to get anything done. We have to do it all ourselves. Those of us who do succeed always move straight to Beijing. Just from that you can tell what the situation is really like here when it comes to art.

To Zeng it appeared as the nascence of the Ürümchi scene combined with corruption and political restrictions all made artists less likely to stay. Yet, at the same time, another Han artist told me that the problem in art development was not due to political restrictions, but in the quality of the art itself. She said:

Some people say that it is hard to be involved in art in Xinjiang because everything is centered around “interethnic unity” and national development, but I think this policy is right. One of the roles of art is to guide the thinking of the people. When people say they think all the “ethnic unity” art is fake, they are also right. But the answer is not to not have “interethnic unity” art. It just needs to be done with humor and realistic narratives. It

can't always end with a simple happy ending. It needs to be more complicated than that. This is a real challenge for artists.

Many of the artists said that when they first came to Ürümchi they had many stereotypes about Uyghurs and the violence of the city. Over time though they thought they had overcome them, but even as they discussed this, they still often blamed Uyghurs for not being “open” and receptive to Han cultural norms. Many of them accused Uyghurs of being “racist” toward Han people – ignoring the obvious privileges they enjoyed as Han citizens in the metropole of the contemporary colonial frontier. As a male Han artist told me:

When I first came to Xinjiang I had a lot of stereotypes about the area. I thought it was all desert and that the population was really small and backward. Actually when I got here I felt like the population in the city was not that small. The city itself is a lot like other cities in China. The main difference is the way the people are from so many other places and of course the minorities. Xinjiang people are very direct. At first I found this unnerving but now I really have come to like it. I'll miss that part of it when I am gone. I have a couple of minority friends. But in general I find Uyghur men to be a bit intimidating. They are so tall and strong, they look like foreigners.

In fact, for many—if not most—Han artists in the art district the concerns that confronted Uyghurs were only an occasional concern. This is what made Tian Lin's work so unique, but in the eyes of some perhaps too limited. As one of Tian Lin's fellow Han artists told me:

I like Tian Lin's work, but I think that he needs to *open up* a little. Ever since the Uyghur informal settlements were torn down he hasn't been producing new work. If there is no “slums” it is as though he doesn't want to work. Maybe he is afraid of starting a new project. In any case his pictures are really good, they give us a very good sense of what life is really like now here in the city (my emphasis).

This comment regarding Tian Lin's work implies that Tian Lin was seen as not “open” to desire for the sake of desire or art for the sake of art. Instead Tian Lin felt as though his art should produce critique. This was evidence that some Han artists did treat Uyghurs as carriers of knowledge and their problems as things which should concern them. However, it also implies that many were not deeply invested in addressing them. Instead they were more concerned with



the positioning of the Ürümchi art scene in comparison to arts production in other Chinese cities. As one young filmmaker told me: “I suppose if I made a film about Xinjiang I could do it with a Uyghur friend. She could explain what is important about certain things and help me to understand the situation. But it is hard to make anything interesting here.” Even in the relative freedom of the art district, many Han artists did not choose to resist the dominant narratives of multicultural domination that were fostered by the state. Instead they longed for greater recognition within the Chinese cultural milieu. Most of them did not see the way their Uyghur counterparts were being dispossessed by the developmental state in the Uyghur homeland, by urban cleansing projects in the city, and by the implementation of the “People’s War on Terror.” Like most urban citizens of the world, they stayed in their own lane and did not recognize their own role in these processes.

### *Conclusions*

To summarize, the dream of building a space for desire to grow and be produced in Ürümchi by investing in the Xinjiang contemporary arts had unintended consequences. Although the new museum and art complex was successful in revitalizing Xinjiang contemporary arts, they did not result strictly in a championing of New Silk Road capitalism as state leaders such as Han Ziyong imagined. Instead, Han artists have used the space to give new vitality to their own artistic impulses: primarily for building greater prestige for themselves as contemporary Chinese artists and at times documenting what was happening on the margins of the emerging global city. For Uyghur artists it occasionally allowed them a space for self-representation, but because of the dominance of state directed multiculturalism it did not allow them to present an anti-racist or decolonial politics in a direct manner. Increasingly Uyghur visual artists drew on inspiration from Iran, India and the West to reassert their authority in the greater Chinese cultural scene. For

Han artists the new museum became a platform through which they attempted to highlight the “Black and White Marginality” of migrant life in the city, but often as a way of demonstrating their benevolence as Chinese citizens and arbiters of Uyghur futures. As Zeng noted, since the founding of the art district in 2009 the number of art exhibitions in the city has dramatically increased (2015a). Over the following seven years there were a total of 69 art exhibitions by Xinjiang artists. Out of these exhibitions *less than ten* have featured the work of Uyghur artists. If the work of Uyghurs was featured, it was always in the context of a multiethnic group show. Clearly, state investment has done much to revitalize the contemporary art scene in Northwest China. Yet, in general it extended Han authority and further subtracted Uyghur knowledge from this staging of desire production.

Thinking more broadly, the example of the arts district and its role in imagining a global city offers a way of understanding how current human engineering projects centered on unconstrained desire production are articulated to older human engineering projects: socialist development and multiculturalism. As the widespread dispossession of Uyghurs in the rural south of the region proceeded throughout the 1990s and 2000s, cultural capital production and technology development emerged as an apparent antidote to imposed precariousness. For Uyghur culture workers, the new freedom around arts and literature production offered a way for them to represent their lives and imagine a better future, but, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter, these forms of representation were also used as evidence of their political loyalty or their lack of patriotic multiculturalism as the “People’s War on Terror” was intensified. Turning to creative expression as a means of dealing with dispossession often had the unintended effect of intensifying Uyghur dispossession and accelerating the elimination of certain aspects of Uyghur sociality.

## Chapter 2:

### Dispossession, Aesthetics and Self-Fashioning Among Young Uyghur Migrant Men



*Figure 2.1. Mahmud's father sits next to the TV while we wait for the police.*

Mahmud's home village was a long way from the city. It was 68 kilometers of bumpy roads away from a county-level town in Southern Xinjiang. When I arrived there in on a winter day in early 2015 there were a few people on the road waiting for us. The news of the arrival of a foreigner must have filtered out. Mahmud, a young video advertisement producer who I had met in Ürümchi, had assured me that there would be no problems with me visiting his family and staying the night. I had warned him many times that this would probably not be the case, but he convinced me to give it a try, saying his village was only 30 minutes from the big town where there were hotels that accepted foreigners. In reality, the town was more like three hours away. Of course, Mahmud's family had no car of their own so getting anywhere would require a lot of work if it came to that. After we ate a chicken that they had purchased especially for my visit on

the way to their home, Mahmud's father suddenly received a call informing him that the police were coming to question all of us.

I had just handed Mahmud my papers, when a group of Uyghur men – two men in police uniforms and half-a-dozen local farmers who carried clubs as security volunteers – burst into the two bedroom house. I watched the faces of my hosts grow tight as they saw them come through the door. When they came into the room all of us stood. We shook hands and said our “salams” clasp<sup>46</sup>ing our hearts. Then we all became absolutely quiet. Mahmud's dad explained that I was Mahmud's friend from the university and that I was just planning to spend the night before going on to Kashgar. It seemed as though most of the volunteer militia just wanted to see what a foreigner looked like. The two police officers in uniform seemed more serious. One of them had a flashlight. The other had a lap-top computer. The one with the flashlight asked a few questions. Speaking with me in Uyghur he asked if I had a phone. I said yes. He then asked to look at my phone. Perhaps because it was all in English he couldn't really figure out where the pictures might be. He looked at my contacts and opened a few apps. After a minute or two, he gave it back. Everyone filed out. In the courtyard, the lead Uyghur officer called his supervisor. On the phone he spoke in Chinese.

After they left, Mahmud's forehead was beaded with sweat. His friends sat in silence on the raised platform (Uy: *supa*) where the family spent much of their time when in the house. It was where they ate and slept. The TV flickered in the background. Xinjiang Television Channel One was reporting on how industrial farming was making the lives of Uyghur consumers better in the city. No one said a word. Mahmud's nine-year-old sister came over and asked if I was scared. She said she was scared. I said everything was fine and that it was not really a problem.

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<sup>46</sup> This practice of greeting each other with the common Islamic greeting Assalam“peace be unto you” (Uy: *assalam alaykum*) was outlawed as a sign of “religious extremism” in 2017.

But she could tell from the way we seemed frozen in place that things were not fine. A few minutes later the police came back, armed with a digital camera. They took pictures of my passport; they said they would contact the security administrators of the county again and let us know if we would be taken to the police station. Now all of us were really anxious. I smiled at Mahmud's sister, but my stomach was knotted in fear. Mahmud began to quickly pack his clothes in case we would have to take an emergency trip to town. One of his neighbors, who was sitting quietly now along the back of the platform asked to look through the pictures on my phone. He flipped through them quickly looking for anything that would raise a concern. He told Mahmud that if he was interrogated that he should tell them that he had met me through his work. "Tell them that you don't know anything about him and what he was doing in Xinjiang." He asked me if I had been staying in registered hotels, and if my passport and visa were all in order. I assured him that everything was fine. I apologized to Mahmud's family for bringing them trouble. They apologized to me for being powerless to stop this from happening.

We sat and watched TV on the sleeping platform next to the kitchen waiting for the police to call. We switched the channel and watched Chinese Central Television news anchors talk in Chinese about a union strike in France. They said France was very chaotic. Mahmud's parents, who had dropped out of school in the sixth grade and never really learned Chinese, couldn't understand what they were talking about. We sat there silently and waited. No one spoke for what felt like hours.

Finally, the phone rang. They told Mahmud's dad that my papers had checked out. The police chief of the county had signed off on my visit. The foreigner would be allowed to stay for the night in a Uyghur village in Southern Xinjiang. Everything was fine.

As if a switch had been flipped, everyone breathed a huge sigh of relief. Suddenly everyone was talking again – reliving the terror of the police visit. They talked about how the doorway into the home was actually really high but when police entered the home they had crouched down a bit, acting as though it were so low. Mahmud’s neighbor made motions with his hands as he said this and demonstrated the bowing motion that this door phenomenon caused in a police officer’s body. He talked about how scared the police were when they saw me. “They didn’t know what to do – they just know how to say yes or no when it comes to foreigners. On the one hand they want to give you the impression that our society is peaceful, on the other hand they were suspicious that you might be a ‘terrorist.’” He talked about how hard it was for Uyghurs in Southern Xinjiang to feel like their true selves since they couldn’t properly host visitors. He said that, in many families where fathers or sons had been arrested, family life had turned into a constant state of secret mourning while at the same time pretending to be grateful for the benevolence of the Chinese state. He said that these days a Uyghur man could be arrested for the smallest mistake. “If you don’t smile when they say smile or dance when they say dance, they will say you are a ‘religious extremist,’” he said.

Mahmud was glad that I had the chance to see what life was really like for rural Uyghurs across Southern Xinjiang after the “People’s War on Terror” began in 2014. He said, “They come all the time – almost every night and check on us.” Their family had received “a peaceful family” (Ch: *heping jiating*) rating sign on the main entrance of their home, so clearly the police were not very suspicious of them. But still the police and their volunteer militia came unannounced every day or two. The possibility of their presence was what made Mahmud’s father and brother shave their mustaches and prevented Mahmud’s mother from decorating the walls of their home with anything that might be construed as overly Uyghur or Islamic. They

said that these days all they did was work on their farm, attend political education meetings, wait for the police to come and watch TV. Because they did not have People's Convenience Cards (Ch: *bianminka*) they were not permitted to travel outside of their county without official permission. The tedium and poverty of this lifestyle and the feeling of powerlessness that came from the home-invasions and struggle sessions were what made Mahmud want to leave his village and never come back.

He saw what the world was like from the perspective of the city when TVs began to arrive in the early 2000s. The advertisements enabled by the state-directed capitalist economy had called him to a different life. Now it reminded him of his need to escape the terror of the countryside. Villagers were not permitted to unplug their TVs (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2). It was common knowledge that televisions should be turned on during police visits. State television was an important way of communicating the values of the state. Refusing to watch it by unplugging it or failing to turn it on was a sign of "religious extremism" (Ch: *zongjiao jiduan zhuyi*).



Figure 2.2. A mural near Mahmud's home village. The text reads: "Interfering with the normal lives of others by prohibiting them from listening to the radio or watching TV is an act of religious extremism." Throughout this chapter I have included images of murals that demonstrate the rules of the "People's War on Terror." These murals which were painted by rural Uyghur farmer-painters at the request of local Culture Ministry officials began to appear throughout the Uyghur homeland in 2014.<sup>47</sup>

This chapter examines the way the aesthetic of the state-directed public cultural sphere has shaped the lives of young migrant Uyghur men in the midst of colonial transformations of the agrarian landscape in the Uyghur homeland. It shows how the material and psychic dispossession associated with the emergence of industrial farming, the arrival of televisions and smart phones, and the effects of the ongoing "People's War on Terror" (Ch: *fankong renmin zhanzheng*) have created new aesthetic subjectivities among young Uyghur migrant men and

<sup>47</sup> For more on the context and content of these murals see Byler 2017a.



their families across the Uyghur homeland in Southern Xinjiang. As a result many young Uyghur men are drawn outside of native modes of production, consumption and desire through Uyghur-medium vocational schools in the city, into new forms of culture work. By drawing on the narratives of two young Uyghur migrant culture producers, Mahmud and Aziz, I consider the itineraries of desire that motivated their migration to the city and why they strive to reinvent themselves as desiring subjects through forms of aesthetic production. Using newly popular forms of Uyghur-language advertising, social media and film as a starting point for conversation with young migrant culture workers, I show how they utilized their experiences of dispossession in order to produce new forms of cultured thought and expression. In analyzing these narratives I find that the communications infrastructure and aesthetics that accompanied the intensifying structural violence in the Xinjiang countryside transformed the way young Uyghur men imagined the possibilities of their lifepaths.

### *Material Dispossession*

Before I turn to the role of television in the lives of Uyghur men, I will first sketch out how Uyghur dispossession began. In most contemporary scholarship the term “dispossession” refers to a Marxist critique of capitalist accumulation by dispossession. It often is used not to discuss “original accumulation” of natural resources and colonized bodies, but the way marginalized people lose their property. As Glen Coulthard (2014) has demonstrated, though in colonial contexts, dispossession is more than the uncompensated loss of quantifiable abstract property, it also refers to a relationship of domination that moves through discursive and non-discursive facets of everyday life. Possession does not simply refer to property remaining under the control of rightful owners, rather in this context it refers to a type of self-determination or autonomy that is rooted in indigenous knowledge. The dispossession of a native people’s way of

life involves forcing them into a new social order, transforming their land into a commodity, their work into labor, their consumption into a new regime of value and their thoughts into ideological frameworks. It means that their lives must be integrated with the market; their desires must be routed through the aesthetics of the metropole.

In the Uyghur case, this dispossession began in the 1950s when structural adjustments to their everyday life and mode of production began to take institutional form. One elderly Uyghur farmer in Khotan described this process using the lives of trees as an example in 2014. He said that in the Uyghur homeland there were three generations of trees. First there were the trees that still remained from before the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. These trees were quite rare and were viewed as sacred by many Uyghurs. Then there were trees that were planted in the new villages built during the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s. During this period, Uyghur farms were consolidated into communes and farmers were moved from stand-alone farming homesteads on the land into villages where every house was the same height, and everyone shared the same communal meal. The trees that were planted in these new villages were quite tall in 2014, but many of them had been replaced by a third generation of trees. These new trees, planted in the 1990s, were the "Open up the Northwest" (Ch: *Xibei Dakaifa*) trees or, as other people I interviewed referred to them, "Open up the West" trees (Ch: *Xibu Dakaifa*), planted in the early 2000s.<sup>48</sup> They were planted when the old trees were cut down in the 1990s and 2000s and replaced by "investment" (Uy: *kapital*) trees. In many cases, the communes sold the rights to these young trees to villagers. At a certain point, decades from now, they will be permitted to cut down the trees and enjoy the profits of their lumber. The old man sighed at this point, and said,

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<sup>48</sup> These two campaigns "Open up the Northwest" and "Open up the West" (sometimes referred to as the "Great Leap West") began in the 1990s and early 2000s respectively. Since the earlier campaign was seen as successful in bringing infrastructure and industrial farming to Xinjiang, the project was expanded to the entirety of China's Western Regions.

“What those people who are buying and selling trees are forgetting is that the trees hold the spirits of our ancestors within them. We have always used wood to build the thresholds of our houses, but we did so out of respect for the trees and a way of guarding our home from evil spirits. Now that respect is lost.” He was saying that, when people begin to treat sacred landscapes like natural sources of capital, they are dispossessed of their relationship with the deep history of the land.

This material transformation of the value of trees in the minds of Uyghur farmers was representative of broader structural adjustments and transformations of Uyghur sociality. These broad transformations were signaled first by the consolidation of homesteads into communal villages in the 1950s and 1960s and then by the arrival of highways and railways in the 1990s and 2000s throughout the Uyghur heartland. This second wave of hard infrastructure transformations was built primarily as a way to target the oil and natural gas “reserves” that the nation had not yet been able to *exploit* as a form of original accumulation to fuel the growing industrial economy in Eastern China. This term, *exploit*, thought of in a Marxist framework is often used to describe the abstract relationship between capital and labor or property. Here again, it is important to emphasize that exploitation is never simply a function of the economy, it is also a relationship of *domination*, particularly in a colonial context. When new infrastructure is built on native land and, along with it, new service sectors and market economies are put in motion by settler populations, the exploitation of natural resources becomes a schema of domination as well. It produces subjects that are separated from their place in the world and increasingly drawn into new modernist economies.

One of the ways this process began was through the production of a new kind of Uyghur farmer through a series of public and private economic interventions. One of the primary goals of

the “Open up the Northwest” (Ch: *xibei kaifa*) state development campaign that began in the 1990s was to increase the production of commodity goods. Uyghur village communes were pulled into corporate contracts with State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) and the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (Ch: *bingtuan*) that demanded the production of rape seed, tomatoes, cotton and other commodity crops on an industrial scale. As in village communes in Eastern China in the 1980s,<sup>49</sup> communes in the Uyghur homeland were asked via these development projects in the 1990s to produce these products for single state-appointed for-profit buyers who bought what they produced at low fixed prices, and then sold it to large corporations in Eastern China.<sup>50</sup> Within just a few short years, many Uyghur farmers found themselves working for contracts with large-scale corporations with limited autonomy to choose what they grew or where they sold it. Because of their inability to receive a living wage or because of the debt they accrued, many were forced to sell the rights to their land to the leaders of their local commune. As a result, by the early 2000s, in many counties in the Uyghur homeland of Southern Xinjiang, the rights to a high percentage of arable land was owned by a few powerful individuals within the local Party institutions. For example, according to a number of farmers I interviewed, in a county near Turpan a single individual owned rights to an estimated 60 percent of all available farming land. In a county near Kashgar, a single family of local officials owned rights to nearly 80 percent of all arable land.<sup>51</sup> What this meant in effect, was that the majority of Uyghurs in these counties were living as sharecroppers: their land and work was owned by local

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<sup>49</sup> See Mobo Gao’s *Gao Village* (1999) for a detailed account of what this looked like in a village in Eastern China.

<sup>50</sup> See “Uyghur Farmer’s Appeal, To No Avail” for an account of how the overproduction of “long beans” in a county in Kashgar affected farming life in 2008 (<http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/longbean-farmer-01302009234055.html>).

<sup>51</sup> It is difficult to obtain exact statistics on land contract ownership, however the consolidation of land into the hands a few local elites was common knowledge among many of the farmers I interviewed. The estimates I have included were based on these interviews.

officials.<sup>52</sup> In exchange, they were given a place to stay and food to eat. But often this payment was not enough to care for a family. Many Uyghur farmers, or their children, were forced to look for work elsewhere either as migrant agricultural workers or as small-scale traders and hired-hands in local towns or at times the big city of Ürümqi.

In 2003, local authorities began to implement labor transfer programs among rural Uyghur farmers as a way of countering the extreme poverty and underemployment that was fostered by the system (Memet 2011). These programs asked farmers to spend significant portions of time away from their home farms working on state-owned farming colonies elsewhere in the province picking cotton or working in factory positions in Eastern China in cities such as Shenzhen, Beijing, Tianjin and Qingdao and smaller towns in Jiangsu, Shandong and Zhejiang (Human Rights Without Frontiers 2008; Hess 2009). Often these programs provided cash incentives for such work, but there was often a certain amount of coercion to these programs as well. Village leaders were asked to meet a quota of workers and so often poor farmers felt as though they had no choice but to follow the directive to enter the migrant labor economy. In Peyziwat in Kashgar prefecture, a county with a population of 385,000 people, ninety-eight percent of whom were Uyghur, the program began in 2003 with only 2000 workers sent out to work as migrant laborers. By 2010, over 81,000 people, 21 percent of the total population of Peyziwat County, had gone to work in fields and factories away from home (Memet 2011: 23). Other counties, from Khotan to Turpan, sent similar amounts of workers to the cotton fields in Xinjiang farming colonies and industrial production in Eastern China. Over

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<sup>52</sup> See Eset Sulaiman's report "In China's Xinjiang, Some Uyghurs are Forced Into a Sharecropper's Life" for an account of what this looked like in Khotan prefecture in 2016 (<http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/in-chinas-xinjiang-some-uyghurs-11222016151601.html>).

the course of the decade, hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs moved off of their farms and into the market economy as wage laborers.

Over the same period, the number of “self-sent” (Ch: *zifa*) migrants began to increase as well. Since these migrations were not facilitated by the state, the numbers of rural Uyghurs who migrated to cities across Xinjiang and the nation are harder to track. However, what is clear is that over this same period of time, informal settlements of 20 to 30 thousand people from places like Payziwat and nearby counties such as Yupergha were formed on the outskirts of Ürümchi. Similar communities sprang up in smaller prefecture level cities across the province. These settlements often took on the name of the counties where these migrants came from. They formed tight-knit communities of traders and businessmen, craftsmen, entrepreneurs and cultural workers; people who hustled on the streets and worked in the growing service economy. Many migrants in these communities, as was the case with Mahmud and Aziz whose stories I tell below, came as individuals, detached from immediate family. They delayed their marriages and saved money for their families back in the countryside while they aspired for an urban life.

As the Uyghur scholar Mijit Memet has noted (2011), in Uyghur Islamic thought poverty and personal suffering have long been considered something that was predestined by Allah. The difficulty of Uyghur farmer life was thus something of a test of one’s character. It was not something to be overcome, but endured. In the past, this attitude led to an acceptance of one’s precariousness and, in turn, a dependence on the will of Allah, one’s community, and the benevolence of local authorities. Memet noted that most Uyghur farmers placed little value in long-term planning and investment and instead took one day at a time. He argued that Uyghur farmers have traditionally placed little value on self-reliance and thus spent what little money they had as soon as they received it. Memet is not arguing that Uyghur farmers are “lazy” – as is

often the case in discussions of the work ethics of unassimilated minorities in China (Yeh 2007). Instead he is pointing out that when Uyghur farmers are pulled into the market economy, they are forced to give up their reliance on the community and the benevolence of Allah and instead claim a self-motivated subjectivity. Doing so often gave them a feeling of giving in to the new economy of self-reliance and failing the test they have received as Muslims. Memet writes that, in the early 2000s when the labor transfer programs were first put in place, “Some migrant workers did not even tell their families at home at first, instead they secretly went to the colony farms and picked cotton” (Memet 2011: 40). Because of these feelings and their wariness of entering into dependent relations with Han settler employers, many Uyghurs were, at least initially, reluctant migrants.

Yet Memet also notes that as Uyghur farmers were given access to cash and capital, these mentalities began to shift. As they moved into the Chinese economy, feelings of communal and family reliance were mixed with feelings of individual achievement. The opportunities that came from travel, technical training, wage labor and investment began to take shape in the minds of farmers, particularly in those of the younger generations. Yet what felt like new forms of freedom and autonomy, were also mixed with new forms of dependence and new feelings of inequality. As young Uyghur migrants began to see a larger horizon of possibility, they also began to receive messages that much of that larger world was not there for them but rather for those with more ethno-racial privilege. Money could not make their lives count in the same way as it did the lives of Han settlers, nor would it buy them freedom from fear of state violence. Through the process of integration, they found that they were losing parts of their native way of life and they were being exposed to new forms of dispossession.

*Dispossession through Media Infrastructure and Self-Fashioning*

In addition to its relationship to material possession, dispossession can also be thought of as relationship of the mind to the self. As Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou argue (2013), the idea of being in possession of one's self is a particular liberal modality. It centers around the perception of control or autonomy on the part of the individual subject. By maintaining control of one's self through processes of self-discipline and self-responsibility, the modernist subject assumes that the choices she or he makes are not conditioned by larger social forces, but are rather acts of freedom. Possessing the self is also in effect a disavowal or misapprehension of the community and infrastructures that enable a life to be lived. In a global capitalist economy, these ideas of liberal self-possession have taken hold across the world. As the Uyghur economy shifted toward the internationalized yet state-directed market liberalization and individualized wage-labor a process of possessing the self also took on a new force in Uyghur society as well. Young Uyghurs in particular began to think of themselves as having control over their lifepath in a way that previous generations did not. Through this process they were moved from a condition of interdependence within a Uyghur lifeworld, to the world of a capitalist urban future. But, unlike the rural Uyghur lifeworld, this new world was not simply one they shared in common with their Uyghur neighbors and Uyghur state officials. The horizon of this new urban world was shared with Han settlers and the institutions of the Chinese state. The urban world of self-fashioning promised individual freedom through individual striving, but often these promises were blocked by larger social forces.

In the early 2000s, the social imaginary of young men such as Mahmud, the young video advertisement producer I introduced at the beginning of this chapter, began to shift. This transformation began, when as part of the "Open the West" campaign, the state first brought electricity to rural Uyghur households and then began to provide every Uyghur household with a



free television and cable connection. As Mahmud told me, he still remembers when the first TV appeared in his neighborhood soon after electricity arrived. For several months, he and dozens of other villagers crowded into their neighbor's small home to watch Xinjiang Television broadcasts of the news, Uyghur music performances and Chinese historical dramas that were overdubbed in Uyghur. Since neither he nor many of his neighbors spoke Chinese (at that time), they avoided the Chinese language channels and instead focused on Uyghur language representations of life in the city. Mahmud found the images he saw on TV, like the foreign and domestic films that he had seen occasionally in town, deeply inspiring. They began to open up a world of possibilities apart from his family's farm and life in the village. Since, like many Uyghur men in the 1990s and early 2000s (Dautcher 2009), with increased access to Chinese liquor his father had developed an alcohol-dependency problem, the images also promised a way of escaping the violence of his family life and the poverty that alcohol and broader structural adjustments had brought to his family.

Around the same time, Mahmud was forced to drop out of high school and help his father and mother on the farm. Because of his father's drinking problem and his inability to keep up with the farm work, Mahmud's family simply could not afford to continue to send him to school. Mahmud said that he did not feel sadness about no longer going to school because he felt he was not learning much there anyway. He said that working at home gave him a chance to read books that he wanted to read: novels about the world outside. He also continued to watch a lot of TV and would occasionally go to the local bazaar to watch VCDs that shop owners would show in order to attract customers.<sup>53</sup> The technologies of cultural dissemination and the aggregated desires they mediated became a significant part of his life. When he was 17, Mahmud began to

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<sup>53</sup> Video Compact Discs (VCDs) were the first form of digital media to reach the rural Uyghur homeland.

write his own stories in a notebook while watching his family's flock of sheep. The stories were based on his own life experience and the things he was watching on TV. Eventually he developed a storyline that tied them all together. His story, called "Life on the Road" (Uy: *bayawandiki toghirak*), was about a young Uyghur farmer who went to the city in pursuit of fame and fortune. Along the way he helped a beautiful young woman escape from the abuse of a criminal drug dealer. The story was a Uyghur drama in a Uyghur city in which the hero describes the complexities of Uyghur modern life. It brought to life the way Uyghurs were drawn into drug and sex trafficking as other paths to economic success were blocked, but it also promised success to young men who worked hard and took personal responsibility for their lives. There was no direct animosity toward the Chinese state in the story—Mahmud said he felt too afraid to allow those feelings to surface in public. Instead it was a story of a Uyghur farmer becoming legible in the modern world as cinematic superstar.

When Mahmud's neighbors found out that Mahmud had written a 100-page novel about his imagined life, they began to ask if they could read it. After his neighbors read the story they told his parents that it would be a shame if a talented young man like Mahmud was not given an opportunity to work in the city. By this time, the allure of the city with its promise of distinction and "achieved" quality was on everyone's minds. They began to put pressure on Mahmud's family to send him off to school. They told his family to pay attention to the advertisements for vocational schools that they had seen on Uyghur language state television. The schools promised to train students in how to use computers and how to speak Chinese. Some of them even taught English and prepared students to study abroad. One of his neighbors had a daughter who had gone to college, so they asked her to check into the schools and make sure they were legitimate. They found out that one of the vocational schools in the advertisements only cost 2800 yuan per

semester, that it accepted farmers without high-school diplomas, and that the medium of instruction was Uyghur. For two years Mahmud's family saved money. Facing increasing pressure from the community, Mahmud's parents finally sent Mahmud on the bus to Ürümqi with 3200 *yuan* (around 500 dollars) in his pocket. The community was thrilled that a young man from their village was going to the big city to make a name for himself. By pursuing his desire to achieve "quality" (Uy: *sapa*), he was giving prestige both to his family and to the larger collectivity in the new globalizing economy.

For the first few months Mahmud struggled. He hardly had enough money for food, and it took him a while to find friends and distant relatives in the city. But he thrived in the school. As he put it: "When I arrived, I just studied Chinese. Every day I would memorize texts. By the end of the first year I had memorized over 53 texts. Using this method I learned Chinese very quickly." With his new found language skills he was able to begin to navigate the city. Eventually he introduced himself to editors of Uyghur language literary journals and showed them his notebooks. They were impressed with his ambition. After reading through his work, an editor recognized the cinematic quality of what he had written. He saw in Mahmud's novel the dialogues and scenes of a movie script. Looking back at it, Mahmud recognized that, because he was writing in response to what he saw on television, he had written his dreams into cinema. Over the next few years he found a place in the emerging industry of Uyghur language Internet media production after the arrival of 3-G networks in 2010. Mahmud taught himself how to make music videos, short films, and commercials and began to cobble together a career in cultural production as a free-lance worker for Uyghur businesses in the city.

Mahmud's first exposure to television and its effects on their imagination resonated in the stories of many of the young Uyghur migrants I interviewed. But there were also a range of

different desires that were emerging at this time. Another young migrant, Aziz, whose hometown near Khotan was thousands of kilometers away from Mahmud's village, said that television was also the first thing that inspired him to want to leave home as well. Unlike Mahmud, Aziz came from a deeply religious family, so the pressures he received were pointed in a slightly different direction toward a Muslim contemporaneity. This new source of attraction, the cultural and religious imagery that were coming from Istanbul and Cairo brought a new complexity to the desires of young Uyghur migrants. Yet despite the differences between the impulses to be a movie star versus a contemporary pious Muslim, within both of these trajectories the self-fashioning impulse and the lure of the cash economy resonated with a generalized desire for an urban life. The young men that began to participate in piety movements in the 2010s when the aesthetics of Islamic piety began to circulate via new 3-G networks, often came to the city simply wanting to be "modern," just like Mahmud. The turn toward an Islamic contemporaneity came later for most of them. Aziz said:

During my last year of high school in 2003 I dropped out, because I felt like I wasn't learning anything. I was just studying on my own at home. I worked as a construction worker for a year earning 1000 *yuan* per month. At the time it seemed like a lot of money, since I had no expenses and since it was my first job. But during that year I saw a commercial for a vocational training school in Ürümqi called 885 when I was watching my family's new TV. It was one of the first Uyghur-run private training centers.

Aziz said that within a few months, like Mahmud, he decided that he wanted to leave his village and go to the school in Ürümqi. He said that the ads made him feel for the first time that it was possible for someone without a high-school degree and formal training in Chinese to participate in the "modern" life that he had seen on TV. He said the advertisement was pitched to farmers just like himself who had few resources, but great ambition to be successful members of the modern Uyghur community. Since so many people were beginning to leave farming life in the early 2000s, many young people were beginning to talk about leaving the countryside and trying

to make it in the city. The advertising fed this imaginary; they made young people believe that it was possible to escape what felt like the limits of rural Uyghur life. Aziz said:

Actually the school was nothing like the advertisement. They shot the advertisement at Xinjiang University, but actually the school was next to the university and the buildings were really old. The tuition was 1600 for one semester including tuition and housing. My parents sold their donkey for around 2000 yuan and we used that money to pay for the tuition and my living expenses. My mother also began working as a seamstress in the county-level bazaar so she used the money she made to support me. The very first day when my father and I came, we paid the money, and then I sat in on a class. I loved it. That was the happiest day of my life.

Aziz said that he felt as though he had been given ownership of his future. As a native Uyghur speaker whose father was both a farmer and an unauthorized Islamic teacher (Uy: *mullah*), he had given up on living as part of the knowledge economy. He had thought he would be a manual laborer his whole life on his family's farm. Now he realized that even though he did not speak Chinese, nor had he passed the college entrance exam, he could still compete with other businessmen and entrepreneurs in the city. In his first few years in the city, he found part-time work as an Amway salesman selling cookware and beauty products to other Uyghur migrants while he studied at the vocational school. He told his customers that he was student, and that he had used the knowledge he had learned in school to research the highest quality American products. He said that by selling himself as an expert on American culture, or "Amway: the American Way," he learned a lot about marketing and using cultural knowledge to create commercial value. Aziz shifted his focus though at around 2011 when the market for American products began to disappear. Many Uyghurs began to listen to the piety teachings that circulated via the new mobile app We-Chat and through this come to believe that American products were not "halal" (Uy: *musulmanche*). Instead, Uyghurs were told they should buy Islamic products imported from Turkey or Malaysia; or "native" products that were produced in a verified halal

manner. Uyghur desires were increasingly shaped by an imaginary that centered around Islamic contemporaneity.

Around the same time in his typing class at the vocational school Aziz found that he had an affinity for computers. With the help of a few of his more advanced classmates he began to teach himself the language of software engineering. The Latin script and logic of computing made sense to him. Within several years of his arrival in the city, he began designing Uyghur-language on-line advertising and e-commerce applications for smart phones. As Islamic piety movements gathered force, he also began to work WeChat based companies to find ways to monetize and expand religious and language instruction for Uyghurs outside of the city. It became important for him to present himself as an urbane Muslim. He began to watch Turkish movies. He divorced his wife, who he had met not long before through his Amway sales. He said he wanted a wife who would be more pious and would be willing to stay at home and care for his children while he worked with Uyghur Internet companies. This desire for “achieved quality” as an urban, yet pious, Uyghur Muslim, as became common among many young Uyghur men at this time (Byler 2015b), caused a nested, further, dispossession of Uyghur women. Uyghur women were slotted into a subordinate role, their value indexed to the public-facing value of pious Uyghur men. Of course, many Uyghur women embraced new forms of piety as well and found ways to use the religious quality they accrued as forms of social value within the Uyghur community (Huang 2009).

### *Shifting Uyghur Urbanities in a Chinese City*

As Lily Chumley (2016) and Lisa Rofel (2007) have demonstrated, across China “self-styling” has been a central element of the liberalization of the Chinese economy. Art students and culture producers are now involved in *all aspects* of Chinese material life. Culture workers

came to play important roles not just in explicit forms of media but also all forms of commodity design and style. Chumley argues: “The aestheticization of the world required and engendered a new kind of aesthetic subjectivity: an interest in style, a susceptibility to the attractions of commodities, *a desire for contemporaneity and anxiety about lacking it*, a habit of looking at and making small talk about commodities and their appearances” (2016: 11; my emphasis). As young Uyghur migrants continued to arrive in the city in the early 2000s they were influenced by the aestheticization done by Han cultural workers that they saw in the city. They began to build their own brands and aesthetic forms for Uyghur audiences in the countryside. However, unlike the art students that Chumley observed, for these Uyghur culture workers feelings of “lacking contemporaneity” were complicated by feelings that they lacked the quality of Han and western culture producers and felt the pressure to transform their ethnic difference into both an Islamic contemporaneity and a politically acceptable Chinese cosmopolitanism. They felt the violence of the way certain forms of “achieved” cultural quality—Chinese *suzhi*, Uyghur *sapa*, western distinction, and Islamic piety—were given positive social value in the Chinese city and other forms of quality were deemed to have less value or negative value. The push and pull of their personal histories, their Uyghur audiences and the surveillance of the Chinese state complicated their desire to build a self-styled individual life.

Many of the Uyghur medium vocational schools in the city acted as incubators for Uyghur commercial talent. The Uyghur schools gave students an opportunity to network with each other and build new styles and aesthetic subjectivities. The owners of the schools were almost universally recognized as Uyghur television personalities; some of them were popular musicians. These owners built the brands of the schools by advertising on television and by hosting widely viewed talent-show spectacles in which their best students demonstrated the skills

they had learned in the schools. The vocational schools thus offered young farmers a point of entrée into the upper-echelons of Uyghur society. By performing well in a Uyghur-language vocational school, some students were able to circumvent the stringent Chinese language requirements that faced them in Chinese university settings and the widespread discrimination of the Chinese private sector.<sup>54</sup>

Of course, some migrants I interviewed were not able to achieve an economically successful self-fashioning.<sup>55</sup> Although they also were drawn to the city by the allure of Uyghur language television advertising, they had less success finding jobs in the knowledge economy in the city. One young migrant told me that he was never able to really learn Chinese or computer programing in the vocational schools because his family could not help him with his tuition. He had to work full-time just to afford his living expenses so he had little time to study and find the job he dreamed of working as an entrepreneur. Some of those I interviewed did develop culture production skills, but were unable to find jobs or start their own businesses because they lacked the connections and capital to do so. Many migrants were forced to abandon their dreams as urban cleansing and Islam “rectification” projects were put in place under the direction of the “People’s War on Terror.”

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<sup>54</sup> Some students in the Uyghur vocational schools were also matriculated university students who needed help learning English and other skills, but many were simply high school dropouts who hoped to find a better life despite their lack of academic success.

<sup>55</sup> This is the subject of Chapter 6 of this dissertation.





Figure 2.3. A mural from a village near Mahmud's home that was painted in 2014: "Wearing ethnic costumes is a way of carrying forward ethnic culture, wearing a burka is a betrayal of ethnic culture."

As I have signaled in the pages above, one of the issues regarding the evaluation of Uyghur migrant self-fashioning had to do with changing gender politics as wider exposure to Islam via the Internet and increased pressure to assimilate Han cultural values led to a widespread transformation of Uyghur Islam between 2010 and 2014. Paradoxically, the same technological development that allowed Uyghur migrants access to cultural production through on-line publishing and video production also offered Uyghur farmers in the countryside greater exposure to global Islamic piety movements. As much as the schools acted as incubators of Uyghur modernization, the cultural production they enabled paled in comparison to the Islamic media production that many rural Uyghur farmers viewed from sources in Turkey, Central Asia and the Middle East via the Internet. The messages and teachings dubbed in Uyghur or produced by Uyghurs in the diaspora had a powerful effect. They were often seen by young migrants such

as Aziz as “true” (Uy: *rast*) Islam, unfiltered by the Chinese state-directed public sphere. Like the urban advertising that they had seen on TV in the previous decade, it too interpellated Uyghur farmers. It asked them to imagine themselves as members of a modern global Islamic community. As Mahmud put it:

When I started at the school there were 43 of us Uyghur students. Now there are just 28 (still in the city). Most of the students that dropped out were women – and a lot of them were from Khotan. The people down there are actually becoming more and more opposed to education and urban life. They just don’t see the purpose in sending a woman to the city. They think it is better if she just gets married. I have one distant cousin who also came to the city. She was doing really well here and then her father suddenly changed his mind. She said it was because her job wouldn’t allow her to wear a veil that covered her neck. I told her, this is not important. Your faith is something you carry with you on the inside. You shouldn’t let a small thing like this change the course of your life. You have a long life in front of you – this choice will change everything. But she said, this is what “true” (Uy: *rast*) Islam means. She said she was at peace with it. Of course there are deeper reasons for why when they hear these Islamic teachings on the Internet it makes sense to them not to allow women to be educated. They don’t want them to think for themselves; and they don’t want them to be influenced by Han ideas.

As Uyghur farmers across the Uyghur homeland began to gather in small group discussions about the forms of Islamic orthopraxis that were common in the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, the impulse to move to the city began to change. Now instead of talking about economic and cultural opportunity, people began to talk about the religious freedom of the city. Many of the rural-to-urban migrants I spoke with said they came to the city simply to escape the religious policing that was becoming so intense in rural communities. They said that in the city no one noticed if migrants went to the mosque five times per day or not. Young migrants could attend illegal prayer-room discussions and, beginning in 2011, on-line WeChat groups without police coming to their door. But at the same time, with that freedom the allure of non-Muslim culture in the city was more intense. For a time, particularly in the years after the violence of 2009 when Internet technology was built out and it became increasingly clear that the Chinese state viewed Uyghur migrants as disposable, young Uyghurs in the city lived in a tension between two

ideological magnetic fields. On the one hand the liberal, technological life of the city pulled them into the market economy and the task of making one's self legible in modern society, while on the other hand the same technological life pulled them toward new forms of Islamic orthopraxis and identification. Both of these forces of dispossession and re-identification were introduced just over the past two decades. These competing forms of self-fashioning, ways of making the self sensible, pulled them in competing directions. The qualities associated with Chinese and western cosmopolitanism competed with Islamic piety. For some, each of these forms of contemporaneity felt like a dispossession of "native" (Uy: *yerlik*) forms of knowledge and practice even as they found new ways to fashion themselves as contemporary.

At the same time both Mahmud and Aziz felt strongly that because they had adapted to city life they had begun to "think for themselves" (Uy: *özüm dep oylimiz*) unlike the rural farmers they grew up around who were turning to new forms of Islam. They saw themselves as fashioning a life for themselves. They felt that their fluency in the systems and aesthetics of the urban world signaled a kind of success. In their home villages people spoke of them with a sense of pride even as they wondered about their devotion as Muslims. They had made it in the big city. But both Mahmud and Aziz were highly aware of their need to perform their success and maintain a public persona of sophistication. One of the ways they did this was through their style of dress and grooming. Neither of them had facial hair, since this was read as a sign of Uyghur rural masculinity and Islamic piety as the "People's War" began. Both of them dressed in name-brand clothes – Aziz consciously chose a Turkish cosmopolitanism while Mahmud wore European designer clothes. Both of them noted that their appearance was a large part of their success as Uyghur migrant-entrepreneurs. They said that, unlike college educated Uyghurs and Han settlers, they had to always prove that they were not imposters in the city. As Aziz put it:

Just last week I bought a new suit from Caravanchi (a Uyghur-run Turkish import store). It is a blue Turkish suit made of wool that cost 2000 yuan (\$320). I've tried other suits like Dior and stuff like that, but they always make me look old. The Turkish suits make people look cool. They have a slim fit and are very flexible. I first started wearing suits when I was selling Amway. At that time I thought that it made me look more impressive. Later I realized that it just made me look like a cheap salesman because it was a cheap suit so I stopped for a while. Last year I bought my black suit at a place in Small Westgate for around 1000. I thought that if I was going to be an entrepreneur it was important that I looked the part. So for the past year I have worn that suit every day.

Aziz said that dressing like a young businessman from Istanbul was a way of demonstrating his affinity with Islamic fashions and halal consumerism while still not appearing too pious as surveillance intensified.

Mahmud on the other hand wanted to be perceived as western. He cut his hair in high-fade. When he walked the streets, he was careful to drape his Apple brand white headphones over his shoulder to signal that he was a person with means. He wore black aviator sunglasses and maroon t-shirt that said ARMANI in bold white letters for weeks at a time. But in both of their cases, there was something more to their appearance than simply a way of signaling their sophistication. For both of them, the threat of the police state was always hanging over them. Increasingly, dressing like an urbanite, rather than like a pious Islamic farmer, was a tactic of survival.

### ***Dispossession by Terror***

As Timothy Cheek (2015) and Lisa Rofel (2007) have noted, since the 1990s ideological-aesthetic production across the Chinese nation has in large part turned from the propaganda state of the Maoist period toward a “state-directed public sphere” (Cheek 2015: 9). This directed public sphere, a form of Chinese liberal governmentality, allows for greater latitude in public speech, though such speech has not been granted full legal protection. Under the “People’s War on Terror,” the freedom of the directed public sphere was eliminated for Uyghurs. Now Uyghurs

were forced to enjoy Chinese language commercial television and Uyghur patriotic talent shows. The “People’s War” which began in May 2014 as a response to a series of violent incidents involving Uyghur and Han civilians, brought much tighter restrictions on what farmers could view on the Internet and in their homes. Not only was viewing or listening to illegal materials a criminal offense punishable by 5 to 10 years of hard labor, but, as I described in the opening pages of this chapter, prohibiting or refusing to watch state TV was also considered an act of “extremism” and a sign of the influence of “terrorist” ideologies. Suddenly Mahmud and Aziz found themselves working in a media environment where everything they produced was directed against religious “extremism” and toward Uyghur assimilation.

At the same time, back in their home villages their loved ones began to face the threat of detention for unauthorized religious or political media they had consumed over the past five years of Internet access. The trauma began for Mahmud in early 2015, just two weeks after the visit to his home that I described at the beginning of this chapter. He told me:

My dad called me two days ago and told me to be very careful, to not communicate with anyone over the phone, he said that something had happened but that he couldn’t talk about it. Then yesterday a friend came from a town near my village and told me what had happened. This is the first time there has ever been any violence in my hometown. I think things will get a lot worse there now; a lot of trouble for me and my family.

Mahmud sighed and began rubbed his temples. His father had told him that he and the rest of the family were just staying in their house. The stretch between their house and the location where 16 Uyghurs had been killed was on lockdown. He asked his father if he should return home to be with the family over this time. His dad said no. If he were to come back now, he might not be able to leave. We all sat there for long moments of silence trying to process the gravity of what had happened and how those 16 lives that were lost would affect such a large group of people. “16 people. That is not a simple thing,” Mahmud said.



Figure 2.4. A mural near Mahmud's home: "Crack down on the 'three forces' to maintain social stability!" The "three forces" referred to here in the rhetoric of the terror state are "National Separatism, Religious Extremism, Violent Terrorism." In fact, what they are referring to are Uyghur self-determination, religious piety and all resistance to Chinese sovereignty.

Over the next few days we pieced together what had happened. Several of Mahmud's neighbors had attempted to grab a Uyghur police officer's gun during a home inspection to turn it on the inspectors. The police had been threatening to arrest the neighbor's wife if she did not stop wearing an illegal Islamic covering. The gun's safety was set, so the neighbor was not able to harm the officer or the farmers who had been conscripted into the security detail, but the neighbors and others in his prayer group had attacked the police with knives. Within several minutes armed security forces arrived and began to shoot indiscriminately in the home and the street in front of the home. According to official reports more than a dozen people were killed, including the neighbor's wife and six-year old daughter as well as one of Mahmud's middle school classmates. Talking a few days later about what had happened, Mahmud said: "This is unimaginable; It is not Islam. People should not kill other people under any circumstance. Life

on this earth is a gift from God. Only he can give it or take it away. If humans do these sorts of things, it changes them from a human to something more like a monster.”

The state used the incident as a pretext to begin going house to house to arrest people who seemed suspicious. In an enactment of the murals that had been painted across the Uyghur homeland (see Figure 4), within several weeks over 1000 people were arrested on suspicion of conspiring in the plot against the police or for questioning the use of force by the police. Five of Mahmud’s uncles were arrested during this time on charges of inciting ethnic hatred; the evidence used against them was recorded messages and videos of Hanafi Islamic teachings on their phones. Over the next few weeks they were given sentences that ranged from five to twenty years. One of Mahmud’s uncles simply disappeared; Mahmud now assumes he died during his interrogation. But the trauma of what had happened did not stop there:

After they were arrested we were all numb with fear and pain. My mother was devastated. Despite the pain they felt, my parents decided to adopt two of my uncle’s children since my aunt couldn’t manage the farm work on her own or find a job and therefore didn’t have any source of income. After several weeks of caring for the kids, the police came again and made all of my family members come with them to the police station. They charged them with “caring for the children of terrorists” and opposing government policies. At the police station, they asked why they did this illegal act. My parents answered, “These kids were living under difficult circumstances, so we lent a helping hand. We had no other motive.” In the end they made my parents sign a “legal pledge” not to care for my nieces and nephews. Since then, my mom has been detached and in a haze. She has nightmares when she sleeps. The worst part of this process, was after they were released, the armed police came to our home to take away my uncle’s children. They said the government would “take care of them.” Later we tried to see them many times at the address where they said they would be, but they always told us that the children were not there. Even now, we don’t know what has happened to them.

Over the next week, the local authorities began to conscript those who had not yet been arrested to participate in apprehending suspects that had fled from the police. They required that every household provide one person to assist in the manhunt. They said that whoever did not cooperate would be treated in the same way as those they were attempting to find. Since Mahmud had already returned to the city, his brother was sent to join the manhunt on behalf of his family. For

months he walked with groups of police and other conscripted young men in search of their neighbors who were in hiding in the mountains.

Back in the city, Mahmud found it difficult to focus on his work. He said that now he found making commercials for commodities meaningless. Every day he received reports from his family of what was happening to the people who had sent him on his journey away from rural life.

After I returned to school in the city, I heard that a lot of people that were forced to join the search were imprisoned for not cooperating. Going back home is not an option because the situation, particularly for young men, has become simply horrible. Like many other families, my family has been placed on a list of suspicious families. They are no longer allowed to leave their village.

Some of the stories he heard were deeply troubling.

My family is fine, but everything around them is terrible. Already over 1000 people have been arrested. Every day they see more and more people being dragged down the road at gun point. There is absolutely no way that all of those people had connections with what happened back in February. My family thinks that this is just an opportunity for them to grab more people. If they can get the numbers up then it looks better for them. Now my younger brother is back from the mountains and working for the local militia which means he has to go out most nights to check houses. He also has to go to the local town once a week for training (he demonstrated what that training looks like by doing some lunges with his arms extended as though holding a club). My father tried to prevent it from happening, but the police said that if he wouldn't allow him to go, then it would mean that he had a problem with his priorities.

The police came and interviewed my mom as well after they arrested her five brothers. They asked her what she thought of the situation; whether she had anything to say in their defense. Of course if she had defended them she would have been arrested as well. So she just said, you are doing the right thing, 'the Party knows best.' She had to disown her own family. Now if you are a young man you have either been arrested or they have made you work for the police. There is no one else left. Women are the only ones left in many houses. Some of them are really old and some of them are pregnant or have small children. No one is planting crops. Everyone is just trying to survive each day. Some of my close friends have been taken. The rest are working for the police now. The armed police come by every day, hunting people. At this point they can just shoot without any consequences, so many people are just shot if they try to escape. At least six people we know have died from torture in prison. My father saw that the day of the incident there were actually dozens of bodies lying in the courtyard of the local police office. So when



they say there were only 16 they are just trying to make it sound as though they handled it better than they did. These days everyone is afraid. No one is doing any work. They are just trying to keep a really low profile and go to all of the meetings. My little sister has been pretty traumatized by everything. When she goes to school (in a larger town over 20 kilometers from Mahmud's village), the Han kids call her "a little terrorist." She comes home crying.

Over the next few months Mahmud heard of things that were happening in his community that previously were unimaginable. Every day his parents were required to go to the local village center, watch instructional videos and learn patriotic songs. The state began to raise a Chinese flag at the local mosque every Friday when they opened the mosque for the once per week prayer service. His mother was forced to burn her prayer rug in the village center. All of his family members were asked to write and publicly recite loyalty pledges to the Chinese state. Although Mahmud's brother was not initially imprisoned, in March 2017, as the mass detention of nearly one million Uyghurs began, one of his brother's friends from the neighborhood confessed that he and Mahmud's brother had listened to illegal Islamic messages on his phone several years prior. Soon after this Mahmud's brother was also arrested. Many people began to crack under the pressure. One day, two months after the widespread police violence and the reeducation effort began, Mahmud told me:

Two days ago my cousin's uncle and his wife passed away suddenly. Everyone thinks it was the government that did it. My cousin's relatives found them hanging from trees behind their house. It seems as though they planned it because they had just bought all of the white burial clothes and had placed them on the sleeping platform in the house. The reason everyone says that the government caused it is because everyone knew that the police had been going to their house every day demanding that they make their son come home. Actually no one knows where that son is. He could be in Eastern China, he could be in prison, he could already be dead. He doesn't have a "green card" like me,<sup>56</sup> so the government suspects that he is an "extremist." But because this couple didn't know where their son was, the police were constantly harassing them. They were 65 and 59 years old. Maybe the pressure had gotten even stronger recently, because of what

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<sup>56</sup> As noted in the introduction the "Green Card" refers to a rural Xinjiang specific passbook system that was implemented in order to precipitate an urban ethnic cleansing of unwanted Uyghur migrants at the beginning of the "People's War on Terror" in 2014.

happened in February. Of course this kind of act is forbidden in Uyghur society and Islamic teaching – a person can never take a person’s life – that is why people never talk about these kinds of things and if they do they say that it is the government that killed them. This is the first time something like this has happened to people I knew, but I’m sure it is happening all over the South. Everyone’s “spirit has been broken” (Uy: *rohi sulghundi*).

Mahmud worried about his own safety in the city. He worried that because he lived away from home, that his family would be put under greater suspicion. He worried that because so many of his relatives had been arrested, someone would begin accusing him of not being patriotic and submissive.

The police always want to know where every family member is. They will make you responsible for everything your children do. They always ask my parents where I am. They tell them “he is working in Ürümchi” and show them a copy of my green card. But now my green card is not enough. They ask them “can you prove that he is not doing illegal work?” So then they show them my commercials on their phone and pictures of me. They can see in the commercials that I am an urban person and that I have a stylish haircut. So then they believe them. If they weren’t able to do this they would put a lot of pressure on my parents to make me come home. This is happening all over southern Xinjiang from Khotan to Kashgar to Aksu; every place is like this now. That is why so many young people in city have been forced to leave. Someone who is part of the city-level Public Security Bureau told me that already 300,000 Uyghurs have been forced to leave the city because of these kinds of pressures. If you don’t have household registration here you are forced to leave. They tell them to return to your hometown and apply for a green card and then you can come back. But actually most people can never process this card. You can never come back. Everyone knows this. That is why young people have so much pressure to go back these days.

For Mahmud the pressure forced him to maintain a particular aesthetic. It made him stop going to the mosque even on Fridays. Instead he prayed privately in his apartment. He kept working, producing commercials for Uyghur companies. Increasingly the narratives of these commercials began to be pitched not just to a Uyghur audience, but to a Chinese speaking audience as well. It was now important that everything spoken in Uyghur be subtitled in Chinese. The symbolism of the Chinese flag began to suffuse Uyghur language commercials. Often the rhetoric of “ethnic unity” (Uy: *milletler ittifaqlig*; Ch: *minzu tuanjie*) was included in the slogans for Uyghur

products. The state began “harmonizing” Uyghur public media consumption and desire toward the political goals of fighting the “Three Forces” of “religious extremism; ethnic separatism and violent terrorism.” The directed public sphere was turned back toward a propaganda state. All unauthorized forms of media were tightly controlled (see Figure 2.5). The human engineering project of the “People’s War” was folded on top of the marketization and global city project that had pulled Uyghurs into the city.



Figure 2.5. A mural near Mahmud’s home village. The inscription reads: “The use of the Internet to download and disseminate violent terroristic audio and video content will be subject to ‘severe’ (Uy: qattiq) legal punishment.”

Aziz was also affected by the aesthetics of the “People’s War on Terror.” Like Mahmud, he was a “green card” holder whose household registration was in Southern Xinjiang. He said his family was also under pressure because he was away from home. He said:

I know (the police in my hometown) are watching me, but I just feel like I have nothing to hide. I am an urban person, anyone can see that from just looking at me. On my WeChat account I actively weed out the people that I think are what they call “separatists” by posting patriotic and ethnic harmony things on my accounts. If someone complains about it; I delete them immediately. Many times those people that are pretending to be really nationalistic are just plants trying to get you to agree with them and say stuff that they can use as evidence against you.

Despite Aziz’s proactive stance in maintaining an acceptable public persona, everything was not well with his family either. His father had also been detained because he had studied Arabic, had some knowledge of Islamic law and had taught others even though he was not authorized to do so. Aziz did not know if they would give him a prison sentence or not. He said that now his mother was barely getting by. He was providing for her as best he could in the city, but he was also worried about what would happen if he went back to his village.

My mom is just barely getting by on her own. We opened a small store where she sells daily necessities and noodles. Actually after Ramadan I need to go back to my village and renew my green card. I don’t know if I will be able to come back or not. Now they are saying that it is really hard for people whose relatives have been arrested to get the card. I have a lot of friends in the police department and also I have money so I think I should be able to do it. But you never know for sure. I would have no reason to live if I went back to the countryside. All of my work is here. If I went there I would just be a farmer.

For Aziz the thought of life as a farmer was no longer a possibility. In this sense his dispossession had been completed, his home had been taken away from him while at the same time the promise of possessing his own life-path by moving to the city in pursuit of economic success was never fully available. His life was not his own; and the supports he had known in his home village were no longer available to him either.

### *Conclusions*

The process of dispossession that Mahmud and Aziz experienced was both a process of material displacement and a psychic transformation. In order to enter the knowledge economy in the city they found that they had to transform their appearances and interests and through this process they were pulled into a new world. At the same time the push of terror in the countryside

both tethered them to the suffering of those they loved and made it impossible for them to consider returning. The risks were simply too high. At the same time, the so-called People's War on Terror began to mediate the aesthetics they were permitted to produce. As the war intensified, everything they made began to feel like a kind of propaganda which ignored the trauma both of them were facing and that was being forced on Uyghur farmers who were suddenly unable to turn off the TV and Internet access they had been given by Chinese development projects. Now Uyghur farmers were forced to watch TV commercials and patriotic programming; they were forced to use their WeChat app to publicly denounce forms of pious Islam and ethnic pride and proclaim their love of the Chinese state. Mahmud and Aziz were forced to carry on business as usual as if the imprisonment of their loved ones had no effect on them. Their urban aesthetics had become a ruse, a grotesque parody of the freedom they had hoped for when they left their villages. They now felt in a much deeper way that their lives and appearances were no longer wholly their own. They had been both been entangled in a process of dispossession and forced to possess a new aesthetic subjectivity. As I show in the next chapter, Uyghur young men were increasingly forced to turn to their friends for social support in an to attempt to survive the human engineering project that was turned upon them. Although Mahmud would eventually find a way to leave the country, as I describe in the epilogue of this project, the future that the city and culture work had seemed to promise him now appeared to be a kind of trap. As Turkish import shops were closed, Aziz turned back toward non-Islamic forms of cosmopolitan self-fashioning and threw himself into Uyghur language culture work that served the needs of the new human engineering project.

**Part 2**  
**Living the City**

### **Chapter 3:**

#### **Figuring Out the City: Slow Dispossession, Storytelling and Uyghur Male Friendship**

The first time I met Ablikim he was sitting in the corner farthest from the door. He was a thin man with a closely-trimmed moustache. He sat hunched over, his shoulders drawn in. He seemed nervous. As is customary among Uyghurs, no one introduced us. The previous week I had met a young man named Batur at a Turkish coffee shop. Now we were at his apartment for a birthday party. I assumed the man in the corner might be Batur's cousin visiting from the countryside. We told each other our names, but I still wasn't really sure how to place him. Over the course of the evening he sat in the corner quietly, his eyes darting around the room. It wasn't until much later, when we were walking home side-by-side that he began to speak. Ablikim didn't like speaking in groups.

He wasn't a new arrival from the countryside; he was Batur's closest friend. They had been living in the city together for nearly a decade. Unlike the young culture workers I discussed in the previous chapter, Ablikim had a bachelor's degree from a university in the city. Because of this certification, he was able to find more institutional affiliation and security in the city, but only for a time. He had recently quit his job as a teacher in a government-operated vocational school. Since then he had been trying to find another job: a job he liked. He had worked as a bookkeeper in a Uyghur fast-food chicken restaurant. He had gone to Beijing, a distance of nearly 2000 miles, to try to find a job as a business consultant with Batur. He had come back to Ürümchi with Batur to try to work for a Turkish food import company as a warehouse manager, but none of these jobs had worked out. He said: "I went to Beijing, and then back to Ürümchi, just to try to figure things out. But I didn't get anything figured out. I'm still trying to figure things out."

As I built a friendship with Ablikim I was struck by how his story as a migrant to the city and the importance of his friendships resonated with the experiences of the dozens of low-income migrants I observed. Although Ablikim had been able to find institutional support as a teacher for a time, like migrants with less formal education, he too had been caught up in the tumult of social violence in Xinjiang. He had first found a job during the summer of 2009 – the same summer when Ürümqi was rocked by Uyghur citizen-rights protests over the unprosecuted mob killing of Uyghur workers by Han migrants in Eastern China. Although he had been in a nearby city during the riots, when he came back to Ürümqi a few weeks later to take up his position as a chemistry teacher, he had been detained by the police. He was let go after a drawn-out interrogation, but that experience, along with countless other experiences of everyday racism over subsequent years, had wounded him to the point that he had finally dropped out of mainstream Chinese city life and stopped looking for work outside the Uyghur enclave at Ürümqi's south end. He gave up his job and developed a constant tremor in his hands. He stayed in his apartment for days at a time, sleeping little. He often spoke about suicide and how his friendship with Batur prevented him from ending his life.

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In many ways Ablikim's position was symptomatic of displacements and disposessions that were happening across the developing world. As capitalism spread around the globe, millions, if not billions, of people were moving from rural poverty to urban precarity; they were being forced to move away from a fragile yet ontologically stable existence as subsistence farmers by urban development, industrial agriculture and forms of dispossession. Over the past two decades in China, 221 million people have abandoned their small plots of land for the hustle of city streets and small concrete apartments (Xiong 2015); since the Xinjiang Uyghur



Autonomous Region is one of the primary receivers of Han migrant urban construction workers, miners and oil workers, the majority of the 22 million inhabitants of the province are also living far from home. As I described in the previous chapter, for Ablikim—and the hundreds of thousands of other Uyghur migrants to the big city of Ürümqi—an additional repulsion was folded into this economic and class-based structural foment. The ethno-racial atmosphere of “counter-terrorism” Ablikim encountered in the city was a mechanism that marked and sorted their bodies in unique and particular ways. In the end they often found themselves slotted by discriminatory hiring and renting practices into the Uyghur enclave at the southern end of Ürümqi, where, for rural underemployed migrants, the violence of ethno-racial policing mixed with feelings of desperation to find firm social footing. Local police entered Uyghur migrants’ homes on a weekly basis, searching for unregistered Uyghurs from the countryside. Checkpoints popped up randomly on street corners and Uyghur men were asked to produce their papers and allow their cell-phones to be scanned for links to “terrorism.” Jobs were hard to find, particularly if a migrant was alone in the city. Life was a hustle.

As Ablikim said one day, “The countryside felt like a lake of stagnant water, but the city feels like a ‘raging river’ (Uy: *derya süyi dawalghup turatti*)”. The relative stability of a stagnant, “boring” Uyghur community on the flat desert plain in Southern Xinjiang had been replaced by the frenetic pace and dangerous terrain of a city where he was surrounded by strangers. The word Ablikim used to describe the “raging” river, *dawalghup*, also carries with it the feeling of social precariousness, of life in chaos, agitation and ferment. In the big city, Ablikim and the thousands of unemployed young Uyghur men just like him found themselves trying to make sense of a Chinese world while using a Uyghur framework. And as they tried to enter that social flow they constantly found themselves pushed into eddies along the side. Since

they were often cut off from their extended families through the process of migration, the violence of this movement made these single young men cling to each other.

As Alan Bray (2003) has noted, the conditions of global capitalism of the late twentieth century have produced a “crisis of friendship” (2003: 2). Increasingly, he argued, elective relationships have appeared as essential elements in processes of identification and political affiliations outside of the dominant norms of citizenship and domestic relations. What stands apart here is that, given the precarious conditions of the racialized city, Uyghur homosocial friendships were not elective. They were experienced as essential to survival. Since migration made young men delay marriage for a time in the city, Uyghur homosocial friendships rose to the fore. Based on my findings and the self-reporting of these young men, these relationships rarely moved beyond the intimacy of close friendship to homosexual relations. Since they did not think of their relationships as queer in that sense, I have chosen not to use the framework of queer theories of friendship in an explicit sense. I do however draw on Michel Foucault’s (1986) understanding of “friendship as a way of life” – a text that is foundational to much of the scholarship on queer friendship.

The hope that was associated with the seeming openness and vital movement that came from transforming Ürümchi into a global city often became a source of cruelty when young men like Ablikim discovered that the dreams to which they had been attached were either “*impossible*, sheer fantasy, or *too possible*, and toxic” (Berlant 2011, 24). In some cases, as in the previous chapter, the religious freedom they anticipated or the culture work opportunities they found in the city were later used by the police as evidence for detention or expulsion from the city. In Ablikim’s case the “too toxic” aspect of his hopes came from the way he “won the lottery” and received a government job as a vocational school teacher. Since job placement rates

for Uyghur college students with baccalaureate degrees were now less than 15 percent due to Xinjiang's state-enforced job discrimination (Tohti 2015), finding a government job in the city was often seen as a major stroke of luck and a way of escaping a life of policing and poverty in small towns in the countryside. Receiving a government position as a civil servant was considered the gold standard of vocational achievement by many Uyghurs, since it offered a guaranteed salary and a full range of social service benefits. Because of this, and because the state only allotted a small percentage of jobs to Uyghur applicants while the rest are given to Han, the competition for government jobs in the city was extremely intense. Often less than two or three Uyghur applicants out of 100 were offered these positions. Clearly, since he received an opportunity like this, Ablikim enjoyed a certain amount of privilege relative to other migrants. Yet after only working for a year he realized that his role at the school was merely that of fulfilling the school's political obligation to build a false sense of "ethnic unity" (Ch: *minzu tuanjie*). In the framework of multicultural domination: he was a diversity hire. The culture work of "ethnic unity" in the context of the Chinese settler-colonial project was, in effect, an unequivocal promotion of Uyghur acceptance of Han chauvinism and settlement in towns throughout the Uyghur homeland. The "unity" it fostered was Uyghur submission to the privileging of state-Han control of their way of life. The falseness of his life as a "success," as defined by his luck in finding a secure job, made him deeply unhappy. Rather than teaching science he was tasked with spreading a message of Chinese state domination in Uyghur communities. After he chose to quit, he felt even more like a failure.

I found that migrants like Ablikim did find limited ways of coping with the impasse of this dispossession. Like many young Uyghur men, Ablikim had the support of a friend who was standing beside him pulling him back to his feet. At times he felt that the supportive dialogues of

friendship were the only thing that kept him alive and struggling to find a way forward. In this chapter I argue that storytelling and the ethics of friendship that come from listening to stories can act as a sort of treatment for desperate feelings of vulnerability on the margins of mainstream societies. More precisely, I argue that among young, underemployed Uyghur men the friendships that arise from hearing and reading stories of dispossession are an emerging source of existential stability. The ethics of friendship that respond to structural violence has had the effect of producing a new genre of storytelling and a new political framing for young Uyghur men in the city.

### *Slow Dispossession, Ethics of Friendship, Storytelling*

During the two years of fieldwork I conducted in Ürümchi since 2011, many friends and acquaintances told me about the way their friends and members of their families disappeared or have been detained indefinitely by the state for resisting or appearing to resist Chinese settler colonialism (Human Rights Watch 2009). Following the protests against the racialized killings of Uyghurs in 2009, disappearances of young Uyghur men became so endemic that local police stations issued a form for families to fill out to request information as to the whereabouts of their loved ones. If they were able to recover the living bodies of their sons and brothers from reeducation facilities and labor camps, often they found them in states of psychic brokenness – frail shells of the vital persons they had once been. My friends spoke often about the struggle to overcome their fear that the same might happen to themselves. They talked about how they had to swallow their pride and not react when confronted with institutional forms of racism and the everyday encounters it produced. They compared Xinjiang to contemporary North Korea and their ethno-racial position to the Jews in Germany, just before the Holocaust. They saw their situation as both a typical site of China's rapid capitalist development and an extreme case of

Chinese structural oppression and Han ethnoracism. Dispossession was forced upon Uyghurs in the city since they were often legally prevented from renting and working. Since their bodies were seen as worthless and not worth grieving, they were made to bear the burden of “underemployment, legal disenfranchisement and differential exposure to violence and death” (Butler 2009: 25). One way into an understanding of how it is possible to live under the conditions of dispossession I discussed in the previous chapter, is through examining a particular kind of friendship between Uyghur young men following the protests and riots of 2009.

As I grappled with these stories and experiences I found that recent research which frames the lives of the dispossessed as an emerging political effect of global capitalism stimulating for thinking through the trauma and daily struggles of marginalized people in post-2009 Ürümqi. The conditions of dispossession under which Uyghurs were living might be referred to as what Judith Butler (2009) and Anne Allison (2013) describe as conditions of “precarity.” This condition that under conditions of terror capitalism I take to mean more than simply underemployment, but also the psychic trauma that arises from structural violence and new sequences of racialization, renders some people more vulnerable than others. Throughout the modern history of capitalism, conditions of dispossession have existed on the margins of societies. Karl Marx ([1852] 1963) conceptualized the dispossessed as the “lumpen proletariat.” This “lumpenization” process refers to the ways in which groups of people, often ethno-racial others, have been refused a class status and instead find ways to work and live in a “gray zone” of the informal economy and “flexible” labor (Bourgois and Schoenberg: 19).<sup>57</sup> Thinking about dispossession as a processual working out of life, allows for a focus less on “zones of exception”

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<sup>57</sup> As scholars of global capitalism have noted (Standing 2011; Muehlebach 2012; Millar 2014), over the past few decades precarity has come to describe the labor conditions of more and more workers around the world. Migrants and ethno-racial minorities are disproportionately affected by this acute form of precariousness.

(Agamben 1998) than an insistence that “engagement with the lives of others must be attendant to the slippages, fraying, and importantly, the exposure of life itself” (Al-Mohammad 2012, 600). Starting from a focus on dispossession as a long slow process refocuses attention on the way lives are not just caught, but also are lived in states of existential instability. This analytic, something I name *slow dispossession* highlights both forms of exploitation and domination but also the agency, control and feeling that emerge over the long duration of first multicultural domination, state-directed material dispossession and now the effects of terror capitalism. Unlike dispossession through war and other forms of quick, immediate, material violence, colonial forms of dispossession often occur over a long, seemingly unending duration. Slow dispossession as an analytic draws attention toward the problems faced by marginalized people and how they figure them out. By turning our attention to the minutiae of vulnerable life, this approach supplements existing scholarship on the macro-politics of Uyghur identity (Bovingdon 2010; Holdstock 2015) by forcing us to take seriously how the lives of the differentially dispossessed are lived.

For Uyghur migrant men who have been separated from their families by their life in the city, maintaining close friendships is a principal way of maintaining a sense of stability in their lives. As in other contexts of precarity, ethical imperatives of their friendships turned on an obligation of “being-with:” of sharing in the pains and joys of each other; mobilizing resources to help the other when they are in need (Al-Mohammad 2010). Most importantly for Uyghur migrants, “being-with” (Uy: *bille*) meant listening to the other; reading the friend in such a way that he or she came to feel as though their lives had entered into the same experience. Solitary Uyghur migrants, most of whom were male, thus came to feel as though the narrative of their lives were seen. In contemporary Islamic societies, such as Uyghur society, gender segregation

along with changes in methods of production have led to a greater reliance on homosocial relations (Ouzgane 2006), particularly in the process of migration (Rana 2011: 119). In an era of market liberalization in China, relationships were often inflected by the utility of socio-economic networks or *guanxi* relations (Smart 1999; Mann 2000) or “associations” (Uy: *munasivet*). Not all relationships were able to turn into friendships, but as conditions of dispossession intensified, they had the effect of forcing young Uyghur men to identify with each other.

Thinking in more ontological terms, theorists such as Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault have argued that friends are those with whom “we share the practice of becoming who we are” (Webb 2003, 119). Speaking in general terms then, homosocial Uyghur friendship differed from other forms of community and kinship in that in such friendships young men were directly pulled into each other’s vulnerability even when those sources of insecurity were not their own. For Foucault this sort of “caring for the self” (1986) or for Arendt, simply, “friendship” (1978), fell along three axes: knowledge and thinking, norms and judging, and self-relation and willing. When the view of knowledge, norms and their selves were exposed to the conduct of a friend, the way Uyghur young men thought, judged, and willed their futures were at times reshaped. Close friendships thus often provided a space in which they could be self-reflective while at the same time tentative and experimental across difference. Unlike with their relations with others, particularly Han acquaintances, Uyghur friends often shared ideas that they had not yet fully considered; they talked about their feelings and, at times, read each other’s minds.

Foucault’s conception of “caring for the self” might be characterized by a state of equilibrium: a “steady *flow*” (Webb 134) that opens to a future, which is “new and unexpected,”

but also remains consistent (Webb 136). As Foucault's interlocutor David Webb puts it regarding the "flow of friendship":

Regularities in the flow are thus shaped in part by regularities in our own practice. If my friend and I meet regularly, we construct a pattern that shapes our existence together. This is the importance of habit, a regularity in the flow of action and experience. We think together and work on ourselves together by meeting to talk and by exchanging ideas, but also by watching the game together, going walking together, drinking wine together. In each case, my future conduct is shaped by the time we spend together, and this time is defined as much by the regularity in our habits as by the deviation that the friend may introduce into the path of becoming (137).

A high intensity flow of friendship – a friendship that springs from shared life experience – can result in a disproportionate influence on the self, relative to other social relationships. It calls friends to a "positive ethics" (Mahmood 2005: 27). An ethics that was oriented beyond a set of regulatory norms toward the demands of evolving interpersonal bonds and changing historical circumstances. In many situations where family relations were attenuated by distance or delayed by instability, as they were for Uyghur migrants, friendships between men became a way to make life endurable.

In gender-segregated Uyghur society, "friendship" has historically been a major source of ethical obligation and sociality. In some areas of the Uyghur homeland people commonly used the word "friend" (*adash*) at the beginning and end of every sentence when speaking to anyone of the same gender and generation. There were many words for friend: *dost*, *adash*, *aghine*, *borader*. All of these variations combined with adjectival modifiers lent a different color and tone to the sort of friendship being described. These relationships ranged from social kinship across a body politic to ritualized forms of fellowship between hosts and travelers. But Uyghurs reserved a special referent for the sort of friendship that is shared by young men such as Ablikim and Batur, the figures I introduced at the beginning of this chapter. They referred to that sort of friendship as a "life and liver friendship" (*jan-jiger dost*) – meaning they were friends who



shared the same life-spirit and liver organ. The liver was considered the seat of courage in Uyghur epistemology (much like the gall of a gall bladder connotes a sense of audacity in other contexts). The Uyghur concept of a “life and liver” friend conveyed the feeling not only of the “soul-mate” aspect of close friendship but also a willingness to sacrifice one’s self for the other as “blood-brothers.” Over the course of my fieldwork, I observed how young men from across the Uyghur homeland used “life and liver” friendships as resource to survive life in the city. For example, I met two young jade sellers from Yaken, Hasan and Adil, who described their relationship as one of life and liver friends. I met a young waiter named Yusup who was best friends with a young kabob-seller named Ibrahim. I met a cell-phone repairman from a small village outside of Khotan who had a *jan-jiger dost* from the same village named Erkin. These homosocial friendships in the broader context of Uyghur dispossession demonstrates that the way young men struggled with dispossession was never fully singular. For young Uyghur men in the city, living with dispossession was often a struggle of friendship – particularly for young men who did not want to rely on the security of the mosque communities I describe in Chapter 5. Friendships did not offer a cure for the exposure they felt in the “raging” (Uy: *dawalghup*) torrent of the city, but they provided a space to narrate it—to try to “figure it out” as Ablikim mentioned when I first met him—and thus an avenue to cope with it “together” (Uy: *billa*).

One of the things friendships did was to give young Uyghur men a daily space for the “subjective in-between” of storytelling (Arendt 1958: 182-184 in Jackson 2002: 11). As many theorists of the politics of narrative have argued, storytelling is a way of giving order and consistency to events in the lives of modernist subjects, who often begin to experience their lives as a narrative of “free will.” In personal stories, modernist subjects—often the narrators—become the main characters rather than bit players on the sidelines of social change. It is not just

that stories give meaning to human lives in general, but rather that they change how people “*experience* the events that have befallen us by symbolically restructuring them” (Jackson 2002: 16). By defining lives, stories supply people with a way of overcoming how social structures block subjects from realizing their hopes. By narrating existence and staging representations of their lives, modernist subjects make their words stand in the place of the world. As Jackson points out, what is crucial here is to understand that the stories that are told are not identical with the structure of societies – rather storytelling is important because it shows subjects how they live. Their importance rests then not in whether stories are true or whether they offer a sense of hope, but in what they indicate about societies and what this knowledge enables subjects to do. Of course, there are many kinds of stories. Some stories confirm what is already known, while others call into question what had previously been thought of as sound knowledge. For Uyghur friends, this latter form, stories which undermined authority and cast aside dominant “regimes of truth” (Foucault 2010) such as the propaganda state of the “People’s War,” could be powerful weapons in maintaining a sense of existential well-being. They could narrate the impasse of slow dispossession when friends felt trapped in a futureless world. Of course, Uyghurs have always been subjects who actively remake their worlds, but they were now also subjects who suffered to a larger degree from circumstances beyond their control. Storytelling was thus only a therapy – not a cure – for the existential precariousness of young Uyghur friends in the city. But no matter how partial storytelling might be in recovering a sense of well-being, my argument here is that storytelling worked to keep people alive in the city even as their relatives “disappeared” into the mass detention system in the countryside.

The obligations that sprung from dispossession provided the conditions of possibility for stories to be told and heard among friends. Since the majority of Uyghur migrants to the city

were single young men who were delaying marriage in order to make a better life for their families back in the countryside, there was also a strong gender component to this phenomenon as well. Young men were sent to the city because they were young men. Uyghur parents often thought that unmarried young women would not be able to survive in the city as under-employed hustlers. Young women did come to the city to work as maids in wealthy Uyghur homes, but they were less of a public presence. In the patriarchal structure of Uyghur society, they were seen as a part of the household where they worked. Young men on the other hand were often on their own. They often came to the city full of masculine energy, the pride of their families and their villages. They wore their mustaches with dignity and wore their single set of clothes boldly. Yet, it was precisely this appearance that rendered them untrustworthy and dangerous as potentially an “ethnic separatist” or “Islamic terrorist” – in the eyes of Han settlers and the police. Uyghur men, like brown and black men elsewhere in the world, were often seen as guilty of harboring violent intentions until proven otherwise. Thousands of underemployed proud young men without families who faced widespread discrimination thus provided the social ground for these emerging friendship networks. In addition, there was an emerging body of Uyghur fiction and poetry that addressed male alienation in the city, to which I will turn in a later section of this chapter, which provided a shared temporal and spatial discursive frame and a way of “being-with” (*billa*) the pain of other depressed young men. For Uyghur young men in the city, male-friendships and the stories friends told were taking on an increasingly vital role in Uyghur masculinity and social life.

### *The Trauma of Slow Dispossession*

Ablikim’s detention in 2009 happened when he was on a public bus traveling from his school – which was in a predominantly Han neighborhood in the northern part of Ürümchi – a

few weeks after the riots. As they were going through a checkpoint he realized that he was the only Uyghur on the bus. Not only that, but he had a mustache, which marked him not as an urban Uyghur with a high level of Chinese language education, but as a migrant from the countryside. His face could be read as overtly masculine and unassimilable in its difference relative to Han faces. He knew that, in the minds of many Han he met, he looked like a suicide bomber. The police took one look at him and immediately forced him off the bus. He said, “At that time I didn’t even know what I said. I was just so terrified. I didn’t know what they would do to me.” The blur of that trauma, although its impact was less immediate than he first anticipated, gave him an unshakable feeling of fear. He said that he felt completely exposed and vulnerable. After that he realized that being a Uyghur in Xinjiang meant that his body could be taken at any time. Since thousands of Uyghur men have been detained and at times disappeared over the last few years, the fear he felt was particularly visceral. In the context of the “People’s War on Terror,” many Uyghurs, including Ablikim, had close friends and relatives suspected of “terrorism, extremism or separatism” who had been detained, tortured and sentenced without due process or notice to their families.

Ablikim said his depression stemmed from both his experience with policing and the apathy and discrimination he received from his coworkers at the school. He said that the experience of being harassed and having no friends turned him into a “crazy person” (Uy: *sarang*).

After I was put in the interrogation room for a couple of hours that time in 2009 it took me years to feel normal again. Actually I still don’t feel normal. That was the whole reason why I started hating that school and my job and why I eventually quit. It is so hard to get over things like that. For the next year I acted like a crazy person. I think I gave all of my coworkers a very bad impression of me. They thought I was some strange guy who was always nervous, always shy, never willing to talk or act in normal ways.

He found out later that his students and fellow teachers, who were mostly Han, openly referred to him as the “Mustache Teacher” (Ch: *Huzi Laoshi*) behind his back. He said that, perhaps for these reasons, and because he had no friends at the school, the administrators decided that he should be sent to the countryside as a political instruction “volunteer” – a practice which had become standard method of implementing colonial re-education in rural Xinjiang since the Maoist human engineering projects in the 1950s and 1960s and the implementation of the “Open Up the West” campaign in the 2000s. These projects were reenergized after the 2009 riots between Uyghur and Han migrants (Silk and Chen 2014). As Ablikim put it: “After I taught at that school in Ürümchi for two years they sent me away. But in the end I just quit. I couldn’t do it.” Because of his failure to meet the expectations of his family to keep his stable job and earn enough money to start his own family, Ablikim felt like a failure. Since he had received a coveted opportunity to become a salaried government employee but could not follow through with the position, he felt deeply despondent. He said:

One of the hardest things about quitting my job was that most of my family was really upset with me. They felt like they had sacrificed a lot so that I could get that job, and that I wasn’t being very grateful. But I really wasn’t very happy in that situation. I had no real role. It was just a fake government job (as a propaganda worker from the city). There was no way that I could be happy doing it. So I quit that job.

The reason Ablikim began studying chemistry in the first place was not in order to work as a teacher. Like many of his classmates, he saw science as the answer to overcoming the perceived “backwardness” (*luohou*) of Uyghur positions relative to mainstream Han society. Already in the 1980s, before the market economy and mass media infrastructure reached the Uyghur homeland, science and engineering became a primary focus of Chinese education and, thus became a central focus of Uyghur-language curriculum. Since the language of science was seen as universal and necessary for developing the nation it became the preferred topic of study for both Han and

Uyghurs. In opposition to the political rhetoric that dominated the earlier Maoist era, science came to be seen as the way of the future.

In Xinjiang this push toward engineering became even more prominent as resource development became the primary driver of the economy in the 1990s. As Ablikim put it plainly, “I got interested in chemistry because I thought it would lead to a good job in the oil industry.” But Ablikim also found solace in chemistry research; he learned to speak its language and took pleasure in it. “There is something about me that makes remembering rare facts about chemicals and compounds easy. I also really liked working in the lab and creating chemicals that had never been seen before. The colors that those compounds could create were so strange and unnatural. I had never seen anything like that before.” Like many young Uyghur students, Ablikim gained a strong feeling of self-worth from mastering something as universal and modern as chemistry. For the first time in his life he did not feel the limits of being a minority; with science he could fashion a self that seemed to have universal social value. As a scientist he had access to a world beyond language and skin-color. When he was in the lab he felt as though his primary position was that of a scientist. His ethnicity seemed as though it was no longer a disadvantage relative to Han colleagues.

Yet despite the pleasure and security he took in science, he found that outside of the lab his scientific skill had little currency. Immediately after college, his uncle, who was a leader in a county-level state-owned utility company in the countryside, pulled some strings to get Ablikim a job at a chemical factory on the outskirts of Ürümqi. Unlike the laboratory, which he had loved so much, this job required intense manual labor alongside Han migrant workers; it didn’t require any expertise at all. And Ablikim was one of the only Uyghurs working for the company. “When I worked at the chemical factory I really felt as though there was no place for me. I

worked at that factory for 4 months, but during that whole time I never felt comfortable. It was just too Han.”

The same uncle then arranged a teaching position at a state-run vocational school, but again the same result. “At that school too, I never felt comfortable the whole time. On the surface everyone was always really nice to me; they never said anything bad to me. But I could always see in their eyes that they were judging me. They were thinking that I wasn’t qualified for the job. I felt this the whole time. And so I put on a fake persona too. I tried to act really nice all the time. Really agreeable. But it always felt fake to me.” For Ablikim, the experience of working for Han employers required him to give up too much of what he valued. In order to make himself marketable in the new environment he felt he had to give up his attachments to Uyghur masculinity. The impossibility of developing what felt like “authentic” relationships with his Han coworkers, the stress of teaching unmotivated students, coupled with the dispossessing effects of the “People’s War” directed toward Uyghur men forced him to reroute his life.

The institutions Ablikim found in the city were oriented around Hanness. As Sara Ahmed points out, racialized institutions “take the shape of ‘what’ resides within them” (2006: 132). In these kinds of homogenous spaces, bodies of the majority are “somatic norms” that make non-majority bodies feel “‘out of place,’ like strangers” (Ahmed 2006:133). Although he could never pass as Han, Ablikim was nevertheless called into these spaces which were built around the power and reach of Han bodies. When he entered these institutions he felt his body being stopped and searched over and over again both by security guards at the entrance to the institutions but also by all of the bureaucrats and other Han workers and students that he encountered. He felt as though every conversation, every encounter was filled with questions: Who are you? What are you doing here? He felt as though he was being rejected by the

institutions and was being forced to go back to Southern Xinjiang “where he belonged.”

Accustomed to being rejected and out of place, he found himself always looking over his shoulder. He felt he had no choice but to opt out.

Lauren Berlant uses the phrase “slow death” to describe the “physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence” (2011: 95). For her, the key here is the way “mass physical attenuation” results from the precariousness of social violence and displacement. For Uyghurs this feeling was not only a condition of capitalist exploitation, as it was primarily in Berlant’s case. Instead for Uyghurs it was also a relationship of colonial domination. For this reason “slow death” felt like a “slow dispossession” – a physical wearing out that defined their historical existence, but that was directed by the institutions of the state rather than simply the forces of global capitalism. Given the way the “People’s War on Terror” directly impacted the agency of millions of Uyghurs—it prevented them from finding jobs or working their own land; blocked them from moving except under direct orders; directed them in what and how they could sing and dance; forced them to watch state television and proclaim their undying loyalty to the state; dictated what they could wear and how they cut their hair—it seemed as though slow dispossession adequately described the conditions under which many Uyghurs lived. The psychological violence of both exploitation and domination was expressed through the arbitrariness of detentions and disappearances. The lack of solidity in knowing the truth of what was happening and the apparent arbitrariness of who was chosen for detention placed the burden of narrating this process on the shoulders of the individual. There were no institutions that would help them assess the truth of what was occurring. Ablikim’s experiences were thus often symptomatic of the experiences of someone attempting to live while slowly



being subtracted from social life. Yet, as Chapter 5 will show, these feelings of slowness were also temporary.

In February of 2015, back in his home village Ablikim's brother was detained for having a religious text on his smart phone. In order to avoid a five-year prison term for "religious extremism," he and his family paid the police 10,000 *yuan*. For Ablikim, the work of living in the midst of this traumatic experience meant not sleeping at night, it meant crying while his mother described how his younger brother was taken, arguing with his father about why he didn't want to return to the countryside to support his family and having his heart pound when someone called from an unknown number. It meant pacing around his concrete apartment, thinking, worrying about the future. He was always wary; it was often impossible for him to eat or sleep.

The trauma of police harassment and losing his job transformed Ablikim. As with many young Uyghur men, the past five years of intensified discrimination and disillusionment triggered a defensiveness that leads toward conflict escalation – a kind of lashing out in order to grasp for some agency. He told me a story over and over again about how sometime in 2013, four years after he was detained on the bus, he and one of his friends, Tursun, were walking in a market area near the train station when a Han policeman confronted them and asked to check their ID cards. He said, "I told him, 'Why do you want to check our ID cards? We're not doing anything. Why don't you check some Han people's ID cards?' He immediately made us go with him to the police station. I wasn't scared at all. Tursun was scared. But I wasn't scared at all. I didn't do anything wrong so why should I be scared of them? If they don't respect me, why should I respect them?" After threatening them, eventually the police let them go. This incident was similar to numerous incidents I observed in which Ablikim and a wide range of other

underemployed migrants confronted other people, both Uyghur and Han, over perceived slights or offenses. Beneath his placid expression, nervous eyes and trembling hands he carried a deep anger.

In segments of societies characterized by both economic and legal uncertainty, the role of honor takes on a greater significance (Brown 2016). When legal and institutional structures are set up to dominate and dispossess racialized minorities, members of such groups are often forced to place a great deal of weight on the ability of their reputations to protect them from imposed vulnerability. As resource-poor actors, the limited protection of a semblance of honor and dignity offers them a sense of existential security. Reacting strongly to perceived insults and slights is a way of reducing opportunities for exploitation. At the same time reacting strongly to strangers is radically different from sharing stories of insecurity with friends. When Ablikim lost his protective shield by telling his stories he was also negotiating his relationship to his sense of honor. He was in fact extending his honor to his friends and asking them to fight with him to preserve his dignity by exposing the vulnerability of his position. Our role as Ablikim's friend is to provide a buffer from the insults of strangers and the threat of police violence.

### *Telling Uyghur Stories of Slow Dispossession*

I suddenly realized that no matter how hard I tried I couldn't figure out where my place was, where I was, or what street I was on. Not only this, but I didn't really know which city I was in. The clarity of my thoughts gradually faded and I lost my perception of space. What country was I in? I gradually came to realize that I didn't even know what planet I was on. I was lost in the infinite universe. Just then I realized that everyone becomes a homeless wanderer after they are born and has difficulty finding a proper place for themselves as soon as they touch the ground and let out their initial cry. They will spend their whole life trying to determine their position – becoming anxious and griping about its vagueness. Everyone is a wanderer in space (57).

-From *The Big City* by Perhat Tursun

As I got to know Ablikim better I suggested that we should meet regularly to read and discuss Uyghur language urban fiction which represents the ways in which Uyghurs figure out the city. Perhaps because Ablikim was chronically underemployed and because the two of us were becoming close friends, he agreed. The Uyghur language novella I suggested was *The Big City* by Perhat Tursun – one of the most provocative contemporary Uyghur language writers.<sup>58</sup> As has been recently noted (Allen-Ebrahimian and Byler, 2015), Perhat Tursun was an alienated figure in the Uyghur literary world. Rather than using fiction as tool of moral instruction, Tursun wrote against the grain about social violence, mental illness and sexual desire. Since Uyghur literature was heavily influenced by Chinese socialist-realism, as well as an indigenous tradition of epic storytelling which privileges didactic and heroic Uyghur moral instruction (Thum 2015), this modernist approach to literature was not well-received. Instead, historical fiction that highlighted the exploits of the modern founders of the Uyghur nation as well as satirical fiction informed by socialist-realist moralism has become wildly popular with Uyghur readers. Since Tursun, instead, wrote in conversation with western authors such as William Faulkner, Franz Kafka, and Albert Camus about traditionally taboo subjects, many Uyghur intellectuals distanced themselves from his work. It was precisely for these reasons that Ablikim had not read his work previously. Since it was the first time for both of us to read his work, our encounter with the warrens of *The Big City* was a shared experience of reading and interpreting.

*The Big City* follows several days in the life of an unnamed Uyghur man who comes to Ürümchi from the countryside after finding a job in a government work unit. As we read through the story we began to understand the protagonist's estrangement in his Han-dominated work environment; we read how the young man was trying to escape the violence and poverty of the

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<sup>58</sup> For more on Perhat Tursun's influence and writing see Byler 2018b.

Uyghur homeland in Southern Xinjiang; we saw how he used mathematics as a language to transcend his minority status; and we saw how his coworkers rejected him and how he slowly descended into madness. All along the way we noticed the way the protagonist translated the Chinese world around him in his mind. The character in the novella never quoted anyone speaking Chinese directly. Instead, he used Uyghur words and imagery to reconstruct a Chinese world as a vivid Uyghur world full of fog, cold, sewage, beauty, lust and loathing. The fogginess of the world made the future appear bleak and hazy, but it also held some potentiality as the protagonist wandered the city while dreaming of the past in the countryside and holding out hope for a place in the city.

As we read, Ablikim found striking parallels between the novella and the migrant life he knew. We sat close to each other, our knees touching, in the corner of a Turkish coffee house reading the novella. We spent hours discussing how disorienting life in the city was for young people who had just come from the countryside. Over bowls of rice pilaf (*polu*), hand-pulled noodles (*laghman*) and endless cups of sweet Turkish tea, we talked about how, in the city young migrants needed to develop a new sense of direction; how the geographical features that they had used to organize their world appeared scrambled. Mountains that used to be to the north were now to the southwest. Houses in the countryside were often built in reference to Mecca – a wall forming the spot where people prayed. He felt it was hard to locate one's self in the city since the orientation of apartment buildings were rectilinear and turned in directions dictated by the grid of the streets. As Perhat Tursun wrote in *The Big City*:

I lost my sense of direction when I first came to the city. Since I was a kid I always thought the higher side was the north and the lower side was the south, and because of this I always gave myself a feeling of disorientation. Even after I realized that my method for determining the direction was wrong, I couldn't correct it. My small village was located on the southern slope of the mountains. As you walked to the south, the land gradually descended into a scrubby marshland. When the sheep we were herding were

grazing in the marshland, I would lie in the grass with my head resting toward the north and feel as though it was higher than the rest of my body. This feeling which I got from my birthplace became a permanent principle of my constitution. It grasped me very firmly and prevented me from correctly understanding the geographical situation and cardinal directions of other places (26).

For Ablikim and the protagonist of *The Big City* this sense of disorientation was complicated by the changing set of rules that governed the streets as well. Unlike contemporary Chinese cities outside of Xinjiang, in Ürümchi every company, every school, every mosque, every police station, every park, every residential area was surrounded by walls and gates as they were for most of the Maoist Era. There was no way to enter these spaces without the tacit consent of the guards who watched who came and went. It was at these bottlenecks that Uyghur young men were most frequently detained and questioned. As Ablikim put it:

Gatekeepers in the city are always trying to exert their authority over other people. Even though they know and you know that they have no real power other than their control over the gate, they will still often demand that you show a lot of respect for them. And unless you manage to develop a good relationship with them, they will never help you solve any problems you have with the bureaucracy of the place they are guarding. They will always tell you ‘it’s not my problem.’ They are one of the most frustrating aspects of living in the city. But people still think they are necessary. Most of them think that a place is not secure without them. I can’t believe they are treating us (Uyghurs) like this. This is a modern developed city of over 3 million people, but they are still trying to herd us like animals. What do they think they will really accomplish by doing this?<sup>59</sup>

Prior to the protests of 2009, many Uyghur migrant workers or underemployed school teachers like Ablikim, lived in tightly-built neighborhoods of gray, single-story courtyard (Uy: *hoyla oy*; Ch: *pingfang*) housing.<sup>60</sup> As I will describe in greater depth in later chapters, this

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<sup>59</sup> As one Uyghur urban planner told me “There is a Chinese saying: guard the gate well; protect your people well (Bashou damen hao; baohu ni de ren hao, 把守大门好; 保护你的人好). People think that every housing district and company should have a wall so in order to protect it from strangers. Since society is becoming more complex this has become more important. Before in the countryside there were none of these walls, but now even in the countryside, the schools and housing districts have walls and guards around them.” Of course in cities outside of Xinjiang, where the perceived threat of ethnic violence is less pervasive, walls have only been retained around exclusive housing complexes; other institutional spaces are now often freely accessible.

<sup>60</sup> See Dautcher 2009 for thick descriptions of life in these neighborhoods in the Uyghur city of Ghulja near the border with Kazakhstan.

housing, which was primarily owned by Uyghur and Hui migrants, was often built in an ad-hoc manner without the requisite legal paperwork. In the years that followed the eruption of violence and suppression in 2009, much of this housing was demolished and replaced with government housing in high-rise apartment buildings. Neighborhoods with a high percentage of Uyghur residents that were not demolished were radically transformed through the introduction of new walls blocking off alleyways and the installation of tens of thousands of closed-circuit surveillance cameras, which were monitored from command centers in every city block. The gate-keepers Ablikim complained about were part of this security apparatus – reporting any suspicious activity directly to the neighborhood police station. Over recent years this system of constant surveillance intensified. This made Ablikim feel as though even living in the Uyghur parts of the city was no longer really safe.

Even as we were reading *The Big City* together, these feelings of insecurity occasionally interrupted our reading just as they seemed to interrupt the thoughts of the protagonist of the book. On one occasion we met at Ablikim's apartment in a government housing project near Ürümqi's South Bus Station. Being together in that space had an effect on us since it was a Uyghur-dominated area that was tightly controlled by local security forces. Up until two weeks prior Ablikim's cousin had been living with him. Since he was from the countryside, his cousin had needed to obtain what Uyghurs commonly referred to as a "Green Card" (*yeshil kart*) from his hometown attesting to his status as a "good citizen" (*yaxshi puqra*).<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> This is an ironic reference to U.S. immigration policy and the status of Uyghurs as third-class citizens, beneath the strata of rural Han farmers and migrants, of the Chinese nation. See the introduction for more assessment of this passbook system.

Since Ablikim's cousin did not have the requisite documentation, neighborhood security officers had entered his home every few nights to check on the situation. Ablikim said that when they came:

They thought I was hiding something, so they searched all the rooms and looked under all the beds. Once they even demanded that I let them look at my computer. I was like, what the hell! You don't know anything about me, but you think I'm some sort of criminal. I asked them if they had some sort of warrant that gave them the right to demand this sort of thing. And this made them really mad. But I was furious. What the hell! It is bad enough that they come here to check on us all the time, but then they try to push us around like this as well. What the hell!

As he spoke, Ablikim, who was normally so quiet and withdrawn, became really animated. He was pacing around. He normally never swore, but now he was interjecting curse words into every sentence.

Two weeks before our talk his cousin had given up on living in the city. He didn't have any friends. He didn't have his "Green Card." It just wasn't worth it to deal with the harassment. Ablikim said that his cousin blamed him for what had happened because he had told his family that it would be no problem for him to come. But then it turned out to be a big problem and now Ablikim was on the radar of the neighborhood police.

A few minutes after he had told me this story the buzzer from the front door of his building rang. Both of us looked at each other. He said, "What the hell! I'm not answering." My mind raced as I thought about how I would explain what we were doing, an American researcher and Uyghur migrant alone in a Uyghur apartment, when the police started knocking on the door.

The knock never came. It must have just been neighbors who forgot their key to the building. We had merely been interpellated as disciplined subjects of the state. In an intensification of the way someone walking down the street is hailed when they hear a police officer yell "Hey you!" into a crowd, to use Althusser's famous example (1971), with the buzzer

the state had invaded even the most intimate spaces of Ablikim's life. In the span of several minutes an intimate conversation between friends was shattered by the call of the state; for a second we were terrified. Then we turned to each other and said we were not answering the call. We decided in a split second to stand as friends and ignore the police.

This moment offers a window into the way psychic stress gets allocated to the least powerful in the racialized politics of Uyghur dispossession. Just as in the book, where the protagonist was pushed around by even the Han janitors in his work unit, Ablikim lived in a state of constant paranoia and fear. His neighbors and low-level security officers all seemed to have the agency to affect his life, but he felt as though he could affect no one. The toxic atmosphere of surveillance and oppression was immensely frustrating for him. It slowly wore him down. Living under conditions of slow dispossession was what Arthur Kleinman (2000) described as living with a particular Chinese form of "social violence." He described the way differential controls of movement, lack of agency, and the disparity between public speech and lived reality fosters a "deep reservoir of rancor, bitter resentment, fantasies of revenge" (2000: 234) among marginalized people in contemporary China. Although Kleinman does not frame his analysis specifically around the stress of contemporary migrant and minority life, the conditions of both exploitation and domination under which Uyghurs lived their dispossession resonate with his findings. In fact, it is likely that that Uyghur feelings are equal to, if not more intense, than Han experiences, particularly since the as terror capitalism was called into existence.

Pun Ngai (2005) has noted the way the gendered and rural origins of Han migrant women in Shenzhen often resulted in the negative intersectionality. In a similar, yet even more dispossessing intersectionality, the gendered, ethno-racial positioning and rural origins of young Uyghur men acted as a triple intensifier. Of course, Uyghur women are also being placed in



deeply precarious positions as well, but the threat of direct violence and profiling from the state was skewed heavily in the direction of men. Women were not often read as potential terrorists while rural-origin men were nearly always perceived as threatening. The everyday dispossessions experienced by Han migrant women under Chinese state-directed capitalist development as they were pulled into exploitative social relations in factories in Eastern China, were redirected toward Uyghur bodies as their bodies were both exploited and dominated as the primary object of terror capital. Their bodies justified the massive buildout of detention facilities. In their subtraction they offered numerous forms of surplus value: spaces open for Han settlement, the promise of commodified security technology that could be exported along the New Silk Road, and jobs for hundreds of thousands of police.

Like the main figure in *The Big City*, Ablikim often fought his boredom and depression by walking the city as an anonymous observer. “When I feel depressed I just walk. Sometimes I walk most of the day, just trying to get lost in what people are doing or noticing how things look. I never did this when I was growing up in the countryside because we were always too busy. People there just work hard and then come home and eat and sleep.” As the “People’s War” intensified though, the fear of being noticed by the police made him want to walk in circuits where he could blend in with other Uyghurs. The anonymity of being unrecognized made him feel more secure. While he was walking, Ablikim did interesting things with the scenes he observed. Just like the main character in the novel, he let the feeling of the city take on a life of its own. He liked collecting phrases from t-shirts people wore and billboards he saw around the city. He often wrote down Chinese and English phrases he saw like: “Can’t tame me,” “Fast or last,” “Hey, love me,” “I am lost,” “Think, think, think.” He said thinking about them made him laugh. It gave him the feeling that he was narrating the city; getting lost in the way its images

created a kaleidoscope of feeling. Of course, in the end, the sense of agency he received from reading the city was often met with a sense of paralysis since the slow yet inevitable human engineering project that was underway seemed to make it impossible for him to find a place in the city. Often walking the streets was not enough for him to overcome his boredom and depression. He said:

“I just worry all the time about my future. It makes me really depressed. Mostly it has to do with my work. I’ve been trying for so long time to find a real job, but I just can’t find one. The longer it goes the more apathetic I become. I completely understand why someone could commit suicide. So much of the time life feels meaningless, and the parts of life that I enjoy are so rare.

It was in these “slow” (Uy: *asta*) moments that Ablikim turned to a resource that the protagonist in the novella did not seem to have: friendship.

#### *Friendship as a Way of Living with Dispossession*

In *The Big City* the main protagonist continuously mutters the phrase “No one in this city recognizes me, so it’s impossible for me to be friends or even enemies with anyone.” When I asked the author of the novella, Perhat Tursun, why this phrase became the refrain of the book, Perhat said that the feeling of invisibility was something that gave the protagonist a “sense of security.” That is to say, when he muttered this under his breath he was reassuring himself of his existential stability. But, of course, in the novel the protagonist also actively seeks out recognition from people he meets on the street. He wants to be seen as a carrier of knowledge; he wants to be loved and desired. The relative freedom of anonymous urban life was thus undercut by the atomizing effect of disconnection and loneliness.

As much as Ablikim identified with the story in the novella, reading it and telling his own story gave him a way of highlighting the differences between the suicidal trajectory of the protagonist and his own life path. Without his friendships, Ablikim said, he would have become

lost in the city. He said that without the intervention of his “life and liver” friend Batur, he would have killed himself. That was why he followed Batur across the country first to Beijing and then back to Ürümqi. He felt as though he owed him his life. Ablikim said that part of the reason he and Batur became so close was because they had both opted out of the system in certain ways:

It is hard to find friends in the city. If you are a migrant without an official place it is difficult to meet people. When I came there were 50 of us in the same class, we were all the same age, we all had the same status so it was easy to make friends. But after college, it became really hard to relate to my old classmates who gave up on being free and took government jobs as teachers and police back in the countryside. We don’t have anything in common anymore. Now the first questions they ask are: why aren’t you married? Why don’t you get a real job? Those of us who haven’t found answers to those questions just hang out with each other, this is why Batur and I are such good friends.”

But there is more to the closeness between Batur and Ablikim than simply this. Like many young Uyghurs from the countryside, Batur himself had experienced devastating loss. As a child his father was killed in a street fight with other Uyghur men. His father’s murderer was never brought to justice and from his mother and siblings he learned how to keep on living. For him there were lots of reasons not to give up. Growing up in a small town in Southern Xinjiang, he had developed a close bond with his elementary school classmate Ablikim. They had shared everything. They had shared food with each other every day for years. They had often discussed their dreams of moving to the city and pursuing fame and fortune. They imagined that they would be “life and liver” friends for the rest of their lives.

Once when Batur stopped by while Ablikim and I were reading *The Big City* in our corner of the Turkish coffee shop, we started talking about Batur’s relationship to the city. As was his habit, Batur spoke in an off-the-cuff monologue. He said:

I like to think that life in the city is a joke, that everything about it is funny. If you approach it from this angle there is no reason to get frustrated or angry in reaction to it. Of course there are some things like sitting in a police station waiting for paperwork to be processed that can be infuriating. So that is why I just say, fuck it, and avoid those situations at all cost. I don’t even have an official Ürümqi resident permit (*hukou*) even

though it says I do on my ID card. I'm totally fine with this. If they don't know about me, why should I tell them? The less they know the better. And since it says Ürümqi on my ID it is never a problem when I travel in the South. I run not in order to achieve something; just as a practice of living. If you stay active like this, the meaninglessness of life can't get you down. There is no meaning in life, but what are you going to do, kill yourself? No. I have to believe that parts of life are fun. And that is why I keep on living.

At this point he paused and motioned to Ablikim who was sitting on the opposite side of the table. He said: "He tried to kill himself twice, or at least talked really seriously about it. But I always told him, why are you talking like this? You have to live your life. Work at it." Ablikim did not say anything in response. He just smiled. I turned to Batur and asked him what friendships mean to him when he feels as though life is meaningless. He said:

Friendships are important because they let you sympathize with other people and share each other's pain. Friendship is what helps you get through those times in life when nothing seems to make sense. Friendships don't drag you down, they build you up. They are different from the obligations you have to your families. Some friends will fuck you up, so you have to stop hanging out with them. You can't do this with family. I don't have to like everything my family does, but I have to accept it. And just let it go. This isn't the same as my relationships with my friends. Friends build each other up. They help each other learn how to better pace themselves when they run in the system. It's about rhythm and breath-control.

For Batur and Ablikim, friendship was something that prevented them from panicking. It helped them to remember to keep breathing. Without it life in the city often seemed impossible. Their families back in the countryside could not provide the support they needed. In the city they needed "life and liver" friends in order to figure out their lives.

When Batur talked Ablikim down from the ledge, he did it by making him think about how to keep moving forward. They talked about philosophy and argued about religion; they talked about living honestly, criticized Uyghur pop culture icons and watched American comedies and science-fiction thrillers. But mostly what Batur did was more concrete than that. As with many of the pairs of "life and liver" friends I met, they felt that sharing food was essential to their well-being. If a day passed without them a shared meal, both of them would

begin to feel lonely. So Batur made Ablikim get out of the house and share a meal with him. He also helped Ablikim find jobs. On numerous occasions Batur quit jobs himself so that he could help Ablikim find work. He said he “had to do it.” It was what needed to be done and so he just did it. Ablikim’s life was part of his own life, so he did not see it as some sort of major sacrifice. It was part of the logic of their friendship. That was the main reason why they moved back from Beijing and why, more recently, Batur left a management position at a Turkish import company to start a new short-term job at a company that would agree to hire both of them. Of course Batur benefited from their relationship as well. The two of them argued with each other; but mostly Ablikim listened – and that gave Batur a sense of recognition and well-being as well. In many ways, Ablikim saw his life reflected in *The Big City*. Unlike the protagonist in the novel, Ablikim and many other young Uyghur men had friends around them who shared both their instability and their pain. Their attachment to the sociality of the countryside had not been as deeply cut off as it had been for the figure in the novella. They still knew that it was better to be precarious together than alone (Al-Mohammad 2012). The feelings of vulnerability that came from the control of the state, the policing of male migrant Uyghur bodies, and the shame that came from the lack of a stable social role in the city shaped how they cared for each other. Of course male friendship has been a major aspect of Uyghur masculinity for centuries (Roberts 1998), but in this current social moment when more and more young men are leaving their villages and delaying marriage until they have established themselves in the city, homosocial bonds appeared to have taken on a new significance.

The friendship inscribed in contemporary “life and liver” friendships that I introduced near the beginning of this chapter came from multiple sources. Since Uyghurs had a long tradition of pre-modern urban living in the oasis cities along the old Silk Road, the development

of specialized trades and crafts have long affected the life-paths of young men. For centuries, a minority of young men have left their hometowns and traveled to nearby cities to apprentice as bakers, tinsmiths, woodworkers and other professions. Often these earlier forms of migration were formed around natal-home relationships. Young men who shared the same hometown (Uy: *yurtdash*) were often the first people to become friends in a new urban location. The second element, in the contemporary iteration of “life and liver” friendships, was a newer development. Often close friends were classmates (Uy: *sawaqdash*) from the same school. This emphasis on the classmate relationships was a recent phenomenon that corresponded with Chinese late-socialist family planning policy and the organization of Chinese school systems. Since most Uyghur families had only three children and since the education system placed children within a singular, segmented, unchanging class throughout primary and secondary education, many young Uyghurs (as with Chinese classmates [*tongban tongxue*] more generally) have come to think of classmates of the same gender in terms similar to that of siblings. In the case of Ablikim and Batur, they had been classmates for over 17 years. All through their lives they had shared an interwoven life-path. The Chinese multicultural institutions of family planning and education that were meant to corral their bodies into permitted Chinese “model minority” slots had shaped the conditions of the relationships that sustained their autonomy.

The closeness of their friendship gave their life a sense of stability that would not have otherwise been there. Part of the reason Ablikim had been unhappy in his job as a “volunteer” propaganda worker in the South was because he was apart from Batur. The same was true of Batur’s life in Beijing and his work in Ürümchi for the import company: if Ablikim was unhappy it was hard for Batur to feel happy as well. There is a Uyghur saying that describes the sort of obligations their relationship entailed: “A friend’s friendship is revealed the day tragedy befalls

you” (Uy: *dostning dostluqi bashqa kün chüshkende biliner*). What this means is that friendship has the power to mitigate a failure in the present and sustain a horizon of possibility. What is particularly intriguing here is that it was the ongoing practice of friendship itself which gave weight and promise to the future of their narrative; Batur himself did not have the power to give Ablikim’s dreams possibility. The obligations of friendship here have a certain agency. The subjective-inbetween was what gave them their will to live. Despite the misery of the present, being together in their predicament gave them more than the sum of their individual narratives. As in spaces of violence in other parts of the world, life under constant threat had the effect of bringing their ethical and experiential intercorporeality into tighter focus (Al-Mohammad 2010). The exposure of life to uncertainty was what allowed them to share each other’s wounding and suffering so directly. Violence, after all, hurts the most when it threatens those close to you and you are powerless to do anything about it (Jackson 2002: 39). In this case then, the inability of a Uyghur migrant to tell his story to a friend was a kind of suspension of social life; likewise sharing the pain of a friend was something that kept them alive.

### *Figuring out the City*

While reading *The Big City* Ablikim began to merge his own story with the narrative of the novel. In doing so he began to feel as though telling me his own story of the city was a way for him to figure out the city. As he spoke he became the center of a story of Ürümchi; the history of his depression took on a narrative form. It was a story both of coming-of-age and a broken journey. It had no neat conclusion, but it did have a tight focus. Ablikim’s story was about precariousness and the friendship it inspired. He said that as a kid growing up in the countryside he always felt optimistic.

Maybe this was because I did very well in school. Even the first two years of college I did very well. I was always the top one or two students in my classes. But then when I

was studying in college, I started to ask questions like ‘What is the meaning of life?’ I asked a lot of classmates, people that I thought were smarter than me, what they thought of these questions, but none of them gave me very satisfactory answers.

Ablikim felt as though coming to the city from the countryside was what triggered these questions.

When I came to the city I suddenly realized that there were many things about the world that I didn’t know or had never experienced. Before this I just hadn’t given much thought to my future; I lived very freely. But all of the sudden I realized that there was a lot more to life than I thought.

Ablikim felt dislocated in the city. Suddenly he was in an environment where he didn’t know how things worked; outside of Batur he didn’t have a strong network of friends and relatives to rely on. He felt alone in a hostile world. He felt as though life in a Chinese city was fundamentally different from life in the countryside. He said that in the countryside everyone knew everything about everybody else. “If you don’t fit in, everyone will talk about you. Everyone watches to see if you go to the mosque or not. They watch everything.” But in a big city like Ürümqi everything was different.

Here no one in your neighborhood cares openly about what you do. But in your workplace, everyone has a group they are a part of: religious, drinking, pro-government. If you don’t belong to any of those groups then no one will talk to you. They will act as though you don’t exist, and you won’t know what it happening. If they can’t place you, then they don’t know how to act around you so it is better to act as though you are nobody.

Here, Ablikim was pointing toward the problem of not being recognized. The anomie of city life, the way that it felt at times to be absolutely ignored and then suddenly to be noticed and predetermined as guilty, made him feel as though he was nearing social death. The way he felt “cut dead” by his fellow teachers, students, passengers on the bus, the police and society in general is something William James remarked on at the end of the nineteenth century,

If no one turned round when we entered, answered when we spoke, or minded what we did, but if every person we met ‘cut us dead,’ and acted as if we were non-existing things,



a kind of rage and impotent despair would ere long well up in us, from which the cruellest bodily tortures would be a relief; for these would make us feel that, however bad might be our plight, we had not sunk to such a depth as to be unworthy of attention at all (James [1890] 1950: 293-294).

The “turning round” that James is describing here operates on a different register than the hailing that we had experienced in Ablikim’s apartment. Rather than being made a subject and realizing one’s own subjectivity according to power relations—although this is also an aspect of Ablikim’s subjectification—here I am positing that a subject also realizes his subjectivity through inter-subjective exchange with friends. This is more than a political relationship of power. As Veena Das and Bhri Gupta Singh might argue, this is an ethical relationship of care: ethical relations that escape political power relations (Das 2007; Singh 2015). They describe how one ought care for the self and the other; rather than prescribe how we ought to live together.

Near the end of my year watching Ablikim figure out the city, reading *The Big City* with him and listening him tell me his story, he told me: “This year is the most real that I’ve ever felt. I feel like I am closer to being honest about who I really am and what I actually want than I ever have been before. It has been really good for me.” Reading and talking about Uyghur stories of life in the city had been therapeutic for him; it had also drawn us close, opened me up to his world of pain and anxiety and given me an analytic for understanding why “life and liver” friendships were so important to the dozens of Uyghur migrants I had closely observed throughout my fieldwork. This is more than a political relationship of power – the ability to affect another. As Veena Das would argue, this is an ethical relationship of care: ethical relations that escape political power relations (Das 2007).

As has been frequently noted in the literature on post-traumatic depression, language often breaks down when attempting to tell stories of violent experience (Das 2003). The numbness of trauma and the slowness of Ablikim’s descent into depression made it even harder

to put words to his feelings. It was hard to say why he felt the way he did. By the end of the year when he said he felt “real,” it seemed as though he was indicating that he had new means of managing or coping with the pain he felt. Although his hands still shook involuntarily, by getting his story into a narrative form it seemed as though he was practicing a form of what psychotherapists might refer to as “the talking cure” in which a person “actively takes charge of his or her memories” (Jackson 2002: 56). Importantly though, he had entered into this treatment for his depression with a friend rather than a paid professional; rather than medicalizing his malady he had found a therapeutic practice in storytelling and friendship.<sup>62</sup> That is to say, Ablikim had called me into more than a mere empathetic or sympathetic understanding of his emotional pain, rather, he had asked me, as he had asked Batur, to “lean into” his pain and participate in it; a therapeutic comportment that Robert Stolorow refers to as “emotional dwelling” (2014: 80). In doing so, we entered into a dialogue that “dwelt” on his trauma, and attempted to articulate how unendurable it felt and thus moved forward toward a positive ethics. By telling me his story, Ablikim was telling his story to someone other than Batur for the first time. His intersubjective framing of trust was thus expanding. And what his story was telling me was that the ethics of friendship could pull him back from the depths of suicidal depression.

### *Conclusions*

In *The Soul at Work* Franco Berardi points out that one way to cope with depression is through friendship. Following Deleuze and Guattari, Berardi suggests that anti-melancholic friendship means “sharing a sense, sharing a view and a common rhythm” (215). The dialectic of slowness and terror that comes with social violence has the effect of intensifying these sorts of

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<sup>62</sup> Psychologists themselves have recently recognized that this form of coping with precariousness can be shown empirically through a large psychological study among socio-economically vulnerable British adolescents (Graber, Turner and Madill, 2015).

friendships, and if the stories that emerge are able to “re-focalize, to deterritorialize the mind and expressive flow” he argues that they can lead to new forms of ethical care of the self (Berardi 216). If depression is based on the “hardening of one’s existential refrain” (Berardi 216), then the therapy which responds to it is an opening up toward the other. This approach resonates with Ivy Schweitzer’s recent formulation of feminist friendship as a process of making selves vulnerable to each other while at the same time recognizing the difference of the other (Schweitzer 2016: 357-358). She argues that through shared affection, people who may otherwise be alone can make life endurable. As Foucault noted in his later work (1986), friendship becomes a way of life when we begin to think with another, frame our norms with respect to another and allow another to shape our sense of self. Since 2009, Ablikim, and the dozens of other single male migrants I had observed, had repeatedly done this, but because of the ongoing, unending process of dispossession, he had often felt like it was not enough to give him a sense that he was “really” living.

By shifting the frame of the narrative of social violence away from the state, oppression and violence toward the work it takes to live in that precarious environment, *The Big City* gave Ablikim a new way of speaking and being heard. He said, “I feel as though this book was written just for me.” It resonated so strongly with him because the feelings in the narrative were his own feelings; the voice of the figure in the book felt like his own voice. Since Uyghur experiences with the level of dispossession at that time were recent and public media was controlled by the state, there were very few public stagings of the experience of terror capitalism available for young Uyghurs to think with. They knew the stories of trauma told by their friends, but they had not seen those stories in print or on television. Reading Perhat Tursun’s *The Big City* was thus a breakthrough for Ablikim. He felt as though he had found a friend in the novella. Framed in this

way, it felt as though his own life had been given cultural form and substance. It felt again as though his life counted, not just to Batur, but also to a listener and reader like me. In this sense, the positive ethics of homosocial friendships in combination with new forms of fiction had enabled what might be thought of as a new anti-colonial politics of friendship – a topic that will be the central focus of Chapter 4.<sup>63</sup>

The story of Ablikim's life after 2009 was more than just his own. What I have tried to foreground here is the way Ablikim's story was not contained by his own singular experience, but was also contingent on Batur's struggles to keep him alive. Perhat Tursun's narrative of Uyghur experiences of Chinese social violence also provided a way of highlighting and retelling his own story in a way that "counted" (Butler 2009). By making his life and the violence he faced intelligible and grieveable, reading *The Big City* made Ablikim's life feel "real" again. The co-constitutive ethical imperatives of storytelling and friendship thus gave him a way of both coping with pain and finding a way forward in the ongoing saga of his life in the city. The larger point I am trying to make here then is that the work of living under conditions of dispossession is not contained in a single life. In addition to this, Ablikim's life story also demonstrates how the particular form of Uyghur precariousness in the "raging" (Uy: *dawalghup*) atmosphere of Ürümchi can be lived. For young Uyghurs who were living through a process of slow dispossession, storytelling and friendship could be a matter of life and death. The imminence of threat made them struggle for "life and liver" friends as though their dreams of tomorrow depended on it. As a result, the orientation of young Uyghur men toward male friendships was being sharpened and an ethics of homosocial friendship was becoming a central focus of their life in the city.

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<sup>63</sup> As Leela Gandhi (2006) has argued "guest-friendships" can produce a shared affective comportment and anarchist politics that invites the stranger to the self while at the same time refusing assimilation.

#### Chapter 4:

### Witnessing Uyghur Migrant Dispossession and Framing an Anti-Colonial Minor Politics



*Figure 4.1. The informal settlement of Uyghur migrant workers on the barren hills known as Yamelike. Image by Tian Lin*

In the early 2000s, the antiquated boilers of the central heating system were ignited on the fifteenth of every October. When the sun came up around 9 am on the sixteenth the sulfur dioxide was already thick in the air over Ürümqi.<sup>64</sup> The poisonous fog stung the eyes, it tasted like vaporized rock. Squat, brutalist apartment buildings disappeared into the near distance, the fifth floor already a haze. The stagnant air was so cold in this wide valley between the Heavenly Mountains (Ch: *Tian Shan*) and the Mountains of God (Ch: *Bogada Shan*) that breath froze on

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<sup>64</sup> The sun rises at 9 am because China only has one time-zone based on Beijing standard time. Based on the rising of the sun it is around two hours and ten minutes behind Beijing standard time.

the ubiquitous face masks worn against the smog. The cooking oil embedded in the heavy olive-green curtains that guarded the entrances to restaurants began to coagulate.<sup>65</sup> Life was hard at the frontier of the nation. People learned to cough quietly; many migrants in their thirties appeared to be in their fifties.

In the early 2000s, cold grey poisonous fogs, windows covered in soot, and dirty snow defined Ürümchi. It was an urban experience that gave its three million inhabitants their grit, their common sense. It was a point of view from which this population of migrant urbanites cast their aspirations. Yet there was also a strange sense of flow and emergence in the midst of this mundane atmosphere of cold and smog. As Gilles Deleuze notes, in every city the complex arrangement of people, infrastructures and climates “take the city out of its confines” (in Simone: 26). Behind the billboards on the hills that surrounded the city, Uyghur migrants attempted to carve out a place for themselves. Yet the “Great Fogs” of Ürümchi winters taught them how to be simultaneously visible and invisible. The fogs announced the development priorities of the industrialized city; they warmed the lives that had been deemed productive in the state’s developmental scheme and seemed to hide the undocumented lives in the informal settlements in the margins of the city. Over the next decade as the city embarked on a new plan of branding itself a global city, many neighborhoods of Uyghur migrants would be reduced to rubble and the heating system would begin using natural gas, rather than coal, as a fuel source – a change that would significantly reduce atmospheric pollution. Over the same duration the lives of Uyghur migrants would come to be seen with a new intensity by other inhabitants of the city. Urban renewal and “greening” (Ch: *luhua*) the city became euphemisms for urban cleansing, a new form of dispossession, that was directed at Uyghur minorities.

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<sup>65</sup> Ürümchi was ranked the most polluted city in the world by the *Toronto Star* in 2008. See Olivia Ward, “The world’s 10 worst places to live,” *Toronto Star*, December 2008, <http://www.thestar.com/article/559958>

In 2004, a year after I first visited the city, it was precisely the “great fogs” of invisibility that invigorated Tian Lin, a largely self-trained Han migrant photographer, to wander the city in walking meditations as part of his Buddhist practice. Writing in his photo-journal in the mid-2000s, he ruminated on what drew him to those Uyghur neighborhoods up on the hillsides and how what he saw stuck in his mind. “I’m haunted by Ürümqi’s great winter ‘fogs.’ I use up roll after roll of film ... and still I feel invigorated by this frozen world. When I experience it, I feel awake to the world and I reimagine the people and the things (I saw)” (2011b). Tian Lin initially climbed the hills in order to get a bird’s-eye-view of the city, but while he was there he saw much more than that – he saw another world up above the city. Those neighborhoods of Uyghur migrant workers obfuscated by the leaden clouds on the barren Mountain Goat Hills (*Yamelike Shan*) overlooking Ürümqi seemed to be out-of-step with the rest of the city. Talking about the past 11 years of his documentary photography project in 2015 he said:

I didn’t start out wanting to take pictures of minorities. This wasn’t my goal at all. I wanted to take pictures of life in the city. This is just what I saw up there on the margins of the city. This was the scenery (*fengjing*) of the city. People are also scenery. You can’t ignore people, or trash or anything that is there. I had no real purpose in taking these pictures. There was nothing behind it. I was just drawn to this sort of life. Of course through the process I learned a lot about these people’s lives. Many of them were just really poor people, who came to the city to try to make some money peddling clothes or fruit. At times they made some money, but other times they really had nothing (2015).

For ten years, Tian Lin, a Han migrant who was raised in a family of Anhui settlers on a paramilitary farming colony (Ch: *bingtuan*) in Northern Xinjiang’s high Gobi desert, spent his winters with these people: Uyghur squatters who self-identified as “travelers” (Uy: *musapir*). He watched the faces of children harden and turn into a flat blankness. “They were just like wild grass, dancing crazily in the wind, then gradually they grew up, and became profoundly silent,” he wrote (2011). Looking through his archive of around 30,000 images I was struck by the way he has struggled to convey the fragility of life in the midst of dispossession, a form of

differentially distributed vulnerability among marginalized groups of people. “Often I’m not capable of capturing their image,” Tian Lin says, “Those people have undergone tortuous, unimaginable experiences, and still find themselves in extremely bleak circumstances” (2011). Tian Lin was wrestling with ways of making meaning out of what he experienced as hopelessness and ways of responding to the basic imperatives of life itself. Over the past decades of life in the city he had seen his Uyghur migrant friends experience a slow process of colonial dispossession as millions of new Han settlers had arrived with the support of the state. It was in this atmosphere that Tian Lin was trying to find a way forward. He was trying to make sensible what he saw as “the subtle truths and emptiness of life. That life is real, it’s fragile, it’s uncertain....”(2011). In doing this, Tian Lin opened up questions regarding the ethics of witnessing the losses of others, and how such questions created the conditions for a new politics.

This chapter argues that Tian Lin in his role as both a Buddhist “blind wanderer” and a “long-term Xinjiang resident” (Ch: *mangliu* and *lao Xinjiang*, terms I will analyze in detail below) enables me to hold in tension the contradictions between the larger social concerns of documentary photography practice, the rise of Buddhist moral philosophy and the way colonial forms are connected to contemporary terror capitalism. In this sense, the figure of Tian Lin becomes the location from which these broader systems of social life are shown to be at play in articulation. In the final sections of this chapter, I describe how his images offer evidence of his politics, but I do not attempt to center his politics in his photographs. His politics instead arise from his practice, his culture work, and the way he implicates himself alongside the lives of his subjects. His Uyghur friends view him as one of them; as a Uyghur “accomplice” or “kin” relation (Uy: *egeshküchi*; *qarandash*). Tian Lin is more than a photographer, a political activist, a



Buddhist monk, a Han migrant, a *lao Xinjiang* settler. Because of this, I argue, he can himself be thought of as a representational figure of what a minor politics in Xinjiang might look like.

### **Life-Making in Northwest China**

This chapter engages recent cross-disciplinary scholarship on sovereignty and dispossession that focuses on inter-subjective lifeworlds, or worlds of life experience, as sites of sovereign power, or what might otherwise be called, ontological security (Foucault 1976; 2004; Jackson 2014). This theoretical framing, as supported in recent anthropological work (Bernstein 2012; Cattelino 2008; Winegar 2006), takes up the notion of sovereignty in two distinct registers: sovereignty as a kind of embodied autonomy and sovereignty as a form of domination as exercised by governance structures of a modern nation-state on the body of a subject. Starting with the sovereign body of a medieval king, sovereignty in this latter sense was animated through the body as a site metonymic for the power of the state. Over time as the body of the king was dispersed into the institutions of the Modernist disciplinary state, sovereignty came to regulate life in different ways. This new form, something Foucault refers to as “biopower,” came to regulate individuals through an explosion of human engineering projects that I have described in earlier chapters.

Shifting attention from normative forms of political governance to the political impulses of ordinary people, recent scholarship on sovereignty has focused on bodies as sites of the performance of sovereign power or domination. Bodies, and the lifeworlds that surround them, can be seen most clearly as sites of violence under extreme conditions such as war, urban cleansing or other forms of sudden social change (Simone 2003; Agamben 1998; Foucault 1976). Yet these instances are symptoms of a much greater and more insidious structural violence that is taking place under the great fogs of normalcy in the slow dispossession that accompanies

capitalist entrenchment and colonial expansion around the world. Exploring how capitalist and colonial norms such as labor migration, racial discrimination, and counter-terror violence are routinized, scholars have argued that, despite being an object of sovereign violence, individual selves can also be sites of counter-sovereignty or refusal (Pun Ngai 2005; Hardt and Negri 2005; Simpson 2009; McGranahan 2016). They argue that, by the sheer fact of their ongoing existence, exhausted factory workers, rioters, artists, squatters, and the colonized can be seen as refusing. By the very fact of their survival, marginalized subjects refuse when they do not fit the norms of modernist development or submit to the sovereignty of the modern nation state. Some of these minorities refuse to participate in formal ways, refusing to recognize the authority of state institutions to grant them rights and recognition. Others refuse in less formal, embodied ways, refusing in practice to recognize the regimes of value that are circulated by global powers (Byler 2018a). What is common in native refusal is a claim to the priorness of native forms of knowledge and practice. This mode of being existed prior to the arrival of the modern state, and as such its value and authority existed prior to the sovereignty of the state and global capital.

This form of refusal becomes political when new political solidarities are formed by minority groups who hold onto ethical frameworks from prior times and outside spaces. Over the past few decades, American cultural theorist Lauren Berlant (1997; 2008a; 2008b; 2011) has demonstrated the tenacity with which people stay attached to life no matter how precarious their circumstances. The undocumented, the racialized and dispossessed find ways to live by drawing on communal resources that help them get by. This commitment to the political, to finding ways of living together, is a limited form of sovereignty that people maintain as marginalized subjects. Within minority communities centered around affiliations to (and, at times, intersections of) marginalized gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, and class positions, people build spaces in

which they have the power to affect and be affected; spaces in which they can stay attached to life. It is by staying committed to each other that they can develop a shared affect that feels political. Regardless of the fragility and failure of their lives, Berlant (2008) demonstrates that people find ways to feel a measure of control over their lives by building “intimate public spheres” centered around commonalities in their lifeworlds. Even if they are not recognized within normative frameworks of citizenship and social rights, marginalized people find ways to organize a way of life as a collective. It is precisely through a politics of detachment from the norms of mainstream social life that the precariousness of marginal life is given its political feeling. This feeling, a kind of “minor politics” (Deleuze and Guattari 1986; Lionnet and Shih 2005) provides a “sense of a shared affective management” of the crises of ordinary life (Berlant 2008b: 5n12). In marginalized communities, people build affective bonds and friendships with each other. They intuit ways of living in the present by drawing on past experiences that they hold in their bodies and drawing from the knowledge of past generations. They remain attached to life by staying attached to each other. Keeping each other in mind, they refuse to think that the norms of the society around them are all that matter.

Put simply, a minor politics, as I define it, is a politics of a minority group that is centered around a shared attachment to minority life. It is “minor” in that its goal is not to attain recognition or normative status with the mainstream political system. Rather, its function is to offer a feeling of repair to traumatized communities and provide a sense of existential well-being, a limited form of sovereignty, to its participants. It is a form of refusal to give in to dominant social norms not through explicit rejection, but rather through the very fact of their ongoing existence at the margins of state domination. It provides marginalized people with a political sensibility, of having power to move and act in the world and on others, but it does not

seek its legitimacy from the state through legal recognition. This is not a form of civil disobedience as much as a form of epistemic disobedience – a “not buying-in” to the system (Mignolo 2009). It is a form of political life that is simultaneously visible and invisible to apparatuses of the state. The human engineering projects of state-run education systems, police systems, religious systems, culture systems and economic systems cannot quite contain it. This is a politics that is wary of the control of the welfare state and the dependency it fosters. A minor politics is a politics of escape routes.

Ethical friendships that develop out of precarious living can become a minor politics or political “torsion” that twists forms of control toward other, non-normative, ways of living together (Rancière 2009). Through the process of deeply-situating themselves in the middle of social violence, aesthetic-political activists “witness” the pain of others (Dave 2014). This act of witnessing calls them into political action. In what follows I will examine the way that an ethics of *being-with* others (Al-Mohammad 2010), made Tian Lin struggle to frame and amplify the stories heard. It made him search for a new lexicon with which to make their lives “count” (Butler 2009). Tian Lin drew on the figures of the marginalized migrant and the deeply-situated local in the Chinese national discourse as well as emerging interests in social documentary photography and post-communist Buddhist practice as a way of identifying with Uyghur migrants. Using these knowledge frameworks, he struggled to make sense of the lives of Uyghur migrants as fully as he could. Yet as he allowed his experience of a Uyghur lifeworld to dictate the terms of what counts as an ethical life, he found that these frameworks are never quite enough. This, precisely, was why a new minor politics was necessary.

Tian Lin used his documentary photography project to build an interethnic minor politics by stubbornly holding onto an ethical framework that is out-of-step with dominant social norms.

This politics linked the tenuous socialist-era relationship Tian Lin shared with Uyghur squatters as an “old-time Xinjiang Blind Wanderer” (Ch: *lao Xinjiang mangliu*) through his practice as a Buddhist monk and photographer.<sup>66</sup> Despite their religious differences, this was a politic that Uyghur critics viewed as “almost good enough” and state officials dismissed as a manifestation of “mental illness.” Since the dismissal of Uyghur lives as “backward,” “terrorist” and “unpatriotic” was so deeply engrained in Han society, dedicating one’s life to advocating for them was seen as indicative of a kind of madness. Although a political project such as Tian Lin’s may only offer a feeling of being politically alive rather than a binding resolution to the intractable problem of Uyghur dispossession, it nevertheless points toward a fragile alternative to the multicultural domination and terror state that I have described in preceding chapters.

#### *A History of a Xinjiang Mangliu*

Tian Lin’s family, like many Han in the New Dominion (Xinjiang), came from Anhui province to secure the Chinese-USSR border in the 1950s as part of the army of paramilitary agricultural workers who took over the steppes with tractors and deep-bore wells. The telos of this human engineering project was one of “opening-up” (Ch: *kaifang*) and reclaiming the “wasteland” (Ch: *huangdi*) through the creation of a population of Han settler-pioneers. On the farms to which Tian Lin’s family was sent, pioneers were placed in planned communities where highly regimented manual labor was enacted to the tune of “Red Songs” extolling the virtues of the sun (representing Mao) rising from the East; food was rationed into each “iron rice bowl” (Ch: *tiefanwan*) eaten at communal tables; nights were filled with organizational meetings;

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<sup>66</sup> A derogatory term similar to the English term “tramp” or “vagrant” used to describe labor migrants in China. Recently among some migrants it has been reclaimed as a source of self-identification and pride. Han migrants to Ürümqi from rural parts of Xinjiang will often describe themselves as “lao Xinjiang” or “old-time Xinjiangers” to demonstrate their identification as part of the first wave of settler colonization in the 1950s. See below for a longer discussion.

education and reeducation campaigns were a constant ebb and flow. Across China, governance was implemented at a very localized level which allowed for a measure of political participation (Gao 2007). Each individual had a place, a role, a number, a quota, a ration, and a dossier.

Although the people of Xinjiang were regarded as “the people” (Ch: *renmin*), the population was precisely segmented, not just by family but by ethnicity (Ch: *minzu*) and work units (Ch: *danwei*) and bifurcated by urban or rural legal residency (Ch: *hukou*) status.

In the rural steppes and oases of Xinjiang, the form of governance was a militarized farming system whose mission was to accelerate the industrialization of the city through the production of basic necessities for the urban proletariat. In the southern part of the province, ethnic minority populations of Uyghurs were also brought into this system, but often with a measure of local indigenous control. This local autonomy gave minorities a feeling of equality under the sovereignty of the state despite their cultural and ethno-racial difference from the Han settlers who had moved into the northern part of the province. The Maoist period from the 1950s to the 1970s was thus a compressed transient moment of normalizing law and discipline in Xinjiang. This human engineering project could be described as a drive “to concentrate; to distribute in space; to order in time; to compose a productive force within the dimensions of space-time whose effect will be greater than the sum of its component parts” (Deleuze 1992: 3).

In the 1980s and 90s, the new flux and freedom of market liberalization, resource extraction and the flood of new Han migrants that these new development projects brought were deeply unsettling to Han workers such as Tian Lin and his family who self-identify with the earlier settlement project as original Xinjiang “locals” (Ch: *bendi*). Like many who came in the first waves of Han pioneers in the 1950s and 60s, Tian Lin looks back on the covalent certainties of poverty and equality under the discipline of communism with a certain amount of nostalgia.

Back in those days the divide between Han and ethnic others was not as stark. In many cases, early Han settlers learned local languages and adopted local cultural norms. Over time, many of them came to see themselves as old Xinjiangers. Yet with the arrival of millions of new Han workers and disinvestment in the Xinjiang state farm colony system this sense of identity began to fracture. Suddenly identification as a pioneering settler was seen as a backward, dead-end social position. Working on the colony farm came to be seen as life of poverty and isolation.

As recent anthropological scholarship has shown (Cliff 2016a; Joniak-Lüthi 2015), many Han who grew up in Xinjiang found themselves allied, to a limited extent, with Uyghurs against the onrush of recent migrants who had arrived to build state- and privately-funded infrastructure and real estate. Since recent Han migrants often found jobs by traveling along employment pipelines generated by interstate labor bureaus, private job brokers, and kinship networks in their home provinces (Guang 2003: 618), Han who grew up in rural Xinjiang were often excluded from these job opportunities. Xinjiang was so far from the metropolises of Beijing and Shanghai, so Xinjiang identifications were often viewed as the most “backward” (Ch: *luohou*) and “lacking in cultural quality” (Ch: *meiyou suzhi*) in Han society.<sup>67</sup> As one *lao Xinjiang* woman told me, “Today, household registration from any place other than Xinjiang is worth more than Xinjiang registration.” Many mentioned that it seemed impossible for them to find jobs anywhere outside of Xinjiang since they did not have close social connections or prestige and, because of all of the new migration to the province, it was hard for them to find jobs within what they saw as their home province. Given the breadth of human and physical geography in Xinjiang—it being one-sixth the size of all of China—migration from remote areas of Xinjiang to Ürümchi often

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<sup>67</sup> See Chapter 6 for a discussion of how this idea of “achieved quality” (Ch: *suzhi*) is associated with differently positioned populations.

required traveling a distance equal to or greater than the distance traveled by recent Han migrants from other parts of China.

Since Tian Lin was identified as an old-time Xinjianger from a rural farming colony, he felt this sense of disorientation acutely. Forced by a changing economic system that devalued rural Xinjiang labor, he came to Ürümchi first as a student in the late 1990s. After graduating from a small college on the outskirts of town with a generic business degree, Tian Lin hoped to find a job by “jumping into the ocean” (*xiahai*) of private business. Yet like many children of farmers who received degrees from small colleges in third-tier cities, for Tian Lin jobs of any sort were very hard to find. After many months of unsuccessful job hunting, as did many other self-described members of the “floating population” of Chinese internal migrants, Tian Lin spotted an advertisement for a training course at a vocational school.

“I had a business degree, but that really didn’t help me find a job. So I saw a flyer for a private school. At that time in Ürümchi there were lots of private schools. The tuition was only 2200 for a two month photography course. I thought that it wasn’t too expensive and it seemed like a skill that I could use to start a business. So I did it. After the course was finished I rented an apartment and opened up a business. But business was terrible. I could only make around 300-500 per month. So after 9 months I just gave up. Since then I’ve given up on working” (2015).

A failed entrepreneur, Tian Lin did something many migrant workers do. He refused to go home. In the midst of this failure he began to take up the study of Buddhism and to treat photography as part of his Buddhist practice. Like many young people unsettled by China’s social transformation, Tian Lin turned to religious practice as a way of reframing his life in urban Xinjiang.

### *Religion in China*

As I noted regarding the rise of Islamic piety movements in early chapters, over the past three decades along with the turn to market liberalization and the opening of the state-directed



public cultural sphere, there has been a large-scale turn to embodied religious practice in China (Johnson 2018). Some forms of embodied religious practice have been given greater autonomy than others. One of the types of faith practice that has been allowed to grow to a significant extent, particularly among Han citizens, is Buddhism. In 2011, there were estimated to be around 150 million self-identified practicing Buddhists, 70 to 100 million Christians and 50 million Muslims in China (Kleinman *et al.* 2011).<sup>68</sup> There has also been a resurgence of traditional Chinese health practices such as *qigong* which at times have also taken on a religious aspect. Even more recently pop psychology and self-help guides have become major industries in China. Among middle-class Han there has also been a recent rise in Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist practice. For many people in China, religion provides a set of values and a shared sense of community that gives them a framework with which to cope with the uncertainties of everyday life. As one of Arthur Kleinman's informants told him:

China, you know has no moral compass today. Some people, maybe a lot of people, are not bothered too much by that, but I am and so are many of my friends. I don't get all that enthusiastic about going to church. And the same holds for Buddhism. But I believe in a kind of fusion of religion, you know. Half reverence for ancestors, half a kind of theism. God is in the small things. Life is sacred. My friends and I read a lot of books about religion (2011: 274).

Tian Lin was one of those people who was bothered by the directionlessness and injustice he saw around him. Like many such people he came to religion and moral philosophy as an adult. Since formal religious education for children was still not a major aspect of life in China, many people found faith through informal meetings in restaurants, book clubs, and workshops that were held in people's homes. After he failed at his business, Tian Lin decided to take the Buddhism he had studied more seriously and did a formal course of study in a Chinese Buddhist monastery in the nearby mountains. After an extended period of study, he decided to come back to the city.

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<sup>68</sup> I will discuss the Uyghur practice of Islam in detail in Chapter 4.

Buddhism has a strong association with luck and fortune in contemporary Chinese popular culture. Buddhist rituals are seen as a way of shaping one's life chances. They are seen as a way of ensuring economic success. Xinjiang is no exception to this. It is no accident that next to the newly constructed hub of the New Silk Road, Ürümqi's international exhibition center, is a giant Buddha complex that was built by a large real estate developer as part of Ürümqi's global city aspirations. As the anthropologist Sara Davis (2005) has noted, giant Buddhas are often built to signify the success of Chinese capitalism in the borderlands of the country. Yet for Tian Lin, Buddhism did not signify this at all—quite the opposite.

For Tian Lin, Buddhist practice did not depend upon ritual and future reward but rather emerged out of the basic tenets of Mahayana Buddhist practice. This meant giving up on working for money. He found a shabby apartment in the north of the city and began to live off the generosity of his friends who came to study photography and Buddhism with him. Through his Buddhist training he came to decide that he should remain single and that he would adhere to a strictly vegetarian lifestyle, something that made his entrance into Uyghur life and halal food practices less of a challenge. After he came back to the city, he found that his Buddhist practice compelled him to encounter everyone he met with a radical honesty and openness. He found great joy in walking meditations where he focused on the atmospheres and environments he saw around him. He felt that his encounters with Uyghur migrants taught him much about generosity, wisdom and forbearance. He might say that they were in fact his community of *bodhisattvas* (or those who are motivated by an ethics of *being-with* the sentient beings around them). They contained a spark of spirituality that motivated him to remain compassionate and open to others around him. Rather than remaining a monk or returning to the colony farm where he grew up, Tian Lin decided to scratch out a life in the city. Since he already had the equipment for a

darkroom and large supply of inexpensive black and white film, his main expenses were food, which his friends in the city and relatives back on the colony farms provided for him. “In the beginning it was just sort of a way to fill the time. I couldn’t find a job and didn’t want a job ... so I just started to live like a ‘blind wanderer’ (Ch: *mangliu*) – going around taking pictures” (2015).

*The “Blind Wanderer” in Chinese Discourse*

Beginning in the 1950s, *mangliu* was used to describe rural migrants to Chinese cities. The term was first coined in a 1953 state document which described state opposition to the “blind flow” of migrants to the city. It was attached to people without formal household registration, without a place in the planned economy of the socialist society. They were people others viewed as destitute and homeless. It meant the person was not a useful member of a work unit and thus not a productive member of society. The “unseeing,” “directionless” flow of bodies was seen as a threat to the centrally-planned socialist revolution. Interestingly it conveyed a feeling quite similar to the feelings Ablikim (in the previous chapter) described upon his entry into the “raging river” of Ürümchi social life. In both cases migrants came to the city riding a metaphoric stream of water, fighting to find footing despite the structural blockages that were arrayed against them.

Over the decades that followed, particularly in the 1980s and 90s, the term *mangliu* came to be used as an epithet used to denigrate strangers to the city. It conveyed a feeling of failure and irresponsibility. As Guang Lei has shown, the term came to refer to a form of “circular affirmation” between urban-based government policies that sought to control the inflow of cheap labor and the xenophobic urban popular culture that sought to deny strangers a right to the city (2003: 615; Zhang 2001). Migrants were characterized as both “irrational (blind) and elusive

(floating)” (622), and thus could be viewed as amoral and illegal and therefore not deserving of basic rights to the city such as minimum wage, health care, education and retirement benefits.

Of course, reformers and workers’ rights activists have voiced objections to these characterizations, pointing out that in fact that the vast majority of migrants have prearranged jobs in the cities to which they migrate (Guang 2003:623). This is certainly the case among recent Han migrants to Ürümchi. In fact, unlike in other cities where Han migrants were viewed as violators of state planning (Guang 2003: 620), in Ürümchi recent Han migrants were celebrated as potential settlers who are bringing cultural quality to the province and securing it for the nation. There was often nothing blind about their wandering at all. Since the mid-1990s, officials in Xinjiang and across the nation have begun to use the term “farmer worker” (Ch: *mingong*) to describe migrants rather than *mangliu*, but in some circumstances, particularly among Han migrants from rural parts of Xinjiang, the older term has stuck. As Guang Lei notes, rural-to-urban migrants occupy a broad range of social classes: “from wage laborers to lumpen proletariat, informal sector workers, and budding capitalists” (2003: 618). Since Tian Lin had more educational background than many Han migrants, many would see him as privileged. Yet since he came from poverty in rural Xinjiang, and since he had failed to find a job in the city, in many ways he lacked the privileges of other recent Han migrants who come to Xinjiang with promises of jobs, housing, and government protection. For Tian Lin then, calling himself a *mangliu* became a way of identifying himself with a state of permanent wandering within his Old-time Xinjiang identity. He was no longer looking for a home to which to return; he was content in his poverty and lack of rootedness on the margins of the nation.

What I am arguing is that, in some instances—such as Tian Lin’s—the power of the stigma has been inverted and used as a locus of identification and pride. By using the term

*mangliu* Tian Lin was attempting to identify himself with the Uyghur migrants he photographs which he often described as “blind wanderers”—though, as I will discuss in the next chapter, they themselves often described themselves using a slightly different term “traveler” (Uy: *musapir*). Of course, many Han independent artists and other people of relative privilege have engaged in similar issues concerning migrant dispossession,<sup>69</sup> but what makes Tian Lin’s use of the term unique is the way he was attempting to combine the term with his *lao Xinjiang* identification, his Buddhist practice and his Uyghur friendships. Given the context of his practice, this framing produced a kind of anti-colonial politics. By attaching himself to this term and describing both himself and Uyghur migrants as “common people” (Ch: *laobaixing*), which he utilized as a way of naming “regular people without political means,” he was attempting to build a form of lateral agency across ethnic lines within the context of the broader mass migrations that were happening all around him in Chinese society. This term was not a perfectly commensurate with Uyghur migrant identifications, after all many of them did not think of themselves in Chinese terms nor could they pass as Han “blind wanderers” even if they desired to. Their Uyghur identification was the target first of multicultural domination and then the People’s War on Terror. Yet, like Tian Lin, the Uyghurs he photographed and advocated for also identified as migrants who had been separated from their homes. Claiming a stigmatized *mangliu*

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<sup>69</sup> As I noted in Chapter 1, since the 1990s the arts in cities across China have exploded. Photography was one genre that quickly became a major field within the new contemporary art scene. As Wanning Sun (2015) has shown, although the primary foci of new Chinese photography were travel, landscapes and fashion, a substantial number of photographers also became engaged in “documentary photography” or social-issue oriented projects focused on urban migration and the industrialization of the Chinese society. Although the state often tried to corral such projects toward a celebration of China’s rapid economic development and the improved living conditions of Chinese rural-to-urban migrants, by the early 2000s the migrant-photographers such as Zhang Xinmin and Song Chao began portraying the precarious lives of migrants as they themselves had lived. Zhang’s first book *Besieging the City* (2004) and Song’s *Miners* (2008), set the standard for a whole generation of migrant-photographers who were just beginning to find their voice at the margins of Chinese society. Rather than representing migrants as “leading a dull, mysterious and hard life” (Song 2012), these projects attempted to portray the full range of feelings that marginalized people possess.

position thus allowed Tian Lin a way of thinking, however imperfect, from an allied position as friend and photographer.

### *Minor Politics On the Margins*

By situating himself as a “blind wanderer,” Tian Lin was claiming a particular type of positionality. He shared affinities with artists who were interested in aesthetic-political engagement, but he was also trying to create a slightly different form of minor politics – one that included a recognition of ethno-racial difference. It was for this reason that many Han observers of his practice thought there was something peculiar about his work. Although the descriptor “blind wanderer” is a common identifier among self-conscious migrant, often male, artists, many people saw Tian Lin’s use of the term as the guiding ethos for his photo project as abnormal and strange. Because of the recent explosion of violence between ethnically-different groups in the city, a Han migrant photographing and identifying with Uyghur migrants was a project that was difficult for both Han and Uyghur viewers to reconcile with mainstream politics. Why was a Han photographer spending so much time with Uyghur “terrorists”?

Tian Lin spoke often about his photography as a kind of compulsion that no one really understood: “I would tell people that you like to spend your money on cigarettes or alcohol, but I like to spend it on photography. It was my addiction” (2015). In the beginning, the Uyghurs whose environments he attempted to represent often saw him as mentally ill or absurd.

Many people thought it was strange that I was taking pictures all the time, and then that I would just give them to them without asking for any money. Some of them thought I had some sort of mental illness. They would see me taking pictures of some pile of trash or some poor old man and they would ask ‘why are you taking pictures of something ugly like that?’ But to me those things were extremely beautiful. (2015)

As his obsession grew his family too began to reject him. They felt as though he had a depressive personality disorder and urged him to seek psychiatric treatment. They could not understand why

he was “wasting his time” taking pictures of Uyghurs. Over the long duration of his projects he had many conflicts with art directors and Culture Ministry censors when attempting to display his work or publish his images. They always asked him why his art focused on what they viewed as “negative things” instead of a celebration of Chinese multiculturalism. They said, “It is as though I have a personality problem. They are right. I do have a personality disorder. In China we aren’t allowed to ‘speak about’ these things. Instead everything should be great, everything is getting better and better. So anyone who speaks about them must be mentally ill” (2015).

Tian Lin’s positioning and the reactions engendered by his project beg deeper questions about the forms of politics that were converging in his work. In part the inherent abnormality of Tian Lin’s work in representing the precarious lives of Uyghur migrants came from the way his images belied the overarching sovereignty of the state. His images were a kind of surveillance which both complemented and disrupted a regime whose developmental horizon was productivity and the regulation of violence and disposable populations. Although Tian Lin was deeply troubled by the experience of poverty and dispossession which his images documented, he spoke often of the ways in which the state and media tried to coopt his project and turn it into an illustration of the “backwardness” of Uyghurs and the need for the state to colonize them more quickly. Many times when he was interviewed, reporters would attempt to turn the project into a tale of Tian Lin’s heroic efforts to save Uyghurs from themselves. In a way that was similar to Wanning Sun’s (2015) findings in her work among documentary photographers in other parts of China, state-run media often tried to frame Tian Lin’s images as migrants smiling through their pain, struggling to make China a better place. Yet those same media producers and Culture Ministry officials refused to confront the structural inequalities that had produced the precarious conditions of Uyghur life in the first place. With his refusal to be coopted by the state,

Tian Lin functioned as a resistant social figure. He functioned as a point of convergence between rising forms of Buddhist moral philosophy, the social concerns of documentary photography practice and the violence of settler colonialism. What Tian Lin hoped to frame through his photographic practice was quite the opposite of the intent of many state-sponsored cultural workers. He was stubbornly resisting the urge to look away and ignore his own role in the settler-colonial project that dominated culture work in Ürümchi. His work was an attempt to attach himself to lives of minority “blind wanderers” by detaching himself from the politics of the mainstream. He was attempting to become an accomplice in the lives of Uyghur blind wanderers.

In 2004, Tian Lin wandered into the informal settlements on Mountain Goat Hill for the first time. To his thinking, experiencing life “on the mountain and off the mountain were two completely different worlds, one was straightforward and clear, the other was a *simulation* of human existence,” he said, “I’m a person who likes to wander around by myself. Often someone would ask: ‘where are you going?’ I would say: ‘I’m not going somewhere, I’m simply looking around everywhere ... I’m looking for the feeling of a place.’” Over the course of the decade as he continued to develop his Buddhist philosophy, he said that he began to feel many things more clearly. The cycles of aimless drifting in mundane existence or *samsāra* that he had studied during his training in the monastery began to make more sense. He began to notice that what many people took to be normal life: buying a home, a car, starting a family, having a career, were not parts of life that were available to everyone and perhaps were not even necessary to live a full life. He said that he came to realize that “Many times we don’t understand what is a desire and what is a demand” (2011). The needs that arose from precarious living in the Uyghur settlements made him reconsider the attachments toward which many Han migrants aspired as desiring subjects.



What Tian Lin's experience pointed him toward was an understanding of abject life which refused or is denied socio-political recognition. Up on the mountain, the undocumented Uyghurs he photographed were excluded from the rationality of normal life. As figures at least partially outside the vision of the state, the migrant workers up on the hill were living through a process of dispossession as a condition of participation in global city. While they were recognized as having a precarious "bare life," they were not recognized by the state as having a politically significant life (Agamben 1998: 138). They were people who could starve, freeze, be shot or otherwise subtracted without the "usual" implications – without their deaths being viewed on the level of negligence or injustice. If these migrants were living under relations of domination and exploitation, then what Tian Lin was looking for with his lens was how dispossessed lives find ways to refuse to die. Yet the domination of the state was never absolute, and as such, their illegibility of subjects could in fact be a productive strategy for resistance to the surveillance and discipline of the state. As I will show in the next chapter, their illegibility was what allowed them to organize their lives in mosque communities and practice forms of unauthorized Islam. For Tian Lin though, the work of reframing these lives by entering into minor political-aesthetic relationships with them came to be Tian Lin's primary task.

During those cold winters in Ürümchi, the lives Tian Lin saw up on the mountain resonated with a life he once had himself. "I saw a different kind of inhabitant on the mountainside, odd children (by "normal" Chinese standards) who were very high-spirited, the same as when I was young" (2011). At first it was the strangeness of the encounter that drew him: a sense of the uncanny – the strangeness of the familiar, the familiarity of the strange. But as he came to develop deeply-situated relationships within the Uyghur migrant community, the feelings between Tian Lin and his subjects emerged out of the shared trauma of precarious life in

Ürümchi. Although Tian Lin's entrance into this life came out of an active choice, rather than through the violence of settler colonialism, the melancholic gaze that migrants cast toward the home to which they could not return and toward the city of which they may never be a fully-visible part was one that Tian Lin shared. Together, by sharing each other's pain, they tried to push past difference and the impasse of the present toward moments of basic happiness on the other side of that despair. He said that "If you gradually get rid of external things you will discover that our basic feelings and needs are the same. Gradually ethnic differences seem less important" (2011).

Of course, this feeling of commonality was in some ways a product of Tian Lin's perspective. Many Uyghurs continued to view him as radically different. They saw themselves as "natives" (Uy: *yerlik*) and him as "Chinese" (Uy: *Khitay*) – a banned Russian loan word that in Uyghur describes Han settlers as foreign to their homeland. Many migrants did not see themselves as having full Chinese citizenship, while they saw Tian Lin as possessing this fully. Of course Tian Lin realized that he would never fully experience or understand the pain of colonial dispossession. Yet staying attached to life by drawing on moments of conviviality, the strength of long-term friendships and a shared sense of instability had profound effects on him. Often witnessing ongoing suffering and the intractable problems of Xinjiang society wore him down. As Tian Lin said "There are still long stretches of time when I feel despondent," a feeling that, as I have noted in the previous chapter, many Uyghur migrants share. Speaking more to this theme, Tian Lin admitted that he was helpless to get ahold of any sort of permanence or trust in the promise of a better life. "Where can life be made in front of one's eyes, we can't shape it even a little bit. It's also no use to superimpose some kind of illusion. What you can

superimpose is only one trivial layer of what the heart can see ... if you are wild grass (like Uyghur migrants), then the city is a bleak and desolate wilderness” (2011).



*Figure 4.2. A film still of Tian Lin (right) introducing a Han photographer to one of his old Uyghur friends in a documentary film called Yamalike – the neighborhood where Tian Lin did his work.*

Building a sense of intimacy across ethno-racial lines and cultural difference was not easy. Early on in his practice Tian Lin was often viewed with suspicion and distrust. Uyghur migrants tried to place him. They wanted to figure out if he was a Korean Christian missionary or a government worker. They could not make sense out of why he kept coming into their neighborhood. Why did he keep taking pictures, giving pictures he had taken back to members of the community? Why did he help them to get medical treatment or negotiate with the police? On one occasion an elderly Uyghur man, who had learned Northeast dialect-inflected Mandarin while serving in the People’s Liberation Army, asked Tian Lin: “Why do you want to take pictures here? Do you understand what is going on in this place?” Tian Lin said, “I had to really

think about this question ....” Then the old man “looked at (another Han photographer’s) camera and asked: ‘Your camera must be worth more than 5000 yuan!?’ My friend said, ‘No, it was worth less than 3000 yuan (\$500).’ (The Uyghur man) said all of the things in his household combined weren’t worth that much ...” (2011). Finding his social status indexed in this way made Tian Lin realize that, in the eyes of this migrant, his fellow photographer was just like everyone else – a normal bourgeois Han settler. Tian Lin said, “Looking at his face I felt all of the heaviness and despair of life.” As he talked further with him the old Uyghur man began to reveal the needs that kept them as a population in the settlement:

He said sometimes when (he and his wife and brother) went out to look for work, the three of them could not make even a combined 100 *yuan* (16 dollars) in one day’s work. Children need to eat. They need to go see the doctor. One stay in the hospital costs a lot. This year his children needed to go to the hospital three times. They didn’t have the money to see the doctor. They just had to wait for death to come (2011).

Living outside of the norms of society and staying attached to life was thus at times compromised by the frailty of bodies. Many Uyghur migrants to the city said they had been dispossessed of their land to infrastructure development and corporate farming. Coming to the city in search of work, often relying on tenuous relationships with distant relatives or neighbors from their hometowns to make connections, was their only way forward. Lack of access to the city and services such as healthcare proved to be at odds with ‘making do’ with this often desperate attempt to make a life (1984 de Certeau). The near invisibility of the undocumented was often too totalizing. Uyghur migrants thus risked being subtracted entirely. Discussing the precariousness of lifeways in the Uyghur informal settlements, the old man continued:

Other people in the neighborhood who had money just replaced those who (were worked to death), they replaced whoever had been *subtracted*, (he said) those that lifted their heads first (following a death) were the ones that were able to move forward (2011; my emphasis).

Being “subtracted” (Ch: *jian shao*; Uy: *kimeytti*) speaks to the calculus through which people were reduced to a numbered segment of work units under the discipline of socialism, but as I describe more fully in the next two chapters it also came to describe the way the global city and “People’s War” human engineering projects targeted Uyghur migrants as part of process of urban cleansing. As Tian Lin moved deeper into world of minority migrant workers he said, “These kinds of conversations came so naturally it was suffocating . . . .” Not only was the city set up in opposition to migrant access, but as the new projects began the police actively harassed undocumented migrants, confiscating or destroying property, leveraging bribes or forcing them into a long slow process of rejection by forcing them to wait in lines and fill out paperwork in dozens of bureaucratic offices in the city.

Clearly many of the Uyghurs Tian Lin met wanted him to hear and see their stories. But what did it mean to him to “move forward” or to be “subtracted”? In each of the many discussions I had with Tian Lin, he always spoke of the way migrant Uyghurs cared for each other. He said that their first priority was helping those around them who were in need. What mattered most to them was not the future of Uyghur ethnicity under Chinese colonialism or the threat of interethnic racism. He said: “The Uyghurs I met are beautiful people. They are deeply generous. They take care for each other” (2015). He spoke at great length about the way his Uyghur friends had invited him into their homes and told him they would be angry if he didn’t eat with him. They said, “If we don’t eat together we can’t be friends.” They referred to him using the terms of kinship, giving him the Uyghur name Ali and referring to him as a “kin relation” (Uy: *qarandash*) using the honorific term “older brother” (Uy: *aka*). They taught him Uyghur and established that his priority was in sharing their pain. They saw him as an “accomplice” (Uy: *egeshküchi*) in their struggle. For Tian Lin, responding to the political

question of “how should we live together” meant continuing to live in a way that allowed you to attach yourself to your neighbors. Often this meant living in opposition to the human engineering goals of the state. Many times when he saw Uyghur migrants being harassed by local police on the street, he tried to intervene on their behalf. Yet often there was not much he could do. The police would just point him in the direction of the city and say “leave!” (Ch: *chu!*). Because of the emergency of the situation, in the time following the 2009 violence he spent much of his time assisting his friends in finding legal documentation that prevented them from being evicted and their homes sold to Han settlers. But again, this was often a losing battle. He said, “those things happen all the time” (2015).

### *Attaching Blame*

Five years after Tian Lin began his project in the informal settlements up on the hills, on July 5, 2009, Uyghur university students took to the streets of Ürümqi demanding justice as Uyghur-Chinese citizens for mob-instigated killing of two migrant Uyghur workers and the wounding of sixty more who had been sent to a factory in Southern China as part of one of the labor-transfer programs I describe in Chapter 2.<sup>70</sup> This protest and the widespread violence that followed, which I describe in the introduction to this project, had a dramatic impact on Tian Lin and his Uyghur friends. The violence that erupted out of a confrontation with police pulled many young Uyghurs who lived in the informal settlements into the protest. At the time, Tian Lin was riding a bus from the Uyghur neighborhood of Hejiashan back to the Han area of the city in the

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<sup>70</sup> The way this incident of perceived sexual harassment was able to escalate so quickly remains a mystery. Perhaps the Han migrant workers felt disadvantaged due to the government aid the Uyghur workers had received in getting jobs at the factory. Perhaps there were other racially charged incidents that led up to this violence. As Huang Cuilian, the “Han girl” whose alleged harassment triggered the disturbances put it, “I was lost and entered the wrong dormitory and screamed when I saw those Uyghur young men in the room... I just felt they were unfriendly so I turned and ran.” She then recalled how one of them stood up and stamped his feet as if to chase her (a generic example of Uyghur ironic humor. Most young Uyghur males are well aware of the racialized perceptions many Han have toward them as violent hoodlums). “I later realized that he was just making fun of me.” <sup>70</sup>

north of town. He was on one of the last buses to make it through that day. Buses that left just after his were stopped by crowds of Uyghur migrants. Uyghur migrants beat Han passengers and drivers. They overturned police cars. They burned Han shops. In the fighting, nearly 200 people were killed and thousands were injured, most of them, at least on the first day of the conflict, were Han.

Over the next few days Han migrants began attacking Uyghur migrants. Many died. In the weeks that followed, the police with the aid of Han migrants began to conduct house-to-house searches for young Uyghur men suspected of participating in the violence. In the neighborhood where Tian Lin had been taking pictures right before the violence began, hundreds of young men were taken. Human Rights Watch (2013) estimates that following the protests of 2009 several thousand Uyghur men were subtracted by the state. Han migrant participants in the violence were not prosecuted.

According to the state-owned media, the blame for the massive violence was pinned on the Uyghur migrant population from the countryside, a narrative that was largely accepted by both mainstream Han and urban, affluent Uyghurs.<sup>71</sup> A new legal framework known as “The Three Evils: Separatism, Extremism, Terrorism” was attached to what had previously been “undocumented” bodies of Uyghur migrants.<sup>72</sup> Although many of the participants who joined the protests after they had become race riots were migrants, attaching the blame for the violence to their bodies did not account for the widespread ethno-racism and dispossession that had brought them to the city and triggered the violence in the first place. Uyghur migrants were read

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<sup>71</sup> This is an amorphous broad accusation that doesn’t target the Mountain Goat Hill settlement in particular, but certainly does not exclude it. What is clear is that outsiders were to blame according to dominant narratives. Overseas Uyghur organizations were also blamed by official state media for orchestrating the events from afar via social networking websites. All online communication was frozen for 8 months following the incidents.

<sup>72</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three\\_Evils](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_Evils)

as deviant from the norms of discipline and therefore the object of blame for what had happened in the city. Like the Han migrant workers in Guangdong who began the spate of violence by attacking Uyghur migrants, Uyghur migrants in Ürümqi were seen as “low quality” (Ch: *suzhi di*) urban citizens. Yet interestingly, in the context of Ürümqi, Han migrants were regarded as “high quality” (Ch: *suzhi gao*) citizens whose culpability in the violence was deemed implausible. Unlike the vast majority of Han migrants with whom I spoke about these incidents, Tian Lin did not blame Uyghur migrants, Islamic tradition, or lack of patriotism for the violence. He did not justify the violence in any way, but he said he understood the frustration and resentment that motivated it. He watched in horror the way mobs of Han migrants beat Uyghur bakers outside his apartment building while the police watched from the sidelines in the days that followed the initial violence.

The areas where Tian Lin worked were rapidly demolished over the next several years and a new infrastructure of concrete grids and high-rise apartment buildings with running water, working lights and closed-circuit security cameras was built further from the center of the city. Of course many Uyghur migrants could not obtain the proper paperwork to gain legal access to the new housing or simply could not afford it. In addition, in 2014 when the new People’s Convenience Card system was implemented, hundreds of thousands of people who had moved into the new housing or continued to live in the informal settlements were forced to leave.

As Tian Lin put it:

There are two major changes that have happened since the events of July 5, 2009. First, on the surface, things have been radically altered. Old-style one-story (Ch: *pingfang*) houses have been torn down and replaced with new apartments... infrastructure has been improved, but the lives of those most directly affected by the redevelopment have not been improved that much. Instead they have just found themselves dispersed into other parts of the city or forced to leave. Second, household registration (Ch: *hukou*) restrictions have been drastically increased. Uyghur migrants are being simultaneously pushed and squeezed. When they came to find work many of (migrants) first built their



own houses without official permission, so this is the reason officials give for tearing down the houses. I really don't agree with this, because behind this is an attitude that Uyghurs "have no culture" (Ch: *mei wenhua*) (and therefore don't matter). People talk as though society should be controlled through competition. People with abilities to do well should be free to live in the city and those that cannot should be pushed out. Of course since Uyghurs are discriminated against and can't move freely and speak easily in the Chinese world this means they will be the first to be eliminated. Actually, if you follow this logic, all of Xinjiang should be eliminated since in the eyes of most Chinese it itself is so far "behind" (*luohou*). I really disagree with this perspective. It lacks vision into the complexity of the problems we face here. Pushing problems to the side does not solve them. Everyone tries to blame their problems on others without considering their own role in making them.

Unlike many other Han in Xinjiang who blamed the violence on Uyghurs who refuse to participate in the Chinese colonial project, Tian Lin saw himself as aligned with the placelessness of Uyghur migrants. Although Tian Lin was able to get the "Green Card" permit to live in the city as a migrant, he still identified with their position. He felt little desire to pursue what other urbanites might consider a good life, not only because he knew this success would come at the expense of Uyghur losses, but also because he found no joy in building a persona through consumption. He had no job, no love interest, no children. All he had was his photographic life practice, his Han artist and Uyghur migrant friends. Once while we were sitting in his apartment drinking tea he told a story about a Uyghur friend:

I have a (Uyghur) friend from the Aqsu area who came to live here (decades) ago, but never managed to get an ID or *hukou* established anywhere. So after July 5, 2009 they tried to force him to go back to Aqsu, but since he had been in the city for so long he didn't have any connections in Aksu anymore. No one would officially recognize him, so he was a person without place. This issue has still not been resolved even though it has been such a long time. He jokes that he is a person without a country.

As he finished telling the story he laughed ironically. To him, the story was symptomatic of lives of Xinjiang people in general both Han and Uyghur. Although he clearly recognized the way Uyghur migrants bore the brunt of dispossession, he felt little loyalty to the Chinese colonial project. He too felt like he was someone without a country. This placelessness and

marginalization that was simultaneously rooted in a commitment to Xinjiang and Buddhism is what bound him to his political-aesthetic practice.

The ubiquity of capitalist exploitation and colonial domination provided some of the ground for the violent resistance by both Uyghur migrants and recent Han migrants in the Ürümqi protests. Yet by allowing the racialized structural antagonism between Uyghur and Han migrants to continue to ferment, the state occluded and continued to block a political imaginary grounded in ubiquity of dispossession. Since the state actively recruited dispossessed Han settlers from Eastern China, blocked Uyghur migration, discouraged Han dissent, and violently repressed any Uyghur protest, the commonalities between Uyghur and Han migrants actively dissipated. Instead the governance structure encouraged a fractured reterritorialization centered around ethnic markers, cultural difference, and xenophobic outcomes.

Tian Lin's politics, on the other hand, catalyzed an intimate interethnic public sphere, or minor politics, centered around shared attachments to a form of precarious Xinjiang migrant life. His Han friends joked that he was carrying out the "interethnic unity" (Ch: *minzu tuanjie*) work that the regional communist party promoted on massive billboards and red banners in every city block. When they said things like this, everyone laughed sarcastically, because no one believed anything the Party said about ethnic solidarity. To them this strategy of demanding that "good citizens" fight the three forces of "separatism, extremism and terrorism" and uphold social stability and harmony was just a strategy of deflecting blame from the real problems, the everyday forms of structural violence that most Han citizens of the city regarded as normal. One of Tian Lin's artist friends said, "What Party officials say sounds reasonable, but it is almost all just a way of saving face." He said that if you just look around for a minute you will see ethnic discrimination and economic corruption taking place everywhere. He said "These things happen

all the time. What kind of government is this? They are causing the problems rather than preventing them” (2015). For Tian Lin and other artists like him, stepping out in solidarity with the ethnic other meant stepping out from the normalcy of capitalist development and settler colonialism that had come to dominate normative politics in Ürümchi.

*Toward a Minor Politics*



*Figure 4.3. One of Tian Lin’s friends poses with her son in her home. Portraits of and Mao Zedong have been turned on their sides to form the walls of her home in the Uyghur informal settlement. Image by Tian Lin.*

Tian Lin’s images were a means to his politics. For Tian Lin the feeling of being political, or being active in the world, was when he was concentrating on life at the margins. These feelings took place in homes, around tablecloths on raised platforms; sitting with Uyghur friends on the porches or in the courtyards of their homes; listening to their troubles and sharing in their pain. He felt connected when he advocated for them at the police station and when they

accepted gifts of his vegetarian food and shared their meals with him. When he thought about the life philosophy that emerged through his aesthetic-political practice, he said things like:

Taking photos is a life practice. In the chaos of the present, the simplicity of watching forces people, who might merely want to soak in salon-style art at their leisure, to return to the inner stillness and bareness of life: you must go by yourself, see for yourself. You have to start from the periphery of the city and continue on alone. Walk silently while facing those scenes and emotions that your camera lens are unable to hold (2013).

Since so much had changed since the violence of 2009, for Tian Lin and many other artists, photography as a life practice came to be tinged with a loss of trust in a better future. When life was lived in the moment; a future life seemed quite distant and bleak. Writing in 2013 he said:

The dream-like intimacy and kindness of these people brought me back to a place I knew 30 years ago. That door had been closed, so I always remained aloof, wandering in every direction. I tried to capture their unforgettable faces and the essence of their yearning for life. I know so many people who have wandered elsewhere due to the demolition. A few people still live on the margins. Sometimes I still hear the sound of the tambour drifting in the alleyways. In that sound I hear all kinds of longing and often catch a glimpse of those figures who have vanished into the past. Once in a ravine I took pictures of a kid. After I had gone on quite far away, *he caught up with me*. He handed me an apple, and then quickly ran back in the direction he had come. Then there was an old horse used for hauling water. One day I approached it while it was chewing its cud. In the dusk it turned toward me, and *looked at me with blank indifference*. Its gaze touched me so deeply. In it I felt I could glimpse the entire ethos of life (on the mountain). Now, when I see the deserted mountain slope where the Uyghur migrants used to live, it feels as if they have disappeared in a mighty torrent. For a number of years I took pictures. I saw much happiness and suffering. I also saw many endings. I saw some of the foundations of human existence. *Life is made out of absurdities and bleakness, excesses and anxiety*. It is incredible. (my emphasis)

Yet although life seemed meaningless, the process of slow dispossession was made survivable in the intervals of sharing friendship and looking honestly at the losses of those nearby. Tian Lin was not entering the world with Uyghurs out of hope of their future recognition by the state, but because of an ethical commitment to being-with the other. That was all there was.

The two encounters Tian Lin described above – the child handing him an apple and locking eyes with an indifferent horse – were images of witnessing. As Naisargi Dave (2015) has

argued with regards to animal activists in India, a singular moment of locking eyes with a suffering other can become a life-changing moment of witnessing. This moment of intimacy between subjects expands the self in a way that transcends previous horizons of relational possibility. When Tian Lin and his colleagues took up a photography that looked honestly at those who had been left out of Chinese development they were taking up a practice of witnessing. That is, in effect, their practice produced an ethical obligation to live as a perpetual witness. Taking these ethical claims a bit further, Dave (2015) argues that intimacy of this sort was more than the coming together of sovereign subjects as the founding myths of our autological modernist societies might imply. Rather than being motivated by free love, the suffering other is brought into the encounter precisely through its “*unfreedom*,” and the activist is compelled to surrender to an ethics outside of herself. Since Uyghur migrants were attached to, and artists such as Tian Lin refused to detach from, life as migrants, none of them had anywhere else to go. Of course, there was a much greater measure of choice on the part of Tian Lin, since he could pass as a member of the privileged ethno-racial majority. Yet by rejecting the truth claims of the state and taking on what many read as a dissident position by identifying with the Uyghur dispossession he witnessed, he was embracing a shared unfreedom which resulted in a deep interdependence. As Dave argues, witnessing thus compels the activist to expand the skin of the self to include the skin of the other folding over forms of difference that previously had seemed insurmountable. For a witness then, the precariousness of someone in pain demands a minor politics, a politics that emerges from a shared experience of *being-with* another (Al-Mohammad 2010). This is more than a form of liberal humanist empathy in which the participant claims a sense of moral superiority while sacrificing little. Rather this is an

imperative that compels the witness to try and fail and try again to make the pain of the other matter in the shared experience of life.

Witnessing produces a sort of torsion or twist in the normal weave of the social fabric. As Jacques Rancière has noted, political solidarities that arise among communities are centered around shared attachments. These torsions around a shared object interrupt the normal ordering of society along normative categories of citizenship or, if adapted to a Chinese context, ethnic status and household registration. Rancière argues that centering life around the shared inheritance of a marker, such as a shared attachment to Xinjiang migrant marginality, outside of the norms of formal political structures, allows for a new form of politics, friendship and equality routed through feelings of intimacy and solidarity. What is crucial in this reframing of politics is that it moves from a liberal politics of inclusion that is aimed at normalizing the “excluded part” by bringing it into alignment with the norms of society and instead opens up a politics with “anybody or whoever” (Rancière 2007: 99). In doing so, this form of politics allows the other to maintain her difference. Through this the other is empowered to refuse to submit her sovereignty. The other is instead regarded as a carrier of knowledge and regarded as a constitutive part of the political sensibilities that emerge out of practices of witnessing, friendship and shared attachments to life.

Following Rancière’s argument further: this torsion is necessarily aesthetic in that it creates a new distribution of the sensible. Non-normative, or what I am describing as minor, politics, “makes visible what had been excluded from a perceptual field” (2004: 226). This was precisely what Tian Lin was attempting to do through his practice of witnessing and his attachment to life as a migrant. He was attempting to pull himself into a particular Uyghur orbit and along the way document his experience and activate fellow Han artists and art viewers to

share an intimate public sphere with Uyghur migrants. Over the past decades Tian Lin has come to be widely respected in the artist community in Ürümchi. He used his position to advocate for Uyghur lives. This had the effect of making Han artists check their privilege and Uyghur artists feel welcome in the community. Yet as Rancière himself admits, this form of politics is rarely successful in a formal lasting sense. It is difficult to step out of normative politics; and even more difficult for a torsion in the social fabric to have any lasting effect. Although Uyghur migrants stayed on Tian Lin's mind and he identified with the conditions of their lives, at times Uyghur and Han viewers of his images had difficulty tuning into the politics of his work.

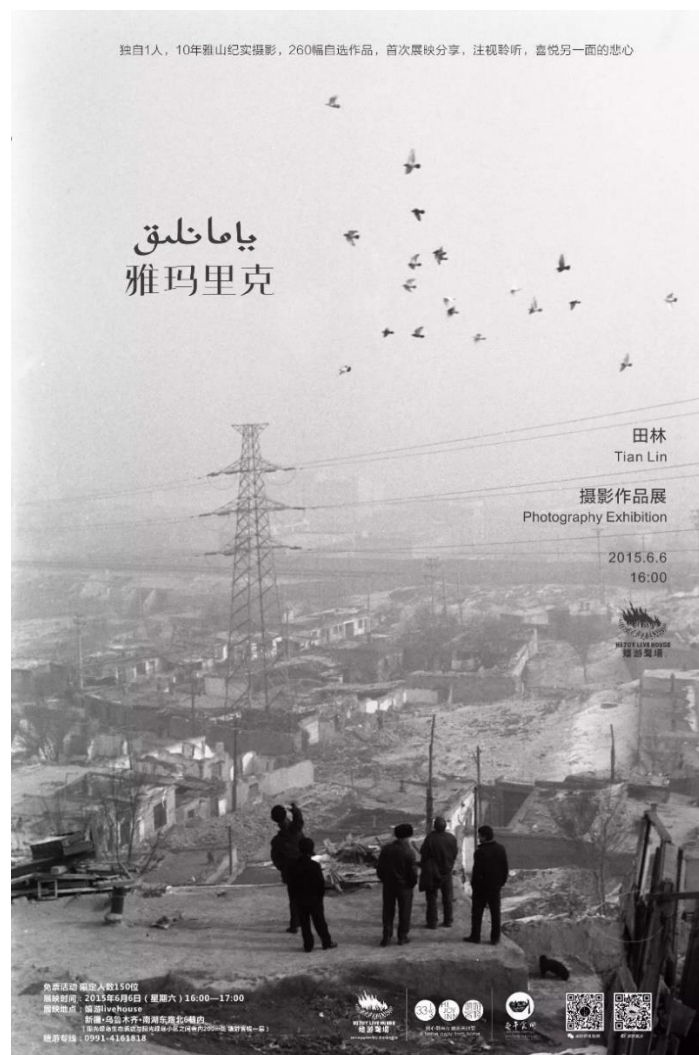


Figure 4.4. Poster for Tian Lin's June 6, 2015 photo exhibition called "Yamalike."

On June 6, 2015, one of Tian Lin's friends helped him put on an exhibition of his work. It was held in a private coffee shop rather than state sponsored space at the Seven City Blocks art district where government censorship would have prevented the images from being shown. Tian Lin showed over 200 images in a slide show set to a Brian Eno soundtrack called "Music for Airports" that several of his Han artist friends had arranged. Around 100 people came. Many of them were artists, some of them quite famous in the mainstream Chinese contemporary art scene. I invited Ablikim, the Uyghur migrant whose story I told in the previous chapter, to attend. As was typical in Han-sponsored cultural events, he was the only Uyghur in the audience. After the show, I introduced Ablikim to Tian Lin. Because of the trauma Ablikim had been through over the past several years, he was reluctant to speak Chinese in public; Tian Lin too was reluctant to speak Uyghur in front of an audience. Because of this mutual shyness it was difficult for them to speak freely with each other. Instead I and other audience members led the conversation in Chinese. Tian Lin talked for an hour about how he got started with his project and how the lives of the people he has come to know so intimately have changed. Tian Lin talked about how difficult it was for him to prevent Chinese media from putting a "happy face" (Ch: *xiaolian*) on the lives of Uyghurs. He spoke about how he did not see himself as a hero, but rather as just a friend and advocate in Uyghur struggles. He was deeply uncomfortable showing his work in such a bourgeois environment.

As we were walking home after our conversation I asked Ablikim what he thought about the exchange. He held up his hand and positioned his finger about an inch from his thumb and said:

He is *this close* to understanding what the situation is really like for Uyghurs. Maybe he is as close as he can get to it. Whenever Han people talk to Uyghurs something always gets a little bit lost in translation. Uyghurs use slightly different words and Han understand what they are saying in slightly different ways. Han people use words like



“common people” (Ch: *laobaixing*) and “backward” (Ch: *luohou*) to describe their situation as migrants. Everything gets translated into the language of Chinese society. Actually Uyghurs don’t think like that or talk like that very much. We think in distinctly different ways – we don’t think we are “backward” compared to Chinese society and “common people” makes it seem as though we are all equal. Maybe the way we talk and the way Han people talk have some similarities but they also feel like they have some big differences. What I really like about Tian Lin though is that he doesn’t see himself as some sort of hero. He just has some ideas about how to do something like photography and he does it. He isn’t trying to make a name for himself or do something great. He just wants to see life the way it really is. I really respect that.

Yet although he deeply admired Tian Lin’s personal ethics, Ablikim voiced a common concern that many Uyghurs mentioned in conversations about Tian Lin’s images that were of Uyghur children.

I wonder why all his images make those kids look so sad. Actually people are often happy even when their lives are not so good. Of course their lives are much different from my own life in the countryside. When I was a kid, I went to school every day. I had plans for my future. I felt like a normal kid and really didn’t worry about anything. Everything seemed fine.

Yet as he spoke he also came to realize that the answer to his question about the sadness of the images, was in the intensifying dispossession of Uyghur migrant life itself and what it meant to make that experience of life sensible.

Those kids, the children of “travelers” (Uy: *musapir*), are probably only happy two days out of seven. Their families have had their “spirits broken” (Uy: *rohi sunghan*) in some way or another. Either their father is a drunk, or their parents just fight all the time (because of money), or their mom was ostracized by the community they came from (because she wasn’t pious enough) or something like that. That is why they left the countryside and came to the city in the first place. They are trying to run away from something like religious restrictions or poverty in their home village. But of course they brought the problems they had in the countryside with them to the city. So those kids can never get away from the feelings of anger and fear that they feel all around them. This is why they look sad, I’m guessing. Maybe some of it is also the way Tian Lin takes pictures. He is looking for moments like that.

For Ablikim it was obvious that the identity that Tian Lin referred to as that of a “blind wanderer” (Ch: *mangliu*) was related to the older Uyghur term or “traveler” (Ch: *musapir*). It was also clear to him that there was a range of issues that caused them to come to the city in the first place.

Perhaps because he himself came from a position of a bit more privilege as a college graduate, he did not quite himself fully understand the level of dispossession that these Uyghur migrants had experienced. Yet he recognized that their spirits had been “broken.” Something had been done to these people to make them appear this way. As I will discuss in the next chapter, a new wave of young Uyghur “travelers” had also come more recently, bringing with them new forms of pious Islamic practice that would catalyze a sudden and violent wave of fast dispossession. Here, though, I simply want to signal that perhaps the incommensurability between these positions – “traveler” from the Uyghur and “blind wanderer” from the Chinese – were a central tension in Tian Lin’s minor politics. This tension sometimes prevented viewers of his work from seeing what was fully at stake. As Ablikim put it:

What will Han people get out of looking at these pictures? These pictures make the problem really clear. They put it right in front of you. But like Tian Lin said, they will probably just turn them into a series of pictures of cute kids and “strange”-looking people taken by a heroic photographer. Of course that is not what he wants and he also doesn’t want it to result in some sort of easy solution – as some excuse to make some kind of new housing or education policy. You can’t ‘fix’ a problem like this. You can only try to find ways to ‘resolve’ the problem. If you really want to resolve the problem you have to look at the problems in the countryside, at the deep problems in Xinjiang. You have to see how the structures of society are causing these sorts of broken families, how discrimination is forcing people to move like this to look for work, how the education infrastructure prevents poor people from finding real jobs, how the education that rural people have is not valued by society. You have to see how people’s voices are not heard and how people are being treated like animals.

No one knows what caused the violence in 2009. There are all kinds of theories that it was organized by some centralized group or something. I think it is pretty clear to see that many people have deep anger that they can’t express. Many, like those people who live in the poor areas, are frustrated and hopeless. They can be pretty easily persuaded by other people who take advantage of that sort of anger. But in any case what happened after 2009 did not address the real sources of the problems. It is just like 1989 or the Cultural Revolution, the leaders just say some very vague things about how things have been taken care of and now everything is harmonious. They just ignore the real problems and act like they never happened. That is a very Chinese way of doing things. I think that is how most Han people will see Tian Lin’s pictures too. They will just be a little sad to see that life was so hard for people like this, *but they won’t do anything about it*. They will just act as though that was in the past in another place and now those problems have

been taken care of. Of course they haven't. Those people's lives have gone on; but for most of them they haven't gotten any better. The people that received that little bit of compensation—7000 yuan or whatever—have just spent that money and are now trying to live somewhere else. Most people will just see them and think they are bad people who aren't willing to work or are maybe involved in some sorts of crime, but the way they got to that condition was because society itself has rejected them. They didn't really have that much choice (my emphasis).

What Ablikim is pointing us toward is the difficulty in translating a minor politics to a broader public. He is noting that, in the Chinese system of multicultural compassion, as in Western forms of liberal empathy, some Han express empathy for the suffering of others, but very few were willing to actually sacrifice their own privilege to help others. Attempting to redistribute the sensible through the development of a new form of aesthetic-political reframing does not necessarily allow the intimacy of *being-with* others to circulate outside of the immediate context of site of production. Instead images of poverty and otherness can also be read as an index of “backwardness” (Ch: *luohou*). They can even be read as evidence of the individual as the cause of violence and poverty rather than the result of structural violence and dispossession. Yet these were chances Tian Lin was willing to take. In the end, witnessing created its own life paths and its own politics, however minor they may have been.

### *Conclusions*

Despite systemic blockages from the state and misrecognition from his viewers, Tian Lin's work continued. No matter what sort of urban cleansing projects were deployed, Tian Lin felt as though the state could not extirpate “the people, the objects, and feelings of a place” which sprouted up like blades of grass in zones of exclusion.<sup>73</sup> When he began the project, “The city was very close,” Tian Lin wrote, “Within ten minutes you could go down the mountain to a

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<sup>73</sup> Here I am reminded of the way grass sprouts in the thinnest of soil between stones and across wide steppes of open ground. As Henry Miller put it so nicely: “Grass only exists between the great non-cultivated spaces. It fills in the voids. It grows between -- among the other things. The flower is beautiful, the cabbage is useful, the poppy makes you crazy. But grass is overflowing, it is a lesson in morality” (in Deleuze 1987:30).

main road where huge billboards kept out the hillside: beautiful women, sofas, cell phones, tires, children's clothes... a wall of giant signs stretched out from the city to cover up its embarrassment" (2011). Obfuscated in the winter by industrial pollution and in the summer by a wall of commercial billboards, the slums on the hills were lacunae in the emerging global city. Lacking natal home relations and tacit knowledge of cosmopolitan manners, formal business acumen, and the passwords necessary to access capital, the slum population proliferated, cloaked by "the great fogs" on the margins of the city. It was only with a major shock to the integrity of the system that those imbricated in the institutions down below were compelled to target the settlements beyond the reach of the city.<sup>74</sup> And then, it was only with the intention of violently dispossessing the population of Uyghur migrants: "returning" them to the rationality of the emerging global city, incarcerating them under the discipline of the mass detention system, or exiling them to the poverty from which they came. If Tian Lin's work of rendering the invisible visible still allowed for a misrecognition of the stranger, at least in his Buddhist and artistic practice there was also a minor politics built out of love, generosity and vulnerability. Although sharing a view of the world from the position of Xinjiang-specific "blind wanderer" or "traveler" did not necessarily produce a recognized form of political rights to the city, it framed a view of ordinary life as lived in the midst of precariousness and that was already an opening to a new form of political feeling.

Tian Lin was not trying to produce a form of multiculturalism in which the minority-other is included in the mainstream without the member of the majority losing something.

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<sup>74</sup> Often the complexity of a social system is only revealed when it is "blown apart" by a trauma, what follows then in a milieu of security is "a process of 'spacing out' of generating, enfolding, and extending space in which mapping is always behind, struggling to 'catch up'" (Simone 26). Here we can think of the problematic mappings of the War on Terror that followed the trauma of 9-11. Agamben tells us that such traumas are, as Benjamin predicted, becoming the norm rather than the exception.

Instead he was attempting to lose parts of his own social potential, by amplifying the voices of the other. By entering into an intimate minor politics with Uyghur migrants, Tian Lin found a measure of repair in his own life. He found ways to give up on the obligations to normalcy that had been placed on him by his family, the state and mainstream society. He found a way to step out of normal life and share a life with the placeless. Rather than being part of an official “ethnic solidarity” team sponsored by the state to bring minorities into categories of domination and productivity as the state turned to terror capitalism, Tian Lin set out on his own to find resonances between his own life and the lives of those on the margins. In doing so, he was introducing a new specificity to the problem at hand, and through this, a strategic reassembling of the terms with which Uyghur travelers were regarded by themselves, by other Han artists and by art viewers. Uyghur viewers of his work viewed it as “almost good enough” and for Tian Lin that was enough to continue his culture work as fogs of pollution that obscured Uyghur neighborhoods were lifted and waves of urban cleansing began.

**Part 3**  
**Cleansing the City**

## Chapter 5:

### The Traveler in the City: Relational Autonomy, Fast Dispossession and Uyghur Piety



*Figure 5.1. The rubble of Black Shell Mountain. Image by Nicola Zolin, used with permission.*

In August 2015, when I walked down the backstreets in the Uyghur migrant community of Black Shell Mountain at around 8 am on Friday, the weekly day of worship in the Islamic world, I saw a community rubbing the sleep out of its eyes. Migrants who woke up before 8 am had coal fires burning in rusting metal barrels. Eggs were roasting on tripods. Big iron woks were filled with a slow-cooking rice and carrot pilaf called *polu*. The butchers were slaughtering their second sheep for the day, hacking open rib-cages with small hatchets. The juice pressers were carting their presses out to their wagonload of withering pomegranates. The breadmakers stoked the fires in their clay ovens lined with lime from the desert. This was one of the last Uyghur neighborhoods where people filled teapots from communal hot water taps. The smoke

from coal fires from the last remaining one story houses hung in the air, mingling with the acrid scent of Styrofoam burning in the ditches. Small children still had free-rein of the streets, where they played in the rubble unsupervised. Farther up the mountain, one story homes were being dismantled by Uyghur day laborers brick by brick while new 20 story apartment buildings were being built by Han construction crews. The sound of the construction of the government-subsidized orange and yellow towers mixed with sound of dogs barking, the cheerful shouts of children on recess at the nearby elementary school and the chanting of the anti-terrorism forces that were stationed next to the community after the mass protests of 2009. In adjacent alleyways, Han migrants from Anhui and Henan sorted through insulation ripped from the sides of salvaged refrigerators in preparation for a big shipment to the recycling plant, but the vast majority of the 20,000 migrants in the community were Uyghur. Uyghur migrants first built this settlement on the hillside in the 1990s; the Han migrants on the fringes came later. It was one of the last remaining Uyghur informal settlements or “shantytowns” in the city.

In this grey island of brick, dust, blood and rubble, the city that surrounded it seemed to be at a remove. Here, everything seemed to be temporary. Since the entire area was scheduled for urban cleansing following the large-scale protests, race riots and disappearances of 2009, there were fewer cameras and more police. There were many newly constructed walls and gates, but they were tended haphazardly. Because everything was in flux, there was a generalized sense of incoherence in the community. Since many of the Uyghur migrants were strangers to each other, they were often guarded in what they said – unsure of who was a police informant and who was not. Many of the people who inhabited the space were not actively resisting the development of city; they were merely trying to live with what they knew and what they had. People lived, sorting the refuse of the city, waiting to be told to leave. The tens of thousands of



Uyghur migrants on Black Shell Mountain self-identified as *musapir* or “travelers” from elsewhere.

Yet, for all of the uncertainty and fragmentation of the community, on the Friday I described above in 2015 there was still a center to their social life. At the bottom of the hill, in the center of the alleyways was the Black Shell Mountain mosque. It served as the institutional center of the Black Shell Mountain community. During weekly Friday prayers, the streets around the mosque swelled to several thousand. A vibrant bazaar sprang to life and for a few hours a spirit of conviviality took over the space. Although plain-clothed police also came to scan the crowds for migrants suspected of Islamic extremism, in many ways the bazaar operated like a weekly rural market. People from an area around a half-an-hour’s walking distance in each direction converged once a week to buy supplies and share the news of the week. Migrants from the same home village met and commiserated. Those who attended the unauthorized prayer-rooms (Uy: *namaz-xana*) in Uyghur restaurants around the city shared with each other unauthorized digital recordings of Islamic teaching messages they had copied that week. They talked about which jobs were coming available, about supplies of shoes, coats, toys and cheap electronics that could be sold at a profit on the streets. By identifying themselves as travelers or *musapir*, they laid claim to a sense of belonging to this mosque community. This belonging was something that in turn provided them with a weekly sense of economic support and wellbeing. Despite the state’s efforts to eliminate the presence of this population in the city through the controlled distribution of rental and commercial permits, here the Uyghur migrant population found ways to survive, but only for a time.

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This chapter considers the Islamic sociality of the Uyghur *musapir* as the basis for a religious economy that prolonged life under conditions of colonial domination and economic exploitation in the city. Often life in a demolition zone appears to be a space of abjection. They might be seen as spaces where the poor are slotted to suffer an almost underground existence as their homes and dreams are torn apart and buried in rubble. Although there is an element of truth to this imagery of abjection, this chapter shows that the story of informal Uyghur settlements is more complicated than this. The Uyghur concept of the *musapir*—long conceived as an exception to the norm of Uyghur rootedness in farming communities and the stability of land tenure—implies a feeling of desolation and loss, but it also describes a kind of piety and willfulness. *Musapir*, or *musafir* as it written in the original Arabic, simply means “traveler,”<sup>75</sup> but among Uyghurs it has come to describe a sense of both psychic and material displacement and a surrender to Islamic faith. It is similar to the way the Chinese term *mangliu*, or “blind wanderer,” was used like Han migrants such as Tian Lin, but it differs in the way it is related to particular histories of cultured thought. For Uyghurs, *musapir* also describes a particular religious practice – the Sufi tradition of the wandering Islamic mystic, and it is here, at the nexus of the psychic, material and religious, that it becomes fruitful as a specific conceptualization of the sociality of Uyghur migrants as they wait to be expelled from the city.

Many self-identified *musapir* repeatedly insisted that they were hoping to someday be able achieve legal status in the city and buy an apartment, yet many of them also admitted that this was not likely to happen. Most of them focused on just the week in front of them. They lived Friday to Friday, when they participated in the weekly Islamic service and street bazaar. The younger generation of migrants relied on their network of fellow travelers to help them find more

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<sup>75</sup> *Musafir* also simply means “traveler” in Persian, Urdu and Hindi.

short-term work, pyramid schemes, and training courses when what they were doing in the present fell through. One of the ways of strengthening this network was through regular meetings to discuss unauthorized religious teachings or *tabligh* of reformist, or fundamentalist, Islam, which became enormously popular among young Uyghur men in Southern Xinjiang since 2009. An older generation of migrants relied on the same mosque community to survive the turmoil that came from having their homes demolished during Ürümqi's urban cleansing projects. Increasingly they saw value in the new forms of piety that were being practiced by younger, more devout, migrants. Like the younger generation of migrants, they too saw themselves as becoming *musafir*.

In what follows, I explore the way Uyghur migrants from Kashgar prefecture struggled to achieve economic stability in their lives while contending with the urban policing of Ürümqi. Since 2009, police forced hundreds of thousands of Uyghur migrants to leave their homes. While some were able to afford government subsidized housing, the majority of migrants were expelled from the city. The expulsions were enforced by regular home inspections where Uyghur inhabitants were asked to produce "green cards" (*yeshil kart*) or "People's Convenience Cards" (*bianminka*) which proved they were good citizens. Needless to say, as I described in the introduction to this dissertation, obtaining this card was a long and difficult process for most resource-poor migrants. Failure to comply with this order resulted in arrests and detention in rehabilitation centers where inmates were taught forms of Chinese socialism and the "proper" role of Islam in their lives. Throughout the period of my fieldwork I saw hundreds of thousands of migrants being forced to leave the city. While for Ablikim, the process of dispossession had felt like a slow interminable process that began in city in after 2009, during this period of time as the "People's War" was put in motion, dispossession began to move very quickly. By May 2015,

entire apartment buildings were vacated; hundreds of Uyghur restaurants were closed. In Black Shell Mountain, many were forced to leave. Others dodged the police and lived without permits in the rooms of friends.

By focusing on a tumultuous year in the life of a family of an older-generation of migrants that inhabited a “nail house” (Ch: *dingzihu*) in this informal settlement, I show that migrant life was often comingled with Reformist Islamic practice. I examine how the family refused to accept compensation for the demolition of their house, thus enacting a “nail house” resistance, while at the same time they prepared themselves for its inevitable demolition by drawing on the *musapir* or “vagabond” Uyghur tradition. I show how they refused to have their lives displayed in a documentary film, but instead chose to tell their stories on their own terms. I found that by participating in a mosque community that was made up of other *musapir*, the family was able to use urban sheep farming – raising a small herd of sheep inside their home and in the rubble that surrounded it – as a viable means to prepare for the oncoming wave of dispossession.

I then turn to the story of a young Uyghur *musapir* who lived in the same mosque community as the family. In his case, the mosque community became the locus of his social identification and a source of economic stability. He actively used his *musapir* identification to validate his religious identification as a reformist Muslim. Within the migrant community the knowledge he had gained through his immersion in prayer room discussions of Islamic wisdom and orthopraxis built a religious calling into his position as temporary inhabitant of the city. I argue that these cases, the “nail house” businessman who was in the process of losing his house and the younger religious migrant are at two ends of the spectrum of what counted as

contemporary *musafir* sociality. In the end, like the hundreds of thousands of other *musafir* like them, both of them failed to claim a secure space in city.

### *Islamic Practice and Religious Economies*

This chapter takes inspiration from growing debates in anthropology on reformist and “everyday” Islam. In a recent review article, Nadia Fadil and Mayanthi Fernando (2015) outlined the way recent ethnographies of contemporary “everyday” Islam have emphasized the agency of Muslims in their encounters with overarching moral or religious structures.<sup>76</sup> This new literature is pitched as a supplement to earlier studies that sought to understand the rise of Salafi or reformist forms of Islam, and the holistic forms of religious piety it produced, as a dominant structure in Islamic society. Fadil and Fernando, however, understand this new focus on the everyday as an effort to delegitimize this earlier scholarship, as well as their own scholarship on piety among Muslims in France and Belgium. My reading of the new literature on the “everyday” is that, in many cases it attempts to open ethnographies of religious people toward the way power structures other than moral or religious authority, such as those of settler colonialism, non-Western forms of racialization and neo-colonial capitalism, are also part of the fabric of contemporary life for Muslims in places like Iraq, India and in my case Northwest China.

The anthropological scholarship on emerging forms of religious piety from scholars such as Saba Mahmood (2005), Charles Hirschkind (2006), Laura Deeb and Mona Harb (2011) presents a compelling argument for the way reformist forms of Islam precipitated a rise in ethical self-cultivation. Many of the scholars of “everyday” Islam do something similar, yet they often place a greater stress on the multiplicity of sources that inform this rise in ethical behavior. For

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<sup>76</sup> Their essay was inspired in part by the publishing of a collection of essays drawn from the archive of *Cultural Anthropology* by Kathryn Zyskowski in 2014 as a “Curated Collection: Everyday Islam.”

example, Veena Das (2010) attempts to come to terms with the way Muslims at times use Hindu moral frameworks as a way to resolve ethnic tensions in their everyday life practices. Hayder Al-Mohammad (2012) describes a communal response to the kidnapping of a friend in post-occupation Iraq as an ethical struggle to share the pain of those who were caught in the widespread trauma of neocolonial violence. Likewise, in this chapter, I argue that although the role of Islam has an increasing force in Uyghur society, the rise of reformist Islam is to some extent a response to a Chinese colonial project that conflates Uyghur refusals to be eliminated with religious extremism. Islam offers Uyghurs displaced by settler-colonialism a way of framing their struggle, but due to constraints on religious practice, the power of economic forces and the pull of indigeneity, it remains for many Uyghurs one form of identification among many.

For Uyghurs, the economic and political precariousness of life as dispossessed migrants was something that pushed them toward reformist forms of Islam. This push toward new forms of Islam was thus simultaneously an effect of state oppression and facilitated by state development of new communication networks. Smart phones, 3G networks, Mp3 recordings carried on SD cards, and the New Silk Road highways were all part of what fostered the religious revival among Uyghur migrants. The precariousness of social life in the midst of a settler-colonial project thus structured and enabled the way they understood, negotiated and deployed Islamic moral frameworks. In addition, the particular form of indigenous Islamic knowledge they drew on informed the way they adapted reformist Islamic frameworks in their own lives. Like Fadil and Fernando, then, my argument is not that Uyghur lives were fractured in multiple identities, as is often conceptualized in Western liberal frameworks, but rather that their everyday experience of Islam was situated in changing structures of power and influence.

One of the ways this adaptation was expressed was through the changing meaning of the figure of the *musapir* or traveler in Uyghur society. In a short story written in 1993 called “The Musapir’s Tavern,” the popular Uyghur fiction writer Memtimin Hoshur describes the role of the *musapir* in Uyghur society at an earlier moment. In his portrait, the figure of the *musapir* was portrayed as a kind of drunken poet who frequented taverns and opined about Uyghur society and Islamic philosophy. It was a Uyghur man of a certain amount of privilege who spent much of his time talking about Sufi flights of the mind while drinking vodka and sorghum liquor. It was presented as a man who was bored with life and irresponsible regarding the needs of his family. Of course, Hoshur was alluding to the rise in alcohol dependence in the 1980s and 90s, but underemphasizing the way this rise in despondency was correlated with the rise in underemployment and new forms of consumption that accompanied the period of capitalist development after the Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms in the 1980s and the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s.

As I demonstrated in Chapter 2, in the 2000s, as the economic dispossession of the rural Uyghur population intensified, the population of rural to urban migration increased significantly. At the same time, a major religious revival occurred. Since 2009, Uyghur men had in large part stopped drinking. The *musapir* lifestyle had come to be associated with pious Islamic living. Migrants often said they left the countryside to escape religious restrictions and detention. The younger generation of *musapir* often claimed the lifestyle as a material manifestation of inner spiritual struggle. It provided them with a mobile network of economic support and a means of claiming prominent social roles even as they combated homelessness. For the older generation, those who were *musapir* since the 1990s, this same transformation provided them with social, religious and psychic resources as they clung to their homes in the city. When they identified

themselves as *musapir* and integrated their lives in a *musapir* mosque community, they were laying claim to an economic and religious position as devout Muslims who were attempting to escape the oppression of colonization in the countryside. Many of them said they had come to the city as a way of living as Muslims despite the anti-Muslim “War on Terror” that dominated the present.<sup>77</sup>

As Talal Asad (2007) has noted, spiritual economies are the outcome of the intersection of global economic development and what he terms a global religious revival. Throughout the developing world, emerging forms of religious practice have been linked to economic development and the individuation of work ethics. In Indonesia and Taiwan, Islamic and Buddhist training courses centered around training neoliberal workers in individual responsibility of time management and productivity through “spiritual reform” are widespread (Pazderic 2004; Rudnyckyj 2009). Pentecostalism has produced new forms of ethical practice and economic striving in Africa and Latin America (Bornstein 2005; O’Neil 2013). Scholarship in the Middle East has also queried the way Islamic practice is being adapted to capitalist frameworks (Tripp, 2006; Kanna 2010; Schielke 2012). In my reading of this scholarship, the sorts of religious economies that emerge tend in two directions. On the one hand, there are formally organized projects, such as those analyzed by Rudnyckyj in Indonesia, that “seek to simultaneously transform workers into more pious religious subjects and more productive economic subjects” (2009: 106). While on the other hand, as in the case of Kanna (2010) in Dubai, there are more “flexible” assemblages where reformist religious practices themselves are pulled together in a

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<sup>77</sup> As in Cabeiri Robinson’s work (2013) on the making of *muhajir* in Azad Kashmir, migration becomes something of a form of *jihad* or “struggle” within the context of a religious *hijrah* or “exile” in the city. Here I am positing, much as Robinson argues that the Muslims she encountered in her work use the concept of the *muhajir*, that Uyghur migrants use the concept of the *musapir* as a way of reconciling new forms of Sunni devotion with older indigenous Sufi traditions and as a way of finding a sense of belonging within a religious economy. It is worth mentioning that the terms *musapir* and *muhajir* can be used interchangeably at times in the South Asian context. I did not however find that Uyghurs used the term *muhajir* in everyday discourse.



highly subjective manner and then circulated among a collectivity. Due to their political and historical circumstances, the religious economy of Uyghur migrants to the city tended toward the latter form. This was a product of the Chinese state's decision to eliminate all but one highly controlled *madrassa* as it implemented the project of socialist multiculturalism. This restriction was followed by the eventual prohibition of all forms of unapproved Islamic instruction such as training in modern Arabic and Turkish or translating unapproved texts into Uyghur from languages other than Chinese have prevented Uyghurs from developing formalized religious training courses that center on economic productivity. These forms of religious control were even further extended by state control of all native forms of Islamic practice, such as Sufi rituals and pilgrimages to shrines. These forms of religious practice were also being eliminated since they infringed on the sovereignty of the state and its deployment of terror capitalism. These limiting factors compelled Uyghur migrants to rely instead on the covert circulation of Uzbek and Uyghur language teachings from movements within the global Islamic religious revival.<sup>78</sup> Yet, even more than a source of moral belonging, for many migrants the *musapir* mosque community was their primary source of economic stability during their time in the city.

In fact, it was the very instability of *musapir* lives that gave the community form and content. Those who lived in the community experienced the space both as a source of stress, but also, as they said, a “comfort” (Uy: *teselli*)—a community to which they could turn when confronted with the frailty of joblessness or the stigma of homelessness. It was a space that afforded them a sense of autonomy in their everyday lives.<sup>79</sup> Here, I am thinking of autonomy

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<sup>78</sup> As Naveeda Khan (2012) has noted in her ethnography of contemporary Islam in Pakistan, the informal nodal structure of the Islamic fundamentalism proselytizing organization Tablighi Jama'at has become the model for many parallel Islamic organizations.

<sup>79</sup> Given the colonial context of Uyghur sociality, this “autonomy” could also be presented as a form of sovereignty. Yet given the way the community has come to rely on transnational religious frameworks as a means of structuring their lives, I have chosen to consider their striving as a claim to autonomy rather than sovereignty. In most cases they seem to be making less of a claim to indigeneity than a claim to global Islamic subjectivity.

not merely in the sense of the self-reliant liberal subject, but rather in relation to what Kathleen Millar has referred to as “relational autonomy” (2013). This is something akin to what Lauren Berlant describes as “lateral agency” (2011) in which a liberal subject attempts to maintain one’s will to live by seeking comfort in food or entertainment. For Millar, though, relational autonomy is not so much an escape from the norms of social life, but rather finding a communal grounds for hanging on to vital forms of sociality. For Uyghur migrants, the mosque community allowed them to build and sustain relationships, develop social roles, and pursue life projects in the midst of uncertainty.

The poverty and rubble that marked the Uyghur *musapir* community in Black Shell Mountain was often a source of stigma in relation to more affluent Uyghurs for those that lived there, yet it also gave them a feeling of belonging – even as they were denied permanency. There was a dissonance here: “comfort” mingled with the stigma of poverty and the threat of elimination by the state through demolition, expulsion, arrest and disappearance. To tease apart the threads of this religious economy, I turn now to the story of Emir and his wife Bahar and how they utilized the *musapir* community in their struggle to keep their home in Black Shell Mountain. For them, identifying with the *musapir* migrant community provided them with a way of clinging to the life they had known, at least for a time.

*The Last Sheep Farmer in the City*



*Figure 5.2. Emir and Bahar's home in 2015. Photo by Nicola Zolin, used with permission.*

The house was built into the hillside (See Figure 5.2). When Emir and his wife Bahar had first built it in the early 1980s, they had designed it with sheep in mind. The main door was flanked on the right by a pen made out of old wooden doors. There was a long hallway built into the hillside which was made of brick and adobe plaster. A small door to the right led to the living quarters of the eldest son's family. At the end of the hallway were coal, wood and leaf roughage storage rooms surrounding a small courtyard. In the center of this open air room was a large raised platform where family life took place during the summer. In the far southeastern corner built furthest into the hillside was an earthen room that became the center of cooking and family life during the winter. The kitchen door was flanked by a large earthen pot for water storage; on the wall behind this was a poster of snacks eaten during the celebration at the end of Ramadan. Next to this was a door to the adjoining sleeping area. The stove pipe from the cooking stove

(Uy: *mashq*) moved horizontally through the adjoining room – providing heat as the smoke was directed out of the house.

The kitchen was windowless, but Bahar had hung curtains on the wall opposing the eating platform (Uy: *supa*); on the opposite wall behind the platform was a large poster of what she identified as “a mosque in Saudi Arabia,” Masjid al-Nabawi, in Medina, Saudi Arabia. They had bought it before the beginning of the “People’s War on Terror,” when such images were still permitted to be bought or sold. There was no running water in the neighborhood. All of the cooking was done over a coal fire. Bahar, who was 68, struggled to lift the heavy rounded “pot” (Uy: *kazan*) that she used to make their daily meal of soup. She said that usually Emir helped her with the pot and the iron rings that she used to adjust the depth of the pot over the coals, but he too had what sounded like emphysema from breathing the coal smoke in air for the past 60 years.

On most days, if he was not praying and visiting with other older men at the mosque, Emir could be found puttering around in the rubble that surrounded their house. He would let his sheep out to “graze” (Uy: *tokhtimay yeyish*) and then chase them down and put them in an outdoor corral. At lunch time, Emir and Behar shared their soup with me in a large tin bowl. Although there was snow on the ground outside, the kitchen was cozy. I could feel why they did not want to leave. Sitting there with them it was easy to forget that we were in the center of the city surrounded by 20 story apartment buildings. All around us was the rubble of the Uyghur neighborhood of Black Shell Mountain. Their house was a “nail house” (Ch: *Dingzihu*) that had not yet been demolished in the push to bring security and modern urban planning to the city of Ürümqi. As in similar situations in numerous cities across the nation, by sheer dint of will they had resisted the government’s efforts to bring “renewal” to the city. They were some of the last of the 20,000 inhabitants of the neighborhood to be relocated to government subsidized

apartment buildings or to be expelled from the city. They were fighting to keep their home by refusing to leave.

Emir came to the city in 1974 as a Uyghur member of the Red Guard in Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution. He and Bahar married in 1982 and had three children. They supported themselves by raising their small flock of 11 sheep. Emir said that when the time was right he would sell them to butchers in the neighborhood. He said, "We have no pension, just the sheep." It was because of this that they refused to take the government's compensation for their house. "They offered us an 180,000 yuan discount on new housing in exchange for our house because it is so large – over 200 square meters, but that means that we would still need to pay for the rest of the house (around 300,000 yuan), and of course we couldn't keep sheep anymore," he said. They did not want to move into the nearby government housing because they would not be able to live off the land as they have their whole lives. "All of the government officials have told us to leave, but we won't do it," he said. He also worried that if they agreed to move, they would be moved far away from the Black Shell Mountain mosque community where he had been an active member for around twenty years. He said that because he had good relationships with the other *musapir* in the community, he had a steady supply of leftover food from the restaurants in the neighborhood. The food waste that his son collected from the string of Uyghur restaurants that lined the street leading up to the mosque was what sustained them, he said. Without these suppliers and the space he needed to keep his sheep, he didn't know what he would do. He said, "I have always been a *musapir*, but now we are truly becoming 'without a home or hearth' (Uy: *öy-uchaqsiz*)."

In Uyghur the term *musapir* has a deep cultural meaning. As I noted earlier, in the original Arabic, the term refers simply to travelers. In the Uyghur context though it takes on the

meaning of a stranger, an alien, a wanderer or a refugee. In a material sense, people often take it to mean precisely what Emir said they are becoming: “those without home or hearth.” Yet there is also a psychic and religious dimension to the concept as well. One of the most common ways in which the term is used is in a proverb that people say when they are going through difficult times: “Until you have been a wanderer, you can’t be a true Muslim” (Uy: *musapir bolmighiche, Musulman blomas*). This phrase draws on the Sufi *derevish* traditions of wandering mystics that have long dominated the Uyghur practice of Islam. Since the very beginning of the Uyghur exposure to Islam in the ninth century “the bringers of Islam” (who today are regarded as “saints” or *wali*) were those who traveled along Sufi networks from Iran and other parts of Central Asia. Over the centuries this exposure continued with the ongoing presence of Sufi mystics who traveled from town to town in the service of Sufi masters (Uy: *sheikhs*) and particular paths (Uy: *tariqeh*) of Sufi religious practice. These wanderers lived off of the charity of the Muslims they met along the way; often they were seen as homeless ascetics, “enthralled in passion” (Uy: *meptun bolup ketken*), and “careless with their own lives” (Uy: *öle tirilishige baqmay*).

The Uyghur oral tradition of song and poetry itself was in large part developed by these *musapir*. Over the past seven centuries the *musapir*’s life became one of the dominant themes in Uyghur folk music. It was a theme that reflected not only the Sufi mystic’s search for the beloved, or divine presence, in a metaphoric or spiritual sense, but also the way poverty and family obligations forced young men who had learned a trade in their hometowns to travel across the desert to other oasis towns in search of a stable life. Nearly every Uyghur migrant in Ürümchi would say they are “like a *musapir*,” as lonely travelers far from home. But only people who were most precarious, like Emir and his wife, would talk of themselves as *musapir* who

were “without home or hearth” (Uy: *öy-uchaqsiz*). This is significant because it tells us that the experience of life as a Uyghur migrant was becoming more precarious, and along with this change, the Uyghur conceptualization of what it means to be a *musapir* was becoming more immediate and deeply felt.

### *A Failed Documentary*

For Emir, his position as a member of a *musapir* community produced a feeling of dissonance. Although he acknowledged the poverty of the community and how the structural violence of the city was threatening to erase it, he was also clear about the agency he had shown in choosing his life path and his standing as a Muslim leader in the community. During one of the many times when I stopped by to see him and Bahar, Emir told me about how his life project had brought him to this place. He began by talking about the rise of Mao Zedong and the Gang of Four as if it was something that had just happened recently. For him, national history was personal history. He said he came to Ürümchi in 1974; he was young and becoming a Red Guard in the Cultural Revolution seemed like a good way to escape the poverty he had been born into. “At that time I was very (politically) active. I really believed in where the country was headed and I wanted to be part of it.” Of course, when he got to Ürümchi he realized that things were quite difficult for people without official positions and regular food rations. For the first few years he said he lived on bread and water. Then in 1979, after Mao’s death, Deng Xiaoping introduced economic reforms that changed his life. “In the 1980s I started doing some business, selling this and that, mostly fruit from Southern Xinjiang, and by 1984 I finally had enough to afford a wife. That was when she came along.”<sup>80</sup> At this point in the story Bahar interjected,

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<sup>80</sup> In later discussions he said: “I first went ‘inside the mouth’ (Ch: *kouli*) in 1966. At that time I was still a high school student (though classes had been suspended). So I and some of my classmates went to Beijing to see Mao Zedong. We left in October of that year. We had to hitchhike from Kashgar to Turpan. Then we took a bus. And

saying he shouldn't be talking so openly about their private love life, but it always seemed as though she was really pleased that he was elaborating on it so much. Finally, we came to the present circumstances of his life in the community. He said:

After the incidents in 2009 the government decided immediately that areas like (Black Shell Mountain) and Mountain Goat Hills needed to be torn down. They came to us with some kind of notice. It was all written in Chinese. There was no Uyghur at all. We couldn't really understand it. So after they posted it, we asked a neighbor girl who had graduated from college to translate it for us. It had four or five points. The first one was that we had no legal right to live in that place. We didn't have "the letter" (deed) we needed and we would have to move. The rest of the points talked about where we should move and how the government would help us with it. Of course they were just trying to scare us into moving. How can we not have a legal right to this place? I built it myself. In any case, we would consider moving if they would give us the money they promised. Instead they said that what they promised would come in the form of a discount in the new housing. Since this place is so large, they said they would give us discounts on two apartments which are 85 square meters each. So we decided to just wait for them to give us new houses or force us to move. My son is already married and living here with us, so if we move then he could have a new house. Actually we are just living on what I can make from raising my sheep and the 1000 *yuan* he can give us from time to time. This is our life. These days the government workers are not coming every day. They say that in the end they know we will move, so they don't need to waste their time with us. For now things are fine for us. Our son delivers the water once a week, or I can hire a three-wheel motorcycle to bring it. It only costs five yuan per barrel. So we are doing fine. We have 7 grandchildren. Some of them can stay here with us. My son is a security guard, he is 28 now. He is a good boy, a bit fat, he has a good sense of humor."

Although Emir said they were doing fine while waiting for the inevitable demolition of their home, when I began to pull apart and consider some of the implications of the strands of his story he became much more fearful. He did not have a deed to his house, nor did he have a "green card" that gave him permission to live in the city. He was deeply worried that the state

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then in Lanzhou we took the train. Eventually we made it. There were tens of thousands of us activists in Tiananmen Square. Then Mao came out and we sang some songs for him. It was really moving (he sang a few lines). After a few weeks we came back to Xinjiang. I stayed in Ürümqi and helped one of the factions fight for a few weeks. Then I went back to Kashgar. I came again in 1974; still helping in the fight. In the 1980s and 1990s I worked in the Big Bazaar selling produce, fruit and nuts, and raising sheep. I did this my whole life as an adult. Now I am retiring! Maybe you can take me to America in your bag!"



would force them to leave the city without any compensation if they became too visible in his opposition to the seizure of their home.

One day I mentioned his story to a Uyghur documentary filmmaker named Adil. The filmmaker, himself the son of poor farmers in Southern Xinjiang, was intrigued to hear that there was someone living in the city raising sheep as a livelihood. He asked if I would introduce him to Emir and Bahar so they could discuss the possibility of making a film about his life. After we arrived, prayed for the household and Bahar served us tea, Adil broached the subject of making a film. He explained that he just wanted to focus on Emir's life experiences. He said that he thought it would be interesting to viewers, because many people did not know that there is a community of "migrants" (Uy: *kuchman*) living in such poor conditions in the city. While Adil was careful not to describe Emir as a *musapir*, given the stigma of homelessness that was often associated with the word, from the connotation of what he said he made it clear that this was how he was thinking about the documentary. While *kuchman* is simply a generic term that refers to someone who has moved to find work, in its current usage, the term *musapir*, when ascribed to someone else by another, has come to identify someone who is perceived as destitute and in need of pity. He said he wanted to highlight the way Emir's son, a security guard, struggles to care for the family, and how Emir had hoped to get a new home for his son when he married, but could not because he was so poor. He said he would highlight the fact that he was not able to provide a home for his son because the government would not provide them with adequate compensation for their home.

Emir was silent for a few moments after Adil said this. Then he said, "As far as making a film, we couldn't mention anything about the government or politics. But I'm happy to talk about my life." Sensing that he was losing ground, Adil began to backtrack a bit, saying he was

just starting to think about the story for the film so he was sure they could tell the story in a way that would make everyone happy. We talked a bit more and then Emir circled back to the topic of the film.

This time as he spoke he was quite animated. His upper lip trembled a bit and he jumped up off the platform a few times as he gesticulated with his hands. He said:

I'm still thinking about the film thing, I decided that it isn't a good idea. Since the story is about how I am a 'poor' farmer, once it gets onto the Internet it will go everywhere and people will think I am complaining about my situation. It will make the government really unhappy and then they will come to me asking why I was willing to do what I did. They will investigate me and find out that my residence permit is still in Kashgar, even though my children's permit is here; they will find out that I don't have a "green card." And then they will make me leave. Also none of the houses here in this community have a deed (Uy: *het*). I don't have one either, so they will just take my home away. If the film is about me being a poor farmer, then I'm not willing to do it. If we made a film about how much life had improved over the past 40 years that would be better. It really has improved. When I came to Ürümchi we were still using ration tickets and sneaking around to buy meat and things. We never had as much as 5 yuan even in the 1980s. Now we always have enough to eat. My son gives us at least 500 yuan (90 dollars) each month. Now even the sheep are used to eating human food, they eat better than we did back during the hard times.

Adil said he understood what Emir meant about the sensitivity of making a film like that, and he said he would reconsider the topic. Emir said again that he thought it was not a good idea. He said: "The police think that the people who live here are *too dangerous*, so if we make a film about this place they will definitely notice. It is not possible." What Emir was referring to here was the way Black Shell Mountain was referred to as one of the epicenter of Uyghur religious extremism and terrorism after the civil unrest of 2009. Many Han inhabitants of the city referred to it as a space that, if you were to enter at night, you would never come out alive. This reading of the space as the locus of religious extremism and "low quality" (Ch: *suzhi hen di*) Uyghur migrants was something that migrants like Emir had internalized. He knew that those who lived there were perceived as potential threats, and any public statement against government land

seizures could be read as a call to terrorism. As Emily Yeh (2012) has pointed out regarding the way “terrorism” has been attached to Tibetan self-immolators, Chinese “terrorism” has come to be “any perceived threat to state territorial sovereignty, regardless of its actual methods or effects vis-à-vis harm to others” (*Cultural Anthropology* Hot Spots).

When I discussed what had caused Emir to back out of participating in the film with Ablikim, the main figure in chapter 4, a few days later, he thought it was the way Adil had framed the film as the story of a “poor migrant” (Uy: *namrat kuchman*) that had bothered Emir. He said: “Of course that was the problem. No one wants to be thought of as poor. Actually, he isn’t really poor, he just appears poor to us because we are living in different community with a different urban environment.” For Uyghurs the term *musapir* can be used as a way of identifying oneself, but it can quickly be perceived as an insult when it is ascribed by others. In fact, Emir thought of himself as having relational autonomy within the *musapir* religious community; it was only when viewed from the outside that he felt himself being stigmatized and when viewed by the police that he felt himself being threatened. Emir’s refusal to allow a documentary to be made about his life speaks to both the precariousness of his position and the limited forms of agency he possessed within the *musapir* community. It also draws attention to the limits of representation. As much as Emir wanted his story to be told, he needed to tell it on his own terms. Thinking about the failure of documentary film to perform the kind of work he needed draws attention to larger frames of representational failure. What are the limits of *musapir* sociality? What are the limits of what it can hold and represent? On a more methodological dimension, what are the limits of ethnography as a documentation of Emir’s lifepath?

*Islam and Musapir Sociality*

Emir said that for most of his life he did not pray five times a day. He said that it was really only after his way of life was threatened after 2009 that he really decided to take religious practice so seriously. He said that many people in the community became more religious after the violence. So many young Uyghur men were killed or disappeared, children were left without fathers, and then the state began to demolish their houses. He said that before 2009 it was normal to be poor and in search of work, but now things were much worse. Out of the population of male migrants who had been there before the violence only the old men were left. He said that more young migrants had come from the South since 2009 and that they had also influenced the community. He said that almost everyone in the community was now quite serious about practicing Islam as devoutly as possible. People no longer smoked cigarettes or drank alcohol. Instead they organized their day around visiting the mosque five times per day or meeting in prayer rooms if they were too far away from the mosque during the day. Since 2009 the mosque had become known as one of the centers of reformist forms of Islam in the city. It had become the center of his life too; he spent a great deal of each day talking about Islam with other older men at the mosque.

Nine months after I met Emir for the first time he told me that they were being forced to move in 15 days. He said:

Our time has become short. Next month we are moving into a big building on the outskirts of the city in the Horse Track Area (Uy: *Saimachang*), over by the lake. They wouldn't give us a space here in these buildings, but over there they gave us two houses. One for me and my wife and one for my son and his family. We will be on the first floor and they will be on the second. There are 30 floors in that building! I can't take the sheep with us, so I will have to sell them. I've been raising sheep here for almost 40 years. There is nothing in those new houses. They are just bare. Of course they will have water inside, so it will be more convenient, but we will have to pay for everything: water, heat, electricity. It is a money-eating house. The worst thing about this situation is that there is no mosque in that area. I will have to go on the bus to the mosque in front of Xinjiang University during the week and only come here on Friday. We have no choice. This is the government we have. They just take what they want and tell us what to do. They won't

give us money for our house and let us decide for ourselves. If they would have done that it would have been good. The problem is that this new house really isn't ours. They are just letting us live in it indefinitely. If they want to kick us out they can. We can't sell it. We have no choice. This government just takes from us Uyghurs and gives to the Han. They are making our lives harder and harder. We don't have any choice. I have pain from all sides, but God will provide.

For Emir, the most difficult thing about moving into a “money-eating” house in an apartment building was not merely the financial uncertainty of needing to pay for utilities or even the fact that he would not be able to continue to practice his livelihood. He had even accepted the fact that the house he had built by hand was going to be reduced to rubble. What was most difficult about the move was the way he was going to be disconnected from his mosque community. Before, he had neighbors from his mosque to depend on for material, psychic and religious support; he had a daily ritual practice that gave his life a sense of rhythm and purpose. Both he and his wife were highly skilled in caring for their family's basic needs of warmth and food around the family hearth just as the *musapir* community had allowed them to feel as though they had a social role and a sense of dignity as experienced travelers in a community of travelers. As in the proverb regarding the way *musapir* life was a prerequisite of “true Muslim experience,” the depth of their experience provided them with a claim to religious, psychic and material maturity. For them, being *musapir* had provided them with a way of functioning in a religious economy on the margins of the city. It had given them a sense of “comfort” (*teselli*) in the midst of precariousness. On May 1, 2015, their house and hearth were demolished (see Figure 5.3).



**BLACK SHELL MOUNTAIN (黑甲山) SUMMER 2002**



**BLACK SHELL MOUNTAIN (黑甲山) SUMMER 2015**

*Figure 5.3. Satellite images of Black Shell Mountain demonstrate the changes that have occurred over the past two decades. Maps by Darren Byler. Images courtesy of Google Earth.*

## *The Story of Hasan*

I turn now to the story of another Uyghur migrant in the same community, a young man named Hasan, and the symbolic value that his role as a young religious *musapir* in the community held for him. As a recent arrival in the community, he used his standing as a devoted teacher and practitioner of what he referred to as *tabligh* or Islamic piety teachings as a means with which to enter into a stable life project. Like Emir and Bahar he perceived his identification as a *musapir* as a means through which to transform and maintain his sense of self. Although the length of time they had spent in the community varied considerably, for both Emir and Hasan, the sense of dislocation they developed as they entered into the relational autonomy of the reformist Muslim community made returning to their hometowns or moving into government housing seem impossible. Of course, this fear of leaving was further exacerbated by broader structures of colonial violence.

The first time I met Hasan he told me he was a *musapir*. He was walking down the street with a stack of fruit crates strapped to a small cart. He was peddling a special kind of *nan* made from chickpea flour that was said to improve your digestion. He told me he was originally from a small village outside of the town of Yaken—one of the poorest parts of Southern Xinjiang near the border of Pakistan nearly 1500 kilometers from Ürümchi.<sup>81</sup> He said he had dropped out of middle school and begun traveling when his father died and his mother remarried in 2008. He said his step-father had beaten him and demanded that he earn money for the family, so he had just left with his “life and liver friend” (Uy: *jan-jiger dost*). He said that for a number of years he and his friends had dug for jade in the riverbeds of Hotan for several months and then came to the city to sell their stones. Right now, he said, they had just sold their supply. That was why he

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<sup>81</sup> Yaken is also sometimes written in Latin transliteration as Yarkand. In Chinese it is called Shache.



was selling nan. With the new restrictions of travel that had been imposed during the People's War on Terror in 2014, it was difficult to travel back and forth between Southern Xinjiang and the city. He said that as a Muslim it was now impossible to live in his hometown.

Hasan walked in a very patterned way through the city. When I suggested more direct routes, he declined, saying that he knew the way. The way he moved followed a path that was less direct, but that was connected by mosques and Uyghur bazaar life. We walked in close proximity to cell-phone salesmen and makeshift theaters; we walked down nameless alleyways, not main streets. Hasan did not speak or read Chinese, but he had other forms of knowledge. Hasan knew the *musapir* sections of the city like the back of his hand. He knew exactly where every prayer room and mosque was located. He had been a traveler in the city for over 7 years, so he had an extensive network of fellow travelers that he could call on at a moment's notice. He walked purposefully with a long loping step, like a farmer who had used a pickaxe and wide-bladed hoe for long periods of time. He walked quickly, but was never in too much of a rush to avoid stopping to pray every two hours; he ate his daily meal in the same way; quickly and forcefully, pausing briefly to whisper a prayer between bites. He knew what he wanted when he talked to other hustlers. After prayer on Fridays he often ran into old acquaintances who told him about supplies of coats or shoes that they had access to – they would make plans to get in touch with each other and pool their resources to buy a big supply and sell them together out of the back of three-wheeled trucks. He relished opportunities to help other *musapir*; but he was also quick to ask about the status of mosque security as we did our circuit from mosque to mosque. He needed to know what was happening: where the police were checking phones and where prayer rooms were being closed.



He said that he “used to have a lot of friends here (in the *musapir* settlements), but since the new green card policy and the destruction of the neighborhoods, many of them have left or gone to other places. So many of my friends don’t exist (Uy: *yoq*) anymore. I don’t know where they are. No one knows. They have (been) disappeared.” He said that over the seven years that he had traveled to the city much had changed, not only had many of his friends had been subtracted, a marked absence in their families and friendship networks, but now there were many young people like him without fathers. As another young *musapir* in the community told me:

After July 5, 2009, so many men were arrested. Many of them died in prison, or found a way to take their own lives. They just broke them. So now there are many kids like me running around whose families are just messed up. Some of them have had their minds are broken. They are squeezing us very hard now. Every year it gets tougher and tougher to survive. Now in (*musapir*) places like Sandongbei, Sanxihangzi, Saimacheng, and Heijiashan, the police check us really closely. It is almost as bad as in the South. Especially in Sanxihanzi. They check our IDs and phones everyday there. We are just trying to work and they are constantly harassing us. Fuck them. And fuck those Uyghur guys who betray Muslims by helping them. They are infidels (Uy: *kafer*). You have to be really careful what you do in those areas, they have cameras and watch everything you do. They will show up with assault rifles in 10 minutes if they think you are doing something suspicious. Many people have had to leave because they couldn’t get the ‘green card,’ and the police tracked down where they live. If they know where you live then they can make your life a kind of hell. I have a lot of friends who have had to leave. Most of us guys who are hustling in the streets don’t have Ürümqi residency permits or have that card, but since they haven’t found out where we live yet, we can still find a way to live here.

Clearly Hasan, and other young men in the community, felt that the police in the city were their adversaries. Many of them felt that without the community of migrants around them they would have no choice but to return to their homes, a prospect that terrified them.

One day as Hasan and I walked through the Uyghur bazaar leading to the new gate in front of the Black Shell Mountain mosque, he said, “It really ‘puts your heart at ease’ (Uy: *köngülge yaqidighan*) here, right?” When I pressed him on what he meant by this he said, “Here around the mosque we feel free to talk and joke with each other, buy and trade things, eat good

food; we're not looking over our shoulder wondering if the police are watching like we always must in Yaken and in other parts of the city; here we are free." For Hasan there was a comfort in being surrounded by fellow travelers in the middle of a demolition zone. Although he was on the verge of homelessness, he felt he still had a place there.

In fact, over the next few weeks as I followed him on the social media app WeChat and continued to meet with him I came to realize that Hasan was deeply involved in the online community of pious young Uyghur *musapir*. He often posted images of himself on the streets of Ürümqi or praying in prayer rooms in restaurants around the city. He posted inspirational quotes, statements about Islamic orthopraxy and the sovereignty of Allah. One of his favorite words of wisdom was one that clearly expressed his relationship to the religious economy of the community: "Allah never shuts one door without opening another door." When I pressed him on why he was so active on social media and how he chose to publish what he did, he said he felt like his role in society was to be a teacher to other young Muslims. He said that many others had not had an opportunity to study Islam as much as he had, so he wanted to encourage them as much as he could. He said that by showing his followers that even a *musapir* can be a religious teacher, he was able to inspire others to become more devout. Of course, it was dangerous to publish too much on public forums, but he said he wrote things in ways that the police would find acceptable. He tried to frame his piety in elliptical ways that only other believers would fully understand. For example, he and his friends often paraphrased passages from the Quran that could be applied to the present Uyghur religious practice (see Figure 5.4 below). Often the images that accompanied this pious messaging demonstrated the religious devotion of the person's online persona. Occasionally Hasan and his friends would also post pro-government messages and images about "interethnic unity" (Ch: *minzu tuanjie*) in case the police or

informants were monitoring their accounts. Hasan said that he needed the WeChat account in order to find jobs and connect with other *musafir*. Of course as the “People’s War on Terror” project was put in motion, posting anything about Islam on Chinese social media could be construed as “extremist.” Despite his precautions, what he was posting was not at all safe.



Figure 5.4. One of the many images and Islamic exhortations one of Hasan’s friends published on WeChat. The text reads as follows: “Prophet Sulayman approached his son and asked him: ‘I have received a message from Allah, I want you to circle the earth and see if there are more people who are alive or more people who are dead (in spirit).’ After a period of time the son returned and said: ‘Father, I went to many places, and everywhere I went I saw more people who were dead than those who were alive.’ Sulayman said ‘With the knowledge Allah has given to me I know that there used to be more people who were alive . . . .’”

Like Aziz, who I described in Chapter 2, Hasan said that before the “People’s War on Terror” it was possible to speak more openly about Islam on public forums. When 3-G networks were first established in 2010, he and many of his friends began to organize study groups on-line. Using their smart phones they shared Mp3 audio files of Uzbek and Uyghur language teachings of Islam that came from Kyrgyzstan and Turkey. They called these teachings *tabligh*. When I asked him what this word meant, he said it was a Uyghur word for “Islamic teaching.” In subsequent conversations, many other young Uyghur Muslims said similar things.

In fact, what Hasan was most likely referring to—though he was not able to trace this genealogy himself—were teachings inspired by global Islamic piety movements such as the Tablighi Jama’at.<sup>82</sup> Founded in 1927 by Muhammad Ilyas al-Kandhlawi in India, the Tablighi Jama’at’s stated aim was to call Muslims to a constant state of non-political spiritual struggle (*jihad*) through proselytization (*dawah*). In order to achieve this mission, the leadership of the movement of over 10 million adherents developed a cellular organizational structure that focus on oral communication in small grassroots groups. It encouraged those interested in the movement to attend daily meetings in prayer-rooms where leaders in the group presented models of orthopraxy. Like other forms of reformist Islam, the Tabligh sought to lead a separate life from the impious around them by adapting an Islamic lifestyle modeled on the life of Muhammad. Hasan, and many other young Uyghurs, told me that over the past several years as smart phone technology became common thousands of rural Uyghurs became part of similar

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<sup>82</sup> The Tablighi Jama’at, a movement centered in South Asia that advocates for a “return” to the orthopraxis of seventh century Islam. Movements such as this came to the Uyghurs largely via the teachings of Uzbek proponents and Uyghur teachers based in Turkey. Some Uyghurs have also been influenced by Hizb ut-Tahrir, a movement centered in London which advocates for a non-violent “return” to an Islamic Caliphate. Castets (2003) has noted these forms of Salafi orthopraxy have led to a small minority of young Uyghurs being drawn toward the radical politics of groups like Al Qaeda, and, more recently, the Islamic State (*Daesh*). In general though, there has been a widespread religious revival among Uyghurs over the past twenty years; much of this revival has been spread by new forms of informal instruction that people refer to as *tabligh*. It is important to note though that Uyghur *tabligh* does not refer exclusively to the formal teachings of the Tablighi Jama’at.

modular underground groups. While it was not clear that the transformation of Uyghur religious practice was directly related to global piety movements, the similarities in organization and oral teaching makes it clear that they were at least indirectly affected by such movements. The rise of a Uyghur version of movements similar to the Tablighi Jama'at translated into a revival of Uyghur traditions that focused on crossing the threshold of a doorway by leading with the right foot, sleeping on one's right side, and, of course, the intense conflict between the state and Uyghur Muslims over the proper veiling of women in public and beards among men.

In most cases, the teachings appeared to circulate via oral recordings from illegally-trained, or, as the state media put it, “wild” (Ch: *ye*) Uyghur imams.<sup>83</sup> Often they were derivative of teachings found elsewhere in the Islamic world, but then took on a life of their own when they reached the Uyghur countryside in Xinjiang. In any case, the non-political form of reformist Islam advocated by the Tabligh was the most dominant among these new forms of Islam. Uyghurs who had a less pious position often referred to Uyghurs who took these teachings seriously as “the ones who wear the short pants” (Uy: *kalte ishtanliqlar*), since they began to wear pants that resembled those worn by Muslims in South Asia and the Middle East. One of the key points of the Tabligh and other piety movements was that Muslims must wear pants that ended above the ankle since it is said that the Prophet felt that clothes that dragged on the ground were a sign of pride. Hasan had not yet begun to dress in this manner, he said it was simply not possible given the precariousness of his legal status, but he had begun to incorporate the

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<sup>83</sup> In 2014 there was only one government-approved madrassa in all of Xinjiang. All imams who were given permission to teach had to be trained in this madrassa. Likewise, teachings could only be delivered after the Friday prayers and government approved “Friday” mosques. The teachings were often read from scripts that were approved by government censors. Because of this the teachings of government approved imams were widely regarded as government propaganda rather than as Islamic teachings. Given the tight censorship of the “Friday” mosques, many Muslims met outside of these designated areas to discuss Islamic teachings and pray. The mosque in Black Shell Mountain was a Friday mosque that was closely watched. It served mainly as a space to pray and connect with other believers, most piety teachings were shared in the periphery around the mosque rather than in the mosque itself.

teachings he listened to into his daily routines and express them in his public persona on-line. He was also aware that that the police specifically targeted young men who wore such clothing, since the police saw this as one of the primary markers of embodied “extremism.”

When we walked with Hasan would often voice his disapproval of the way other Uyghur young men dressed or talked. At times, one of his acquaintances would spit at the feet of Uyghur women who he felt were dressed immodestly. This young man said that, as long as he had his freedom, it was his duty to teach others. Hasan felt differently about this form of misogyny, he felt that such admonishment was appropriate for husbands and fathers to guide their wives and daughters, but not when it came to relations between strangers. It was the role of men who were in immediate social relations. Nevertheless, in both the public and private spheres such actions spoke to the way Uyghur masculinity came to be situated in a particular nexus of pious forms of Islam and the increasing precariousness of Uyghur male authority. As the target of the “People’s War on Terror,” Uyghur bodily sovereignty are particularly vulnerable to violations from the state. As a result, a hyper-vigilance on issues of modesty and Islamic appearance emerged among pious Uyghurs. Just ten years ago, it was highly unusual for Uyghur men to act in this way toward Uyghur women that they met on the street. As I discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, in many cases the honor and chastity of Uyghur women were regarded by Uyghur men as a site of their patriarchal dominance. The public appearance of Uyghur women thus emerged as a site of contestation between Uyghur men and the state, which had the effect of increasing sexual violence toward women. When Hasan acted in abhorrent ways toward women he perceived to be unchaste, he was reacting to what he perceived to be a threat to his patriarchal dominance within Uyghur society. Although women were often not the primary target of state control, the autonomy of women was also diminished through this process. Although Uyghur

women were less frequently detained by the police, as the stress of the situation built they were also rendered more vulnerable to domestic abuse. All Uyghur lives were subject to exploitation and domination as the state turned toward the unending process of terror capitalism, but some of these forms of dispossession were nested within others.

### *Fast Dispossession*

As the slow dispossession I discussed in Chapter 3 turned toward faster forms of mass detention, the level of threat began to heighten. Hasan said that, although there was the constant worry of surveillance and violence in the *musapir* community in the city, in late 2014 it was nevertheless better than the current conditions in his home town. He said:

In Ürümqi everything seems free, you can do business freely, you can pray freely, you can communicate freely, you can live freely, in Yaken none of this is possible. There when you walk in the bazaar, the police always stop you and ask for your ID. Everyone is always monitoring what you do; it is hard to make any money because no one has any money or any opportunity to make any money. They try to control you. This year during Ramadan (three months before) they locked me up so that I couldn't pray; they made me break the fast. Police are the enemy of Muslims; they will never help you—only make your life worse.

When he said this last line he spoke very quietly and pulled his hands up to his face. As he spoke I noticed that he had developed a nervous twitch in his left eye since the last time I had spoke with him. I asked if he felt scared to go back to Yaken. He said:

Actually I have to go back next week because I am being forced to go. The Yaken police have been calling me every day telling me that I must come back; they are making my parents call me and tell me the same thing. When I ask why, they won't give me a reason. They just say that, if I come back, everything will be fine. They say that, if I stay here, they will alert the Ürümqi police and have me arrested. I don't have any choice. If I go to another city, they will be able to track me because of my "green card" registration. I actually have all of the documents to live legally here, but now they are making me go back. So I am very afraid. Lots of my friends have gone back to Yaken because the police told them to come, and now they don't exist. I don't know where they are, no one knows, they have disappeared. My wife doesn't say anything about this situation, but she is also scared. She doesn't want to go back either. She knows that when we go back they will take away our green cards so that we can never travel again and that I might disappear.

Hasan buried his head in his hands. His eyes filled with tears, but he didn't cry. He said very quietly:

I think this issue is connected to what happened (back in Yaken) at the end of Ramadan this year; someone must have accused me of something.<sup>84</sup> There is no freedom in this world. For Uyghurs life is very difficult and we have no freedom. I don't even know what I am accused of but I must accept their judgment. I have no choice. Where there is no freedom there is tension (Uy: *jiddiy weziyet*); where there is tension there are incidents; where there are incidents there are police; where there are police there is no freedom.

Over the space of several minutes, several of the missing pieces about Hasan's lifepath began to fall into place. Although I had known him for two months, I only found out now that he had spent time in prison, that he had a 19 year-old wife and one year old daughter and that he was terrified of returning to his home village. While most young *musapir* were unmarried men who relied on close friends and family for support, a number of them, particularly those who were most pious, also married women from their home towns and brought them to the city. Often the women in relationships with particularly devout *musapir*, such as Hasan, stayed at home throughout the day and cared for their children and prepared meals for their husbands.<sup>85</sup>

Hasan said he dreamed of traveling abroad, of seeing the world, climbing mountains, sailing on ships, but he knew that none of these things would happen. He said that his phone was easily his most important piece of equipment for negotiating city life. It offered him the freedom to know, to move and live as he felt he should as a Muslim. It was what allowed him to teach others, which he felt was something that gave his life meaning. He said that it was what he would

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<sup>84</sup> He was referring to the large-scale insurrection that occurred immediately after Ramadan over a dispute with police over the veiling of women in the home of a Uyghur farmer. Based on the discrepancy between Chinese government and the Uyghur government-in-exile statistics, between 96 and 2000 unarmed Uyghur civilians were killed by the police as a result of the protests. As a result, a state of emergency was declared in Yaken County; which meant that the nearly 1 million Uyghurs in the county were subject to curfews, daily visits by the police and mandatory political education meetings in 2015. As in many other counties, tens of thousands of Uyghur men were arrested and held without trial in reeducation camps (see Hoshur 2014 for further discussion).

<sup>85</sup> There was however a sizable number of women who work in certain sections of the bazar around Black First Mountain selling fabric and household items. Young single women in nearby neighborhoods often worked as maids for wealthy urban Uyghurs in exchange for room and board.



miss the most when he disappeared in Yaken. It was strange to watch a condemned man contemplate his future. It is here, at the limits of relational autonomy, that we see the powerlessness of any form of representation to stop the inevitable. Just as Emir's refusal to be documented on film was motivated by the threat of the state to banish him from the city, here Hasan's impending disappearance enabled him to tell his stories freely. He was beyond hope; he realized that his limited autonomy was coming to an end. While he was in the city his freedom as a *musapir* in the city had been mediated by rituals of Islam, by his constant fear of being disappeared, and by his responsibilities to his wife and one year old daughter. He needed money to survive day-to-day and he found that he had relational autonomy within the *musapir* community to both maintain his way of life and attain a feeling of social belonging. Now he felt the fragility of his position.

Over the next few days as we walked the back streets we continued to talk about his imminent return to Yaken. Now, more than ever, he looked over his shoulder with the look of the hunted. We talked again about the effects of the constant harassment of the police on young Uyghur lives. He said:

When you are in the police station, you learn to never say anything yourself. If you do say something, if you respond to what they are accusing you of, they will beat you senseless. So you learn really quickly not to say anything. In America they don't have police like this, right? Here they have so many, but they have so many more in Yaken.

Like Ablikim, the main figure in Chapter 4, Hasan said he felt comfortable talking to me because I was an outsider. He said he felt that it was not likely that I would be arrested and forced to inform on him. With his other friends he said he could never be sure.

Eventually the day came and Hasan and his small family boarded a sleeper bus headed to Yaken. They took all of their belongings with them: two small bags. In his farewell message he wrote, "God willing, I will survive."

Within two days I received another cryptic message from him. This time he said he was in the hospital in the small oasis town halfway between his hometown and the city. He said there had been an accident. He said his wife had been killed, he had broken some ribs and fractured his scapula. His baby girl had lost a finger. He said, “It was God’s will. Praise Allah.” Two weeks later I went to see him. He was still in the hospital in obvious pain. He said the driver of their sleeper bus had fallen asleep and run into a dump truck loaded with coal along the side of freeway.<sup>86</sup> His wife died within 5 minutes—her throat crushed by a piece of flying coal. He said:

At first I didn’t see that her throat was crushed, other people told me later. I just saw her bleeding from her mouth. We sat there in the cold for 40 minutes before the ambulances arrived. I watched my wife die. There was nothing I could do. If I had been in her bed I would have been killed by the coal too, but since my child was sleeping with me—all of us were sleeping at the time—we weren’t hurt as badly. Many people lost limbs; four people died on the spot; three died later in this hospital. This hospital is very bad. If I was in Yaken I would have already been healed, but in the hospital here most of the doctors and nurses are Han.

Hasan was still very young. He was only in his early 20s. But now when he walked he winced. He felt for his back. He propped his arm up in his jacket pocket. He had new shoes since his old shoes were lost in the accident. He had also lost his ID and “Green Card” in the accident. Hasan seemed happy to see me when I met him outside the hospital in the small town near the location of the accident. He seemed more settled. He said: “I’m going back to the Yaken prison – that’s what we call it – there is no Internet, not even text messaging, but still the life there is good. My family will care for me.” He said that, since he was injured, he was sure the police would not take him.

Several weeks later after I traveled the 1500 kilometers to visit him in Yaken he was much more tense. He had traveled the 20 kilometers from his village to meet me at a prearranged

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<sup>86</sup> In Xinjiang the cheapest way to travel long distances across the desert was by sleeper bus. This is a bus that is equipped with three rows of narrow cots. Hasan and his family were in the back of the bus when they hit the coal truck.

location in town. After being careful to make sure I was not being followed, I met him and we walked in busy bazaar streets talking under our breath. His eyes were constantly scanning crowds and the middle distance in the direction we were headed. He could read the checkpoints and knew if the police were just checking motorbikes and cars or if they were looking for pedestrians. We drifted a few meters apart if it looked like we would be stopped, but no one noticed us.<sup>87</sup> We talked about his health, his family's situation and his future. He said he was ready to begin his life again. When I left him at the bus station he said: "I'll see you again in Ürümchi, God willing!"

But I never saw Hasan again. Within three fast weeks, as he recovered from his injury he was taken by the police. The first sign of his disappearance was that his phone was blocked. When I called it I received a message saying the number had been disconnected due to illegal activity. When I spoke to his friends back in the city they said he had been taken behind "the black gate" (Uy: *qara derweze*). They did not know if he would just be held indefinitely in a reeducation camp or receive a prison sentence. They did not know what he had been charged with, or if there was a charge. They had no control over what would happen to him; no way to fight it. What was clear, was that Hasan had been disappeared. He had been subtracted from the *musapir* community.

### *Conclusions*

In this chapter I have outlined the emergence of a new form of "relational autonomy" that Uyghur migrants were turning to as self-identified *musapir* or travelers. By identifying as pious Muslims without a home, they turned to a type of everyday Islam that responded to the economic

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<sup>87</sup>I have been told many times by Uyghurs I meet that I can pass as a "city Uyghur." Because of this, strangers often assume I am Uyghur. Walking the streets, we must have looked like a Uyghur from the city hanging out with his cousin from Yaken.

exploitation and political domination of life as the objects of the “People’s War on Terror.” Being part of the Uyghur *musapir* community provided the grounds for a temporary politics of holding on to life even as it was being taken away. The two examples I discussed in this chapter, that of the older couple Emir and Bahar and the younger man Hasan, who was subtracted, are two examples from opposite ends of the spectrum of the religious economy of the *musapir* community. Although the older couple had built a home in the city over the past 30 years, like Hasan, who had only been there for five years, in the climate of terror capitalism, the community was only able to sustain their ways of life for a short time. Yet, despite the ultimate failure of the community to cradle their lives, as in Kathleen Millar’s work among those who live around Rio de Janeiro’s garbage dump, the Uyghur migrants who lived in the rubble of shantytowns in Ürümqi nevertheless had a certain form of autonomy.

It is important to note, though, that this autonomy did not emerge out of a chosen political project as it did for Tian Lin in the previous chapter. This is part of the reason why the Uyghur word *musapir* does not connote the same meaning as Tian Lin’s Chinese term *mangliu*. Both terms could be translated as “traveler” or “blind wanderer,” but they emerged from very different forms of cultured thought and social positions within the Chinese nation. For one group, the lifestyle of a wanderer could result in a form of short-term economic stability followed by social erasure, as in Hasan’s case; while for the other group, a quite similar lifestyle could result in long-term economic stability and in some cases what I have described as an intentional “minor politics.” For Uyghur migrants, becoming a *musapir* was something that arose from their lack of access to permanent housing, employment and freedom of religion, something that in general was not the case for Han migrants. This differential distribution stemmed from the settler-colonial forms of governance that regulated their lives both in the city and the countryside.

Yet, at the same time the autonomy of the *musapir* community was similar to what minor politics did for Tian Lin and his fellow Han “blind wanderers” in that in both cases there was a distancing or delaying of the direct power of the state to determine how people should live together. This similarity demonstrates that despite the disjunctures in autonomy, in both the Uyghur and Han migrant communities there were acts of turning away from the authority of the Chinese state toward other forms of existential stability, other ways of making do with the given. Just as Tian Lin’s discovery of Buddhist forms of witnessing allowed him to reconfigure the way he saw the world, so Hasan and Emin’s increasing interest in fundamentalist forms of Islam gave them ways of modifying their status in the community and extending their stays in the city. In both cases, though to differential degrees, they were demonstrating examples of what Millar (2014) describes as: “an art of living through the precarious present, as that which makes possible a continued, shared existence in delicate times” or “relational autonomy.”

I began this chapter with a discussion of everyday Islam and the way it relates to religious economies. Islam is clearly an integral part of the lives of young Uyghur migrants. For most self-described *musapir* it was a central element of their self-identification. Often they told me stories of coming to faith through informal study groups. As David Montgomery (2016) noted in his recent ethnography of Islam in Kyrgyzstan, often they became interested in religion not because of an attraction to the moral framework of the faith, but because it was something their friends and family expected them to practice. Yet, unlike in Montgomery’s case where Kyrgyz Muslims have a greater degree of sovereignty, for many Uyghurs this expectation was grounded in a refusal to be eliminated by the state. By turning to a global community of pious Muslims they were turning what many refer to as the “hopelessness” (Uy: *ümitsizliq*) of the current situation into a feeling of belonging. As they began to practice, they said they came to understand the

purpose of the faith and a consciousness of right and wrong. When I spoke to young men like Hasan, they frequently asked me about my own background as an agnostic former Christian and tested my moral limits by posing hypothetical questions about personal life choices. Often what convinced them I was someone who could be trusted was the position I expressed regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and their own situation in Northwest China. For them Islam provided them with a strong sense of their social role in the environment of the city as well as source of psychic stability. As one young man told me:

Before I left and became a *musapir* I didn't do anything. I just slept and ate and went to the mosque. I hung out with a gang of other boys who had also dropped out. We used to fight other gangs, steal things and try to help each other find jobs. But then I started praying five times a day when I was 12. It is our tradition. Everyone must know that when you are 12 you need to start to pray. Actually before I went traveling I used to just pray sometimes. This was because I didn't really understand. Now I understand. You need to pray 5 times per day or you will go to hell.

But, of course, the relative autonomy of being part of the religious economy failed to save young men like Hasan. They often felt quite exposed. Once when when I was walking with one of Hasan's acquaintances near one of the mosques we frequented together, we met a unit of armed police. For a second the young man panicked. Then he whipped out the student ID card that he had from attending a computer course at a nearby vocational school. Once we were out of earshot he started talking loudly:

Fuck, fuck, fuck, I hate them so much. I want to fuck them up. But we have nothing to fight with, so we really can't fight them. Fuck, fuck, fuck. I know it's not appropriate to say these words, but those "dogs" make me so angry.

In the end, being a religious *musapir* often fails. Although Hasan had thousands of followers on WeChat, the sense of authority he drew from them was only temporary. Once he was arrested, his account was deactivated immediately. In the end, Emir and Bahar also lost their house and were forced to leave the community and enter the state system as precarious tenants in

government housing. When a documentary filmmaker attempted to represent their struggle, they felt compelled to refuse to put their story on display. The potential stigma of being represented as poor, as well as the threat implied a representation of their noncompliance, made them uncomfortable. They felt their visibility might exceed the limits of the autonomy afforded by the *musapir* community. For them, having access to the mosque community was essential to their psychic stability. They were deeply afraid of being forced to move into government housing where they would be isolated from their fellow believers. At the same time, Hasan actively represented himself as a religious *musapir* to his many on-line followers. This suggested that the new religious figure of the *musapir* was able to circulate in certain publics but not others. In the context of the city, it could be represented from within the group. Yet, when it was represented outside the context of the religious economy in the city it had the potential to produce stigma and fear.

The failure of representation that *musapir* sociality points us toward calls into question the work of film and ethnography, and my own investment in minor politics, in attempting to document the hundreds of thousands of people who lost their homes in Ürümchi over the past decade. The stories of Emir and Hasan try and fail to cradle their lives and the lives of the hundreds of thousands that have been disappeared in the “People’s War on Terror.” Of course the Chinese state, like a Western liberal reader, wants to know everything about *musapir* lives in order to dominate them or perhaps to “save them.” On a deeper level then, the failure of the documentary and this chapter to hold their lives in place, to make them matter, reflected the limits of the autonomy that *musapir* were able to achieve. They were only able to tell a certain kind of story. There was no happy ending. They were not permitted to have political subjectivity.

This is what is at stake in telling their stories not for consumption, but in order to amplify their voices. As such, this ethnography as representation of their lives will always fail. Like the community, a representation of their lives is only a temporary amplification of their voices. Trying to tell and listen to their stories is a powerful reminder that ethnography always fails. Yet, there is a comfort in being close to these stories, even if just for a time.

In the same way in the religious economy of the *musapir* community there was also a sense of comfort and relief from the control of the state. As in Millar's case, there is a "politics of detachment" that is not simply the "anger, anomie, anxiety, and alienation" that Guy Standing (2011, 19) has identified as the conditions of labor precariousness. Instead, Uyghur migrants actively organized a parallel economy of mutual assistance. The precarious lives of the *musapir*, at once a source of stigma and comfort, allowed bonds to be built between subjects and for life projects to be extended if not sustained. It also allowed Uyghur traditional knowledge of Islam to adapt and change under new conditions of oppression, settler colonialism and exposure to global religious movements. The demolition zone thus became more than a site of ruin; rather, the religious economy it sustained allowed forms of relational autonomy to flourish for a time.



## Chapter 6:

### Trajectories of Quality: Narratives of Value and Desire in Ürümchi

In the center of the neighborhood immediately south of the Black Shell Mountain neighborhood, there was a restaurant with big red sign. In Chinese, the six-foot tall characters read “PORK” (Ch: *DA ROU*). The sign was an anti-Islamic political statement; it told everyone in the neighborhood that Han migrant-settlers had arrived and that they would not respect the native knowledge and values of the Muslims who called this land their homeland. This Uyghur majority neighborhood known as Big Bend (Ch: *Dawan*), was one of the centers of violence during the July 5, 2009 protests. A large number of the Han settlers who were killed or injured during the violence came from this neighborhood. In the years that followed, many Han settlers moved from this neighborhood to Han dominated districts of the city to the north. Those that remained were often defiantly anti-Uyghur. They territorialized their space with Han markers, signaling that they were there to stay. The six-foot tall sign was a symbol of this defiance. It was also a statement regarding the type of “quality” or “cultural capital” (Ch: *suzhi*; Uy: *sapa*) that was protected by the institutions of the city. The sign announced that Han qualities were the qualities that were valued in the city. In Ürümchi, Han farmers from elsewhere were often seen as possessing higher levels of prestige than the native Uyghur inhabitants of the city. Han rural-to-urban migrants received more institutional support than even affluent and highly educated Uyghurs in the city. As the operations of terror capitalism swung into motion, many Han migrants began to believe that the state had their best interests at heart.

In this neighborhood, if Uyghurs entered Han shops they were often either ignored or they were ordered to leave. Han proprietors would hold out their right hands, palm down, fingers pointed to the ground, and flick their wrists upward while yelling “Out! Out!” (Ch: *Chu!Chu!*). Or they would simply look past Uyghur customers, ignoring their questions, refusing to take

their money. One Uyghur inhabitant of the community recalled a dispute he had with a Han gas station technician in the neighborhood. While he was waiting to have his ID checked so he could drive his car into the gas station, a Han taxi driver cut in line in front of him. When he protested, the Han gas station worker threatened to call the police. He told the Uyghur customer, “I’m not afraid of you. You should be afraid of me. I could have you arrested whenever I want.” In the mind of this Uyghur rural-to-urban migrant, this encounter drove home the point that, in this city, Han lives were valued. Han desires took precedence. The police, the schools, the hospitals, the banks, the stores, all catered to the production of Han desires and needs. At the same time, over the course of the “People’s War,” these same institutions prevented Uyghurs from advertising their products as halal. They prevented Uyghur children from studying their mother tongue. They enforced family planning rules for Uyghurs while encouraging growth in the Han population. They gave loans with no questions asked to Han settlers while tightly regulating loans to Uyghurs (Cliff 2016b). They prevented Uyghurs from selling imported goods from Muslim majority countries and instead emphasized Chinese domestic products. These institutions assured that pork could be consumed without reprisals; that Han could enter gated communities and institutions while unauthorized Uyghurs could not. The “People’s War on Terror” became a euphemism for Han inclusion as “the people” conducting “the war” and Uyghur exclusion as the objects of terror.

In fact Uyghur lives often mattered only when they contributed to the production of Han desires in the city. Uyghur bodies were useful in fulfilling the desires of the tourist gaze for happy, dancing exotic others in the large Han-owned banquet halls in the Uyghur districts. They were useful as employees in the Han-owned tourist bazaar spaces for similar reasons. They were useful as objects of control for the state-funded institutions of the city; their presence provided

jobs to police, teachers, construction workers and bureaucrats of all types. They provided justification for the mass internment camps that were built around the city. In general though, Uyghurs, particularly low-income, rural-origin Uyghurs, were unwanted in the city outside of their utility as the objects of terror capitalism and as low-level workers in the accompanying policing and education initiatives. This differential treatment was rationalized by the “People’s War on Terror” which criminalized the entire population of Uyghurs and reoriented their economy around “re-education work” (Ch: *jiaoyu zhuanhua gongzuo*).

Uyghurs responded to this ethno-racial exclusion in a variety of ways. They saw Han settlers as inhabiting an obvious, but often unacknowledged, social privilege. In their minds, Han settlers were weapons of the state who were willing to take all they could from Uyghurs. They felt as though Han settlers were always watching them as mercenaries in the “War on Terror.” They said Han settlers would never give them the benefit of the doubt in a dispute. They felt as though they constantly had to prove their loyalty to the state by acting in ingratiating ways to Han neighbors. Even more affluent Uyghurs who were trained in Chinese language schools and were able to find jobs in government institutions felt pressured to demonstrate their loyalty to the state and publicly agree with their Han colleagues when they discussed the “backwardness” of Uyghur migrants. Yet no matter how “open” (Ch: *kaifang*) or sycophantic they acted in relation to Han neighbors, they would never be able to pass as truly equal. The society was militarized against them. On the other hand, Han settlers often saw themselves as bringing civilization and “modern” culture to the city. They saw it as their duty to report Uyghurs they deemed suspicious. By policing Uyghurs who they saw as “low quality” (Ch: *suzhi di*), they positioned themselves as “high quality” (Ch: *suzhi gao*), valued members of society. Unlike in cities in Eastern China,

recent rural-to-urban migrants enjoyed a sense of prestige and distinction relative to the native inhabitants of the city they had come to occupy.

The market economy and forms of liberal agency affected both Uyghur and Han migrants. Despite the impossibility of achieving value as “high quality” urban citizens, many Uyghur young men still strove to find ways to perform their contemporaneity. Like their Han neighbors, they too wanted to achieve a quality of life that resonated with desires that had been elicited through processes of dispossession. The desire to achieve qualities of contemporaneity gave this structure and propulsion. These qualities, which they referred to in Uyghur as “*sapa*,” in some ways resonated with understandings of quality that Han urbanites referred to in Chinese as “*suzhi*.” As described in Chapter 2, they too attempted to buy forms of distinction by dressing in certain ways and adopting urbane styles. Nearly everyone I spoke with wanted to find a life path that helped them to achieve a “higher” quality of life by which they meant a life without poverty and a life that promised future autonomy. They had dreams that involved cultivating their selves as success stories. Yet, despite these resonances across ethno-racial divides, what counted as quality was often pointed toward different sources—one toward a native and Islamic contemporaneity the other toward a Chinese contemporaneity—and because of this it was valued both by the state and by the people performing this quality in different ways. The main way that these two forms of quality differed was in the degree to which low-income young Uyghur migrants valued their native knowledge as having a great deal of value; Han migrants on the other hand saw non-urban and Uyghur forms of knowledge as having little value.

In this chapter I examine different trajectories of “achieved quality” by examining how low-income Han men and women and Uyghur male migrants performed similar kinds of cultural work, how they saw these forms of work in different ways and how they achieved widely

differentiated outcomes in the context of the city. While low-income Uyghurs often found themselves closed off from the city, Han migrants often described their life paths as opening in new directions. Certain forms of achieved personal quality were valued and other forms were framed as “backward” (Ch: *luohou*) or “unauthorized” (Ch: *jinzhi*). This chapter argues that the privileging of Han values was often obfuscated by the state, which contributed to the institutionalization of bias and a lack of the interethnic empathy among recent Han migrants that older generations of Han migrants, such as Tian Lin, saw as important.<sup>88</sup> It further accelerated as the society moved deeper into a mode of terror capitalism and the limited forms of difference that were permitted in earlier periods were further retracted. The privileging of Han values and desires also contributed to a widespread disruption in Uyghur social reproduction or social vitality.

In the second half of this chapter I examine a staging of this disruption in a piece of short fiction called “Iron Will ...” written by the Uyghur author Eset Emet which shows the way low income Uyghur native tradecraft was devalued by more affluent Uyghurs, Han settlers and the police. I show that the perceived failure of the story to represent low-income Uyghur migrants as self-fashioned subjects led to a rejection of the short story by Uyghur migrants. I theorize this rejection as symptomatic of larger structural issues concerning the Uyghur social imaginary of contemporary “nativeness” and human engineering projects in Uyghur society. As the story and lives of its readers demonstrate, the city denied young Uyghur men entrée. As a result, many young trade apprentices were forced to both abandon their trades and leave the city. Many of them attempted to frame their leaving as a means of maintaining control over their own lifepaths; in the end, staying in the city would have suspended narratives of self-fashioning altogether

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<sup>88</sup> See Chapter 4 for an account of Han interethnic empathy as a positive ethics.

(Desjarlais 1997).<sup>89</sup> Through this process, the work of reproducing “native” foodways, products and styles was also rejected as a devalued form of labor by urban authorities and upper-class Uyghurs and Han migrants. The work of performing Islamic contemporaneity by participating in religious economies was also outlawed by the state.<sup>90</sup> Instead many migrants returned to their rural villages and towns to work as contingent wage-laborers in state-funded infrastructure and industrial agriculture projects and to attempt to escape the prison system that targeted out-of-place young Uyghur men. Han migrants with similar levels of formal education on the other hand found numerous ways to stay and flourish in the city. The desire to achieve a better life, or to simply have access to the site of desire production itself in the emerging global city was shown to be structured around particular forms of knowledge and rooted to Chinese histories of racialized multiculturalism.<sup>91</sup>

### *Discourses of Quality in Contemporary China*

Han success stories emanating from China’s widespread rapid economic and social transformation were infused with new wealth, development and qualities of life. Indeed, a new phenomenon of commodity housing fueled by desires for cultural prestige and social stability catalyzed what the anthropologist Li Zhang (2010) identifies as an emerging Chinese middle-class (Ch: *zhongchan jieji*).<sup>92</sup> Zhang describes these people—professionals, managers and entrepreneurs in China’s booming commercialization—as forward-leaning urbanites in search of private utopian spaces made possible through commodity housing. These people operate within a

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<sup>89</sup> See Chapter 3 for an analysis of the way storytelling and friendship provided Uyghur young men with a way of coping with fear and depression.

<sup>90</sup> See Chapter 5 for a description of the way Uyghur migrants used new forms of pious practice in religious economies as a means to find relational autonomy in the city.

<sup>91</sup> See also Chapter 1 for a discussion of the role of desire in the planning of the city.

<sup>92</sup> Although wealth is perhaps a bad index of class, economists would tell us that the Chinese middle class is a population whose per-family annual income is between \$10,000-60,000. This nascent strata is estimated at approximately 200 million people (Zhang 6).

stratum of urban society dominated by consumerism and new forms of “achieved quality” or “cultural capital” (Ch: *suzhi*). No longer seeking happiness and recognition through an emphasis on communal sacrifice and Maoist ideals, members of this new class strive to build (or buy) a hedge against the chaos of market forces while simultaneously accumulating cultural value through the purchase of distinctive places in newly planned and constructed communities (Zhang 2010: 8, 35). It is in the exchange of accumulated cultural value or capital into social value that was recognized and supported by political institutions where Han *suzhi* became most clearly incommensurate with Uyghur *sapa*. Uyghur culture work or “achieved” quality did not have the same social currency as Han quality.

Like cities in other parts of China, Ürümchi too had an emerging middle class. Much of the wealth of the city was centered around natural resource development and the securitization of the Uyghur homeland. This middle class of government employees and private entrepreneurs formed the engine of economic growth in the city. Built into this Chinese pursuit of the middle-class “good life” was the industrial exploitation of a “reserve army” of the approximately 211 million Han migrant laborers needed to build it. The anthropologist Pun Ngai argues that the “floating population” (Ch: *liudong renkou*) of *dagongmei* and *dagongzai* (working girls [little sisters] and working boys [little fellows]), names the contours of a yet unformed working class which is emerging in China’s economic reforms. In Ürümchi, these laboring bodies whose “raw” energy was building China’s New Silk Road, were young, rural Chinese women and men at the liminal intersection of three covalent systems: the authoritarian state with its continued imposition of Maoist-legacy urban-rural apartheid (Ch: *hukou*), protections of market stability, and the guarantees of merit goods such as access to food, transportation, heat, security and other hard infrastructure services; and the global system of market capitalism with its insatiable need

for the bodies of cheap disciplined workers while simultaneously catalyzing affective desire for commodity consumption; and the gendered force of both village and urban forms of patriarchy and sexual violence.

This new labor subject emerged from what Pun Ngai (2005) refers to as a “triple displacement”: the erasure of socialist class discourse and the introduction of wage labor in the service of the ever expanding “race to the bottom” of labor/cost efficiency which accompanies global capitalism coupled with the maintenance of patriarchal systems. Working in dynamic relation to the legacy of the social class structures, institutions, and infrastructure of Maoist China, these social strata profoundly transformed the spacing of social landscapes in urban China. The operative function of these systems combined with the intransigence of Maoist-legacy rural-urban apartheid and the erasure of class discourse, had strong effects in Chinese society.

The securitization of Xinjiang introduced an additional new object into this formula of negative intersectionality: rural, minority bodies as the object of dispossession and control at the hands of Han migrant-settlers. In Ürümqi, new social strata such as the emerging middle class and flexible migrant working class were in effect being formed around the policing, education, and exclusion of Uyghurs. One of the trajectories that framed this social transformation was the life narrative of Han *suzhi* as a form of individually-achieved cultural capital.

As Andrew Kipnis has shown, when *suzhi* (achieved quality) first emerged as a replacement for the word *zhiliang* (ascribed quality) in government public relations assessments of populations in the early 1980s, the disciplining apparatuses regulated by the state (schools, healthcare providers, employers) were taking up the rationale of regarding people as “human



resource investments” (Kipnis 2011: 65).<sup>93</sup> As Ann Anagnost has argued, this turn toward a discourse of *suzhi* “marks a significant departure from earlier forms of subjectivity in the sense that the worker is understood as an entrepreneur who invests in his or her own self-development” (2013: 26n11). What this implies is that individuals must adopt practices recognized as holding value that in turn can be exchanged for positions and practices that hold ever greater exchange value (see also Yan 2004).<sup>94</sup>

As Li Zhang noted in 2001, since the mass migration from the countryside to the city began in the early 1980s, Han migrants have often been denied formal political recognition as “an amorphous flow of undifferentiated laborers without histories” (2001: 31). Mainstream media often represents them “not as living individuals with their own desires, dreams and intentions, but as flocks of raw labor that can be used or expelled at any time” (31). Yet, as Anagnost explains, evaluating the bodies, perceptions and affects of migrants as “low quality” “justifies the extraction of surplus value” while at the same time it legitimates “new regimes of social differentiation” (2004: 193). As a result, young migrants pursue life projects indexed to family loyalty, the erasure of class, and the stigma of rural *hukou* status, hoping to accrue *suzhi* by participating in the capitalist economy of production and consumption. As Yan Hairong (2008) has shown, relationships between migrants and urbanites that appear durable can be made disposable with sudden, arbitrary attachments of “low *suzhi*” to the bodies of migrants. For example, low-income Han migrant nannies in Beijing often feel bonded to the affluent families that employ them, yet, as Yan (2008) demonstrates, a small misstep can result in an immediate

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<sup>93</sup> Here, Kipnis seems to be contradicting the critique of anthropologies of *suzhi* which he wrote in 2007.

<sup>94</sup> Of course the distinction of possessing high-levels of human capital do not exhaust the value systems of Chinese “enterprising subjects,” older cultural institutions such as “saving face” which is related to intersubjective and familial relations (Kleinman 2011:12) as well as the emerging valorization of personal desire (Rofel 2007) are also operative. Yet as Anagnost (2004) has argued even these forms of personal desire are often inflected by the logic of consumption and production of marketable personae and the production of desire for the sake of desire.

severing of deep relationships. Because the worker is seen as having little quality they can be treated as disposable. In the context of Ürümchi however, Han migrant status is much more secure perhaps simply because Han bodies are needed to complete the dispossession of Uyghurs. Instead, disposability is associated with rural origin Uyghurs, the primary object of institutional violence along the New Silk Road.

The perceptions and affects of achieved quality can be measured only relative to the positions of others within a social field. *Suzhi* within the political frame of a village is not the same thing as *suzhi* in an urban setting; neither is the experience of *suzhi* in rural Sichuan province the same as that of a person from Sichuan living in Tibet. As Emily Yeh has demonstrated in her exemplary account of the construction of a “Little Sichuan” by Han migrant vegetable farmers on the outskirts of Lhasa, it is “essential to see status and value as determined not only by ethnicity and the rural/urban spatial divide, but also by the *suzhi* coding of the territory of the nation-state in relation to development” (2013: 116). Following Yan Hairong’s 2008 argument of the tautology of development indexed to *suzhi* (low quality is the result of low development / low development is the result of low quality), Yeh shows that the national topography of Chinese value is oriented toward the eastern seaboard as the site of sophistication while the western frontier is evaluated as lacking the infrastructure, style, and distinction of modernity. Han migrant-settlers in Ürümchi likewise recognize the sophistication of Eastern Chinese cities, but they also recognize the relative ease with which they find a good life in Ürümchi.

Migration to the west rather than the east likewise follows slightly different lines of desire. Yeh makes clear that migrants from Sichuan to Tibet feel as though they “accumulate no *suzhi*” (117) which they can bring back with them to their village settings. In fact, they feel there

is an inherent danger in “suffering” too long in underdeveloped and minority populated areas. It is as if the extreme lack of *suzhi* might rub off on them: darkening their skin, damaging their ability to affect others. Yet there is a sharp disconnect here, since frontier migration brings vast amounts of wealth and prestige to rural areas in Sichuan. Unlike migrants to Eastern cities, migrants to the West have high success rates in earning significant incomes. In both Xinjiang and Tibet, this migration was in fact motivated by both the local governments of sending communities and national state subsidies for Western frontier development.<sup>95</sup> As Yeh notes, “The material force and consequence of the national discourse of quality and development means that the ‘marginal and precarious legal status’ of migrants does not have the same effect in Lhasa as in other provinces” (Yeh 120). Migrants to the frontier instead see themselves as agents of development, or in the case of Xinjiang, the “People’s War on Terror.” As they told Yeh, “what we did there was a huge benefit for Tibet” (Yeh 122). By slipping *suzhi* and development into a framework of national progress, patriotic duty and a sacrificial life-project among low-*suzhi* minorities, migrants thus come to see the benefits they accrue as justified even as they resent the “misallocation” of resources that drew them away from their homes toward low-*suzhi* frontier settlements in the first place. In a strange confluence of the excess of *suzhi* discourses, many Han migrants resent the “favoritism” the government policies have shown to “stupid” and “simple-minded” Tibetan and Uyghur minorities (Yeh 118). They may feel that the resources of the nation would have been better spent in improving living conditions in rural Eastern China, yet

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<sup>95</sup> Yeh notes, by quoting a local government report, that “in order for Tibet to be a stable out-migration destination for this town, every year during Spring Festival we especially invite a representative [from among the successful Tibet out-migrants] to have discussions with the government, and give them prizes” (113). What this tells us is that migration to the frontier cannot rely on *suzhi* aspirations and income benefits alone. It must be incentivized and interpolated by sacrifices outside of the usual structures of interpersonal relationships and family loyalties.

despite these feelings of ambivalence toward the priorities of the nation, many of them are proud that of their sacrifice for the nation.

As Tom Cliff (2016) has argued recently, drawing on fieldwork in the smaller Xinjiang oil city of Korla, the main goals of the current administration in Xinjiang are to integrate the frontier with the rest of China and placate the Han population of Xinjiang. Unlike Tibet, the majority of Han in Xinjiang are long term settlers who work either as tenants or owning members of the Maoist-legacy Civilian Construction and Corps or as subsidized small-business entrepreneurs. There are of course hundreds of thousands of additional seasonal vegetable farmers, cotton pickers, coal miners, and road builders as in Tibet, but because of the breadth of resources extractions industries and infrastructures in Xinjiang, long term settlers form the core of the Xinjiang Han population. As the Han occupation continues its capillary spread across Xinjiang, the violence of disembedding millions of Uyghurs has resulted in a considerable amount of leverage for Han migrants.<sup>96</sup> This is particularly the case for Han migrants who have found a place for themselves in Ürümchi. In an emerging global city that is actively cleansing large populations of unwanted Uyghurs, employment opportunities abound. In fact, for urban migrant-settlers the rhetoric of “sacrifice” or “building the nation” that Cliff and Yeh noted among Han migrants in smaller frontier cities such as Korla and Lhasa seemed to slip out of view.

Many of the Han settler-migrants that I interviewed showed a sense of the political and cultural leverage they possessed as patriotic Han subjects. The trajectories this leverage enabled were often expressed as a kind of ease. By simply showing up they were able to participate in the

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<sup>96</sup> For example, as Cliff (2012) points out following the unusually high death toll of 2009, the developmental state instituted programs to provide natural gas to migrant households, crack-downs on corruption, training programs for Xinjiang college graduates, and across the board income and performance bonuses to “grass-roots” employees, in order to placate the demands of what might otherwise be considered low-*suzhi* migrants.

economy of the city as self-fashioning subjects. As one Han migrant who owned a small shop near the giant “PORK” sign in the Big Bend neighborhood told me:

I could totally see myself living here for the rest of my life and just going back to my hometown now and then. It is so much easier to find jobs and they pay way better than in Anhui. It wasn't a big adjustment at all when I moved here. I just found that it was so much easier to find jobs here. I have several businesses that I am doing at the same time here. It would be impossible to do that if I was back in Anhui.

Although most of the dozens of Han migrants I spoke with still had affinities with their home provinces, they said that it was much easier for them to perform the regional variations of Hanness in Ürümchi than in their home villages. In Ürümchi they had more wealth, and there were fewer class distinctions in groupings of migrants from other provinces. For example, in Ürümchi Anhui people were often inclined to help other Anhui people find jobs and resources even if they were strangers. Their shared place of origin was enough to link them in a common cause. They said this sort of comradeship was quite rare in Anhui itself. In the global city, everything they needed to perform their identities was available to them and the differences in status that they experienced back in their hometown were flattened out. They also found themselves exposed to new variations of Han cuisine and style and their tastes began to reflect this diversity. They said that in the city, the class differences they experienced back in Eastern China were not as apparent. All of the Han settlers were from somewhere else, so they cast less judgment toward other Han. Of course, what was often unstated, was the way they were unified in opposition to the threat of Uyghur resentment. As in colonial experiments elsewhere, the frontier was a space both of social mobility and in shared nationalist cause.

A woman from Henan exemplified the ease and contentment of Han migrant life in a global city that supported Han migrants. She said:

I'm from Henan. I came here 15 years ago. Back in Henan we had less than 5 mu (2.5 acres). We raised wheat, but we barely made enough to eat. There are so many people in

Henan.<sup>97</sup> It is impossible to find any real opportunities there. That's why we came here. But I'm still definitely a Henan person. I still think like a Henan person. Sometimes we go back to Henan over the Spring Festival, but sometimes we can't. It's too far and sometimes we can't afford it.

When I asked her to compare her life in Ürümqi to her life in Henan she said:

One of the biggest differences I found between life in the countryside in Henan and life here in the city in Xinjiang is that food is so much more convenient. I don't miss cultivating at all. It took so much time to prepare anything in Henan. Here everything is convenient. You can just buy what you need and make food right away. We can find everything we need to make Henan food. We had three kids after we came here; they all have jobs. My husband also works as a home repairman. *Wulumuqi* (Uy: *Ürümqi*) is developing so fast that we can always find work. I've never had a job myself, but I always find a way to make money. For the past two years I've been selling small supplies of things in the market. Lately I've been making around 50 yuan per day. Our place is small and costs too much (500 yuan), but it is enough for us.

As scholarship on rural poverty in Henan has shown (Anagnost 2006), many Han farmers in the province struggle with basic food security in the context of state-directed capitalism. Since extreme poverty is the baseline for many of these Han migrants, the work that this woman was able to find in Ürümqi seemed more than adequate.

Another young man from Henan who was working as a real estate agent for a commodity housing development told me something similar. For him and his wife, coming to Xinjiang was the best thing they had ever done in their lives. It allowed him entry into a neighborhood that would have been impossible to enter in Henan and it allowed him to imagine achieving a high-quality standard of living despite only having a high school degree. He said:

Everyone who lives here in this housing development works for state owned enterprises. Their *quality* is really high. This place is built for convenience. It is only 15 minutes to the high speed rail station. We have the largest Carrefour in *Wulumuqi* (Uy: *Ürümqi*). It is only five minutes away and we are connected to all of the major roads. In a year or two we will also be connected with the subway. Every housing district in the development has its own English-Chinese kindergarten. Also there are nearby parks for you to relax and exercise. You can go fishing. Everything is very convenient. It is a young community with access to all of the best schools. I came to here in 2012 with my wife. Both of us are just making money for our families. We have a 1-year-old son who is at home with my

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<sup>97</sup> With a population of around 93 million, Henan has one of the highest population densities in the world.

parents, eventually we will bring him to live with us here. We have no land back in Henan so there is no work for us there.

He said that because he was good at navigating the Chinese language Internet and using cell phone applications it was easy for him to find work immediately after he came to the city. His ease at finding a job made the work of cultivating his “achieved” quality through leisure performance and consumption a possibility. He said that cultivating quality was much easier than in the metropolises in Eastern China:

Xinjiang is better than Beijing and Shanghai because the income levels are high but the rent is still low. So in the end we can make more here than in the East. I’m also not willing to do construction, because it is such hard work. I’m good at using the internet and cell phones so I would rather work in that market selling things. I’ve only been doing this job for 2 months, but I really like it. They give us a base salary of 2000 and then if we sell a house they will give us a commission of .05 percent. I know it is too low but this is China. So I can do this job and then do other jobs on the side as well. My wife also works in real estate; but as a waitress for a big real estate office. I like *Wulumuqi* (Uy: *Ürümchi*). The *atmosphere* really suits me. Everyone in the city comes from somewhere else, so it is easy to be accepted. If I had a chance I would definitely settle here; there are so many more opportunities for us here than in Henan. Of course I miss my family in Henan, but this is a place where I feel like I could really *begin to live* (my emphasis).

The “atmosphere” of rugged self-fashioning suited his temperament and his social standing. Ürümchi marked a location where he could “begin to live.” That is, he felt his story of self-fashioning and achieving personal quality started when he arrived in the city. He could find multiple jobs and through hard work move into a better social position. What is remarkable in what he said was his lack of awareness of how his success in the city was mediated by his Han identification and knowledge. As in nearly all conversations I had with Han migrants there was no acknowledgement that their success was contingent on Uyghur dispossession in general and the devaluation of Uyghur native work in the city. It was as though it was natural for Han cultural values and Han bodies to be welcomed and protected in the city while Uyghur bodies were systematically excluded from city life.

Although a few Han migrants recognized that the type of quality they were accruing in Ürümqi was less valuable than what might be possible in bigger cities such as Beijing or Shanghai, they saw their lives in Xinjiang as radically better than lives of their relatives in rural Eastern China. A perspective that stands in opposition to the Han migrants from Sichuan that Emily Yeh interviewed in Tibet. In many ways they saw their identities being disaggregated from their native place of origin into a more general Chinese national future. They also said that the perceived differences in quality between bigger cities and Ürümqi was largely one of perception. They said, the actual threat of Uyghur “terror” (Ch: *kongbu*) was wildly exaggerated. They felt safe because the police presence was so strong. They said that Ürümqi actually had all of the qualities of every other city. Many of them said that they could live their lives without interacting with a single Uyghur. It was as if the Uyghur “problem” (Ch: *wenti*) did not even exist. A migrant from Hunan who worked as a cook in a Hunanese restaurant said:

All of my family is from a town near Changsha so I really do need to go back periodically. I don’t see the differences between Changsha and Ürümqi as purely “quality” issues. Changsha is a bit bigger, but it is also a bit more closed. Here everyone is from somewhere else and the government has put a lot of money into developing the area. The future is very bright here.

While in popular discourse, Xinjiang was represented as “backward” (Ch: *luohou*) and “dangerous” (Ch: *weixian*) and therefore lacking the quality of Eastern Cities, Han migrants rarely experienced this on an everyday basis. In fact many noted that the general sense of lack that was associated with Ürümqi was beneficial, because underdeveloped and “dangerous” locations could be made the recipients of massive injections of funds. As Cliff (2016a) puts it, the goal is “to make the region attractive to Han and accelerate cultural change in Xinjiang. That means privileging Han people and Han ways of doing things” (2016a: 104). Although migrant settlers in Xinjiang may be evaluated as having low *suzhi* from the perspective of middle class



urbanites in the East, by giving their bodies to a national project, migrants often came to feel as though they had the power to control their own futures and, by extension, the futures of others. Their life stories appeared to center around the self-fashioning of achievable dreams and goals.

In the “People’s War on Terror” there was a differential transmission of power that corresponded with the depletion of Uyghur life and the enrichment of Han life. The types of labor Uyghurs were called to do in terror capitalism centered around detaining and being detained, and the culture work that supported the prison and educational institutions. Han migrants often managed Uyghur labor, but still more worked in other industries. Most Han workers were busy doing the work of development and dispossession. Many, for example, worked in urban renewal projects that doubled as urban cleansing or they worked in Han food industries that doubled as a subtraction of Uyghur heritage trades. They often seemed willfully ignorant of the processes of dispossession they were enacting. This ignorance was not simply a passive absence of awareness. It was an ignorance that was fostered by privilege. For the first time in their lives, in Ürümchi many Han migrants came to believe that the state was empowering them rather than exploiting them. This support and the success they realized as they took over Uyghur neighborhoods gave their ignorance a kind of confidence. They began to believe that they deserved the distinction they received, that they had actually “achieved” it; and that Uyghurs had not achieved it.

The definition of *suzhi* as “achieved” quality conveys the meritocratic illusion of a cultural good being equally available to any person. In fact, cultural quality is always linked to other less mutable categories such as class, gender, sex, ability, and of course race or ethnicity. “Achieved” quality when it is naturalized as a universal standard of value, masks the way mechanisms of governance, historical legacies, and transnational modes of evaluation shape

cultural values. *Suzhi* is not just a product but also a major force of economic growth and hard work. Not only does it produce and organize desire in particular ways, it also creates surplus value. This value is often expressed as confidence, distinction and the production of further desire in the individual, but it also reproduces hierarchies of power often in ways that are unacknowledged. Often this value added to a life is not the result of personal striving. Sometimes improved social status comes to people simply because of the presentation of their body and the way that body is recognized by state institutions. Those impelled by an achieved quality economy to work hard may never be able to achieve what comes easily to a differently positioned person. *Suzhi* is mediated by linguistic regimes, popular culture, educational policy, national security, and interpersonal distinction to name only a few of its catalysts, but it also mediates development plans for the global city and the life projects that compose it.

As a Chinese language instructor told me, his “Chinese dream” for his life in Ürümchi was made up of all the stereotypical things he, and Chinese society in general, “lacked”: submissive wives, dutiful children, luxury cars and giant houses. He said his desire was to have: “A Japanese wife, Korean children, a German car, and an American house.” Desires take consistency through their aggregation throughout a social field. As I spoke further with this Han man, he said that “everyone knew” that Germans and Americans had the highest quality cars and houses. He had seen this in movies, he said. The “achieved” quality of Japanese wives and Korean children was likewise something he had seen through Chinese mass media. He acknowledged that this kind of thinking was simplistic and perpetuated certain stereotypes, but he said that he really did think that these imagined ideals worked as standards that many Han migrants hoped to achieve. For him, *suzhi* desire had as much to do with intersubjective competition for opportunities and survival as it does with personal passion for distinction.

Moving with the flow of society means desiring *suzhi*. In *Desiring China*, Lisa Rofel notes that desire in China has been “assigned the weight of throwing off historical constraints and creating a new cosmopolitan human nature in the contingent context of postsocialist experiments and post-Cold War global politics” (2007: 198). She writes that such an undertaking will undoubtedly lead to unintended ends. Because the “achieved” aspect of the *suzhi* discourse of quality often masks the class or ethno-racial position of the self, it can also be used to solidify historical legacies and obfuscate forms of social violence. The new sequence of Uyghur racialization I have alluded to throughout this project is one such end. Bodies now marked as “terrorist” are not able to achieve positive quality in the “People’s War.” Instead the state has made them the objects of human engineering experiments in policing, surveillance and detention. Uyghurs have become a population against which the state has set out to prove its global dominance in cyber-security.

### *Uyghur Quality and Narrative Failure*

As I signaled in Chapter 2, the discourse of achieved quality has also been taken up in Uyghur society. In a series of extended interviews conducted in 2014 and 2015, the Uyghur public intellectual, poet and filmmaker, Tahir Hamut described Uyghur conceptualizations of achieved quality as follows:

In many ways the idea of quality seems to be a human universal. It is associated with education, ability, taste and refinement. For Uyghurs the role of these qualities have been valued for a long time, but we know the most about it from the 1920s onward when “achieved quality” (Uy: *sapa*) really became a highly coveted value. Although there were actually very few intellectuals relative to the whole population of Uyghurs, compared to other minorities and even Han, Uyghurs had quite a lot of “quality.”

Tahir was referring to the period when the Jadid school of Islamic modernists from other parts of South and Central Asia and the Middle East began to introduce new forms of scientific learning in Uyghur society. As a result, there was an efflorescence in Uyghur language education. This

new form of quality, achieved through education, produced an intellectual class and new forms of cultural knowledge. It also shaped the formation of the first Turkic Islamic Republic of East Turkistan (1933-1934) centered around a nascent Islamic nationalism. In the 1940s, as Uyghurs began to learn about socialist experiments in nation building, these earlier forms of cultural knowledge were put to work in service to the second East Turkistan Republic (1944-1949).

Tahir said though that since the arrival of the communist party in 1949 Uyghur cultural development had been largely blocked by socialist multiculturalism and the propaganda state. He said, “During the Maoist years we really had very little control over what we produced. We did not have the freedom to study or to cultivate ourselves.”

This began to change during the 1980s when, as in spaces around the nation, there was a turn toward individual cultivation and a new fashioning of aspiring subjects, much as Anagnost (2013) noted among Han populations. As a result throughout the 1990s there was a resurgence in Uyghur knowledge production by aspiring entrepreneurs began to produce new forms of cultural quality, even though it lacked the institutional support to truly flourish as it did in Eastern China. Then in the mid-2000s a new form of censorship and regulation began to block this culture work. As Tahir put it:

Part of the issue is the way media production has been regulated over the past decades. From the early 1990s until 2004 we were able to produce a lot of media: films, music, comedies on very cheap VCDs. In 2005 there was a sharp crackdown on selling Uyghur language media. After 2009 it became even more tightly controlled. The government wanted to prevent the circulation of anything that did not serve Han values. Now it is hard to find any Uyghur mass media, particularly in the South. Even previously-approved Uyghur language television and movies have been censored. There are no movie theaters in the South. Instead we are fed state propaganda all the time.

As he thought about this further, Tahir said that there were three main factors that made Uyghurs appear to lack achieved quality from the perspective of Han settlers in the city. He said these factors centered around a generalized lack of autonomy that was manifested through a lack of a

financial capability to produce and consume media, a lack of political ability to produce and consume media, and more general language differences and structural antagonisms. Because Uyghurs lack the opportunity to produce and stage representation of who and what they want to be, negative stereotypes of Uyghurs as backward and potentially dangerous have been able to pervade popular culture. To a greater extent than Han culture workers in the city, particularly after the “People’s War” began, Uyghur culture workers were prevented from pursuing their desires through the cultivation and performance of the self.<sup>98</sup> Instead Uyghur desires were often perceived by the state and Han culture workers as too Uyghur, too Western, too Islamic and not Chinese enough. In most cases the only positive images of Uyghurs that were staged for public consumption were those of happy, dancing, exotic others performing their permitted difference for the benefit of the nation. Tahir said that this lack of cultural freedom and knowledge recognition in the production of Chinese desire had a profound effect on the Uyghur self-image as a whole and on their ability to achieve forms of quality that were recognized as contemporary.

Tahir said that this lack of freedom combined with “native” (Uy: *yerlik*) forms of knowledge gave Uyghur ideas of quality a different trajectory and expression. He said:

Because of this (native orientation), rural-origin Uyghurs are less interested in (Chinese-style) “development” than Han people. For them, the old ways of doing things, the courtyard houses they grew up with, they see as having more quality than new apartments and urban living. Maybe they want to have modern conveniences, but they want them to be set up in a traditional style.

As an example of this, he described the way many Uyghur migrants found the quality of the aesthetics of Turkish-themed Uyghur restaurants in the city tremendously appealing. He said this was because such restaurants reimagined Uyghur cuisines and modes of comportment as urban and contemporary, Islamic and Turkic – rather than Chinese or western and therefore non-

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<sup>98</sup> See Chapters 1 and 2 for comparisons of experiences of Han and Uyghur culture workers.

Islamic. Uyghurs could still sit on rugs around low tables in hierarchies of honor and respect, eating traditional Uyghur dishes and drinking Uyghur tea, but it was reproduced as worldly and cosmopolitan because of the attire of the white-gloved waiters and the shape of the Turkish tea-cups.

Tahir and other Uyghur culture workers I interviewed identified the sources of Uyghur ideas of quality as coming from different places, from rural traditions and aspiring toward Turkish, Islamic and western urban contemporaneity. But they also said that in many ways ideas of quality were simply a function of the market economy and the need to produce a marketable persona. As Tahir noted, the consumer lifestyle was beginning to have a large effect on Uyghur migrant life. He said:

Now people are becoming more and more self-centered. They feel like a high quality of life just means that everything should be convenient. If people have a nice house, car and family then they feel content and feel like they have high quality. But actually they are just as stupid as before. They are not cultivating themselves they are just buying what appears on the surface to be a high-quality lifestyle.

In addition to this, the structural inequalities of life in the city had a sharp effect on the ability of Uyghur migrants to achieve the quality of life that they hoped for. Rural origin Uyghurs who valued Uyghur traditional knowledge often saw their dreams destroyed when they came to the city. Life narratives of Uyghur craft apprentices without formal education demonstrate this—they appear to have low levels of quality from the perspectives of both urban Uyghurs and urban authorities.

### *Staging Devalued Native Work in the City*

Uyghurs have a long tradition of cultivating skilled craftwork through “master-apprentice” (*ustaz-shagirt*) relationships between senior craftsmen and young men. For centuries, the “native” (*yerlik*) trades of the metal-smith, wood-carver, apothecarist, barber, butcher and

baker have been cultivated in this manner. Over the past few decades, this form of social reproduction not only maintained a contemporaneity in Uyghur everyday nativeness and a sharply gendered division of labor, but it also enabled families who were not able to support their children's formal education to guarantee a secure life path for their sons. After years of unpaid labor, apprentices were often given opportunities to become masters of a trade and owners of their own businesses. Over the past two decades the transformation of the Xinjiang economy, as well as urban cleansing and mass incarceration projects in cities across the Uyghur homeland, have strongly diminished the role of this type of native reproduction.

One exemplary staging of this process of devaluation is the Uyghur short story "Iron Will ..." (Uy: *jeni tumor...*) by Eset Emet. The story centers around the life narrative of a young Uyghur man who works as an unpaid apprentice to a butcher in the Uyghur district of Ürümqi. The story is told from the perspective of an urban Uyghur school teacher who encounters the young man on the street near his apartment building. The teacher sees the young man as representative of a large population of Uyghur teenagers who work in a variety of Uyghur native trades ranging from baking to Uyghur traditional medicine. As the teacher develops a relationship with the young man, he comes to understand that the young man's parents had struggled to feed him and he had failed to thrive in school. In desperation his parents sent him to the city to work as an apprentice to a butcher. In the city, the young "iron willed" man found himself in a series of abusive relationships with the master-butcher who took him on as an apprentice and with gangs of other young men he was forced to rely on after he left the butcher shop. In the end, the young man was forced into a life of crime by other young men in the city.

The story turns upon a particular encounter between the narrator and the young man in which he attempts to give him a tip of 20 yuan (3 dollars) for carrying half of a sheep from the

butcher shop to his apartment building. The young man refuses the money which makes the narrator wonder:

Why did this young man not take the money? Was it because his future had been destroyed by problems with money? Or did he sense a trick behind the gift? Was it that he was trying to protect his dignity?

As part of my research method, I discussed this fictive encounter and these related questions with apprentices I interviewed over a year in 2014-2015. They said that these perceptions and suspicions revealed the way their social role was regarded by affluent urbanites and the urban authorities. Many apprentices saw their work as bakers, barbers and cooks as an honorable form of labor, but felt as though others in the city saw them as impoverished, “backward” (Uy: *qalaq*) and in need of help. In a sense, this perception was not misplaced. Because of the exploitive conditions in which they worked and the way their labor was devalued by urbanites and city police, they were often forced to find other work in the informal economy as hustlers and small-scale thieves.

When I told this story to young apprentices, or asked them to read it with me during my interviews with them, they often said that the young protagonist in the story did not take the money because he wanted to be treated like an equal, not like a “no quality” (Uy: *sapasi yok*) beggar. They said the narrator could have offered him a loan, but giving him a gift was a sign of disrespect. The apprentices I spoke with said that the story gave them the impression that apprentices who work in native trades are illiterate and poor. It made them feel as though they should be treated as objects of pity. Reading it gave them the sense that the author thought they had no authorship over the stories of their lives. This sounded wrong to them. They said that the story sounded like it was written by someone who did not know what it was like to actually be an apprentice.



In fact, the author of the story was himself an upper-class Uyghur intellectual who had a relatively secure position in a government institution. He, like many of the other Uyghur intellectuals I interviewed, had something of a negative view of the quality of Uyghur “travelers” or low-income migrants. He felt that young people like the butcher apprentice he wrote about in the story should be in school finding a place in the city by learning science, Chinese and technical skills. He felt that it was at least in part a lack of discipline on their part and a lack of education on the part of their parents that had led these young men to this life path. He also recognized that poverty was endemic in rural Uyghur communities, but he felt that his own life history as someone who came from a rural background proved that, despite all odds, Uyghur young people could succeed in the global city. What he may have failed to realize is that he came of age during a period in which Uyghurs attaining higher education was quite rare and that his role in the state multiculturalism project was largely responsible for the relative security he was able to find. The slightly paternalistic tone of his short story reflected this unacknowledged privilege.

Yet, nevertheless, the attention he paid to low-income migrants was admirable when compared to the outright hostility with which some Uyghur elites regarded low-income Uyghur travelers. For instance, one wealthy Uyghur government official told me:

Uyghurs from the South think that things should just come to them without having to work for them. They think that they somehow deserve to be handed everything just because they’re Uyghur. Also, now many of them think that the traditional roles of the past should be done away with. They don’t have any respect for people in power. They think everyone’s opinion should just be considered as equal. But actually we Uyghurs are different than the Americans or Turkish people they see in the movies. We have a long tradition of respecting our parents and respecting those who are older and wiser. You have to earn the right to be successful.

Continuing in this openly condescending manner, the official said that the new forms of religious piety that migrants were practicing was a fundamental threat to both the Uyghur way of life and all of the success he had worked to achieve by working within the Chinese system.

He and a number of other Uyghur officials I interviewed believed that it was their own intellect and hard work that had given them the power and security they enjoyed as Uyghur elites. They felt that the security of their lives was threatened by all of the strangers that had arrived from the countryside since the early 2000s. Another Uyghur official told me:

Among the Uyghurs in Ürümqi, only about 20 percent of us are “locals” (people with urban household registration). The rest come from other places. Some of them work hard and are trying to make a better life for their children. When I see people doing that – driving a “black” (Ch: unauthorized) cab or something like that – I feel really happy. But a lot of them really don’t know what to do with themselves. They have no goals and no plans. They just don’t want to live in the countryside so they come here. They don’t realize it, but they are the ones who give Uyghurs the reputation of having low *suzhi*.”

Although we had been talking in Uyghur, in the last sentence the official codeswitched in an interesting way. Rather than using the Uyghur term for achieved quality, *sapa*, he used the Chinese term *suzhi*. For him, achieved quality was measured in Chinese, not in Uyghur.<sup>99</sup>

The young Uyghur men who arrived in the city and worked as apprentices in Uyghur trades did not believe this. They said they did have goals for their lives. Nor did they believe that they were low quality workers or that they lacked knowledge. They said that felt that they had actually chosen their life work as the best option that was available to them. The problem was not with their work but with the society around them. The reason they were seen as valueless or objects of pity by Uyghur elites, and the reason they were abused by their “masters” (Uy: *ustaz*)

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<sup>99</sup> The state system had granted him a right to the city, and he had worked within the system to achieve recognition and prestige. Now he wanted to enjoy the capital he had accrued, but he worried that his status as a Uyghur would prevent him from doing so. Over the next few years, these attitudes began to shift to some extent, when I spoke to this official’s daughter in 2018, she said that her family was beginning to understand the forces of dispossession that had been directed at rural Uyghurs for decades, but this sort of privilege was hard to unravel.

was because of this, not because they were illiterate and powerless. To their thinking, if the state would support their work and the knowledge they possessed in relation to their craft, the respect from broader society would follow. In order to demonstrate in more depth how these structural forces affect the life-paths of young everyday native workers I turn now to an account of a young apprentice named Yusup.

### *Choosing Native Work*

Yusup first came to the city when he was 14. He said his family sent him to the city because “life was very hard, and my family couldn’t afford to send me to school. My family has only eight *mu* (1.25 acres), which means we can hardly make enough to survive.” Yusup said that his older brother had also been sentenced in 2008 to 12 years prison, which was part of the reason why his parents took him out of school and sent him to the city. After his brother was convicted for killing another Uyghur young man in a knife fight, his parents felt as though a new life in a distant city would help to guarantee Yusup’s future success. His parents sent him to Ürümchi to live with a baker who was originally from a nearby village. Initially Yusup said he was excited to travel to the city, he did not like school and city life seemed exciting. But this changed very quickly.

It was very hard work. I had to get up at three in the morning and start mixing the dough. Since I was just training, I only received 10 yuan per month, a place to sleep and just enough to eat. I was the only one being trained. The rest were adults. I really had nothing. After one year of this, I left. I felt like my work was not treated like a *real job*. It was a kind of slavery. I had no choice. If I didn’t work they would beat me and I would be given nothing to eat (*my emphasis*).

The “real job” that Yusup wanted was a job that gave him a wage and gave him the time and space to cultivate his own sense of self. After he left his first apprenticeship he found that the jobs available to him were hard to hold onto. He first tried selling bread from a tray that he held over his head in the bazaar, but this job only paid around 20 yuan per day and meant that he had

to sleep in an all-night Internet café. He then found a job as a dishwasher in a Uyghur restaurant. But this job only paid him 500 yuan per month and hardly covered his living expenses. Yusup said:

Then my parents found me another bakery to work at – but that was the same as the first one. They didn't pay me. And when I demanded that I get paid they beat me. All the other workers were bigger than me so there was nothing I could do.

Eventually he found a job as a security guard, but once again he had a similar problem. His boss refused to pay him. His employer said that room and board was enough for someone as low-skilled and “low quality” (Uy: *sapasi töven*) as Yusup. Eventually Yusup found a bit of success working as a hustler or “hard worker” (Uy: *ishlemchi*) selling consumer goods such as belts and shoes. He said that this was the best job he had during his time in the city. “If the belts sold well you could make money quickly. Once I made over 200 in one day. I sold all kinds of stuff in those years. There was nothing I wouldn't try.” But his success was often short lived. On numerous occasions he was cheated out of profits by suppliers or he simply ran out of products to sell.

Yusup's contingent labor was not enough. He felt as though everyone still saw him as an uneducated baker's apprentice who had no real skills in the contemporary city. He said that his position in life was a product of his family's circumstances. He said:

My brother quit school when he was in the third or fourth grade too. He really can't read Uyghur well. My parents are the same. They didn't have a chance to go to school either. It's not that they don't like school, it just wasn't possible. They needed to work in order to eat. In the countryside things are boring. There is no future. I want a good job, a wife and children. It would be hard to find those things in the countryside.

At the same time though Yusup said: “You are invisible here.”<sup>100</sup> He felt as though only other apprentices and “hard workers” (Uy: *ishlemchiler*) saw him as a person that had any value. The

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<sup>100</sup> Echoing the sentiments of Ablikim in chapter 3

lack of desire production in his home village, what he referred to as “boredom” combined with extreme poverty and the extreme intensity of rural policing, made returning to the rural life seem like an impossibility.

One afternoon he met a relative whose father owned a hotel in the city and had previously given him a “job” as security guard. We went together in the relative’s car to a park to eat kababs. In this context Yusup seemed to really be in his element. He was placed in charge of the preparing the meat. The others in the group seemed to really respect his knowledge when it came to preparing food. But after we ate, he lapsed back into what was perceived as “backward” (Uy: *qalaq*) behavior by his relatives. He asked his cousin to let him see his new iPhone 6. He spent 45 minutes looking at pictures and videos stored on the phone until eventually the cousin asked for it back and said he was bored. It seemed as though the only reason he had invited to Yusup to the picnic was so that he could cook for him and his guests.

In many encounters with more affluent Uyghurs and Han migrants, Yusup was unacknowledged or treated as a secondary consideration. Others, even if they are younger than he, constantly over-shadowed him. Often they treated him as though he was not there. When this happened he became more despondent and withdrawn, behavior that had the effect of further amplifying his lack of belonging and his lack of “quality.” More affluent Uyghurs told me that they thought Yusup might be “crazy” (Uy: *sarang*), because he was always hanging around when other people were talking, listening in on their conversations.

Yusup was aware of this rejection. He knew that others thought that he had “no quality” (Uy: *sapasi yoq*), but he did not know how to escape this perception. He felt as though the narrative of his life was stuck. He said that in the city people judged others on their style, on the things they owned, not on the knowledge they possessed when it came to baking bread or

butchering a sheep. This perception was part of what contributed to the cycle of poverty that often further alienated apprentices. This is what he perceived as the main problem with the story “Iron Will ...”: the author did not understand the true value of native traditions. Yusup said:

The story is wrong about the work the boy is doing in the story. The boy does not hate his work itself, he hates his poverty and the disdain he feels from rich Uyghurs and police and the pity he feels from teachers. He just wants to be valued for the knowledge he has of native traditions.

In his own life though, the only way Yusup saw to climb out of the low quality position he found himself in was to attempt to achieve a marketable persona. Although he wished that his work in heritage trades was not valued, he was forced to instead attempt to find a job that would give him a wage. He had to give off the impression that he was a player in the desire economy of the city. In order to project contemporary “quality,” Yusup and many other apprentices spent a high percentage of their incomes on clothes and maintaining their masculinity. Yusup said:

I spend between 200 and 300 yuan per month on clothes. Since I am a man I don’t wash them myself. I just buy new ones. I know it is expensive, but I don’t have any choice. I have to look good. I also bought my Android one year ago for 500 yuan. It is important because I can use it to read the news and watch videos if I have wi-fi. My parents have no idea about WeChat. They can’t even write a text message. All they can do is speak.

Having traditional knowledge was not enough. To survive in the city, one had to look cosmopolitan and be able to access the knowledge economy. Not doing so was in fact often read by more affluent Uyghurs and Han migrants as a sign of not being contemporary and as potentially suspicious. Everyday native work was devalued, while performing “quality” as self-fashioning consumerist subjects was seen as a way of performing a permitted Uyghur masculine contemporaneity.

Narratives like “Iron Will ...” staged a sense of social identification and desire aggregation for the apprentices I interviewed in 2015. By reading through the story they could identify what aspects of the narrative matched their experiences and where it failed to capture the

underlying structural problems that shaped their own life paths. This interpenetration of literature and experience was helpful not because it promised a better representation of their lives and through this a new form of politics, but simply as a diagnostic of what was happening to them. Over the space of implementation of the “People’s War on Terror” in 2014 and 2015, Uyghur apprentices saw a sharp decrease in the value of their work in the city. While native work had previously offered the existential security that came from the production of what were seen as basic needs, in the new economy and security regime their work was increasingly seen as unnecessary. After all, basic staples could be bought at the Carrefour supermarket as well. The nativeness of their work was increasingly devalued and outlawed as urban cleansing projects intensified.

One day near the end of the year that I spent getting to know Yusup in 2015, we met up with another apprentice who was Yusup’s closest friend, his “life and liver friend” (Uy: *jan-jiger dost*), Ibrahim. Together we walked in the bazaar and ate *samsa* (baked dumplings stuffed with meat). Yusup and Ibrahim told me about how they both had made *samsa* in the past. They described how the ratio of fat to meat had to be just right, and how it had to be mixed with onion and cumin. They showed me how to eat a *samsa* when it was very hot by starting with a small bite in the corner. They took great pleasure in showing me all of this and in the food itself.

As we were talking they both remarked on how so many “hard workers” (Uy: *ishlemchiler*) that used to be on the streets had left the city. The bazaars they used to walk seemed empty to them now. Yusup said the passbook system that had forced all Uyghurs with rural household registration to return to their hometowns was a very bad policy.<sup>101</sup> He said it was

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<sup>101</sup> See the Introduction for a description of the implementation and effects of this passbook system.

obvious that this policy and the “People’s War on Terror” in general was meant to target Uyghur migrants, many of whom were hard workers like him and Ibrahim. He said:

(The passbook system) destroys people’s livelihoods and makes life here in the city much harder for everyone. One year ago, before this new policy started, there were no gates on the small streets. You could walk anywhere you wanted without worrying too much. Now there are so many places where they check us. The (Uyghurs) that live on these small streets are good people. They work hard and are very respectful toward each other. They are good people. Actually, these people are the true “natives” (*yerlik*) to this place. They have truly “achieved quality” (*sapa*). I feel comfortable and as though I am really alive when I am around them.

Yusup said these kinds of policies that were directed at native workers made him more fearful than anything else. He felt that the value he possessed as a native worker was on the brink of being erased. Since he did not have a passbook himself, he said he knew that if he was caught in a checkpoint he could be arrested or sent back to his home village, especially if the police were able to connect him to his brother who was in prison. He said that since the beginning of the “People’s War” everything had become more stressful. He said: “My work, my family, my society, all of these things make me stressed. No one helps me in anyway. It feels like everyone just takes and takes from me.”

A few weeks later, Yusup told me that the police had forced Ibrahim to go back to his home village because he did not have a passbook. Yusup said:

I don’t know if he will be able to come back or not. It’s a lot of trouble for us now. This year is definitely worse than the last. In terms of our life things are getting worse and worse. So now I am completely alone. Actually I am not completely alone because you are still here. Maybe one really good friend is better than 100 normal friends. That is my own proverb. A real friend is someone who spends time with you all the time and is there when you need him to be. A real friend follows you wherever you go; they share everything with you.

Of course, when he said this, Yusup knew that I too would soon return to America. He knew that I would no longer be able to loan him money to help him pay his rent or buy clothes. He knew that his status as a migrant without a passbook or the skillset for a high-paying job in the urban



economy would catch up with him. He knew he was being rejected by the city and urban society. But like the protagonist in “Iron Will ...” he refused to accept charity; he would only accept loans from friends who he felt respected him. He also refused to have his “iron will” severed from his person and his authority as a native excised from his sense of self even as he tried and was blocked from moving into service sector jobs.

### *Narrative Failure*

For young male apprentices dispossessed of their livelihoods, unable to hold onto short-term work and denied a place in the city, narrative often failed to adhere to their experience. This lack of narrative coherence resembles the lack of narrativity that Robert Desjarlais (1997) noted among homeless populations in Boston. Increasingly, like residents of homeless shelters in the United States, Uyghur young men felt themselves lumped into an undifferentiated category of unwanted and devalued bodies. As their friends were sent away, they lost the life and liver friends who valued the qualities they had achieved and listened to their stories. As they were forced to leave the city, they struggled along as best they could depending on other apprentices for support as Uyghurs with urban residency turned their backs on them and the police dragnet intensified.

A few weeks after Ibrahim was forced to leave, Yusup told me he had lost his current job as a waiter in a Uyghur restaurant. He said his boss said he could no longer risk hiring workers without passbooks. “I haven’t told my family back in my village. I can only tell my friends. My life is so difficult,” he said with a sigh.

Very few Uyghurs are really true friends. Usually they just try to act as though they are real friends, but as soon as you have nothing to offer or you need something from them then they will just turn their back on you. They make me beg them for money. They never seem to genuinely care about me or not. It is as if I am just a nuisance to them; like they are spitting on me (he spat violently on the sidewalk). They don’t treat me as if I am a real person.

For Yusup the system of attempting to achieve cultural capital by developing marketable skills and personas seemed like a cruel joke. He felt as though the city mocked native workers like him. Affluent Uyghurs treated him poorly as soon as he was in need and, because of the structural inequalities of urban life, he was often needy.

Other people who work like me, who are genuinely good people, treat me much better than them. They are like my true family. It is strange, we come from completely different places but they are much closer to me than my own family.

Yusup said that, despite these friendships, he felt as though the walls were closing in on him. In order to escape being caught without a passbook and the possibility of being incarcerated he felt as though he had to return to his village. This prospect filled him with a great deal of dread, because he felt that he would no longer have the security of the social role he felt as a native worker in the urban food industry.

If I was back in my village I would just be a “loafer” (Uy: *bikarchi*). I wouldn’t have to worry about food or shelter or any of those basic things. But I also wouldn’t have work or freedom to think. Everything would be about my family and the political education there. I might even be sent behind the “black gate” (a euphemism for the reeducation camp system). Here I had freedom to think and work. I always had enough to eat. I had enough money to buy new clothes. I had a good life in the city. I used to feel as though I had a future. If I go back to my village I will never feel this way.

Increasingly Yusup felt the future of his life story slipping away. Increasingly Yusup began to speak of the present in the past tense. He began to speak in the language of narrative endings and giving up. The daily routines of work began to fade; even the event-dependent organization of time began to lack the coherence of narrative. Apprentices like Yusup were simply waiting for their lives to change. It was as if native work was being placed on hold. In the short story “Iron Will ...,” the apprentice eventually leaves his job at the butcher shop and enters a life of crime as pickpocket. Because of the passbook system, Yusup did not even have this option. He felt himself being forced to leave his trade both because it no longer felt contemporary in the eyes of

urban Uyghurs and because the state had now deemed him out-of-place. All of the unpaid labor as an apprentice, the loneliness of a teenager far away from home, meant nothing in the eyes of the state and urban society. He was being told that the village was his place and, if he did not accept this, that the prison system was his only other option.

Several weeks later, Yusup returned to his village. Unlike other migrants he was not arrested upon his return, though he was interrogated by the village police for a number of hours. The police did not give him a passbook, so he was no longer permitted to leave his home county. But he did find temporary work on a construction site in the county seat a dozen kilometers from his home. He later found out that the apartment complex where he found work was housing for the new group of Han teachers that had been sent to foster political education in the surrounding villages. Yusup said he hoped to find work in the bazaar, but no one was willing to pay him and he did not have enough money to start his own bakery or samsa place.

In April 2017, I lost contact with Yusup. His WeChat app was deleted. Over the next few months an estimated 800,000 young Uyghurs were sent to political reeducation camps throughout the Uyghur homeland.<sup>102</sup> It is likely that Yusup was also sent into this system.

### *Conclusions*

The suspension or drastic diminishment of native work among low-income native apprentices in Ürümchi in 2015 tells us something about the value associated with nativeness in contemporary Chinese Central Asia. Increasingly Uyghurs were directed away from native work, which was seen as “backward” or “low quality” toward production and consumption of what were referred to as “domestic” Chinese products. Not only was Uyghur native work being deemphasized, but the importation of halal products from Turkey, Malaysia and other Muslim-

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<sup>102</sup> See the Introduction for a description of the implementation and effects of these camps.

majority nations was sharply curtailed. Both “yerlik” or native products and halal international products became viewed as a potential marker of Uyghur ethnic pride or Islamic piety. Both of these markers were described in official discourse as “ethnic separatism” and “religious extremism” and associated with “violent terrorism.” The work of young Uyghur apprentices was thus both devalued within the urban economy and, increasingly, excluded from the city.

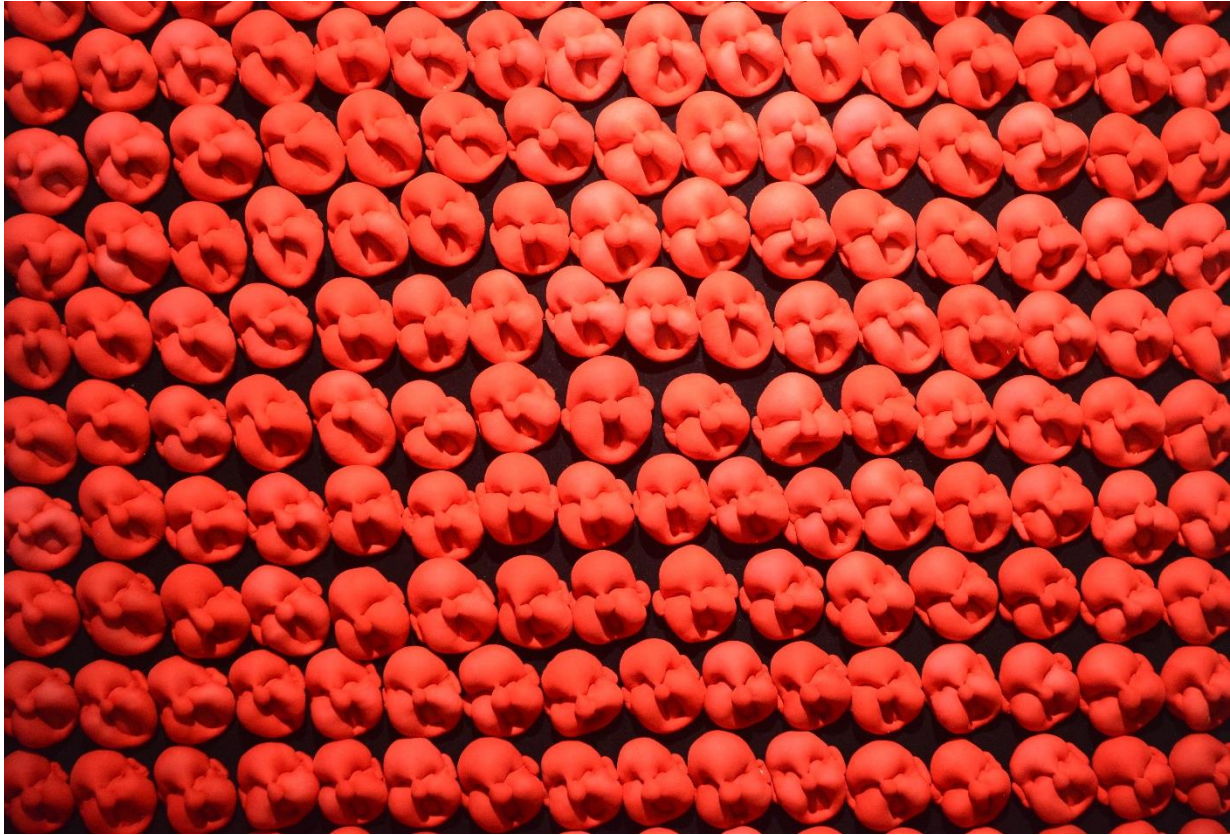
The short story “Iron Will ...” stages this diminishment by showing how a form of “achieved” Uyghur “quality” (Uy: *sapa*) failed to be converted into social value. Instead the qualities that were valued in the city cohered to people with a Han ethno-racial presentation. Or, among Uyghurs, only qualities associated with state-directed culture work—expressed as a particular form of multiculturalism— and counter-terror policing appeared to “achieve” a valued social status. The story demonstrates the perspective of a concerned school teacher who pities an apprentice but does not overtly value his work as part of the reproduction of native lifeways. This failure to see the apprentice’s work as the work of reproducing Uyghur everyday native life, rather than the work of the poor and uneducated, was the main form of rejection that Yusup and other apprentices offered in response to the story. In rejecting this element of the story, they were also rejecting the role of the author and narrator as their benefactor. Instead they wanted to claim authorship of their own life stories and the qualities they possessed as native hard workers. Yet, as this chapter has demonstrated, their stories appeared to be limited by their disappearance into the reeducation camp system and restrictions on movement imposed by the police state. Their story, like their work as native craftsmen, was suspended.

At the same, time Han migrants saw their perceived qualities welcomed and amplified. Han workers involved in the cultural production of regional food cuisine or Han markers such as “PORK” saw their businesses bolstered by the institutions of the state. Uyghur bodies provided a

“low quality” (Ch: *suzhi di*) object of revulsion and disdain to which Han presentations of self were indexed as objects of desire. As a result, the life narratives of Han migrants seemed to open into new chapters when they arrived in the city. At the same time, the way their flourishing was indexed to Uyghur dispossession was rarely recognized. Instead, Han migrants often saw their own hard work, their own investments in themselves as the cause of their success. If they did think about the diminishment of Uyghur social life, it was often seen as deserving of diminishment because Uyghurs were “backward” or “dangerous.” Uyghurs were often seen as not having achieved the “quality” necessary for life in the global city. As a result the closing of their story in the city was justified and the opening of a new Han story was normalized.

The suspension also calls into question the utility of ethnographic narrative. As I discussed in the previous chapter, writing the political ethnographically seems to fail to hold the lives of those that are being subtracted by urban cleansing and mass detentions. In the face of life suspension and silence, ethnographic narration turns toward bearing witness. I can only hope to amplify these stories and hope that documenting narrative suspension will move readers to share the pain, however partial, of those that disappeared from the city. As I describe in the Epilogue that follows, telling the Uyghur story of life subtraction means describing the new objects of terror capitalism.

**Epilogue:**  
**Life Subtracted: Spirit-breaking Behind the “Black Gate” of Terror Capitalism**



*Figure 7.1. Detail from a mixed-media display of busts of caricatured elderly Uyghur men by Han artist Dan Xiumei at Seven City Blocks in April 2018.*

In April 2018, an exhibition celebrating the ninth anniversary of Seven City Blocks opened in the Xinjiang Contemporary Art Museum. The show filled out the two floors of the museum with paintings and sculptures from featured resident artists. No minority artists were included in the show. Instead minorities were only represented on the walls and displays of the museum. As much as Zeng Qunkai, the central figure in Chapter 1, wanted to open the space up to autonomous representations of contemporary life at the margins of the city, in this landmark show, nine years after the mass protests of 2009, all forms of resistance to the dominant narrative of social harmony and stability were subtracted from the walls. There were no critiques of capitalist development from Ali K. or images of urban cleansing from Tian Lin.

Instead, on the landing of the second floor, a large three meter wide mixed-media display of busts of caricatured elderly Uyghur men (See Figure 7.1), modeled on a cartoonish representation of the Turkic Sufi folk hero Nasreddin Apendi, dominated the space. The faces of the men, created by the Han artist Dan Xiumei, were a bright red. Seen from a distance, the framed display looked like a chorus of screaming babies. The garish display of bald heads mirrored the state of politics in the city. Nearly four years into the so-called People's War on Terror, social violence had saturated Xinjiang contemporary art. Nearly all forms of Uyghur culture work had been subsumed by a human engineering project directed at erasing embodied forms of Islamic piety and a diminishment of Uyghur ethnic pride. The bright red screaming heads were symptomatic of the culture work that all Uyghurs were now asked to participate in: patriotic "red" songs sung at full volume. For Uyghurs the lyrics of "Without the Communist Party, There Would Be No New China" had become a constant refrain.

This feat of political engineering was mirrored by the built environment of the city. Less than 50 meters from the grotesque display of screaming Uyghur stereotypes, just next to the front gate of the museum, was a brand-new police station. The station, one of the hundreds of new "convenience" (Ch: *fangbian*) police stations that had been built every 300 to 500 meters throughout the city, was part of the intensification of securitization that had been initiated by a new party secretary, Chen Quanguo, when he arrived in 2016. When he became the leading official in the province, he ordered that the stations be installed in every Uyghur neighborhood and district throughout the province. The police stations employed a dozen or so low-wage officers who monitored cameras that scanned the streets using facial recognition software and were often deployed to conduct spot-checks of IDs and cell-phones of young Uyghurs.





*Figure 7.2. A new “convenience” police station stands in the middle ground between the Xinjiang Contemporary Art Museum and the studios of Seven City Blocks in April 2018.*

The absence of representations of urban cleansing in the museum were likewise mirrored by the absence of Uyghur migrants in the city and the erasure of the spaces they had previously inhabited. On Black Shell Mountain, the streets were nearly completely empty. Even on Friday, the day in which the streets had filled with thousands of devout travelers in 2015, the streets remained empty. On Black Shell Mountain, the walls that had been erected at that time to corral Uyghur migrants through checkpoints had been dismantled (see Figures 7.3 and 7.4). Now there were no checkpoints. All that remained of the old neighborhood was the mosque itself, but it too



stood vacant. No one entered or left the mosque. The newly installed ID and face-scanning machines at the entrance to the mosque prevented anyone from entering to pray. Near the spot where Emir's nail house once stood, a point of focus in Chapter 5, Han construction workers were building a new tower. Other crews were paving a wide road right over the rubble of his neighbor's houses. The travelers of Black Shell Mountain, like nearly all Uyghurs without urban household registration in Ürümchi, had been forced to leave the city. Tens of thousands more, even those who could claim a right to the city, had been sent to reeducation camps. In total an estimated 500,000 to one million people across the province were in the camp system in 2018 (Zenz Forthcoming). Ablikim, whose account of alienation and friendship I discussed in Chapter 3, had become one of this multitude of detainees.

On June 29, 2017, I received a final message via email from Ablikim. He said: "It's been a long time that we did not talk, I am sorry to say I had to delete all foreigners from my WeChat friends list for security reasons." He said he had returned to his village near Kashgar because his parents had arranged for him to marry a woman from his neighborhood. He was working for his



*Figure 7.3. Walls that were erected to corral travelers on Black Shell mountain in 2015.*



*Figure 7.4. Dismantled walls in the same streets on Black Shell Mountain in 2018*

cousin selling appliances in the nearby town. Several months later, Ablikim's life and liver friend (Uy: *jan jigger dost*), Batur, lost touch with him. He feared the worst. Batur said that the only thing that would explain Ablikim's disappearance was if he had been detained and sent to the prison camp for reeducation.

On January 29, 2018, Uyghurs across the world began to hear rumors that the author of *The Big City*, the book that had meant so much to Ablikim, had also been detained and sent to a reeducation camp. In a wave of detentions that targeted Uyghurs of influence, Perhat Tursun and numerous other public intellectuals were loaded into vans and taken to the fortified camps where they were interrogated and given extrajudicial sentences of re-education through thought work.

When people like Ablikim and Perhat were taken, heavily armed SWAT teams placed them in shackles with black masks over their heads. According to the Uyghurs I interviewed in 2018, one of the purposes of the violence of these arrests appeared to be terrifying them and their families. One of the primary goals of the mass detention program was collecting intelligence regarding the immediate family members, friends and neighbors of those that were detained (Shih 2018). Immediately upon detention, detainees were asked to provide names of those who passed or taught unauthorized religious knowledge to them or others who they had heard complain about government programs or act in "two-faced" (Ch: *liang mianzi*) ways. According to Uyghurs I interviewed that were released, they were told that, if they provided information, that they might be treated in a more lenient manner. They were told things like "It will be better for you if you tell us now rather than if we find out later." In some cases, detainees were threatened with criminal prosecution and "re-education through hard labor" if they did not cooperate with interrogators. This was a viable threat because convictions of Uyghurs and Kazakhs accused of terror, separatism or extremism crimes was near one hundred percent.

Because detainees were in a vulnerable position, they often cooperated or at the very least provided the appearance of cooperating. Admitting one's ignorance and inadvertent guilt (i.e. someone else had led them astray) appeared to be an important way of avoiding criminal prosecution and instead being sent to reeducation camps rather than prison. The evidence provided in interrogations was likely used in further detentions of others.

Even if the reported illegal behavior was said to have occurred years in the past, it was still used as evidence to send people into detention. For instance, Mahmud's brother, whom I discuss in Chapter 2, was detained in 2017 for having listened to unauthorized Islamic messages with another detainee in 2013. The detainee confessed during interrogation that Mahmud's brother had done this with him. The neighbor of another young Uyghur I interviewed was detained in 2017 because he taught his daughter to read Arabic in the late-1990s. He confessed to this during interrogation as well. The data collected through a type of "plea-bargaining" became one of the primary ways that the state assessed the currents of embodied Islamic practice and the potential for ethno-nationalism. Since the majority of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities had engaged in "two-faced" behavior or unauthorized practices of Islam over the past two decades, nearly everyone was guilty.

After the interrogation was completed and their sentence was decided by the officers, detainees had their shoe-laces and belts removed. They were given prison uniforms and assigned bunks in dorm-style group cells. Inmates woke at six am Beijing standard time. Their rooms were inspected. They attended flag raisings and pledge loyalty to the Chinese state. They sang patriotic songs. They attended political education classes and were often asked to memorize and recite policy documents and speeches delivered by Xi Jinping. Many of the detainees were also

asked to study Chinese language. Their progress in political education and language was assessed during regular exams.

Based on accounts that have filtered out from the camps, the camp work centered around military style training and denunciations of Islam (Shih 2018). Detainees were required to stand in front of classes of 60 to 80 detainees and publicly confess their crimes on a daily basis. They were forced to say things like: “I was taught the Holy Quran by my father and I learned it because I didn't know better” over and over. Others in the class were then required to criticize them and verbally abuse them; those that insulted their fellow detainees well were given points toward their eventual release. Only Chinese language was permitted in spoken communication. Punishments were allotted to those who broke the rules. These punishments ranged from sleep and food deprivation, punishment by solitary confinement, water boarding and holding them in stress positions, to forcing them to eat pork and drink alcohol. Many detainees were physically beaten; often public confessions were later used in further interrogations.

The camps were surrounded by razor wire and guard towers. Inside they were blanketed with closed-circuit cameras, even in the restrooms (Shih 2018). Detainees were not permitted to wash their hands or feet for weeks at a time because this was equated with Islamic ablutions. They were forced to chant “Thanks to the Party! Thanks to the Motherland! Thanks to President Xi!” (Ch: *Ganxie dang! Ganxie zuguo! Xiexie Xi Zhuxi!*) before each meal. On numerous occasions throughout the day they were asked to chant in unison “We will oppose extremism, we will oppose separatism, we will oppose terrorism” (Ch: *women fandui jiduan zhuyi, women fandui fenlie zhuyi, women fandui kongbu zhuyi*). Every day they sang patriotic songs such as “Without the Communist Party There Would be No New China” (See Figure 7.1). Many detainees lost weight due to their poor diet and frequent bouts with food poisoning. Often they

slept in gender segregated rooms with more than 20 other detainees. Many attempted suicide. At night the rooms were filled with crying.

In 2018, Uyghurs outside of the camps began to hear that their relatives in the camps were being forced to eat pork. They also began to hear that detainees were being sexually abused by the guards in the detention centers. As in the stories from Alim that began this project, no one knew for sure how widespread these forms of physical and psychological torture. Often they did not know exactly where their relatives were being held, why they were taken or if they would ever be released. Like Hasan, one of the central figures in Chapter 5, they talked about those that were missing as “those who now no longer existed” (Uy: *ular hazir yoq*) and like the old traveler in Chapter 4, as those that were “subtracted” (Uy: *kimeytti*). They were like “the disappeared” in other contexts, but in the context of the “People’s War on Terror” it was likely that they were still alive, just simply living out their lives in the Chinese mass incarceration system, trying to survive. For the families that remained on the outside, it felt as though those that had been taken had been “subtracted” in the calculus of the human engineering project. They were not just simply missing, their absence had a magnetism about it. Their absence organized the lives of those that remained outside of the black gate (Uy: *qara dereweza*). Their disappearance and the ongoing threat of further disappearances held all Uyghurs hostage. Unlike the disappeared in other contexts, those that had been subtracted could not be openly mourned, they could not become the rallying cry for mothers in the streets demanding justice. Instead, they functioned as a constant reminder of the psychological cruelty of the “People’s War on Terror.” The human engineering project that was being directed at them was about power, domination and exploitation. The dispossession they felt was directed at how they were being made to live. Increasingly they came to understand that their role was to produce the happiness of the nation

by enjoying their domination. The state and the Han settlers it supported would settle for nothing less. It was not enough for the state to be in complete control; it needed Uyghurs to desire the Chinese state and Han settlers.

The everyday life of Uyghurs that remained “free” was restructured around the performance of patriotism and submission. They wore red armbands, attended flag raisings and posted propaganda on their WeChat accounts. In general, they kept placid expressions on their faces as they moved from checkpoint to checkpoint, yet there were still occasional moments when Uyghurs refused. At a checkpoint I passed through in April 2018, I encountered a Uyghur woman screaming at a Han officer in Chinese. With tears in her eyes she was yelling, “How many people are left in your family?” He barked in Uyghur “Yak! Yak!” (No! No!) and then switched to Chinese “Bu!” “Bu!” (No! No!) trying to shut her up. No one was permitted to protest the indefinite detention of their loved ones. They were not even permitted to ask where their fathers and brothers had been taken or when they would be released. Those that did were often detained themselves. I did not linger at the checkpoint because I did not want the outcome to be worse for her.

### *The “People’s War” as a Human Engineering Project*

When I first began researching and writing this project, I was primarily interested in understanding how migrants live meaningful lives in the city despite conditions of dispossession. Initially, my research centered around the minor politics that Tian Lin was enacting in Uyghur traveler settlements and the positive ethics that Ablikim and many other young men were building with their life and liver friends. Yet, over the course of my research as the “People’s War on Terror” intensified, I saw too that these novel forms of sociality were not enough to cradle the lives of those who were being dispossessed from the rural ways of life, subtracted

from the city by the state and detained in the mass incarceration system. The space of disobedience and desire that the new art district and broader new media development seemed to promise to culture workers such as Zeng Qunkai and Mahmud was undermined by its entanglement with older and newer forms of dispossession. When my informants began to disappear near the end of my fieldwork in 2015, it became clear that the kind of anti-racist politics fostered by contemporary artists like Tian Lin or the friendship networks that Ablikim and Batur exemplified could not adequately address the intensification of human engineering in Chinese Central Asia.

The limits of relational and narrative autonomy that pervaded Uyghur society led me to widen my focus to consider the way material dispossession and desire production had motivated Uyghur migration to the city in the early 2000s. Spaces of freedom in the city could not be separated from older colonial impulses and socialist multiculturalism. These entanglements were intensified by the rise of new forms of Islamic piety in 2010s when 3-G networks and social media apps enabled Uyghurs to connect with the larger Muslim world and global religious movements. The promise of greater autonomy in the city became a form of further dispossession in 2014 when the arrival of the “People’s War on Terror” hardened the new sequence of racialization that was associated with the perceived “threat” of young Uyghur travelers as potential “terrorists.” New spaces where the circulation of new forms of culture work had been fostered as part of the global city plan increasingly became spaces of entrapment. Novels of urban alienation, short films and commercials with ethno-nationalist connotations or linkages to the wider Muslim world, and pious messages shared on WeChat were all used as evidence to “disappear” (Uy: *yoq*) young travelers into indefinite detention. The state-directed human



engineering project that first pulled young Uyghurs into the global city turned increasingly toward processes of social elimination and reengineering.

As these processes intensified, young Uyghur women and men were increasingly forced to make a choice between joining the police force and reeducation administration under close supervision of the state or be sent into the camp system. Many young women and men, perhaps around 100 thousand or more, chose police work as an alternative to life in detention. Once they joined the force however, they quickly realized that they were being tasked with tearing apart families, interrogating neighbors and surveilling their friends. Those that I spoke with said that the salary they were given was adequate, ranging from between 1800 to 2500 yuan per month, and because of their position they were able to obtain household registration in the city and support their families, but many of them regretted their decision nonetheless. After they joined the force, they realized that police work in the “People’s War on Terror” was a life choice. They were not permitted to quit. Those that did were arrested and sent into detention under suspicion of disloyalty to the state. Young men who began to work as police were being forced to spend a lifetime policing themselves. Rumors circulated of young Uyghur officers committing suicide. Like the hundreds of thousands who were detained they too often felt as though their lives were over.

#### *Uyghurs as the Object of Terror Capitalism*

The “People’s War on Terror” created its own object and its own productive vectors. Every young Uyghur found a place and role within it. This human engineering project centered on the vast population of military-aged bodies that found themselves being retrained in the camps, but it also implicated a vast army of young Uyghurs who enforced the subtraction of those bodies from the general population, enforced the rules of the camps and monitored the

population of those that remained in the Uyghur neighborhoods of the city. The population of Uyghurs that remained outside of the camps and police force were asked to mediate their lives, to enact their patriotism in public through social media, their physical appearance and their attendance at political ceremonies. In point of fact, those that remained outside the camps became culture workers performing their human reengineering through their everyday life. They were asked to perform their desire for the state and for Han culture on a daily basis. In this way the “People’s War on Terror” created roles for everyone: detainees, police and culture workers. Everyone participated in the project.

Not only did the project structure everyday life, but it transformed and recentered the Uyghur economy. Mosque communities were reoriented. Now they centered on police stations and government office buildings and the flow of people into camps. Income, in many neighborhoods, now flowed through the police stations and the services that supported the police. Much of the work of the police centered on the busy work of ID checkpoints and patrols. “The People’s War on Terror” was enforced not simply through sophisticated technology but through redundancy and policing density. As Adrian Zenz and James Leibold noted in a 2017 report, over the past decade China’s domestic security budget increased from 5.45 billion RMB to 57.97 billion RMB. Much of this funding was structured around the implementation and operationalization of technology; each face-scanning machine, cell-phone scanner, wi-fi sniffer, bank of closed-circuit cameras, metal detectors, required multiple officers to operate and monitor. Technology was a framing for state security investment and, in turn, a site of job creation. Uyghur officers always worked in pairs or trios in order to ensure accountability. They, like the detainees themselves and the remaining culture workers, were the objects of the “People’s War on Terror.”

At the heart of this human engineering project was information gathering. Qualitative data, such as the initial ten category assessments that I outlined in the introduction to this project and the interrogations I mentioned above in this epilogue, were supplemented by quantitative data that was collected through technological surveillance. Face-scans, DNA data, blood samples, fingerprints and voice prints were all recast Uyghur bodies as objects of scientific knowledge. As I demonstrated in the introduction, their bodies became the sites of venture capital investment. Experiments on their bodies and collectivity promised to make China a cyber-superpower. The project simultaneously transformed Uyghur sociality into a criminal population in need of reengineering and at the same time an object of biometric knowledge in need of curing. Often state propaganda described this process using agricultural and biomedical metaphors. As one Uyghur official said, describing the rhetoric he had heard in meetings with more Han officials:

(One of them) said: “you can’t uproot all the weeds hidden among the crops in the field one by one—you need to spray chemicals to kill them all, re-educating these people is like spraying chemicals on the crops. That is why it is a general re-education, not limited to a few people.” The message I got from this was that the re-education will last a very long time (Hoshur 2018: NP).

In other messaging permanent stability was talked about as “removing tumors” of ethno-nationalism or piousness or a process of “inoculation” that would strengthen the immune system of the overall population against the threat of ideological viruses (Dooley 2018). But these were also more than simply metaphors. For new research and development technology firms in Eastern China, these experiments in human engineering innovation were couched as a long-term investments, a kind of venture capital investment, in machine learning and predictive policing. From their perspective they were combating terrorism with science. Of course the state was

paying them to do so, and they anticipated that the technology they developed through the People's War could be exported elsewhere and used in other applications.

The terror capitalism they perpetuated broke the spirits of Uyghurs as the objects of both collective guilt and empirical knowledge. The mass detentions and wide-scale securitization instilled fear and posited the authority of the state. It criminalized the everyday lives of millions of Uyghurs and authorized the state's use of violence. It normalized confrontation between police and the general population. Every day was filled with encounters that reproduced acts of submission and authority. Young Uyghurs expected to have their ID cards checked multiple times a day at random checkpoints. They expected to be asked to provide the pass-code to their phones. All Uyghurs with smart phones were asked to install an Internet security app called Clean Net Guard (Ch: *Jingwang Weishi*) on their phones. The app was registered to their state-issued ID and tracked identifiers of their social relations through all audio, video and images that were sent and received through their phones. These identifiers were then indexed against a centralized database of all materials flagged as extremist, separatist or terrorist. Many of the Uyghurs I spoke with said that, if flagged material was found on their phones by the app, they would be detained and sent to reeducation camps.

The routinization of these confrontations and detentions had the effect of turning the violence of the human engineering project into a technical operation that masked the shattering of families and lives as a kind of standard operating procedure. The decision to send people into the camp system appeared both systematic and arbitrary. It felt systematic in that the disappearances and confrontations always followed the same trajectory. Because of the sweeping nature of the assessments of criminality, the detention of nearly any person identified as Uyghur was always a possibility. Because of this, detentions often appeared arbitrary. As local

authorities in Xinjiang have noted since the beginning to the project, the majority of those who had been detained did not know what crime they had committed prior to their detention and reeducation (Qiu 2015). Often one's personal relationship to local police or one's presentation to interrogators could be the difference between someone being sent into detention or not. Guilt was often assumed; so making the case for why one need not be detained hinged upon one's perceived compliance and the way extenuating circumstances, such as health, age or ability, required mercy on the part of the interrogator. Since there was no judicial process in place for determining guilt or innocence, officials had a great deal of power in determining whether or not someone was sent to the camp. As a result, the absolute authority of the police was posited very strongly in the minds of people who had not yet been detained. Uyghurs I spoke with said that these logics of vulnerability and structural violence had the effect of further "breaking the spirit" (Uy: *rohi sunghan*) of the general population.



*Figure 7.5. Empty shelves in the Uyghur language section of the Xinhua Bookstore on Yan'an Lu in Ürümqi in 2018.*

This vulnerability and meaninglessness was further amplified by the way more formal forms of culture work were redirected during the “People’s War.” In 2017, as Perhat Tursun, whose novella I discuss in Chapter 3, and dozens of other public intellectuals were swept up in a wave of detentions of culture works, the state began a project to retroactively assess Uyghur language publications that had been published by state publishing houses over the past several decades. Based on interviews with Uyghur writers in April 2018, approximately 30 percent of all Uyghur language publications were removed from the shelves as a result of this process (See Figure 7.5). Famous pre-socialist sagas of Turkic heroism and historical novels about the Uyghur participation in the socialist revolution were banned as promoting ethno-national separatism. Books that discussed state approved forms of Islam and Uyghur cultural festivals were also

targeted for promoting religious extremism or ethnic separatism. All television productions, music and digital media was also reassessed. Many musicians, poets, artists, actors and filmmakers were arrested as a result of this delayed censorship. Intellectuals I spoke with described it as a process similar to the Hundred Flowers campaign in the late 1950s when Mao Zedong encouraged intellectuals to offer criticism of the Communist Party and were subsequently purged. Uyghurs writers said that, in the 1990s and 2000s, they were often asked by the state Culture Ministry to write about Islam or ethnic issues in a way that would moderate discussions of religious piety or ethnic pride. Now they were being punished for having done this work.

Simultaneously, the state began an unabashed effort to promote political dogma and Han cultural festivals as examples of permitted “modern” culture (Wang 2017). In a policy statement, Wang Xiuli a researcher at the Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences, noted that culture workers “must confidently carry out face-to-face propaganda” of the “modern culture” of the New China (2017 NP). She argued that this was essential to closely integrated “the practical achievements of modernization and the personal feelings of the masses with a Marxist ideology that goes deep into people’s hearts” (2017 NP). In addition, she posited that culture workers must pay close attention to “unconscious education:”

First, ideological propaganda must be used wisely to take advantage of the readable and visible advantages of literature and art, television and film. It must be sensitive to and absorb our socialist ideology. Second, ideological propaganda must emphasize the tremendous achievements made by the country’s reform and opening up ... so that people have the empathy to improve and recognize the value of the Party and the socialist system from the depths of their heart (2017 NP).

Wang argued that to begin this process the first step was to “clean up and rectify” the existing cultural market. The second step was to subsume all aspects of life with ideological education. She wrote: “We must use scientific theories, advanced culture, and beautiful hearts to occupy all

ideological and cultural positions and truly do it” (2017 NP). This last line “truly do it” speaks to the way Uyghurs described the transformation of culture work and human engineering project more broadly as a process of “breaking their spirits.” They said that something was being done to them. They were passive actors in the matter; they had no choice but to rewrite their aesthetic sensibilities in red. They hung posters of Xi Jinping in their homes and posted videos of their children kissing the image of Father Xi (Uy: *Xi Dada*). They held Uyghur dance parties where Uyghur musicians improvised lyrics thanking Father Xi for teaching them how to be “modern” Chinese citizens. Human engineering and culture work that supported it was being done to them. Their spirit of autonomy was being broken and a new sycophantic cultural spirit was emerging. People like Wang were “truly doing” the human engineering, they had the police and the prisons to back them up. Uyghurs that remained began to feel as though they had no choice but to participate in the cultural labor of producing their own reengineering.

The theme of the terror capitalism policy program centered on what Wang refers to as “long-term” or “permanent” (Ch: *changzhi*) stability. She described the “People’s War on Terror” as a “protracted war” that would target the generation of young Uyghurs born in the 1990s and 2000s. It implied that an entire generation of Uyghurs would be held in place by the mass detention system and the police force that regulated it.

For Uyghurs who heard a barrage of these metaphors via their obligatory exposure to state television, radio, WeChat messages and regular attendance of political education meetings that were carried out by their local police stations, the diagnosis of Uyghur native and Islamic knowledge and practice as a social “cancer” felt terminal. When I walked the streets of Uyghur districts in towns across the Uyghur homeland in April 2018, no one smiled. The sadness of what was happening to them was palpable. Many of those I spoke to said they were without “hope”



(Uy: *umidsiz*). They felt as though the “pesticides” of the engineering project would eliminate all that they loved in their society. They said that hope of individual autonomy and collective autonomy as a native people now seemed beyond what they could imagine. Their spirit and vitality had been broken. They felt they were disposable objects, chaff, in the machine of terror capitalism. Permanent stability was being enacted upon them and they had no choice but to accept and attempt to perform it. To them permanent stability meant the permanent elimination of Uyghur knowledge and sociality.

### *Running Away*

The metaphors of public health and agronomy that suffused the human engineering project failed to capture what motivated new Uyghur forms of piety and resistance to colonial domination. As this dissertation has shown, new Uyghur social formations were not catalyzed by ideology. Instead, resistance and refusal were motivated by acute forms of social loss and a desire for greater ontological security. The violence of the new sequence in racialized dispossession that confronted Uyghurs in the 2000s and 2010s was in fact the trigger that forced them to turn to new ways of making their lives matter. The July 5, 2009 incident that resulted in so much protracted death and destruction, began as a protest by Uyghur college and high school students against the disposability of dispossessed Uyghur workers who had been sent in a labor transfer program to work alongside Han migrants in a factory in Guangdong province. When a number of those Uyghur young men were killed by Han workers and their deaths celebrated in viral videos on new media networks, Uyghurs took to the streets to protest (Harris and Isa 2011). It was only when these protests were met by police violence that the protesters themselves began to destroy Han businesses and beat and kill Han migrants. This by no means justifies their

actions, but it does underline the trajectory of Uyghur violent action. In almost all cases it proceeds from loss, and mediatized representation of this loss, not from ideology.

Many Uyghurs would prefer to respond to loss or the threat of loss not with reactive violent resistance but with forms of refusal to concede their autonomy. If given a chance, they would prefer to leave and try to escape the reach of the state engineering project. This is precisely what Mahmud, the central figure in Chapter 2, has done. In October 2016, with the help of some well-appointed friends and a sponsor in the United States, Mahmud was permitted to obtain a passport and a visa to come to the United States as a language student. Over the next several months Mahmud applied for political asylum in the United States and began to imagine a new life as an immigrant. For him, taking flight to the United States was an act of freedom and autonomy. It felt like a dream come true. For the first time in his life he felt as though his life was his own. He was performing a boundary act in risk-taking. He was experimenting with transnational exchange and social reproduction. As a single young man, he was striking out into an unknown world where his life chances were thrown wide open but also unpredictable. For the first time in his life since he had first come to Ürümchi as a young migrant, he was without social relations. He had no friends. It was no longer possible for his parents to arrange a marriage for him. He was on his own.

Of course, leaving, becoming a permanent traveler, carried with it its own forms of dispossession. By applying for asylum, Mahmud committed to possibly never returning to the Uyghur homeland. He severed many ties with other Uyghur culture workers and with his life and liver friend. As the “People’s War” tightened its grip and detained his brother, it was increasingly difficult for him to contact his family. Because contact with people in foreign countries was closely monitored, they told him not to call often. They were no longer able to

support him financially. In his new community in the United States he found a job as a dishwasher in a restaurant cleaning Texas-style bar-b-que pork off of plates. He said he did not mind the work even though it was not halal, because it allowed him to continue to go to school and pay his rent. He said the other immigrants who worked in the restaurant treated him with respect. They did not care about where he was from. He began to feel he had a social role.

Mahmud's action as a permanent traveler was an example of life-making that both supported and weakened the human engineering project being enacted in the Uyghur homeland. By running away, Mahmud (or Michael, as he called himself in the United States) entered into a realm of actions that were again autonomous and not completely within the purview of the state. In the United States, Mahmud could pass as Japanese, Mexican, or South Asian. Looking at him, no one assumed he was a Chinese subject or potential Islamic "extremist." Most of the time, the specific Chinese sequence of racialization lost its hold on him in public life. In the United States he was able to sustain his life through practices of autonomy and personhood both despite and because of his illegibility as a Chinese racialized subject. His masculinity was no longer read as threatening. Instead he began to find a place among the black and brown people from elsewhere. His knowledge and "quality" (Uy: *sapa*) as a Uyghur urbanite was transmuted into a practice of immigrant living. He began to imagine new forms of culture work. He wanted to narrate the Uyghur story of survival in film. He began writing a screenplay that centered on his flight from the Chinese state. Yet he could never fully escape. In his language classes, Han international students were surprised to find out that Mahmud was from Northwest China. They asked him if it was true that many Uyghurs were terrorists.

*Life-Making Behind the Black Gate*

Human engineering projects—building a global city, enacting a “People’s War on Terror”—are modernist global projects. They are linked to other spaces, infrastructures and technologies that circulate elsewhere in the world. For instance, Ürümqi urban planners drew on inspiration from global cities such as London, New York and Beijing; government officials drew inspiration from the rhetoric of the Global War on Terror, American war economies, and Silicon Valley experiments in artificial intelligence to build what eventually would become a China-specific form of terror capitalism. Such projects are often built on the dispossession and subtraction of racialized others and they benefit dominant systems of knowledge and power. There is a capitalist logic to them, a form of original accumulation, that builds productive value into particular objects. These objects – land, groups of people, hard infrastructure, spaces of desire – are made productive through a transformation of value. The land of the Uyghur homeland was made productive for the extraction of natural resources, industrial farming, real estate development and tourism. Uyghurs as a collective were made productive as the objects of infrastructures of control, policing, reeducation, and cultural transformation. Their perceived threat to the nation was catalyzed by an enormous flow of money and jobs, research and development, from state governments and private security firms. The terror industrial complex, terror capitalism, transformed the economy across the Uyghur homeland. The product produced by the new economy was reengineered Uyghur minds, an army of young Uyghur police, and a media landscape suffused with new forms of culture work. These projects also produced new spaces in the city of Ürümqi: art districts such as Seven City Blocks where new culture work can be performed, circulated and displayed as contemporary art. Through this process, the aesthetics of both the global city and the “People’s War on Terror” were institutionalized and normalized. In this normalization people adapt; they find ways to live and make meaning. But a

global project also has global consequences, it shifts the frame of what is permitted and what is possible to imagine. Life behind the black gate of the “People’s War on Terror” has become more circumscribed since this project began in 2014. Nearly one million people have been disappeared by the calculus of these human engineering projects. Uyghur life has been subtracted.

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