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MADLEN KOBI

Buildings and material infrastructure in cities are not just there; rather, they are embedded in complex political and social planning and construction contexts. In China, spatial transformations and urbanisation in its eastern and coastal regions have received a great deal of attention. This article investigates the relatively little explored urban development in China's Northwestern Uyghur homeland of XUAR (Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region). Based on 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork between 2010 and 2017, the article outlines the ways in which Sinicization, modernisation and globalisation have simultaneously changed the morphology of XUAR's cities. The restructuring of material urban infrastructure has also challenged local ethnic place-making. Until the opening-up reforms in the 1980s, Uyghur ethnic belonging used to manifest visually in urban spaces through mosques, Muslim cemeteries or low-rise mud-brick buildings. In recent decades, such structures have been gradually demolished and replaced with Chinese-style urban landscapes such as high-rise residential compounds, riverside promenades or large central squares. This leaves a void for ethnic self-identification through forms of the built environment. Uyghur urban middle-class citizens critically engage with urban restructuring in their native places. The article highlights the ways in which they negotiate ethnicity, social status or the relation to the state through reflecting on the construction and perception of architecture.

RESTRUCTURING CITYSCAPES IN XINJIANG UYGHUR AUTONOMOUS REGION (XUAR)

China is known for its 'high-speed urbanization' (Jansen 2006), which describes the material transformation since the opening-up reforms in the 1980s: agricultural lands have been cleared to make space for industrial, residential and commercial constructions, while high-rise buildings have replaced low-rise neighbourhoods. These radical changes in the built environment are intertwined with a social transformation: immigration from rural areas, changes in dwellings, displacement of socio-economically weak parts of the population from inner-city areas to the outskirts, and a socio-economic stratification with regard to living conditions.

While spatial transformations and urbanisation in China, especially in its eastern and coastal regions, have received a great deal of attention from the social and political sciences (e.g. Broudehoux 2004; Friedmann 2005; Wu et al. 2007; Campanella 2008; Hsing 2010; Ren 2013; Kipnis 2016), relatively little research covers urban development in XUAR (Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region) – by area the largest province of the People's Republic of China, and situated in the northwest of the country. Since the early 1990s, oasis towns with a few 10,000s inhabitants all over XUAR have grown into mid-sized cities with several hundred thousand inhabitants. This is mainly the result of government policies which have pushed economic development through initiatives like the Great Campaign to Open Up the West (Chin. *xibu da kaifa*) launched in 2000, or the One Belt, One Road (Chin. *yi dai yi lu*) initiative launched in 2013. Rapid urbanisation is one of the key strategies to territorialise the region and build hubs of geopolitical importance along China's gateway to Central Asia and Europe.

Urbanisation in XUAR in many ways aligns with developments elsewhere in China, but it takes place in an ethnically diverse region which until the 1980s was dominated by a Muslim population consisting mainly of ethnic Uyghurs, Kazakhs and Kyrgyz. The growth of cities has been accompanied by massive immigration of Han Chinese. In 1949, Han only constituted 6% of the entire population of XUAR, but by the late 2000s they already comprised more than half (Joniak-Lüthi 2013, 3). This immigration from other parts of China to Xinjiang was made possible through state support of the oil and cotton sectors (Cliff 2016), the trend towards a formalisation of urban economies (Steenberg and Rippa 2019), and the consolidation of national Construction and Production Corps (McMillen 1981; Joniak-Lüthi 2013) among others. Not only migrant labourers, but also officials and highly-qualified staff have since settled in XUAR's oasis towns.

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The population growth and change in ethnic composition of inhabitants in XUAR has taken place in parallel with the transformation of local cityscapes (Kobi 2016a; 2019). In the words of a Uyghur interlocutor: 'Aksu will turn into the Shanghai of Xinjiang because so many Han immigrants are coming here.' When passing by a newly erected residential compound in the city of Kashgar in 2011, another of my Uyghur interlocutors explained that for him the design of these houses is definitely in line with styles from Inner China (chin: *neidi*) rather than reflecting Uyghur vernacular architecture. He later admitted that although many Uyghurs inhabit these houses, the government subsidises this kind of construction and that is why their physical appearance is similar to those from Inner China.[1] A Kyrgyz conversation partner also associated high-rise buildings with the Han: 'Yining [a city in northern XUAR on the border with Kazakhstan] used to be a beautiful city, but then the Han came and built tower blocks and now it is not the same.'[2] All these examples emphasise that architectural elements from eastern China are increasingly replacing the visual culture of Uyghur architecture.

In this paper, I argue that the spectacle of transforming cities in the Uyghur homeland is embedded in a state strategy to territorialise XUAR. Similar developments have been documented for Tibetan cities such as Xining (Grant 2022) and Lhasa, where we literally see a 'westward-expanding Han China' (Yeh 2013, 226). XUAR's cities have also gradually changed their morphology from predominantly Uyghur to Chinese. Instead of promoting and encouraging ethnic diversity in the built environment, urban transformation seems to erase material and social markers of Uyghurness in

FIGURE 1. Aksu's Century Square on a sandstorm day. The urban morphology of oasis towns consists mainly of narrow roads that offer shade while large squares are elements that haven been introduced by a Chinese-driven urbanism emphasising monumentality. The square is paved with marble-effect stones, with trees and a fountain added. (Photo: Madlen Kobi 2011).

public spaces. Beyond the reorganisation of residential structures, this paper will consider the ways in which the transformation of streets from labyrinthine alleys to surveilled avenues, the introduction of river promenades and large squares (Figure 1), and the erasure of a Muslim graveyard as part of 'greening' measures are indicators of the Sinicization of XUAR cityscapes. However, as I will outline, it is often difficult to distinguish between state-induced urban transformations related to modernisation and those deliberately seeking to demolish local cultural heritage.

WALKING THROUGH THE UYGHUR CITY

Field access to XUAR has become almost impossible for foreign scholars since the mid-2010s due to surveillance and control policies introduced by the Chinese government under Xi Jinping. Recent newspaper reports and the analysis of internet sources present a shocking image of recent developments in and around oases: century-old mosques have been razed to the ground (Sintash and Uyghur Human Rights Project 2019; Ruser et al. 2020), Muslim cemeteries have been bulldozed (Rivers 2020) and Uyghur material culture that is fundamental to social life in households – such as the *supa* (Uygh.), a platform inside the living room to receive guests for sitting, eating and festivities (Grose 2021) – is prohibited. The destruction of Uyghur heritage has been accompanied by an unprecedented wave of detentions: more than one million Uyghurs all over XUAR have been brought to internment camps in the name of a governmental campaign to combat terrorism (Smith Finley 2019; Zenz 2019; Byler 2021; Tobin 2022). Evidence for the erection of these camps stems from analysis of online sources and satellite images (Batke 2018) as well as eyewitness accounts (Haitiwaji and Morgat 2021; Tursun 2022).

Beyond transformation of the physical cityscape and detention of Uyghur inhabitants, the installation of surveillance technologies and the omnipresence of the state have accompanied the restructuring of the Uyghur city. This becomes particularly evident in the reconstruction of Kashgar, where the previously labyrinthine alleys of the old town have disappeared and the spatial layout of buildings has been reorganised. Many of my Uyghur informants lament the fact that the restructuring of Kashgar's old town is part of a deliberate destruction of their cultural history. Renovated buildings have received new house numbers that can more easily be tracked, semi-private spaces such as courtyards, rooftops or small alleyways have been prohibited in any new house constructions, and video surveillance is installed everywhere (Alpermann 2021, 82–83). While

urban public spaces have traditionally been areas for exchange and leisure for citizens, the authorities can now monitor their every step through the ever-visible and ever-watching cameras. But neither have private spaces been excluded from the panopticon: since 2016, in the course of a major government campaign, Han Chinese cadres were sent to reside with Uyghur families in order to detect possible extremists and to teach the masses about civilised ways of living (Byler 2018; Alpermann 2021, 173).

The discrimination of Uyghur inhabitants and the continuous replacement of Uyghur material heritage with new Chinese-molded urban spaces was already very much in evidence in 2011 and 2012, when most of the ethnographic data for this paper was collected. Based on a total of 12 months of fieldwork between 2010 and 2017, this paper discusses local perceptions around the reconstruction of cities in XUAR. The expansion of material urban infrastructure has created new spaces which are integrated into public and personal discourses of ethnic belonging. The mapping of houses and construction sites, as well as everyday discussions with residents, enabled me to learn about the meaning of the built environment for local people. Buildings, public places and urban landscapes are all parts of the urban fabric; they reveal stories about power, wealth, history, dreams and social relations. Analysis of this ethnographic material collected in XUAR's cities opens space for understanding the disenchantment that has come along with urban reconstruction in China's northwest since the economic reforms of the 1980s.

During my ethnographic fieldwork, I spent periods ranging from several days up to several weeks in the following cities located in both northern and southern Xinjiang: Ürümqi, Aksu, Kashgar, Korla, Kuche, Hotan, Yining. In addition, I travelled to many other towns, such as Turpan, Altay, Tacheng, Ruoqiang, Shihezi, Bortala, Yengisar, Khargilik. Although the examples I consider primarily draw on observations from my time in Aksu, experiences in other cities have afforded me a sense of the urban transformations happening all over the region.

As a way to sensorially assess urban transformations (Low 2014; Nguyen 2016; Pink 2008), one of the methods that I applied during fieldwork is the urban walk. Due to the political difficulties of conducting research in Xinjiang by deeply engaging with one place and establishing long-term relations with residents, the mobile method of the urban walk allowed me insight into the everyday workings of the city. Such a bodily encounter with the city evoked similar feelings, senses and perceptions to those of the users that create and populate such spaces by traversing these sites (Low 2014,

41; Pink 2008, 193; Tilley 2012, 16). Sometimes I was accompanied on these walks by local residents, whom I mostly contacted through my social network in Xinjiang. Walking together along a newly developed riverside, a busy shopping street or a redeveloped central square enabled a discursive exploration of my interlocutors' perceptions of the transforming built environment, which became crucial components to develop my arguments. Rather than a formal 'walking interview' (Evans and Jones 2011), I had no specific questions in mind when walking through the city, but conversations unfolded in response to what we encountered while strolling. Observations and conversations were not taped but recorded retrospectively in written form in my fieldwork diary.

Furthermore, I used my movement through the cities to collect flyers, booklets and brochures about ongoing construction projects. Such material was freely distributed in real estate offices, simply landed in the post box of my interlocutors or was pinned under the wipers of cars along main roads in order to attract possible apartment purchasers. In Aksu alone, my collection consisted of 25 printed items on new real estate projects which I analysed to get a sense for how the imagined urban residence in a modern city was meant to look. I also took around 50 photographs of billboards with governmental or commercial slogans that mostly addressed the benefits of urbanisation for the region's multi-ethnic population (Figure 2).

In what follows, I not only discuss how the introduction of urban elements such as new apartment blocks, public parks and river promenades have changed cityscapes visually, but I also critically engage with the social repercussions that these have caused in the lives of local residents. My ethnographic data indicates that most of

FIGURE 2.   Billboard in Aksu promoting ethnic harmony in tandem with the restructuring of the city. The slogan translates as: 'Strengthen Ethnic Unity/Cooperate for a Prosperous Aksu.' (Photo: Madlen Kobi 2011).

my informants welcome the material expansion of urban areas, as it gives them the opportunity to catch up with the development of eastern Chinese cities and thereby to make up for a sense of 'lateness' (Zhang 2006). At the same time, they voice feelings of powerlessness in urban transformation because it is mainly the governmental and industrial actors that decide the visual appearance of such constructions. This has led to a sense of vulnerability with regard to the decisions made in urban restructuring.

VISUALITY, ARCHITECTURE AND IDENTITY IN THE CITY

Buildings and material infrastructure are not abstract, socially detached entities; rather, they are embedded in relational contexts. In social sciences, urbanisation is frequently addressed through focusing on characteristics such as migration, population density or new consumer lifestyles. On the other hand, architectural history has foregrounded the role of buildings in urban change but neglected the other sorts of spaces that are created by the built environment (Archer 2005, 432). In line with Müller and Reichmann (2015, 218), who rely on STS (Science and Technology) studies, I consider the separation of subject and object as deceptive, because material objects are always embedded in social worlds. This is also emphasised by Lefebvre, who sees the production of place and space as emerging from the interplay of conceived, perceived and lived dimensions (Lefebvre 1990; 2005). Indeed, the visual spectacle in urbanisation processes in XUAR is very much present in residents' discourses and practices. Ethnography is useful here to engage with the interrelation of architecture and the social context, as the perspectives of urban users are foregrounded against a purely visual analysis that often approaches urban spaces from the standpoint of an external observer.

XUAR is an ideal location to focalise this interaction between material and social worlds. On one hand, urbanisation of oasis towns since the early 1990s has left visual traces in the material texture of these places. On the other, the politicised nature of the built environment and the particular ethnicized context offer a way to analyse different ethnic attachments to cityscapes. Research from other ethnically divided cities shows the contested nature of urban built environments (e.g. Doherty and Poole 2000; Yiftachel and Yacobi 2003; Gentile 2004; Calame and Charlesworth 2009; Navaro-Yashin 2009). In XUAR, the emerging and perceived reality is negotiated in light of Sinicization, modernisation, globalisation and ecology among others.

In practice, it is difficult to distinguish these processes as residents live them simultaneously.

Embedded in the framework of Ingold's (2011) approach to anthropology as the fundamental experience of movement, knowledge and description, I analyse the multiple and important roles that built environments play for social and ethnic identities in XUAR. The visual perception of built structures is accompanied by certain smells, sounds and practices. My informants rarely speak of 'urban space' being transformed, but they specifically refer to the introduction of new architecture and built structures when they talk about urban transformations. These visible contours of the city are describable aspects of a rapid transformation as residents position themselves socially, economically and ethnically through them.

CHINESE STANDARD RESIDENCES: DISPLACING THE VERNACULAR

Many of the everyday discourses on social change as voiced by my informants in XUAR relate to the transforming cityscape: high-rise buildings are connected to an anonymization of society, the demolition of old-town housing is interpreted as a symbol of the loss of culture and the wide boulevards are seen as representing the economic boom and expected improvement of everyday life. The transformation from a rather horizontal to a vertical cityscape and the practical erasure of low-rise buildings is perceived as a method to do away with a certain image of backwardness (Zhang 2006, 463). At the same time, this kind of urbanisation in China's ethnic regions aligns not only with ideas of development and modernisation but downplays ethnic autonomy (Yeh 2013, 202–203) through the restructuring of formerly ethnically shaped places.

The introduction of new residential compounds in XUAR, for instance, led to a functional, aesthetic and organisational transformation of urban living. Until the 1980s, many oasis towns, especially in southern XUAR around the Taklamakan desert, were characterised by low-rise mud-brick dwellings with wood-carved window and door frames (Akin 1997; Wang, Yang, and Rozi 1997; Sint 2007). These buildings were aligned along narrow, serpentine-like alleys which were in some cities built-over by housing constructions that created shaded passages. The materiality of the urban built environment largely depended on locally available materials such as rammed earth and wood. In order to mitigate the harsh desert climate, this vernacular architecture included courtyard spaces, small windows and greenery in and around the house. Moreover,

FIGURE 3.   Construction site of a residential compound in the city of Baicheng. Most of the companies involved in residential construction are from eastern China. Not only do qualified staff come from eastern China, but also the architectural designs. (Photo: Madlen Kobi 2011).

Uyghur social organisation revolved around the house structures, with extended families often sharing the same courtyard and with neighbourhoods organised in *mähälle* (Uygh.) around the local mosque (Dautcher 2009).

Since the early 2010s, living in a gated apartment block has become the norm for middle-class residents all over China (Zhang 2010). Government and local populations' discourses often deem the oasis towns of southern XUAR as 'backward' (Chin. *luohou*) in terms of living standards and infrastructure. The newly built apartment houses are part of a modern, urban lifestyle, thus aligning with the highspeed development taking place in China's East. Urban planning and construction can be seen as the material extension of government ideology that forms the population in certain ways (Humphrey 2005). The modern residential compounds mimic the earlier organisation of socialist work units (Chin. *danwei*), which were located within a delimited territory and defined not only the place for work but also formed the collective identity of people living in the same unit (Bray 2005). Shaped by the idea of Marxist materialism, this was to define the superstructure and the ideological and socialist values of residents (Humphrey 2005, 39).

Rather than being formed by socialist values, the real estate market in XUAR's cities in the early 2010s looked like one big capitalist bazaar: everyone scraped together the money to buy an apartment in one of the new residential compounds. The purpose was not always actually to live in these flats; my informants emphasised over and over that real estate was meant to be a good investment for the future. Those who worked in government administration were able to benefit from state-subsidized housing, and many invested in a flat even if they already had one. The material comfort and status gain of owning new apartments were enjoyed by both Han and Uyghur inhabitants, as it is more one's economic status than ethnic background that defines the potential to acquire housing (Kobi 2016b). But when it comes to dwelling, the interior decoration clearly differs: to mark their ethnic belonging, Uyghur inhabitants include elements such as wood-carved walls, Central Asian carpet patterns or elevated areas in their living rooms used for receiving guests (Kobi 2018; Grose 2021).

The rapid physical transformation of XUAR's urban residential landscape is closely connected to the mobility of concepts, investments and people from eastern China (Figure 3). My analysis of real estate brochures from Aksu confirms that companies from eastern China dominate the business. In many of the construction projects going on in Aksu in 2011, the actual builder (Chin. *kaifa shang*) was a company with a local name (e.g. Dolan Villa Real Estate). However, other experts involved in project design (Chin. *guihua sheji*), architecture (Chin. *jianzhu sheji*) and landscape architecture (Chin. *jingguan sheji*) had their head offices in Beijing, Chongqing, Guangzhou or Shanghai. Not only qualified staff but also designs come from eastern China or elsewhere. Some residential compounds are praised for their 'European style' or their 'Spanish architecture' in order to stress the relation to contemporary global standards of urban living. In addition, eastern Chinese elements such as the landscape gardens of Suzhou or the urban centres of Shanghai or Guangzhou were used as another way to market new residential compounds.

While the old courtyard houses are linked to a local, climate-adapted tradition of Uyghur vernacular architecture, the new compounds strikingly resemble residential architecture in eastern China. Beyond the imported design, the new constructions mostly lack an ecological sensitivity for the region's climatic conditions: the glass facades rapidly get dirty from the desert sands in the air, while the apartments have to be heated in winter and cooled in summer with electrified technologies because the high-rise architecture is not tailored to the local context.

ERASING MUSLIM HERITAGE WHILE GREENING THE CITY

It was a sandstorm day in 2011 when I was doing fieldwork in Aksu, a city of around 300,000 inhabitants located on the northern rim of Taklamakan Desert in the southern part of XUAR. The air was full of dust, and one could barely see a few metres ahead when I took a walk with Alim through a Muslim cemetery covering an area

FIGURE 4.   The Muslim cemetery in the heart of Aksu on a sandstorm day in 2011. Local residents welcomed its reconstruction as it had become a dumpsite for garbage and effluence. At the same time, though, Uyghur interlocutors lamented the relocation of the graves of their ancestors to a suburban cemetery. (Photo: Madlen Kobi 2011).

equivalent to eight football fields along Happiness Road (Chin. *Xingfu lu*) in the centre of the city (Figure 4). The cemetery was surrounded on three sides by a 2-meter-high wall which impeded the sight from outside onto this huge area. The fourth side was lined with dilapidated low-rise buildings inhabited by Uyghurs. Many of the houses were shortly for removal, indicated by the Chinese character for demolition (Chin. *zhai*) painted on their external walls.

It is common in Chinese urban reconstruction for inner-city areas to be redesignated as development land for residential housing. As we passed by one of the remaining low-rise houses, a resident told us that he had received financial compensation from the government for moving out of his house, but it was not a huge sum as he mentioned that he lacked any connections with the city administration. He was promised 10,000 RMB (roughly 1,350 euros), but in the end only got half of it. Concerning the graves, he outlined that many had already been transferred to another cemetery outside of the city centre. According to him, the government planned to maintain some of the graves while also planting some trees to rescue the place from its image as an urban dumpsite.

Alim, the Uyghur informant who accompanied me that day, grew up in a small town close to Aksu and had just finished his studies in plant biology at one of the universities in Ürümqi. At first, he hesitated to walk in the cemetery because he was not familiar with the area. Once he agreed, we carefully navigated our way among the graves and the heaps of waste. The open pits filled with glass or plastic bottles and the many defecation sites made the whole place really unappealing. On another day, as I was passing the same graveyard in a taxi, my

Han driver blamed the state of the cemetery on a failure of the local government: 'Why is this cemetery not transformed into a nice urban space? Whenever there are strong winds, the sand from the cemetery swirls through the streets. The government should finally transfer this graveyard and start some construction work on this plot of land.'[3] From Alim's facial expression, I read a similar disgust at the place as we walked. The smells of excrement and waste contrasted starkly with the perception of a cemetery as somewhere holy, a final resting place of the dead.

When I returned in 2015, part of the cemetery and all of the one-story buildings had disappeared (Figure 5). Online research in 2022 revealed that a public park with the name 'Aksu Happiness Park' (Chin. *Xingfu Gongyuan*) had been erected on the site (for images of the park in 2019, see Dolan Tribal 2019). This is a radical transformation of an urban space that visibly manifested as Uyghur heritage. The new park represents an urban element familiar from other cities in China and worldwide, where green infrastructure is promoted as a way to enhance the wellbeing of citizens. The greening of urban landscapes is also deployed to attract potential home buyers and to evoke a sense of urban apartment houses being closer to nature (cf., for Lhasa, Yeh 2013; for Xining, Grant 2022, 86–89). International urban development trends such as greening, garden cities or ecological urbanism have reached XUAR mainly through planning companies from outside the region.

The Muslim cemetery is not the only space related to Uyghur heritage that was sacrificed for the expansion of residential or other built structures with Chinese characteristics. Until the early 2010s, local Uyghur architectural and engineering experts used to experiment with Russian, Central Asian and Chinese

FIGURE 5.   Restructuring the city of Aksu: Uyghur children strolling among demolished houses on the fringes of the Muslim cemetery. Former low-rise mud-brick buildings are being replaced by high-rise concrete structures. (Photo: Madlen Kobi 2015).

FIGURE 6. A sanitised and touristified version of Kashgar's old town. Uyghur urban heritage is highlighted where it can be commercialised for tourists, who mainly come from other provinces of China to experience the character and atmosphere of the old Silk Road. (Photo: Madlen Kobi 2015).

architectural styles (Ross 2012, 17), but now the trend has shifted towards a replacement of local architecture with supposedly 'modern' urban elements. This becomes apparent in the demolition of traditional housing as we see in Kashgar, in the loss of mosques, shrines and other tangible heritage (Dawut 2007; Sintash and Uyghur Human Rights Project 2019; Ruser et al. 2020), in the Disneyfication of Islamic sites (Ross 2012, 7) and in the securitisation of Uyghur tourist attractions (Szadziewski, Mostafanezhad, and Murton 2022). The replacement of Uyghur characteristics with more globalised and Sinicized urban elements lead to a loss of identification with the materiality of the city for Uyghur residents. In the sense of Grant (2022), who describes urban transformation of the Tibetan city of Xining as part of a 'Sinocentric civilizing machine', Uyghur residents are pushed towards living a subaltern urbanism. Uyghur visual culture vanishes from the foreground and Uyghurness is lived out in more marginal zones of the urban assemblage or moves indoors (Kobi 2018). The only places where local vernacular features are still highlighted and even over-emphasised are tourist spots such as the Grand Bazaar in Ürümqi, Afaq Khoja Mausoleum in Kashgar or the restored old town of Kashgar (Figure 6).

THE DOLAN RIVER PROMENADE: MIMICKING SHANGHAI'S BUND

In the course of new places appearing through urbanisation in XUAR, a salient element that I encountered in many cities was the river promenade. In Aksu, for example, in the early 2000s the government initiated a complete renewal of the riverside along the Dolan River which crosses the city

territory from north to south. While the river marked the boundary with the poorer and more rural western parts of the city, it was meant to become the new centre – offering a place of leisure to the growing population of Aksu.

Until the regeneration of the riverside, its shore was basically a slum district with dirty water and no public access to the watercourse. Almost 6,000 inhabited huts along the river were destroyed during the renewal project and replaced by a large park. In 2011, the river promenade was opened to the public. Since then, a green belt of about 50 metres' width with various leisure possibilities (playgrounds, pedestrian walks, sports facilities, etc.) has extended about 2.5 kilometres along the river. In small squares, the achievements of local heroes as well as the cultural history of the city are exhibited in statues and monuments. Other decorative elements – from minaret-like pillars to stone-pot monuments – celebrate the multi-ethnic character of the local context. According to a local official, the city planners were transforming the banks of the Aksu River with the visual appeal and functionality of the Bund in Shanghai as their model. But he added with a wry smile that it could possibly take another 30 years before this would be fully realised![4]

The green and watery atmosphere of the river promenade created a new sort of urban space accessible to the public. Indeed, during my fieldwork in 2011, many Aksu residents of all ethnic backgrounds used the newly opened river promenade as a place to spend their leisure time with friends and family (Figure 7). Elderly couples came for a walk with their grandchildren, groups of young women exchanged the latest gossip, families rented motorboats to cruise around the lake-like section of the river, while wannabe-heroes drove their electric scooters along the pedestrian walks. Others headed for the park-like areas to picnic under the shade-giving trees. Apart from the visual elements such as statues and decorations that connected this space to the historical context of the Silk Road, these activities recalled urban life in any large city around the world.

Most of the Aksu residents I met were quite content with the space offered along the river and usually invited me to join them for a walk or a drink there. Because such river promenades have only been created in XUAR in the last two decades, they also triggered some surprising responses. Senemgül, a middle school teacher from the city of Hotan, was apparently fascinated by the park in Aksu when I invited her for a walk. She exclaimed:

> Wow, what a beautiful place! I feel like I'm in inner China, like in Qingdao [a coastal city], or

somewhere similar. Everything is so modern and clean. In Kashgar and in Ürümqi, I am often among Uyghurs and the atmosphere is Uyghur, but here it is so different. I do not even feel as if I'm in Xinjiang at all.[5]

Senemgül's reaction astonished me: as she had spent several years in a Chinese coastal city for her studies and had only recently come back to Xinjiang, I assumed she would be used to such places. However, she clearly associated the river promenade with spaces of modernity in eastern China and somehow to a superior standard of urban living. Besides the neatness, she later pointed to the arrangement of the flowerbeds and mentioned that these were as carefully curated as in eastern China. There is a contradictory desire that these greening measures evoke among Uyghur inhabitants like Senemgül: on one hand, they embrace these new urban landscapes as symbols of a modern and more ecological urban life, partly inspired by the media and official communication.

FIGURE 7.   Uyghur couple strolling along the Dolan River promenade. For the riverside regeneration, 6,000 dwellings were destroyed to make way for construction of a modernised and clean, publicly accessible promenade. At the same time that Aksu residents enjoy this new urban space for leisure, they also voice criticisms about the ecological implications of a riverside promenade in a desert region. (Photo: Madlen Kobi 2011).

On the other, the spectacular staging of urban nature in the form of waterways and parks raises concerns of a new colonialism and of ecological irresponsibility as water is scarce in desert regions such as XUAR.

ECOLOGICAL CRITICISM OF REDEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

Most of the oasis cities in XUAR see low annual rainfall and heavily depend on the meltwaters of the mountain ranges (Tian Shan or Kunlun Shan). Critiques address the excessive and inappropriate use of water for forms of representative urbanism such as river promenades. A

student named Rahile commented on the river park in her hometown Turfan:

> Why do we need a river park in my city, why do we have to imitate other places? Water is too scarce here to play with it like this. […] I do not like this river park, but if there were no such places in my town, I would not know where to take you for a walk. So maybe it is still good to have it. We could just do it more according to local conditions, with a narrower and deeper riverbed, and with less concrete, so that the surrounding trees could drink from the river.[6]

The restructuring of public spaces through the introduction of riverside promenades and so forth is hence perceived ambivalently, with both welcoming and critical feelings. They figure somewhere between ideas of a modernising urban space that erases the visible misery of slum neighbourhoods and a concern for their incompatibility with the local ecology. In Rahile's argument, the current implementation of river parks in Xinjiang seems an exorbitant spectacle. Water is simply channelled through town as if it were endlessly available. However, water is a very precious resource in this region and oasis dwellers over the centuries have developed ways to maximise its use – such as through the construction of underground channels (Uygh. *kariz*) (Zhai 2017) in the Turfan region that prevent rapid evaporation.

Ecological reservations thus shape my interlocutors' perceptions of recent developments in their hometowns. Besides the increase in construction activities, population growth through the extensive immigration of Han Chinese puts pressure on the environment too. Many cities in XUAR report lowering groundwater levels, drying out of rivers and the salinisation of agricultural land (Joniak-Lüthi 2020). These ecological implications lead to more rural–urban migration as making a living in desert areas with scarce water resources becomes impossible.

Ecological concerns in this desert region also inform criticism concerning the sealing of grounds through urban restructuration. An element deeply rooted in the governing techniques of the Chinese state is the open central square. Introduced to XUAR since the 1950s, these squares offer space for large gatherings like military parades or Communist Party festivities but are a poor fit with local climatic conditions. The former morphology of the oasis towns consisted mainly of narrow roads that offered shade and did not include such squares, as the continental climatic conditions of hot summers and cold winters rather discourage people

from sojourning in open spaces. These squares can be barely used during daytime in the summer months as the ground gets exceedingly hot and there are only few shady spaces. The materiality of the squares mostly consists of paving of concrete or marble-look slabs with a scattering of trees or fountains.

Tursun, an urban planner from Aksu, was indignant that these large squares cannot be used properly because they are not adjusted to the local climate and so augment urban heat island effects:

> Today, a public square [Chin. *guangchang*] is built in every city [in XUAR]. This is idiotic, because it is too hot in summer. But it seems that every city needs such squares for representative and aesthetic reasons, and for the elderly people from inner China [Chin. *kouli*],[7] who can come to the squares and relax.[8]

This unsuitability for local conditions is also reflected in the words residents use to describe them: Century Square in Aksu, for instance, is often called a 'Han square' by Uyghur interlocutors, which hints to its being perceived as part of a new colonialism related to the large-scale immigration of Han Chinese in recent decades. Squares are often discursively rejected as 'from outside' or as being imported from eastern China in a way to demarcate not only physical territory but also social belonging. Indeed, we see elderly Han people who have immigrated from other parts of China in the square dancing or playing cards.[9] However, on my visits to Century Square, I always spotted Uyghur people performing leisure activities just like their Han co-residents. Especially in the temperate times of the year and on summer evenings, these squares transform into a playground for old and young, where dance groups, children with kites and peddlers selling ice cream, soft drinks or plastic gadgets mingle (Figure 1). In this sense, the square as space of encounter is highly successful despite the fact that it is perceived as an element not originating in Uyghur urban morphology.

CONCLUSION: 'THE NEW SHANGHAI' – IMPOSING CHINESE DESIGNS IN XUAR'S CITIES

By walking through different neighbourhoods and observing the street life, buildings and atmosphere, I developed a 'structure of feeling and an awareness of the material character of place and landscape' (Tilley 2012, 28) which goes beyond a pure visual approach. Smelling the stench from the waste dumped on the Muslim cemetery or enjoying a fresh breeze along the river promenade allowed me to experience the value of these

spaces for public life. Strolling with Uyghur informants was a welcome opportunity to juxtapose my impressions with their own feelings and thoughts on urban restructuring. I learned about the ways in which people like Senemgül, Rahile or Tursun perceive this restructuring in their everyday use of urban spaces. All of them are part of an Uyghur urban middle-class that has lived in eastern China and even abroad for parts of their life, and they critically engage with their native places. Like other residents, they negotiate ethnicity, modernity, ecology, social status or the relation to the state through reflecting on the construction and perception of architecture in XUAR. While walking the city was at first a way to deal with the difficulties of fieldwork access, it turned out to be a rich tool for assessing discourses and practices of the use of urban space.

XUAR is not a far-away hinterland of China, but through its materials and designs is connected to other parts of the country and to global living standards. Perceptions of what is modern, what is Chinese and what is cosmopolitan often overlap – as exemplified through the evaluation of new residential compounds, the disappearance of a Muslim cemetery and the introduction of a river park in Aksu. In order to redevelop Aksu's urban space, the cases of the restructured cemetery and the riverside promenade are striking examples of the importance given to the introduction of green and clean spaces that represent a modern, eco-aesthetic city (Grant 2022, 89). Doing away with disordered spaces where waste accumulates is a common reasoning for demolishing low-rise buildings, which in XUAR are often inhabited by Uyghurs. This can be read as both a modernising process or a displacement of ethnically and socio-economically disadvantaged parts of the population. 'Proper' urban design often means control of urban nature in the form of parks and canalised rivers, to achieve the ideal of a Chinese public imagination of modernity. These approaches are not only represented in brochures and official publications on urban development, but they have found their way into public discourse as well. However, climatic conditions in XUAR – with it scarce water resources and strong winds that carry dust – often prevent such a clean vision from being realised. Furthermore, restructuring XUAR's cities goes hand in hand with the demolition of built heritage deeply embedded in Uyghur culture.

The replacement of built structures that has occurred in XUAR in recent decades is not just a neutral bystander: it is happening alongside wider social processes such as migration and the accompanying shift in ethnic composition of the population. Urban restructuring and the changing cityscapes in XUAR reconfigure social

relations through infrastructures (cf. Jensen and Morita 2017, 4). Or in the words of Zhang, such 'spatial and architectural reconfigurations do not merely *reflect* recent socio-economic changes in China; they also *transform* the very modes of social life, local politics, and cultural identities' (Zhang 2006, 461, emphasis in the original). The direct encounter with Aksu's public spaces sensitised me for an ethnic reading of the transforming cityscape in XUAR. Uyghur ethnic belonging used to manifest visually in urban spaces through mosques, Muslim cemeteries or low-rise mud-brick buildings. Now, such structures have been gradually demolished and replaced with Chinese-style urban landscapes such as high-rise residential compounds, riverside promenades or large central squares. This leaves a void for ethnic self-identification through forms of the built environment. Restructuring of XUAR's cities thus means not only the replacement or modernisation of buildings and infrastructure, but has become a locus for dealing with issues of identity and belonging.

Notes

[1] Field interview, November 2011.

[2] Field interview, November 2011.

[3] Field interview, May 2011.

[4] Field interview, June 2011.

[5] Fieldwork interview. May 2011.

[6] Fieldwork interview, September 2012.

[7] In order to contrast Xinjiang with eastern and central China, both terms *kouli* and *neidi* are used as place-marking denominators for inner China.

[8] Fieldwork interview, November 2011.

[9] For the phenomenon of how the knowledge and practice of square dancing (Chin. *guangchang wu*) spread across China along with migration movements, see Chen and Chen (2018).

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