

Kashgar's old city: the politics of demolition

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The heart of Kashgar - a place where Uighur people have lived and worked for centuries - is being destroyed or transformed into a tourist theme-park, and its people resettled. In a pattern familiar in modern China no one has asked the Uighurs themselves, says Henryk Szadziewski.

In the heart of Kashgar's old city, the bustle of central Asian life has not changed in centuries. In bright sunlight, the mud-brick buildings seemingly blend in with labyrinth-like streets powdered by the sands of the Taklamakan desert. Coppersmiths hammer away making shapely bowls, pans and jugs, which will sit on the shelves of cool courtyard-fronted homes. A seller of shirniliq meghiz (hand-made Uighur candy) pushes his cart in the heat of the day, stops, and wipes the sweat from his brow. Women, their heads covered with brown-coloured gauzed blankets, move from market-stall to market-stall discussing the cost of spices (sold in huge sacks) and cuts of mutton (hanging on shaded meat-hooks). Vendors selling hand-sewn doppas (Uighur skull-caps) and brightly decorated knives from Yengisar, (the best in the region) watch donkey-cart drivers shouting the warning posh! posh! as they navigate the streets and the people. Minarets subtly overlook over the scene, reminding Kashgaris that in addition to trade, Islam is also an influence on their daily routines. Then, a muezzin's call breaks the activity and stirs the pious to hurry along the narrow streets to attend prayers.

Such a portrait of timeless Uighur traditions and livelihoods - so familiar from the work of travel-writers and journalists - is compelling. But there is another Kashgar, one firmly rooted in the 21st century. This Kashgar contains high-rise apartment blocks, cellphones, cars, western fashions, Dove chocolate bars and mass-produced consumer goods. Kashgaris are not only coppersmiths and traders; the Uighur men and women of this city are also bank-tellers, university professors and auto-mechanics.

Kashgar has a long and layered past. It is a city with a history stretching over 2,000 years. Its location - in a fertile oasis to the north of the Pamir mountains and on the western edge of the Taklamakan desert - has put it at the centre of traffic heading west to central Asia and eventually to Europe, east to China and south to the sub-continent. As a crossroads between civilisations (sometimes the travel-writers' clichés are true), Kashgar was one of the major trading centres of the Silk Road; in his Travels, Marco Polo recorded a visit here in the 1270s.

Throughout its history, Kashgar has hosted a mix of peoples, religions and languages, among which the Uighurs have been for centuries at the centre, giving this city its character and flavour. The Uighurs are a Turkic Muslim people, who consider Kashgar's old city as one of the cradles of their culture and the physical embodiment of an illustrious history. Today, however, in a story that has largely fallen under the radar of the international media, the old city is being demolished by the ruling Chinese government. This demolition brings with it some fundamental, opposed ideas that relate directly and personally to the many people affected: tradition vs modernity, conservation vs construction, assimilation vs resistance.

The lure of the modern

The reports in official Chinese media indicate that the demolition of Kashgar's old city is well underway. The reports paint a benevolent picture of what is being called a "residents' resettlement project". A number of articles published in February 2009 outlined the specifics of the project. The Chinese authorities considered that the 65,000 houses in Kashgar's old city were suffering from poor drainage and were vulnerable to collapse from earthquakes. For their safety, the residents of the old city would therefore be moved to newly constructed buildings away from the area (see Maureen Fan, "An Ancient Culture, Bulldozed Away", 24 March 2009).

Wei Jingsheng, "China's political tunnel" (22 January 2009) 1.5 million foreign and domestic tourists visit Kashgar annually, generating approximately 620 million yuan in revenue; it adds that Kashgar's old city is a must-see tourist attraction. There would seem to be little economic incentive or logic, therefore, in demolishing the old city.

But the plans anticipate a switch of focus: a state official, Wang Zhengrong, explains that part of the old city will be "protected, managed, and developed" with the aim of "creating international heritage scenery". This will increase income from tourism, says Wang, who adds that under the plans tourists will still be able to view "minority lifestyle and architectural characteristics." It is unclear what will be built in the demolished areas of the old city, but Wang Zhengrong's comments suggest that the remainder will operate as an open-air museum of Uighur culture sanitised for tourist consumption.

In addition, the changes appear to involve new management of the old city. There have been rumours circulating online that the local government in Kashgar has offered a group of Han Chinese from Wenzhou the right to administer the area around the heart of the old city, the ancient Id-Kah mosque. In addition, oversight of the Appaq Khoja Mazar - a place of religious significance to Uighurs, though outside the old city itself - has it is said been offered to a Han Chinese company called Jinkun. Whether these rumours are true, there is a genuine concern as to who the real beneficiaries are from the "residents' resettlement project".

The control project

The official Chinese media proclaims the modernity of the new living arrangements for resettled Uighurs, but at the same time neglects to pay much attention to the fact that former old-city residents have been relocated to an area approximately "eight to nine kilometres outside of the city" (according to a correspondent). It is difficult to avoid concluding that the resettlement of Uighurs is part of a policy by the Chinese authorities to dilute Uighur culture by taking control of how Uighur communities are arranged. This control permits closer management of Uighur activity in new regimented living arrangements, and forces on resettled Uyghurs a form of indebtedness where none existed before.

What is left of Uighur identity in the parts of Kashgar's old city saved from the "residents' resettlement project" is also subject to management by Chinese authorities. This management of ethnic identity by the Chinese Communist Party is a common phenomenon in the modern-day People's Republic of China (see Tsering Shakya, "Tibet and China: the past in the present", 18 March 2009). It has occurred too in places such as Jinghong in the Xishuangbanna region of Yunnan province, where during the 1990s - in a process lasting eight years - the town was transformed from a stronghold of Dai culture to an ethnic theme-park for predominately Han Chinese tourists. In the past, Dai water-festivals were reserved for particular times related to traditional beliefs; now, they have become daily events so that tourists can be sure to not miss out on the fun.

But the situation in Kashgar is for China's leaders a far more grave matter than the one in Jinghong.

In the eyes of the Chinese Communist Party, the Uighurs are perceived as far more of a threat to its control and to the territorial integrity of the People's Republic of China than are the Dai. Uighurs, after all, share many cultural features with their Turkic cousins in the independent states of central Asia. Thus the assimilation of Uighurs into China is seen as a policy priority, leading to greater control of Uighur-related issues. This larger purpose is also behind its other elements: a reduction in the status of the Uyghur language, mass Han Chinese in-migration to Uighur areas, and the transfer of Uighur women to eastern China.

What is clear from the "residents' resettlement project" is that the Uighur voice in decision-making was not heard. In the plans to relocate Uighurs living in Kashgar's old city, transparent and meaningful participatory processes for Uighurs were absent. There is no doubt that Uighurs want better living conditions; but perhaps they would prefer this to happen in the context of using a sum equivalent to the project's 3 billion yuan to modernise their current old-city housing, while maintaining one of the few remaining centres of Uighur culture. No one has asked them, and such an option appears nowhere in the official media.

If Uighur participation in the "project" is absent, there is also no way for Uighurs to address grievances stemming from the resettlement (such as unfair compensation) without fear of punishment. This too seems of little concern to Chinese authorities. They too will pay a price, however: for the result of the "residents' resettlement project" will be that tourists from developed nations will stay away from the old-city theme-park. Much more important, Uighurs will be further marginalised and the prospect of a solution to their grievances will be even more distant.

P.S.

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