

# Urban Heritage of the Silk Road



Xinjiang's largest cities have undergone a series of redevelopment programs over the last decade. The westerly autonomous region in China is inextricably connected to the romantic narrative of the Silk Road, a narrative that is used to legitimize the destruction and gentrification of historic urban centres. Xinjiang's heritage is being managed to build transboundary economic relations with Central Asia, assimilate the Uyghur population into the Chinese nation, and secure the region against perceived threats to the state. This can be seen in particular at Kashgar, the westernmost city of China, where the buildings of the historic town centre have been bulldozed, and their Uyghur residents moved to the outskirts of the city.

Tomás Skinner



TODAY, HERITAGE IS RECOGNIZED as a discursive process of meaning-making. The Silk Road can be viewed not as a clearly demarcated 'thing' with a linear history that carries intrinsic meaning and value, but a set of attitudes and relationships with the past by specific people at a specific time for specific reasons. Certain parts of the Silk Road's past are highlighted in particular, and dominate over others, according to top-down principles of 'value' and 'knowledge'. Xinjiang's cities are affected by this "authorized heritage discourse",<sup>1</sup> which is used to establish a set of social, economic, and political relationships between China and its Central Asian neighbours, and between the state and its Uyghur ethnic minority population. These relationships are contradictory. On the one hand, China promotes the Silk

Top: One of the largest statues of Mao in China (18m/59 ft). Kashgar, Xinjiang. Photo by Dperstin (flickr).

Above: Uyghur men outside the Kashgar mosque. Photo by Eric Wilson (flickr).

Road as a timeless heritage that can unify the country with its Central Asian neighbours. Yet, at the same time, at the local level Xinjiang – considered to have been one of the most active landscapes in the historic Silk Road – is a place where heritage is fiercely contested. It is dangerous to readily accept evocations of the Silk Road without identifying or understanding their nationalist applications.

## Critical approaches to Silk Road heritage

Approaching the Silk Road with a critical heritage perspective requires asking one fundamental question: who does what to whom, and why? Many stakeholders wish to protect, preserve, or exploit 'the past'. A critical heritage perspective questions what past, whose past, and for what reasons?

Heritage is about selectivity and power; it is used to assert local, national and international interests. Ancient sites become muddled between ideas of authenticity and depictions of an 'accurate' past. Layers of history are removed and forgotten, whilst others are highlighted for their evocative or marketable values, and placed within broader and more exciting narratives that are unrelated to the entire history of the site. Urban heritage consists of material 'anchors' and references to an idealized past that are conceptualized in different ways by different stakeholders. Moorings to the past, spatial markers of identity, and feelings of 'belonging to' or 'owning' a place are processes that can be managed to secure loyalty and assimilate people into imagined communities, as well as to evoke ideas of shared heritage that bridges nations and cultures. When abused, this has real effects on the people involved: spatial separation and emotional banishment from the environment with which their identity was formed, and values that are shifted according to non-local aspirations and nationalist agendas.

Urban heritage is a single field of relations that should not be divided into tangible and intangible. Like a Möbius strip, these frequently applied dichotomies are illusory; heritage cannot be preserved when the tangible materiality of the city and its intangible human actors are detached from one another.<sup>2</sup> A focus on material culture might disregard the performative or experiential dimensions of urban heritage, whilst a focus on 'intangible' rituals and action risks ignoring the material context that frames and enables them. Neither action nor the historic environment in which they take place can be separated or artificially generated.

Despite theoretically discarding a separation of tangible and intangible, each are frequently demarcated, privatized, and commodified for their economic or narrative value. It seems that when a 'heritage asset' is noticed and defined it is only a matter of time until it becomes isolated as a resource to be used and abused. This is selective; only some heritage is noticed – let alone protected – when urban sites are developed or modernized, at the expense of that which is regarded as insignificant and discarded as rubbish.<sup>3</sup>

## The Silk Road as a heritage discourse

The Silk Road is a discursive process, not a clearly demarcated entity with a single fixed location, time, or material presence. However, it is frequently reified as a narrative that is fixed, linear, and representational of people, places, and traditions. This narrative is used to frame diplomatic, economic, and heritage dialogues between and within modernizing nation-states.

This has occurred in particular within new states that have appeared in Central Asia. Their sudden sovereignty following the collapse of the Soviet Union has resulted in a flurry of cultural heritage property claims and the formation of new national identities, selectively drawing upon the deep history of the lands they control.<sup>4</sup> A 'renaissance' of New Silk Road schemes has emerged in Eurasian states, aimed at 'reviving' ancient markets between their countries.<sup>5</sup>

Xinjiang is of great economic and strategic value for China, with enormous borders linking the country with the growing markets of six neighbouring states. China has therefore been keen to collaborate with these countries through strategies focused on exploiting the economic and diplomatic potential of their shared Silk Road heritage, such as Xi Jinping's 'One Belt and One Road' (*yi dai yi lu*). China draws heavily upon a Silk Road narrative to do this, advocating its location as an "important trunk road where the economic, political and cultural exchanges between the Orient and the West were taking place", where "friendly exchanges" and "national amalgamation" occurred, and which connected the "friendship of China and Eurasia".<sup>6</sup> The Silk Road has a capacity to evoke Orientalistic imagery and ideas that have been used to legitimise development in the areas through which it passed.

UNESCO has long been invested in the Silk Road's heritage discourse, from the *Major Project on the Mutual Appreciation of Eastern and Western Cultural Values* between 1957 and 1966 to the continuing designation of transboundary Silk Road World Heritage properties. From the mid-1980s, China has sought to collaborate with UNESCO by expressing their shared interest in promoting unity and preserving diversity. The Chinese approach to safeguarding urban heritage appears to hold similar values for the social dimension of historic urban centres that are expressed in UNESCO's *Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape* (2011). *The Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China*, China's heritage policy that was adopted in October 2000 and revised in 2015, draws heavily upon Australia's *Burra Charter* by placing an emphasis on the recognition of ethnic and religious heritage, and by claiming to approach heritage sites as cultural landscapes with a living heritage that is worth protecting.<sup>7</sup>

Yet the state fails when it comes to implementation at the local level; in Xinjiang, we see a dearth of community involvement in urban development projects, and the intrinsic 'friendly exchanges' that are believed to exist along the Silk Road are largely absent. Far from being unifying, Xinjiang's heritage is dissonant; it involves a lack of agreement and inconsistency of

treatment. Not all heritage is protected in the region's cities, and it is often restricted to a limited 'representational' selection of everything else that gets destroyed, imitated, or forgotten. These are issues that are faced throughout China. City-scale preservation policies in Beijing struggle to protect vernacular *sihéyuàn* houses and *hútòng* neighbourhoods from the destructive effects of urbanization, even though the dominant heritage discourse in the capital advocates the preservation of the entire Old Town.<sup>8</sup> On both sides of China conservation and development are a façade that facilitates the demolition of entire neighbourhoods, which has often led to gentrification by rising land prices and the development of luxury residences or economic districts.

The development of Xinjiang's cities, supported by the globalising Silk Road discourse, is being used to assimilate the Uyghur population into the Chinese nation. Although in practice Uyghur and Han frequently assert their own spatial and social boundaries in cities across Xinjiang, China follows a strict policy of assimilation, and does not recognize attempts of national self-determination by the Uyghur. Sinitification (*hànhuà*) is taking place, by which local identities are being transformed according to the values of Han China. The ideological promotion of a single, unified people has been viewed by China's ethnic minorities as an attempt to destroy their identity. With cultural hegemony and state nationalism has come the widespread suppression of religious places and practices in Xinjiang. Muslim ways of life are being disrupted by a strict crackdown on the 'three evils': separatism, extremism, and terrorism, particularly following anti-Chinese uprisings in the 1990s. This has resulted in tight constraints to religious freedom, increased surveillance over Uyghur communities, and the bulldozing of the region's dense historic urban centres.

#### Kashgar

The above processes can be seen in Kashgar, a city that was an important node along the Silk Road, one of the oldest and best-preserved Islamic cities in the world, and a potential candidate for World Heritage status.<sup>9</sup> Since 2009, in the aftermath of the Sichuan earthquake the previous year, the Old City has been systematically demolished and rebuilt as part of the *Kashgar Dangerous House Reform* program. The government maintain that they are modernizing the Old Town, protecting its allegedly flimsy structures from future earthquakes, improving the infrastructure, and installing plumbing and electricity.<sup>10</sup> In addition, Kashgar is modelled to become the Special Economic Zone of the West, based on Shenzhen. Around 65,000 buildings have been demolished, to be replaced with a new and modern city. This development follows strategies that focus on its marketable value for non-local stakeholders, clouded in a rhetoric of progress and given legitimacy through evocations of the Silk Road narrative.

When making judgments about the destruction of heritage, we must consider ethics to always be relative to the people concerned. Many Uyghur seem to welcome their new homes, enjoying all the benefits of modern living. The city is under risk of regional earthquakes, though this raises the question of how the Old Town has lasted for so long with its allegedly unsafe

buildings. Government cadres evoke humanitarian responsibility as justification for their actions – not for the tangible heritage assets of the city, but for the wellbeing of the people living there. They claim that the world values the material remains of past cultures over the suffering and destitution of people living there in the present day.<sup>11</sup>

However, spatial cleansing and gentrification occur in Kashgar. The Chinese state has claimed ownership of Kashgar's Old Town, and is enforcing a spatial separation of Kashgar's Uyghur and non-local communities, and the structural cleansing of the material that formed Uyghur identity. At least 220,000 Uyghur residents have been relocated to the outskirts of the city when they found that the compensation they received from the state was not enough to redevelop their previous homes. Non-local organisations employed only Han workers for the development of new buildings in the Old Town, with highly skilled local Uyghur craftsmen – well-practiced in constructing adobe buildings – being rejected. Most of the former residents of the Old Town are not able to afford the luxury apartment complexes emerging in place of their old homes. This is intentional: promotional materials for the European View Gardens properties are not written in Uyghur, the Han letting agents having stated "What's the point? They can't afford this place".<sup>12</sup>

Land is seized and transformed, with communities forced to leave their generational homes. The apartments that they have moved to are flimsy and monitor the Uyghur residents with surveillance cameras. Many communities fear the loss of social networks that had been formed in the *mehelle* neighbourhoods of the Old Town, neighbourhoods that were created according to close social relations between family units.<sup>13</sup> In place of vernacular courtyard houses and a warren of lanes, in which many generations of local identity have been built, luxury apartments for international investors and Han settlers are being built.

This development goes against the Chinese State Administration of Cultural Heritage's own principles, which emphasize *yuánzhēnxìng* – originality or authenticity – as of prime importance.<sup>14</sup> A small part of the Old Town has been 'preserved' as an ethnic theme park, a 'living Uyghur folk museum' where tourists can visit 'traditional' Uyghur homes where they can buy souvenirs and ethnic unity propaganda. Yet this new Old City is not based on accurate evidence from the past. Archaeologists were not involved in the development projects; officials maintained that they were not needed because the government "already knows everything about old Kashgar".<sup>15</sup> In doing so, there has been a tremendous and irretrievable loss of the archaeological record, with accurate data being discarded in favour of creating an authentic experience. Neither is it formed from the authentic interactions of its generational residents. Instead it is managed by the government, which approaches Kashgar and its Uyghur community in terms of their marketable value. An authentic experience, sanitised of threats to national unity, is desired, rather than one that pursues an accurate and data-driven story of the city and how it is experienced by its residents.

#### Community involvement in the future

What does it mean to be Uyghur in Xinjiang compared to being Chinese in Xinjiang? Can one simply be 'Kashgarian'? The competing answers to these questions have led to discord between Xinjiang's Han and Uyghur populations. The Silk Road has been resurrected in a way that facilitates the link with Central Asian markets and a globalising world, and turns the region's heritage into symbolic resources that are used to promote a unifying Chinese national identity. China continues to keep Kashgar off their list of sites submitted to UNESCO for World Heritage status, despite international claims that Kashgar demonstrates Outstanding Universal Value as part of the Silk Road narrative. The opportunity for Kashgar to acquire World Heritage status seems to have been lost, due to the dramatic transformation of the Old Town.

Procedures must be found that do not resort to a nationalist or separatist rhetoric – a solution that involves Uyghur independence will not be found quickly or peacefully. Neither is freezing the urban site and preventing development a feasible solution. Preservationist discourses often do not respect the social dimensions of material culture, instead often falling back on aesthetic and essentializing museum language and models. Tourism has played a role in developing a heritage industry in Xinjiang, though so far it is based on presenting selected places that are enjoyed by Han visitors to the city. Marketing heritage is not intrinsically bad, and has been seen across the world to bring great benefits to local communities that are involved.

An approach is therefore required that facilitates consultation with the local population and allows them to guide how their city develops in response to change according to their heritage values, their ways of life, their future aspirations. Interfering with the long-term practices of China's minority groups will result in the disruption of longstanding ideas of ownership, inheritance, and authenticity, leading to still further conflict. Transformations to urban sites must respect – not offend and destroy – the existing practices and values of local communities. The divide between 'authentic' or 'traditional' material structures and the vernacular context that makes them real, must stop. There is no one single homogeneous Uyghur, Han, or Chinese identity in Xinjiang, nor is there a single, linear Silk Road narrative. The Silk Road was a constantly changing and infinitely describable process, yet it has been isolated from the world-in-formation through imposition of nationalist ideologies and association with a homogenizing narrative.

**Tomás Skinner holds an MA in Archaeology from the University of Glasgow. He currently studies at Leiden University, with a focus on 'Critical Heritage Studies of Asia and Europe' as part of an MA in Asian Studies. (tomasrowanskinner@hotmail.com)**

Below: Destruction of historic buildings in Kashi, Xinjiang, China (2012). Photo by Marc van der Chijs (flickr).

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