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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/32r2v3vg>

Journal

Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review, 1(3)

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Publication Date

2012-06-01

Supplemental Material

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/32r2v3vg#supplemental>

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

Desert Mazâr in Context

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In this desert are many evil demons and hot winds; when encountered, then all [travelers] die without exception. There are no flying birds above, no roaming beast below, but everywhere gazing as far as the eye can reach in search of the onward route, it would be impossible to know the way but for dead men's decaying bones, which show the direction.

- Faxian, Chinese Buddhist pilgrim, fifth century CE¹

At the heart of the Tarim Basin in modern China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, the mighty Taklamakan Desert boasts a mythology tinged with fear and fascination. It is not surprising that ancient China's annals describe the oasis town of Dunhuang as lying at the far western edge of what was truly the empire, for traveling from the Gansu corridor into Central Asia one entered the unpredictable "western regions," 350,000 square miles of punishing climate that devoured many and nurtured few (figure 1).

Figure 1. The Tarim Basin. Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tarimrivermap.png>.



Despite its reputation as one of the most inhospitable areas in the world, the Tarim Basin has been home to thriving agricultural and mercantile communities since the early centuries of the Common Era, when oasis cities were linked in a lucrative network of Eurasian trade. Today, the Tarim is home to China's Uyghurs, a Turkic-speaking Muslim community whose ancestral ties to the region date back to at least the ninth century CE.² For them, the Taklamakan is sacred land, enveloping the political and religious heroes of a storied past who are buried in countless mausoleums (in Uyghur: *mazâr*) that dot the desert landscape. It is the power believed to emanate from these shrines that New York-based photographer Lisa Ross has captured so vividly in her images over the course of several journeys to China's west.

Xinjiang: Central Asia in China

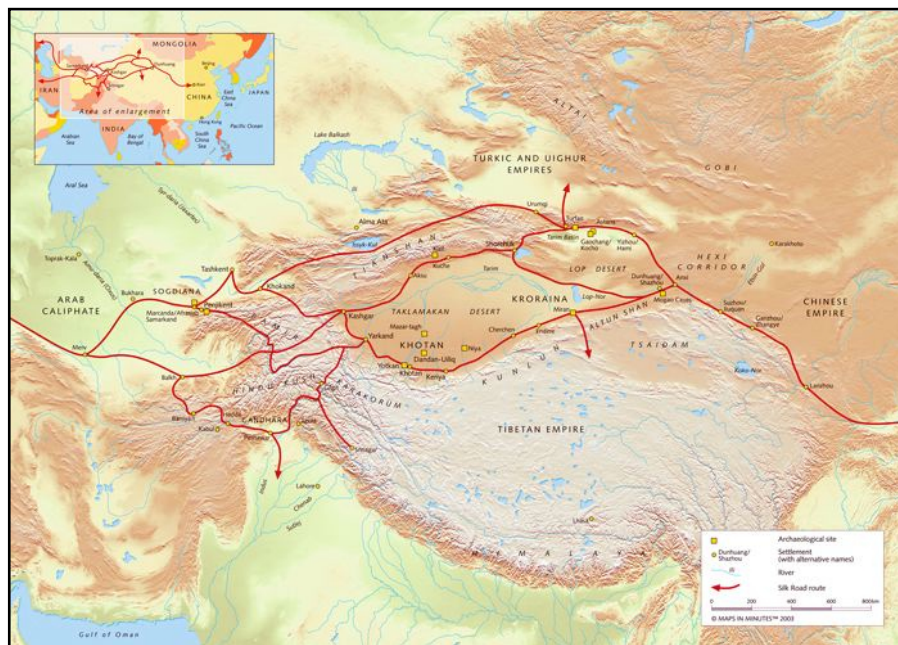
Also known as Chinese Central Asia or East Turkestan, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (figure 2) is bifurcated by the Tian Shan mountain range into two ecological zones: the northern Jungarian Basin, an area of steppe and semidesert, traditionally home to mostly pastoral nomadic communities, and the southern Tarim (River) Basin, a desert region where agriculture-based populations have eked out an existence in a number of oases nourished by the rivers flowing down from the surrounding Pamir, Tian Shan, and Kunlun mountains. During the era of the so-called Silk Road (figure 3), these towns and villages provided shelter and provisions for travelers making the treacherous desert crossing and slowly developed into flourishing centers of trade and communication linking China to Central Asia and beyond.³

China's ties to the Tarim region run deep, the region's strategic importance indicated by the remains of many Chinese garrison towns, dating back two thousand years to the Han dynasty, which protected the empire's interest in the lucrative trading network. Already during the early days of commercial linkages, around the turn of the Common Era, Khotan provided precious jade to China, and gold from the Altai region became an important trading commodity. Today, jade remains an important source of income for local communities, though cotton is the white gold and the region is more known for its large deposits of tin, uranium, iron and, most importantly, massive reserves (according to some estimates) of oil that make the region vital to China.

Figure 2. Map of Xinjiang. Source: <http://johomaps.com/as/china/xinjiang/xinjiang1.html>.



Figure 3. Map of the eastern Silk Road showing the routes north and south of the Taklamakan Desert. Source: http://idp.bl.uk/database/img_popup_a4d?recnum=160.



Despite the Tarim Basin's long-standing political and economic ties to the region, its formal annexation did not commence until the eighteenth century, when China's Qing dynasty extended Manchu control into Central Asia and put an end to independent Turkic rule there. The roots of Turkic opposition to China's control of the region date from this period and culminated in serious revolts in the second half of the nineteenth century. A number of rebellions were put down after decades of fighting, and in 1884, after a second wave of expansion, this northwestern region was officially incorporated into the Chinese Empire as "Xinjiang," or "New Frontier." Since formally incorporating Xinjiang into the Chinese Empire, and more recently into the People's Republic of China (PRC), Beijing has faced periods of stiff opposition to Chinese rule in Xinjiang. This opposition has come particularly from the Uyghurs, among whom there has been a growing desire for control over the region's domestic affairs.

China considers Xinjiang an integral part of the country, but this political reality cannot mask the great cultural differences between its westernmost province and the regions of the PRC's "heartland." In many ways, the Tarim and Jungarian Basins (particularly prior to the massive, government-supported immigration of Han Chinese into the area in the 1960s and 1970s) are more connected culturally to the countries west of the Pamirs formerly known as Soviet Central Asia—Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. The vast majority of Xinjiang's inhabitants are Turkic speaking and Muslim. And the "ethnic" groups of modern Xinjiang are, in name at least, related to historic, nomadic groups or states that populated the vast reaches of Central Asia during its ancient and modern periods.

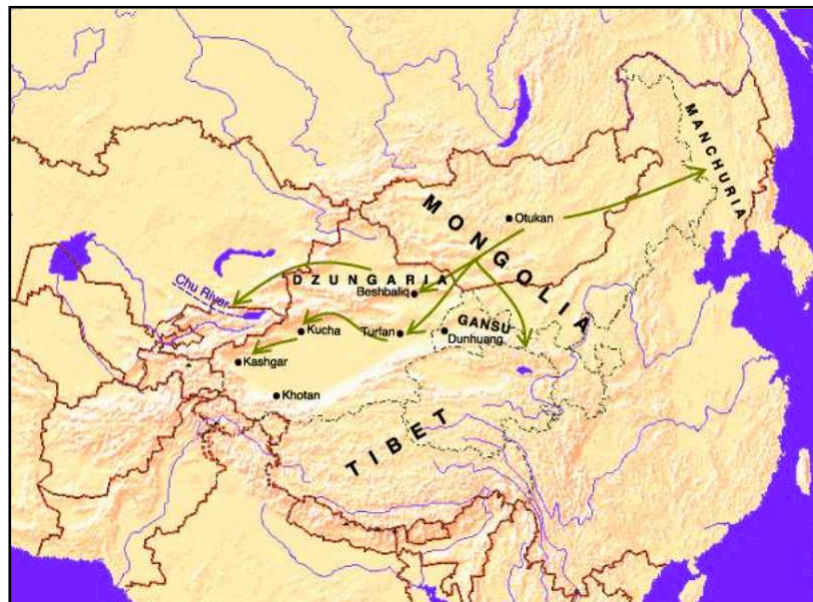
Cultural Crossroads, Intersecting Beliefs and Practices

Wedged between the Mongol and Kazakh steppes, mainland China, and the high ranges of the Pamirs and Himalayas, the Tarim region has always been a crossroads of languages, cultures, and religions. Given the great distances the Silk Road connected, it is not surprising that many cultural trends of the early Common Era were diffused among the sedentary communities of the river valleys along its trading network. Buddhism and its accompanying art forms made their way along these routes from India into Central Asia and China. Oasis towns in Central Asia also became havens for religious refugees coming from the west, such as Nestorians and Manichaeans.⁴ In addition to missionaries, merchants and their distant settlements were instrumental in the spread of religious practices and cultural forms. And it was along these same

routes that Islam spread to Central Asia and China, leaving an indelible mark on the cultures of the Silk Road regions.

Among the animist Turkic- and Mongol-speaking pastoral nomadic communities of the Central Asian grasslands, shamans conducted religious ceremonies, a tradition that continues today not only among nomadic and hunting communities of the Chinese north but also among the pastoral Kazakh and Mongol populations. Upon their migration in the ninth century CE from the territory of modern Mongolia to the Tarim Basin (figure 4), the pastoral nomadic Turkic Uyghurs gradually sedentarized into the region's towns and villages, where they mixed with Indo-European-speaking oasis populations, blending their Turko-shamanic traditions with Buddhism, Nestorian Christianity, Manichaeism, and, ultimately, Islam.

Figure 4. Dispersion of the Uyghurs from Mongolia and Dazungaria. Source: <http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/images/en/map20.jpg>.

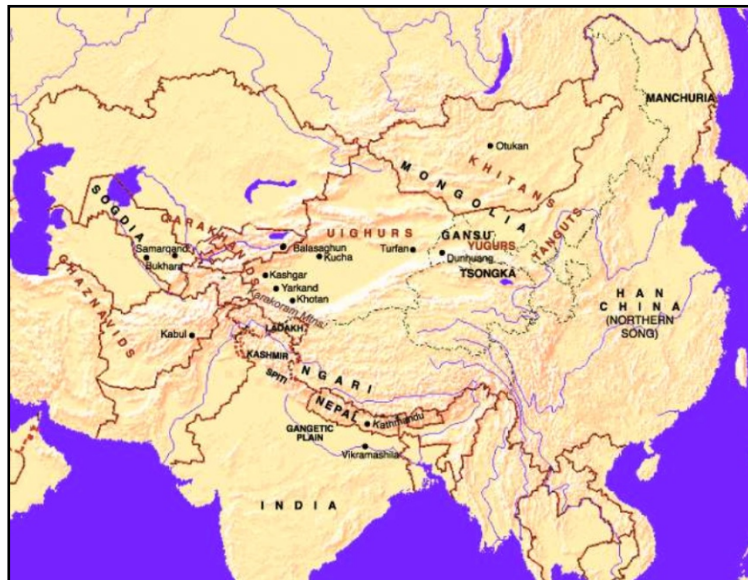


Until the first Arab military incursions across the Oxus River in present-day Uzbekistan in the second half of the seventh century CE, the lands to the west of the Pamir mountain range in Central Asia—ethnically, linguistically, and culturally Iranian—were linked by a nexus of commercial routes with the nomadic steppes, which ran from eastern Europe to the borders of China and benefitted from the cultural stimuli of both the Iranian and Indian worlds. Conversions to Islam turned the cities of southern Central Asia into great Islamic cultural centers, headed by

Bukhara and Samarqand, in modern Uzbekistan, and gradually other religions died out. By the tenth century, much of southern Central Asia was fully Islamized.

In the Tarim region, the Turkic Muslim dynasty of the Qarakhanids initiated the conversion of Central Asia east of the Pamirs, starting with Kashgar in the tenth century and ending with the Islamization of the Uyghur Buddhist Kingdom by the thirteenth century CE (figure 5). Among the Turkic populations of Central Asia, Sufism in particular was held in high regard and became the path of Islam among pastoral nomads of the region, mingling with local, pre-Islamic beliefs and preserving those traits in sacred sites scattered across the region.

Figure 5. Central Asia at the time of the Qarakhanid invasion of Khotan, approximately 1000 CE.
Source: <http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/images/en/map26.jpg>.



Sacred Places, Sacred Spaces

There are many archaeological and natural sites in Xinjiang that have been thought of as auspicious or sacred, some associated with the power or presence of spirits. Zoomorphic petroglyphs in the high mountain areas of the Pamir and Kunlun mountains imbued treacherous crossroads with apotropaic forces. The seeds for many Buddhist monastic settlements in the Tarim Basin were planted after “Thousand Buddhas” apparitions. And holy sites emerged around the shrines of important Sufi saints and sheikhs. Legendary accounts, historical records, and pilgrims’ reports tell of extraordinary, even miraculous, occurrences at these places—the sick are

cured, deities appear in dreams and visions, prophets bestow their blessings upon the faithful, and spiritual enlightenment is attained.

Sacred sites were initially thought to extend little beyond their own localities and religious traditions. Yet the political power of sacred places transcends the immediate, and, linked by pilgrimage routes, certain sites have become instrumental in strengthening collective identity. An example is the case of the Uyghurs who participate in large-scale annual pilgrimages to important shrines on auspicious calendar days or during harvest festivals, not only to pray and honor the buried saints and to seek their blessing but also to solidify family or friendship ties, recite Uyghur poetry, recount Uyghur history, and play Uyghur music and songs. Some sites transcend not only spatial but also cultural boundaries, with certain locales becoming sacred to different linguistic and religious constituents.

Tuyuq Mazâr near Turpan, for example, is surrounded by caves containing Buddhist murals (though now largely destroyed by earthquakes). Worship here centres on one of these caves, as it does in Khotan's Kokhmarim (Snake Mountain) Mazâr, where people go to pray for rain. This commonly found use of animal or plant names, such as Ujma (Mulberry) Mazâr and Ghaz (Goose) Mazâr, points to the pre-Buddhist roots of many of these pilgrimage sites and suggest that the mazâr tradition incorporates a variety of pre-Islamic beliefs and practices. (Harris and Dawut 2002)

Mazâr and Pilgrimage in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

Among the Uyghurs and other inhabitants of the Tarim Basin, Islam brought by Central Asian and Persian merchants and missionaries progressively replaced shamanic beliefs, Christian Nestorian communities, and above all, Buddhism, which had spread across the Tarim Basin during the first millennium CE. Throughout Islamic Central Asia, believers have venerated the heroes of this Islamic religious history—converted kings, great proselytizers, holy fighters, learned men, pious zealots, and mystical figures.

These “saints” of Islam not only aroused the devotion of masses but received material and spiritual support from urban and landed elites. Considered “friends of God” (in Arabic: *wali*, pl. *awliya*) and intermediaries between Allah and the faithful, these guardians of faith became major figures in Central Asian society. They were respected, listened to, and praised, not only during their lifetime but also after death. They were believed to have the power to cure, help, or punish people, as well as the ability to determine the course of life's events. Saints and their descendants have occupied a central place in the history of Chinese Central Asia from the

medieval period through the present, despite atheist campaigns, secularization processes, and Islamic reformist opposition to saint veneration in Xinjiang.

The cult of saints (both male and female) is performed at the countless *mazâr* located throughout the Tarim region. There are large holy complexes, many of which have been turned into museums, but pilgrims more frequently go to the innumerable secondary shrines, characterized by simple architecture and often (though not always) situated in remote rural areas. A common type of shrine is the small local *mazâr*, often reduced to a single tomb (“Unrevealed, Site 20”), sometimes a sacred source or cave with a rudimentary structure (“Unrevealed, Site 5”).

Mazâr are sites where believers communicate with spiritual powers and seek their intercession to better the believers’ lives. Certain *mazâr*, such as the shrines of Imam Hasim (“Unrevealed, Site 2”) and Imam Ja’fari Sadiq near Khotan (“Unrevealed, Site 1”), developed around burials of prominent Muslim saints. These *mazâr* are marked by tall branches with prayer flags placed by believers seeking to receive the blessing of those interred. Other *mazâr* sprang up around natural sites thought to be imbued with spiritual and healing powers, such as the Achiq Mazâr in Aqsu Prefecture (“Unrevealed, Site 6”), where people come to bathe to wash away impurities causing illness. In addition to flags and other strips of cloth, many of the shrines are marked with rams’ heads or animal skins (“Ritual Sacrifice” and “Head of a Ram”), a tradition of animal sacrifice common in shamanic as well as certain Islamic practice.

Pilgrimages to holy tombs, called *ziyarat* (literally “visits”), share several similarities with the obligatory and, in many ways, more important pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*). In Xinjiang, as elsewhere in the Muslim world, *ziyarat* take place at various times and occasions. People visit saints at religious festivals like *mawlid* (the birthday celebration of the Prophet or of Sufi saints); at specific religious periods in the year like *ramadan* (the fasting month); at the beginning of new seasons, particularly spring; and on specific days, most prominently Fridays, following prayer and sermon at the mosque. The most common ritual acts at shrines consist of prayers to God, devotional circumambulations, animal sacrifices, and offerings seeking the intercession of the saint in obtaining divine favor. To celebrate the saints and ask for their blessing or protection, pilgrims bring various ritual objects to the burial site. For example, women struggling with fertility bring homemade dolls to the shrine (“Pair of Qorchaq (Dolls)”).

Although *mazâr* are considered Islamic shrines, and the communities that hold them in high regard are Muslim, the architecture and the rituals performed at these sacred sites argue

against any narrow religious and cultural definitions. The aforementioned tying of flags on poles, the offering of dolls, the sacral nature of trees, circumambulation, and the inclusion of animal remains at the shrines, for example, seem to transcend essentialist labels such as “Islamic,” “Muslim,” or “Turkic,” instead manifesting parallels, for example, with rituals conducted at *Oboo* [auspicious cairn] shrines in largely shamanic and Buddhist Mongolia (Dawut 2009). To quote one of the foremost scholars on Sufism in Central Asia, Thierry Zarcone (CNRS, Paris):

The relationship with nature of the Turkic-speaking peoples of Central Asia has several special features that do not exist among their Muslim co-religionists in the Middle East and North Africa. These are the consequence of a cross-fertilization of beliefs and practices inspired on the one hand by Islam, more especially Arab-Muslim philosophy (Ibn Sina, al-Farabi) and Sufism, and on the other by animism, shamanism and Buddhism. (2005)

The Politics of Pilgrimage in Xinjiang

Saint veneration is still widespread in the Tarim region, not just among the Uyghurs but also among other Muslim minorities in the region, such as the Hui, Kazakh, and Kyrgyz. In Xinjiang today, the state, anxious in its struggle against “illegal religious activities,” has tightened its control over shrines and visits to shrines, going so far as to ban certain important pilgrimages such as the Ordam Padishah festival held at the shrine of the Qarakhanid ruler Ali Arslan Khan near Kashgar during the Islamic month of Muharram, which celebrates the ruler’s martyrdom in the struggle against Buddhism. Beijing is often wary of large-scale festivals that attract tens of thousands of people who come not only to honor the saint but also to celebrate Uyghur culture, reaffirm Uyghur identity, and honor Turkic political and religious roots. As noted by Harris and Dawut (2002):

The Chinese constitution enshrines the right to religious worship within the framework of the five acknowledged “systematized religions” of Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Daoism and Islam. Hand-in-hand with this goes official intolerance of “illegal religious activities” (*ifeifa zongjiao huodong*) and “feudal superstition” (*fengjian mixin*), which are consistently linked in state propaganda to the “backward” and “uncivilized” and to social disorder... However, as Xinjiang’s political situation became increasingly tense during the 1990s, policy towards the *mazâr* festivals became caught up in fears of the spread of Islamic fundamentalism and Uyghur separatism, which are regularly equated in government terminology with violence and terrorism. This problem was undoubtedly instrumental in the new ban on the *Ordam* imposed in 1997.

Whether venerated or despised, saints are historical figures that demand a social, political, and religious response. They represent the heroes of the faith and the ideal believer. They remain an irreducible part of the Muslim minorities' identity, linking Muslims not only to the local cultural environment but to the history of Islamization and to the geography of the Muslim world. From the believers' point of view, politics or economics may affect the shrines, but they do not affect the saint. In Islam, the Muslim "friends of God" never die.⁵

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Notes

1. Quoted from parts of Faxian's travel account included by Samuel Beal in the introduction to his translation of the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang's [Hiuen Tsiang](629 CE) written account (Beal 1981: xxiv).
2. Based on textual references, the Uyghur migrated into the Tarim Basin around the mid-ninth century CE. However, as a result of population mixing, many Uyghurs believe that they are descendants of early communities that had already established themselves in the region during the Bronze Age.
3. The term *Silk Road* is a modern construct coined in the nineteenth century by Ferdinand von Richthofen, after China's main trading commodity. In this essay, the term is used to denote the trading network that connected China to Central Asia from the second century BCE through the first millennium CE.
4. For an overview of the spread of religions, see Foltz (1999).
5. Papas (2008:56)