



The Complicity of Heritage

Cultural Heritage and Genocide in the Uyghur Region

UHRP

UYGHUR HUMAN RIGHTS PROJECT

ئۇيغۇر كىشىلىك ھوقۇق قۇرۇلۇشى

About the Uyghur Human Rights Project

The Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) promotes the rights of the Uyghur people through research-based advocacy. We publish reports and analysis in English and Chinese to defend Uyghurs' civil, political, social, cultural, and economic rights according to international human rights standards.

About the Authors

Rachel Harris teaches in the School of Arts at SOAS, University of London, and her research focuses on Uyghur expressive culture, religion and heritage. Her latest book is [Soundscapes of Uyghur Islam](#), and her latest research project www.meshrep.uk focuses on efforts to revitalize Uyghur heritage in the diaspora. Personal website: www.soas.ac.uk/about/rachel-harris.

Aziz Isa Elkun is a UK-based poet and researcher, born in the Uyghur homeland. He has worked as secretary of the PEN Uyghur Centre, and as Research Assistant on various research projects based at SOAS, University of London. He is editor of a major anthology of [Uyghur Poems](#) published by Penguin Random House in 2023. Personal website: www.azizisa.org/en.

Aziz and Rachel have co-authored several English language articles in academic journals, including [Invitation to a Mourning Ceremony: Perspectives on the Uyghur Internet and Islam by smartphone: reading the Uyghur Islamic revival on WeChat](#); and a chapter in *The Routledge Companion to Music and Human Rights (Music, Terror, and Civilizing Projects in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region)*.

Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our thanks to our anonymous reviewers for generously sharing their expertise and insights, and to Henryk Szadziewski and Peter Irwin at UHRP for their support and guidance as we prepared this report. We are most grateful to all of our interviewees who gave us their valuable time to share their experiences of heritage (mis)management in the Uyghur region.

Cover art by [YetteSu](#). © 2023 Uyghur Human Rights Project. Please share materials freely, with appropriate attribution, under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

Uyghur Human Rights Project
1602 L Street NW | Washington, DC 20036
www.uhrp.org | info@uhrp.org



Table of Contents

I. Introduction	1
II. Heritage As Governance	5
Rewriting Uyghur History	7
III. The Uyghur Muqam	9
Detentions of Muqam Singers	11
Suppression of Muqam in Religious Contexts.....	13
Bans on Informal Music-Making	14
Arrests of Researchers	14
Restrictions on Muqam Research.....	15
Muqam Deployed on the International Stage.....	17
IV. Manas	18
Detentions and Coercion of Manas Performers and Researchers.....	20
Manas Deployed on the International Stage	21
V. Meshrep	22
Suppression of a Grassroots Meshrep Movement in the 1990s.....	23
Government Controls on Organizing Meshrep After 2009.....	24
The Use of Meshrep in Anti-Religious Extremism Campaigns in 2014.....	25
Detention of Meshrep Participants	26
Meshrep Deployed on the International Stage	29
VI. The Tengritagh Mountain Range	30
Forced Relocation and Suppression of Protest	31
Enclosure and Rebranding.....	34
VII. Karez	36
New Historical Narratives	37
Environmental Damage to Karez.....	39
VIII. Conclusions	40
IX. Recommendations	41

I. Introduction

Since 2014, Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples in East Turkistan, also referred to the Uyghur region and Uyghur homeland,¹ have suffered heavy securitization, mass incarcerations, and attacks on local languages and other aspects of cultural identity.² According to estimates, over a million people have been arbitrarily detained in a system of “political education” camps, pretrial detention centers and prisons.³

Numerous witnesses have reported that detainees in the camp system are subjected to systematic torture and rape, cultural and political indoctrination, and forced labor. Outside the detention facilities Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples are subject to a pervasive system of mass surveillance, controls on movement, forced sterilization, and family separation.⁴

The severity of this situation was acknowledged in the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) “Assessment of human rights concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People’s Republic of China,” published in August 2022. The report concluded that possible crimes against humanity have been committed in the Uyghur region and that “the conditions remain in place for serious violations to continue and recur.”⁵ The OHCHR report also raised serious concerns about

¹ The toponyms “Uyghur homeland” and “Uyghur region” are used in this report, which along with “East Turkistan” are preferred by Uyghurs in the diaspora over “Xinjiang” and the “Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region,” which are seen as offensive colonial terms. In cases where we cite particular publications or refer to government offices and apparatuses, however, we do use “Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region” or related forms such as “the XUAR” or “Xinjiang.”

² “China’s Algorithms of Repression,” Human Rights Watch, May 1, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/05/01/chinas-algorithms-repression/reverse-engineering-xinjiang-police-mass>.

³ Adrian Zenz, “Thoroughly reforming them towards a healthy heart attitude: China’s political re-education campaign in Xinjiang,” *Central Asian Survey* 38, no.1 (2019): 102-128; “Documenting Xinjiang’s detention system,” Australia Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), September 24, 2020, <https://xjdp.aspi.org.au/resources/documenting-xinjiangs-detention-system/>.

⁴ “Break Their Lineage, Break Their Roots,” Human Rights Watch, April 19, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/19/break-their-lineage-break-their-roots/chinas-crimes-against-humanity-targeting>.

⁵ “Assessment of Human Rights Concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People’s Republic of China,” Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), August 31,

China's claims that its actions are necessary in order to counter terrorism.⁶

The Process of UNESCO Inscription

In order to be included on one of UNESCO's heritage lists, an item of culture must meet UNESCO's criteria for outstanding universal value. A State Party submits a nomination file for assessment by UNESCO's Heritage Committees, and if this is approved, the item will be inscribed on one of the lists.

A growing number of governments have also expressed alarm about the atrocities perpetrated against Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples. The U.S. State Department determined in January 2021 that this treatment amounted to genocide and crimes against humanity, and parliaments in Canada, the United Kingdom, Ireland, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Lithuania, the Czech Republic and the European Parliament have all passed motions or resolutions condemning China's actions.

In tandem with these documented human rights violations, the regional authorities have destroyed large swathes of built heritage, including mosques, shrines and graveyards; destroyed Uyghur language books and restricted the use of Uyghur and other indigenous Turkic languages; and imprisoned hundreds, possibly thousands, of Uyghur, Kazakh and Kyrgyz intellectuals and cultural leaders.⁷

2022, 44, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/2022-08-31/22-08-31-final-assesment.pdf>.

⁶ "Assessment of Human Rights Concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People's Republic of China," OHCHR, August 31, 2022, 7, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/2022-08-31/22-08-31-final-assesment.pdf>.

⁷ Rachel Harris, "Uyghur Heritage under China's 'Antireligious Extremism' Campaigns," in *Cultural Heritage and Mass Atrocities*, eds James Cuno and Thomas G. Weiss (Getty Publications, 2022); Abdullah Qazanchi, "The Disappearance of Uyghur Intellectual and Cultural Elites: A New Form of Eliticide," Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP), December 8, 2021, <https://uhrp.org/report/the-disappearance-of-uyghur-intellectual-and-cultural-elites-a-new-form-of-eliticide/>.

This report argues that China's actions in the Uyghur region constitute what UNESCO calls "strategic cultural cleansing": the deliberate targeting of individuals and groups on the basis of their cultural, ethnic or religious affiliation, combined with the intentional and systematic destruction of their cultural heritage.⁸ As acknowledged in the 2021 International Criminal Court framework on cultural heritage, acts of dispossession and destruction of cultural heritage are often inseparable from – or the precursor to – acts of genocide.⁹ James Cuno and Thomas Weiss write that "history has shown that it is virtually impossible to disentangle attacks on cultural objects, structures, and monuments from attacks on human beings. Both seek in the end to eliminate a people and the cultural heritage with which they identify."¹⁰

Against this backdrop, UNESCO continues to acknowledge China as a protector of Uyghur, Kazakh and Kyrgyz heritage in the Uyghur region through the inclusion of several items on its lists:

- The Uyghur Muqam of Xinjiang, inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008;¹¹
- Manas, inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009;¹²
- Meshrep, inscribed on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding in 2010;¹³

⁸ "Reinforcement of UNESCO's Action for the Protection of Culture and the Promotion of Pluralism in the event of Armed Conflict," UNESCO, Document 39 C/57, October 24, 2017, <https://en.unesco.org/heritage-at-risk/strategy-culture-armed-conflict>.

⁹ ICC Policy on Cultural Heritage, 2021, p30, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/items/Documents/20210614-otp-policy-cultural-heritage-eng.pdf>.

¹⁰ James Cuno and Thomas G. Weiss, "Introduction," in *Cultural Heritage and Mass Atrocities*, eds James Cuno and Thomas G. Weiss (Getty Publications, 2022), <https://www.getty.edu/publications/cultural-heritage-mass-atrocities/>.

¹¹ Uyghur Muqam of Xinjiang, UNESCO, 2008, accessed on January 19, 2023, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/uyghur-muqam-of-xinjiang-00109>.

¹² Manas, UNESCO, 2009, accessed on January 19, 2023, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/manas-00209>.

¹³ Meshrep, UNESCO, 2010, accessed on January 19, 2023, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/USL/Meshrep-00304>.

- Xinjiang Tianshan (Tengritagh) mountain range, included on UNESCO's World Heritage List in 2013;¹⁴
- Karez, included on UNESCO's Tentative List since 2008.¹⁵

This report asserts the broad responsibilities of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to safeguard all of the heritage present on its territory and to protect the human rights of all of its inhabitants. In the Uyghur region, numerous items of heritage included on China's own regional and national lists, as well as many more important artefacts and practices which are not included on any lists, require closer scrutiny for the ways in which they are implicated in cultural cleansing and destruction. We have chosen to focus on the five items of heritage included on UNESCO's lists specifically because their inclusion on these lists requires an active response from the international community.

We examine the current situation of these five internationally recognized items of heritage following China's campaigns of securitization, mass incarceration and cultural cleansing in the Uyghur region. Our report draws on a range of previously published media, academic and NGO reports in English, Uyghur, Chinese and Kyrgyz. It includes testimony from interviews conducted with Uyghur exiles based in Central Asia, Turkey, Europe, and the U.S.

We detail the ways in which heritage in the Uyghur region is co-opted and used to promote new and revisionist understandings of history that tie the region and its inhabitants more tightly into the Chinese sphere, and we demonstrate that this process contributes directly to the wider project of cultural erasure. We provide specific details concerning violations of UNESCO's standards of heritage safeguarding, including:

- bans on grassroots practices;
- the detention and imprisonment of culture bearers;
- forced expulsion of residents from their ancestral lands;

China's actions in the Uyghur region form part of the wave of deliberate destruction of cultural heritage in the 21st century identified by UN Special Rapporteur Karima Bennoune.

¹⁴ Xinjiang Tianshan, UNESCO World Heritage List, accessed on January 19, 2023, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1414/>.

¹⁵ Karez Wells, UNESCO, 2008, accessed on January 19, 2023, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/search/?criteria=karez>.

- environmental damage to heritage sites.

Using these five case studies, this report demonstrates that China's management of the cultural heritage of the Uyghur region places control firmly in the hands of the government and its chosen commercial partners. Heritage is exploited for economic profit and used to promote the government's chosen versions of history and culture, regardless of established historical fact and regardless of the rights of communities and culture bearers acknowledged in UNESCO's conventions.

This report argues that China's actions in the Uyghur region form part of the wave of deliberate destruction of cultural heritage in the 21st century identified by UN Special Rapporteur Karima Bennouna. As Bennouna argued in her 2016 report, such acts represent "a form of cultural warfare being used against populations, and humanity as a whole ... [They] take the terrorization of a population to a new level by attacking even its history and represent an urgent challenge to cultural rights, one which requires rapid and thoughtful international response."¹⁶

II. Heritage As Governance

Over the past two decades, China has developed an extensive heritage management system including national and regional inventories of heritage sites and cultural practices. These inventories are specifically designed to "raise consciousness about the inseparability and historical continuity of the Nation's culture." China's 2011 Intangible Cultural Heritage Law specifies that the protection of heritage should strengthen cultural identification with the Chinese nation and should facilitate national cohesion, interethnic solidarity, and social harmony.¹⁷

¹⁶ Karima Bennouna, "Report of the Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights," UNESCO, February 3, 2016, 16, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/831612?ln=en>.

¹⁷ Kai Tang, "Singing a Chinese Nation: Heritage Preservation, the Yuanshengtai Movement, and New Trends in Chinese Folk Music in the Twenty-First Century," *Ethnomusicology* 65, no.1 (2021), <https://scholarlypublishingcollective.org/uip/etm/article-abstract/65/1/1/234767/Singing-a-Chinese-Nation-Heritage-Preservation-the?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.

The use of heritage as a tool of governance is, of course, not unique to China, and a substantial literature in critical heritage studies examines numerous examples of similar systems and processes elsewhere.¹⁸ Equally, China's approach to heritage as governance is applied across its territory, but its implementation varies widely depending on the political status of particular regions. The situation in the Uyghur region is particularly egregious because of the backdrop of massive human rights violations, and it requires an international response because of the way that heritage is directly implicated in projects of cultural erasure.

In the Uyghur region, the management of cultural heritage is closely tied to government attempts to deepen its control over the region through a center-led economic development campaign which works together with an assimilationist agenda. The regional government regards cultural heritage primarily as a resource to develop the tourism industry, and a propaganda tool used to present heavily stage-managed images of normality in the region.¹⁹ Economic development and tourism facilitate the movement of Han Chinese into the region, both as short-term visitors and permanent settlers.²⁰

The folkloric promotion of Uyghur Muqam and Meshrep and the Kyrgyz Manas has served primarily to cement the longstanding designation of the region's indigenous peoples as singing and dancing "ethnic minorities" within the PRC, and to normalize PRC control of their ancestral lands.²¹ In the same way that mosques and shrines are closed to local communities but open for tourist business, community gatherings are transformed into glamorous

¹⁸ Christina Maags and Marina Svensson, "Introduction," in *Chinese Heritage in the Making: Experiences, negotiations and contestations*, eds Maags & Svensson, (Amsterdam University Press, 2018), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2204rz8>.

¹⁹ Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "China promotes domestic tourism to Xinjiang, site of ongoing genocide," *Axios*, November 30, 2021, <https://www.axios.com/2021/11/30/xinjiang-china-ethnic-tourism-uyghurs>.

²⁰ Henryk Szadziewski, Mary Mostafanezhad and Galen Murton, "Territorialization on tour: The tourist gaze along the Silk Road Economic Belt in Kashgar, China," *Geoforum* 128 (2022), 135-147, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0016718521003328>.

²¹ Rachel Harris, "A Weekly *Māshrāp* to Tackle Religious Extremism: Music-making in Uyghur Communities and Intangible Cultural Heritage in China," *Ethnomusicology* 64, no.1 (2020), 23-55, <https://scholarlypublishingcollective.org/uip/etm/article-abstract/64/1/23/234753/A-Weekly-Mashrap-to-Tackle-Extremism-Music-Making?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.

stage shows purveying messages of interethnic harmony within the framework of Chinese nationhood, while local communities are terrorized and torn apart.

Rewriting Uyghur History

In July 2022, Xi Jinping embarked on an inspection tour of the Uyghur region, his first visit to the region since 2014 and the roll-out of the policies of securitization, mass incarceration and cultural erasure of which he was arguably the principal architect.²² During his visit, Xi Jinping emphasized the need to utilize history and culture to tie the Uyghur region and its peoples more tightly to the Chinese nation:

Chinese civilization is the root of the culture of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang. Xinjiang needs to educate and guide the officials and people to correctly understand the history of Xinjiang, especially the history of ethnic development, so that a historical view of the Chinese nation can be widely accepted.²³

Xi's inspection tour included a staged performance of the Kyrgyz epic poem *Manas*, which was inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009, and which we discuss in detail below.²⁴ This performance clearly signaled the role that heritage is intended to play in promoting these revisionist views of history. As the U.S.-based scholar Tang Kai argues:

The Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection campaign allows the state to more efficiently manage the historical narratives of individual ethnic groups and the construction of national memory about each group. The

²² Austin Ramzy and Chris Buckley, "Absolutely No Mercy: Leaked Files Expose How China Organized Mass Detentions of Muslims," *New York Times*, November 16, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/16/world/asia/china-xinjiang-documents.html>.

²³ "Xi Jinping's remarks after Xinjiang inspection tour," translated by Yang Liu, *Beijing Channel*, July 15, 2022, https://open.substack.com/pub/beijingchannel/p/xi-remarks-after-xinjiang-inspection?utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web.

²⁴ *Manas*, UNESCO, 2009, accessed on January 19, 2023, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/manas-00209>.

multilevel nomination, evaluation, and preservation procedure thoroughly filters out what the state wants a group to forget.²⁵

This “purging of Xinjiang’s past,” as historian David Brophy puts it, is a process underpinned by state violence. It has been enforced by prison and even death sentences for Uyghur writers, editors, and publishers who were involved with the production of Uyghur language and culture textbooks that were previously approved by the state but were later deemed to provide an “incorrect” view of the region’s history.²⁶

The “correct” view of history promoted by China’s central government argues that all of the diverse nationalities living within the current borders of the PRC have been mutually assimilating and interdependent over thousands of years, and have formed a “pluralistic-unitary” (Ch: *duoyuan yiti*) Chinese nation (Ch: *zhonghua minzu*). This heavily politicized and distorted view of history is driven by numerous policy statements and directives.

This rhetoric developed during the mid-2000s in tandem with the development of China’s heritage system. It marks an important shift away from the long-standing opposition between the majority Han and non-Han “minority nationalities” (Ch: *minzu*). As historian James Millward notes, in today’s Uyghur region the narrative of interethnic mingling is contradicted by the reality of a stark colonial divide which promotes Han opportunities for settlement and jobs, allows Han to pass freely through checkpoints while subjecting non-Han to mobile phone scans and physical searches, criminalizes

²⁵ Kai Tang, “Singing a Chinese Nation: Heritage Preservation, the Yuanshengtai Movement, and New Trends in Chinese Folk Music in the Twenty-First Century,” *Ethnomusicology* 65, no.1 (2021), <https://scholarlypublishingcollective.org/uip/etm/article-abstract/65/1/1/234767/Singing-a-Chinese-Nation-Heritage-Preservation-the?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.

²⁶ David Brophy, “Chapter 3: Purging Xinjiang’s Past,” in *The China Story Yearbook 2021: Contradiction*, <https://www.thechinastory.org/yearbooks/yearbook-2021-contradiction/chapter-3-purging-xinjiangs-past/>; Abdullah Qazanchi, “The Disappearance of Uyghur Intellectual and Cultural Elites: A New Form of Eliticide,” Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP), December 8, 2021, <https://uhrp.org/report/the-disappearance-of-uyghur-intellectual-and-cultural-elites-a-new-form-of-eliticide/>.

Muslim practice but not Han customs, and progressively criminalizes Uyghur language in favor of Mandarin.²⁷

III. The Uyghur Muqam

The first of the five heritage items from the Uyghur region placed on UNESCO's lists is the "Uyghur Muqam of Xinjiang." This musical repertoire, widely regarded as the classical music of the Uyghurs, was proclaimed by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2005, and inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008.²⁸ Since 2017, several well-known professional Muqam performers employed in government-supported troupes have been arbitrarily detained, along with unknown numbers of Sufi followers who performed Muqam in religious contexts. The regional authorities have closed institutions previously tasked with researching the tradition, and introduced radical changes to the teaching and performance of the Muqam in order to align with Xi Jinping's policy of promoting a "pluralistic-unified" Chinese nation.

Since the 1950s, the Uyghur Muqam has been the object of extensive research, recording and publication, all supported by the regional government. The repertoire has great symbolic significance for Uyghur identity, and Muqam singers are widely known and cherished. By the late 1990s, Ürümqi was home to various institutions dedicated to the study, performance, and promotion of Muqam, including the Muqam Research Society, the program in Uyghur music at the Xinjiang Arts Institute, and the Xinjiang Muqam Ensemble. A Muqam Performance undergraduate major was founded in 1996 at the Xinjiang Arts Institute.²⁹

Since 2017, several well-known professional Muqam performers employed in government-supported troupes have been arbitrarily detained, along with unknown numbers of Sufi followers who performed Muqam in religious contexts.

²⁷ James A. Millward, "(Identity) Politics in Command: Xi Jinping's July Visit to Xinjiang," *The China Story* (blog), August 16, 2022, <https://www.thechinastory.org/identity-politics-in-command-xi-jinpings-july-visit-to-xinjiang/>.

²⁸ Uyghur Muqam of Xinjiang, UNESCO, 2008, accessed on January 19, 2023, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/uyghur-muqam-of-xinjiang-00109>.

²⁹ Elise Anderson, *Imperfect Perfection: Uyghur Muqam and the Practice of Cultural Renovation in the People's Republic of China*, PhD dissertation, Indiana University (2019), <https://www.proquest.com/openview/c6463ecf5092624b18322e8d5db63a0a/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>.

Since 2017, large numbers of professional Uyghur singers and musicians have been detained in the region's internment camps.³⁰ One interviewee suggested:

Many of the dance and music students from the Arts Institute were sent to the camps. ... We can say that around 30 to 40 percent of the employees of the Xinjiang Arts Center were detained and sent to the camps.³¹

Those released have subsequently appeared in public giving performances which directly promote government ethnic policies. Prominent Muqam performers have been featured on Xinjiang TV performing songs praising Xi Jinping. In 2017, Shireli Eltekin



Image of Shireli Eltekin, shared by Abduweli Ayup, to mark the anniversary of his detention, April 26, 2022.

³⁰ Abduweli Ayup, "List of Uyghur intellectuals imprisoned in China from 2016 to the present," Uyghur Help Project, October 20, 2021, <https://uyghurhelp.org/2021/10/list-of-uyghur-intellectuals-imprisoned-in-china-from-2016-to-the-present-last-up-dated-by-abduweli-ayup-on-october-20-2021/>.

³¹ Interview, anonymous, Uyghur Turkish citizen, September 24, 2022.

released “A Song for Leader Xi Jinping,” which compared China’s President to the sun lighting up the sky, but this demonstration of compliance did not save him from detention in 2021.³²

Detentions of Muqam Singers

Two of the best-known Uyghur Muqam singers, Shireli Eltekin and Abduqadir Yareli, have both been detained. Abduqadir Yareli was arrested in 2018 and was reportedly released in 2020.³³ Shireli Eltekin was arrested in 2021 and is to the best of our knowledge still in detention.³⁴ Our interviewee Hesriti was familiar with Shireli’s case:

Shireli Eltekin was born in Kashgar, and studied singing at the Xinjiang Arts Institute. He was recruited as a Muqam singer by the Muqam Ensemble, where he worked as a singer of the Uyghur Twelve Muqam. ... He travelled to the U.S. on a Chinese government-organized tour in 2015. Following that visit, he was regularly harassed and called in for interrogations by the police, right up to his arrest in 2021.³⁵

Several well-known female Uyghur singers were detained in early 2019 and held in the camps for several months. They included Aytulla Ela, a Muqam singer from the Xinjiang Theater,³⁶ and the region’s most famous traditional singer, Sanubar Tursun, known for

³² “In Xinjiang, officials are trying to stamp out Uyghur identity,” *The Economist*, October 21, 2021, <https://www.economist.com/china/in-xinjiang-officials-are-trying-to-stamp-out-uyghur-identity/21805768>.

³³ Dare Wish (@darewish), “This is Abduqadir Yareli, a famous Uyghur Muqam performer ...” Twitter, June 11, 2020, <https://twitter.com/darewish/status/1271081726895423488>.

³⁴ Elise Anderson, “The Politics of Pop: The Rise and Repression of Uyghur Music in China,” *LA Review of Books*, May 31, 2020, <https://www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/politics-pop-rise-repression-uyghur-music-china/>; “Uyghur Muqamist Shireli Eltekin in captivity already for one year,” *Uyghur Times*, April 26, 2022, <https://www.uyghurtimes.com/posts/29d78e28-f004-4262-bc31-b2f1eb424848/uyghur-muqamist-shireli-eltekin-in-captivity-already-for-one-year>.

³⁵ Interview, Hesriti, September 16, 2022.

³⁶ Entry 2914, Xinjiang Victims Database, accessed on January 18, 2023, <https://shahit.biz/eng/#2914>.

her performances and recordings of Muqam in the international arena.³⁷

According to one interviewee:

On the same day in January 2019, the police arrested a whole group of singers and musicians all at the same time: Muqam singer Sanubar Tursun, singers Rashide Dawut, Paride Mamut, Aytulla Ela, Gulzar Tomur and many others ... mostly women. They were all arrested at the same time during the night, and all of them were taken to the camps. Almost a half year later, all of them were released again.³⁸

These large numbers of short detentions of professional singers relate to government perceptions of the significant role played by music in promoting Uyghur identity. As our interviewee Tahir Imin, a Uyghur intellectual now based in the U.S. explains:

Many musicians were arrested, because they [the government] believe that singers, musicians and artists are the main force that promotes Uyghur culture and nationalism, so they become the first target. ... When the regime targets artists, then ordinary people get frightened. Some people hid or destroyed their own musical instruments like *dutar*. They were afraid of getting arrested, because keeping a Uyghur musical instruments in their home means “I am Uyghur” ... not Chinese; it would be interpreted that this



Sanubar Tursun. Aga Khan Music Initiative, 2012.

³⁷ Entry 1805, Xinjiang Victims Database, accessed on January 18, 2023, <https://shahit.biz/eng/#1805>; “Wu Man and Sanubar Tursun,” *Aga Khan Music Initiative*, accessed on January 18, 2023, <https://the.akdn/en/how-we-work/our-agencies/aga-khan-trust-culture/performance/wu-man-and-sanubar-tursun>.

³⁸ Interview, Hesriti, September 16, 2022.

person stands against the ethnic harmony and unity policy.³⁹

Suppression of Muqam in Religious Contexts

Although Chinese language publications de-emphasize this history, the roots of the Muqam repertoire lie in the religious context of Sufi gatherings. Uyghur Sufi groups have been periodically subject to bans and persecution since the region's annexation by the PRC in the 1950s, but they continued to practice underground throughout the 20th century. Since 2016, Sufi gatherings have been criminalized under the anti-religious extremism campaign, and numerous Sufi followers and Muqam singers (*hapiz*) were sent to internment camps. Information on these already semi-underground practices is hard to confirm, but two interviewees provided details on detained Sufi performers:

There used to be so many people in Kashgar who could recite the Quran or had religious knowledge ... As for *hapiz* – people who recited Hikmet and Muqam – they have almost all disappeared. There was a student of my father; his name was Abdurehim Hajim. He was the only *hapiz* in Kashgar city. I couldn't get any information about what happened to him. Another *hapiz* called Xelil Qari also disappeared, and another called Eziz Qari, a fruit seller from a village near Kashgar called Suzaq. I think Xelil Qari is probably already sentenced.⁴⁰

Nejmidin Sherip, now resident in the Netherlands, named several spiritual leaders and reciters at Sufi gatherings who have been detained:

Hidaytulla Pehirdin from Chong Yultuz town in Toqsu County was arrested along with his whole his family. Ershidinkhan Khojam [a descendent of the Khoja Sufi lineage] was arrested and sentenced in summer 2017. From this family, 17 men were arrested and taken away. I

“When the regime targets artists, then ordinary people get frightened. Some people hid or destroyed their own musical instruments like *dutar*.”

³⁹ Tahir Imin, interview August 2022, U.S.

⁴⁰ Abdugheni Hajim, interview, August 19, 2022, Dubai.

had a friend called Turdi Memet, a Sufi from Khotan, who was working as a trader in Ürümchi. He was one of the important spiritual leaders of the Naqshbandi order. He was arrested and sentenced to 20 years.⁴¹

Bans on Informal Music-Making

Sweeping controls on public and private gatherings have affected people's ability to gather together informally to listen to Muqam even in secular contexts. Nejmidin Sherip recalls:

I heard about a group of people who received a warning from the police after they gathered at Abdullah Majnun's home to play music. Police said the song texts and music were not approved by the government, and they couldn't sing or play music without approval. The police also said that all gatherings without specific permission from the police were banned.⁴²

Arrests of Researchers

While professional performers appear by-and-large to have been given a "short, sharp, shock" experience of detention before being pressed into service as mouthpieces for the regime, researchers and public figures linked to Muqam have typically been given longer sentences, likely because their published research contradicts the newly approved version of the region's history and culture. According to our interviewee Hesriti:

Professor Qeyyum Muhammet was Director of the Faculty of Acting and Performance at the Xinjiang Arts Institute. He was arrested because police found he had participated in a WeChat messaging group. He was given a five-year prison sentence in 2017. He was a well-respected academic. For many years he was the host for the New Year

"Police said the song texts and music were not approved by the government, and they couldn't sing or play music without approval. The police also said that all gatherings without specific permission from the police were banned."

⁴¹ Nejmidin Sherip, interview, September 2022, Netherlands.

⁴² Nejmidin Sherip, interview, September 2022, Netherlands.

Celebration Concerts, Meshrep and Muqam performances.⁴³

The well-known case of Rahile Dawut, formerly Professor of Folklore at Xinjiang University, detained without charge since 2017, also touches on Muqam.⁴⁴ Professor Dawut's research, which was supported by government grants, included work on grassroots religious contexts for Muqam performance including shrine festivals and Sufi gatherings. According to Nejmidin Sherip:

Rahile Dawut brought some grassroots Muqam singers and Dastan storytellers to Ürümchi in 2016 to record their performance in a professional studio. Two of the technicians who participated in those recordings were later arrested and sentenced. Their names are Osman Ahad and Ibrahim. After they were arrested, the police confiscated all the equipment used for the recording.⁴⁵

Restrictions on Muqam Research

The detention of Professor Dawut alongside many other prominent researchers of Uyghur history and culture, attests to a wider policy of the rebranding, or even reinvention of the region's history and culture in order to align with Xi Jinping's model of pluralistic unity, removing from the public sphere all intellectuals with the knowledge and authority to challenge the new narrative.

Alongside these detentions, multiple reports attest to the closure of institutions devoted to Uyghur history and culture, including Muqam research. In February 2022, the XUAR Civil Affairs Bureau announced the closure of 160 organizations devoted to researching traditional Uyghur culture, among them the Muqam

⁴³ Interview, Hesriti, September 16, 2022.

⁴⁴ Chris Buckley and Austin Ramzy, "Star Scholar Disappears as Crackdown Engulfs Western China," *New York Times*, August 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/10/world/asia/china-xinjiang-rahile-dawut.html>.

⁴⁵ Nejmidin Sherip, interview, September 2022, Netherlands.

Research Association.⁴⁶ This move was confirmed by one of our interviewees:

After I left the country in 2017 I heard that the Xinjiang Muqam Research Office was closed down. The Government abolished these kinds of research offices that were supporting the study of Uyghur culture, but the Xinjiang Arts Centre and Muqam Ensemble still exist.⁴⁷

The retention of these performance-oriented institutions against the background of sweeping closures of research organizations lends further support to the conclusion that Muqam is being used as a propaganda tool for government policy.

We have found evidence that teaching materials used to teach Muqam have been banned and destroyed, alongside other documented instances of book burning, bans on Uyghur history textbooks, and death sentences handed to their authors.⁴⁸ A textbook used in the Muqam program at the Arts Institute, originally published with support from the Regional Education Bureau, was banned and copies were burned during the major cleansing of Uyghur language materials that took place in Spring 2018.⁴⁹

We have also found evidence of restrictions on teaching and performing Muqam in the Uyghur language. The period between 2005 and 2016 saw the gradual disappearance of Uyghur language from schools and higher education across Xinjiang. Although this move was officially termed “bilingual” education, in practice it entailed the replacement of all Uyghur language-medium teaching for the Chinese.⁵⁰ Uniquely, Muqam teaching, performance and

⁴⁶ “China moves to close down Uyghur cultural, language organizations,” RFA, March 1, 2022, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/deregistered-organizations-03012022193543.html>.

⁴⁷ Interview, Hesriti, September 16, 2022.

⁴⁸ Wu Huizhong, “A Uyghur gets death sentence, as China bans once OK’d books,” AP News, February 1, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/uyghur-death-sentence-china-banned-books-6da7d5d6ed5c9937d1a4796b3bcb94b1>.

⁴⁹ Elise Anderson, “The Politics of Pop: The Rise and Repression of Uyghur Music in China,” *LA Review of Books*, May 31, 2020, <https://www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/politics-pop-rise-repression-uyghur-music-china/>.

⁵⁰ Arianne Dwyer, “The Xinjiang Conflict: Uyghur Identity, Language Policy, and Political Discourse,” Washington, DC: East-West Center, January 1, 2005, <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/xinjiang-conflict-uyghur-identity-language-policy-and-political-discourse>; “Assessment of Human Rights Concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People’s

research was still conducted almost entirely in the Uyghur language, a privilege possibly linked to the UNESCO designation. This privilege was revoked in 2016, and professional Uyghur music-making turned to the “bilingual” model implemented in educational institutions across the region.

For Muqam, this has meant that Uyghur language singing must be strictly balanced by singing in the Chinese language, and performances should either include Chinese performers playing Uyghur instruments, or Uyghurs performing Chinese traditions. In a study of televised performances in 2018 at the height of the internment drive, Anderson and Byler detail several examples of clumsy attempts to “blend” Chinese and Uyghur culture in accordance with the political principle of pluralistic unity.⁵¹

Muqam Deployed on the International Stage

Muqam is a regular topic in China’s internationally facing state media, and overseas journalists who come to the Uyghur region are frequently taken to concerts which include Muqam performance.⁵² International performances of Muqam by government sponsored troupes are used strategically to showcase China’s guardianship of intangible cultural heritage, and are particularly targeted at Muslim majority countries and journalists, suggesting an effort to win over countries that might raise concerns about the erasure of Islamic culture.⁵³

Muqam performances are also deployed on various media platforms to support government policies. Muqam singer Sanubar

Republic of China,” OHCHR, August 31, 2022, 28-9, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/2022-08-31/22-08-31-final-assesment.pdf>.

⁵¹ Amy Anderson and Darren Byler, “‘Eating Hanness’: Uyghur Musical Tradition in a Time of Re-education,” *China Perspectives*, 2019, no.3, 17-26, <https://journals.openedition.org/china-perspectives/9358>.

⁵² “Journalists from 24 countries visit Xinjiang,” Xinhua, July 23, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/23/c_138250679.htm; Zheng Yibing and Shen Hui, “China’s ancient ‘Twelve Muqam’ music has been well preserved and passed on,” China Global Times Network (CGTN), July 30, 2019, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2019-07-30/China-s-Twelve-Muqam-music-has-been-well-preserved-and-passed-on-IK0lw9wMvK/index.html>.

⁵³ “China’s Xinjiang cultural shows enchant Egyptian audience in Alexandria,” Xinhua, July 11, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-07/11/c_136435462.htm; Sherif Sonbol, “Upper Egypt on the Silk Road,” *Ahram*, September 9, 2019, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/345132.aspx>.

Tursun spent six months in a camp in 2017. After her release, she appeared on television singing Chinese-language Cultural Revolution era Red Songs and leading mixed groups of Han and Uyghur musicians performing “bilingual” Uyghur music. In 2021, she opened a TikTok account to promote her new “studio” for teaching Uyghur music. Our interviewee Hesriti suggests that this move was initiated by the authorities in response to overseas awareness-raising on Sanubar Tursun’s case:

In Ghulja, above the Alte Sheher neighborhood, there was an old family home that belonged to Sanubar Tursun’s grandfather. After her release from the camp, the government spent money to restore that old house and named it the “Sanubar Tursun Family Culture and Art Museum House” in order to deceive the world and show that they [the Chinese government] are protecting Uyghur culture.⁵⁴

The promotion of the Tursun Family Culture House coincided with a major push by the Chinese authorities in 2021 to deny reports of abuses and the charge of genocide being voiced in the international sphere.⁵⁵ Here we see UNESCO-inscribed heritage deliberately manipulated and staged as part of a wide-ranging disinformation campaign to deny crimes against humanity in the Uyghur region.

IV. Manas

Manas, an oral epic recounting the history of the Kyrgyz people, was inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009.⁵⁶ As with several of China’s other submissions which have sought to lay a claim on cultural practices beyond its borders, its inscription as representative intangible

Here we see UNESCO-inscribed heritage deliberately manipulated and staged as part of a wide-ranging disinformation campaign to deny crimes against humanity in the Uyghur region.

⁵⁴ Interview, Hesriti, September 16, 2022.

⁵⁵ “PRC Efforts to Manipulate Global Public Opinion on Xinjiang,” U.S. Department of State, August 24, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/prc-efforts-to-manipulate-global-public-opinion-on-xinjiang/>.

⁵⁶ Manas, UNESCO, 2009, accessed on January 19, 2023, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/manas-00209>.

cultural heritage on the initiative of China rather than Kyrgyzstan caused controversy, and UNESCO subsequently accepted a parallel nomination submitted by Kyrgyzstan in 2013 for the Kyrgyz epic trilogy: Manas, Semetey and Seytek.⁵⁷

The epic was highlighted during Xi Jinping's inspection tour of the Uyghur region in summer 2022 which he used to promote the notion of the "pluralistic unity" of the Chinese nation. Xi attended a short and heavily revised staged performance loosely based on the Manas epic. He posed for photos with Kyrgyz performers, and delivered further comments that directly tied heritage to this project of promoting "Chinese civilization" as the root of all cultures within the Uyghur region. As reported by the official Xinhua news agency:

Xi visited the Museum of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region and watched a show of the Kirgiz ethnic minority



Xi Jinping poses with "Manas" performers during his inspection tour of the Uyghur region in July 2022.

⁵⁷ Svetlana Jacquesson, "On Folklore Archives and Heritage Claims: the Manas Epic in Kyrgyzstan," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 64 (2021): 425-454, https://brill.com/view/journals/jesh/64/4/article-p425_4.xml. Other submissions made by China and contested by neighbouring countries include Mongolian Khöömii throat singing, and the Korean city and tomb complex of ancient Kogoryo.

epic Manas at the museum. Chinese civilization is extensive and profound, and has a long history stretching back to antiquity, Xi said, demanding efforts to better preserve and pass on the intangible cultural heritage, and to carry forward the fine traditional cultures of all ethnic groups.⁵⁸

Detentions and Coercion of Manas Performers and Researchers

Beneath this glossy exterior lies a more troubled situation. A prominent young Manaschy (Manas performer) called Turgunaaly Tursunaaly uulu, grandson of Jusup Mamai, the famous transmitter of Manas in the Uyghur region, was reportedly coerced by the Chinese authorities into returning from Kyrgyzstan to the Uyghur region in 2018.⁵⁹ Radio Free Europe reported that Turgunaaly went to Kyrgyzstan in 2014 to study. He became popular in Kyrgyzstan for his Kyrgyz dance and his performance of Manas. In 2017, he graduated from the Kyrgyz National University and applied for a two-year Master's degree. However, in October 2018, he suddenly left for China, disappeared from social media and has not returned to Kyrgyzstan.⁶⁰

Following media attention in 2019, Turgunaaly re-emerged stating that he had been appointed as the head of the Manaschy association of China.⁶¹ Independent researcher Gene Bunin believes that Turgunaaly, like many other Kyrgyz people from the Uyghur region, was forced to return and remains in the PRC due to pressure from the authorities.⁶²

⁵⁸ "Xi stresses implementing Party's policies on Xinjiang, highlights stability, security," Xinhua, July 16, 2022, <https://english.news.cn/20220716/f3d0fe51142044aa8cf8abd64a628caf/c.html>.

⁵⁹ Entry 2738, Xinjiang Victims Database, accessed January 19, 2023, <https://shahit.biz/eng/view/entry.php?entryno=2738>.

⁶⁰ Кытайлык кыргыз Жусуп Мамайдын урпагы Тургунаалы Кыргызстанга келди, May 14, 2019, <https://www.azattyk.org/a/29939996.html>.

⁶¹ Gene Bunin, "Kyrgyz Students Vanish Into Xinjiang's Maw," *Foreign Policy*, March 31, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/31/963451-kyrgyz-xinjiang-students-camps/>.

⁶² Gene Bunin, "How Kyrgyzstan Abandoned its Own," *Living Otherwise*, July 4, 2019, <https://livingotherwise.com/2019/07/04/gene-a-bunin-how-kyrgyzstan-abandoned-its-own-in-xinjiang-while-kazakhstan-didnt/>.

The Xinjiang Victims Database also reported the detention of the principal scholar of Manas, Mambatturdu Mambetakun.⁶³ Mambatturdu was a professor at Xinjiang Normal University, a researcher at the Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences, and co-president of the Xinjiang Writers Association. He was also an honorary professor at the Arbaev State University in Kyrgyzstan, and he served as the head of the Xinjiang Manas Research Centre in Ürümchi.

His detention was first reported via a list of detained intellectuals created by the Norway-based Uyghur intellectual Abduweli Ayup,⁶⁴ and partially corroborated by Mambatturdu's colleague Karl Reichl.⁶⁵ Mambatturdu's arrest was confirmed by our interviewee Hesriti:

Mambatturdu, a Manaschy, was arrested. He was an academic of the Xinjiang Social Science Institute. He is ethnic Kyrgyz and a very knowledgeable person. ... He was playing a leading role in conducting Manas research. He was arrested because he loved his own nationality. We can't say that his arrest was directly connected to his Manas research but I do think that his consciousness of his Kyrgyz identity was the reason for his arrest.⁶⁶

Disappointingly, it appears that Kyrgyzstan has been able to exercise little or no leverage over China regarding the abuses of ethnic Kyrgyz culture bearers and intellectuals.

Manas Deployed on the International Stage

As in the case of Muqam and Meshrep, staged versions of Manas are used to tell revisionist versions of the region's history at home and

Disappointingly, it appears that Kyrgyzstan has been able to exercise little or no leverage over China regarding the abuses of ethnic Kyrgyz culture bearers and intellectuals.

⁶³ Entry 2617, Xinjiang Victims Database, accessed January 19, 2023, <https://shahit.biz/eng/#2617>.

⁶⁴ Abduweli Ayup, "List of Uyghur intellectuals imprisoned in China from 2016 to the present," Uyghur Help Project, October 20, 2021, <https://uyghurhelp.org/2021/10/list-of-uyghur-intellectuals-imprisoned-in-china-from-2016-to-the-present-last-up-dated-by-abduweli-ayup-on-october-20-2021/>.

⁶⁵ Gene Bunin, "How Kyrgyzstan Abandoned its Own," *Living Otherwise*, July 4, 2019, <https://livingotherwise.com/2019/07/04/gene-a-bunin-how-kyrgyzstan-abandoned-its-own-in-xinjiang-while-kazakhstan-didnt/>.

⁶⁶ Interview, Hesriti, September 16, 2022.

abroad. China Global Times Network (CGTN) reported in 2019 that a Chinese language opera based on Manas had been staged in Beijing. The opera was based on the version of the epic as told by Jusup Mamai (1918–2014), but employed a Chinese language text prepared by Adyl Jumaturdu, a Beijing-based writer. The article also reported that the opera was due to be shown in Bishkek in 2019.⁶⁷ Here again in the case of Manas, we have a picture of detentions and coercion underlying the glossy presentation on the international stage of the Chinese government as protector of the heritage of the Uyghur region.

V. Meshrep

Meshrep, an umbrella term for Uyghur community gatherings that typically include food, music, joking and storytelling, and an informal community court, was added to UNESCO’s List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding in 2010. Both before and after the nomination, grassroots community Meshrep gatherings have been designated by the Chinese authorities as criminal activities, Meshrep leaders and participants have been arbitrarily detained, and Uyghur communities which formerly nurtured Meshrep have been uprooted.⁶⁸ In their place, staged Meshrep shows have been used as tourist entertainment and for cultural diplomacy.

China’s “safeguarding” of the Meshrep involves separating the practice from its community roots and promoting versions that serve national and regional policy goals. Safeguarding Meshrep, as that term is understood in the Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention as presupposing the “widest possible community participation,” is impossible under current conditions in the Uyghur region since all forms of civil assembly are regarded as suspicious. State security measures are directly hostile to the sustainability of

State security measures are directly hostile to the sustainability of grassroots Meshrep, precisely because of its role in creating meaningful local community.

⁶⁷ Yang Yan, “Manas: An epic preserved by the people of China and Kyrgyzstan,” CGTN, July 18, 2019, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2019-07-18/-Manas-An-epic-preserved-by-people-of-China-and-Kyrgyzstan--lqFMCvsywE/index.html>.

⁶⁸ “Living on the Margins: The Chinese State’s Demolition of Uyghur Communities,” UHRP, April 2, 2012, <https://uhrp.org/report/new-report-uhrp-living-margins-chinese-states-demolition-uyghur-communities-html/>.

grassroots Meshrep, precisely because of its role in creating meaningful local community.

Our interviewee Hesriti highlighted the value of Meshrep gatherings in promoting community identity and social cohesion:

We don't regard Meshrep as just for playing music, singing and dancing, community entertainment. It is an unofficial form of self-government, a core social structure for the Uyghur community. Meshrep helps the community to take care of its social issues. It's an essential social gathering to preserve Uyghurs' cultural and social existence and development.⁶⁹

These are core values in UNESCO's heritage framework and they are also the direct reason why the Chinese authorities have consistently and sometimes violently suppressed the grassroots practice of Meshrep over the past 30 years.

Suppression of a Grassroots Meshrep Movement in the 1990s

China's nomination of Meshrep gatherings to UNESCO presented a purely secular version of the tradition, laying emphasis on its role as a context for music and dance. This secular presentation directly contradicted the most significant grassroots Meshrep revival of the mid-1990s. The revival movement was an attempt by Uyghur social activists in the northern city of Ghulja (Ch: Yining) to counter endemic problems of youth alcoholism, drug abuse and crime by bringing young men into neo-traditional Meshrep gatherings which sought to foster a pious Muslim lifestyle, abstention from alcohol, and participation in competitive sports.

The Ghulja authorities clamped down on this movement, and the ensuing protest led to the imposition of martial law in 1995. These events formed part of the build-up to the "Ghulja Massacre" of February 5, 1997, when a large-scale protest was suppressed by police shootings and thousands of arrests. An Amnesty International report on the incident and its aftermath accused state

⁶⁹ Interview, Hesriti, September 16, 2022.

security forces of gross violations of human rights including the torture of detainees and a large number of executions.⁷⁰

In the aftermath of the violence, the XUAR People's Congress Chairman Hamudin Niyaz released a statement in which he distinguished "healthy" Meshrep which would "enrich the masses' cultural and recreational life" and "unhealthy" Meshrep which were used by "separatists" to "undermine national unity and carry out illegal religious activities."⁷¹

Anthropologist Jay Dautcher argued that this was not a valid division; instead, "the state felt its legitimacy threatened by any form of community activism it did not initiate and control. ... The state's vision of civic identity in Xinjiang had no place for the neighborhood as a basis for social belonging or grassroots social action."⁷²

Government Controls on Organizing Meshrep After 2009

China submitted its nomination file for Meshrep to UNESCO in 2009, a year marked by the July 5 incident in Ürümchi, when a peaceful Uyghur protest was countered by lethal force by the police, leading to a night of interethnic violence followed by sweeping security measures and mass arrests of Uyghurs.⁷³ In spite of this troubled history and immediate context, the submission was approved in 2010. Following its inscription, the regional government took extreme measures to control the practice of Meshrep. Tahir Imin provided details on these controls, and on the

⁷⁰ "Gross Violations of Human Rights in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region," Amnesty International via Refworld, April 21, 1999, <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/3ae6a9eb0.pdf>.

⁷¹ Jay Dautcher, *Down a Narrow Road: Identity and Masculinity in a Uyghur Community in Xinjiang China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674032828>.

⁷² Jay Dautcher, *Down a Narrow Road: Identity and Masculinity in a Uyghur Community in Xinjiang China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674032828>.

⁷³ James A. Millward, "Introduction: Does the 2009 Urumchi violence mark a turning point?" *Central Asian Survey*, 28, no.4 (2009), 347-360, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02634930903577128>.

use of staged Meshrep performances for commercial and political ends:

After the July 5, 2009 protest, the Uyghurs' freedom to organize Meshrep gradually disappeared. Instead, the Chinese government allowed Xinjiang TV2 to sell the rights to organize televised Meshrep to city and county governments. Permission to organize one Meshrep event cost 100,000 *yuan* [USD 14,757]. After a county or city got the rights to organize an event, they used it as a stage to advertise their businesses and companies or to disseminate their propaganda.

Only the county administration has the power to get permission to organize a Meshrep. First, they have to submit a request to the prefectural government, then to the Autonomous Regional Government. This means that organizing a Meshrep is a very serious political event. ... There is no possibility that ordinary people can organize Meshrep by themselves.⁷⁴

Imin also described the close control exercised over the content of staged Meshrep:

The Autonomous Region Cultural Department sends an investigative working group to ten different towns and villages. They hold discussions and watch their performances. ... They discuss all the details of how the folk musicians are going to perform, what kind of songs they will sing and what kind of clothes they are going to wear for the performance.

The Use of Meshrep in Anti-Religious Extremism Campaigns in 2014

Since UNESCO's inscription of Meshrep in 2010, Meshrep have been frequently used by local authorities in the service of political

⁷⁴ Tahir Imin, interview, August 2022, online.

campaigns.⁷⁵ In late 2014, Uyghur language media reported on a “weekly Meshrep to tackle extremism” campaign in Aqsu Prefecture, part of the wider “Strike Hard” campaign then being rolled out across the Uyghur region. Ömerjan Hakim, governor of Awat County in Aqsu, reported on his blog that his government had organized a series of Meshrep events involving compulsory public dancing by local residents in order “to prevent extremist religious ideology from infiltrating society and to totally eliminate extremist religious activities.”⁷⁶

These accounts show that heritage initiatives were being deployed right at the heart of campaigns which have been characterized as acts of cultural erasure.⁷⁷ As the 2022 OHCHR report notes, the “Strike Hard” campaign specifically restricts and suppresses practices that are part of Uyghur identity and cultural life, falling short of international rights standards, and raising concerns of discrimination on prohibited grounds.⁷⁸

Detention of Meshrep Participants

According to a Radio Free Asia (RFA) report, the regional authorities reasserted in 2017 that participation in Meshrep was an indication of “religious extremism” and that Meshrep were a “propaganda platform for ethnic separatism.” Several members of a long-standing Meshrep group in Kashgar were detained in May

Ömerjan Hakim, governor of Awat County in Aqsu, reported on his blog that his government had organized a series of Meshrep events involving compulsory public dancing by local residents in order “to prevent extremist religious ideology from infiltrating society and to totally eliminate extremist religious activities.”

⁷⁵ Peter Irwin notes a similar process of co-opting religious clerics as mouthpieces for government policy: “Islam Dispossessed: China’s Persecution of Uyghur Imams and Religious Figures,” UHRP, May 13, 2021, <https://uhrp.org/report/islam-dispossessed-chinas-persecution-of-uyghur-imams-and-religious-figures/>.

⁷⁶ Rachel Harris, “A Weekly *Māshrāp* to Tackle Religious Extremism: Music-making in Uyghur Communities and Intangible Cultural Heritage in China,” *Ethnomusicology* 64, no.1 (2020), 23-55, <https://scholarlypublishingcollective.org/uip/etm/article-abstract/64/1/23/234753/A-Weekly-Mashrap-to-Tackle-Extremism-Music-Making?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.

⁷⁷ Nathan Ruser, James Leibold, Kelsey Munro and Tilla Hoja, “Cultural erasure: Tracing the destruction of Uyghur and Islamic spaces in Xinjiang,” Australian Strategic Policy Institute, September 24, 2020, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/cultural-erasure>; Rachel Harris, “A Weekly *Māshrāp* to Tackle Religious Extremism: Music-making in Uyghur Communities and Intangible Cultural Heritage in China,” *Ethnomusicology* 64, no.1 (2020), 23-55, <https://scholarlypublishingcollective.org/uip/etm/article-abstract/64/1/23/234753/A-Weekly-Mashrap-to-Tackle-Extremism-Music-Making?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.

⁷⁸ “Assessment of Human Rights Concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People’s Republic of China,” OHCHR, August 31, 2022, 11, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/2022-08-31/22-08-31-final-assesment.pdf>.

2017. They were accused of “illegal gathering and organizing.” Notably, these “crimes” were related to Meshrep gatherings held prior to 2014.⁷⁹

According to the source, the Meshrep group had engaged in charitable fundraising, traditionally an important part of Meshrep activities.⁸⁰ Sixteen members of the Meshrep were detained in May 2017 and held for a year in the internment camps. Fourteen of them were subsequently given prison sentences. The group included well-respected and influential members of Kashgar society. Among them were Abliz Tohtaji, head of Kashgar’s Transport Department, who was jailed for seven years, and Obulqasim Abdurehim, an engineer for China Telecom.⁸¹



Detained Meshrep leader Behtiyar Abduweli pictured in an undated photo. RFA.

⁷⁹ “Transportation Chief, Fellow ‘Meshrep’ Members Confirmed Jailed in Xinjiang’s Kashgar,” Radio Free Asia (RFA), February 9, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/chief-02092021180453.html>.

⁸⁰ Rachel Harris and Ablet Kamalov, “Nation, Religion and Social Heat: Heritagizing Uyghur *māshrāp* in Kazakhstan,” *Central Asian Survey*, 40, no.1 (2021), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02634937.2020.1835825?journalCode=ccas20>.

⁸¹ “Transportation Chief, Fellow ‘Meshrep’ Members Confirmed Jailed in Xinjiang’s Kashgar,” RFA, February 9, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/chief-02092021180453.html>.

In the northern town of Ghulja, several people previously sentenced for their involvement in the Meshrep movement of the 1990s were re-arrested and sentenced again in 2017. According to RFA, a Uyghur man associated with the 1990s Meshrep movement, Abdusalam Rozi of Hudayaryuzi Bazaar in Ghulja County, was sentenced in 1998 and spent 18 years in prison. In 2017, he was detained again, and in 2019 he was handed a second 18-year prison sentence. According to a camp official, he was among around ten former prisoners associated with the Meshrep movement who were being held at the site for past “crimes,” including participating in a Meshrep group.⁸²

RFA also reported on the 2017 detention of 20 members of a Meshrep group organized by Uyghur teachers working at Ili Pedagogical University in Ghulja. Named detainees include Meshrep leader Behtiyar Abduweli (photo above), son of a prominent Uyghur musician; Nijat Sopi; Dilmurat Awut; and Abdullah Ismail, Party Secretary of the university’s Marxism Institute.

According to two of our interviewees, Behtiyar Abduweli was a highly-respected member of Uyghur society. He was well-known in the sphere of sport, and organized many public events as well as Meshrep. He was involved with the soccer matches organized by Meshrep groups in Ghulja in the 1990s, and was again organizing Meshrep gatherings for university teachers in 2013.⁸³

RFA noted that Behtiyar had spoken out against the local authorities attempts to ban the initiative in 1997. His outspokenness 25 years ago was defined in 2017 by Chinese authorities as “opposing the Chinese government” and “inciting ethnic tensions in the society.”⁸⁴

The leading academic and former Professor of Folklore at Xinjiang University, Rahile Dawut, mentioned above in connection with her research on Muqam, was also active in research on Meshrep, and served as editor of an important book series on

⁸² “Uyghur Who Served 18 Years in Jail After Ghulja Incident Again Handed 18-Year Sentence,” RFA, February 16, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/jail-02162021145630.html>.

⁸³ Europe-based witness X; Hesriti, interview, September 2022.

⁸⁴ “Uyghur sports trainer confirmed arrested by Chinese authorities in Xinjiang,” RFA, May 26, 2022, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/behtiyar-abduweli-05262022160727.html>.

Meshrep. Dawut was detained in 2017 and remains in detention at the time of writing.⁸⁵

These cases support a number of conclusions which run contrary to human rights standards: that individuals who have previously served out their prison sentences may at any time be re-arrested and imprisoned for the same initial “crime;” that individuals engaged in Meshrep organization have been imprisoned even though they are ostensibly secular and even Party members; while academics engaged in research on cultural traditions are also at high risk of detention.⁸⁶ These examples make clear that some of those detained in connection with organizing Meshrep were targeted purely for their efforts to use Meshrep to foster civil society and strengthen local communities.

These stage shows, like the staged Muqam performances detailed above, serve to mask the dispossession of culture bearers, and are strategically deployed to whitewash the ongoing abuses in the Uyghur region.

Meshrep Deployed on the International Stage

Since the UNESCO inscription, Meshrep performances have been frequently deployed on the national and international stage to promote state narratives of a “joyful” and “harmonious” Xinjiang, for example the bilingual song-and-dance show “The Meshrep is Dancing” promoted by the Beijing Fine Arts Troupe in 2021. Typically, this entails the development and adaptation of local music repertoires by arts professionals outside the local communities, often for commercial profit; Xinjiang Dilinaer Arts Troupe’s choreographed show, “Forever Meshrep,” for example, has toured internationally since 2013.⁸⁷ These stage shows, like the

⁸⁵ Rahile Dawut and Yasin Muhpul, *Uyghur Meshrep medeniyiti*, (4 volumes, Ürümchi: *Shinjang guzel senet-foto suret neshriyati*, 2011); Chris Buckley and Austin Ramzy, “Star Scholar Disappears as Crackdown Engulfs Western China,” *New York Times*, August 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/10/world/asia/china-xinjiang-rahile-dawut.html>.

⁸⁶ Abdullah Qazanchi, “The Disappearance of Uyghur Intellectual and Cultural Elites: A New Form of Eliticide,” UHRP, December 8, 2021, <https://uhrp.org/report/the-disappearance-of-uyghur-intellectual-and-cultural-elites-a-new-form-of-eliticide/>. Peter Irwin similarly notes the practice of re-arresting religious leaders for historical crimes. “Islam Dispossessed: China’s Persecution of Uyghur Imams and Religious Figures,” May 13, 2021, <https://uhrp.org/report/islam-dispossessed-chinas-persecution-of-uyghur-imams-and-religious-figures/>; “International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,” UNOHCHR, December 16, 1966, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>.

⁸⁷ Kang Ruiqin, “Lotus Award Winning Dance: Forever Meshrep,” *Youlin Magazine*, July 28, 2016, <https://www.youlinmagazine.com/article/lotus-award-winning-dance-forever-Meshrep/NjM0>; “Across China: Ethnic exchange thrives under Belt and Road initiative,” *Xinhua*, May 24, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/24/c_136311906.htm.

staged Muqam performances detailed above, serve to mask the dispossession of culture bearers, and are strategically deployed to whitewash the ongoing abuses in the Uyghur region.

VI. The Tengritagh Mountain Range

In similar ways to the intangible heritage items discussed above, items of natural heritage in the Uyghur region are also deeply implicated in the ongoing human rights violations and are used to present revisionist versions of the region's history. The Tengritagh mountain range was added in 2013 to UNESCO's World Heritage List under the Chinese name "Tianshan" as an area of outstanding natural beauty and ecological diversity.⁸⁸ Recent research has documented the forcible displacement of indigenous Kazakh communities and the sale of their ancestral lands in this mountain range to Chinese tourist companies for commercial development. According to interviewee testimony, tourist development across the Tengritagh mountains has led to significant ecological damage and excluded communities from accessing their former lands:

China submitted Tengritagh as an item of World Heritage, and it promised UNESCO that the local people's social and ecological lived environment would be protected, but in actual fact the government has taken away the herders' rights to live in the mountain areas. I heard that many Kazakhs who lived on the Tengritagh pasturelands were forced to move out, and it was sold to commercial property developers and tourist agencies. These places have provided new opportunities to make a fortune, and the environment has been badly exploited.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Xinjiang Tianshan, UNESCO World Heritage List, accessed January 19, 2023, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1414/>. In the same way that we reject the toponym "Xinjiang," we prefer the local name "Tengritagh" over the Chinese "Tianshan," which we regard as a colonial term.

⁸⁹ Tahir Imin, interview, August 2022, online.

Forced Relocation and Suppression of Protest

Canada-based academic Guldana Salimjan has conducted a detailed investigation of the abuses surrounding the designation of the Tengritagh mountain range as a natural heritage site.⁹⁰ In 2005, the regional government began to relocate herders, farmers, and miners out of the Bogda Lake area.⁹¹ In 2012, the regional government implemented a grazing ban on 100 km² (36.6 miles²) of pasture around the lake, and demolished the local shops and buildings there.

Salimjan believes that these actions were undertaken specifically so that the site would meet the World Heritage application's requirements concerning ecological conservation, and that they form part of a wider policy in the Uyghur region of resettling pastoral herders in towns and cities, and developing their former herding lands as sites for ecological conservation. In practice, the approach to ecological conservation in the Uyghur region means the development of ecotourism to generate new sources of revenue from the land. Contracts are typically awarded to companies from eastern China, and the revenue overwhelmingly flows back into eastern China.⁹²

The Qarajon grasslands, situated in Tekes County, Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture, are specifically named (in Chinese transliteration: Kalajun) in the UNESCO designation. In 2011, the local government banned grazing on 1,600 km² (585.6 miles²) of grassland, an area which provided a livelihood for over 200 households engaged in animal husbandry. According to Salimjan's sources, these households did not receive the promised compensation due to corruption within the local administration. Instead, they were forcibly moved off their land by the local police,

In practice, the approach to ecological conservation in the Uyghur region means the development of ecotourism to generate new sources of revenue from the land. Contracts are typically awarded to companies from eastern China, and the revenue overwhelmingly flows back into eastern China.

⁹⁰ Guldana Salimjan, "Camp land: Settler ecotourism and Kazakh dispossession in contemporary Xinjiang," *Lausan*, September 1, 2021, <https://lausancollective.com/2021/camp-land/>.

⁹¹ This forms part of a wider pattern of displacement and destruction of communities across the region; for details of the implementation of similar policies in Kashgar, see: "Living on the Margins: The Chinese State's Demolition of Uyghur Communities," UHRP, April 2, 2012, <https://uhrp.org/report/new-report-uhrp-living-margins-chinese-states-demolition-uyghur-communities-html/>.

⁹² Henryk Szadziewski, Mary Mostafanezhad and Galen Murton, "Territorialization on tour: The tourist gaze along the Silk Road Economic Belt in Kashgar, China," *Geoforum* 128 (2022), 135-147, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0016718521003328>.

leading to the death of a large number of livestock. The herders petitioned in May 2012 to be compensated for their economic losses but were awarded less than a quarter of the amount originally promised.



Still from a news report documenting the forced removal of Kazakh herders from Qarajon in 2014.

A Chinese news report on the Qarajon incident shows Kazakh women trekking out of their land on foot, carrying their children and their belongings.⁹³ In the video, they complain that the government had sent trucks to demolish their homes, that their land had been allocated to tourism sites, and that many of their livestock had died after being chased by police vehicles. They claim that government officials had pressured them to sign relocation papers and evicted them with no place to go. The report shows local Kazakhs remonstrating with the police, citing the PRC's grassland laws to argue for their legal right to access the land they had lived in for generations. Their protest was suppressed by the local police, and resisting herders were rounded up and arrested.

⁹³ Erkin Azat, "2014 Kalajun Riots," YouTube, April 28, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5ALhghmGno>.

After the herders' forced relocation, the Ili Tekes County government transferred the land rights of the Qarajon grassland to the tourism company Haoxinzhong Tianshan. The company was renamed Kalajun Investment Company in March 2012, and given the rights to manage Qarajon as an international ecotourism site.⁹⁴ The company commissioned the regional Environment Protection Technology Center to assess the Qarajon ecotourism construction project, but there was no consultation with the local community.⁹⁵ In 2013, Qarajon received UNESCO World Heritage status, and in 2016 it attained national status as a top ecotourism site in China.

The experience of local people in this area is echoed in interview testimony which refers to displacement and tourist development across the Tengritagh range:

Take Nanshan, the mountains south of Ürümchi. ... The government built houses for officials, and built factories close to the mountain, and turned Nanshan into a commercial industrialized suburb. ... The Kazakhs were not happy with the developing situation, so they went to the higher authorities to appeal. They [the government] gave them a bit of compensation, then sent them away. ... At that time many Kazakhs also published an appeal letter on the Internet, but due to China's censorship this has now disappeared.⁹⁶

Salimjan reports on the case of a Kazakh student named Nurbaqyt Nasihat,⁹⁷ then studying at Jiangnan University in eastern China, who made an appeal on behalf of another community of herders dispossessed from their lands in Mori Kazakh Autonomous County in Changji Hui Autonomous Prefecture. Nurbaqyt gathered 14,000 herders' signatures, and on April 10, 2014, he went to petition

⁹⁴ Guldana Salimjan, "Camp land: Settler ecotourism and Kazakh dispossession in contemporary Xinjiang," Lausan, September 1, 2021, <https://lausancollective.com/2021/camp-land/>.

⁹⁵ Szadziewski et al note a similar pattern of the co-option of the tourist industry for security purposes and the unequal distribution of benefits, in: Henryk Szadziewski, Mary Mostafanezhad and Galen Murton, "Territorialization on tour: The tourist gaze along the Silk Road Economic Belt in Kashgar, China," *Geoforum* 128 (2022), 135-147, <https://www.science-direct.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0016718521003328>.

⁹⁶ Tahir Imin, interview, August 2022, online.

⁹⁷ Entry 1461, Xinjiang Victims Database, accessed January 19, 2023, <https://shahit.biz/eng/#1461>.

central government authorities in Beijing, accompanied by 11 other Kazakhs. In May, they were taken back to Mori, hooded and chained. Nurbaqyt was interrogated and beaten by the local police. He was detained for eight months, and then sentenced to a further two years and eight months for assembling a crowd to disrupt social order.⁹⁸

In January 2023, a new case of individual persecution relating to advocacy for these herders emerged in international media. The Ürümchi-based Kazakh singer, Zhanargül Zhumatay, was well known for her work with heritage initiatives. In 2008, she established a cultural promotion company which was awarded Chinese government prizes for its promotion of ethnic harmony. However, she fell foul of the authorities when she spoke publicly of the need for proper compensation for Kazakh herders who had been forcefully resettled. In 2017 she was detained and spent two years in a camp. After her release she was not permitted to work or to collect her passport to exit to Kazakhstan. In January 2023, observers reported that she was being threatened with re-arrest.⁹⁹

Enclosure and Rebranding

Our interviewee Hesriti provided extensive testimony on the enclosure of former herding lands around the Tengritagh range, effectively excluding locals who could not afford the high entry prices now charged by the new owners of their lands:

It's widely known how the government treated the Kazakh nomads who lived on the northern Tengritagh range. They allocated them new houses in the suburbs of county towns, and forced them to move there. After the government had removed the Kazakhs, they found Han Chinese from Inner China and sold them the land where Kazakh herders used

⁹⁸ Testimony provided by Nurbaqyt's sister Mariya Nasihat: Atajurt, "Soxbat," YouTube, November 15, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GJufI_Uhcq4.

⁹⁹ Ruth Ingram, "Zhanargul Zhumatai: A Dramatic Interview with an Ethnic Kazakh Camp Survivor Who May Soon 'Disappear'," January 4, 2023, <https://bitterwinter.org/zhanargul-zhumatai-a-dramatic-interview/>; Entry 48985, Xinjiang Victims Database, accessed February 7, 2023, <https://shahit.biz/eng/#48985>.

to live. Then these Han Chinese turned this mountain area into holiday resorts, and put up fences and buildings.

The holiday resorts were built along the northwestern edge of the Tengritagh range, and mostly around the Ürümchi, Ghulja, Bortala, Altay and Chöchek regions, in Nilqa, Toqquz Tara and Tekes counties. ... Before that anyone could freely go and enjoy the fresh air and drink the fresh water of the mountain. Now locals can't do that. These beautiful places have been turned into resorts, and you have to pay to enter. The entrance fee is 50, 100 or 200 *yuan* [USD 7.50, 15 or 30]. Nowadays, Uyghurs, Kazakhs and Kyrgyz whose ancestors lived there for generations can't even visit.

Sayram Lake on the northern edge of Tengritagh is a very famous spot for travelers on the way to Ghulja. We used to visit the lake when we drove this way. We could rest there and swim. But the government first set up 2.5m high defense wires and then they replaced the wires with sheet steel, and sealed off the whole shore of the lake. Now we can't even see if Sayram Lake exists.¹⁰⁰

Just like the intangible heritage described above, this natural heritage site is used to rewrite the region's history. During a 2015 visit to the tourist site Bogda Lake in the Tengritagh mountains, Guldana Salimjan observed a newly built Taoist temple, and the Chinese characters "Flying Dragon Pond" carved into the cliff above the lake. Tourist signage designated Bogda Lake as the bath tub of the mythical Taoist goddess Xiwangmu. As Salimjan argues:

The artificially manufactured tourist landscape in Bogda Lake, which reduces Kazakhs who have lived on their land for generations to a mere commodity, is only the tip of the iceberg in the systemic dispossession of Turkic peoples and other minorities in Xinjiang. ... As China aims to be a global leader in tackling climate change, ethnic minorities in Xinjiang and their livelihoods have borne the brunt of top-

¹⁰⁰ Hesriti, interview, September 2022.

down policies that are still geared towards intensifying extractivism and economic development.¹⁰¹

This rebranding of place reflects the wider policy of drawing the region's history more tightly into the Chinese sphere, effectively erasing the Kazakh herders' long-standing claim to and relationship with the land. The use of the Chinese name for the Tengritagh mountain range on UNESCO's platforms further serves this project of cultural erasure.

VII. Karez

The Uyghur region's Karez irrigation system has been on the World Heritage Tentative List since 2008. UNESCO describes the Tentative List as "an inventory of those properties which each State Party intends to consider for nomination."¹⁰² The Karez system is a network of gravity-fed underground channels that transport water from the Tengritagh mountains into the Turpan Basin. Recent investigations have revealed industrial development around the Karez system which risks serious harm to the environment and to the health of local communities.

The oldest of the Karez channels have been carbon dated to the early 15th century. Karez serve as an integral part of an ecosystem, providing water for domestic use, farm irrigation, native plants and wildlife habitats. While the number of Karez in the region has decreased rapidly in the last 20 years due to industrial development, oil exploration, and large-scale farming, more than 600 of these channels are still flowing.¹⁰³

Karez systems are not only a source of livelihood for local populations but also carry cultural meaning. Shalamu Abudu, a Uyghur hydrologist and water resources expert, contends that "a

This rebranding of place reflects the wider policy of drawing the region's history more tightly into the Chinese sphere, effectively erasing the Kazakh herders' long-standing claim to and relationship with the land. The use of the Chinese name for the Tengritagh mountain range on UNESCO's platforms further serves this project of cultural erasure.

¹⁰¹ Guldana Salimjan, "Camp land: Settler ecotourism and Kazakh dispossession in contemporary Xinjiang," *Lausan*, September 1, 2021, <https://lausancollective.com/2021/camp-land/>.

¹⁰² UNESCO, "Tentative Lists," accessed on January 19, 2023, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentative-lists/>.

¹⁰³ "Without land, there is no life: Chinese state suppression of Uyghur environmental activism," UHRP, July 20, 2016, 11-14, <https://docs.uhrp.org/pdf/Without-land-there-is-no-life.pdf>.

Karez system is not only a structure to extract groundwater, but is also an integration of the history, culture, and unique knowledge of its builders. ... Cultural traditions also helped the Karez system to be handed down as a legacy.”¹⁰⁴ According to our interviewee Hesriti:

Karez is our forefathers’ outstanding contribution to human civilization. It is a highly complicated water irrigation system which lies deep underground, and can bring water from one town to another town. Because the surface land level is not even, they had to measure the level of the water source under the ground, and they dug those channels using candles and oil lamps. Our ancestors created the Karez; they fought against the desert and turned the Turpan oasis green.¹⁰⁵

Recent research by Laura Murphy and Nyrola Elimä has shown that a Chinese company, supported by the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the lending arm of the World Bank, built a lead battery disposal facility on top of part of the Karez system in Turpan with potentially serious harm to the environment and to the health of local communities who are the culture bearers of the Karez system.¹⁰⁶

New Historical Narratives

In the case of Karez, as with other items of Uyghur heritage submitted to UNESCO, the presentation of history is manipulated to create links with Chinese history. Hesriti provided concrete details:

[A] Chinese company, supported by the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the lending arm of the World Bank, built a lead battery disposal facility on top of part of the Karez system in Turpan with potentially serious harm to the environment and to the health of local communities.

¹⁰⁴ Laura T. Murphy, Kendyl Salcito and Nyrola Elimä, “Financing & Genocide: Development Finance and the Crisis in the Uyghur Region,” Helena Kennedy Center, February 16, 2022, 28-36. <https://www.shu.ac.uk/helena-kennedy-centre-international-justice/research-and-projects/all-projects/financing-and-genocide>.

¹⁰⁵ Hesriti, interview, September 2022.

¹⁰⁶ Laura T. Murphy, Kendyl Salcito and Nyrola Elimä, “Financing & Genocide: Development Finance and the Crisis in the Uyghur Region,” Helena Kennedy Center, February 16, 2022, <https://www.shu.ac.uk/helena-kennedy-centre-international-justice/research-and-projects/all-projects/financing-and-genocide>.

In the 1980s they [the Chinese authorities] established a Karez Museum in Turpan in order to protect the Karez and introduce them to the wider world. In the museum they displayed the historical tools, and the biographies of those people who played a significant role in creating and develop the Karez. In recent years, all the historical records about Karez that related to the Uyghurs were removed from the museum, and now they display their own fabricated history of the Karez.¹⁰⁷

A detailed Uyghur language article published by RFA refutes China's claim that Karez were created under influence of "Central Plains" technology.¹⁰⁸ In a 60-part CCTV documentary funded by the XUAR Propaganda Department entitled "Historical Narrative of Xinjiang," it was suggested that Turpan's Karez were created as a result of the influence of the ditch and well drilling technology of China's Central Plains. The documentary suggests that Karez technology was transmitted to Xinjiang by one Lin Zeshu (1785–1850), an exiled Chinese official. In fact, this supposed transmission postdates the earliest carbon dating of Karez by 300 years.

Uyghur and Turkish researchers argue that wells and water structures built in the inland provinces of China are fundamentally different from those constructed in the arid regions of Inner Asia, and that the Karez of the Uyghur homeland share structural and geographical similarities with similar irrigation channels found in Central and Western Asia, including ancient Iran.

In spite of these challenges, the story of Lin Zeshu is included in China's submission to UNESCO. This new historical narrative provides further evidence of the often clumsy attempts to tie the history of the Uyghur region more tightly to China, manipulating the meaning and history of items of heritage in order to further its territorial claims.

¹⁰⁷ Hesriti, interview, September 2022.

¹⁰⁸ "Uyghur karezlirining heqiqi igiliri kim?" RFA, September 21, 2022, <https://www.rfa.org/uyghur/mulahize/kariz-09202022140905.html>.

Environmental Damage to Karez

A 2017 RFA investigation raised concerns that Karez are threatened by over-drilling of power wells, climate change, inadequate investment by the Chinese authorities and lack of awareness of aquifer protection. During phone interviews, local officials confirmed that 90 percent of Karez in the Turpan Basin are on the verge of drying out. According to official estimates, underground water levels in Turpan are dropping at a rate of three million cubic meters (106 million cubic feet) per year. One official claimed: “We used to have more than 1,000 Karez in Turpan during the 1950s, but these days there are only 20–30 of them left containing water.”¹⁰⁹

Hesriti further suggested that the remodeling of local villages in order to promote easy surveillance had also contributed to the degradation of the Karez system:

The Karez system has been severely damaged because all the trees above the Karez have been cut down. It’s vital to keep the Karez’s ecological and environmental balance and to protect the soil. As part of the government’s recent crackdown and surveillance system, they demand that a camera on the western edge of a village must be able to see an egg on the eastern edge of the village. If there are any obstacles – trees or houses – they destroy them. In this way they completely ruined many Uyghur villages in Turpan and severely damaged the foundations of the Karez water irrigation system.¹¹⁰

Murphy and Elima have raised serious concerns about toxic waste and pollution of the Karez system in their 2022 report.¹¹¹ Camel Group is among China’s largest battery manufacturers focused on the production, distribution, and recycling of lead-acid storage batteries for car engines. In 2019, Camel Group expanded its

[A] camera on the western edge of a village must be able to see an egg on the eastern edge of the village. If there are any obstacles – trees or houses – they destroy them. In this way they completely ruined many Uyghur villages in Turpan and severely damaged the foundations of the Karez water irrigation system.

¹⁰⁹ “Exploitation Puts Ancient Well System at Risk in Uyghur Region,” RFA, April 27, 2017, www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/wells-04272017165849.html.

¹¹⁰ Hesriti, interview, September 2022.

¹¹¹ Laura T. Murphy, Kendyl Salcito and Nyrola Elimä, “Financing & Genocide: Development Finance and the Crisis in the Uyghur Region,” Helena Kennedy Center, February 16, 2022, 28-36, <https://www.shu.ac.uk/helena-kennedy-centre-international-justice/research-and-projects/all-projects/financing-and-genocide>.

recycling operations in Toksun County near Turpan. Karez channels are common in the area where Camel Group established its recycling, smelting, and manufacturing facilities.

Battery breaking carries a high environmental risk, because old batteries can leak acid, and because the secondary smelting of lead from batteries risks the leaking of an array of heavy metals. Lead battery recycling facilities have been associated with lead poisoning worldwide. Satellite imagery of the industrial zone locates the Camel facility directly above at least two Karez canal systems, while the nearest vertical shaft lies well within the 1km perimeter which is required by international standards for industrial development in order to protect local populations. There are urgent concerns around the potential poisoning of the water system and severe health impacts for the local population, which require urgent investigation.

VIII. Conclusions

Heritage management is not an innocent celebration of culture, but a selective process that leads to hierarchies and exclusion. In China, heritage is used as a soft tool of governance to control and manage history, and to steer people's memories, sense of place, and identities in particular ways.¹¹² When the management of heritage is used in tandem with the hard modes of governance currently in play in the Uyghur region – ones that states and international bodies have designated a form of genocide – then the heritage system is complicit in those acts of genocide.

China's approach to heritage in the Uyghur region takes the heritage out of the hands of its rightful owners, by expelling communities from their ancestral lands and polluting the environment, by destroying built heritage and de-sacralizing religious traditions, and by criminalizing grassroots cultural practices, while using their staged representations to promote new political narratives. Culture bearers are dispossessed and imprisoned while their history is rewritten, and the economic

Culture bearers are dispossessed and imprisoned while their history is rewritten, and the economic benefits of heritage accrue in the hands of the ethnic majority and flow back to eastern China.

¹¹² Christina Maags and Marina Svensson, "Introduction," in *Chinese Heritage in the Making: Experiences, negotiations and contestations*, eds Maags & Svensson, (Amsterdam University Press, 2018), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2204rz8>.

benefits of heritage accrue in the hands of the ethnic majority and flow back to eastern China.

As UN Special Rapporteur Karima Bennouné argued in her 2016 report:

There are many examples where destruction is part of the “cultural engineering” practiced by diverse extremists. To deal with these forms of cultural heritage destruction, the international community must tackle, in accordance with international human rights standards, extremist and fundamentalist ideologies, sectarianism and discriminatory attitudes towards, inter alia, those with different views, minorities, indigenous peoples, which often lead to cultural cleansing in the form of cultural heritage destruction.¹¹³

Bennouné’s comments are clearly applicable to the Uyghur region where cultural engineering, cleansing, and destruction driven by discriminatory attitudes are manifest in both policy and in practice. The situation requires urgent intervention by the international community.

IX. Recommendations

- The Special Rapporteur on Cultural Rights and the High Commissioner for Human Rights should advocate for a stronger and more effective UNESCO response to abuses in the Uyghur region, including addressing letters to the UNESCO Director-General and to the chairpersons of the respective Committees.
- In order to initiate the process of reactive monitoring, as provided in paragraphs 169-176 of the Operational Guidelines for the World Heritage Convention, one or more States Parties to the Convention should bring to the attention of the World Heritage Center their concerns that Tengritagh (Ch: Tianshan) mountain range has seriously

¹¹³ Karima Bennouné, “Report of the Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights,” UNESCO, February 3, 2016, 16, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/831612?ln=en>.

deteriorated and its Outstanding Universal Value is threatened, as set out in this report.

- One or more States Parties to the ICH Convention should bring the information provided in this report to the attention of the ICH Committee at its 18th Session in Botswana (December 2023) and request that the Committee address a specific request to China for additional information on its implementation of the Convention in the XUAR and on the status of Muqam, Meshrep, and Manas, with particular attention to the widest possible participation of the Uyghur, Kyrgyz and Kazakh communities in the practice and safeguarding of their respective heritage.
- At such time as China submits its scheduled periodic reports to the Committee concerning its implementation of the Convention and/or the safeguarding status of Muqam, Meshrep, and Manas, the ICH Committee should rigorously scrutinize such reports and should ensure that they accurately reflect the actual situation of that heritage within the XUAR and that the reports are prepared with the broadest possible involvement of “the communities, groups and, where applicable, individuals concerned as well as relevant non-governmental organizations” (Operational Directive 160).
- The advisory bodies to the World Heritage Committee and the NGOs accredited to provide advisory services to the ICH Committee should give due consideration to the information in the present report, disseminate it widely among their members and constituents, and take further actions within their competence to (1) monitor the situation of cultural heritage within the XUAR and the human rights of the Uyghur, Kyrgyz and Kazakh communities, and (2) advocate for the safeguarding of such heritage and the protection of such rights.
- In order to initiate the process of enhanced follow-up, as provided in paragraphs 40.1-40.3 of the Operational Directives for the ICH Convention, one or more States Parties to the Convention should request the removal of Muqam, Meshrep, and Manas from their respective lists,

given the serious and substantiated evidence set out in this report that the elements no longer satisfy the criteria for inscription on those lists.



© 2023 Uyghur Human Rights Project
1602 L Street NW | Washington, DC 20036
+1 202-478-1920 | www.uhrp.org | info@uhrp.org