

WRITTEN BRIEF TO THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS OF  
THE HOUSE OF COMMONS OF CANADA

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Rather than point to material that is already published and in the public domain, I draw here on my own interviews and observations conducted during two research trips to Xinjiang:

- **Field Trip 1: 13 – 25 September 2016, Urumchi**
- **Field Trip 2: 28 June – 18 July 2018, Urumchi and Kashgar**

I will illustrate the political situation in Xinjiang in 2016 and 2018 respectively, illuminating changes over time. I will introduce my material using sub-headings to demarcate sub-themes.

1. DISAPPEARANCES / INTERNMENT CAMPS:

**Detention of Famous Cultural Figures (“Killing the Chicken to Show the Monkey”)**

On 19 September 2016, I met my friend Abdurehim Heyit – the famous singer, dutar player and peaceful nationalist who would later be detained - by chance in one of the Uyghur districts of regional capital Urumchi. I had not previously contacted him by phone as I was concerned that, in the context of the “People’s War on Terror” (since 2014), it would not be safe to do so. He was pleased to see me, though interacted very quietly / was circumspect, and we arranged to meet on another day. It was significant that when I stopped to speak with him, the Uyghur woman I was with pointedly continued walking up the road, and clearly did not want to be seen talking to him (indicating deep political anxiety). When we met up on 22 September 2016, Heyit talked to me about his recent foreign travels – in Iran a month earlier, where he performed with Iranian musicians, and in Turkey (both Muslim majority countries, which may partly explain his subsequent detention). By the time I returned to Xinjiang in 2018, Heyit had been “disappeared”, reportedly around February 2017 (6 months after the accession of new CCP regional Party Secretary, Chen Quanguo). A dutar player and musical instrument seller working at the Urumchi Grand Bazaar told me on 4 July 2018 of his extreme sadness that Heyit had been taken away, explaining that his detention was “a misunderstanding”, that some lines in one of Heyit’s songs had been misinterpreted as “jihadist”. But he protested: **“There is nothing extremist in any of Heyit's songs. The problem is, these Hans [the majority Han Chinese] don't understand our language. They look at the Uyghur language, try to translate it, get it wrong, then misinterpret the meanings”**. The next day, 5 July 2018, this respondent lamented: **“Some people say that he is already dead; others that he is alive. And yes, we too have heard that he was sentenced to 10 years in prison. But once someone is taken away, there is no way of knowing what has happened to them. They simply disappear.”** He also said that his wife had previously been temporarily detained before being allowed to return home.

**Fear of Internment, Self-Censorship and Trauma**

In 2018, the extreme fear of being sent to an internment camp meant that almost none of my long-term Uyghur friends and respondents in Urumchi would meet with me – association with foreigners was one of the criteria that made a Uyghur “untrustworthy” and eligible for internment. I met with one friend, G – a street trader – for just 3 minutes on 30 June 2018. G had previously not responded to my texts and calls, so I went to his outdoor place of work under cover of darkness. A prefab “convenience police station” had been constructed literally 20 metres to the right of the restaurant outside which he worked. I approached quietly from behind, placed my hand on his shoulder, and asked quietly if it would cause him a problem if I stayed to talk. First, G replied: **“It is too dangerous to see you now, but I can't help but want to see you”** (smiling). Then his smile faded, and he said: **“Many of my mates have been taken away”**, confirming that he meant to **“school”** (the local euphemism for internment camps). He said he had not taken my phone calls (made from a foreign-registered mobile, because local Chinese SIM cards were now forbidden to foreign tourists) since **“if I had done so, I would not be here now”**. I bade him stay safe and left.

On 2 July 2018, I tracked down Z, another old Uyghur friend in Urumchi. When I asked after him at his old workplace, a Uyghur colleague phoned him and he appeared within 5 minutes. Without missing a beat, Z hushed down my excitement and bade me follow him down some stairs into the basement, which was empty and free of CCTV. There, we sat in a private booth with the curtains drawn (the room was set out like a restaurant). He subsequently confirmed that 3 of his friends were “off studying at school” (i.e. in internment camps). He explained that it was not only pious people who were being detained. Often, the authorities claimed detainees had saved “illegal content” on their phones, especially pictures. At this point, he became nervous and suggested we arrange to meet again on another day, with a mutual friend (a Uyghur policeman), in a safe place where neither of them was known. He warned we could not use my foreign mobile phone for communication (too dangerous) and asked me for my local hotel telephone number. Our second meeting (without his friend the policeman, who had been too afraid to come) lasted around 30 minutes. Z came to my hotel close to midnight, phoned me in my room, asked me to come down to street level, and then insisted we walked constantly around in the dark back streets – afraid that anyone should see him continuously in the company of a foreigner. Z told how some of his friends had been detained simply because they had previously been arrested at the time of the Urumchi riots in 2009. Even though one had completed his time in prison for his supposed involvement in those riots, he was re-arrested in 2017 when CCP Regional Party Secretary Chen Quanguo’s “Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) Regulations on De-extremification” were published. Another of Z’s friends, who had gone on holiday with that person in recent years was also interned (guilt by association is common, as with *Sippenhaft* in Nazi Germany).

Chance meetings with strangers revealed a similar level of trauma. On 2 July 2018, a green-eyed Uyghur lady in her late fifties or early sixties at Nanmen in Urumchi engaged me in conversation after I smiled at her. She said her 14-year-old daughter wanted to learn English and was very happy (tears in her eyes) when I said I could correspond with her daughter by email from the UK. She invited me to come and eat together at her home next time, asked if I was a teacher, and said she could tell I had a kind heart. Then she said: “You have given me hope. I have no hope coming from anywhere else. Everything is dark; so many people have been taken away and put in prison. [here, the tears almost coursed down her face, but she squeezed my arm and fought them back]. We are a good family! We’re not chaotic!” [the suggestion here is that they are not “terrorists” or “extremists”].

### **Internment camps – physical and mental health impacts**

On 18 July 2018, I had a low conversation with a Uyghur man in a phone tech shop in Urumchi. He confirmed he had two friends in the camps and stated: “People are taken for small things, not necessarily always because of religious practice. Two of my friends were taken because the police wanted to know where they had earned so much money, and simply assumed it was via criminal activities”. He confirmed that he had not heard of anyone coming out of the internment camps, except for those who fell ill: “Some people were given ‘medicine’ to change their thinking, ‘for their minds’. When this made them mentally ill, only then were they released.”

On 11 July 2018, I had a low conversation with a female primary school teacher and pharmacist in their thirties in a Kashgar restaurant over lunch. When I mentioned the “schools”, they sent one another smiles and knowing looks. The pharmacist confirmed: “Almost no one is coming out of the internment camps, only those who have fallen ill in the camps”. Both observed that it was very hard to get information about the camps, that no one heard anything about what was going on in them or dared speak about them: “We used to chat a lot, we Uyghurs... but now we don't talk any more. We are so afraid of saying the wrong thing”.

### **Internment camps – Uyghur men missing from the streets**

On 5 July 2018, I conducted a gendered head count of passers-by from a Uyghur restaurant near Urumchi’s Grand Bazar complex, to test whether there were more women than men at large (it was

believed that most internment camp detainees were men). Between 4-5pm Xinjiang local time, 320 Uyghur women passed compared with only 206 men. Caveats:

- I did not count school-aged children (although it is possible that teenage boys may also have been disappeared)
- Some of the women may have been Hui Muslims, as many dress similarly to Uyghur women in Xinjiang
- I may have not counted some Uyghurs who look Chinese
- I may have double-counted some people who passed in one direction then back in the other
- The location and time of day may have skewed the result.

Notwithstanding, this result seemed to confirm the widespread sense at that time that Uyghur men were missing from the streets.

### **Internment camps – double detentions (=both parents)**

On 12 July 2018, I visited a part of Kashgar Old Town that was off the beaten tourist track, and still had its original adobe walls as well as many beautiful arched wooden window frames and colourful painted gates (as traditionally). It was unusually quiet, apart from the occasional group of small children and their grandmas looking after them. Parents were noticeable in their absence (likely interned), and many homes were padlocked. There had clearly been a campaign here at Chinese Spring Festival to impose Han Chinese traditions, evidenced by faded, weather-battered red lanterns and New Year rhyming couplets. Many of the doors also carried a Chinese-language plaque on them, reading "Civilised household" or "Peaceful household" – perhaps the occupants' last-ditch attempt to prove their loyalty to the Chinese authorities.

### **Internment camps – coercive Chinese language tuition**

On 6 July 2018, a melon seller in Urumchi (originally from Kashgar in south Xinjiang) and his fellow trader told me that some people were now being released from the internment camps (they were among only a few respondents to make this claim). When I asked why the people were detained in the first place, the men declined to answer, but a fellow female trader chimed in with the official line regarding "vocational training": "Well, they want us to learn Chinese right? Because it's the national language".

### **Internment camps – different categories of camp for different "crimes"**

On 9 July 2018, I interviewed two EFL teachers from the US, based long-term in Urumchi. They were not aware of any people starting to come out of the internment camps yet. Their son noted different categories of camp for different "crimes", for example, those who had spent a short period abroad might be taken away for just two-three months of "schooling", but would then be released. Longer periods of internment were meted out to very religious / pious individuals. Like us scholars working on Xinjiang, they had heard about regional government plans to build many new cemeteries in Xinjiang, and worried about whether this indicated a local state intention of genocide (when combined with camp internments and ejection of foreigners – see below). Whether or not there was such an intention at the time (and it is possible that there was, prior to journalists, scholars and human rights advocates raising the alarm), more recent developments indicate rather an intention to destroy ancient Uyghur graveyards and replace Uyghur traditional burial practices with cremations.

### **Views of Han Chinese Residents on the Internment Camps**

I also had some conversations with local Han Chinese about the internment camps. On 14 July 2018, a middle-aged female cleaner in a Western restaurant in Kashgar, who had migrated in from Sichuan 15 years earlier, confirmed that she knew that hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs were detained in them. She stated that if a person had committed a genuine crime, they deserved such treatment, but

acknowledged that “many of the current detentions are not justified, many have been detained simply because they are from the southern Xinjiang countryside and are ‘uneducated’” (meaning they had not received a Chinese-medium education), thus automatically assumed to be prone to “infiltration by religious extremism”.

Also on 14 July 2018, I heard from a colleague then in the northern oasis of Ghulja that a Han Chinese taxi driver there had described the internment camps as “a secret” and stated that people “just disappear into them”. She also heard from a Uyghur respondent that it was at that time officially allowed for locals to apply for a visa to leave China, but that, if they did, the visa would not be granted and the person would be taken for questioning and classified as a person with “bad thoughts” who does not cherish China (reminiscent of the earlier Hundred Flowers campaign to reveal traitors and then smash them).

On 16 July 2018, a Han Chinese taxi driver based in Urumchi told me that internment camp detainees would one day be let out again and explained: “Detainees are just there to have their thinking changed”. He did not believe there was a state intention of genocide. At the same time, he acknowledged that most detainees had not committed an actual crime. He stated that simply praying or believing in a religion was “harmless”. However, he also observed that there was very little sympathy among Han people in Urumchi for Uyghur detainees, partly because “No-one [in Xinjiang] feels sympathy for anyone anymore. Things have changed. Before, people used to care about each other, but now all they think about is earning money and getting by” (indicative of a general sense of political fatigue in a paranoid climate).

## 2. HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS VIA SURVEILLANCE, ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

### Increase in securitisation between 2016 and 2018

Enhanced securitisation practices were already strongly in evidence by 2016. On 16 September 2016, I observed security to get in and out of Yan’an Park in the Uyghur district of Urumchi, although security was less tightly enforced here than in Han districts. This was a recurring theme at that time – securitization seemed intended to reassure and protect Han residents more than to control Uyghur residents. One long-term Uyghur friend, R reflected on this as follows: “Well, we all know that the government is working only for them [Hans] – that was made very clear during and after 7.5 [the Urumchi riots 2009]”.

By 2018, securitization and surveillance was prevalent across every inch of regional capital Urumchi. On 28-29 June 2018, I observed prefab “convenience police stations” every few hundred metres throughout the city: two or three-storey grey structures with barricaded doors, PRC flag and flashing lights. There were also mobile police boxes parked at roadsides. And by this time, securitization was as heavy in the Uyghur districts as in the Han districts, e.g. a military police vehicle parked near the Yan'an Road mosque with two soldiers with machine guns; random checks on mobile phones of Uyghur youths in the street; Unity Garden (a park) with chained gates and fences covered in razor wire; and rows of PRC flags along every street and outside every shop. On 4 July 2018, I observed razor wire across the metal fencing and a securitised checkpoint at the entrance of the No. 1 People's Hospital Emergency Dept. Propaganda on the windows read: “Eliminate extremism; transmit positive energy; build unity; gather together the people's hearts; promote harmony.”

On 4 July 2018, I observed construction to widen the road to the west of Grand Bazar in Urumchi, this part of a move to securitize urban space, like changes already made in Kashgar Old Town some years earlier.

### Fatigue associated with securitisation and surveillance

By this time, many Uyghur residents in Xinjiang had begun to be recruited into the securitization industry, with the security guard role becoming one of the few stable jobs available to Uyghurs. However, the role also brought significant emotional fatigue. On 25 September 2016, Z described how he always said sheepishly: “Don’t be angry [=Sorry]” to Uyghur residents when he checked their bags and conducted body searches. At the same time, I observed Han security guards saying “I’m embarrassed [=Sorry]” to people during security checks, in the same way.

In a conversation on 21 September 2016, Uyghur policeman, R2 observed: “**One of the key reasons for having school [University] police is to keep a watch out for subversive politics**”. He said he regretted going into the police force, since it had become exhausting since the Urumchi riots of 2009: “**Now everything is checked, everywhere at all times**”. He confirmed that Xinjiang police are not allowed to travel abroad in case they pass on sensitive (classified) information to foreigners. He also warned me that I “**should never speak about politics or policy on the phone**”, stating that it was very likely that someone was listening to my phone calls to the UK. His friend, Z, said he believed that Chinese authorities were listening to all communications via WeChat.

When I met with dutar player, Abdurehim Heyit, on 22 September 2016, he observed that while there had been economic development in Xinjiang, the current heightened securitisation “**had brought much pressure to bear on people’s everyday lives**”. He pointed to a new police station and police training academy being built near his home in the Yan’an Road district of Urumchi.

If securitisation was becoming a heavy burden in Urumchi by 2016, it was clear that it had been a part of daily life in south Xinjiang for much longer. On 21 September 2016, a migrant taxi driver from Khotan explained that he had come to Urumchi because of the constant police checks and surveillance in the south, where authorities “**kept a tight grip on society and social behaviour**”. I heard this repeated many times during the 2016 field trip. E.g. Street trader G concurred, stating that securitisation (especially religious restrictions) in south Xinjiang had directly led to an increase in local, retaliatory violence: “**It is not a coincidence... Things were far better before even if the economy was less developed. Their hold over people’s lives is so tight now... I go back [south] once a year, but would not want to live there – the pressure on people is so great. Yes, life there has improved. But it looks pretty only on the surface. The earthen houses are gone, replaced by brick-built houses, with running water and electricity. But the appearance is illusory. Underneath, people are under all sorts of pressures from the heavy securitisation procedures, police checks**”.

### **Surveillance and paranoia**

Surveillance practices were already creating deep levels of fear and paranoia among local Uyghurs in 2016. On 19 September 2016, two long-term Uyghur friends, R and S warned: “**There are eyes and ears everywhere. You must take care at all times about what you’re saying, to whom, and where you say it. Police trucks parked at the roadside contain surveillance equipment allowing police to listen in on public conversations up to a distance of 15 metres away!**” They confirmed that some Han Chinese police could now understand Uyghur (this was not the case in the past, but local Han were by this time being encouraged to learn the Uyghur language so as to better surveil and control Uyghurs).

On a separate occasion on 25 September 2016, an old friend A confided that she feared: “**The police can listen in on any conversation anywhere at any time, via people’s personal mobile phones using GPRS [General Packet Radio Service] mobile data service technology and satellites**”. Whether true or not, this demonstrates the level of fear and paranoia instilled in even the most law-abiding citizen like this one by this time.

Local people spoke of the political danger of receiving international phone calls. On 30 June 2018, a migrant waitress from Kashgar listened to my complaint that my Uyghur friends were not taking my phone calls, then drew a plus sign on a piece of paper (like that which precedes international dialling codes): “**If this plus sign appears against a number coming into your phone, you cannot accept the call, or you will get in trouble.**” When I then ask her about “disappearances”, she immediately removes herself from the situation, and goes to chat with the other waitress outside.

In Kashgar Old Town, surveillance also took the form of framed wall-mounted notices about the community cadre household allocation policy. On 12 July 2018, I photographed these public notices, which show the name and contact telephone number of the assigned cadre, plus a table outlining the residency situation at each home (name of household head, number of persons living at that address). Such notices heighten the sense of being watched – everyone knows who you are and where you are... and can inform on you to the community cadre at any time.

### **Racial profiling in securitisation practices – viewing/treating all Uyghurs as “terrorists”**

While having lunch with two female Uyghur friends in their fifties in Urumchi on 25 September 2016, one became humourless when I mentioned roadside checkpoints, stating that Uyghurs “**just cannot accept some aspects of the current society**” [i.e. the assumption that all Uyghurs are criminals / terrorists]. The other then declared angrily: “**Fine, take the bad ones away, we agree with that! But we are not all bad people [...] Why can’t they just treat the bad ones with suspicion and leave the rest of us alone?**”

The day before, on 24 September 2016, I had experienced a roadside checkpoint on the way to the mountains outside Urumchi with Uyghur friends A and her husband. The checkpoint generated a long queue of traffic, with all cars stopped and passengers asked for ID. My friends, irritated, complained about how this wasted people’s precious time. One Han motorist in the queue was heard to comment “**Does everyone need to be checked?**” [the implication being, only Uyghurs should be checked, not Han Chinese]. This would change by 2018, by which time Han Chinese would simply be waved through (see below). A told me how there were official plans to install a CCTV camera above the front door of every home, trained on visitors. She observed that if she refuse this, she would get into trouble with the authorities.

On 7 July 2018, I filmed a roadside checkpoint in operation at around midnight in Urumchi, where police would ask drivers to wind down the driver window and check their racial features before waving through all Han Chinese and all Uyghur women (following a smile), while stopping all Uyghur men. Of the men, they asked for ID, checked their mobile phone, and demanded they open the car boot and bonnet. On 9 July 2018, two American teachers living long-term in Urumchi confirmed that most roadside checkpoints operated on a system of racial profiling in this way, although sometimes the policed pulled everyone over. They also described how security forces would present a show of force, with convoys of police cars moving slowly down Beijing Road (NW Urumchi, Han-dominated district), with sirens sounding. This was clearly intended for the Han audience, to make them feel “safe”.

Racial profiling was also in evidence at the Kashgar "Old Town Scenic District" checkpoint on 12 July 2018, where four Uyghur policemen and one Han policemen were on duty. All foreigners were waved straight through. Those Han who got out their ID card were told no need, but most assumed there no need and walked straight through anyway. Elderly Uyghur gentlemen who made no attempt to present ID were left alone as were some though not all elderly Uyghur women. One woman in her sixties was rudely called back by a Uyghur policeman and ordered to remove her flimsy chiffon headscarf. All Uyghur men, except the elderly, had ID checked without exception, but more rigorously by the Han than by the Uyghur policemen.

### **Securitisation – passport confiscation**

A colleague communicated to me on 12 July 2018 a conversation she had held with a Han Chinese and a Kazakh passenger on the train from Kashgar to Ghulja in north Xinjiang, where it was stated that “**professionals (teachers, doctors) were the first ones targeted for passport confiscation in 2017**” (the year of the publication of the “XUAR Regulations on De-extremification” in March).

### **Views of Han Chinese residents on Uyghur “extremism”**

Han Chinese respondents often associated the perceived need for securitization with Uyghur illiteracy in the south, automatically associating this with vulnerability to radicalisation. On 30 June 2018, two young Han Chinese staff at a Western-style restaurant in Urumchi stated: “The police are necessary because of the Uyghurs. All the Uyghurs have been made to leave Urumchi and go back south, because the north needs to be stable for economic development. If they stay in Urumchi, there is a risk of violence. Now, Uyghurs in the south will spend 12 years in school instead of 9 (being taught in Chinese). This is necessary in order to change their thinking, especially about Islam. They’re illiterate, so they couldn’t understand properly what is written about Islam and have a wrong understanding of it”.

### **State mistrust increasing to include Han residents in Xinjiang**

On the other hand, it appeared that by 2018, some Han Chinese residents were coming under suspicion of the authorities, especially where individuals appeared to be sympathetic to the Uyghurs or opposed to securitization policies. Two American teachers living long-term in Urumchi reflected on 9 July 2018: “Hans are now being pulled into the net of distrust, with local cadres being asked to write self-criticisms – 5 things I should be doing better – as well as criticisms of 5 fellow cadres. This latter order was later dropped, however.” They confirmed that, fed up with the security regime, 15-16% of Hans with Urumchi residency permits had returned to east China. They also stated that some Han Chinese cadres from Urumchi sent south to conduct home visits / sleepovers in Uyghur homes (the invasive “Becoming Relatives” surveillance policy) were unhappy about sleeping under the same roof with Uyghur families who raise livestock in their homes (lice, fleas, etc.).

### **Over-zealous securitisation leading to exodus of Han settlers from Xinjiang**

It was also clear in 2018 that a Han exodus from Xinjiang had begun. A young Han Chinese waiter in a Western-style restaurant in Kashgar, who grew up in Kashgar (family hometown Chongqing) affirmed on 14 July 2018: “Some Han are leaving Xinjiang for east China, because the building has stopped. The economy has slowed down, and the big, wealthy companies have stopped investing here. This is likely the result of Chen Quanguo’s security-related restrictions.” He also confirmed that some Han in state work units were being asked to write self-criticisms. A middle-aged Han Chinese woman working as a cleaner in the same venue suggested that the exodus resulted partly from Han fear of inter-ethnic riots, and partly from the National Partner Assistance Programme (which twins rich eastern cities with poor western cities) not proceeding as well as before. She confirmed that big companies were not so keen to be in Xinjiang since the cycle of state-local violence in 2012-2015.

A Han taxi driver in Urumchi confirmed on 16 July 2018 that around 15-16% of Urumchi Han had gone back to east China, blaming a variety of reasons, including the securitised environment; socio-political tensions: “I myself am preparing to go back to Shaanxi after 4-5 years here, because there is no freedom here. You can’t freely buy a house here, without constantly having your credentials checked and people bothering you in your own home ... regional rule is chaotic and unreasonable.”

This was echoed by the Han Chinese owner of a phone tech shop in Urumchi on 18 July 2018): “15% of Urumchi Hans have left because of the constant surveillance/attention. People like to be free to go here and there, go about their business... but here you can’t go anywhere without having to show your ID card, or go through a security guard. And it is horrifically difficult to open a business; the formalities you have to go through are so complicated”.

## **3. FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF, FOR UYGHUR AND OTHER MUSLIMS**

### **Tarring all Uyghur Muslims with the label of “extremism” and “radicalism”**

In 2016, secular Uyghur intellectuals in Urumchi acknowledged that a tiny minority of Uyghurs had succumbed to “wrong-headed forms of Islam that came in from Saudi Arabia” and supported the state in its efforts to control the un-Islamic, violent direction taken by those individuals. However, R and S, speaking on 14 Sept 2016, emphasised that the majority of Uyghurs deplored the radicals’ ideas and methods, while at the same time acknowledging: “Some Uyghur sheep have been forced by circumstance [overly zealous religious restrictions in south Xinjiang] to turn into tigers”. A, a pious respondent speaking on 22 September 2016, observed that the state should not stereotype all Muslims as violent terrorists, and that: “Those people resorting to violence are motivated not by religion but by politics.”

### **Migrant workers fleeing religious restrictions in southern Xinjiang, 2016**

Restaurant staff in Urumchi, who had moved up from Kashgar and Aqsu in the south, described those religious restrictions on 18 Sept 2016 as follows: “It is better to be in Urumchi now, as there is no freedom in the south. There, young men cannot even grow a short beard or moustache – all facial hair is forbidden now. Only older men are allowed to grow a longer beard. Women are forbidden to wear the niqab or burqa.” Long-term respondent R confirmed on 21 September 2016 that women could not wear the hijab in the south, only the traditional sheer Uyghur headscarf tied at the back and definitely not tied under the chin. She also stated that southerners wearing the niqab were frequently refused entry to Urumchi and given one-way tickets to leave.

A migrant taxi driver from Khotan observed on 21 September 2016 that there was far less violence and chaos in southern Xinjiang before the religious restrictions were introduced, and stated that they were counter-productive: “A lot of people have been put in prison down south for very small things, like wearing veils and growing beards”.

### **Peaceful Islamisation of Uyghur districts of Urumchi, 2016**

In regional capital Urumchi, religious restrictions were not yet especially visible in 2016. Parts of those districts felt almost as though one were in Turkey or Central Asia. For instance, peaceful Islamisation / “halalification” of commerce and trade in the Uyghur districts was fully apparent on 16-19 September 2016, with Tianchi Road lined with halal Uyghur restaurants, characterised by elegant carved wood, tiling, embroidered silk tablecloths in Islamic textile patterns. In the Yan’an Road district, Uyghur everyday life was expressed through trade with Turkish and Central Asian businesspeople and consumption of Turkish / Central Asian products. Shopping malls and new residential blocks sported authentic Islamic architecture, their names reproduced in three languages (Uyghur, Cyrillic, Chinese), with real estate offices adorned with Uyghur-language adverts (no Chinese), Uyghur traditional medicine clinics, Uyghur dentists, etc. Female traders imported dresses from Kyrgyzstan and travelled to Central Asia regularly to buy clothes to bring back and sell. DIY businesspeople / traders / import-exporters operated almost independently of the state, safe in the knowledge that the products (especially foods) they imported were ‘clean’ (in a ritual sense) and also safe (not contaminated, like e.g. the Chinese milk powder scandal). The Arman supermarket chain was everywhere, stocked with Turkish import goods. For the overwhelming majority, this represented a *peaceful* Islamic revival motivated by a belief that giving up alcohol and tobacco (and, for some, music) would make Uyghurs better Muslims and, by extension, secure a better future for the Uyghur nation. It manifested itself in e.g. the new circumstance of only 1 or 2 weddings in 6 serving alcohol (a wedding I attended on 24 September 2016 served only blackberry juice).

In 2016, this peaceful piety was still able to be demonstrated through mosque attendance. On 16 September 2016, I observed the Friday 6pm prayers at the Yan’an Road mosque from the pavement and, while the mosque was now fenced off with metal bull bars before the gate and kept closed until prayer time, several hundred men of all ages entered. It was noticeable however that none had very long beards and there was no audible call to prayer.

Piety also continued to be expressed through veiling and modest clothing, although the niqab and burqa could not be seen (present since the 2000s, now presumably banned). On 16 September 2016, I observed many young women wearing the hijab or a fashionable turban. However, it was notable that



the hijab was worn in a modified form. As Uyghur policeman R2's wife exclaimed on 25 September 2016: **"This is not a real hijab! – a true hijab would cover half of my forehead and completely cover my hairline – with mine, you can see some of my hair peeking out. Also, a real hijab would be longer at the front... We would get in trouble with the authorities if we wore a real hijab!"** Still others were wearing their sheer Uyghur headscarf in the old style, with hair pinned up under the scarf 'tail' and visible at the back. Some had their heads completely uncovered. By and large, though, most young women in the Uyghur districts were more covered than before, wearing tunics and under-trousers, very long skirts, very long dresses etc. Middle-aged and older women looked exactly as before, with knee-length dresses, tights/leggings, mid-height heeled shoes and the sheer traditional headscarf.

### **Abandoned mosques, 2018**

By 2018, this relatively relaxed environment in Urumchi had disappeared. My walking survey of Urumchi's large mosques (Khantangri mosque, Aq mosque, and Yan'an Road mosque) on 28-29 June 2018 found them empty; no-one going in and out, each mosque complex heavily securitised with high metal fences covered in coiled razor wire, padlocked gates, PRC flag and entry permitted only via securitised data gates (facial recognition) – which no-one seemed to want to use. But, in Urumchi at least, crescent insignia and minarets etc. on both Uyghur and Hui mosques were intact, unlike in Kashgar (see below).

In a conversation with two American teachers based long-term in Urumchi, I learned on 9 July 2018 that the crescents had been removed from the city's mosques with cranes on one day several months earlier... and then replaced again after a 9- or 10-day period. It was unclear, they reported, whether this policy reversal related to the international outcry then brewing in relation to revelations about the internment camps or to an internal policy split in the regional CCP leadership. They also described how religious policies had apparently been recently relaxed in Urumchi and local people encouraged to go back into the mosques; but **"No-one will go, because everyone is too afraid."**

Conversations with security guards / doorkeepers at Urumchi's heavily securitised Khantangri mosque (2 July 2018), Nanmen mosque (2 July 2018) and Aq mosque (4 July 2018), as well as the Hui mosque on Heping South Rd (8 July 2018), revealed that:

- Only between 10 and 20 elderly (retired) men went in at prayer times
- Everyone else was too scared to go in: **"We want to go in the mosque... but if we do they will take us to prison ... you know they check our identity cards"**
- Most retired men feared having their retirement benefits stopped by the government
- People working in state work units couldn't go in because they would lose their jobs (not allowed to be openly religious)
- Even the independent businessmen were too scared to go in (threat of camps)

In Kashgar in 2018, mosques were completely out of service, and many were desecrated to greater or lesser degrees. On 10 July 2018, I asked the hotel receptionist why the name of my hotel had been changed from Sultan Hotel to Nurlan Hotel? He explained that the local government had changed it. Clearly, it now no longer approved of calling places and venues by names with links to Islamic history ("sultan" meaning a king or sovereign of a Muslim state). The new name "Nurlan" had the innocent meaning of "bright, dazzling". My next (devil's advocate) question to the receptionist was "What time do folks go in the mosque?" to which he replied after a short pause: **"They don't go in the mosque"**.

The following extract from my field diary details what I found at Kashgar's ancient Heytgah Mosque on 10 July 2018:

**"A ticket seller (45 yuan entry) and two riot police with riot shields sit inside the entrance. I express surprise that tourists are allowed in and ask when the people are allowed in to pray? The police immediately become threatening, demanding to know my business. Inside is a ghostly museum, a historical site. There is no one praying. Across the front wall of the far prayer hall are banners reading: "Ethnic unity is happiness (fu 福); Splittism and riot are calamity (祸)." Young Uyghur men**

in traditional embroidered shirts (but no hats - uncovered heads in the mosque) usher Han and foreign tourists into the rear prayer hall at the back. I ask one what he thinks of tourists entering the prayer hall? He briefly shakes his head, and says "This is just my job (*mening khizmitim*)... I wouldn't know about that (*män ukhmidum*)". As I walk away, he gets out his phone, and I suspect informs the police on the door of what I said. When I approach an older guy watering plants, he moves away metre by metre, then shakes his head when I say hello. Seconds later, a police officer appears at about 8 metres and hangs around until I move away."

As for the smaller neighbourhood mosques in Kashgar Old Town, on 11 July 2018, I found these without exception padlocked and razor-wired. Locals told me no-one had entered them for over a year. Some had had their crescent removed from the dome: "They [local authorities] took it away!" All were covered in propaganda on the outside walls about "de-extremification", "ethnic unity work", "illegal religious activities", etc. (as also at the Heytgah mosque). Tellingly, "Love the Party, Love the Country!" banners had now replaced the earlier "Love the Country, Love Religion" [love the Chinese nation above your religion] banners. One neighbourhood mosque had even been converted into a café bar called "The Dream of Kashgar", frequented by Han Chinese backpackers.

A female Uyghur tour guide (26) and juice bar owner confirmed on 12 July 2018 that "people in Kashgar do not go in the mosque at the moment", and that this was the case since about a year previous (again, following publication of the XUAR Regulations on De-extremification end March 2017). Also on this day, I realised that over the previous two days of being in Kashgar, I had seen almost no woman wearing even a basic headscarf, and certainly no hijabs / turbans of any description.

This situation was causing considerable fear and trauma in the community. For example, on 13 July 2018, I talked to a man living near a padlocked, empty mosque, minus crescent, and located opposite a deserted Quranic school. When I asked if the crescent had been "taken away", he nodded but did not voice his answer (evidently mindful of audio surveillance). When I asked him whether he used to go in, he denies this, saying "I have never prayed there". Further down the street, I asked an older Hui man and his Uyghur wife what happened to the mosque. He confirmed that it had been closed for some time, and the religious school longer still. They were clearly upset. When I told them that the Heytgah mosque was open not for prayer but for tourism, they looked at one another in shock. Then his wife asked what I do. I told her I was a scholar / university teacher, and then it dawned on her: "So... you know about the situation then?" She promptly burst into quiet tears. I comforted her, squeezing her arm, and saying that everything changes, things would get better at some point. She then asked me: "When will they get better?"

My colleague visiting Ghulja at this time communicated a similar pattern in that northern oasis. On 14 July 2018, a Kazakh respondent told her: "My father used to pray at home in secret, but now he is so scared of the consequences, he has stopped praying altogether." Another man told her he still prayed in secret at home, while a third couple said they were "not allowed to talk about things like that [praying]". When my colleague tried to look for mosques in Ghulja, she found local people strangely reluctant to say where they were. Some even claimed there were no mosques in Ghulja (mosque having become a dangerous word). When she did locate two mosques, both had been closed for about a year, and had had their crescents removed about half a year previous. My colleague also reported talking to a taxi driver in Ghulja about the sad situation, whereupon he started to cry, showed her a photo of him sporting a moustache, and lamented that today it was not possible to grow one: "It is not officially forbidden... but everyone knows the consequences of doing so." Meanwhile, Hui Muslim restaurants in Ghulja had had not only the halal signage removed but also the Hui ethnonym (Huizu) and Muslim-sounding names of their owners.

### **Defacement and removal of halal signage, 2018**

Elsewhere, halal signage had been, or was in the process of being, systematically removed from catering premises. On 5 July 2018, I began to notice that newly opened Uyghur restaurants bore no halal signage, only the restaurant or Uyghur owner's name in Chinese and Uyghur script. One owner

told me it was “not allowed to have halal signage now”. This had taken effect since the XUAR Regulations on De-extremification were published end March 2017. Another owner told me that “We did not put it in the plan” (meaning that they did not include it at design stage). He declined to tell me why he had self-censored in this way (clearly because of fear of the consequences, with “halalification” having been identified by the state as a form of “extremism”) but assured me that “everyone knew” the food served inside was halal. In 2018, locals were extremely practised in saying only the safe thing – something I had never previously experienced in Xinjiang since I first visited in 1995.

On 6 July 2018, I took countless photos of restaurant signs that had had the halal signage blacked out or scraped / torn off, both Uyghur and Hui (Hui are the Chinese-speaking/Sinophone Muslim descendants of Arab traders and soldiers), as well as of more new signs that simply didn't carry the label “halal” at all. In one district slated for renovation, I found a Hui restaurant on Heping Road South that unusually had all signage *except* for the halal symbol removed. The female Hui employee told me: “We're not allowed to carry the halal sign any more, but this one doesn't matter because they're ripping all the shop fronts off anyway, and they know it will be gone soon... but even if the halal sign does not appear up there, *I will still have it in my heart*” (pointing to chest).

### “Beautification” / De-Islamisation of Uyghur districts in Urumchi, 2018

Meanwhile, Urumchi city was also engaged in an urban “beautification” project in the Uyghur district, with everything covered in scaffolding and green netting. According to conversations held with local Uyghurs on 2 July 2018, the area was “refurbished”, using the faux-Islamic red brick style used for the Grand Bazar mosque and tourist complex (also used in Kashgar Old Town, see below). They stated: “The government wants to make the area clean and tidy ... and to standardise the building style across the area.” They confirmed there had been no local consultation, but rather than complaining about this (as they would have in the past), they stated that the refurb would be good for tourism and for business. Again, I had the strong sense that they were saying the “correct, safe thing” and were too scared to articulate their true feelings about it. I discovered on 5 July 2018 that this project was called the “Tianshan District Old Town Renovation and Improvements Programme”. It was being carried out entirely by Han Chinese construction workers, and no local Uyghurs were benefiting from related employment opportunities. It was in essence a process of “de-Islamisation” of urban space.

### Faux-Islamic architecture in Kashgar Old Town (Disneyfication)

The same process was observable in the earlier-refurbished Kashgar “Old Town”, which I traversed on 10 July 2018. Most of the original adobe old town, with its narrow streets, had vanished, replaced by huge wide roads, lined with identical faux-Islamic architecture in red-orange brick, presumably supposed to mimic the colour of the adobe earth of old. A new taller, fake red brick minaret had been constructed to one side of the ancient Heytgah mosque. The whole area felt like a hollow shell, robbed of its life and soul. A colleague communicated on 10 July 2018 that a Uyghur tour guide from Urumchi had told her he hated the “fake culture” of the new “Old Town”.

## 4. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

### Academic freedom severely curtailed, 2016

Not only freedom of expression but also freedom of association, freedom of language use, and academic freedom have been increasingly severely curtailed since 2016. In a conversation on 14 September 2016 about possibilities for conducting social science research in Xinjiang, academic contacts R and S doubted whether any research project could obtain official approval at that time, even if the research focus was on past, not present. Even if officially approved, respondents were “unlikely to open up and tell the truth”. S. recounted how he had taken two Taiwanese scholars to Kashgar on an unofficial research visit, and even then his contacts there had simply dried up and

remained silent. Both considered it very difficult and probably impossible for a foreign researcher to conduct research in south Xinjiang at that time. They observed: “Things have changed a lot; Now it’s not possible to randomly interview strangers. No-one trusts anyone; everyone is scared; everyone is looking out for their families; no-one wants any trouble [Chinese saying: It is better to have one less issue than one more, where an issue may become a problem]”.

This viewpoint was reaffirmed by G, a street trader, who counselled against my going down south with a Uyghur associate: “It would not be prudent now; the person you went with would get into trouble, and anyway would be too afraid to go with you. Everyone is afraid now. People only trust their oldest, closest friends, and feel automatically anxious when they have to deal with strangers. They do not trust them enough to ever talk about politics or policy.” For his part, dutar player Abdurehim Heyit advised that I went down south alone: “Look at everything, say nothing and speak to no-one”.

### **Linguistic genocide (erasure of the Uyghur language)**

There is also a clear process of linguistic genocide (linguistic genocide) underway, present in 2016 and accelerating in 2018. On 18 September 2016, a migrant worker from Kashgar living in Urumchi told me: “Kashgar Old Town [following refurbishment] has become clean and beautiful now. Hans and Uyghurs can both live there, but a Uyghur can live there only *on condition that they speak fluent Chinese*”. Thus, monolingual Uyghurs [mother tongue only] were being excluded to the suburbs.

By 2018, a policy had emerged to erase all state documentation of the previous “bilingual education” policy (Uyghur- and Chinese-medium education, itself something of a misnomer, since “bilingual education” was always intended as a transition phase to monolingual Chinese education and language use) and replace it with a new “national language education policy” (Mandarin Chinese only). In a conversation in an Urumchi restaurant on 28 June 2018, a young female Uyghur kindergarten teacher originally from Khotan, when asked which language Uyghur children should learn in, answered without hesitation that they should learn in the “national language” (Chinese), because “We are all Chinese and China is our country, right?” This was uttered without a hint of irony, almost as though she really believed it, presumably because it was emotionally easier to accept this than to try to contest it in the current political climate. When I asked whether Uyghur children would not forget their mother tongue, she looked down and declined to answer.

The effects of this policy of steadily decreasing Uyghur-medium education are beginning to be visible. On 6 July 2018, I chatted with two Uyghur girls in a music instrument store in Urumchi’s Grand Bazar. One stated that she liked Chinese-language or English-language songs but didn’t listen to Uyghur-language songs. She said she used to know a Uyghur song when she was little (before she went to a Chinese-immersion school), and tried to sing it, but couldn’t remember the words. The store-holder commented that a lot of Uyghur kids are like this now. She pointed out that there isn’t a lot of Uyghur music around [result of orthodox Islamic revival], which clearly is also a factor. Nonetheless, the two girls stated that they speak Uyghur best, Chinese second best, and English third best. But, the store-holder reflected that he worried for the next generation – those educated in Chinese-immersion kindergartens. The implication was that the current policy could inflict significant damage on Uyghur language skills.

During the 2018 trip, I also photographed a poster outside the Urumchi No.1 primary school of a teacher teaching Uyghur children how to say “Hello” in Chinese. The poster included the Chinese characters and pinyin transliteration, and Uyghur Latinisation, but the Uyghur modified Arabic script had literally been \*cut out\* from the poster. There seemed to be a clear policy intention to eliminate the use of the Arabic script owing to its connection to Islam (as earlier happened in the Cultural Revolution period).

On 13 July 2018, I met three Uyghur boys (6, 8, 5) playing outside a juice bar in the refurbished Kashgar Old Town. The first claimed he speaks Chinese best, but also Uyghur well. I later watched

him converse with his mum for a long time in Uyghur, but not before he had sung me the Chinese national anthem and another song in Chinese designed to help children learn the 4 tones. He clearly loved to speak in Chinese and was very proud of his Chinese language skills. Sadly, he could not remember the words to any Uyghur songs.

On 7 July 2018, a Uyghur bookseller at the Xinhua bookshop at Nanmen in Urumchi (30) told me that a set of Uyghur-medium (Uyghur script) primary textbooks titled *Language and Literature* had been revised in 2018 and their content “changed” to remove references to local Uyghur culture and history and replace them with Han Chinese culture. She also lamented that “No one is allowed to talk about [Islamic] festivals anymore...we don’t have any festivals now. And no-one dares to say *Assalam Allaykum* [an Islamic religious greeting] any more either!” She then pointed out that the bookshop no longer carried any books that teach the Uyghur script to Uyghur children.

### **Self-censorship of speech (loss of freedom of expression because of deep fear)**

Evident since 2016 and greatly escalated in 2018 was the pervasive sense of fear, indeed terror, among the local people, and their tendency to self-censor (speech, behaviour and association) to try to keep themselves safe. During our meeting in a halal restaurant in Urumchi on 14 September 2016, R and S were visibly nervous and kept a constant eye on those in the immediate vicinity. Now and then they would break abruptly out of a politically sensitive conversation and launch into an unrelated, innocent topic. R confided how relieved she felt to have retired from her civil service position: “Now I never have to think / worry about politics again!”

A few days later on 20 September 2016, I had a very strange encounter with A, a long-term friend in Urumchi. Talking in a public restaurant, she repeatedly delivered government-approved lines, straight-faced, such as that Kashgar Old Town “had been rebuilt very sympathetically” and was now earthquake-proof. This pattern continued on the way to their family home, and after we joined her husband there. As we made our way through multiple security checkpoints, she would repeatedly state in bright, cheery tones that such facilities “make people in Xinjiang safe”. At home, she asked me what topics I teach at university, and then stated with a straight face that she wanted me to tell my students that “Uyghurs are all living very happily”. At the time, I was completely dumbfounded.

All became clear on 24 September 2016, when A and her husband collected me by car and drove me into the mountains outside Urumchi. Parking at the roadside, A led me far up a deserted mountain path and then said: “I have much in my heart I want to say, but I can’t say any of it. Well, I can say it, but no-one must hear it. If state policies are fine, then why am I afraid of speaking about them to anyone? The policies are formed with no prior consultation, and implemented without warning, or without helping people to understand how those policies can be used to their advantage.” Evidently, everything she had said at our previous meeting had been false, uttered only out of fear of surveillance. Whereas A had repeatedly stated that she felt ‘safe’ when passing through scenes of securitisation during our first meeting, here in the mountains she mocked securitization, pointing to two golden inflated lions set outside an estate agents: “We have these to protect us here, and I like these better!”. Her husband later affirmed that he was “afraid of speaking in his own house” in case of bugging equipment.

Two American teachers based long-term in Urumchi described to me on 9 July 2018 how fear in Xinjiang was being maintained by constantly moving the goal posts: “The state makes its policy pronouncements so vague and broad that people do not readily understand what activities are included in the prohibitions. To be safe, people end up self-censoring on a far wider basis, to extremes, to ensure that they cannot get in any kind of trouble.”

### **No freedom of association – Uyghur fear of foreigners**

Another way in which locals self-censored sharply in 2018 was by avoiding contact, or at least sensitive communication, with foreigners. On one occasion on 1 July 2018, a university graduate and

two students gave me their phone numbers, but asked me not to call them from my foreign mobile. So, I had to agree not to call them again during that trip.

An Australian teacher based long-term in Urumchi told me on 3 July 2018 of the risks attached to Uyghurs communicating with foreigners. Her female Uyghur student had invited all her English teachers to her home for a party recently; the other teachers went, but she did not. Straight after the party, the student had received a visit from the police and had her passport taken away. Meanwhile, the teacher and other foreigners based in the city talked of how hard it had become to renew their work visas, or rent an apartment in the city's Uyghur districts.

Two American teachers based long-term in Urumchi stated that the first time they realised they could no longer mix with local Uyghurs was in summer 2016, when they were speaking Uyghur to a Uyghur fruit seller, and a Uyghur policeman came over and said openly to the seller: “*You know you're not permitted to interact / speak with foreigners, don't you?*”

My long-term friend Z was so anxious the second time he met me in 2018 that he came to my hotel on 9 July 2018 at midnight and phoned me in my room on the local landline number. He then suggested we walk quietly around the streets (to avoid being continuously observed together in one location). The meeting lasted just half an hour. He told me he had just been to help a Uyghur female friend, in trouble with the police because they had looked back through her WeChat record and found communications with a foreigner dating from four or five years ago. Fortunately, she had explained that that person had just been a foreign student in Urumchi, whom she had helped out, and police had not identified her for internment.

Another long-term friend, R, initially arranged to meet me at Yan'an Rd (16 July 2018), but on arrival declared that she would soon have to return home “to entertain a guest” (evidently an excuse). Walking along (again, to prevent being observed continuously in my company), she subsequently admitted she was nervous about meeting, and cautioned me to stop talking as we walked past a convenience police station. She then counselled me to keep on smiling as we talked, so that it appeared we were chatting about light topics: “*Don't look so serious – everyone is paying attention to everyone else right now [implication there are spies / informers]*”. It is hard to talk about the potential for genocide with a smile on your face. Like others, she told me that no-one talks about the internment camps, and so no one hears of anything because no-one talks about it. It is all a huge secret. She said her family was relatively safe (politically speaking, as retired, and formerly attached to respectable work units), and so they were even less likely to hear anything about the camps. She then urged me to “understand correctly” why my friends could not see me during this trip.

When I contacted another long-term Uyghur friend AD (by local landline not foreign mobile) on 17 July 2018, at first I could not get a connection. When I did get through to her, she pretended to think I was a nuisance caller. Next, she came out with a series of prepared excuses: she had her mother-in-law staying with her, who was ill; she herself “had a heart condition” (this is a long-standing euphemism in the region associated with being in political trouble). It turned out she had received a call from R, warning her that I was in town...

When I attempted to call long-term Uyghur friend, S on 17 July 2018, there were again repeated blockages: an incorrect number, then number engaged. Finally, he heard my voice and hung up without speaking to me. All were evidently determined to protect themselves from political trouble at all costs – and understandably so.

In a Western-style café run by young Uyghurs, in Kashgar Old Town Scenic District on 13 July 2018, two Uyghur university students completely clammed up when I quietly asked them about the internment camps. Although one was studying political science / policy (or perhaps *because* he was?) neither would say a word. The first said: “*Let's not talk about those things*” while the second just remained silent. When I gently persisted, the first turned away in a different direction and consulted his smartphone. The second looked perplexed and uncomfortable, then got up and left. As far as they

were concerned, talking to me would land them in an internment camp. Earlier, on 10 July 2018 in the same bar, when I turned around to start talking to a group of 3-4 young Uyghur men sitting behind us, the music in the bar was suddenly turned up really loud when the conversation turned political and we could hardly hear each other speak; it seemed deliberate. When I turned back round to talk to my foreign companion, the young men left and the music was turned off.

Another group of Uyghur university students in a Western-style bar in Urumchi on 17 July 2018, though happy to watch the England-Belgium World Cup match with me, were less friendly once the conversation touched on political issues. E.g. when I showed one of them media images of the day before showing CCP cadres cutting Uyghur women's long tunics short in the Urumchi streets (part of the “de-extremification” drive), they said: “Don't look at them, ignore them”. Turning a blind eye seemed to be a popular strategy for integrated, secularised city folk – “Never mind the rural southerners... I must save myself.”