

# MekongReview

ASIAN LITERATURE

≡ MENU



**China** , **East Asia** , **Issue 36** , **Reviews** , **Volume 9** August 2024

## Memory as resistance

**Sophie Beach**

Share: [f](#) [t](#) [p](#)



Life in Kashgar, 1998. Photo: Kevin Bubriski

## **The Uyghurs: Kashgar Before the Catastrophe**

Kevin Bubriski

George F. Thompson Publishing: 2023

## **Under the Mulberry Tree: A Contemporary Uyghur Anthology**

Edited by Munawwar Abdulla, Sonya Imin, Maidina Kadeer and Emily Zinkin

Tarim Network: 2022

**O**n the wall of my living room hangs a photo by the American photographer Lois Conner. Taken in 1991 in Kashgar, in China's westernmost Xinjiang region, it depicts a group of Dickensian-looking children, jointly holding a broomstick and gazing in curiosity, presumably at the foreigner behind the camera. They're a beguiling and lively group, each face full of character. The children are mostly male. Their clothes and faces indicate they belong to the Turkic-speaking Uyghur minority and their ages appear to range between five and fifteen. They'll be in their late thirties or older by now. In other words, prime candidates for internment camps in Xinjiang (also called East Turkestan by many Turkic Muslims).

Conner's photograph shows some of what's been lost in Xinjiang: the carefree spirit of children gathered on the street for an impromptu exchange with a foreigner free to wander, explore and document. China has since launched a security crackdown throughout the region, and little of Conner's experience can be replicated in Kashgar today. Over the past twenty years, the 2,000-year-old trading centre along the Silk Road has been systematically demolished, reconstructed and placed under a web of surveillance by Chinese authorities.

Among those who've been paying attention, it's generally understood that Beijing is making a concerted effort to destroy the culture and identity of ethnic and religious minorities in the country—Uyghur Muslims and

Tibetan Buddhists in particular—through policies of settler colonialism and forced assimilation. After Xi Jinping came to power in China in 2012, he launched a series of policies aimed at forcibly assimilating minority groups into the majority Han Chinese culture. In 2014, after a series of attacks allegedly carried out by Turkic Muslims, Xi’s government launched the Strike Hard Campaign Against Violent Terrorism. In Xinjiang, this resulted in widespread surveillance, arrests and the detention of an estimated one million Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in internment camps, where they undergo intensive political indoctrination, forced labour and other forms of mistreatment. Every Uyghur resident of Xinjiang is viewed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as a potential terrorist and treated accordingly, with surveillance cameras tracking their every move in what has become a testing ground for political control throughout China. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has said the Chinese government’s actions in Xinjiang could constitute “crimes against humanity”, while the US and other foreign governments have gone as far as labelling it genocide.

**M**uch has already been written about the harsh policies that have led to cultural destruction and how they breach international human rights law and standards. But what has been the impact, on very personal levels, on human experience? What do ‘culture’ and ‘identity’ mean to individuals living in a specific place at a specific time?

*The Uyghurs: Kashgar Before the Catastrophe*, a powerful and important new book of photographs by Kevin Bubriski, answers these questions in much the same way Connor’s image does. Bubriski, a Vermont-based photographer who has worked all over the world, spent a month in Kashgar in 1998, just a few years before the CCP launched a campaign to demolish

and rebuild large sections of the Old City. His work captures a moment in time, when Kashgar was still intact as a cultural, historical and religious centre that was nevertheless moving into the modern world. Describing the importance of Kashgar as a cultural meeting place over thousands of years in an essay included in the volume, the late scholar Dru Gladney wrote, “The faces, language, clothing, and dwellings of the Kashgaris who inhabit the town and the hordes of travelers who pass through are the most enduring legacy of this multicultural and diverse history.” Bubriski’s photos poignantly show us exactly what he means. For a more personal approach, the book also includes commentary by the Uyghur poet Tahir Hamut Izgil, who grew up in the city. All the text is in English and Uyghur.

The CCP’s effort to suppress Uyghur culture and religion had been underway long before Xi’s policy of Sinicisation went into full effect. In 2009, the government, citing earthquake safety, announced a plan to rebuild Kashgar’s ancient Old City. According to a report by the Uyghur Human Rights Project, at least 85 per cent of the city’s neighbourhoods—made up of densely connected mud-brick structures that have housed generations of families in communal settings—have since been razed. Thousands of families have been relocated to apartments on the outskirts of the city, removing them from their communities and traditional ways of living. Centuries-old livestock and food bazaars have been moved outside the city into sanitised, concrete installations. The traditional layout of the city had neighbourhood streets radiating out from mosques, which served as the community’s anchors. Today, neighbourhoods centre around police substations, creating ruthlessly efficient networks for surveillance and social control. Mosques and cemeteries have been demolished or shuttered.

The few parts of the Old City still left standing have been reduced to tourist attractions.

If seen without context, there's nothing remarkable about Bubriski's photos. They show regular people going about their everyday lives. But they're extraordinary precisely because they give us a glimpse, without any editorial judgement, filter or beautification, of people's old lives in Kashgar. They have become remarkable because these lives are no longer allowed to be lived in the same way.

Bubriski depicts Kashgari life on a small scale: the quotidian moments of friends gathered on the street, children playing, street food being cooked. It's mostly about a city seen through the lives of its people. The security state had not yet arrived, and a sense of community and life lived in public streets runs through his book. Surveillance cameras weren't ubiquitous yet. In one photo, a police officer relaxes in a straw chair outside a mosque, smoking a cigarette. In another, a young boy stands by the statue of Mao Zedong in People's Square—one of only three remaining Mao statues in China—and playfully mocks his salute. Another photo shows schoolchildren copying text in the Uyghur language. People also freely and publicly express their religious and cultural identity: elderly men sport long beards, while men and boys of all ages wear the traditional Uyghur skullcap, the doppa. Women don headscarves and veils.

The photos don't portray mosques as isolated, venerated buildings; they are living, breathing entities where people gather, share stories, pray and bury their dead. The grand Id-Kah Mosque, in particular, is shown to be a gathering place for young and old: men and women linger on the steps

outside, lean against its walls or chat in groups in its shadow. Built in the fifteenth century, this mosque is one of the most revered spaces for Central Asian Muslims, and has held up to 20,000 worshippers at a time. For hundreds of years, the square around it was filled with a bazaar of family-owned stalls and stores.

Compared to today's Kashgar, all these sights might as well have come from a different world. The cheeky and innocent gesture of the child by the Mao statue would likely be deemed subversive now, with grave consequences. Mandarin has replaced Uyghur as the language of schooling throughout Xinjiang and children are discouraged or outright banned from learning their native tongue. After adults are sent to internment camps, their children are often bundled off to boarding schools where they are fed political ideology and cut off from their families, language, culture and communities. Traditional cultural markers such as veils and long beards have now been banned in public throughout much of Xinjiang. Two years after Bubriski's photos were taken, the authorities cleared and rebuilt the square, populating it with commercial buildings. In 2016, as part of a broadening political crackdown, the mosque was mostly closed to worshippers. Id-Kah, the largest mosque in China, no longer exists as a focal point for the local community. It has been transformed into a tourist attraction; one has to purchase a ticket to be allowed in. It's in line with the Chinese government's superficial claims of respect for the very cultures they are destroying: preserving and commodifying colourful ethnic costumes, performances and architectural façades while gutting spirits and cores.

If Uyghurs can no longer wear the clothes that identify their cultural

affinities, learn their own language in schools, live in traditional spaces, worship at sacred buildings or gather freely with their community, then what identity do they have left?



Life in Kashgar, 1998. Photo: Kevin Bubriski



**R**esponding to Bubriski's photos, Izzil writes: "I believe that what makes Kashgar what it is is an ethos that has been forged over thousands of years. This spirit permeates the faces of the people of Kashgar, the walls of buildings, the bricks laid on the streets, the food and even the air of the city. Kevin has captured that ethos in his photos, perhaps even unconsciously."

The spirit Izzil describes travels within Uyghurs when they leave their homeland, voluntarily or otherwise. Like exiles around the world and throughout time, Uyghurs abroad are left only with memories, images and sensations of being immersed in their own culture and way of life. *Under the Mulberry Tree: A Contemporary Uyghur Anthology*, published by the Tarim Network, collects the voices and memories of Uyghurs in the diaspora. Defined in the introduction as "a creative collaboration by members of the diasporic Uyghur community to insert, highlight, and amplify our own stories", the slim volume contains snippets of personal remembrances, photos, paintings, poems and stories—a testimony to the culture and history Uyghurs cherish and protect even when they're far from home.

In the introduction to *The Uyghurs*, Bubriski writes, "As new generations supplant the old, it would normally be through oral histories passed down that the past is kept alive. If those voices are intentionally silenced, the memories die with those who hold them." The CCP is working towards this outcome and is largely succeeding within Xinjiang. It falls to those living in exile to keep collective memory alive.

*Under the Mulberry Tree*, which the editors plan to develop into a

continuing series of multiple volumes, is a beautiful attempt to write a history the Chinese government is determined to eradicate. It's also an effort to recreate the sense of community that's been battered and suppressed within Xinjiang. As in Bubriski's photos, these testimonies offer memories of daily life, food, the natural environment and family elders—essentially, the writers are trying to capture and convey what it means to be Uyghur. Maidina Kadeer, one of the editors, writes, “If I lived in a country that recognised and respected me, I'd be in ay-mummam's garden, her head resting in my lap and the mountain air caressing our skin in sweet tenderness.” A graphic story by Sarah Suzuk depicts a character reminiscing about their life in Xinjiang: “If I try really hard I can go back... I can smell the rain on a cool summer night. I can taste the naan from that bakery down the street. I can hear the carefree laughter ringing through the neighborhood. Everything I never thought I would miss so much...” The writings and images introduce traditional Uyghur foods like the khoshang (dumplings) and toquatch (flatbread), clothing like the doppa and colourful etles hoodies, and handicrafts like pottery and metalwork—objects that make up a culture.

Bubriski's photos in *The Uyghurs* and the words contained in *Under the Mulberry Tree* weave stories of everyday practices that should constitute lives lived lightly. Given all that has been inflicted upon the Uyghurs, these works now bear the heavy weight of great loss. Yet they are also testament to the power of memory as resistance against complete annihilation, a signal that the people of Xinjiang and the culture they created will continue to survive.



**Sophie Beach** is the operations manager of China Digital Times, a nonprofit media organisation based in Berkeley, California, and has been writing about China for more than 25 years.

## More from Mekong Review



### 'Sometimes'

Poetry by Ghojimuhemmed Muhemmed



## **Chuan'r**

One syllable brings the spice





## **Woman-radical: A feminist lesson in Chinese characters**

Poetry from Yuan Changming

Tags: **China, Emily Zinkin, Issue 36, Kevin Bubriski, Maidina Kadeer, Munawwar Abdulla, Sonya Imin, Sophie Beach**

---

[< PREVIOUS ARTICLE](#)

[NEXT ARTICLE >](#)

**A new chapter**

**The Dawn of Independence (August '47)**

---

[About](#) · [Contact](#) · [Privacy](#)

