

Kashgar: Traditional Uighur Life in Transition

Photographs by Stacey Irvin



For centuries, the majority of traditional inhabitants in the vast region of Northwestern China have been Uighur (pron. 'wee ger'), a Turkic ethnic group whose language, religion and culture contrasts with that of the Han Chinese. During the past decade, the Chinese government has been working on a rapid campaign to develop its western regions. This campaign has led to a dramatic influx of China's majority Han into Xinjiang Province. As demographics change and industry begins to boom, Uighurs are faced with increasing marginalization and enormous pressure to assimilate.

In July 2009 racial and political tension in Xinjiang Province received international attention due to ethnic violence in the provincial capitol, Urumqi. Even with increasing media attention, most people in western countries are not familiar with the Uighur people. This unfamiliarity is compounded by the fact that Chinese media often portrays Uighurs as violent muslim extremists.

I first traveled to Xinjiang in 2000, less than one year after construction of the Southern Xinjiang railway reached the city of Kashgar. At times it was often hard for me to believe that I was still traveling in China. Uighur culture was clearly dominant and intact in most Xinjiang places despite new construction of modern Chinese buildings and wide boulevards on the outskirts of cities throughout the province.

I returned to Xinjiang in 2004 to witness many changes and a shift in population and cultural influence. In Kashgar, ancient homes in the Uighur Old Town were being demolished to make way for new commercial shopping areas near the Id Ka Mosque in the center of town. In 2009, the Chinese government announced that it will be accelerating demolition of up to eighty-five percent of the ancient Uighur Old Town in Kashgar. The government claims that this centuries-old part of the city is not earthquake-safe. Large apartment complexes are planned to replace what many argue should instead be preserved and designated a UNESCO world heritage site.

My main desire has been to get to know the Uighur people of Xinjiang and preserve through photographs Uighur traditional life in the face of an uncertain cultural future. I am hopeful that more people will come to appreciate Uighur culture and empathize with the humanity and dignity of the Uighur people.



Interrupted while playing in a roadside puddle near Kashgar's Old Town, a young Uighur girl shows an enthusiastic sign for peace.



Two men sit at the side entrance to the tree-filled courtyard at Id Kah Mosque in Kashgar. Id Kah is China's largest mosque.







Two brothers sell girde nan, a bagel-like bread cooked in a tandoor-style oven, along a quiet lane in the heart of Kashgar's Old Town.



A toddler plays with a plastic bowl just outside of his family's home on a quiet residential lane in Kashgar's historic Old Town.









Children play in a quiet residential cooridor in the Uighur Old Town, Kashgar.



Two girls play while their grandfather splits firewood in the Old Town residential area. Many of the homes in the Old Town lack plumbing and electricity.



A young girl watches a small kiosk in Kashgar's historic Uighur Old Town.



Surrounded by fresh produce, a Uighur woman and her daughter laugh in amusement at being photographed. Their family home is just around the corner in Kashgar's historic Old Town.



Uighur girls play near a local water source in Kashgar's Old Town on their way home from school. Many of the homes in the Old Town lack plumbing. Residents come to this communal area near a natural spring to fetch water and do laundry.





Shoppers purchase fresh fruit and produce on the streets of Kashgar's Old Town.



A man enjoys some tea inside a traditional Uighur tea house in Kashgar's Old Town.



A Uighur father and daughter sit outside and drink tea in the Old Town, Kashgar.



Mutton kebabs are prepared and briskly fanned on a grill in a night market across from Id Kah Mosque in Kashgar.



Two Uighur girls stand in front homes that are being demolished to make way for new commercial shopping areas in a residential area near Id Kah Mosque.



A man stands in front homes that are being demolished to make way for new commercial shopping areas in a residential area near Id Kah Mosque in Kashgar.



Remnants of Uighur homes sit in the shadow of modern apartment buildings on the edge of the Uighur Old Town.



A new shopping center is constructed near Id Kah Mosque where Uighur homes once stood. Many of Uighur residents had to relocate to apartments and homes in areas outside of the Old Town.

LINKS:

[Save Kashgar](#)

[Uighur Human Rights Project](#)

[PDF: Amnesty International Uighur Identity](#)

ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHER:

Stacey Irvin is an award-winning photographer living in Nashville, Tennessee. She has traveled and photographed extensively in Asia, North America, and in parts of Africa and South America to explore and document indigenous communities, rural life, and our shared humanity. Irvin graduated in 1999 with a B.A. in Philosophy from Vanderbilt University. Recent solo photography exhibitions include: The Nashville International Airport and The Parthenon Museum, Nashville, TN. Irvin is available for assignments and special projects worldwide.

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