

Building a New Old City in Kashgar: China, Central Asia, Cultural Clash [Video update]

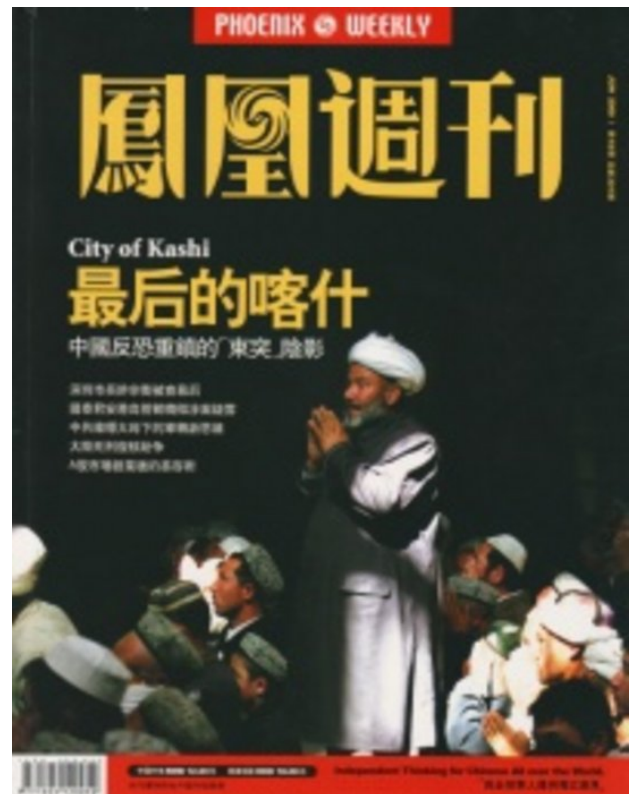
Zhou Yu

Building a New Old City in Kashgar: China, Central Asia, Cultural Clash [With [video](#) update by Stephen McDonnell, Australia Broadcasting Company]

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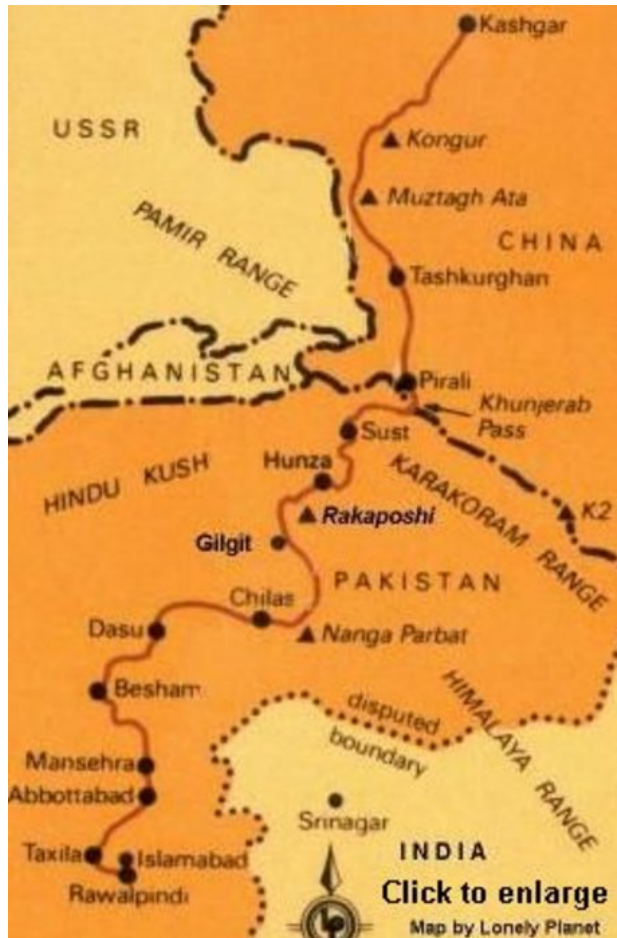
Joel Martinsen translator

Old Kashgar is not long for this world. Quake fear, anxiety over ethnic unrest, and pursuit of development have spurred the authorities to launch a large-scale plan to demolish and redevelop 85% of the Old City.



Phoenix Weekly II (2009)

There has been considerable criticism of the project among Kashgar residents and in the world world media, but it has done little to stop the project. This month's Phoenix Weekly contains an interesting cover feature on life in the Old City and how it may change in the future. The story is a little oversold based on the coverline: "The Shadow of 'East Turkestan' on China's Strategic Anti-Terrorism City," as most of the feature is about everyday life as opposed to terrorism.



Map of Central Asia

Translated below is an excerpt that looks at how the area has already changed in the days since the founding of the People's Republic.

First though, a look at what's coming next. The "This is Xinjiang" blog put up a post that detailed the changes that are in store for Kashgar's old city and included photos of a promotional sign trying to sell the project to a skeptical public:



The new Kashgar

Basically, in this plan, the city will straighten the major pathways within the block. The first story, comprised of neatly squared stores, will attempt to replace the current commercial district in the area. Now, people must pass through a labyrinth of homes in order to reach the inner core, but in the future, anyone will be able to access these shops easily from the street. The project aims to cover the entire first floor with a roof, which will eliminate the traditional sunlit courtyards of Uyghur houses. Instead, I guess that street lamps will light these alleyways, which is so very environmentally friendly. A grassy surface will top the first floor. Four outdoor staircases, one from each major road, will lead to this second level, which opens to four lawns and possibly a central fountain, all enclosed by five-story apartment buildings. Finally, the project offers eight different types of apartment layouts. This plan organizes social life vertically, instead of horizontally, which dramatically cuts down on daily interactions.



Old Kashgar

The blog post has more descriptions of the reconstruction project, photos of the old city, and additional views of the plans for the new buildings.

Here's a translation of an excerpt of a much longer piece on Kashgar's Old City that ran in Phoenix Weekly: From The End of Kashgar by Zhou Yu

Crossing the bazaar street that has already been entirely demolished, Alimjan (阿里木江) approaches his old house in the depths of the lane.

In the course of a month, the dust covering everything has made it impossible to see what sort of homes used to be here. Workers blackened in the sun sit on the ground pounding brick fragments. The earthen bricks of the oldest homes are to be discarded, ground into fine powder.



Razing Kashgar (Shiho Fukada)

A billboard stands here describing the impressive outcome of the old city's reconstruction: trim and tidy six floor matchbox buildings, with toy-like cars running single-file between them. Behind the billboard comes the noise of real-life cars.

More than 100 meters down the lane, you reach an entirely different world.

A building standing astride the street casts a long shadow. A pair of foreign tourists amble in the shadow, unsure of whether to continue deeper into the lane. The twists and turns of the old city alleyways are like a labyrinth to tourists, who call it "a place where time stands still," and who need four-way or six-way directional indicators to help them identify through streets and dead ends. Alimjan knows all of the lanes and all of the owners of the earthen buildings on either side.



Kashgar lane

At home, Alimjan shuts the wooden door, and protected back behind his thick mud brick walls, the sweltering heat gradually recedes from his body. In the mornings, the windows of the old home are opened to let in the cool breezes, and when the sun climbs into the sky, Alimjan shuts the doors and windows tight to enjoy the coolness all day.

Alimjan sits down on the carpet that covers the floor. Sunlight filters through Islamic-style mullions to illuminate this traditional residence. In the corners are colorful tile mosaics, just within reach. The entire wall in the sitting room is a mosque-shaped plaster latticework, and the compartments are filled with fine ceramics that have been around for several generations, as old as the house itself.

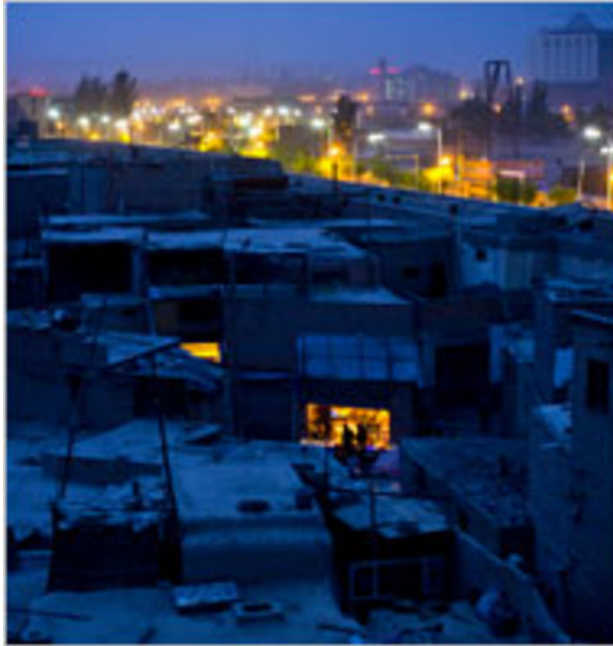


Kashgar mosque

Alimjan's father and grandfather were born in this mud brick house, and though Alimjan's beard has now grown as long as his grandfather's, there has been no perceptible change to the house.

Mud bricks are the most important earmark feature of homes in Kashgar. An academic in Kashgar who preferred to remain anonymous gave this description: "Square houses built of mud bricks laid out in thick layers, with a capped wooden roof covered in reeds, straw, and mud...to guard against earthquakes, the walls are built 70 to 90 cm thick, and their durability is rarely seen in the Muslim world."

Alimjan's grandfather recalled that over the 100 years since the home was built, it had always been rock-solid and never needed to be repaired. The lanes surrounding it were peaceful, and you could hardly feel the passage of time.



Kashgar at night (Shiho Fukada)

But sudden changes crashed into this placid life.

In 1958, Kashgar was electrified. This miraculous event changed the working habits of the inhabitants of the old city. Previously, even though they had kerosene lamps and candles, residents would still plan their days the way Allah intended, going to sleep as soon as it got dark and waking up at around 4 in the morning. Going out onto the balcony at night, you could see the moon half-hidden behind an earthen wall.

After electricity came, nighttime was like a lantern. Not only was the nighttime bazaar illuminated, but people could read at home, and they delayed their bedtime.

In 1968, red guards charged through the old lanes. They tore off women's scarves and threw them to the ground, they smashed old artifacts and tore up mosques, and they surged into people's homes and burned old books.

Two years later, the old city experienced its

first major "reconstruction" under the new regime: digging tunnels.

The neighborhood committee told everyone that Soviet revisionists were going to attack. Alimjan hoisted a shovel and dug into the ground. Air-raid shelters were dug under many streets in the old city, four to seven meters down, and about two meters high.

The old city was already crowded, so the earth that was dug up had to be piled along the road. In some places it stood a meter high, so the old drainage system failed and rain and snow flooded people's yards and ate away the foundations of the walls.

In the end, Soviet revisionists did not attack. Half a year later the tunnel digging campaign came to a quiet end, and residents sealed up the strange tunnels that had entrances but no exits. The days continued on.

At the end of the 1990s, running water came to the old city. Alimjan remembers that it came along with a number of other things: the term "East Turkestan" circulated ever more stridently through the old lanes, and mosques and public address systems echoed with lectures about ethnic unity and anti-splittism.

Then one lane after another was torn down. In 2002, renovations to the Id Kah Mosque commenced.

During this round of renovations, the traditional bazaar and old residential area in front of the mosque vanished and were replaced by a broad square and giant commercial buildings on the other side of the street.

This time, things were different from the past. A Kashgar official who preferred to remain anonymous recalled that between 2002 and 2006, the sounds of disturbances in the old city were carried overseas.

In 2004, Minister of Construction Wang Guangtao made an inspection tour of Kashgar. In a speech, Wang said that as soon as he got out of the car, he went looking for the old city: "Earthen-walled structures cover four square kilometers, and in the middle a mosque famous across Central Asia. Let me make it more tangible for you: these four square kilometers are worth more than the districts surrounding you, their price is far higher."

Wang stressed that the old city's original appearance had to be preserved as much as possible while improving the road network and expanding services: "Mud brick structures are the basic characteristic of this ancient city...plans for precautionary strengthening against earthquakes should not be overemphasized."



Melons in Kashgar bazaar

The eye of the foreign media first turned toward the old city's reconstruction in 2006. Alimjan was surprised to discover that their voices of protest seemed to have born fruit: large-scale reconstruction in the old city largely came to a halt.

But after the Wenchuan Earthquake in 2008, calls for "earthquake precautions" overwhelmed everything else.

The television repeatedly aired scenes of the ruins in Wenchuan, and the old city was

described as a dangerous place that could completely collapse at any moment.

This time, the government's will was firm. "We will absolutely not let a few people use the guise of protecting historical culture to hoodwink our populace, making them pay a price in blood and face a loss of life and property to protect old and dangerous homes that have no value whatsoever, and we will absolutely not let those people with ulterior motives fabricate erroneous public opinion to prevent the development of Kashgar," warned the General Management and Publicity Outline for the Reconstruction Project for Old and Dangerous Houses in Kashgar's Old City.

On February 27, 2009, at a municipal mobilization meeting, officials were requested "to immediately dismiss any leaders who intentionally interfere with or refuse to cooperate on the work, or do not carry out their respective duties and obligations. There is no alternative...."

On March 25, the first stage of demolition of the Östang Boyi* neighborhood commenced, and nearly one hundred families were moved to a residential neighborhood five kilometers away.

"We had no right to choose." One resident of the street said that after being moved to the new district, some of the older people would come back to the street in the evenings to stand in front of their demolished homes for a long while.

On his way back home, Alimjan saw this scene play out in the shadow of the old street-spanning building: two old men in identical doppas, with identical white beards, clad in identical long robes, stood in the shadows shaking hands and exchanging a greeting in Uighur, while a tourist snapped a photo.



Wall and stairs

What the camera did not capture was the tear at the corner of one old man's eye, while the other felt in his heart an uncertainty that

stretched as long as the lane itself.

Note: 吾斯塘博依. I originally had the Pinyin Wusitangboyi, and replaced it with a version supplied by a commenter. Neither rendering appears to be all that common in English.

Links and Sources

* Phoenix Weekly 凤凰周刊, The End of Kashgar (最后的喀什), June 2009 (#331), p16

* This is Xinjiang blog: Signs of the Fall

* Far West China: Kashgar's Old Town Bulldozed; Is Uyghur Culture in Danger?

* The New Dominion: Old Kashgar: Reconfiguring Space With Bulldozers, includes links to a number of detailed news reports Translated and posted by Joel Martinsen at Danwei on July 1, 2009

Source: JDM090701phoenixs.jpg

Phoenix Weekly, June (II) 2009

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