

UYGHUR HOLY SITES

What is holiness? This is the essential question for scholars, artists or anyone who approaches a holy place (usually called mazar in Central Asian languages), especially in the Muslim world, where saints and their tombs, more than mosques, arouse the most popular, dramatic and powerful experience of religious devotion.

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Photography **Lisa Ross** | www.lisaross.info

The Uyghur are a Turkic people of Central Asia. They are one of China's 56 officially recognized ethnicities, with a population, according to the 2007 Chinese census, of 9.6 million people. Throughout the history of Central Asia, the Uyghurs have left a lasting imprint on both culture and tradition.

In China today, Uyghurs live primarily in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (also known by its controversial name, East Turkestan). There are also Uyghur communities in Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Uzbekistan, and Turkey, as well as a smaller Uyghur population in Taoyuan County of Hunan province in South-central China.

For centuries, the desert has offered divine inspiration to ascetics who set out in search of meaning. The structures resulting from this quest are found at holy sites in oasis villages and along the desert's edge. Deeply influenced by Sufi mysticism, a central aspect of Uyghur spiritual practice is visiting the tombs of saints. Susceptible to the elements of nature, such as sand and strong desert winds, these fragile monuments are forever changing. Among the materials used to create them are branches, stones, scarves sewn by hand into flags and brooms to sweep away evil spirits.

These sculptures rely on the devotion of their makers. Their existence marks a personal prayer: a woman's wish for a child, desire for domestic harmony, or the healing of illness. Pilgrimage to many of these religious sites has changed under Chinese domination. Their disappearance is linked to modernization and China's drive to develop the northwest, which is rich in natural resources, including gas and oil.

Collaborating with a Uyghur ethnographer and a French historian of Central Asian Islam has enabled Lisa Ross to visit many of these sites and create images that are informed by history, oral tradition, and collective memory.



Unrevealed, site 1 (fertility)



Black Garden (burial marker with door)



Unrevealed, site 1 (shelter for rituals)



Unrevealed, site 4 (colored cribs)



Unrevealed, site 9 (hilltop crib markers)