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Nick Holdstock (/contributor/nick-holdstock) interviews Lisa Ross (/author/lisa-ross)

### Eternal Sleep: The Uyghur Shrines of the Taklamakan Desert

May 16th, 2013

THERE ARE MOSQUES in towns all over China, but the most concentrated signs of Islamic belief are found in the western province of Xinjiang. The region is home to most of China's Uyghurs, a Muslim people linguistically and culturally distinct from the Han Chinese (the ethnic majority in China). The majority of Uyghurs live in the southwest of the province, in oasis cities that skirt the edges of the Taklamakan Desert. This is the setting for Lisa Ross's Living Shrines of Uyghur China, a book of photographs a decade in the making, whose subject is the shrines to folk saints (in Uyghur, mazar) found throughout the region. People make pilgrimages to mazars throughout the year, both at religious festivals and when they want to ask for the saint's intercession with a personal problem (a spiritual, physical, or mental ailment) or one that affects their community like a drought. Mazars are usually surrounded by ritual offerings that range from goat horns and horsetails to metal crescents and bricks. There are also small handmade dolls made from cloth that are left by women to inform the saint of their wish to have a child.

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[Lisa Ross \(/author/lisa-ross\)](#)

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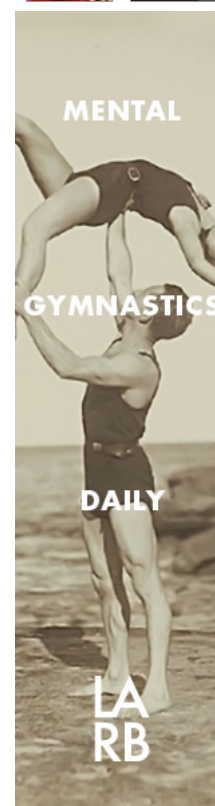
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Mazars have existed in Xinjiang for centuries; as the accompanying essays in the book make clear, they are a vital sign of Uyghurs' connection to the land and their traditions. Though their isolation has protected them, in recent years some have been turned into tourist sites. Several of the major festivals have also been banned in reaction to the acts of protest (some of them violent) that have taken place against the Chinese government (over such issues as the resettlement of Han Chinese from inner China, the family planning laws, and religious and cultural restrictions). Given the uncertainty that surrounds so much in Xinjiang at present, where huge changes in infrastructure and urban planning have already destroyed major sites of Uyghur culture (such as most of the old city of Kashgar), Lisa Ross's book is both a timely celebration and a vital record of mazar in Xinjiang. Its release accompanies a major [exhibition](http://www.rmanyc.org/nav/exhibitions/view/1908) (<http://www.rmanyc.org/nav/exhibitions/view/1908>) (until July 8) of her work at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York.

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NICK HOLDSTOCK: How did this project begin?

LISA ROSS: In 2002 I visited a mazar, a holy site, south of the Taklamakan desert. I was traveling in Xinjiang and following an intuition, something I felt I was meant to see and do. I'm an artist and believe in my intuition. I must. When I walked through the desert and arrived at the mazar, I knew this is what I was meant to see. I had no idea of how I would return, but I knew I would find a way. Over the next 10 years I returned to this mazar more than half a dozen times.

NH: These photos vividly convey the way that these shrines are shaped by both human hands and also natural forces. Can you say something about the importance of the landscape as a setting for these shrines?

LR: The desert, in its starkness is a powerful setting for the shrines. Human spirit is bursting forth from the shrines. They represent man's need to express life and a belief in a relationship between the living and the dead.

The shrines are a physical manifestation of faith. When asked what a miracle is, a holy person responded that a miracle is anything that creates greater faith in people. The mazar in this case are overflowing in miracles.

The desert setting provides a contrast to the physical markers and challenges their survival. People must return and maintain the shrines or natural forces would swallow them up in time. In a way there is defiance in the shrines' ability to exist over decades and centuries.

The dunes remind me of waves and the vast ocean, both calm and unforgiving. I originally saw the wooden burial markers as small ships at sea with flags blowing in the wind, ghosts of human spirit.

Of course the landscape is not always desert as defined by dunes. As the landscape changes, so do the markers.

In the photograph titled Unrevealed, Site 4 (Colored "Cribs"), the mazar is in the center of town, a village on the desert's edge. The burial markers are surrounded by tall reaching poplar trees, whose green leaves and white bark create a wall of protection. In this setting the wooden markers are painted brightly. Here again, contrast occurs between man and nature. In each setting human hands found a way to shape the shrines to somehow stand in contrast to their environment, whether consciously or not.

NH: A lot of photographers approach religious subjects by photographing believers, but in these pictures there are no people at the shrines. What were the reasons for this?

LR: I wanted the viewer to be the believer, to stand in front of this marker imbued with so much faith and have an intimate experience. For me it was an overwhelming feeling to experience these markers. It doesn't matter what I believe in — god, no-god, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism or Judaism — I still had a response. Perhaps, it was a spiritual response. In order to create the potential for intimacy it was important that the relationship between the viewer and the spiritual architecture was unmediated by the presence of the human figure. I did not want the viewer to look at a person looking at a thing.

NH: The photographs give the powerful sense that mazars are truly "Living Shrines," in that they're continually changing and being recreated. Can you say something more about this? Over the course of the project did you witness any significant changes in a particular *mazar*?

LR: Yes, sand would often cover a marker, so one year only the top edges would peek out. The next year when I returned, it would have been dug out from under the sand and now stood waist high.

Markers would be painted so colors would change. One year there was a fresh sacrifice, so a ram's head was bleeding still and stuck atop a tall branch. Two years following it was a skull and horns only, in the same place but had swung upside down. Markers were added, *Qorchaq* (dolls) were added. The mazar are in constant flux, maintaining balance in the lives and communities of people who visit them.

NH: Why did you choose to place the captions for the photos at the end of the book, rather than with the photos?

LR: I wanted to leave room for people's imagination. I wanted to give the viewer time to think about what they were looking at before I told them what I thought they were looking at.

NH: Some of the most striking pictures in the book are of the dolls that people leave as offerings. Although these are intended to be temporary, most appear to have been made with great care. Can you say anything about the way in which they're constructed, for example their design or the choice of materials used?

LR: I believe they are not meant to last forever and eventually return to the earth. They serve an important role as they mark a prayer for healing and often for fertility. They are made with very personal materials that women choose to sew them with. They are often made with twigs, branches, or

chopsticks. Many represent a mother and child, some a womb and fetus, others the body of a person they want to heal. I never saw a negative or punishing doll for causing harm. I did notice one *Qorchaq*, dressed in a distinctive way with a checkered shirt and black pants. This same doll was at three different mazar that I visited, but none were near each other. It means a person was on pilgrimage to different sites. Some believe that visitation to seven different mazar is equivalent to the Hajj, one visit to Mecca.

NH: Though the book rightfully stresses the centrality of mazar to Uyghur cultural and spiritual life, there are also many overlapping religious traditions in the region. There's a mazar in the north of Xinjiang where people from different beliefs visit on different days of the week — for example, Uyghurs on Mondays, Kazakhs on Wednesday. Did you encounter anything similar?

LR: I did not. I did witness some mazar where certain areas were designated for Hui burials. I also noticed that mazar were affected by the history of previous religions, for instance Turkic-Mongol Shamanism, Nestorian Christianity, Buddhism...

NH: Most of the shrines you photographed were in remote locations — were there any particular challenges in either locating them or gaining access?

LR: Yes, they were often not easy to find. It took time and speaking to a lot of people. The book we had, published by Rahile Dawut, was a guidebook but gives general locations. That is good in terms of protecting the sites. Some sites took very long to find and to get to. Often taking numerous forms of travel, starting with a taxi switching to a bus, then to a motorized wagon or donkey cart and finally by foot.

Access was less of an issue but sometimes did require permission and ID.

NH: Were there any aspects of mazars that you wanted to document but were unable to?

LR: Nothing specific, but it is a project that could go on for years. If I continued, I might want to work with sound. It was important to spend time creating video as an essential experiential aspect of this body of work.

NH: There are many changes taking place in Xinjiang at present, not least in terms of infrastructure projects and demographic shifts. Do you see any evidence that mazars and the spiritual tradition that underlines them are being affected?

LR: As modernization occurs, things change. So some old structures are being rebuilt. I did see some sites turned into tourist attractions. They lose much of their original function. Hopefully, they are seen as valuable aspects of Uyghur Tradition. It would be great if mazar were recognized as important historical monuments, so they could be protected.

NH: You've done a number of other projects in Xinjiang before this. Can you tell us more about them, and whether you plan to do any more work in the region?

LR: The other projects I made in Xinjiang, I created simultaneously. *After Night* is photographs of beds in the landscape. I focused some time on this project during each visit to Xinjiang. I was very interested in the relationship between the bed and burial marker and the idea that the saint is in a state of eternal sleep. I thought the landscapes that the beds were found in often had a dreamlike quality. They mimicked the dream state of surreal territories. The beds are often handmade using the same materials as burial markers, such as wood and bright colored material. Often there were prayer beads hanging on the bedpost and a prayer rug rolled up.

*Desert Control* was another project that describes the extreme, almost obsessive control of the desert dunes, creating a clear road for vehicles to travel rapidly across the province and through the territory.

A video I made, from black and white still photos, is called *Transport*. It

recreates an experience of moving through and across former Silk Road territory in contemporary times during which great change is taking place.

I am working on a new video now of material I collected in 2011.

I'd like to end by quoting Isabelle Eberhardt from an essay of hers entitled "In the Land of Desert Sands" written in the early 1900s about her relationship to Algeria:

There are exceptional times, very mysteriously privileged moments, when certain lands reveal to us, through sudden insight, their *soul*, perhaps even their very *essence*, moments when we develop an accurate and unique vision, and which months of patient study wouldn't know how to complete or even modify.

□

*Nick Holdstock is the author of The Tree That Bleeds: A Uighur Town On the Edge, which is about the year he spent living in Xinjiang province in western China.* (<http://lareviewofbooks.org/author.php?cid=594>)



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