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The Spirit Of China's Sufi Shrines

by CLAIRE O'NEILL

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In 2002, photographer Lisa Ross found herself far away from home — in the remote Taklamakan Desert of western China, in what is known as the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region.

"I was looking for something," she says, but "I didn't know what I was looking for."



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She had been visiting a friend in Beijing but ventured out to the

desert on her own. That's where she first encountered *mazars*: handmade holy sites in Sufi Islam, built to commemorate saints who are buried there.

Several trips to China and about a decade later, Ross now has a book out — as well as a show at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York City: *Living Shrines of Uyghur China*.

The Uighurs (also spelled Uyghurs) are Muslims who live in this remote part of China. And these sites are tributes to saints, who in their lifetime were deemed to have healing power that they carried to the grave.

The shrines are located sporadically throughout the sprawling region and are often unmarked. Some of them, Ross says, are easily 500 years old. The sites serve as destinations for pilgrims — who leave offerings in exchange for healing.

But in Ross's quiet, lonely photos, the pilgrims are obviously missing.

"Intimacy was very important to me," she says. "I couldn't really make intimate photographs of people I didn't know. I wanted to photograph the landscape as if I were making a portrait."

The shrines aren't always easy to find — especially for an outsider. It's not like there's a handy map to the region. The closest thing Ross found was a 2001 hagiography (or a biography of saints) written in the Uighur language by local scholar Rahila Dawut.

With that as a basic guide, Ross traversed the desert by rickety bus, donkey and foot — accompanied first by historian Alexandre Papas, and later by Dawut and her students.

They managed to find dozens of shrines — but another thing Ross excludes from her photos is the specific location: "As much as it would be awesome for as many people to see these things in person, it would also endanger their existence."

This part of the world is modernizing, and that could jeopardize some of these places and the traditions. But Ross has captured something that will endure: The spirit of a place.

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