

# China's Sufis: The Shrines Behind the Dunes

Ian Johnson



Lisa Ross

Lisa Ross's luminous photographs are not our usual images of Xinjiang. One of China's most turbulent areas, the huge autonomous region in the country's northwest was brought under permanent Chinese control only in the mid-twentieth century. Officially, it is populated mostly by non-ethnic Chinese—Turkic peoples like Uighurs (also spelled Uyghurs), Kazakhs, and Kyrgyz, as well as Mongolians and even Russians—and its population has long had difficult relations with Beijing. In 2008, 2009, and 2012, Xinjiang was the site of bloody protests.

Instead of representing these political conflicts, however, Ross's photographs are unassuming and quiet; people are never present and the objects she captures—stone on sand, cloth on stone, the skeleton of a dried animal—have an incandescent glow, as if lit by another sun. In fact, these images reveal a little-known religious tradition in Xinjiang—its desert shrines to Sufi saints. Taken in the Xinjiang's Taklamakan Desert, they are collected in Ross's addictive new book, *Living Shrines of Uyghur China*, and are now on view at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York.

Xinjiang is famous as part of China's Silk Road. Buddhism entered the country through this western region and, later, Islam. Today, the Uighurs form the second-biggest Muslim population in China. Unlike their more numerous Hui brethren, however, the Uighurs are ethnically very different from the Chinese, descending from Turkic peoples. Ethnic Chinese control has been tenuous, with regular rebellions against Beijing's rule. Most locals are Sunni Muslims, but many Sufi sects are popular. It is these more mystical groups that worship in the shrines photographed by Ross.

These shrines are made of different kinds of materials, but most are wooden posts or dried branches, stuck in the sand or cracked earth, and bound with colorful cloth.

Some are more clearly identifiable as funeral memorials for one, often famous, deceased person. They are individual graves, sometimes grouped together as in a cemetery, other times alone in the desert, frequently in the form of little picket fences surrounding a mound. Most have some colorful cloth tied to the wood to make it stand out in the monochromatic landscape.

Occasionally, Ross found small dolls, which signify a wish from visiting women for pregnancy. Women would drop off the dolls at shrines that they found efficacious. Other times, dried remains of animals testify to a sacrifice made in a saint's honor, or function as talismans.



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In her preface, the New York-based Ross explains what drew her to this unusual topic. She was visiting Xinjiang over a decade ago and a friend who knew her tastes suggested she walk into the desert. After a while she began to see colors—the cloths revealing themselves behind the dunes—and the small wooden cribs or rafts that marked the burial areas. She made another trip and then another, centering around the heartland of Uighur culture, the oasis towns surrounding the Taklamakan Desert that is located in the heart of Xinjiang and forms its spiritual and ethnic center of gravity.

Becoming almost an obsession, her interest led her to meet local scholars, such as Rahilā Dawut, who had written in China on the shrines and accompanied Ross on a trip. Despite the complicated politics surrounding her—Beijing has restricted access to the region at times of heightened unrest—she writes that “I made a conscious decision to remain apolitical, in large part because I wanted to respect and protect everyone with whom I worked.”

*Lisa Ross*

And yet these empty landscapes and simple graves—Ross says she purposefully avoided people—belie political struggles. In one of the introductory essays, the French historian Alexandre Papas notes that many of these shrines have over the past decade become commercialized. As part of its effort to bring minority faiths under central control—and to commodify religion—the Chinese government has encouraged some to be walled off, with admission charged. Often, this is done by Chinese entrepreneurs, with government approval. This isn't unique to Xinjiang but it's imaginable that it could add to ethnic tensions between the indigenous people and Chinese immigrants, who have been encouraged to move to Xinjiang to work in construction, energy industries, and services.

The state, though, has also sought to protect them by giving some of them official status as “cultural patrimony sites.” This means there is money available for preservation, but it also risks transforming them into exotic relics rather than part of a continuing religious tradition. Islam is one of the officially recognized religions in China but it remains tightly proscribed, with ethnic Chinese bureaucrats deciding how many Uighurs and other Muslims may travel, for example, on the Hajj to Mecca.

Most of this, however, is left unsaid in Ross's book. Many of the photos are of more modest shrines than the big tourist attractions. They are small mounds and markers to more personal religious expression. Mostly, what interests Ross are the deeper issues of spirituality: what does a pilgrim see or experience on the way to a shrine? What is holiness? Looking at these bright, numinous images, we begin to sense something inexpressible but more profound than any of the region's difficult politics—a glimpse at the intangible traditions and beliefs that have given shape to Xinjiang's Muslims over many centuries.



Lisa Ross

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***Living Shrines of Uyghur China*** by Lisa Ross, with essays by Beth Citron, Rahilä Dawut, and Alexandre Papas, is published by The Monacelli Press. Ross's photographs are on view at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York City through July 8.

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