A climate of terror prevails in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. This borderland is politically part of the People’s Republic of China, yet culturally it is part of Central Asia. Today, its citizens face surveillance and mass detention on an unprecedented scale.

Xinjiang is home to some 12 million indigenous Turkic-speaking Muslims, primarily Uighurs but also smaller numbers of Kazakhs and others. The region has seen a rise in Islamic piety since the 1980s, very similar in form and closely related to the revival elsewhere in Central Asia, and more broadly part of a global Islamic revival.

Since 2001, Xinjiang has been in a downward spiral of government repression and violence, culminating in the 2014 declaration of a “People’s War on Terror” and the introduction of punitive policies of securitization and control. These policies form part of Chinese President Xi Jinping’s wider agenda to establish his personal authority—and to demonstrate absolute control over this key strategic region, in order to ensure the success of the flagship Belt and Road Initiative, China’s global infrastructure investment push.

Over the course of 2017, news began to leak out revealing the construction of a huge, secretive network of detention camps, dubbed “transformation-through-education centers” or “counter-extremism training centers” in official Chinese sources. Overseas journalists and scholars began to piece together the evidence. By mid-2018, international organizations and foreign governments were raising concerns that more than a million Muslims, over 10 percent of the adult Muslim population of the region—mostly Uighurs but also Kazakhs and other ethnic groups—had been interned in the camps for indefinite periods of time without formal legal charges.

INSIDE THE ZONE

Although international attention has focused on the unprecedented extent of the recent mass detentions, the camps are only the sharp end of a set of policies that have transformed the whole region into a militarized high-security zone. These new policies were introduced by Chen Quanguo, who was appointed Communist Party secretary in Xinjiang in August 2016. Chen was transferred to Xinjiang from Tibet, where he had previously developed a sophisticated network of surveillance and control in response to protests in 2008.

In Xinjiang, the same policies were applied with great speed and on a much larger scale, taking advantage of newly available surveillance technologies. Ubiquitous checkpoints at transportation hubs and at entrances to markets and shopping centers are equipped with metal detectors and facial-recognition or iris-scan machines.

One of the main mass surveillance systems used by the Xinjiang authorities is dubbed the Integrated Joint Operations Platform. This software collects massive amounts of personal information and flags residents for detention and reeducation, based on designated “signs of extremism” that extend to behavior such as “not socializing with neighbors” or “often avoids using the front door.” The system also flags the use of virtual private networks (VPNs), often used in China to access censored websites, and social media platforms, including WhatsApp and Viber.

When Uighurs and other Muslims pass through a security check (Han Chinese residents are per-
mitted to bypass them) after getting off a train or on the way to the bazaar, their faces and phones are scanned. If anything “suspicious” has been logged against them, an alarm is triggered, summoning extra police from a nearby station to interrogate and possibly detain them.

By the spring of 2018, the Uighur social media network Ündidar (WeChat) was awash with statements of passionate patriotism. Uighurs in Xinjiang replaced their former statements of piety with expressions of love for Xi and loyalty to the Communist Party. Uighur intellectuals and artists posted images of themselves against the background of the Chinese flag, alongside quotations from the Thought of Xi Jinping, freshly enshrined in the Chinese constitution.

But occasionally messages creep through the “walls of steel” surrounding Xinjiang (which Xi called for in a 2014 speech), suggesting that other sentiments lie beneath. In February 2018, one woman shared and then swiftly deleted a post lamenting, “These days many, many people I know are being taken away, every second, every minute, hour, or day, accused of all sorts of things.”

People are often detained directly in connection with their digital footprints. A foreign phone number in their contacts list, an audio recording of a Quranic recitation, or a religious image are now all counted as sufficient evidence of extremism to condemn individuals, without formal charge, to a bout of “reeducation” of unspecified length in the camps.

Surveillance techniques also include the low-tech but intrusive method of home stays. Under the “Becoming Family” policy, over a million Han Chinese government employees were mobilized to lodge uninvited with Uighur families and observe their enthusiasm for speaking in Chinese and singing patriotic songs. They also probed for suspicious activities, such as using the traditional Muslim greeting “Assalamu alaikum,” hiding a Quran in the home, or having friends or relatives in “sensitive” countries such as Turkey or Egypt. Other suspicious signs might include refusing a proffered cigarette or glass of beer, or hesitating to accept food that might not be halal.

By 2017, the so-called anti-religious extremism campaign had spread beyond the sphere of religion; no longer just branding everyday religious activity as terrorism, its scope had expanded still further to target all signs of Uighur nationalist sentiment, foreign connections, or simply insufficient loyalty to the state. Official statements suggest that the entire Uighur population is now regarded as a problem in need of an aggressive solution. As one Xinjiang official commented in a speech in late 2017:

You can’t uproot all the weeds hidden among the crops in the field one by one—you need to spray chemicals to kill them all; reeducating these people is like spraying chemicals on the crops. . . .

Any kind of link with Uighurs in the diaspora, whether in Central Asia, Turkey, or the United States, is now regarded as evidence of anti-Chinese intent. Since 2017, families with relatives working or studying abroad have been warned against receiving their phone calls, which would bring a risk of detention in one of the camps. Many Uighurs living in Central Asia have been completely cut off from their relatives inside Xinjiang for over two years. Uighur students studying in North America have been detained when they return home to visit their parents. Some Uighurs in Turkey, separated from their children, have seen them in Chinese propaganda videos shared on social media, shouting their love for the motherland in Chinese.

The campaign has been further broadened to target “two-faced” people, including government officials, teachers, and businesspeople, who “appear to be fighting terrorism while actually sympathizing with it.” Also sucked into the detention camps have been hundreds of prominent Uighur intellectuals, writers, and artists, whose crimes—although they are not formally stated—seem to be that their work has in some way promoted Uighur language, culture, or history. Many of my own colleagues, long-term associates, and friends made over the 25 years I’ve conducted research in this region have been detained: the iconic and much-loved musicians Sañbar Tursun and Abdurehim Heyit, the popular author and scholar of Chagatay poetry Abdulqadir Jalaleddin, and my research partner Rahile Dawut, a professor of folklore at Xinjiang University—an internationally respected scholar who dedicated years of her life to documenting the rich culture of Uighur shrine pilgrimage.

Increasingly, the term “religious extremism” appears to serve as an official gloss for Uighur culture and identity, now regarded as a “virus” to be eradicated. Uighurs in exile and other commenta-
than 1,000 detainees. According to his account, Bekali was taken to a reeducation center that housed more than 1,000 detainees. According to his account, this was a project to “reengineer” Uighur society.

**Human reengineering**

In February 2018, Chinese media carried images of crowds of Uighur peasants waving flags to celebrate the Chinese New Year or standing next to traditional New Year’s greetings they had pasted on their front doors. A year later, videos shared on social media showed that whole Uighur communities in Khotan had mobilized to celebrate the Chinese New Year by performing traditional Chinese dances in the streets.

Uighurs across Xinjiang are expected to regularly attend Chinese-language lessons, and officials suggest that speaking Uighur in public is a sign of disloyalty to the state. These new initiatives indicate that it is now no longer sufficient to reject Islam; Uighurs are required to fully adopt Chinese cultural identity. As the scholar Adrian Zenz put it, this is a project to “reengineer” Uighur society.

The children of detainees are taken to orphanages, where they are taught to regard the religion and identity of their parents as backward and dangerous. Men are detained in larger numbers than women, and the Xinjiang authorities have encouraged ethnic intermarriage, offering cash incentives to Han men willing to marry Uighur women.

By 2019, the reengineering project had extended to the innermost bodily aspects of Uighur identity by targeting halal eating practices. Radio Free Asia reported that detainees in the camps were being served pork and threatened with physical punishment and food deprivation if they refused to eat it. Chinese media reported that pork had been distributed to poor Uighur families as part of a poverty relief effort for the Chinese New Year. Such radical efforts to break down core aspects of faith and identity across the broad population are part of the regime of terror enforced by the camps.

Former detainees have provided detailed accounts of life inside the camps. Omir Bekali, a citizen of Kazakhstan, was imprisoned in 2016 while visiting his parents in Xinjiang. (He was released after seven months of detention, following Kazakh diplomatic intervention.) After being held in a detention center where he was tortured, Bekali was taken to a reeducation center that housed more than 1,000 detainees. According to his account, they would wake before dawn to sing the national anthem and raise the Chinese flag. They gathered in large classrooms for history lessons in which they learned that the indigenous peoples of Xinjiang were backward and yoked in slavery under feudalism before they were liberated by the Chinese Communist Party in the 1950s. The detainees also studied the dangers of Islam. They were given frequent tests; those who failed were punished by being made to stand facing a wall for several hours at a time. Refusal to follow orders was punished by solitary confinement or food deprivation.

Gulbahar Jelil, another citizen of Kazakhstan who was incarcerated for over a year, gave a harrowing account of her experience in detention centers and a camp, where she lived on a starvation diet in overcrowded cells. She observed several suicides and the widespread use of psychiatric drugs to subdue inmates.

Mihrigul Tursun, a resident of Egypt, was detained while trying to visit her parents in Xinjiang. In testimony to a US congressional committee, she said she had suffered torture and starvation, observed the deaths of several fellow inmates, and was separated from her young children, one of whom died under mysterious circumstances.

Experiences of being forced to repeat slogans and self-criticism are prominent in these accounts. Detainees are made to recite repeatedly, “We will oppose extremism, we will oppose separatism, we will oppose terrorism.” Before meals, they are required to demonstrate their gratitude to the Communist Party by chanting, “Thank the Party! Thank the Motherland! Thank President Xi!” In classes, they present self-criticisms of their own religious histories. They also criticize their fellow inmates and submit to the criticism of their peers. Learning to recite the Quran, traveling outside China (where they supposedly risked being exposed to extremist thought), wearing Muslim clothing, and praying are all treated as past transgressions. Those who confess to such actions must repeatedly recite, “We have done illegal things, but we now know better.”

The detainees who most vigorously criticize the people and things they love are rewarded, and those who refuse are punished with solitary confinement, beatings, and food deprivation. The journalist Gerry Shih observes that “the internment program aims to rewire the political think-
ing of detainees, erase their Islamic beliefs, and reshape their very identities.” Such policies are deeply rooted in the Chinese Communist Party. They were implemented on a massive scale during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s.

Oppressive Music
Musical performance plays a key role in the reeducation program. A leaked video clip circulated by Uighur exile networks in 2017 appears to show two rows of Uighur detainees kneeling in an empty room, holding plastic bowls, and singing the revolutionary song, “Without the Communist Party There Would Be No New China.” The Uighur intellectual Abduwali Ayup, who was assaulted and detained in 2013 in connection with his efforts to establish a Uighur-language school, explained in a Facebook post: “They are singing for [their] meal.” Such coercive practices may be described as the weaponization of music.

US forces in the Iraq war also used music in interrogations to help destroy an individual’s will, sense of self, and religious faith. In Xinjiang’s reeducation centers, although detainees are not blasted with 24-hour heavy metal, we can see an equivalent use of music to discipline and transform them—as in the coerced singing of revolutionary songs to break down the embodied habits of pious practice. These methods of coerced listening take advantage of music’s unique ability to serve simultaneously as sensory experience, site of cultural belief, and medium of cultural practice.

Musical performance featured in carefully choreographed visits to the camps organized in 2019 by the Chinese authorities for selected international media organizations. Staged in response to allegations of mass human rights abuses in Xinjiang, these visits were intended to reassure the international community that the camps were voluntary “vocational training centers” for people who had been led astray by “extremist thoughts.” Assembled inmates sang the English-language children’s song “If You’re Happy and You Know It” for the press crews. International observers highlighted the irony of this coerced display of happiness, but it was just the latest manifestation of a long-standing official practice of representing the contentment of China’s minority peoples through staged singing, dancing, and smiling.

Collective Trauma
As I sit in my study in London, I contemplate the fates of my Uighur friends, relatives, colleagues, and many interlocutors who may currently be detained in reeducation centers. (Since calling them from abroad might result in detention, I do not phone to find out if they are safe.) Are they singing praises of the party for their food? Are they chanting that they are traitors and terrorists? How long will they be subjected to this regime? Will the experience permanently change them—spiritually, mentally, and physically? Can I imagine a future for my friends in which these experiences will be overlaid by new impressions and memories, if not entirely forgotten?

In interviews, Uighurs in the diaspora have framed the experience of the mass campaign in terms of trauma. “The psychological pressure is enormous when you have to criticize yourself, denounce your thinking—your own ethnic group,” said Omir Bekali, who broke down in tears as he described the camp to Gerry Shih. “I still think about it every night, until the sun rises. I can’t sleep. The thoughts are with me all the time.” Mihrigul Tursun reported suffering symptoms of debilitating post-traumatic stress, including nightmares and sudden bouts of anxiety. Accounts of conversations with Uighurs within China also hint at the extreme psychological pressure, pervasive fear, and depression that many people have experienced.

Uighurs in exile have reported anxiety and trauma as well, due to the difficulty of maintaining contact with loved ones, uncertainty as to their fate, feelings of guilt and personal responsibility for the detention of family members, and harassment by Chinese security forces if they choose to speak out about their experiences.

Uighur communities in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are under acute pressure to stay silent. The Kyrgyz government condemned a demonstration against the Xinjiang camps as an outbreak of anti-Chinese racism, while Kazakhstan placed the human rights campaigner Serikzhan Bilal under house arrest for his attempts to publicize the detainees’ plight. Along with many other Muslim nations drawn into the Belt and Road Initiative, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have praised China’s approach to managing its Muslim minorities.

The field of trauma studies has produced psychological models for the catastrophic long-term effects of war, persecution, and violent social upheaval. Individual experiences of trauma may be transmitted within families to future generations and become part of the collective memories of
whole social groups. These are forms of cultural trauma caused by a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, or a tear in the social fabric.

Many commentators have noted the revival of the political and social techniques of China’s Maoist period under Xi Jinping. The “anti-extremism campaign” in Xinjiang evokes many tropes of the Cultural Revolution, including spectacles of revolutionary fervor involving song and dance, coercive reeducation, and self-criticism. Given the continuities with the Cultural Revolution era in the methods now being applied in Xinjiang, it is worth considering the experiences of people who lived through that period and were subjected to similar coercive techniques.

The psychic damage of the Cultural Revolution was expressed in some measure in the “scar” literary movement of the 1980s, but because of the continuity of Communist rule in China—in contrast to Germany, for example, where the Holocaust legacy has been thoroughly studied and memorialized—the suffering and lasting psychological impact of the Maoist period on those who lived through it, and on subsequent generations, has been largely sidelined.

A rare collaborative project carried out in the 1990s by Chinese researchers working with German psychotherapists applied the methods developed in the field of trauma studies to a study of Cultural Revolution survivors and their children. A common source of trauma noted by interviewees was the habit of constant scrutiny of one’s own thinking and actions for signs of political deviance, which had become a necessity for survival. The researchers argued that the psychological trauma of the first Cultural Revolution generation had affected the next, leading to the repetition of traumatizing behavior.

The Cultural Revolution also played out in Xinjiang, and Uighurs were subject to the extreme violence, social chaos, reeducation, and self-criticism of that period. The terror was unevenly distributed—for people in rural areas, memories of criticism sessions and violence may well be less prominent than recollections of food shortages and sickness. The Uighur Islamic revival that began as early as the 1980s was in many ways a response to the restrictions and trauma of the Maoist era. A renewal of faith and former practices served as a form of healing and transformation.

In the course of my research on the religious revival among Uighur communities in Xinjiang, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, I interviewed many people who had recently returned to their faith. It was often the case that childhood memories of early religious experience within the home, especially learning the forms of the daily prayer from an older relative, inspired their adoption of a pious lifestyle. Even forty years of social upheaval and secularization was not sufficient to erase these early memories and lessons in religious practice. There is little doubt that China’s concerns about this Islamic revival have driven its so-called anti-extremism policies.

**Colonialist thinking**

Both in terms of the measures being employed and the ideological justification of its actions, the Chinese state project to exert control over Xinjiang (the name means the New Dominions) and reengineer its Muslim peoples may be read as a colonial project. As the international relations scholar Dibyesh Anand has argued of China’s treatment of both Xinjiang and Tibet, the colonial mentality is about proprietary control, dispossession, and difference; built into it is the assumption that the progressive Self has the duty and the right to mold the violent and backward Other into its own image. Similarities abound in other colonial projects in world history.

In many cases, the imposition of colonial rule entailed an almost obsessive interest in the embodied, performative practices of subjugated peoples—rituals, songs, or dances. This suggests that colonists understood the importance of such practices for the expression and transmission of identity and memory. The Latin America scholar Diana Taylor argues that the colonizing project throughout the Americas sought to discredit autochthonous ways of preserving and communicating historical understanding. Just as Uighur religious and cultural practices are denounced as religious extremism and terrorism in China, so indigenous performance practices were condemned as devil worship under colonial rule in the Americas.

But Taylor’s account also makes clear that the persistent attempts by the colonizers to erase these practices were matched by their obstinate resurgence. Such lessons from other colonial histories warn us against easy assumptions that the “anti-
religious extremism campaign” in Xinjiang will succeed in permanently erasing the religious sensibilities and the cultural identity of its subjects and rewiring them as patriotic automatons.

SOUNDS OF RESISTANCE

In the crowded cell of the reeducation camp where Gulbahar Jelil was held, the detainees were under constant surveillance, and strict punishments were enforced against anyone seen performing the movements of prayer. Gulbahar recounts how women whispered to each other to “pray on the inside.” Even when inaudible, the Islamic soundscape may be reactivated—internally, repetitively—through simple acts of remembering ingrained bodily practices. Such small acts of resistance hint at the possibility of sustaining embodied memory even under the most extreme conditions of coercion and control, and foretell the inevitable failure of state projects of human reengineering.

If we imagine the Xinjiang soundscape as composed of layers of sonic memories that can be reanimated at any time, then arguably the task of the scholar is to listen through the layers—to perceive not only the dominant and immediately audible present of the soundscape, but also what has been submerged and overwritten, yet never fully erased. One scholar, Ildikó Bellér-Hann, describes the bulldozing of a Uighur graveyard in the eastern town of Qumul in 2008, part of the regional development policy of that period, and the construction of a new Muqam Heritage Center on the site. She observed the way that Uighur cultural officials entered the new building for the first time in 2009, offering a prayer to the displaced dead before they passed through the doors. The new building could not efface their memories of the former landscape; their whispered prayer served to reanimate that landscape, and perhaps to soften the memories of its violent erasure.

In 2017, as the police checks and intrusions into daily life became more intense and the penalties for possessing religious material more severe, stories circulated of streams clogged with religious books that had been hastily thrown away. People deleted apps and files containing religious material from their phones. But the new regulations, and even the new high-tech surveillance measures, could not completely erase the Islamic soundscape.

While retaining sonic memories, people also carefully hid many of their prized religious artifacts. Just as their parents or grandparents had done during the Cultural Revolution, they buried books in their gardens, and hid their prayer mats and prayer beads in the larder or the sheep pen. In a contemporary twist, some people downloaded their digital libraries onto spare SIM cards, which they hid in dumplings and preserved in the freezer.

Far from internalizing the propaganda that depicts their culture and faith as an infectious disease that leads inexorably to terrorist violence, Uighurs are well accustomed to the periodic and transient nature of political campaigns, and they know how to attune themselves to the requirements of the present. “Five or six years ago we even dared to play Quranic recitation on the village loudspeakers. Now they say it is religious extremism,” one village woman told me in 2009.

Others respond to political persecution in ways that strengthen their religious faith. In Yantai village, Büwi Nisakhan remembered when local government officials raided her family’s home in 2011 looking for “illegal religious books,” in an early phase of the anti-religious extremism campaign. They discovered her mother’s carefully preserved handwritten prayer book:

The government people looked at the book, and they said, “This is worse than reading the Quran. It is not acceptable because it says, if you don’t do your prayers, if you don’t follow the rules of Islam, you will die a bad death.” That’s why the administration banned it. It also says this kind of thing in the Quran, but it’s in Arabic so people can’t understand it.

Nisakhan took the officials’ assessment as a validation of the power of her religious practice. If they wanted to ban it, she reasoned, it must be worth doing. Her mother’s book was taken, but she hid her own copy and preserved the memory of ritual performance. Coercive political campaigns may temporarily silence her practice and overwrite the Islamic soundscape with new layers of sound, but they cannot fully erase it.

In this moment of crisis for the Uighur people, forms of cultural and faith-based activism in the diaspora have a crucial role to play. Uighur-language schools serving communities from Turkey to North America, new musical ensembles springing up in Europe and Australia, and initiatives in Kazakhstan to revitalize community structures through traditional gatherings—all of these serve not only as a response to collective trauma, but also as a means to preserve and strengthen collective memory and cultural identity.