China Perspectives

2013/3 | 2013

The Urbanisation of Rural China

Peripheral Urbanism

Making history on China's northwest frontier

Tom Cliff

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/6249>

DOI: 10.4000/chinaperspectives.6249

ISSN: 1996-4617

Publisher

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2013

Number of pages: 13-23

ISSN: 2070-3449

Electronic reference

Tom Cliff, « Peripheral Urbanism », *China Perspectives* [Online], 2013/3 | 2013, Online since 01 September 2016, connection on 28 October 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/6249> ; DOI : 10.4000/chinaperspectives.6249

Peripheral Urbanism

Making history on China's northwest frontier

TOM CLIFF

ABSTRACT: This paper analyses the motives, processes, and effects of urbanisation in Korla, a small but rapidly expanding city in northwest China, where the author conducted over two years of fieldwork. The paper aims to show that the historical monuments of the urban environment are physical manifestations of a stirring, and often violent, program of ideational and socio-economic change that is directed at the periphery and all of its residents – even as some of those residents are also posed as agents of the ongoing transformation.

KEYWORDS: Chinese modernity, historiography, *wenming*, political aesthetics, habit, Xinjiang, inter-ethnic relations.

The argument of this article is that the urbanisation of rural, regional, and peripheral China has aims that include the modification of discourse and the retelling of history, as well as the modification of space and the remaking of everyday habits. The Chinese narrative of urbanisation is intimately connected with the broader narratives of modernisation, development, and “civilisation.” On the periphery of the Chinese state, this narrative of urbanisation concurrently seeks to maintain stability and to advance cultural and economic integration with the core regions of China. In other words, urbanisation has both tangible and intangible objectives, which are interwoven, interdependent, and inherently political.

I present my case by outlining some of the social and spatial transformations of Korla, a small but relatively well-off city located on the northern edge of the Tarim Basin in Xinjiang, western China. Korla is the administrative centre for oil and gas exploitation in the Tarim Basin (South Xinjiang), has a 70% Han population, and is the fastest-developing urban region in Xinjiang.

Two large state institutions have been most influential in shaping the city of Korla, both socially and spatially – the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, called *bingtuan* for short in Chinese,⁽¹⁾ and China National Petroleum Corporation's (CNPC) Tarim oil company (known as *Tazhi*).⁽²⁾ The *bingtuan* is associated with agriculture, low-paid, work and “behindness.” Viewed from the metropole in eastern China, the *bingtuan* epitomises Xinjiang's image as a “behind” (*luohou* 落后) and empty region. In direct contrast, the oil company is associated with China's political and economic elite, with the country's modernisation and with modernity *per se*.

Although Korla attained the bureaucratic status of a city in 1979, urban development really began to take off only with the expansion of oil and gas production in the Tarim Basin in the mid-1990s. The presence of the oil company means that the educational and consumption levels of the upper socio-economic class in Korla are high by national standards. Similarly, Korla's urban space exhibits politico-aesthetic sensibilities that can be found in aspirational cities across China – broad and long boulevards, tall signature buildings, artificial watercourses, and government headquarters as a spatial focus. As such, Korla presents itself as “ahead” in a place that is “behind” – an outpost of metropolitan civility.

Demographics is a key element of this story. The Han in Korla today have come to the region in a series of waves since 1949, two main ones being the state-sponsored migration to work on the *bingtuan* through the 1950s, and the economically-motivated self-sponsored migration that began in the early 1990s, concurrent with the rapid growth of the Tarim oil company. South Xinjiang is otherwise populated predominantly by Turkic Uyghurs, and there is an underlying tension between Uyghur and Han in Xinjiang that occasionally flares up into violence.

In the ethnically-infused battle for hearts and minds that plays out constantly in Xinjiang, history and urban development⁽³⁾ are front-line weapons. The citizens of Korla are expected to “know their place” in official history and in the hierarchy of modernity. The local official history is particularly concerned with Han Chinese settlement in Korla and with Xinjiang's relationship to the core regions of China. This history, as will be seen, is presented not just verbally but also in institutional, spatial, and monumental forms in Korla. It will also be seen how, in the process of urbanisation, the perspectives and the daily lived habits of the population get shaped and remade. It is through the remaking of habits that an empty “wasteland” becomes civilised, and a place with “neither culture nor history” gets shaped into one with both.

History and its making

Early urbanisation in Korla

Korla's initial urbanisation derived from the *bingtuan*. The *bingtuan* was founded after 1949 as a system of military-agricultural colonies, and was

I thank Ben Hillman and Jonathan Unger for helping to shape this article, and two anonymous reviewers for their invaluable comments and suggestions for taking it further.

1. *Xinjiang shengchan jianshe bingtuan* (新疆生產建設兵團).
2. “Tazhi” is an abbreviation of *Talimu youtian gongsi zhihui bu* (塔里木油田公司指揮部). Both the *bingtuan* and the oil company report directly to Beijing, rather than via the provincial-level Xinjiang government.
3. Becquelin noted the importance of urbanisation in peripheral assimilation, citing the great William G. Skinner – see Nicolas Becquelin, “Xinjiang in the Nineties,” *The China Journal*, Vol. 44, 2000, p. 75.

Map 1 – Map of Xinjiang in Asia. The square over the Korla region (main map) marks the boundaries of the map shown in Map 2. This map shows the centrality of Korla to Xinjiang, and the centrality of Xinjiang to the Eurasian land mass. Many of the roads and railways are new, or newly-paved and widened.

the main force behind Han in-migration and cultural transformation in Xinjiang until the late 1970s. *Bingtuan* pioneers and their offspring make up a large proportion of the Han population of Korla, including the majority of those who were born in Xinjiang or settled in the region before 1980. Across Xinjiang, both the pioneers and their offspring strove to settle in urban areas, in order to escape the harsh conditions on *bingtuan* farms.

The *bingtuan* today is almost entirely civilian, and is a weaker social, economic, and political force than in the past, but it nevertheless remains important. The *bingtuan* is both a state-owned enterprise group and a parallel “quasi-government” in Xinjiang.⁽⁴⁾ It has a population of 2.5 million, 12% of Xinjiang’s population, but occupies 30% of the arable land. Although the *bingtuan* is located within Xinjiang’s administrative jurisdiction, it has its own budget, its own police

force, and its own court system – a sort of bounded sovereignty.⁽⁵⁾ Internally, the *bingtuan* is arguably the least reformed bureaucratic entity of comparable scope in China today. The resilience of the organisation is related to the fact that it is still seen by the central government as playing an important role in

4. Yubin Zhou and Ke Chen, “Xinjiang shengchan jianshe bingtuan xinxing chengzhenhua daolu jixi yiqi cheng-xiang guihua tixi goujian tansuo” (A study of XPCC’s new urbanisation and planning system construction), *Chengshi fazhan yanjiu* (Urban development studies), Vol. 19, No. 5, 2012, p. 38.

5. There are parallels here between the contemporary *bingtuan* and the inter-war South Manchurian Railway Company. Prasenjit Duara’s concept of the “new imperialism” – the coexistence of domination and exploitation with development and modernisation that was pioneered in Manchukuo – resonates in Xinjiang’s relationship with the Chinese metropole, especially considering the massive increase in state-directed investment in Xinjiang following the riots of July 2009. Prasenjit Duara, *The New Imperialism and the Post-Colonial Developmental State: Manchukuo in comparative perspective*, 1715, 30 January 2006, www.japanfocus.org/-Prasenjit-Duara/1715 (accessed on 22 August 2012).

Map 2 – Korla City administrative region map. The irrigation channels of the *bingtuan* 29th and 30th Regiments can be seen in the top left quadrant of the map. The Uyghur-populated rural areas are south and west of Korla City, around Awati Village. Korla City itself is in the top right quadrant.

maintaining social and political stability in Xinjiang. In part, this is because the *bingtuan*'s 94% Han population occupies key peri-urban, rural, and border regions.

The soldier-farmers of the *bingtuan* were directed in the early 1950s to "defend the border and open the wasteland" by establishing agricultural colonies in strategic locations in Xinjiang. Xinjiang was seen by the victorious Communists as a *tabula rasa*, just as the Qing dynasty emperors of China did before them.⁽⁶⁾ The fact that at the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Xinjiang was already a diverse and dusty palimpsest of cultures, conflicts, and politics – both imagined and extant – presented no obstacle to this time-honoured conceit. It was, after all, the conqueror's prerogative.⁽⁷⁾ In the decades since the *bingtuan* was established, its evolution has framed the social, political, and economic milieu of Xinjiang. Any understanding of contemporary Xinjiang must take the *bingtuan* into account.⁽⁸⁾

Korla has been shaped by Han in-migration since 1949. At the inception of "New China," Han people amounted to only 1.4% of the population of Korla, and it was a county town of fewer than 30,000 people. A few small Uyghur villages spread out to the south of the township, and were

enclosed and somewhat protected by a large bend in the Peacock River before the river enters the hard stony desert en route to extinction in the wastelands to the east. After 1955, the in-migration of more than 55,000 Han tripled the total population, and by 1965 Han people were in a 56.4% majority.⁽⁹⁾ An administrative reshuffle partly explains this rapid growth: Korla took over in 1960 from the nearby county of Yanqi as the capital of Bayinguoleng Mongol Autonomous Prefecture,⁽¹⁰⁾ and

6. James A. Millward, *Beyond the Pass: Economy, Ethnicity, and Empire in Qing Central Asia 1759-1864*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 110.
7. Jeff Sahadeo, *Russian Colonial Society in Tashkent: 1865-1923*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2007, pp. 3-4; Bradley J. Parker and Lars Rodseth (eds.), *Untaming the Frontier in Anthropology, Archaeology, and History*, Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 2005, p. 3.
8. For an analysis of the history and political roles of the *bingtuan*, see Becquelin, "Xinjiang in the Nineties," art. cit; Gardner Bovingdon, "Autonomy in Xinjiang: Han Nationalist Imperatives and Uyghur Discontent," *Policy Studies*, Vol. 11, 2004; Thomas Matthew James Cliff, "Neo Oasis: The Xinjiang Bingtuan in the Twenty-first Century," *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 33, No. 1, 2009.
9. Qiu Yuanyao (ed.), *Xinjiang 50 Years 1955-2005*, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Bureau of Statistics, Beijing, China Statistical Press, 2005, p. 505.
10. Bazhou Government Net, *Bayinguoleng Menggu zizhizhou lishi yange* (Bayinguoleng Mongol Autonomous Prefecture historical evolution), 23 June 2004, www.tianshanet.com/GB/channel59/401/403/200406/23/94774.html (accessed on 24 November 2008).

Photo 1 – The headquarters building of the Tarim oil company. The large amount of open space surrounding the building emphasises that shortage of land was not the major influence on the company's imposing high-rise design for the headquarters building. © Tom Cliff

the *bingtuan's* Second Agricultural Division shifted its headquarters to Korla at the same time.⁽¹¹⁾

The *bingtuan's* unequalled transformative influence on the social space and economy of the Korla region began in 1950 with the construction of a large irrigation canal. The 18th Regiment Grand Irrigation Canal took 7,000 people nine months to build and enabled an irrigated area of 3,335 hectares.⁽¹²⁾ Map 2 shows the geometric organisation of space in the newly-opened areas associated with the *bingtuan* – compare the straight outlines of the *bingtuan* irrigation channels and fields to the scribbly lines of natural seasonal watercourses and irrigation deltas of the villages (many populated largely by Uyghurs) to the south of Korla. Although this is a recent map, the organisation of rural space – land and water resources – shown in it dates from no later than the 1960s. The flat land presented no physical obstacle to large-scale state-organised agriculture, and allowed the ordered geometric arrangement seen in these images.

Maoist ideology had labelled the land as wasteland and positioned nature as an “enemy” to be conquered through violent struggle.⁽¹³⁾ For the demobilised soldiers-turned-*bingtuan* pioneers, the new “war” was posed as equivalent to the arduousness and valour of the civil war that many of them had fought for most of their adult lives. Subsequent waves of *bingtuan* set-

tlers, most of them civilian, came to Xinjiang in the 1950s and the 1960s as what Mette Hansen calls “subaltern colonisers.”⁽¹⁴⁾ They established their sites of settlement “at the margins of civility.”⁽¹⁵⁾ In Korla, this meant attempting to farm the salty and inhospitable desert-fringe to the west of what was then an agricultural market town.

Bingtuan settlers, and the organisation itself, have long sought to leverage the discourse of their collective contribution to the type of development favoured in Xinjiang by the central state.⁽¹⁶⁾ In May 1966, the leader of a group of “sent down educated youth” who had come from Shanghai to labour on a *bingtuan* farm in Xinjiang declared: “The ever-changing picture of construction in [Xinjiang] is marked with our writing. This is our greatest happiness.”⁽¹⁷⁾ She adopted the same narrative of selfless sacrifice and history-making transformation of a “behind” region that the state used to justify its actions, and claimed primary agency in that narrative for herself and her peers.⁽¹⁸⁾

Consistent with the discourse of historical frontier emptiness, an oft-stated claim among Han residents of Korla today is that “before Liberation [1949], there was nothing much in Korla, just a dirty little river and a few Uyghur farmers; even the Uyghurs came after the Han started to build the city.” These Han people directly equate development with the physical attributes of urbanisation and the height of the tallest buildings in town. On more than one occasion, the availability and quality of restaurants in Korla – public places of (literal) consumption – was also presented to me as a barometer of modernity and development:

One Sunday, just after we got to Korla [in 1991] and had been working [for the oil company] for a few weeks, I and a few classmates from university decided to get together to eat a meal. At that time, transportation was pretty undeveloped in Korla: we rode on mule carts – you know, like only the Uyghurs use today. The roads were dusty. There were only two places to go shopping, and pretty much everything was single-storey. We spent more than an hour riding around town on a mule cart before we found a place. That is to say, restaurants and eating-places were very scarce (...) At that time, [Korla] was really very behind.

11. Bingtuan Second Agricultural Division, *Er shi gai kuang* (The general situation of the Second Agricultural Division), 2006, Nong er shi xinxi zixun zhongxin, www.nes.gov.cn/ (accessed on 25 January 2010).
12. Xianghong Jin, *Bayinguoleng Menggu zizhizhou zhi* (The annals of Bayinguoleng Mongolian Autonomous Prefecture), Beijing, Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe, 1994, p. 497.
13. Judith Shapiro, *Mao's War against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2001.
14. Mette Halskov Hansen, *Frontier People: Han Settlers in Minority Areas of China*, Vancouver, UBC Press, 2005, p. 7.
15. Mark E. Workman, “Tropes, Hopes, and Dopes,” *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 106, No. 420, 1993, p. 179.
16. An estimated 50,000 “sent down youth” from Shanghai were in Xinjiang by 1965, and the number reached 450,000 by 1972, of which at least 160,000 served on “army farms” – almost exclusively belonging to the *bingtuan*. See Thomas P. Bernstein, *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages: The Transfer of Youth from Urban to Rural China*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1977, pp. 69, 191; Lynn T. White, “The Road to Urumchi: Approved Institutions in Search of Attainable Goals during Pre-1968 Rustication from Shanghai,” *China Quarterly*, No. 79, 1979, pp. 505–06.
17. *Survey of People's Republic of China press*, Hong Kong, American Consulate General, 9 May 1966, p. 27.
18. Exactly the same discourses have circulated among colonisers in various different situations across space and time – from British India to Russian Central Asia and the Japanese “informal empire” in Northeast China and Sakhalin/Karafuto. See Peter Duus, et al. (eds.), *The Japanese Informal Empire in China, 1895–1937*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990; Tessa Morris-Suzuki, “Modernity and Authority in Colonial Karafuto: the Architecture of Power in an Indigenous Village,” n.d.; Sahadeo, *Russian Colonial Society in Tashkent: 1865–1923*, op. cit; Ann Laura Stoler and Carole McGranahan, “Refiguring Imperial Terrains,” in Ann Laura Stoler, et al. (eds.), *Imperial Formations*, Santa Fe, School for Advanced Research Press, 2007.

Korla was transfigured with increasing speed over the next two decades, due to the development of oil production in the Tarim Basin and the growing urban presence of the oil company. Among other things, the company constructed high-rise buildings in its compound that claimed and reclaimed the increasingly-vertical skyline of Korla, and impressed the status of the company on the city.

The Tarim oil company – *Tazhi* – is the aesthetic, aspirational, and spatial core of urbanisation in Korla. The oil company compound showcases modern-ness and a lifestyle that is associated with elite gated residential communities in eastern metropolitan China, and is something to aspire to for those outside the oil company. Life in the Tarim compound is quiet, regimented, physically and economically very secure, and above all exclusive. A *Tazhi* division head noted that “once you get into this state-owned enterprise, you are set for life.” According to a vice-director of the Urban Landscaping Department, “*Tazhi* is the only successful residential district in Korla” because the watercourses and gardens of the commercially-built residential districts are unmaintained, and are now dried-out and decrepit. *Tazhi* is widely recognised as “the best work unit in Korla,” yet the oil company almost never takes on locals as permanent employees. New permanent employees are sourced from among the best and brightest young graduates from universities across China, causing locals (both Han and non-Han) to feel “left out” of the wealth and privilege associated with the oil company. A number of locals explained to me that “*Tazhi* is not really a part of Korla. It belongs to the centre” – meaning the central government.

Both energy production and commodity consumption by the highly-paid oil company employees help to raise Korla’s political-economic status. The city of Korla links its identity to oil and gas production, and thus portrays itself as playing an instrumental role in China’s economic development. Most sites of production, however, are far outside the city, and only half of the city government’s annual taxation revenue in 2009 derived from primary and secondary industries combined – including agriculture, mining, and oil and gas extraction. The other half was tax on tertiary industries – notably real estate, retail spending, and services.⁽¹⁹⁾ A local government cadre referred to Korla as “a consumption city” (*xiaofei chengshi* 消费城市), due largely to oil company salaries. In the national and international economic picture, a high level of household consumption is a sign of advancement and modernity.⁽²⁰⁾ In other words, today, the most exalted “constructors” (*jianshezhe* 建设者) and the most dedicated consumers are one and the same. One way that this particular historical narrative – of the development of a “behind” place – is sustained and reinforced in the present is through the creation and consumption of historical monuments.

Reimagining history through monuments

Korla’s public monuments explicitly represent the key junctures of the meta-narrative that situates Korla historically – in particular, in relation to the Chinese core region and Han endeavours in Xinjiang. Seven kilometres to the north of Korla, for instance, is a monument, the Iron Gate Pass, which represents the presence of Chinese officialdom from the Chinese core region as early as the Han Dynasty – a primary basis of the contemporary Chinese claim to Xinjiang. Within the city, three other grandiose monuments mark key transition points of the official narrative history of Korla. These monuments are representations of 1950s *bingtuan* commander Wang Zhen (Photo 2), explorer/geologist Peng Jiamu (background, Photo 3), and the Beijing 2008 Olympic torch (Photo 3). Wang Zhen’s contribution was to

Photo 2 – Wang Zhen statue in Korla. Retired *bingtuan* pioneers bring their grandchildren here to (in their words) “educate them about the great man – old uncle Wang.” © Tom Cliff

build the large irrigation canal that gave life to the surrounding *bingtuan* farms and gave regional political importance to Korla. Peng Jiamu perished in the desert east of Korla while on an expedition to the ancient and once “lost” city of Lop Nur in 1980. He is held up as a martyr, and is credited with being instrumental in the successful development of the oil industry in the Tarim Basin. The Olympic torch brings the global glory of the Han civilisation, and the grand declaration of China’s rise that was the Beijing Olympics, to the ethnic periphery. It is also a statement of allegiance by Korla to the core of the nation and an assertion of Korla’s pride in being part of this ascendance. The heightened nationalism of the torch relay, and the demonstrations by separatists and human rights advocates, lend the Korla Olympic torch monument an added emotive power in the context of Xinjiang. Through this and other monumental declarations that dominate

19. The revised resources tax implemented in July 2010 increased the revenue from primary industry, but expenditure on infrastructure construction also increased massively over the period. Among the effects of this is a rise in commodity prices and thus tertiary industries’ contribution to taxation revenue. For more, see Thomas Cliff, “The Partnership of Stability in Xinjiang: State–Society Interactions Following the July 2009 Unrest,” *The China Journal*, Vol. 68, 2012.
20. Developed Western nations and international financial institutions, as well as economists in the Chinese central government, urge the growth of domestic consumption in China as the key to “balancing” the Chinese economy. For further references, see Rod Tyers, “Looking Inward for Growth,” in Huw McKay and Ligang Song (eds.), *Rebalancing and Sustaining Growth in China*, Canberra, ANU E-Press, 2012.

Photo 3 – Cuckoo River and monuments in Korla's New City District. Looking north from the Petroleum Avenue Bridge, September 2009. A replica of the Beijing Olympic torch stands 25m high, on its own pontoon in the middle of the widest part of the river. In the distant background can be seen a 20m high statue of Peng Jiamu. © Tom Cliff

key urban vistas, Korla's urban development seeks to shape (or reshape) the narratives of both the future and the past of Han Chinese settlement in Xinjiang.

A fifth monument makes the story of history in Korla explicit. The violence inherent in civilising projects, and in this civilising project in particular, is summed up in visual narrative form by a large relief panel that adorns one side of a newly-built museum (see Photo 4). This political art is a celebration of violence and its central role in the history of the Korla region, and in the modern project more generally.⁽²¹⁾ From the top, this panel commemorates Han Dynasty military victories, the *bingtuan* pioneers' "war on the wasteland," China's development of atomic bomb technology at a no-longer-secret location in the mountains to the north of Korla (recently opened as a site of "Red Tourism"), and the oil company pioneers' "campaign" to extract oil from the Tarim Basin, with a jackhammer wielded like a machine gun.

The second important point to take from this mural and from the other four monuments is the elision of non-Han agency, and even presence. There is a 2,000-year gap between the Han dynasty expeditions and the arrival of the *bingtuan* pioneers in 1950. Uyghurs and representatives of Xinjiang's other official ethnic minority groups are nowhere to be seen – they are invisible and unnoteworthy objects, not agents, of transformation. The mural

Photo 4 – Relief mural on the Bazhou Museum. The mural is roughly 5m across by 20m high, and the bottom edge of it is at least 15m off the ground.

© Tom Cliff

poses as significant only those events that fall easily into a direct line with today's preferred history, in which all of the agents of historical change are Han. Even the Manchu-ruled Qing is omitted – despite, and no doubt also because of, the fact that the current territorial extent of the PRC owes its greatest debt to Qing expansionism. It is as if the Qing were merely a weak echo of Han dynasty greatness, and not comparable to the resurgence of the Han ethnicity in the mid-twentieth century. The meta-narrative proclaims and glorifies early conquest, modern hegemony and muscular legitimacy. This and the modernity on display in Korla's development – the flashy buildings, wide roads, and artificial watercourses – are emphatically lauded by the Party-state, and attributed to its institutional agents in Xinjiang – the

bingtuan, the army and, most prominently, the oil company.

City planning and the modern ideal in Korla

Korla's relatively high political and economic profile in Xinjiang, combined with the importance of Xinjiang to China's economy and sense of domestic social stability,⁽²²⁾ make it a political priority for the city to be seen as a model of urban development. As tools of governance, city-planning models are the physical manifestation of preconceived ideals, and need to be replicable. James Scott's analysis in *Seeing like a State* is useful here:

A far-flung, polyglot empire may find it symbolically useful to have its camps and towns laid out according to formula as the stamp of its order and authority. Other things being equal, the city laid out according to a simple, repetitive logic will be easiest to administer and to police.⁽²³⁾

21. The visual expression of this idea can be traced back at least as far as radical art movements, particularly the Italian Futurists, in the early twentieth century. See F.T. Marinetti, *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism*, Unknown.nu, www.unknown.nu/futurism/manifesto.html (accessed on 3 December 2012). For a socio-historical critique of the civilising process, see Norbert Elias, *The Civilising Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, Eric Dunning, et al. (eds.), Oxford, UK, Blackwell Publishers, 2000 [1939].
22. Xinhua, "Zhou Yongkang qiangdiao: yange luoshi zeren quebao Xinjiang shehui daju wending" (Zhou Yongkang emphasises: Resolutely implement responsibility; guarantee Xinjiang's overall stability), 13 July 2009, [www.gov.cn, www.gov.cn/jldhd/2009-07/13/content_1364384.htm](http://www.gov.cn/jldhd/2009-07/13/content_1364384.htm) (accessed on 18 July 2012); Xue Zhang, "Xinjiang shixing jiceng ganbu gangwei butie deng 4 xiang zhengce" (Xinjiang implements four policies to support grassroots cadres), 30 September 2011, www.shache.gov.cn/ReadNews.asp?NewsId=4149 (accessed on 18 November 2011).
23. James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1998, p. 55.

Scott considers this formula to be part of a “high-modernist ideology,” and he notes that the “carriers of high modernism tended to see rational order in remarkably visual aesthetic terms.”⁽²⁴⁾ It follows that we use visual and spatial analyses to recount the development of this model.

The photographs and maps in this article illustrate that the organisation of space and the built environment of urban Korla is increasingly in accordance with the “administrative ordering of nature and society” that Scott terms “legibility.”⁽²⁵⁾ Until the early 1990s, all but the *bingtuan*-dominated “old” city centre of Korla was effectively still rural land in terms of how it was organised and utilised (Photo 5). The fields, irregular boundaries, and homes of extended families shown in the bottom half of Photo 5 are typical of a rural organisation of space. In the past, the relative proportions and positions of agricultural land, courtyards, and low adobe-style dwellings depended on the economic and population growth of these individual (mostly Uyghur) family units. Photo 6 illustrates Korla’s transformation from a rural centre to an urban model. These two photographs, and others later in this article, show that in the twenty-first century, Korla increasingly conforms to a planned, geometrically-ordered layout imposed from above. Materials too have changed – from being predominantly brick, earth, and wood, to being predominantly steel, concrete, and bitumen. The acceleration towards a geometric organisation of space – both on the two-dimensional map and in the three-dimensional built environment – is also a transition towards legibility. Although it was the *bingtuan*, not the Tarim oil company, that initiated the project of legibility, *Tazhi’s* political and economic gravity has enabled and led an intensification of legibility and ideal modernity in urban Korla. Legibility and a modern façade are, in the context of contemporary China, conditions of being civilised. Thanks to the economic boom brought on by the oil and gas extraction that began in the late 1980s, Korla is now an “All China Civilised City.”

Civilisation: Remaking habits

Civilising the city is a teleological process, in that it has a series of stages that must be passed through to reach a final destination. The final destination is imagined to be known, is often idealised, and is assumed to be imminent – reflecting what Immanuel Wallerstein calls “the enormous subterranean strength of the faith in inevitable progress.”⁽²⁶⁾

In contemporary PRC discourse, civilisation has both material aspects (*wuzhi wenming* 物質文明: e.g. urban space, the built environment, consumption, and standard of living) and spiritual aspects (*jingshen wenming* 精神文明). This latter aspect is what Chinese state discourse means by “civilized people”: civility in personal qualities and behaviour – the opposite of being uncouth – e.g., properly educated, with good manners, taste, language, and accent, and loyalty to the official concept of nation. Both Michel Foucault and Norbert Elias have argued that the civilising mission is about normalisation and standardisation.⁽²⁷⁾ As is implicit in this 2007 billboard in Korla (Photo 7), civilisation in these terms is measured by the habits, habitat, and habitus of the population, and is the foundation of a “harmonious society.” In other words, only one type of civilisation, and therefore one route to modernity, is posed as worthwhile here – a Han Chinese one.

The Korla City government and Party committee began a push to claim the title of “Civilised City” in 1996, declaring April 2 “Founding spiritual civilisation mobilisation day.” In the following years, Korla was awarded a series of increasingly prestigious awards, including: 1997 “All-China *shuangyong* [army-people] model city”;⁽²⁸⁾ 1998 “China outstanding tourism city”; 1999

Photo 5 – Korla, late 1980s. The land that becomes the Tarim oil company headquarters compound is in the foreground on this side of the river. © Hou Jian

Photo 6 – Newer Korla: circa 2004. Everything pictured on this side of the river belongs to the Tarim oil company compound. © Hou Jian

“National-level hygienic city”; 2004 “All-China technological progress model city” and “National environmental protection model city”; 2005 “All-China constructing civilisation advanced city” and “CCTV 2006 China top-10 charming city.”⁽²⁹⁾ However, in practice there is a sense among Korla officials

24. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

26. Immanuel Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism*, London, Verso, 1983, p. 8.

27. Thomas Boutonnet, “From Local Control to Globalised Citizenship: The Civilising Concept of *Wenming* in Official Chinese Rhetoric,” in Corrado Neri and Florent Villard (eds.), *Global Fences: Literatures, Limits, Borders*, Université Jean Moulin - Lyon 3, 2011, p. 4.

28. In 1997, the People’s Liberation Army Political Department awarded Korla the title of “All-China *shuangyong* model city.” *Shuangyong* (雙擁) translates as “support the army and give preferential treatment to the families of army men and martyrs.” In practice, this is a recognition of Korla’s role as the headquarters of the military in South Xinjiang; the military in Korla has a prefectural bureaucratic rank (as does the Tarim oil company and the Second Agricultural Division of the *bingtuan*), one level above the county rank of the city government.

29. Wenmingban, *Ku’erle shi jingshen wenming chuangjian zhidao shouce* (Korla City founding spiritual civilisation guidance manual), Korla, Ku’erle shi chuangujian quanguo wenming chengshi bangongshi (Korla City founding a civilised city office), July 2007, p. 1.

Photo 7 – Billboard in the New City District, 7m high by 80m long. © Tom Cliff

and residents that the ideal is never reached – the objective is a moving target that is always “up ahead.” A still-higher award, which is yet to be attained, is “Ecological City” – described as an urban area in which humans live in harmony with nature.

Alongside this rhetorical focus on the *style* of development, the vice director of the Urban Landscaping Department was also notably concerned with crude growth when he outlined the city’s 2005 development plan to me in 2008. He stated categorically that “the population of a city must keep increasing” – from the 2010 figure of 550,000 to at least 800,000 by 2015. Although this sounds like a tall order, almost half of the difference could be made up by reclassifying the temporary migrants who do not currently hold household registration in Korla. Spatially, the plan for Korla designates specific areas as, for example, green space (minimum 40%), waterways, residential, or government institutions, and includes an expansion of the urban area from 38 km² to at least 60 km² over the 2010–2015 period.

Korla underwent a period of especially accelerated physical construction in 2007–2009. When I got there in July 2007, I was struck by the large number of advertisements for as-yet unbuilt residential estates. Their promotional strategies drew on a perceived desire for European, metropolitan, and executive lifestyles – images of parkland, middle-class consumption, and technology predominated. The prospective orientation that is inherent to civilising projects, colonial endeavours, and the frontier was also strongly present. A high-profile development named Future Zone is one example, but another (Photo 9) is both more subtle and more distinctly Chinese in its strategy. The name of this residential development – *qiantu* (迁徙), meaning “to move/relocate” or “to change” – is a homonym of *qiantu* (前途), meaning “future” or “prospects.” The emphasis on this combination of concepts – relocation and future prospects – is quintessentially frontier. Migrants from the core region look forward to making their fortune on the frontier, spurred on by a long-running narrative that “Xinjiang is a place where constructors engaged in opening up can make the best of themselves.”⁽³⁰⁾ Less universal, but no less striking, was the intimate connection made in these real estate advertisements between urban watercourses (existing or planned) in this desert region, centres of administrative power, and high-status residential areas. The brochures and billboards often situated the planned residential district in spatial relationship to the offices of the city or of the prefectural government as well as to at least one of the four main public bodies of water in the urban area.⁽³¹⁾ Residential districts often also advertised their own water feature within the compound. Such for-consumption water features have displaced an earlier network of irrigation canals that were used primarily for productive and practical purposes, and were associated with small-scale agriculturalists – most of whom were Uyghur.

Urban transformation, Uyghur dislocation

The rate and style of urban reconstruction – and social change – can be seen in the following four images. Photos 10 to 13 show the redevelopment of socially and spatially porous urban villages on the eastern side of Korla into gated residential compounds. Most of the landowners in the urban villages are Uyghurs who live in single-story adobe and brick dwellings that they have progressively added to as their family size and wealth grew. Their economy is semi-subsistence: most families grow vegetables for their own consumption, and may raise a few sheep or goats that they then consume or convert into cash; the landed families tend cash-crop orchards of the nationally-famous Korla fragrant pear. Compensation (calculated per square meter) for this agricultural land is less than one half of the compensation for residential land whose buildings are not declared “illegal.” This is a point of great tension and an opportunity for corrupt and coercive behaviour on the part of state actors. For their part, Uyghurs living in villages in line for demolition hastily extend the floor area of their dwellings. Although some profess to be quite happy with their compensation, most Uyghurs are extremely reluctant to leave their extended family compounds for the sterility and atomisation of a distant apartment complex. It is not just family life that is upset – many Uyghurs are self-employed and run businesses that rely on a base close to the city centre. For them, relocation means unemployment. On the whole, Korla’s current wave of urban reconstruction means a disruptive change in the practices of inner-city Uyghurs’ everyday life – including cooking, eating, cultural production, and social reproduction.

The Uyghur residential buildings that are being eradicated in Korla helped to sustain Uyghur community life, though it cannot be said that the buildings and layout of the villages represented some fundamental symbol of Uyghur-ness. These villages have not developed organically over hundreds of years – as in the case of Kashgar, for example. Instead, a regular diamond

30. Enmao Wang, “Xinjiang she kaituo jianshezhe da you zuowei de difang” (Xinjiang is a place where constructors engaged in opening up can make the best of themselves), *Lilun Yuekan* (The Theory Monthly), Vol. 10, 1985.

31. These are the Peacock River (*kongque he* 孔雀河, between *Tazhi* and the centre of town); Man-Made Lake and Cuckoo River (*rengong hu* 人工湖; *dujuan he* 杜鹃河, both in the New City District); and White Egret River (*bailu he* 白鹭河, the centrepiece of the Economic Technology Development Zone [ETDZ]). The location (but not the form, since it has been widened considerably) of the Peacock River is the only element of these watercourses that is not entirely artificial. As memorialised in the name of the lake, being man-made is a point of pride. These watercourses are monuments in their own right – claiming victory over nature and the technological supremacy of the Han. The question of water resources in Xinjiang is unfortunately beyond the scope of this article. Suffice to say that the exponentially-increasing stress on water resources – for urban construction and artificial waterways, resource extraction and industry, and the lifestyle associated with urban living – means that downstream areas are drying out. The lower reaches of the Tarim River are an environmental catastrophe, and settlements (both Han *bingtuan* and Uyghur) that once relied on the Tarim for their livelihood are all but abandoned.

Photo 8 – An advertisement for a residential development in the New City District. The new city government is the complex on the left of frame, just across the road from the Man-Made Lake. The estate itself is represented by the neatly-aligned buildings in the centre of the picture. © Tom Cliff

Photo 9 – Location is the primary selling point of this residential estate (the large rectangle on the map). The star on the map is the new city government – and of course Man-Made Lake. The ribbon-like strip to the left of the map is the Peacock River, and over it is the centre of town. © Tom Cliff

lattice-work of roads – clearly a product of a recently preceding round of construction in Xinjiang – is what is being drawn over. The inner-city Uyghur villages have developed in relation to these roads, and the overall layout appears to result from a relatively recent but nevertheless quite complex process of accommodation and adaptation between mainly Uyghur agriculturalists and the mainly Han state.⁽³²⁾ Large new boulevard-type roads, designed for the car and arranged on a grid pattern, make “no compromise”⁽³³⁾ with the pre-existing spatial form.

The project to transform space and society is far from complete. Apparently finished buildings rise out of rubble, and artificial stream beds run weakly – if at all. Korla’s “civilised” façade, impressive as it is, is in many places only skin deep: scratch the surface and you will find a provincial desert town. Urban planning policies require developers to construct tall signature buildings on highly visible street corners and along major thoroughfares. The old urban villages are walled in, out of sight, before being demolished altogether and their residents relocated.

A stroll through these back alleys reveals the diversity of the population – a diversity stemming from when they came to Korla, where they came from, why they came, what they do now, and how they identify themselves. The stroller meets groups of disoriented migrant labourers from central and eastern China, old *bingtuan* people and their children, old Korla people who never quite recovered from the final collapse of state enterprises during the 1990s, well-off employees of state enterprises that are doing well, Uyghurs whose families have lived around Korla for generations, and other Uyghurs just arrived off the slow bus from Kashgar. Every urban resident is engaged in consuming and re-creating the narrative of urban development and transformation. Many take on the narrative – or want to – but even those who don’t eventually have little choice but to change their habits.

Urbanisation as habit

Urbanisation is a process of *remaking habits*. In Korla, as in cities across China, habits are forced to change when villages are transformed into urban residential communities, when spaces of production are transformed into

spaces of consumption, and when an assumption of peripheral “behindness” becomes an expectation of metropolitan modernity. Old pathways disappear under high-volume road grids, forcing people to modify the way they move through the city and thus whom they encounter. Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” clearly signalled how architecture and urban space has a corporeal impact on humans: “Buildings are appropriated in a twofold manner: by use and by perception...” He goes on to claim that “the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation, alone. They are mastered gradually by habit...”⁽³⁴⁾ The very act of living in a constantly-changing city works to transform the residents’ habits of mind and body.

Han and Uyghur people respond to the disruption of habits in quite different ways. As shown above, it is usually Uyghur neighbourhoods, and the roads running to and through them, that are destroyed to make way for the new plan. Relocated Uyghurs experience massive social and economic changes to their lives. Many Uyghurs justifiably see the destruction of old roads and neighbourhoods as an imposition. Han, on the other hand, tend to see such destruction as a necessary condition of advancement, and an inevitable stage in the modernisation project. Many Han honestly fail to understand why Uyghurs would rather stay in unheated, earth-floored houses than in modern apartments. For Han migrants, change is not only an aspiration but also a way of life – beginning with their migration from the core area and continuing with their implicit or explicit role as agents of development and civilisation.

The aesthetics and objectives of peripheral urbanisation are, by definition, Han- and metropole-centric. The coercive force of urbanisation processes are being brought to bear on Uyghurs, but Uyghurs and other non-Han ethnicities are not the only objects of this element of the civilising project in Xinjiang. Han people – especially rural, regional, and peripheral (including

32. At the same time, it would be reasonable to suggest that an essential characteristic of Uyghurness in Xinjiang is precisely such adaptation to incoming occupying regimes.

33. James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State*, op. cit., p. 104.

34. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations*, London, Fontana, 1969 [1936], p. 240.

Photo 10 – Dispossession and disorientation. Inside a now-demolished section of the Uyghur residential area. Demolitions are often impending for many years – facilities and services are gradually downgraded or cut off entirely – but tend to proceed rapidly when they do start. © Tom Cliff

Photo 11 – Salvage and relocation. A former Uyghur residential and pear-orchard area of the old city. © Tom Cliff

Xinjiang) Han people – are also seen to have “nasty habits.”⁽³⁵⁾ Although the final objective – integration of the ethnic periphery created by the Qing dynasty and inherited from the Qing by the Republic and then the People’s Republic – has not changed markedly over the course of the past 60 years, the social and political context that this colonial endeavour is unfolding within, and *creating*, certainly has. Han migration to Xinjiang today is predominantly voluntary, rather than state-sponsored and coercive as in the past; many migrants are self-employed, or work in services or the construction industry in the urban centres; and these days, most migrants are not members of large formal state institutions like the *bingtuan* and the oil company. Furthermore, the Han population of Xinjiang is now within a few percentage points of the Uyghur population, even by official figures.⁽³⁶⁾ The changed, and changing, context has necessitated an adjustment of the methods and processes of peripheral integration. In particular this means an adjustment of the aesthetics, economics, and demographics of settlement, which in turn means accelerating a particular style of urban development in both the cities and the rural town centres of Xinjiang. In a sense,

the lure of the city is taking over part of the role that formal state institutions performed in the past – in attracting, regulating, and transforming the (Han) in-migrants – as well as in regulating and transforming the lifestyles of the Han, Uyghurs, and others already in Xinjiang.

City building as frontier consolidation

The quintessentially rural and peripheral *bingtuan* has also recently taken on the ideology of urbanism. In direct response to the violent conflict and political upheaval that began with the ethnic riots of July 2009 in Xinjiang, the organisation’s founding mandate – “opening wasteland, garrisoning the frontier” – was officially, and at the highest level, modified to: “building cities, garrisoning the frontier.”⁽³⁷⁾ “Garrisoning the frontier” in this context is less a military exercise than a cultural, demographic, and politico-aesthetic project – modern urbanisation. The *bingtuan* needs an urban model to counteract its chronic problem of depopulation (especially among able-bodied, working- and reproductive-age men and women), and it is imperative that the first of the new urban models is seen to succeed if there is any hope of slowing this population flow and attracting new settlers.

City-building could signal a transformation in the political economy of Xinjiang. Academics from the influential Urban Planning and Design Institute at Shanghai Tongji University recently argued strongly for the administrative, as well as spatial and economic, merging of peri-urban *bingtuan* areas with the local urban centre.⁽³⁸⁾ There is some logic in this: an urban centre has social, political, economic, and cultural gravity that a market town does not, and this allows the urban centre to project its place-making over a broader geographical area. A few years earlier, planners argued for a “stratagem of comparative centralisation,” pointing out that aridity, large distances between oases, and the relatively small economic scale of urban areas in Xinjiang mitigate against the construction of an urban network with multiple centres.⁽³⁹⁾ Moreover, *bingtuan* cadres confirmed in early 2013 that formal ranking as a city in the non-*bingtuan* administrative system will allow thus-classified *bingtuan* areas to tax residents and economic activity within their jurisdiction. This is important, since it grants a previously-unavailable source of income and affirms the *bingtuan*’s nested autonomy while simultaneously blurring certain boundaries between it and the non-*bingtuan* system. Could this be the peripheral version of an urban agglomeration – the Greater Shanghai region writ super-small?

The first of the new peri-urban developments will be constructed on the site of the *bingtuan*’s 29th and 30th Regiments to the west of Korla (see Map 2). *Bingtuan* Regiments are functionally equivalent to market townships in the local government system. While the former *bingtuan* areas closest to Korla have already been incorporated into the urban area, these

35. See the extensive literature on rural people in the city, and urbanites’ view of the “quality” (*suzhi* 素质) of country people – among others, Andrew Kipnis, “The Disturbing Educational Discipline of ‘Peasants,’” *The China Journal*, Vol. 46, 2001; Tamara Jacka, *Rural women in urban China: Gender, migration, and social change*, Armonk, NY, M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2006.

36. Official population statistics for Xinjiang omit military and security forces, as well as migrants without household registration in Xinjiang.

37. *Tunken shubian* (屯垦戍边) and *jiancheng shubian* (建城戍边), respectively. See Bingtuanet, *Hebei sheng dali bangzhu nong er shi jian xin cheng* (Hebei Province to make a great effort to help the Second Agricultural Division build a new city), 17 July 2012, <http://epaper.bingtuanet.com/index.asp?id=63117> (accessed on 13 August 2012).

38. Zhou and Chen, “Xinjiang shengchan jianshe bingtuan,” *art. cit.*, pp. 39–42.

39. Yuxiang Ma, “Xinjiang luzhou chengshihua yu quyu xietiao fazhan zhanlue yanjiu (On the oasis urbanisation and regional harmonious development in Xinjiang),” *Journal of Bingtuan Education Institute*, Vol. 17, No. 1, February, 2007, pp. 13, 16.

Photo 12 – Suburbia displaced: an exclusive villa development adjacent to the land in Photo 11. © Tom Cliff

Photo 13 – The suburban dream only goes so far. The villas sat surrounded by sandy desert and hemmed-in by construction sites from when they were built in 2004 until at least 2011. © Tom Cliff

urbanised townships are to become a “satellite city” of Korla. They will supposedly benefit from proximity to Korla as the area’s logistics hub and as a centre of consumption.⁽⁴⁰⁾

Conclusion

My visual and spatial exploration of the urban morphology, architecture, and monuments of Korla shows a strong push towards the currently-dominant nationwide ideal of urban Chinese modernity.⁽⁴¹⁾ In Xinjiang, these grand plans of engineering are far less constrained – by history, culture, or space – than in central and eastern China. The plans and their implementation are also inflected by the need to present a particular set of nested images – of Korla and its truncated history; of the centre and its power and benevolence; and of the nation and its unity. But unlike some other Chinese cities that lie “Beyond the Great Wall,” the urban morphology and architecture of Korla pay only the most superficial tribute to the history, culture, and aesthetics of the local non-Han.⁽⁴²⁾ And although cities on the Chinese frontier today take the aesthetics of the core regions of China as their

model, they do not slavishly emulate the core. Rather, an aesthetic is emerging that is associated with the Han – and with the core that they implicitly represent, whether or not they have ever been there – but is peripheral. This aesthetic is framed by a different history and looks forward to a different future to that of the core aesthetic.

Urbanisation is often treated as a process of transforming space and social relations. Here I have expanded on this idea in two different ways. First, I have tried to show that urbanisation in a city like Korla on the Chinese frontier entails a particular process of remaking history and place. Second, I have suggested that how people experience urbanisation – how they remake their habits of mind and body – is itself a key objective of urban development in China.⁽⁴³⁾ This place-, history-, and subject-making is considered politically useful, even essential, to nation-building on the frontier.

■ **Tom Cliff is a postdoctoral fellow in the School of Culture, History and Language at the Australian National University. Room 4239, Coombs Building, School of Culture, History and Language, The Australian National University, ACT, 0200, Australia (Tom.Cliff@anu.edu.au).**

40. 111city.com, *Xinjiang bingtuan nong er shi ni jian xin cheng: gongkai zhengming jiang 5 wan* (Xinjiang Bingtuan Second Agricultural Division to build new city: Public naming competition with 50,000 RMB prize), June 23 2012, Changcheng, www.111city.com/news/2485.html (accessed on 13 August 2012).
41. For the standardised aesthetic to which I refer, see Andrew B. Kipnis, “Constructing Commonality: Standardization and Modernization in Chinese Nation-Building,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 71, No. 03, 2012, pp. 742–47. See also the Special Feature “The City, Laboratory of the New China,” in *China Perspectives* 2008/4 – especially the contributions by P. Gaubatz and J.-F. Doulet: Piper Gaubatz, “New Public Space in Urban China: Fewer Walls, More Malls in Beijing, Shanghai and Xining,” *China Perspectives*, Vol. 4, 2008; Jean-Francois Doulet, “Where Are the Chinese Cities Heading? Three Approaches to the Metropolis in Contemporary China,” *China Perspectives*, Vol. 4, 2008.
42. Piper Gaubatz, *Beyond the Great Wall: Urban Form and Transformation on the Chinese Frontiers*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1996.
43. My analysis here is inspired by Luigi Tomba, “Creating an Urban Middle Class,” *The China Journal*, Vol. 51, 2004; and Luigi Tomba, “Making Neighbourhoods: The Government of Social Change in China’s Cities,” *China Perspectives*, Vol. 4, 2008.