5 Minor Politics

In the early 2000s, cold, gray poisonous fogs, windows covered in soot, and dirty snow defined the long Ürümchi winters. It was an urban experience that gave its three million inhabitants their grit, their common sense. It was an atmosphere from which this population of migrant urbanites, both Han and Uyghur, cast their aspirations. There was also a sense of flow and emergence in the midst of this mundane atmosphere of cold and smog. As Gilles Deleuze notes, in every city the complex arrangement of people, infrastructures, and climates "take the city out of its confines" (quoted in Simone 2003, 26). Behind the billboards on unclaimed land in the hills that surround the city, Uyghur migrants attempted to carve out a place for themselves. The "Great Fogs" of Ürümchi winters taught them how to be simultaneously visible and invisible.

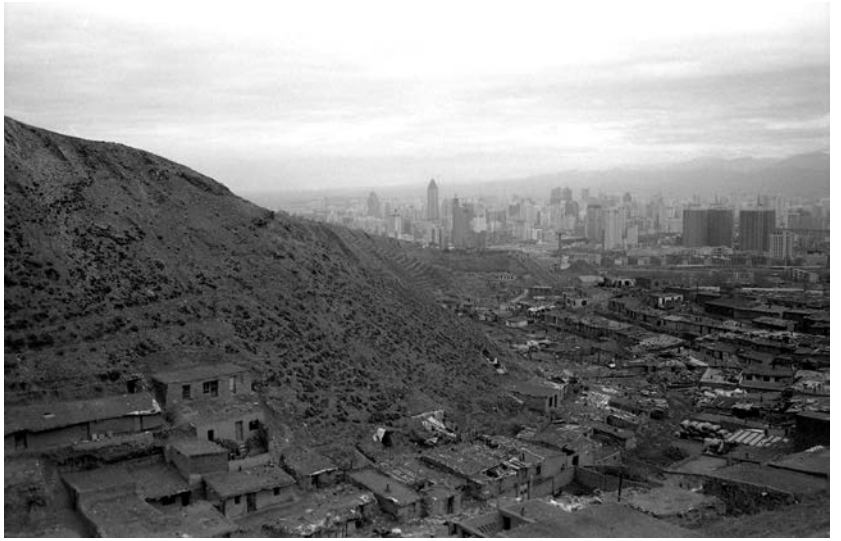

FIGURE 5.1. The informal settlement of Uyghur migrant workers on the hills known as Yamalike. Image by Chen Ye.

The fogs announced the biopolitical priorities of the industrialized city; they warmed the lives that had been deemed productive in the state's developmental scheme and seemed to hide the devalued lives in the informal settlements at the margins of the city. Over the next decade, as the city embarked on a new plan of branding itself as a techno-political "smart city," many neighborhoods of Uyghur migrants would be reduced to rubble. Over the same duration, the lives of Uyghur migrants would come to be seen with a new intensity by surveillance systems. Urban renewal and "greening" (Ch: *lühua*) the city became euphemisms for urban banishment (Appadurai 2000; Roy 2019), a part of the broader enclosure and devaluation processes that were directed at Uyghur and other Turkic minorities.

In 2004, a year after I first visited the city, it was precisely the "Great Fogs" of invisibility that invigorated Chen Ye, a largely self-trained Han migrant photographer, to wander the city. He noted, "I'm haunted by Ürümchi's great winter 'fogs.' I use up roll after roll of film . . . and still I feel invigorated by this frozen world. When I experience it, I feel awake to the world and I reimagine the people and the things I saw." Chen Ye initially climbed the hills in order to get a bird's-eye view of the city, but while he was there he saw another world up above the city. Those neighborhoods of Uyghur migrant workers obfuscated by the leaden clouds on the barren Yamalike Mountain overlooking Ürümchi

seemed to be out of step with the rest of the city. Talking about the past eleven years of his documentary photography project in 2015, he said:

> I didn't start out wanting to take pictures of minorities. This wasn't my goal at all. I wanted to take pictures of life in the city. This is just what I saw up there on the margins of the city. This was the scenery [Ch: *fengjing*]. People are also scenery. You can't ignore people, or trash, or anything that is there. I had no real purpose in taking these pictures. There was nothing behind it. I was just drawn to this sort of life. Of course, through the process I learned a lot about these people's lives. Many of them were just really poor people who came to the city to try to make some money peddling clothes or fruit. At times they made some money, but other times they really had nothing.

For ten years, Chen Ye, a Han migrant who was raised in a family of Anhui settlers on a paramilitary farming colony (Ch: *bingtuan*) made up of veterans of the Chinese Civil War in Northern Xinjiang's high Gobi Desert, spent his winters with these Uyghur migrants. He watched the faces of children harden and turn into a flat blankness. "They were just like wild grass, dancing crazily in the wind, then gradually they grew up and became profoundly silent," he noted. Looking through his archive of around thirty thousand images, I was struck by the way he has struggled to convey the fragility of their lives in the midst of processes of dispossession. "Often I'm not capable of capturing their image," Chen Ye said. "Those people have undergone tortuous, unimaginable experiences and still find themselves in extremely bleak circumstances." It was in this atmosphere that Chen Ye opened up questions regarding the ethics of witnessing the enclosure and domination of others, and how such questions created the conditions for a new minor politics.

In this chapter, I argue that Chen Ye's embodiment of the figure of both a Han rural-to-urban migrant, or "blind wanderer," and a "long-term Xinjiang resident" (Ch: *mangliu* and *lao Xinjiang*, terms I will analyze in detail below) enables me to hold in tension contradictions between the larger social concerns of colonial capitalism and its refusal. His documentary photography practice and its relationship to a colonial gaze both respond to and refuse contemporary terror capitalism. In the final sections of this chapter, I describe how his images offer evidence of his politics, but I do not attempt to center his politics in his photographs. His politics instead arise from his practice and the way he implicates himself alongside the lives of his subjects. His Uyghur friends viewed him as one of them—as a Uyghur "accomplice" or "kin" relation (Uy: *egeshküchi*; *qarandash*).[1] To them, he was more than a photographer, a political

activist, a Han migrant, a *lao Xinjiang* settler. Because of this, I contend he can be thought of as a representational figure of what a minor politics in Xinjiang might look like. Unlike homosocial friendships and the ethical obligations such relationships entail for young Uyghur men, the minor politics Chen Ye embodies *moves across ethnic difference* through a practice of witnessing. Like jan-jiger friendships, this minor politics fosters forms of social reproduction that resist the enclosing effects of terror capitalism and gestures toward a decolonial politics.

Life Making in Northwest China

This chapter extends my engagement in the previous chapter with scholarship on colonial dispossession that focuses on intersubjective lifeworlds, or worlds of life experience, as sites of autonomy (Foucault 1977, 2007; Jackson 2013). This theoretical framing, as supported in recent anthropological work (Winegar 2006; Cattelino 2008; Bernstein 2012), takes up the notion of autonomy in two distinct registers: first, embodied autonomy of individual and collective actors and, second, sovereign power as a form of domination as exercised by the governance structures of a modern nation-state on the body of a subject. Starting with the sovereign body of a medieval king, sovereignty in the latter sense was animated through the body as a site metonymic for the power of the state. Over time, as the body of the king was dispersed into the institutions of the modernist disciplinary state, sovereignty came to regulate life through calculation and statistics. This new form—something Foucault refers to as "biopower"—came to regulate individuals through enclosure and evaluation as I have described in earlier chapters.

Shifting attention from normative forms of political governance to the political impulses of ordinary people, recent scholarship on autonomy has focused on bodies as sites of the performance of sovereign power or domination. Bodies, and the lifeworlds that surround them, can be seen most clearly as sites of violence under extreme conditions such as war, urban cleansing, or other forms of sudden social change (Foucault 1977; Agamben 1998; Simone 2003). Yet these instances are symptoms of a much greater and more insidious structural violence that is taking place under fogs of normalcy in the marginalization that accompanies capitalist entrenchment and colonial expansion around the world. Exploring how capitalist and colonial norms—such as labor migration, ethno-racial discrimination, and counterterror violence—are routinized, scholars have shown that, despite being objects of sovereign violence,

individual selves and informal collectivities can also be sites of autonomy or refusal (Pun 2005; Hardt and Negri 2005; Simpson 2014; McGranahan 2016). They contend that, by the sheer fact of their ongoing existence, exhausted factory workers, protestors, artists, squatters, and the colonized can be seen as refusing to concede their autonomy. By the very fact of their survival, marginalized subjects refuse when they do not fit the norms of modernist development or submit to the sovereignty of the modern nation-state. Some of these minorities refuse to participate in formal ways, refusing to recognize the authority of state institutions to grant them rights and recognition (Simpson 2014; McGranahan 2016). Others claim autonomy in less formal, embodied ways, refusing in practice to recognize truth regimes that devalue their lives (Byler 2018d). What is common in Native refusal is a claim to the priorness of Native forms of knowledge and practice. Their mode of being existed before and through the arrival of the modern state, and as such its value and authority existed prior to the sovereignty of the state and primacy of global capital.

This form of refusal becomes political when new political solidarities are formed by minority groups who hold on to ethical frameworks from prior times and spaces beyond the control of the state. Over the past few decades, the American cultural theorist Lauren Berlant (1997, 2008a, 2008b, 2011) has demonstrated the tenacity with which people in European and American contexts stay attached to life no matter how vulnerable their circumstances. Women, the undocumented, the racialized, and the colonized find ways to live by drawing on communal resources that help them get by. This commitment to the political, to finding ways of living together, is a limited form of autonomy that people maintain as marginalized subjects. Within minority communities centered around affiliations to (and, at times, intersections of) marginalized gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability, and class positions, people build spaces in which they have the power to affect and be affected—spaces in which they can stay attached to and reproduce their lives. It is by staying committed to each other that they can develop a shared affect that feels political. Regardless of the fragility and failure of their lives, Berlant (2008b) demonstrates that people find ways to feel a measure of control over their lives by building "intimate public spheres" centered around commonalities in their lifeworlds. Even if they are not recognized within normative frameworks of citizenship and social rights, marginalized people often find ways to reproduce a way of life as a collective. These forms of "minor politics" (Deleuze 1986; Lionnet and Shih 2005) provide a "sense of a shared affective management" of the crises of ordinary life (Berlant 2008b, 5n12). In marginalized communities, people build

affective bonds and friendships with each other. They intuit ways of living in the present by drawing on past experiences they hold in their bodies and drawing from the knowledge of past generations.

Put simply, a minor politics, as I define it, is a politics of minority groups that is centered around a shared attachment to the reproduction of minority life. It provides marginalized people with a political sensibility of having power to move and act in the world and on others, but its legitimacy does not rest on legal or formal recognition from the state or capitalist institutions. This is not a form of civil or consumerist disobedience as much as a form of epistemic disobedience—a "not buying-in" to the system (Mignolo 2009). As such, it is a form of political life that is simultaneously visible and invisible to dominant political systems. Until the full maturation of terror capitalism in 2017 and the rollout of "smart" city checkpoints, digital enclosures, mass internment, and monitored labor systems, it was not contained by state-run education systems, police systems, religious systems, culture systems, or financial systems. Instead, communities that develop out of marginal living can become a minor politics or political "torsion" that twists forms of control toward other, nonnormative, ways of living together (Rancière 2009).

Ürümchi as a Stage for Minor Politics

The young city of Ürümchi is situated at an old intersection on the trade routes of Central Asia. Located in a high valley between the Mountains of Heaven (Uy: *Tengri Tagh*; Ch: *Tian Shan*) and the Mountains of God (Uy: *Boghda Tagh*; Ch: *Bogada Shan*), it has long been a meeting point for differently identified groups of people. The history of Ürümchi cannot be understood without an understanding of the broader social forces that fell within its orbit and drew its inhabitants to it. Ürümchi is young but the ideas that circulate within it are old. Over three-fourths of the three to four million people who live there have come to the city in the last twenty years. The people of Ürümchi come from a Maoist past and from rural ways of life. Some of them consider Xinjiang to be their homeland but some do not. All are shaped by particular projects of human engineering that accompanied the arrival of China's modern state form—for example, the logic of Maoist multiculturalism, which in the 1950s began the process of placing people within essentialized ethnic ascriptions without a politics of self-determination. In the space of Ürümchi, the goals of these state projects at times seemed to have been achieved for those who possessed the relative privilege of Hanness; for those who did not have this privilege, this logic was

often experienced as an intimacy with an ethno-racial violence that ate into the basic fabric of their social life.

The city formed the center of this segmented cultural production. Following the founding of the Xinjiang People's Press on March 5, 1951, Ürümchi became a central node through which Maoist prescriptions for Uyghur and Han settler life were published and disseminated. Under the leadership of the Xinjiang Provincial Culture and Education Commission, Maoist multiculturalism was staged in publications and performances of ethnic solidarity in class struggle. When in 1980 the arts were liberalized for commercial consumption, the overall goals of Han-centric socialist liberation continued to dominate government-approved aesthetics. In 2021 the Ürümchi-based Xinjiang Culture Ministry continues to give final approval to all cultural production, though production has been semiprivatized and sources of funding are now much more diverse. When it comes to Uyghur culture work, the public sphere is still quite tightly directed, and as the People's War on Terror has intensified, increasingly constrained by the propaganda work of state-imposed multicultural domination. Nearly all Xinjiang culture work must promote "interethnic unity" (Ch: *minzu tuanjie*) and opposition to antirevolutionary, and now "terrorist," forces.[2]

Chen Ye was one of the content producers in this milieu. His family, like many Han in the Uyghur autonomous region, came from Anhui Province to the Chinese–Soviet border in the 1950s as part of the army of paramilitary agricultural workers who took over the steppes with tractors and deep-bore wells. The telos of this human engineering project was one of "opening up" (Ch: *kaifang*) Kazakh pastureland deemed "wasteland" (Ch: *huangdi*) through the creation of a population of Han settler-pioneers. Across China, governance was implemented at a very localized level, which allowed for a measure of political participation (Gao 2007). Each individual had a place, a role, a number, a quota, a ration, and a dossier. In many ways, social order seemed fixed in place.

In the 1980s and 1990s, this began to change. The new flux and freedom of market liberalization, resource extraction, and the flood of new Han migrants that these new development projects brought were deeply unsettling to Han workers such as Chen Ye and his family who self-identify with the earlier settlement project as original Xinjiang "locals" (Ch: *bendi*). Like many who came in the first waves of Han pioneers in the 1950s and 1960s, Chen Ye looked back on the covalent certainties of poverty and equality under the discipline of communism with a certain amount of nostalgia. Back in those days, the divide between Han and ethnic others was not as stark. In many cases, early Han settlers learned local languages and adopted local cultural norms. Over time,

many of them came to see themselves as "old Xinjiangers" (Ch: *lao Xinjiang*). Yet, with the arrival of millions of new Han workers and divestment in the Xinjiang state farm colony system in the 1990s, this sense of identity began to fracture. Suddenly, identification as a pioneering settler was seen as a backward, dead-end social position.

As recent anthropological scholarship has shown (Joniak-Lüthi 2015; Cliff 2016b), many Han who grew up in Xinjiang found themselves allied, to a limited extent, with Uyghurs against the onrush of new Han migrants who had arrived to build both state-funded and privately funded infrastructure and real estate. As described in chapter 2, recent Han migrants often found jobs by traveling along employment pipelines generated by interstate labor bureaus, private job brokers, and kinship networks in their home provinces (Guang 2003, 618). Xinjiang Han, on the other hand, were at times excluded from these job opportunities due to their household registration status. Since the region was so far from the metropoles of Beijing and Shanghai, all Xinjiang identifications, regardless of whether they were Han or minorities, were often viewed as the most "backward" (Ch: *luohou*) and "lacking in achieved quality" (Ch: *meiyou suzhi*) in Han society.[3] As one *lao Xinjiang* woman told me, "Today, household registration from any place other than Xinjiang is worth more than Xinjiang registration." Many mentioned that it seemed impossible for them to find jobs anywhere outside of Xinjiang since they did not have close social connections or prestige and, because of all the new migration to the region, it was also sometimes hard for them to find jobs within what they saw as their home region.

Because Chen Ye was identified as an old-time Xinjianger from a rural farming colony, he felt this sense of disorientation acutely. Forced by a changing economic system that devalued rural Xinjiang labor, he first came to Ürümchi as a student in the late 1990s. After graduating from a small college on the outskirts of town with a generic business degree, Chen Ye hoped to find a job by "jumping into the ocean" (Ch: *xiahai*) of private business. Yet, like many children of farmers who received degrees from small colleges in third-tier cities, for Chen Ye jobs of any sort were very hard to find. After many months of unsuccessful job hunting, Chen Ye spotted an advertisement for a training course at a vocational school.

> I had a business degree, but that really didn't help me find a job. So I saw a flyer for a private school. At that time in Ürümchi there were lots of private schools. The tuition was only 2,200 for a two-month photography course. I thought that it wasn't too expensive and it seemed like a

skill that I could use to start a business. So I did it. After the course was finished, I rented an apartment and opened up a business. But business was terrible. I could only make around 300–500 per month. So after nine months I just gave up.

A failed entrepreneur, Chen Ye did something many migrant workers do. He refused to go home. Chen Ye decided to scratch out a life in the city. Since he already had the equipment for a darkroom and a large supply of inexpensive black-and-white film, his main expenses were food, which his friends in the city and relatives back on the colony farms provided for him. "In the beginning, it was just sort of a way to fill the time. I couldn't find a job and didn't want a job . . . so I just started to live like a 'blind wanderer' [Ch: *mangliu*]—going around taking pictures."

The "Blind Wanderer" in Chinese Discourse

Beginning in the 1950s, the word *mangliu* was used to describe rural migrants to Chinese cities. The term was first coined in a 1953 state document that described state opposition to the "blind flow" of migrants to the city. It was attached to people without formal household registration, without a place in the planned economy of the Maoist society. Others viewed them as destitute and homeless. It meant the person was not a useful member of a work unit and thus not a productive member of society. The "unseeing," "directionless" flow of bodies was viewed as a threat to the centrally planned communist revolution. Interestingly, this way of viewing migration conveyed a feeling quite similar to the feelings Ablikim (in chapter 4) described upon his entry into the "raging river" of Ürümchi social life. In both cases, migrants came to the city riding a metaphoric stream of water, fighting to find their footing despite the structural enclosures arrayed against them.

Over the decades that followed, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, the term *mangliu* came to be used as an epithet to denigrate strangers to the city. It conveyed a feeling of failure and irresponsibility. As Guang Lei has shown, the term came to refer to a form of "circular affirmation" between urban-based government policies that sought to control the inflow of cheap labor and the xenophobic urban popular culture that sought to deny strangers a right to live in the city (Zhang 2001; Guang 2003, 615). Migrants were characterized as both "irrational (blind) and elusive (floating)" (Guang 2003, 622), and thus could be viewed as amoral and illegal and therefore not deserving of basic rights such as a minimum wage, health care, education, and retirement benefits.

Of course, labor rights activists have voiced objections to these characterizations, pointing out that in fact the vast majority of migrants have prearranged jobs in the cities to which they migrate (Guang 2003, 623). This is certainly the case among many recent Han migrants to Ürümchi.[4] Since the mid-1990s, officials in Xinjiang and across the nation have begun to use the term *farmer-worker* (Ch: *mingong*) to describe migrants rather than *mangliu*, but in some circumstances, particularly among Han migrants from rural parts of Xinjiang, the older term has stuck. For Chen Ye, then, calling himself a mangliu became a way of identifying himself with a state of permanent wandering within his old-time Xinjiang identity. He was no longer looking for a home to which to return; he was content in his poverty and lack of rootedness on the margins of the nation.

For Chen Ye, the power of the stigma associated with the word *mangliu* has been inverted and used as a locus of identification and pride. By using the term, he was attempting to identify himself with the Uyghur migrants he photographs, who he often described as "blind wanderers" as well—though, as I will discuss in the next chapter, they often described themselves using a slightly different term, *traveler* (Uy: *musapir*). Some Han independent artists and other people of relative privilege have engaged in similar issues concerning migrant dispossession. Since the market reforms in the 1990s, the arts in cities across China have exploded (Rofel 2007; Welland 2018). Photography was one genre that quickly became a major field within the new contemporary art scene. As Wanning Sun (2014) has shown, although the primary foci of new Chinese photography were travel, landscapes, and fashion, a substantial number of photographers also became engaged in documentary photography or social issue–oriented projects focused on urban migration and the industrialization of Chinese society. Although state authorities and digital surveillance companies had often tried to corral such projects toward a celebration of China's rapid economic development and the improved living conditions of Chinese rural-to-urban migrants, by the early 2000s migrant-photographers such as Zhang Xinmin and Song Chao began portraying the precarious lives of migrants that they themselves had lived. Zhang's first book, *Besieging the City* (2004), and Song's "Miners" (Song 2012) set the standard for a whole generation of migrant-photographers who were just beginning to find their voice at the margins of Chinese society. Rather than representing migrants as "leading a dull, mysterious and hard life" (Song 2012), these projects attempted to portray the full range of feelings that marginalized mangliu people possess.

What makes Chen Ye's use of the term *mangliu* unique is the way he was attempting to combine the term with his *lao Xinjiang* identification and his

Uyghur friendships. Given the context of his practice, this framing produced a kind of anticolonial politics. By attaching himself to this term and describing both himself and Uyghur migrants as "common people" (Ch: *laobaixing*), which he utilized as a way of naming "regular people without political means," he was attempting to build a form of lateral agency across ethnic lines within the context of the broader mass migrations that were happening all around him in Chinese society. This term was not perfectly commensurate with Uyghur migrant identifications; many of them did not think of themselves in Chinese terms nor could they pass as Han "blind wanderers" even if they wanted to. Yet, like Chen Ye, the Uyghurs he photographed and advocated for also identified as migrants who had been separated from their homes. Claiming a stigmatized mangliu position thus allowed Chen Ye a way of thinking, however imperfect, from an allied position as a friend and accomplice in their suffering.

Minor Politics on the Margins

By situating himself in this way Chen Ye was claiming a particular type of positionality—one that included a recognition of ethno-racial, rural, Xinjiang difference. It was for this reason that many Han observers of his practice thought there was something peculiar about his work. Because of the recent explosion of violence between ethnically different groups in the city, a Han migrant photographing and identifying with Uyghur migrants was a project that was difficult for both Han and Uyghur viewers to reconcile with mainstream politics and economics. Why was a Han photographer spending so much time with Uyghurs that many Han saw as prone to terrorism?

Chen Ye spoke often about his photography as a kind of compulsion that no one really understood: "I would tell people that you like to spend your money on cigarettes or alcohol, but I like to spend it on photography. It is my addiction." In the beginning, the Uyghurs whose environments he attempted to represent often saw him as mentally ill or absurd:

> Many people thought it was strange that I was taking pictures all the time, and then that I would just give them to them without asking for any money. Some of them thought I had some sort of mental illness. They would see me taking pictures of some pile of trash or some poor old man and they would ask "Why are you taking pictures of something ugly like that?" But to me those things were extremely beautiful.

As his obsession grew, his family too began to reject him. They felt as though he had a depressive personality disorder and urged him to seek psychiatric

treatment. They could not understand why he was "wasting his time" taking pictures of Uyghurs. Over the long duration of his projects, he had many conflicts with art directors and Culture Ministry censors when attempting to display his work or publish his images. They always asked him why his art focused on what they viewed as negative things instead of a celebration of permitted forms of Chinese multiculturalism. They said, "It is as though I have a personality problem. They are right. I do have a personality disorder. I document the things I see. In China we aren't allowed to 'speak about' these things. Instead, everything should be great, everything is getting better and better. So anyone who speaks about them must be mentally ill."

Chen Ye's positioning and the reactions engendered by his project beg deeper questions about the forms of politics that were converging in his work. In part, the inherent abnormality of Chen Ye's work in representing the precarious lives of Uyghur migrants came from the way his images belied the overarching sovereignty of the state. Chen Ye was deeply troubled by the experience of poverty and dispossession his images documented. He spoke often of the ways in which state authorities and digital media companies tried to coopt his project and turn it into an illustration of the backwardness of Uyghurs and the need to colonize them more quickly. Many times when he was interviewed, reporters would attempt to turn the project into a tale of Chen Ye's heroic efforts to save Uyghurs from themselves. In a way that was similar to Wanning Sun's (2014) findings in her work among documentary photographers in other parts of China, state-owned and mainstream digital media platforms often tried to frame Chen Ye's images as migrants smiling through their pain, struggling to make China a better place. Yet those same media producers and Culture Ministry officials refused to confront the systems of enclosure and devaluation that had produced the vulnerable conditions of Uyghur life in the first place. With his refusal to be coopted by the state, Chen Ye functioned as a resistant social figure. He served as a point of convergence between the social concerns of documentary photography practice and the violence of settler colonialism. What Chen Ye hoped to frame through his photography was quite the opposite of the devaluative intent of many state-sponsored culture producers who participated in the Uyghur reeducation project. He was stubbornly resisting the urge to look away and ignore his own role in enclosing, evaluative processes that dominated culture work in Ürümchi. His work was an attempt to attach himself to the lives of minority "blind wanderers" by detaching himself from the politics of the mainstream.

Chen Ye felt that the lifeworlds of the Uyghur migrant community and the Han settler communities were "completely different." The Uyghur lifeworld

"was straightforward and clear" while the other lifeworld "was a simulation of human existence," he said. Over the course of the decade, he began to notice that what many Han people took to be normal life—buying a home and a car, starting a family, having a career—were not parts of life that were available to everyone and perhaps were not even necessary to live a full life. He said that he came to realize that "many times we don't understand what is a desire and what is a demand."[5] The needs that arose from the devalued life in the Uyghur settlements made him reconsider his own attachments and the life he wanted to reproduce. It pushed him to think about social life beyond economistic activities.

What Chen Ye's experience pointed him toward was an understanding of life that refused or is denied sociopolitical recognition. Up on the mountain, the Uyghurs he photographed were excluded from the rationality of normal life. As figures at least partially outside the vision of the state, the migrant workers up on the hill were living through a process of dispossession as a condition of participation in a Chinese frontier city. While they were recognized as having expropriable potential as data sources and forced labor subjects, they were not recognized by the state authorities and surveillance companies as having normative political rights. They were people who could starve, freeze, be shot, or otherwise be subtracted without the usual implications—without their deaths being viewed on the level of negligence or injustice. Yet the domination of the colonial relation was never absolute, and as such, their illegibility as rights-bearing subjects could in fact be a productive strategy for resistance to the surveillance and discipline. As I will show in the next chapter, their initial partial illegibility, outside the gaze of face-scanning cameras and digital surveillance, was what allowed them to organize their economies around mosque communities and practice forms of unauthorized Islam until this practice was enclosed by the surveillance system. For Chen Ye, though, the work of reframing these lives by entering into minor political-aesthetic relationships with them came to be his primary task.

Building this new type of solidarity was not easy. Many Uyghurs continued to view Chen Ye as radically different. They saw themselves as "Natives" (Uy: *yerlik*) and him as "Chinese" (Uy: *Khitay*)—a banned Russian loan word that in Uyghur describes Han settlers as foreign to their homeland. Many Uyghur migrants did not see themselves as having full Chinese citizenship, while they saw Chen Ye as possessing this fully. Early on in his practice, Chen Ye was often viewed with suspicion and distrust. Uyghur migrants tried to place him. They wanted to figure out if he was a Korean Christian missionary or a government worker. They could not understand why he kept coming into their neighborhood.

FIGURE 5.2. A film still of Chen Ye (*right*) introducing a Han photographer to one of his old Uyghur friends in a documentary film called *Yamalike*—the neighborhood where Chen Ye did his work.

Why did he keep taking pictures, giving pictures he had taken back to members of the community? Why did he help them to get medical treatment or negotiate with the police?

On one occasion, an elderly Uyghur man who had learned to speak Northeast dialect-inflected Mandarin while serving in the People's Liberation Army, asked Chen Ye: "Why do you want to take pictures here? Do you understand what is going on in this place?" Chen Ye said, "I had to really think about this question." Then the old man "looked at [another Han photographer's] camera and asked: 'Your camera must be worth more than 5,000 yuan!?' My friend said, 'No, it was worth less than 3,000 yuan [$500].' [The Uyghur man] said all of the things in his household combined weren't worth that much."[6] Finding his social status indexed in this way made Chen Ye realize that, in the eyes of this migrant, his fellow photographer was just like everyone else—a bourgeois Han settler. Chen Ye said, "Looking at his face I felt all of the heaviness and despair of life." As he talked further with him, the old Uyghur man began to reveal the basic needs of social reproduction that kept them as a population in the settlement:

> He said sometimes when [he and his wife and brother] went out to look for work, the three of them could not make even a combined 100 yuan [sixteen dollars] in one day's work. Children need to eat. They need to go

see the doctor. One stay in the hospital costs a lot. This year his children needed to go to the hospital three times. They didn't have the money to see the doctor.

Living outside the norms of society and staying attached to life was thus at times compromised by the frailty of bodies. Many Uyghur migrants to the city said they had been dispossessed of their land due to infrastructure development and passbook systems. Coming to the city in search of work, often relying on tenuous relationships with distant relatives or neighbors, was their only way forward.

Discussing the vulnerability of Uyghur migrant life, the old man continued:

> Other people in the neighborhood who had money just replaced those who [were worked to death], they replaced whoever had been *subtracted* [he said]; those who lifted their heads first [following a death] were the ones who were able to move forward. (my emphasis)

Being "subtracted" (Ch: *jian shao*; Uy: *kımeytti*) speaks to the calculus through which people were reduced to a numbered segment of work units under the discipline of party–state-directed modes of production, but as I have noted throughout this book, it also describes the way terror capitalism reduced Uyghur migrants to their data and labor power, transforming their bodies into biometric code, a "surplus population" (Ch: *shengyu renkou*) that could be subtracted from the city (see also Li 2017). As Chen Ye moved deeper into the world of minority migrant workers, he said the types of conversations he had that centered on discourses of subtraction "came so naturally it was suffocating." Not only was the city set up in opposition to Uyghur migrant access; as the new projects began, the police contractors actively harassed undocumented migrants at random and at fixed checkpoints, leveraging bribes or forcing them into the long slow process of rejection by making them wait in lines at police departments—first to have paperwork processed and, finally, to submit their biometric data.

Clearly, many of the Uyghurs Chen Ye met wanted him to hear and see their stories. But what did it mean to him to "move forward" or to be "subtracted"? In each of the many discussions I had with Chen Ye, he always spoke of the way migrant Uyghurs helped those around them who were in need: "The Uyghurs I met are beautiful people. They are deeply generous. They take care of each other." He said he learned a lot about a politics of solidarity from the way his Uyghur friends had invited him into their homes and told him they would be angry if he didn't eat with them. They said, "If we don't eat together we

can't be friends." They referred to him using the terms of kinship, giving him the Uyghur name Ali and referring to him as a "kin relation" (Uy: *qarandash*) using the honorific term *older brother* (Uy: *aka*). They taught him Uyghur and established that his priority was in sharing their pain. They saw him as an "accomplice" (Uy: *egeshküchi*) in their struggle. For Chen Ye, responding to the political question "How should we live together?" meant continuing to live in a way that allowed you to attach yourself to your neighbors. Often this meant living in opposition to the goals of terror capitalism. Many times when he saw Uyghur migrants being harassed by local police contractors on the street, he tried to intervene on their behalf. Yet often there was not much he could do. The contractors would just point him in the direction of the city and say "Out!" (Ch: *chuqu!!*). He spent much of his time assisting his friends in finding legal documentation that prevented them from being evicted and their homes being sold to Han settlers. But again, this was often a losing battle. He said, "Those things happen all the time."

Minor Politics as Refusal of Devaluation

Five years after Chen Ye began his project in the informal settlements up on the hills, on July 5, 2009, Uyghur university students took to the streets of Ürümchi demanding justice for the killing of Uyghurs as described in chapter 1. Unlike the vast majority of Han migrants with whom I spoke about these incidents, Chen Ye did not blame Uyghur migrants, Islamic tradition, or lack of patriotism for the violence. He did not condone the violence in any way, but he said he understood the frustration and resentment that motivated it. He watched in horror the way mobs of Han migrants beat Uyghur bakers outside his apartment building while the police watched from the sidelines in the days that followed the initial violence.

The areas where Chen Ye worked were rapidly demolished over the next several years and a new infrastructure of concrete grids and high-rise apartment buildings—with running water, working lights, and closed-circuit security cameras—was built further from the center of the city. Of course, many Uyghur migrants could not obtain the proper paperwork to gain legal access to the new housing or simply could not afford it. In addition, in 2014 when the new People's Convenience Card system was implemented, hundreds of thousands of people who had moved into the new housing or continued to live in the informal settlements were forced to leave.

As Chen Ye put it:

> There are two major changes that have happened since the events of July 5, 2009. First, on the surface, things have been radically altered. Old-style one-story [Ch: *pingfang*] houses have been torn down and replaced with new apartments. . . . Infrastructure has been improved, but the lives of those most directly affected by the redevelopment have not been improved that much. Instead, they have just found themselves dispersed into other parts of the city or forced to leave. Second, household registration [Ch: *hukou*] restrictions have been drastically increased. Uyghur migrants are being simultaneously pushed and squeezed. When they came to find work many [migrants] first built their own houses without official permission, so this is the reason officials give for tearing down the houses. I really don't agree with this, because behind this is an attitude that Uyghurs "have no culture" [Ch: *mei wenhua*] [and therefore don't matter]. People talk as though society should be controlled through competition. People with abilities to do well should be free to live in the city and those that cannot should be pushed out. Of course, since Uyghurs are discriminated against and can't move freely and speak easily in the Chinese world, this means they will be the first to be eliminated. Actually, if you follow this logic, all of Xinjiang should be eliminated since in the eyes of most Chinese it itself is so far "behind" [*luohou*]. I really disagree with this perspective. It lacks vision into the complexity of the problems we face here. Pushing problems to the side does not solve them. Everyone tries to blame their problems on others without considering their own role in making them.

Unlike many other Han in Xinjiang who blamed the violence on Uyghurs who refuse to participate in the Chinese colonial project, Chen Ye saw himself as aligned with the placelessness of Uyghur migrants. Although Chen Ye was able to get the green card permit to live in the city as a migrant, he still identified with their position. He felt little desire to pursue what other urbanites might consider a good life, not only because he knew this success would come at the expense of Uyghur losses, but also because he found no joy in building a persona through consumption.

Chen Ye lived in a simple walk-up apartment made of concrete with patched green-and-white tiles on the floor. The walls were packed with bookshelves crowded with the poetry of Bei Dao and Xi Chuan, translations of James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, John Steinbeck, and Gary Snyder. On a side table above labeled jugs of vinegar, he had a few Uyghur naan. As is the tradition for Uyghurs, who view bread as something that should never be wasted, the old

naan was broken in pieces in preparation for a sky burial. Once, while we were sitting in his apartment drinking tea, he told a story about a Uyghur friend:

> I have a [Uyghur] friend from the Aqsu area who came to live here [decades] ago but never managed to get an ID or hukou established anywhere. So after July 5, 2009, they tried to force him to go back to Aqsu, but since he had been in the city for so long he didn't have any connections in Aqsu anymore. No one would officially recognize him, so he was a person without place. This issue has still not been resolved even though it has been such a long time. He jokes that he is a person without a country.

As he finished telling the story, he laughed ironically. To him, the story was symptomatic of the lives of Xinjiang people in general, both Han and Uyghur (see also Bovingdon 2010). Although he clearly recognized the way Uyghur migrants bore the brunt of dispossession, he felt little loyalty to the Chinese colonial project. He too felt like he was someone without a country he believed in.

Chen Ye's images were a means to his politics. For Chen Ye, the feeling of being political, or being active in the world, was when he was concentrat-

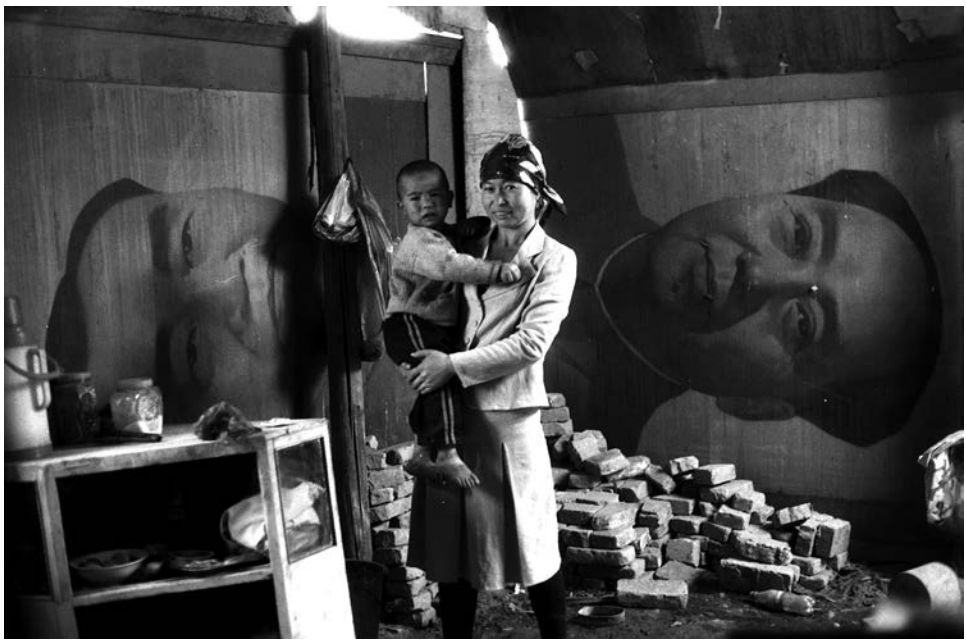

FIGURE 5.3. One of Chen Ye's Uyghur friends poses with her son in her home. Portraits of Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong have been turned on their sides to form the walls of her home in the Uyghur informal settlement. Image by Chen Ye.

ing on life at the margins. These feelings took place in homes, around tablecloths on raised platforms; sitting with Uyghur friends on the porches or in the courtyards of their homes; and listening to their troubles, sharing in their pain. He felt connected when he advocated for them at the police station and when they accepted gifts of his vegetarian food and shared their meals with him. When he thought about the life philosophy that emerged through his aesthetic-political practice, he said things like this:

> Taking photos is a life practice. In the chaos of the present, the simplicity of watching forces people, who might merely want to soak in salon-style art at their leisure, to return to the inner stillness and bareness of life: you must go by yourself, see for yourself. You have to start from the periphery of the city and continue on alone. Walk silently while facing those scenes and emotions that your camera lens is unable to hold.[7]

Since so much had changed since the violence of 2009, for Chen Ye and many other artists, photography as a life practice came to be tinged with a loss of trust in a better future. When life was lived in the moment, a future life seemed quite distant and bleak. Writing in 2013 he said:

> The dreamlike intimacy and kindness of these people brought me back to a place I knew thirty years ago. That door had been closed, so I always remained aloof, wandering in every direction. I tried to capture their unforgettable faces and the essence of their yearning for life. I know so many people who have wandered elsewhere due to the demolition. A few people still live on the margins. Sometimes I still hear the sound of the tambour drifting in the alleyways. In that sound I hear all kinds of longing and often catch a glimpse of those figures who have vanished into the past. Once, in a ravine, I took pictures of a kid. After I had gone on quite far away, *he caught up with me*. He handed me an apple, and then quickly ran back in the direction he had come. Then there was an old horse used for hauling water. One day, I approached it while it was chewing its cud. In the dusk it turned toward me, and *looked at me with blank indifference*. Its gaze touched me so deeply. In it I felt I could glimpse the entire ethos of life [on the mountain]. Now, when I see the deserted mountain slope where the Uyghur migrants used to live, it feels as if they have disappeared in a mighty torrent. For a number of years I took pictures. I saw much happiness and suffering. I also saw many endings. I saw some of the foundations of human existence. *Life is made out of absurdities and bleakness, excesses and anxiety*. It is incredible. (my emphasis)

Although life seemed meaningless, the process of dispossession was made survivable in the intervals of sharing friendship and looking honestly at the losses of those nearby. Chen Ye was not entering the world with Uyghurs out of hope for their future protection by the state, though he would welcome such protections but because of an ethical commitment to being-with the other. That was all there was.

The two encounters Chen Ye described above—the child handing him an apple and locking eyes with an indifferent horse—were images of witnessing. As Naisargi Dave (2014) has argued with regard to animal activists in India, a singular moment of locking eyes with a suffering other can become a life-changing moment of witnessing. This moment of intimacy between subjects expands the self in a way that transcends previous horizons of relational possibility. When Chen Ye and his colleagues took up a photography that looked honestly at those who had been devalued by Chinese colonial-capitalism, they were taking up a practice of witnessing. That is, in effect, their practice produced an ethical obligation to live as a perpetual witness. Taking these ethical claims a bit further, Dave (2014) argues that intimacy of this sort is more than the coming together of autonomous subjects as the founding myths of our autological modernist societies might imply. Rather than being motivated by free love, the suffering other is brought into the encounter precisely through its "*un*freedom," and the activist is compelled to surrender to an ethics outside of herself. Since Uyghur migrants were attached to, and artists such as Chen Ye refused to detach from, life as migrants, none of them had anywhere else to go. They were in it, a shared lifeworld, together. Of course, there was a much greater measure of choice on the part of Chen Ye since he could pass as a member of the privileged ethno-racial majority. Yet, by rejecting the truth claims of the techno-political system and taking on what many read as a dissident position by identifying with the Uyghur dispossession he witnessed, he was embracing a shared unfreedom that resulted in a deep interdependence.

As Dave (2014) argues, witnessing thus compels the activist to expand the skin of the self to include the skin of the other, folding over forms of difference that previously had seemed insurmountable. For a witness, then, the vulnerability of someone in pain demands a minor politics, a politics that emerges from a shared experience of being invited into face-to-face relations as co-creators of experience (Levinas 1979, 198). This immediacy, or true nearness—in contrast to the false intimacy of a techno-political gaze described in chapter 1—is experienced as what Emmanuel Levinas (1979) describes as a "living presence" that refuses representation as image or, in the context of terror capitalism, algorithmic programming. These encounters, as a practice of

living, produce more than a form of false empathy in which the participant claims a sense of moral superiority while sacrificing little. Rather, this is an imperative that compels the witness to try and fail and try again to make the pain of the other matter in the shared experience of life. It is an attempt to extend the value of their social reproduction.

Witnessing produces a sort of torsion or twist in the normal weave of the social fabric. As Jacques Rancière (2007) has noted, political solidarities that arise among communities are centered around shared attachments. These torsions around a shared object interrupt the normal ordering of society along normative categories of citizenship or, if adapted to a Chinese context, ethnic status and household registration. Rancière argues that centering life around the shared inheritance of a marker, such as a shared attachment to Xinjiang migrant marginality, outside of the norms of formal political structures, allows for a new form of politics: friendship and equality routed through feelings of social intimacy and solidarity. What is crucial in this reframing of politics is that it moves from a liberal politics of inclusion—aimed at normalizing the "excluded part" by bringing it into alignment with the norms of society—to opening up a politics with "anybody or whoever" (Rancière 2007, 99). In doing so, this form of politics allows the other to maintain her difference. Through this, the other is empowered to refuse to submit her autonomy. The other is instead regarded as a carrier of knowledge, as a constitutive part of the political sensibilities that emerge out of practices of witnessing, friendship, and shared attachments to life.

Following Rancière's argument further, this torsion is necessarily aesthetic in that it creates a new distribution of the sensible. Nonnormative sociality, or what I am describing as minor politics, "makes visible what had been excluded from a perceptual field" (2005, 226). This was precisely what Chen Ye was attempting to do through his practice of witnessing and his attachment to life as a migrant. He was attempting to pull himself into a particular Uyghur orbit and along the way document his experience and activate fellow Han artists and art viewers to share an intimate public sphere with Uyghur migrants.

Over his decades of work, Chen Ye became widely respected in the artist community in Ürümchi. He used his position to advocate for Uyghur lives. This had the effect of making Han artists check their privilege and Uyghur artists feel welcome in the community. Yet, as Rancière admits, this form of politics is rarely successful in a formal lasting sense. It is difficult to step out of normative politics, and even more difficult for a torsion in the social fabric to have any lasting effect. Although Uyghur migrants stayed on Chen Ye's mind and he identified with the conditions of their lives, and increasingly those he

photographed saw him as an accomplice, at times, Uyghur and Han viewers of his images had difficulty tuning in to the politics of his work.

On June 6, 2015, one of Chen Ye's friends helped him put on an exhibition of his work. It was held in a private coffee shop rather than a state capital–sponsored space where government censorship would have prevented the images from being shown. Chen Ye showed over two hundred images in a slideshow set to the Brian Eno soundtrack "Music for Airports" that several of his Han artist friends had arranged. Around one hundred people came. Many of them were artists, some of them quite famous in the mainstream Chinese contemporary art scene. I invited Ablikim, the Uyghur migrant whose story I told in the previous chapter, to attend. As was typical in Han-sponsored cultural events, he was the only Uyghur in the audience. After the show, I introduced Ablikim to Chen Ye. Because of the trauma Ablikim had been through over the past several years, he was reluctant to speak Chinese in public; Chen Ye too was reluctant to speak Uyghur in front of an audience. Because of this mutual shyness, it was difficult for them to speak freely with each other. Instead, I and other audience members led the conversation in Chinese. Chen Ye talked for an hour about how he got started with his project and how the lives of the people he has come to know so intimately have changed. He discussed how difficult it was for him to prevent Chinese media from putting a "happy face" (Ch: *xiaolian*) on the lives of Uyghurs. He spoke about how he did not see himself as a hero but rather as just a friend and advocate in Uyghur struggles. He was deeply uncomfortable showing his work in such a bourgeois environment.

As we were walking home after our conversation, I asked Ablikim what he thought about the exchange. He held up his hand and positioned his finger about an inch from his thumb and said:

> He is *this close* to understanding what the situation is really like for Uyghurs. Maybe he is as close as he can get to it. Whenever Han people talk to Uyghurs something always gets a little bit lost in translation. Uyghurs use slightly different words and Han understand what they are saying in slightly different ways. Han people use words like "common people" [Ch: *laobaixing*] and "backward" [Ch: *luohou*] to describe their situation as migrants. Everything gets translated into the language of Chinese society. Actually, Uyghurs don't think like that or talk like that very much. We think in distinctly different ways—we don't think we are "backward" compared to Chinese society and "common people" makes it seem as though we are all equal. Maybe the way we talk and the way Han people talk have

> some similarities but they also feel like they have some big differences. What I really like about Chen Ye though is that he doesn't see himself as some sort of hero. He just has some ideas about how to do something like photography and he does it. He isn't trying to make a name for himself or do something great. He just wants to see life the way it really is. I really respect that.

He deeply admired Chen Ye's personal ethics and he found his images presented something he had rarely seen staged before—a profound sadness.

> I wonder why all his images make people look so sad. Actually, people are often happy even when their lives are not so good.

Yet, as he spoke he answered his own question. The sadness of the images was in the intensifying dispossession of Uyghur migrant life itself and what it meant to make that experience of life sensible.

> Those kids, the children of "travelers" [Uy: *musapir*], are probably only happy two days out of seven. Their families have had their "spirits broken" [Uy: *rohi sunghan*] in some way or another. Either their father is a drunk, or their parents just fight all the time because of money, or their mom was ostracized by the community they came from because she wasn't pious enough or something like that. That is why they left the countryside and came to the city in the first place. They are trying to run away from something like religious restrictions or poverty in their home village. But, of course, they brought the problems they had in the countryside with them to the city. So those kids can never get away from the feelings of anger and fear that they feel all around them. This is why they look sad, I'm guessing. Maybe some of it is also the way Chen Ye takes pictures. He is looking for moments like that.

For Ablikim, it was obvious that the identity Chen Ye referred to as that of a "blind wanderer" (Ch: *mangliu*) was related to the Uyghur term for "traveler" (Ch: *musapir*). It was also clear to him that there was a range of issues that caused them to come to the city in the first place. He recognized that their spirits had been "broken." Something had been done to these people to make them appear this way. The gap that Ablikim noticed in Chen Ye's politics appeared in the incommensurability between their respective positions—"traveler" from the Uyghur and "blind wanderer" from the Chinese. Because Chen Ye's images were being presented from a Chinese position, a fully decolonial politics was not possible. As Ablikim put it:

What will Han people get out of looking at these pictures? These pictures make the problem really clear. They put it right in front of you. But like Chen Ye said, they will probably just turn them into a series of pictures of cute kids and strange-looking people taken by a heroic photographer. Of course, that is not what he wants and he also doesn't want it to result in some sort of easy solution—as some excuse to make some kind of new housing or education policy. You can't fix a problem like this. You can only try to find ways to resolve the problem. If you really want to resolve the problem, you have to look at the problems in the countryside, at the deep problems in Xinjiang. You have to see how the structures of society are causing these sorts of broken families, how discrimination is forcing people to move like this to look for work, how the education infrastructure prevents poor people from finding real jobs, how the education that rural people have is not valued by society. You have to see how people's voices are not heard and how people are being treated like animals.

No one knows what caused the violence in 2009. There are all kinds of theories that it was organized by some centralized group or something. I think it is pretty clear to see that many people have deep anger that they can't express. Many, like those people who live in the poor areas, are frustrated and hopeless. They can be pretty easily persuaded by other people who take advantage of that sort of anger. But, in any case, what happened after 2009 did not address the real sources of the problems. It is just like 1989 or the Cultural Revolution, the leaders just say some very vague things about how things have been taken care of and now everything is harmonious. They just ignore the real problems and act like they never happened. That is a very Chinese way of doing things. I think that is how most Han people will see Chen Ye's pictures too. They will just be a little sad to see that life was so hard for people like this, *but they won't do anything about it*. Most people will just see them and think [the Uyghurs] are bad people who aren't willing to work or are maybe involved in some sort of crime. But the way they got to that condition was because society itself has rejected them. They didn't really have that much choice. (my emphasis)

What Ablikim is pointing to is the difficulty in translating a minor politics to a broader public. Attempting to redistribute the sensible through the development of a new form of aesthetic-political reframing does not necessarily allow the intimacy of *being-with* others to circulate outside of the immediate context of the site of production. Instead, images of poverty and otherness can also be read as an index of "backwardness" (Ch: *luohou*). They can even be read as

evidence of the individual as the cause of violence and poverty rather than the result of structural violence and dispossession. Yet these were chances Chen Ye was willing to take. In the end, witnessing created its own life paths and its own politics, however minor they may have been.

Conclusion

Despite systemic enclosures from the techno-political system and misrecognition from his viewers, Chen Ye continued his work. No matter what sort of urban-cleansing projects were deployed, Chen Ye felt as though the surveillance system could not extirpate "the people, the objects, and feelings of a place" that sprouted up like blades of grass in zones of exclusion.[8] When he began the project, "The city was very close," Chen Ye noted, "within ten minutes you could go down the mountain to a main road where huge billboards kept out the hillside: beautiful women, sofas, cell phones, tires, children's clothes . . . a wall of giant signs stretched out from the city to cover up its embarrassment." Obfuscated in the winter by industrial pollution and in the summer by a wall of commercial billboards, the informal settlements on the hills were a lacunae in the landscape of the Chinese city. Lacking natal home relations and tacit knowledge of cosmopolitan manners, formal business acumen, and the passwords necessary to access capital, the slum population proliferated, cloaked in the "great fogs" on the margins of the city. It was only with a major shock to the integrity of the system—with the mass protests in 2009 and then again with the unfolding People's War on Terror—that those imbricated in the institutions down below were compelled to target the settlements beyond the reach of the city.[9] And then, it was only with the intention of violently dispossessing the population of Uyghur migrants: reeducating them through digital enclosures, internment camps, and reeducation factories. If Chen Ye's work of rendering the invisible visible still allowed for a misrecognition of the stranger, at least in his artistic practice there was also a minor politics built out of love, generosity, and vulnerability. Although sharing a view of the world from the position of a Xinjiang-specific "blind wanderer" or "traveler" did not necessarily produce a recognized form of political rights to live in the city, it framed a view of ordinary life as lived in the midst of vulnerability and that was already an opening to a new form of political feeling.

Chen Ye was not trying to produce a form of multiculturalism in which the minority-other is included in the mainstream without the member of the majority losing something. Instead, he was attempting to lose parts of his own social potential, by amplifying the voices of the other. By entering into an

intimate minor politics with Uyghur migrants, Chen Ye found a measure of repair in his own life. He found ways to give up on the obligations to normalcy that had been placed on him by his family, the techno-political system that mediated his life, and the safe enclosures of mainstream society that repelled him. He found a way to step out of normal life and share a life with the dispossessed. Rather than being part of an official ethnic solidarity team sponsored by state capital to bring minorities into categories of domination and productivity as the economy turned to terror capitalism, Chen Ye set out on his own to find resonances between his own life and the lives of those on the margins. In doing so, he was introducing a new specificity to the problem at hand and, through this, a strategic reassembling of the terms with which Uyghur travelers were regarded by themselves, by other Han artists, and by art viewers. Uyghurs who saw his work considered it "almost good enough" and, for Chen Ye, that was enough to continue his culture work as fogs of pollution that obscured Uyghur neighborhoods were lifted and waves of biometric data collection and social reeducation began.