6 Subtraction

In August 2014, when I walked down the backstreets in the Uyghur migrant community of Heijia Shan at around 8 a.m. on a Friday, the weekly day of worship in the Islamic world, I saw people rubbing the sleep out of their eyes. Those who had woken up before 8 a.m. had coal fires burning in rusting metal barrels. Eggs were roasting on metal tripods. Big iron woks were filled with a slow-cooking rice and carrot pilaf called *polu*. The butchers were slaughtering their second sheep for the day, hacking open rib cages with small hatchets. The juice pressers were carting their presses out to their wagonload of shriveling pomegranates. The bread makers stoked the fires in their clay ovens lined with lime from the desert. This was one of the last Uyghur neighborhoods where people filled teapots from communal hot water taps. The smoke from coal fires from the last remaining one-story houses hung in the air, mingling with the

acrid scent of Styrofoam burning in the ditches. Small children still had free rein in the streets, where they played in the rubble unsupervised. Farther up the mountain, one-story homes were being dismantled by Uyghur day laborers brick by brick while new twenty-story apartment buildings were being built by Han construction crews. The sound of the construction of the government-subsidized orange and yellow towers mixed with the sound of dogs barking, the cheerful shouts of children on recess at the nearby elementary school, and the chanting of the antiterrorism army platoon stationed next to the community. In adjacent alleyways, Han migrants from Anhui and Henan sorted through insulation ripped from the sides of salvaged refrigerators in preparation for a big shipment to the recycling plant, but the vast majority of the twenty thousand migrants in the community were Uyghur. Uyghur migrants first built this settlement on the hillside in the 1990s; the Han and Hui migrants on the fringes came later. It was one of the last remaining Uyghur informal settlements or shantytowns in the city.

In this gray island of brick, dust, sweat, and rubble, the city that surrounded it seemed to be at a remove. Here, everything seemed to be temporary, subtracting. Social life was simultaneously disappearing yet ongoing. Since the entire area

FIGURE 6.1. The rubble of Heijia Shan. Image by author.

was scheduled for urban cleansing following the uprising of 2009, there were fewer cameras and more police.[1] There were many newly constructed walls and gates, but they were tended haphazardly. Because everything was in flux, there was a generalized sense of incoherence in the community. Many of the people who inhabited the space were not actively resisting the development of the city; they were merely trying to live with what they knew and what they had. People lived, sorting the refuse of the city, waiting to be told to leave. The tens of thousands of Uyghur migrants on Heijia Shan self-identified as *musapir* or "travelers" from elsewhere.

Yet, for all the uncertainty and fragmentation of the community in the scene I just described, there was still a center to social life. At the bottom of the hill, in the center of the alleyways, was the Heijia Shan mosque. It served as the institutional center of the community. During weekly Friday prayers, the crowd around the mosque swelled to several thousand. A vibrant bazaar sprang to life and for a few hours a spirit of conviviality took over the space. Despite the presence of plainclothes state police and uniformed contractors also came to scan the crowds for migrants suspected of Islamic extremism, in many ways the bazaar operated like a weekly rural market. People from an area around half-an-hour's walking distance in each direction converged once a week to buy supplies and share the news of the week. Migrants from the same home village met and commiserated. Those who attended the unauthorized prayer rooms (Uy: *namaz-xana*) in Uyghur restaurants around the city used the Bluetooth function on their smartphones to share illegalized digital recordings of Islamic teachings they had downloaded from WeChat that week. They did not realize that this activity would be enough to send them to the internment camps, which would be built across the region beginning the next year. For now, WeChat functioned as a semipublic private sphere where online communities of religious piety formed along social networks (Harris and Isa 2019). Nearly everyone I met seemed to be in a Quran study group. They were not yet aware that they were becoming the object of terror capitalism and a new industry of biometric and digital surveillance.

The migrants who met through this new religious community used this space to network. They talked about which jobs were coming available, about supplies of shoes, coats, toys, and cheap electronics that could be sold at a profit on the streets. By identifying themselves as travelers or musapir, they laid claim to a sense of belonging to this mosque community. This belonging in turn provided them with a weekly sense of economic support and well-being. Despite the efforts of the state-sponsored techno-political system to eliminate the presence of this population in the city through the controlled distribution

of rental and commercial permits, here the Uyghur migrant population found ways to survive but only for a time.

This chapter considers the role of the Uyghur musapir as a basis for a religious economy that prolonged life in the city by fostering social reproduction beyond purely economic activity. Often life in a demolition zone appears to be a space of abjection. It might be seen as a space where the poor are slotted to suffer an almost underground existence as their homes and dreams are torn apart and buried in the rubble. Although there is an element of truth to this imagery of abjection, this chapter shows that the story of informal Uyghur settlements is more complicated than that. The Uyghur concept of the musapir—long conceived as an exception to the norm of Uyghur rootedness in farming communities and the stability of land tenure—implies a feeling of desolation and loss, but it also describes a kind of piety and willfulness. *Musapir*, or *musafir* as it written in the original Arabic, means "traveler,"[2] but among Uyghurs it has come to describe a sense of both psychic and material displacement and a surrender to Islamic faith.

The Chinese term *mangliu*, or "blind wanderer," is used in contemporary Chinese discourse with both the negative connotations of poverty and homelessness and self-ascribed positive associations of migrant toughness and courage. The Uyghur term *musapir* differs from this Chinese conceptualization in the way it is related to particular religious histories of encultured thought. For Uyghurs, musapir also describes a particular religious practice—the Sufi tradition of the wandering Islamic mystic—and it is here, at the nexus of the psychic, material, and religious, that it becomes fruitful as a specific conceptualization of the sociality of Uyghur migrants as they wait to be expelled from the city.

Many self-identified musapir repeatedly insisted that they were hoping to someday be able to achieve legal status in the city and buy an apartment, yet many of them also admitted that this was not likely to happen. Most of them focused on just the week in front of them. They lived Friday to Friday, when they participated in the weekly Islamic service and street bazaar. The younger generation of migrants relied on their network of fellow travelers to help them find more short-term work, pyramid schemes, and training courses when what they were doing in the present fell through. One of the ways of strengthening this network was through regular meetings to discuss unauthorized religious teachings or *tabligh* of reformist, or pious, Islam, which became enormously popular among young Uyghur men in Southern Xinjiang as a result of their experience of dispossession and their new access to the internet and social media. An older generation of migrants relied on the same mosque community to survive the turmoil that came from having their homes demolished during Ürümchi's

urban-cleansing projects. Increasingly, they saw value in the new forms of piety that were being practiced by younger, more devout, migrants. Like the younger generation of migrants, they too saw themselves as becoming musapir.

In what follows, I explore the way Uyghur migrants from Kashgar Prefecture struggled to achieve economic stability in their lives while contending with the rise of terror capitalism in Ürümchi. Since 2009 the digital enclosure system has forced hundreds of thousands of Uyghur migrants to leave their homes. The expulsions were enforced by regular home inspections where Uyghur inhabitants were asked to produce "green cards" (Uy: *yeshil kart*) as described in previous chapters. Throughout the period of my fieldwork, hundreds of thousands of migrants were forced to leave the city. While, for Ablikim, dispossession had felt like an interminable process of subtraction that began in the city after 2009; as the People's War on Terror was set in motion, dispossession began to move very quickly. By May 2015 entire apartment buildings had been vacated; hundreds of Uyghur restaurants had closed. In Heijia Shan, many had been forced to leave. Others had dodged the police contractors and lived without permits in the rooms of friends until eventually they were caught at checkpoints or by facial surveillance systems.

By focusing on a tumultuous year in the life of a family of an older generation of migrants who inhabited a "nail house" (Ch: *dingzihu*) in this informal settlement, I show that migrant life was often comingled with Reformist Islamic practice. I examine how the family refused to accept compensation for the demolition of their house, thus enacting a "nail house" resistance while at the same time preparing themselves for its inevitable demolition by drawing on the musapir Uyghur tradition—an Islamic and communal practice of active interdependence. People in this community often depended on relational support while autonomously pursuing pious virtue. I also show how they refused to have their lives displayed in a documentary film but instead chose to tell their stories on their own terms. I found that, by participating in a mosque community made up of other musapir, the family was able to use urban sheep farming—raising a small herd of sheep inside their home and in the rubble that surrounded it—as a viable means to prepare for the oncoming wave of dispossession.

I then turn to the story of a young Uyghur musapir who lived in the same mosque community as the family. In his case, the mosque community and the online social network it fostered became the locus of his social identification and a source of economic stability. He actively used his musapir identification to validate his religious persona as a reformist Muslim. Within the migrant community, the knowledge he had gained through his immersion in prayer

room discussions and online forums regarding Islamic othropraxis built a religious calling into his position as a temporary inhabitant of the city. I argue that the "nail house" migrant farmer, who was in the process of losing his house, and the younger religious migrant were at two ends of the spectrum of what counted as contemporary musapir sociality. In the end, like the hundreds of thousands of other musapir, both of them failed to claim a secure space in the city. For the older man, strategic online invisibility prevented his detention, while in the younger man's case online behavior led to his *subtraction*—a term that describes the general process of urban banishment, epistemic erasure, and unfree labor that typified the effects of terror capitalism.

Islamic Practice and Religious Economies

This chapter takes inspiration from growing debates in anthropology on reformist and "everyday" Islam.[3] My reading of the new literature on the "everyday" is that, in many cases, it attempts to open ethnographies of religious people toward the way power structures other than moral or religious authority—such as those of settler colonialism and non-Western forms of racialization—are also part of the fabric of contemporary life for Muslims in places like Iraq, India, and in my case, Northwest China. Anthropological scholarship on the power and efficacy of religious piety from scholars such as Saba Mahmood (2005), Charles Hirschkind (2006), and Lara Deeb and Mona Harb (2013) presents a compelling argument for the way reformist forms of Islam have precipitated a rise in ethical self-cultivation. Many of the scholars of everyday Islam do something similar, yet they often place greater stress on the multiplicity of sources that inform this rise in ethical and political behavior (Zyskowski 2014; Fadil and Fernando 2015). For example, Veena Das (2010) attempts to come to terms with the way Muslims at times use Hindu moral frameworks as a way to resolve ethnic tensions in their everyday life practices. Likewise, in this chapter, I argue that the rise of reformist Islam was to some extent a response to a Chinese capitalist and colonial project that conflated Uyghur refusals to be eliminated with so-called religious extremism.

The vulnerability of social life in the midst of a settler-colonial project structured and enabled the way Uyghurs understood, negotiated, and deployed Islamic moral frameworks. This push toward new forms of Islam was thus simultaneously an effect of techno-political enclosure, facilitated by an infusion of state capital in new communication infrastructures, and, as shown throughout this book, the object of terror capitalism. Smart phones, 3G networks, MP3 recordings carried on SD cards, and transportation infrastructure were all part

of what fostered the religious economy among Uyghur migrants. In addition, the particular form of land-based Islamic knowledge they drew on informed the way they adapted reformist Islamic frameworks in their own lives. My argument here is not that Uyghur lives were fractured in multiple identities, as is often conceptualized in Western liberal frameworks, but rather that their everyday experience of Islam was situated in changing structures of power, influence, and capital accumulation.

One of the ways this adaptation was expressed was through the changing meaning of the figure of the musapir or traveler in Uyghur society. In a short story called "The Musapir's Tavern," the popular Uyghur fiction writer Memtimin Hoshur (2015) describes the role of the musapir in Uyghur society in the early 1990s. In his portrait, the figure of the musapir represented a kind of drunken poet who frequented taverns and opined about Uyghur society and Islamic philosophy. He was a Uyghur man of a certain amount of privilege who spent much of his time talking about Sufi flights of the mind while drinking vodka and sorghum liquor. He was presented as a man who was bored with life and irresponsible in regard to the needs of his family. Of course, Hoshur was alluding to the rise in alcohol dependence in the 1980s and 1990s but underemphasizing the way this rise in dependency correlated with the rise in underemployment and new forms of consumption that accompanied the period of capitalist development after Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms in the 1980s and the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s.

As I showed in chapter 3, in the 2000s, as the economic dispossession of the rural Uyghur population intensified, the population of rural-to-urban migration increased significantly. At the same time, a major religious movement began to gain currency, particularly among young men. By 2012 Uyghur men had in large part stopped drinking and smoking. With the arrival of WeChat, they began joining online religious discussion groups, which they associated with urban life and citizenship in the global Muslim community. The musapir lifestyle had come to be associated with pious Islamic living. Migrants often said they left the countryside to escape religious restrictions and detention. The younger generation of musapir often claimed this lifestyle as a material manifestation of inner spiritual striving for Islamic righteousness. This virtue seeking was expressed through a daily practice of devotion, moral comportment, truth seeking, and dependence on God and each other. It did not mean that they were uninterested in worldly things, but they strove to see suffering as part of a larger spiritual journey. This path also provided them with a mobile network of economic support and a means of claiming prominent social roles even as they combated homelessness. For the older generation, those who had

been musapir since the 1990s, this same transformation provided them with social, religious, and psychic resources as they clung to their homes in the city. When they identified themselves as musapir and integrated their lives in a material and virtual musapir mosque community, they were laying claim to an economic and religious position as contemporary devout Muslims who were attempting to escape the oppression of colonization in the countryside by entering a religious community in the city.[4]

In fact, it was the enclosure of musapir lives that gave the community form and content. Those who lived in the community experienced the space as both a source of stress and a "comfort" (Uy: *teselli*)—a community to which they could turn when confronted with the vulnerability of joblessness or the stigma of homelessness. It was a space that afforded them a sense of autonomy in their everyday lives. Here, I am thinking of autonomy not merely in the sense of the self-reliant liberal subject but rather in relation to what Kathleen Millar has referred to as "relational autonomy" (2014). This is something akin to what Lauren Berlant describes as "lateral agency" (2011) in which a subject attempts to maintain the will to live by seeking comfort in food or entertainment. For Millar, though, relational autonomy is a kind of involuntary minor politics, finding a communal grounds for hanging on to vital forms of sociality. For Uyghur migrants, the mosque community allowed them to build and sustain relationships, develop social roles, pursue life projects in the midst of uncertainty, and evaluate their subtraction in relation to the longer spiritual horizon. It gave them strength to endure.

The poverty and rubble that marked the Uyghur musapir community in Heijia Shan was often a source of stigma in relation to more affluent Uyghurs. It produced a dissonance: comfort mingled with the stigma of poverty and the threat of subtraction by the techno-political policing systems. To tease apart the threads of this religious economy, I turn now to the story of Emir and his wife, Bahar, and how they utilized the musapir community in their struggle to keep their home in Heijia Shan. For them, identifying with the musapir migrant community provided them with a way of clinging to the life they had known, at least for a time.

The Last Sheep Farmer in the City

The house was built into the hillside (see figure 6.2). When Emir and his wife, Bahar, had first built it in the early 1980s, they had designed it with sheep in mind. The main door was flanked on the right by a pen made out of old wooden doors. There was a long hallway built into the hillside that was made of

brick and adobe plaster. A small door to the right led to the living quarters of the eldest son's family. At the end of the hallway were coal, wood, and leaf roughage storage rooms surrounding a small courtyard. In the center of this open-air room was a large raised platform where family life took place during the summer. In the far southeastern corner, built furthest into the hillside, was an earthen room that became the center of cooking and family life during the winter. Beside the kitchen door, there was a large earthen pot for water storage; on the wall behind it was a poster of snacks eaten during the celebration at the end of Ramadan. Next to this was a door to the adjoining sleeping area. The stovepipe from the cooking stove (Uy: *mashq*) moved horizontally through the adjoining room—providing heat as the smoke was directed out of the house.

The kitchen was windowless, but Bahar had hung curtains on the wall opposing the eating platform (Uy: *supa*); on the opposite wall behind the platform was a large poster of what she identified as "a mosque in Saudi Arabia," Masjid al-Nabawi in Medina. They had bought it before the beginning of the People's War on Terror, when such images were still permitted to be bought or sold. There was no running water in the neighborhood. All the cooking was done over a coal fire. Bahar, who was sixty-eight, struggled to lift the heavy round

FIGURE 6.2. Emir and Bahar's home in 2015. Photo by Nicola Zolin, used with permission.

"pot" (Uy: *kazan*) she used to make their daily meal of soup or pilaf. She said that usually Emir helped her with the pot and the iron rings she used to adjust the height of the pot over the coals, but he was not that strong either. He had what sounded like emphysema.

On most days, if he was not praying and visiting with other older men at the mosque, Emir could be found puttering around in the rubble that surrounded their house. He would let his sheep out to "graze" (Uy: *tokhtimay yeyish*) and then chase them down and put them in an outdoor corral. At lunchtime, Emir and Behar shared their soup with me in a large tin bowl. Although there was snow on the ground outside, the kitchen was cozy. I could feel why they did not want to leave. Sitting there with them, it was easy to forget that we were in the center of the city surrounded by twenty-story apartment buildings. All around us was the rubble of the Uyghur neighborhood of Heijia Shan. Their house was a "nail house" (Ch: *dingzihu*) that had not yet been demolished in the push to bring security and modern urban planning to the city of Ürümchi. As in similar situations in numerous cities across the nation, by sheer dint of will they had resisted the government's efforts to bring renewal to the city. They were some of the last of the twenty thousand inhabitants of the neighborhood to be relocated to government-subsidized apartment buildings or to be expelled from the city. They were fighting to keep their home by refusing to leave.

Emir had come to the city in 1974 as a Uyghur member of the Red Guard in Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution. He and Bahar married in 1982 and had three children. They supported themselves by raising their small flock of eleven sheep. Emir said that when the time was right he would sell them to butchers in the neighborhood. He said, "We have no pension, just the sheep." It was because of this that they refused to take the government's compensation for their house. "They offered us an 180,000 yuan discount on new housing in exchange for our house because it is so large—over 200 square meters, but that means that we would still need to pay for the rest of the house [around 300,000 yuan], and of course we couldn't keep sheep anymore," he shook his head. They did not want to move into the nearby government housing because they would not be able to live off the land as they had their whole lives. "All of the government officials have told us to leave, but we won't do it," he stated, a look of resolve on his face. He also worried that if they agreed to move, they would be moved far away from the Heijia Shan mosque community where he had been an active member for around twenty years. Because he had good relationships with the other Uyghur migrants in the community, he had a steady supply of leftover food from the restaurants in the neighborhood. The food waste that

his son collected from the string of Uyghur restaurants that lined the street leading up to the mosque was what sustained his sheep. Without these suppliers and the space he needed to keep his sheep, he didn't know what he would do. "I have always been a musapir, but now we are truly becoming 'without a home or hearth' [Uy: *öy-uchaqsiz*]," he said.

In Uyghur the term *musapir* has a deep cultural meaning. As I noted earlier, in the original Arabic the term refers simply to travelers. In the Uyghur context, though, it takes on the meaning of a stranger, an alien, a wanderer, or a refugee. In a material sense, people often take it to mean precisely what Emir said they are becoming: "those without home or hearth." Yet there is a psychic and religious dimension to the concept as well. One of the most common ways in which the term is used is in a proverb that people say when they are going through difficult times: "Until you have been a wanderer, you can't be a true Muslim" (Uy: *musapir bolmighiche, Musulman blomas*). This phrase draws on the Sufi *derevish* traditions of wandering mystics that have long featured in the Uyghur practice of Islam. Since the very beginning of the Uyghur exposure to Islam in the ninth century, "the bringers of Islam" (who today are regarded as "saints" or *wali*) were those who traveled along Sufi networks from Iran, Iraq, and other parts of Central Asia. Over the centuries, this exposure continued with the ongoing presence of Sufi mystics who traveled from town to town in the service of Sufi masters (Uy: *sheikhs*) and particular paths (Uy: *tariqeh*) of Sufi religious practice. These wanderers lived off the charity of the Muslims they met along the way; often they were seen as homeless ascetics, "enthralled in passion" (Uy: *meptun bolup ketken*), and "careless with their own lives" (Uy: *öle tirilishige baqmay*).

The Uyghur oral tradition of song and poetry was in large part developed by these musapir. Over the past seven centuries, the musapir's life became one of the dominant themes in Uyghur folk music. It was a theme that reflected not only the Sufi mystic's search for the beloved or divine presence, in a metaphoric or spiritual sense but also the way poverty and family obligations forced young men who had learned a trade in their hometowns to travel across the desert to other oasis towns in search of a stable life. Nearly every Uyghur migrant in Ürümchi would say "I'm like a musapir," reaching for a poetic image of a lonely traveler far from home. But only the people who were most vulnerable, like Emir and his wife, would refer to themselves as musapir who were "without home or hearth" (Uy: *öy-uchaqsiz*). This is significant because it tells us that the experience of life as a Uyghur migrant was becoming more precarious and, along with this change, the Uyghur conceptualization of what it means to be a musapir was becoming more immediate and deeply felt.

For Emir, his position as a member of a musapir community produced a feeling of dissonance. Although he acknowledged the poverty of the community and how the structural violence of the city was threatening to erase it, he was also clear about the agency he had shown in choosing his life path and his standing as a Muslim elder in the community. During one of the many times when I stopped by to see him and Bahar, Emir told me about how his life project had brought him to this place. He began by talking about the rise of Mao Zedong and the Gang of Four as if it were something that had just happened recently. For him, national history was personal history. He said he came to Ürümchi in 1974; he was young, and becoming a Red Guard in the Cultural Revolution seemed like a good way to escape the poverty he had been born into. "At that time I was very (politically) active. I really believed in where I thought the country was headed and I wanted to be part of it." Of course, when he got to Ürümchi he realized that things were quite difficult for people without official positions and regular food rations. For the first few years, he lived on bread and boiled water. Then in 1979, after Mao's death, Deng Xiaoping introduced economic reforms that changed his life. "In the 1980s I started doing some business, selling this and that, mostly fruit from Southern Xinjiang, and by 1984 I finally had enough to afford a wife. That was when she came along."[5] At this point in the story, Bahar interjected, saying Emir should not be talking so openly about their private life, but it always seemed as though she was really pleased that he was elaborating on it so much. Finally, we came to the present circumstances of his life in the community. As he put it:

> After the incidents in 2009, the government decided immediately that areas like [Heijia Shan] needed to be torn down. They came to us with some kind of notice. It was all written in Chinese. There was no Uyghur at all. We couldn't really understand it. So after they posted it, we asked a neighbor woman who had graduated from college to translate it for us. It had four or five points. The first one was that we had no legal right to live in that place. We didn't have "the letter" [lease agreement] we needed and we would have to move. The rest of the points talked about where we should move and how the government would help us with it. Of course, they were just trying to scare us into moving. How can we not have a legal right to this place? I built it myself. In any case, we would consider moving if they would give us the money they promised. Instead, they said that what they promised would come in the form of a discount in the new housing. Since this place is so large, they said they would give us dis-

counts on two apartments that are eighty-five square meters each. So we decided to just wait for them to give us new houses or force us to move. My son is already married and living here with us, so if we move then he could have a new house. Actually, we are just living on what I can make from raising my sheep and the 1,000 yuan he can give us from time to time. This is our life. These days the government workers are not coming every day. They say that in the end they know we will move, so they don't need to waste their time with us. For now things are fine for us.

Although Emir said they were doing fine while waiting for the inevitable demolition of their home, when I began to pull apart and consider some of the implications of the strands of his story, he became much more fearful. He did not have a lease agreement for his property, nor did he have a green card that would give him permission to live in the city. He was deeply worried that the system would force them to leave the city without any compensation if they became too visible in their opposition to the seizure of their home.

One day I mentioned his story to Mahmud, the Uyghur screenwriter who is one of the central figures in chapter 3. By this time Mahmud had a large following in a Uyghur-language WeChat "Short Film Salon." Mahmud was intrigued to hear that there was someone living in the city raising sheep as a livelihood. He asked if I would introduce him to Emir and Bahar so they could discuss the possibility of making a film about Emir's life. After we arrived, prayed for the household, and Bahar served us tea, Mahmud broached the subject of making a film. He explained that he just wanted to focus on Emir's life experiences. Mahmud thought it would be interesting to his hundreds of thousands of viewers because many people did not know that there was a community of "migrants" (Uy: *kuchman*) living in such poor conditions in the city. While Mahmud was careful not to describe Emir as a musapir, given the stigma of homelessness that was often associated with the word, from the connotation of what he said he made it clear that this was how he was thinking about the documentary. While *kuchman* is simply a generic term that refers to someone who has moved to find work, in its current usage the term *musapir*, when ascribed to someone else, has come to identify someone who is perceived as destitute and in need of pity. Mahmud intended to highlight the way Emir's son, a security guard, struggles to care for the family, and how Emir had hoped to get a new home for his son when he married but could not because he was so poor. Mahmud's imagined documentary would turn on the fact that Emir was not able to provide a home for his son because the government would not provide them with adequate compensation for their home.

Emir was silent for a few moments. Then he blurted out, "As far as making a film, we couldn't mention anything about the government or politics. But I'm happy to talk about my life." Sensing that he was losing ground, Mahmud began to backtrack a bit, saying he was just starting to think about the story for the film so he was sure they could tell the story in a way that would make everyone happy. We talked a bit more and then Emir circled back to the topic of the film.

This time as he spoke he was quite animated. His upper lip trembled a bit and he jumped up off the platform a few times as he gesticulated with his hands. His voice quavered as he thought through the implications of a digital representation of his life:

> I'm still thinking about the film thing. I decided that it isn't a good idea. Since the story is about how I am a 'poor' farmer, *once it gets onto the internet it will go everywhere* and people will think I am complaining about my situation. It will make the government really unhappy and then they will come to me asking why I was willing to do what I did. They will investigate me and find out that my residence permit is still in Kashgar, even though my children's permit is here; they will find out that I don't have a green card. And then they will make me leave. Also, none of the houses here in this community have a lease [Uy: *het*]. I don't have one either, so they will just take my home away. If the film is about me being a poor farmer, then I'm not willing to do it. If we made a film about how much life had improved over the past forty years, that would be better. It really has improved. When I came to Ürümchi, we were still using ration tickets and sneaking around to buy meat and things. We never had as much as five yuan even in the 1980s. Now we always have enough to eat. Now even the sheep are used to eating human food; they eat better than we did back during the hard times.

Although Emir was not fully computer literate, he understood the danger of online surveillance. If his story was to "go everywhere," it would certainly be noticed by the authorities and would produce a negative outcome. Unlike Mahmud—and Hasan, whose story I will tell next—Emir had a sharper awareness of his vulnerability as a musapir and his need to stay out of the gaze of techno-political surveillance. "The police think that the people who live here are *too dangerous*, so if we make a film about this place they will definitely notice. It is not possible," he stated matter-of-factly. What Emir was referring to here was the way Heijia Shan was considered to be one of the epicenters of Uyghur religious extremism and terrorism after the civil unrest of 2009. Many

Han inhabitants of the city regarded it as a space where, if you were to enter at night, you would never come out alive. This reading of the space as the locus of religious extremism and "low quality" (Ch: *suzhi hen di*) Uyghur migrants was something that migrants like Emir had internalized. He knew that those who lived there were perceived as potential threats, subject to digital and human surveillance by community intelligence workers and software programs, and any public statement against government land seizures could be read as a call to terrorism.

Emir thought of himself as having a limited relational autonomy or comfort within the musapir religious community. It was only when he was observed from the outside that he felt stigmatized and when he was scrutinized by the state police and their contractors that he felt threatened. Emir's refusal to allow a documentary to be made about his life speaks to both the vulnerability of his position and the limited forms of agency he possessed within the musapir community. It also draws attention to the limits of representation. As much as Emir wanted his story to be told, he needed to tell it on his own terms. Thinking about the failure of documentary film to perform the kind of work he needed draws attention to larger frames of representational failure. What are the limits of musapir sociality? What are the limits of what it can hold and represent? In a more methodological dimension, what are the limits of ethnography as a documentation of Emir's life path?

Islam and Musapir Sociality

Emir said that for most of his life he did not pray five times a day. It was really only after his way of life was threatened after 2009 that he really decided to take religious practice so seriously. Many people in the community became more devout after the violence as a way of coping with their increased vulnerability. So many young Uyghur men were killed or disappeared, children were left without fathers, and then the contractors began to demolish their houses. He recalled that, before 2009, it had been normal to be poor and in search of work, but now things were much worse. Out of the population of male migrants who had been there before the violence, only the old men were left. He felt that more young migrants had come from the South since 2009 and that they had also influenced the community through the knowledge they had gained in online discussion groups and from teaching recordings. Now almost everyone in the community was quite serious about praying five times a day, fasting during Ramadan, and maintaining personal purity. This did not mean that there were no longer any problems with theft, drug abuse, or domestic

violence in the community, but he felt that there had been a shift toward cultivating virtue. The people in the community depended on each other in deeper ways for economic support and spiritual protection. Since 2009 the mosque community had become the center of his life; he spent a good part of each day talking about Islam and gossiping with other older men at the mosque.

Nine months after I met Emir for the first time, he told me that they were being forced to move in fifteen days. There was a kind of hopelessness in his voice as he told me:

> Our time has become short. Next month we are moving into a big building on the outskirts of the city in the Saimachang, over by the lake. They wouldn't give us a space here in these buildings, but over there they gave us two houses, one for me and my wife and one for my son and his family. We will be on the first floor and they will be on the second. There are thirty floors in that building! I can't take the sheep with us, so I will have to sell them. I've been raising sheep here for almost forty years. There is nothing in those new houses. They are just bare. Of course they will have water inside, so it will be more convenient, but we will have to pay for everything: water, heat, electricity. It is a *money-eating house*. The worst thing about this situation is that there is *no mosque in that area*. I will have to go on the bus to the mosque in front of Xinjiang University during the week and only come here on Friday. We have no choice. This is the government we have. They just take what they want and tell us what to do. They won't give us money for our house and let us decide for ourselves. If they would have done that, it would have been good. The problem is that this new house really isn't ours. They are just letting us live in it indefinitely. If they want to kick us out, they can. We can't sell it. We have no choice. *This government just takes from us Uyghurs and gives to the Han*. They are making our lives harder and harder. We don't have any choice. I have pain from all sides, but God will provide. (my emphasis)

For Emir, the most difficult thing about moving into a "money-eating" house in an apartment building on the grid was not just the financial uncertainty of needing to pay for utilities or even the fact that he would not be able to continue to practice his livelihood. He had even accepted the fact that the house he had built by hand was going to be reduced to rubble. By saying that the government "takes from Uyghurs and gives to Han," he was alluding to the way his house would be replaced with commodity housing that only Han settlers could afford and that only they would be permitted to buy according to

zoning regulations that prohibited Uyghurs from renting or buying property in Uyghur-majority areas of the city.

The most difficult thing about the move would be the disconnection from his mosque community. Before, he had neighbors from his mosque to depend on for material, psychic, and religious support; he had a daily ritual practice that gave his life a sense of rhythm and purpose. Both he and his wife were highly skilled in caring for their family's basic needs for warmth and food around the family hearth just as the musapir community had allowed them to feel as though they had a social role and a sense of dignity as experienced travelers in a community of travelers. As in the proverb regarding the way musapir life was a prerequisite of "true Muslim experience," the depth of their experience provided them with a claim to religious, psychic, and material maturity. It had given them a sense of "comfort" (*teselli*) in the midst of vulnerability. On May 1, 2015, their house and hearth were demolished.

The Story of Hasan

I turn now to the story of another Uyghur migrant in the same community, a young man named Hasan, and the symbolic value that his role as a young religious musapir in the community held for him. As a recent arrival in the community, he used his standing as a devoted teacher and practitioner of what he referred to as *tabligh* or Islamic piety teachings to enter into a stable life project. Like Emir and Bahar, he perceived his identification as a musapir as a means by which he could transform and maintain his sense of self. Although the length of time they had spent in the community varied considerably, for both Emir and Hasan, the sense of dislocation they developed as they entered into the relational autonomy of the reformist Muslim community made returning to their hometowns or moving into government housing seem impossible. Of course, this fear of leaving was further exacerbated by broader structures of colonial and capitalist violence.

The first time I met Hasan he told me he was a musapir. He was walking down the street with a stack of fruit crates strapped to a small cart. He was peddling a special kind of naan made from chickpea flour that was said to improve your digestion. He told me he was originally from a small village outside the town of Yaken—one of the poorest parts of Southern Xinjiang, near the border with Pakistan nearly fifteen hundred kilometers from Ürümchi.[6] He had dropped out of middle school and begun traveling after his father died, and his mother remarried in 2008. His stepfather had beaten him and demanded that he earn money for the family, so he had just left with his "life and liver

friend" (Uy: *jan-jiger dost*). For a number of years, he and his friends had dug for jade in the riverbeds of Khotan and then came to the city to sell their stones. They had sold their supply, which was why he was selling naan. With the new restrictions on travel that had been imposed during the People's War on Terror in 2014, it was difficult to travel back and forth between Southern Xinjiang and the city. He noted that, as a Muslim, it was now impossible to live in his hometown. There were just too many police.

Hasan walked in a very patterned way through the city. When I suggested more direct routes, he declined, saying that he knew the way. He followed a path that was less direct but was connected by mosques and Uyghur bazaar life. We walked in close proximity to cell-phone salesmen and makeshift theaters; we walked down nameless alleyways, not main streets. Hasan did not speak or read Chinese, but he had other forms of knowledge. Hasan knew the musapir sections of the city like the back of his hand. He knew exactly where every prayer room and mosque was located. He had been a traveler in the city for over seven years, so he had an extensive network of fellow travelers he could call on at a moment's notice via his many contacts on WeChat. He walked purposefully with a long loping step, like a farmer who had used a pickaxe and wide-bladed hoe for long periods of time. He walked quickly but was never in too much of a rush to avoid stopping to pray every two hours; he ate his daily meal in the same way, quickly and forcefully, pausing briefly to whisper a prayer between bites. He knew what he wanted when he talked to other hustlers. After prayer on Fridays, he often ran into old acquaintances who told him about supplies of coats or shoes that they had access to—they would make plans to get in touch with each other and pool their resources to buy a big supply and sell them together out of the back of a three-wheeled truck. He relished opportunities to help other musapir; but he was also quick to ask about the status of mosque security as we did our circuit from mosque to mosque. He needed to know what was happening: where the police contractors were checking phones and where prayer rooms were being closed.

"I used to have a lot of friends here [in the musapir settlements], but since the new 'green card' policy and the destruction of the neighborhoods, many of them have left or gone to other places," he commented. "So many of my friends don't exist [Uy: *yoq*] anymore. I don't know where they are. No one knows. They have [been] disappeared." He recalled how over the seven years he had traveled to the city, much had changed; not only had many of his friends been subtracted, a marked absence in their families and friendship networks, but now there were many young people like him without fathers. As another young musapir in the community told me:

> After July 5, 2009, so many men were arrested. Many of them died in prison, or found a way to take their own lives. They just broke them. So now there are many kids like me running around whose families are just messed up. Some of them have had their minds broken. They are squeezing us very hard now. Every year it gets tougher and tougher to survive. Now in migrant neighborhoods like Sandongbei, Sanxi Hangzi, Saimachang, and Heijiashan, the police check us really closely. It is almost as bad as in the South, especially in Sanxi Hangzi. They check our IDs and phones everyday there. We are just trying to work and they are constantly harassing us. Fuck them. And fuck those Uyghur guys who betray Muslims by helping them. They are "infidels" [Uy: *kafir*]. You have to be really careful what you do in those areas, they have cameras and watch everything you do. They will show up with assault rifles in ten minutes if they think you are doing something suspicious. Many people have had to leave because they couldn't get the green card, and the police tracked down where they live. If they know where you live, then they can make your life a kind of hell. I have a lot of friends who have had to leave. Most of us guys who are hustling in the streets don't have Ürümchi residency permits or have that card, but since they haven't found out where we live yet, we can still find a way to live here.

Clearly, Hasan and other young men in the community felt that the digital enclosure system was their enemy. Many of them believed that, without the community of migrants around them, they would have no choice but to return to their villages, a prospect that terrified them since it would likely lead to their detention in the growing camp system.

One day as Hasan and I walked through the Uyghur bazaar leading to the new gate in front of the Heijia Shan mosque, he turned and said, "It really 'puts your heart at ease' [Uy: *köngülge yaqidighan*] here, right?" When I pressed him on what he meant by this, he told me, "Here, around the mosque we feel free to talk and joke with each other, buy and trade things, eat good food; we're not looking over our shoulder wondering if the police are watching like we always must in Yaken and in other parts of the city; here, we are free." For Hasan, there was a comfort in being surrounded by fellow travelers in the middle of a demolition zone. Although he was on the verge of homelessness, he felt he still had a place there.

In fact, over the next few weeks as I followed him on the social media app WeChat and continued to meet with him, I came to realize that Hasan was deeply involved in the online community of pious young Uyghur musapir.

He often posted images of himself on the streets of Ürümchi or praying in prayer rooms in restaurants around the city. He posted inspirational quotes and statements about Islamic orthopraxy and the sovereignty of Allah. One of his favorite words of wisdom was one that clearly expressed his relationship to the religious economy of the community: "Allah never shuts one door without opening another door." When I asked him why he was so active on social media and how he chose to publish what he did, he noted that he felt like his role in society was to be a teacher to other young Muslims. Many others had not had an opportunity to study Islam as much as he had, so he wanted to encourage them as much as he could. By showing his followers that even a musapir can be a religious teacher, he was able to inspire others to become more devout. Of course, it was dangerous to publish too much on public forums, so he wrote things in ways that he thought the police contractors would find acceptable if they scanned his account. He tried to frame his piousness in elliptical ways that only other believers would fully understand. For example, he and his friends often paraphrased passages from the Quran that could be applied to the present Uyghur religious practice (see figure 6.3). Often the images and videos that accompanied this pious messaging demonstrated the religious devotion of the person's online persona or featured more explicit religious messages since they assumed it would be more difficult for surveillance systems to detect Uyghur text in images or sound in videos. Occasionally, Hasan and his friends would also post progovernment messages and images about "interethnic solidarity" (Ch: *minzu tuanjie*) "in case the police were watching." Hasan said that he needed the WeChat account in order to find jobs and connect with other musapir. None of them imagined that what they were posting in 2014 would be used as evidence of their extremism when the mass detentions began 2016. Despite their precautions, what the young musapir were posting was not at all safe.

Like Aziz, who I described in chapter 3, Hasan said that before the People's War on Terror it was possible to speak more openly about Islam on public forums. After 3G networks were first established in 2010, he and many of his friends began to organize study groups online. Using their smartphones, they shared MP3 audio files of Uzbek- and Uyghur-language teachings of Islam that were not authorized by the parameters of the techno-political and legal systems. They called these teachings *tabligh*. When I asked him what this word meant, he told me it was simply a Uyghur word for "Islamic teaching."

In fact, what Hasan was most likely referring to—though he was not able to trace this genealogy himself—were teachings inspired by global Islamic piety movements such as the Tablighi Jama'at.[7] Founded in 1927 by Muhammad Ilyas al-Kandhlawi in India, the Tablighi Jama'at's stated aim was to call Muslims to

FIGURE 6.3. One of the many images and Islamic exhortations that Hasan's friends published on WeChat. The text reads as follows: "Prophet Sulayman approached his son and asked him: 'I have received a message from Allah, I want you to circle the earth and see if there are more people who are alive or more people who are dead [in spirit].' After a period of time, the son returned and said: 'Father, I went to many places, and everywhere I went I saw more people who were dead than those who were alive.' Sulayman said 'With the knowledge Allah has given to me I know that there used to be more people who were alive.'"

a constant state of nonpolitical spiritual struggle (*jihad*) through proselytization (*dawah*). In order to achieve this mission, the leadership of the movement of over ten million adherents developed a cellular organizational structure that focused on oral communication in small grassroots groups (Balci 2015). It encouraged those interested in the movement to attend daily meetings in prayer rooms where leaders in the group presented models of orthopraxy. Like other forms of reformist Islam, the Tablighi sought to lead a separate life from the impious around them by adapting an Islamic lifestyle modeled on the life of Muhammad. Hasan, and many other young Uyghurs, told me that, over the past several years as smartphone technology became common, thousands of rural Uyghurs became part of similar modular underground groups. While it was not clear that the transformation of Uyghur religious practice was directly related to specific global piety movements, the similarities in organization and oral teaching makes it clear that they were at least indirectly affected by such movements. The rise of a Uyghur version of movements similar to the Tablighi Jama'at translated into a revival of Uyghur traditions that focused on crossing the threshold of a doorway by leading with the right foot, sleeping on one's right side, and, of course, the intense conflict between state authorities, surveillance companies, and Uyghur Muslims over the proper veiling of women in public and beards among men.

In most cases, the teachings appeared to circulate via oral recordings from independently trained or, as surveillance algorithms and counterterrorism frameworks put it, "wild imams" (Ch: *ye ahong*) such as Aziz's father, one of the figures in chapter 3.[8] Often they were derivative of teachings found elsewhere in the Islamic world but then took on a life of their own when they reached the Uyghur private–public sphere (see also Harris and Isa 2019; Harris 2020). In any case, a nonpolitical form of reformist Islam came to be the most dominant. The Uyghurs who took such teachings most seriously were often referred to as "the ones who wear the short pants" (Uy: *kalte ishtanliqlar*), since they began to wear pants that resembled those worn by Muslims in South Asia and the Middle East. One of the key points of the Tablighi and other piety movements was that Muslims must wear pants that ended above the ankle since it is said that the Prophet felt that clothes that dragged on the ground were a sign of pride. Hasan had not begun to dress in this manner, but he had begun to incorporate the teachings he listened to into his daily routines and express them in his public persona online. He was also aware that the police contractors and surveillance systems specifically targeted young men who wore such clothing since the parameters of the system recognized these representational forms as a primary marker of so-called embodied extremism.

The Expanding Object of Terror Capitalism

As the subtraction turned toward wider forms of mass detention through the operationalization of the digital enclosure, the level of threat began to heighten. Hasan said that, although there was the constant worry of surveillance and violence in the musapir community in the city, in late 2014 it was nevertheless better than the current conditions in his hometown. In a matter-of-fact way he told me:

> In Ürümchi everything seems free, you can do business, you can pray, you can communicate, you can live freely. In Yaken none of this is possible. When you walk in the bazaar there, the police always stop you and ask for your ID. Everyone is always monitoring what you do; it is hard to make any money because no one has any money or any opportunity to make any. They try to control you. This year during Ramadan [three months before] they locked me up so that I couldn't pray; they made me break the fast. Police are the enemy of Muslims; they will never help you—only make your life worse.

When he said this last sentence, he spoke very quietly and pulled his hands up to his face. I asked if he felt scared to go back to Yaken.

> Actually I have to go back next week because I am being forced to go. The Yaken police have been calling me every day telling me that I must come back; they are making my parents call me and tell me the same thing. When I ask why, they won't give me a reason. They just say that if I come back, everything will be fine. They say that if I stay here, they will alert the Ürümchi police and have me arrested. I don't have any choice. If I go to another city, they will be able to track me because of my green card registration. I actually have all of the documents to live here legally, but now they are making me go back. So I am very afraid. Lots of my friends have gone back to Yaken because the police told them to come, and now they don't exist. I don't know where they are, no one knows, they have disappeared. My wife doesn't say anything about this situation, but she is also scared. She doesn't want to go back either. She knows that when we go back they will take away our green cards so that we can never travel again and that I might disappear.

Hasan buried his head in his hands. His eyes filled with tears, but he didn't cry. He whispered:

> I think this issue is connected to what happened [back in Yaken] at the end of Ramadan this year; [9] someone must have accused me of something

> or reported something I have done online. There is no freedom in this world. For Uyghurs life is very difficult and we have no freedom. I don't even know what I am accused of but I must accept their judgment. I have no choice. Where there is no freedom, there is tension [Uy: *jiddiy weziyet*]; where there is tension, there are incidents; where there are incidents, there are police; where there are police, there is no freedom.

Hasan dreamed of traveling abroad, of seeing the world, climbing mountains, sailing on ships, but he knew that none of these things would happen. He said that his phone was easily his most important piece of equipment for negotiating city life. It offered him the freedom to know, to move and live as he felt he should as a Muslim. It was what allowed him to teach others, which he felt was something that gave his life meaning. It was what he would miss the most when he disappeared in Yaken.

It was strange to watch a condemned man contemplate his future arrest and the silencing of his digital voice. It is here, at the boundary of relational autonomy, that the powerlessness of any form of representation, minor politics, or friendship to stop the domination of the colonial relation meets its limit. Just as Emir's refusal to be documented on film was motivated by the enclosure of the techno-political surveillance system, here Hasan's impending disappearance enabled him to tell me his stories freely. He was beyond hope; he realized that his limited autonomy was subtracting. While he was in the city, his freedom as a traveler in the city had been mediated by rituals of Islam, by his constant fear of being disappeared, and by his responsibilities to his wife and one-year-old daughter. He needed money to survive day to day and he found that he had relational autonomy within the musapir community to both maintain his way of life and attain a feeling of social belonging. Now, he felt the fragility of his position.

Over the next few days, as we walked the backstreets, we continued to talk about his imminent return to Yaken. Now, more than ever, he glanced over his shoulder with the look of the hunted. We talked again about the effects of the constant harassment of the police on young Uyghur lives. He said:

> When you are in the police station, you learn to never say anything yourself. If you do say something, if you respond to what they are accusing you of, they will beat you senseless. So you learn really quickly not to say anything. In America they don't have police like this, right? Here they have so many, but they have so many more in Yaken.

Like Ablikim—the main figure in chapter 4—Hasan said he was comfortable talking to me because I was an outsider. He felt that it was not likely that I

would be arrested and forced to inform on him. With his other friends, he could never be sure.

Eventually, the day came and Hasan and his small family boarded a sleeper bus headed to Yaken. They took all their belongings with them: two small bags. In his farewell message he wrote, "God willing, I will survive."

Within two days, I received another cryptic message from him. He was in the hospital in a small oasis town halfway between his hometown and the city. There had been an accident. His wife had been killed, he had broken some ribs and fractured his scapula. His baby girl had lost a finger. "It was God's will. Praise Allah," he wrote in a text message. Two weeks later, I went to see him in the small town. He told me it would be safe because no one knew him there. He met me in a restaurant next to the hospital in obvious pain. The driver of their sleeper bus had fallen asleep and run into a dump truck loaded with coal along the side of the freeway.[10] His wife died within five minutes—her throat crushed by a piece of flying coal. His voice steady, he recalled:

> At first I didn't see that her throat was crushed; other people told me later. I just saw her bleeding from her mouth. We sat there in the cold for forty minutes before the ambulances arrived. I watched my wife die. There was nothing I could do. If I had been in her bed, I would have been killed by the coal too, but since my child was sleeping with me—all of us were sleeping at the time—we weren't hurt as badly. Many people lost limbs; four people died on the spot; three died later in this hospital.

Hasan was still very young. He was only in his early twenties. But now when he walked he winced. He felt for his back. He propped his arm up in his jacket pocket. He had new shoes since his old shoes were lost in the accident; he had lost his ID and green card as well. He noted that the hospital did not provide him with "comfort" (Uy: *teseli*). There were so many Han nurses who made him feel like he was a stranger undeserving of care by the way they talked as though he was not even in the room, denigrating his ability to speak Chinese. Yet, despite this, he felt as though eventually he would be well enough to travel and then, with the care of his mother, he would heal. He continued: "I'm going back to the Yaken prison—that's what we call it—there is no internet, not even text messaging, but still the life there is good. My family will care for me." Since he was injured, he was sure the police would not take him. We talked about his family's situation and his future. He was ready to begin his life again even though his wife was gone. When I left him at the bus station, he told me: "I'll see you again in Ürümchi, God willing!"

His friends back in the city told me that within three fast weeks, after he recovered from his injury, he was taken by the state police. The first sign of his disappearance was that his phone was blocked. When I called it, I received a message saying the number had been disconnected due to illegal activity. When I spoke to his friends back in the city, they said he had been taken behind "the black gate" (Uy: *qara derweze*). They did not know if he would just be held indefinitely in a reeducation camp or receive a prison sentence. No one knew what he had been charged with, or if there was a charge. His family and friends had no control over what would happen to him, and no way to fight it. They were too afraid to even ask, since showing concern could be seen as a sign of extremism. It was clear that Hasan had been disappeared; he had been subtracted from the musapir community.

Subtraction

Because the parameters of the surveillance system are programmed to recognize racialized markers and signs of Uyghur sociality, nearly all Uyghurs are now seen as guilty of extremist tendencies and are living under threat of detention and reeducation. As a result, hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs, particularly men under the age of fifty-five, have been placed in indefinite detention or *subtraction*: a form of enforced disappearance that coexists with ongoing social life. Since Uyghur families were often not told where their loved one was being held, what they had been charged with, how long they would be held, or whether or not they would ever see them again, Uyghurs often described those who had been taken as being in a state of "nonexistence" (Uy: *yoq*) or said that they had been "subtracted" (Uy: *kɨmeytti*). Importantly, though, this process of disappearance differs from other forms of genocidal violence where unwanted bodies are simply killed and buried in mass graves. In this context, state authorities and private proxies strive to make Uyghurs productive through subtraction by harvesting their data and through coerced labor.

As I argue throughout this book, the subtraction of Uyghurs was calculated as a strategic part of the terror-capitalist and colonial frontier in three distinct ways. First, there was a numerical calculus in place as to what percentage of the population needed to be reeducated. Throughout the region, state authorities used subsidies and penalties to implement numbered intelligence and detention quotas that targeted a proportion drawn from the entire adult Uyghur and other Muslim-minority populations in the region, with a particular focus on young Uyghur men (Leibold 2019). Second, subtraction held those who had not yet been physically subtracted in a state of suspension and unfree action, a form of

dispossession that resulted in labor and data expropriation. The absence of the missing organized the lives of the remainder, mobilizing them in police work and the fear-driven performative work of demonstrating one's patriotism and loyalty to the state. Third, the incalculable value of Uyghur life was converted by a numerical calculus that reduced their lives to data, to forms of racialized policing, and to the programming of reeducated labor in factories, and the affective labor of performing gratitude to their colonizers. Their lives were turned into code, slotted into the biased gaze of cameras and police contractors. Machine learning enclosed them, turning them into patterns of behavior, and made them a new frontier in state-directed capitalist accumulation. The dynamic of terror capitalism first devalued their knowledge and practices and dispossessed them of autonomy through the use of new technology and infrastructure, and then rapidly subtracted the social autonomy of their bodies by tracking that usage.

In this chapter, I have outlined the emergence of a fragile relational autonomy that Uyghur migrants were turning to as self-identified musapir or travelers. By identifying as pious Muslims without a home, they turned to a type of everyday Islam that was fostered by digital social networks. These networks responded to the colonial domination of their lives, but, paradoxically, it also made them targets of digital enclosure. Ultimately, traveler autonomy became the very reason for their internment. Being part of the material and virtual Uyghur musapir community provided the grounds for a temporary politics of holding on to life even as it was being taken away. The two examples I discussed in this chapter, that of the older couple Emir and Bahar and the younger man Hasan, who was subtracted, are examples from opposite ends of the spectrum of the religious economy of the musapir community. The older couple had built a home in the city over the past thirty years and was not deeply invested in online discussion groups. Yet, like Hasan—who had only been there for five years and had a pious online persona—in the climate of terror capitalism, the community was only able to sustain their way of life for a short time. Despite the ultimate failure of the community to cradle their lives, Uyghur migrants who lived in the rubble of shantytowns in Ürümchi nevertheless had a certain form of autonomy.

It is important to note, though, that this autonomy did not emerge out of a chosen political project as it did for Chen Ye in chapter 5. This is part of the reason why the Uyghur word *musapir* does not connote the same meaning as Chen Ye's Chinese term *mangliu*. Both terms could be translated as "traveler" or "blind wanderer," but they emerged from very different forms of cultured thought and social positions within the Chinese nation. For one group, the

lifestyle of a wanderer could result in a form of short-term economic stability followed by social subtraction, as in Hasan's case; while, for the other group, a quite similar lifestyle could result in long-term economic stability, as I noted in chapter 2, and in some cases what I have described as an intentional "minor politics." For Uyghur migrants, becoming a musapir was something that arose from their lack of access to permanent housing, employment, and freedom of religion; in general, this was not the case for Han migrants. This differential distribution stemmed from the settler-colonial forms of enclosure and evaluation that regulated their lives in both the city and the countryside.

At the same time, the autonomy of the musapir community was similar to what minor politics did for Chen Ye and his fellow Han "blind wanderers" in that, in both cases, there was a distancing or delaying of the direct power of the techno-political surveillance system to determine how people should live together. This similarity demonstrates that, despite the disjunctures in autonomy, in both the Uyghur and Han migrant communities there were acts of turning away from the authority of the Chinese state and the surveillance capacities of the private Chinese technology firms toward other forms of existential stability, other ways of making do with the given. Hasan's and Emir's increasing interest in pious forms of Islam gave them ways of modifying their status in the community and extending their stays in the city. In both cases, though to different degrees, they were demonstrating examples of what Millar (2014) describes as "an art of living through the precarious present, as that which makes possible a continued, shared existence in delicate times" (2014, 48).

Conclusion

I began this chapter with a discussion of everyday Islam and the way it relates to religious economies. Islam is clearly an integral part of the lives of young Uyghur migrants. For most self-described musapir, it was a central element of their self-identification. Often they told me stories of coming to faith through informal online study groups. In an inversion of what David Montgomery (2016) noted in his recent ethnography of Islam in Kyrgyzstan, often they became interested in religion because the moral framework of the faith offered them a sense of existential stability. It also became something their friends and family expected them to practice, but this utilitarian impulse did not appear to be the primary driver. Unlike in Montgomery's case, where Kyrgyz Muslims have a greater degree of autonomy, for many Uyghurs faith practice was grounded in a refusal to be subtracted by the techno-political system. By turning to a global community of pious Muslims, they were turning what many

refer to as the "hopelessness" (Uy: *ümidsizliq*) of the current situation into a feeling of belonging. As they began to practice, they said they came to understand the purpose of the faith and a consciousness of right and wrong. When I spoke to young men like Hasan, they frequently asked me about my own background as an agnostic former Christian and tested my moral limits by posing hypothetical questions about personal life choices. Often what convinced them I was someone who could be trusted was the position I expressed regarding the Israeli colonization of the Palestinian Territories and their own situation in Northwest China. For them, Islam provided them with a strong sense of their social role in the environment of the city as well as being a source of psychic stability. As one young man told me:

> Before I left and became a musapir, I didn't do anything. I just slept and ate and went to the mosque. I hung out with a gang of other boys who had also dropped out. We used to fight other gangs, steal things, and try to help each other find jobs. But then I started praying five times a day when I was twelve. It is our tradition. Everyone knows that when you are twelve you need to start to pray. Actually, before I went traveling, I used to just pray sometimes. This was because I didn't really understand. Now I understand. You need to pray five times a day or you will go to hell.

But, of course, the relative autonomy of being part of the religious economy failed to save young men like Hasan. They often felt quite exposed.

In the religious economy of the musapir community, there was a fragile sense of comfort and relief from the social enclosure. As in Millar's case among marginalized people in Rio (2014), there is a "politics of detachment" that is not simply the "anger, anomie, anxiety, and alienation" Guy Standing (2011, 19) has identified as the conditions of labor precariousness. Instead, Uyghur migrants actively organized a parallel economy of mutual assistance. The lives of the musapir, at once a source of stigma and comfort, allowed bonds to develop between subjects and for life projects to be extended if not sustained. They also allowed Uyghur traditional knowledge of Islam to adapt and change under new conditions of oppression, settler colonialism, and exposure to global religious movements. A Uyghur religious economy allowed forms of relational autonomy to flourish for a time but then became a way for a techno-political system to identify an entire site of social reproduction within Uyghur society. As much as it offered protection, it also left members of the community exposed, angry, and terrified.

Once when I was walking with one of Hasan's acquaintances near one of the mosques we frequented together, we met a unit of armed state police. For a

second the young man panicked. Then he whipped out the student ID card he had from attending a computer course at a nearby vocational school. Once we were out of earshot, he started talking loudly, his voice trembling a bit:

> Fuck, fuck, fuck, I hate them so much. But we have nothing to fight with, so we really can't fight them. Fuck, fuck, fuck. I know it's not appropriate to say these words, but those dogs make me so angry.

In the end, being a religious musapir often failed. Although Hasan had many followers on WeChat, the sense of authority he drew from them was only temporary, while the traces of his activity could never be fully erased. Once he was arrested, his account was immediately deactivated and, it is likely, used as evidence of his so-called extremism. In the end, Emir and Bahar also lost their house and were forced to leave the community and enter the state system as precarious tenants in government housing. When a documentary filmmaker attempted to represent their struggle, they felt compelled to refuse to put their story on display on WeChat forums. The threat implied by a representation of their noncompliance exceeded the limits of the autonomy afforded by the musapir community. At the same time, Hasan actively represented himself as a religious musapir to his many online followers. Like hundreds of thousands of other young Uyghurs, he failed to imagine that this activity was essentially a way of tagging themselves in the metadata of the terror-capitalist enclosure. Being assessed by the programming of these techno-political tools would result in their mass detention two years later.

The failure of representation that musapir sociality points us toward calls into question the work of film and ethnography, and my own investment in decolonial friendships and minor politics, in attempting to document the hundreds of thousands of people who have lost their homes in Ürümchi since. The stories of Emir and Hasan try, but fail, to cradle their lives and the lives of the hundreds of thousands who have been disappeared in the People's War on Terror. Of course, the Chinese state authorities and their proxies want to know everything about musapir lives in order to dominate them while liberal Western readers might hope to save them. On a deeper level, then, the failure of the documentary and this chapter to hold their lives in place, to make them matter, reflected the limits of the autonomy that musapir were able to achieve. They were only able to tell a certain kind of story and provide a limited, palliative form of protection. There are no happy endings to their stories.

This is what is at stake in telling their stories not for consumption but in order to lift up their voices. As such, this ethnography as a representation of Uyghur life under colonization will always fail. Like the community, a representation

of their lives is only a temporary amplification, a short echo, of their voices. Listening to their stories and trying to retell them are powerful reminders that ethnography always fails. Yet there is a palliative comfort in being close to these stories, even if just for a time. I hope this intimacy, sitting knee to knee, with these people who have shared so much of their lives with me, might restore some of their authorship over their own lives.

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