3 Dispossession

As I have shown in the preceding chapters, the turn to Islamic and market-oriented, individualized forms of work as a means of dealing with the authorized theft of land often had the effect of accelerating the elimination of certain aspects of Uyghur sociality. This chapter pulls back from the more tightly focused analysis of techno-political enclosure and devaluation in the first two chapters to examine changes in the lives of young Uyghur men across rural social life outside the city and over the past decade. By broadening the temporal and spatial scale of analysis, it shows how enclosure and devaluation are nested within broader material and colonial processes of dispossession.

This process of dispossession is associated with specific moments of expropriation in the emergence of industrial farming, the arrival of televisions and smartphones, and finally the People's War on Terror. As a result, educated

migrants who had the ability to work in the valued knowledge economy—unlike Yusup in the previous chapter—are drawn outside of more traditional skilled labor, through urban Uyghur-medium vocational schools and social media, into more cosmopolitan forms of work. By drawing on the narratives of two young Uyghur-migrant digital-content producers, Mahmud and Aziz, I consider the itineraries of desire that motivated their migration to the city and why they strove to reinvent themselves as desiring subjects through divergent urban Islamic identifications. Using newly popular forms of Uyghur-language advertising, social media, and film as a starting point for conversation with these young migrant culture workers, I show how they negotiated their experiences of dispossession. The chapter is punctuated by images of murals that signify the types of dispossession that Mahmud and Aziz experienced in their home villages.[1]

My thinking on the processes of techno-political enclosure and social devaluation was crystallized during an encounter with the police in a Uyghur village in Southern Xinjiang. The systems I had observed in Ürümchi were in fact constituted through older and broader processes of rural colonial dispossession. The village where I did this thinking was a long way from the city. It was sixty-eight kilometers of bumpy roads away from a county-level town in Southern Xinjiang. When I arrived there on a winter day in early 2015, there were a few people on the road waiting for us. The news of the arrival of a foreigner must have filtered out. Mahmud, a young video advertisement producer I had met in Ürümchi, had assured me that there would be no problems with my visiting his family and staying the night. I had warned him many times that this would probably not be the case, but he convinced me to give it a try, saying his village was only thirty minutes from the big town where there were hotels that accepted foreigners. In reality, the town was more like three hours away. Of course, Mahmud's family had no car of their own, so getting anywhere would require a lot of work if it came to that. After we ate a chicken they had purchased especially for my visit on the way to their home, Mahmud's father suddenly received a call informing him that the police were coming to question all of us.

I had just handed Mahmud my papers when a group of Uyghur men—two men in police uniforms and half a dozen local farmers carrying clubs as security volunteers—burst into the two-bedroom house. I watched the faces of my hosts grow tight as they saw them come through the door. When they came into the room, all of us stood up. We shook hands and said our "salaams" clasping our hearts.[2] Then we all became absolutely quiet. Mahmud's dad explained that I was Mahmud's friend from the university and that I was just planning to spend

the night before going on to Kashgar. It seemed as though most of the volunteer militia just wanted to see what a foreigner looked like. The two police officers in uniform seemed more serious. One of them had a flashlight. The other had a laptop computer. The one with the flashlight asked a few questions. Speaking with me in Uyghur, he asked if I had a phone. I said yes. He then asked to look at my phone. Perhaps because it was all in English he couldn't really figure out where the pictures might be. He looked at my contacts and opened a few apps. After a minute or two, he gave it back. Everyone filed out. In the courtyard, the lead Uyghur officer called his supervisor. On the phone he spoke in Chinese.

After they left, Mahmud's forehead was beaded with sweat. His friends sat in silence on the raised platform (Uy: *supa*) where the family spent much of their time when in the house. It was where they ate and slept. The TV flickered in the background. Xinjiang Television Channel One was reporting on how industrial farming was making the lives of Uyghur consumers better in the city. No one said a word. Mahmud's nine-year-old sister came over and asked if I was worried. She said she was scared. I said everything was fine and that it was not really a problem. But she could tell from the way we seemed frozen in place that things were not fine. A few minutes later the police came back, armed with a digital camera. They took pictures of my passport; they said they would contact the security administrators of the county again and let us know if we would be taken to the police station. Now all of us were really anxious. I smiled at Mahmud's sister, but my stomach was knotted in fear. Mahmud began to quickly pack his clothes in case we would have to take an emergency trip to town. One of his neighbors, who was sitting quietly now along the back of the platform, asked to look through the pictures on my phone. He flipped through them quickly looking for anything that would raise a concern. He told Mahmud that if he was interrogated he should tell them that he had met me through his work. "Tell them that you don't know anything about him and what he was doing in Xinjiang." He asked me if I had been staying in registered hotels and if my passport and visa were all in order. I assured him that everything was fine. I apologized to Mahmud's family for bringing them trouble. They apologized to me for being powerless to stop this from happening.

We sat and watched TV on the platform next to the kitchen waiting for the police to call. We switched the channel and watched Chinese Central Television news anchors talk in Chinese about a union strike in France. They said France was very chaotic. Mahmud's parents, who had dropped out of school in the sixth grade and never really learned Chinese, couldn't understand what they were talking about. We sat there silently and waited. No one spoke for what felt like hours.

Finally, the phone rang. They told Mahmud's dad that my papers had checked out. The police chief of the county had signed off on my visit. The foreigner would be allowed to stay for the night in a Uyghur village in Southern Xinjiang. Everything was fine.

As if a switch had been flipped, everyone breathed a huge sigh of relief. Suddenly everyone was talking again—reliving the terror of the police visit. They talked about how the doorway into the home was actually really high but when the police had entered their home they had crouched down a bit, acting as though it were too low. Mahmud's neighbor made motions with his hands as he said this and demonstrated the bowing motion that this door phenomenon caused in a police officer's body. He talked about how scared the police were when they saw me. "They didn't know what to do—they just know how to say yes or no when it comes to foreigners. On the one hand, they want to give you the impression that our society is peaceful; on the other hand, they were suspicious that you might be a 'terrorist.'" He talked about how hard it was for Uyghurs in Southern Xinjiang to feel like their true selves since they could not properly host visitors. He said that, in many families where fathers or sons had been arrested, family life had turned into a constant state of secret mourning while at the same time pretending to be grateful for the benevolence of economic development. He said that, these days, a Uyghur man could be arrested for the smallest mistake. "If you don't smile when they say smile or dance when they say dance, they will say you are a 'religious extremist,'" he said.

Mahmud was glad I had the chance to see what life was really like for rural Uyghurs across Southern Xinjiang after the People's War on Terror began in 2014. He said, "They come all the time—almost every night and check on us." Their family had received "a peaceful family" (Ch: *heping jiating*) rating sign on the main entrance of their home, so clearly the police were not very suspicious of them. But still the police and their volunteer militia came unannounced every day or two. The possibility of their presence was what made Mahmud's father and brother shave their mustaches and prevented Mahmud's mother from decorating the walls of their home with anything that might be construed as Uyghur or Islamic. They said that, these days, all they did was work on their farm, attend political education meetings, wait for the police to come, and watch TV. Because they did not have People's Convenience Cards (Ch: *bianminka*), they were not permitted to travel outside of their county without official permission. The tedium and poverty of this lifestyle and the feeling of powerlessness that came from the home invasions and political training sessions were what made Mahmud want to leave his village and never come back.

He had seen what the world was like from the perspective of the city when televisions began to arrive in the early 2000s. The advertisements had called him to a different life. Now the consumer-oriented ads that popped up in between state-sponsored TV programming reminded him of his need to escape the terror of the countryside.

In fact, villagers were not permitted to unplug their TVs (see figures 3.1 and 3.2). Unlike in the city, it was common knowledge in Uyghur villages that televisions should be turned on during police visits. State television was an important way of communicating the values of the state and the "normal" (Ch: *zhengchang*) Chinese economy. Refusing to watch it by unplugging it or failing to turn it on was a sign of "abnormality" or "deviance" (Ch: *yichang*). The only way of escaping the police, underemployment, and state TV was to flee to the city.

Before I turn to the role of television and policing in the lives of rural Uyghur men, I will first sketch out how Uyghur dispossession began. In most contemporary scholarship, the term *dispossession* refers to a Marxist critique

FIGURE 3.1. A mural near Mahmud's home village. The text reads: "Interfering with the normal lives of others by prohibiting them from listening to the radio or watching TV is an act of religious extremism." Throughout this chapter, I have included images of murals that demonstrate the programming of the People's War on Terror. These murals, which were painted by rural Uyghur farmer-painters at the request of local Culture Ministry officials, began to appear throughout the Uyghur homeland in 2014. Image by Zheng Yanjiang.

FIGURE 3.2. Mahmud's father sits next to the TV while we wait for the police. Image by author.

of capitalist accumulation by dispossession. It is often used not to discuss "original accumulation" of natural resources and colonized bodies but the way marginalized people lose their property. As Glen Coulthard (2014) and Alyosha Goldstein (2017) and others have demonstrated, however,[3] in colonial contexts, dispossession is more than the uncompensated loss of quantifiable abstract property; it also refers to a relationship of domination that moves through discursive and nondiscursive facets of everyday life, from the material to the epistemic. Possession does not simply refer to property remaining under the control of its rightful owners; rather, in this context, it refers to a type of self-determination or autonomy that is rooted in Indigenous knowledge. The dispossession of a Native people's way of life involves forcing them into a new social order, transforming their land into a commodity, their traditional labor into wage labor, their consumption into a new regime of value, and their thoughts into imposed ideological frameworks. It means that their lives must be integrated with the market; their desires must be routed through the cultured thought of the metropole.

Importantly, as feminist scholars of capitalist frontier making have noted, the ongoing dispossession of marginalized populations creates forms of expropriated or stolen labor and property that are often unmediated by civil rights or contract law. As Nancy Fraser (2016) argues, ongoing processes of ethno-racialization and sexism naturalize devalued, unfree, dependent labor that is excluded from "ex-

ploitive" yet "freely chosen" wage labor.[4] This results in colonized peoples and women being slotted into subordinated roles as sharecroppers, low-wage or unpaid service workers, or domestic servants. The perceived threat, "backwardness," or impurity of linguistic, cultural, and sexual difference justify enclosure and processes of devaluation similar to those I examined in preceding chapters. Expropriation is often enshrined through legalized and discursive forces. Simply allowing the dispossessed to live in servile conditions is often regarded as a sign of beneficent gift giving on the part of the colonizer-capitalist (see also Yeh 2013). The work and resources of the dispossessed are pushed to the background, disavowed as the necessary foundation of the waged economy.

Dispossession is the term I use here to name the ongoing process of more specific forms of labor expropriation through devaluation and techno-political enclosure.[5] More specifically, I am following Glen Coulthard (2014) in his recuperation of the term *dispossession* from the likes of David Harvey (2014), who speaks of "accumulation by dispossession" as the ongoing process of capitalist expansion but does not dwell on the ethno-racial and epistemic violence that such processes produce in colonial contexts. Like Coulthard, in my view, dispossession speaks to a relational process of removal across the entire spectrum of social life from the perspective of the colonized, while expropriation speaks to a narrower juridical tradition of ownership rights and contract law from the perspective of the state and the co-constituted capitalist-colonizer. As a scholar committed to decolonial politics, it is important that the overarching conceptual framework I use to describe these processes proceeds from the standpoint of the dispossessed (Moreton-Robinson 2015).

A Short History of Uyghur Dispossession

In the Uyghurs' case, the process of dispossession reached a new threshold in the 1950s when structural adjustments to their social life and mode of production began to take a Chinese institutional form. One elderly Uyghur farmer in Khotan I interviewed described this process using the lives of trees as an example. He said that, in the Uyghur homeland, there were three generations of trees. First, there were the trees that still remained from before the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. These trees were quite rare and were viewed as sacred by many Uyghurs. Then there were trees that were planted in the new villages built during the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s. During this period, Uyghur farms were consolidated into communes and farmers were moved from stand-alone farming homesteads on the land into villages where every house was the same height and everyone shared the same communal

meals. The trees that were planted in these new villages were quite tall in 2014, but many of them had been replaced by a third generation of trees. These new trees, planted in the 1990s, were the "Open up the Northwest" (Ch: *Xibei Dakaifa*) trees or, as other people I interviewed referred to them, "Open up the West" trees (Ch: *Xibu Dakaifa*), planted in the early 2000s.[6] They were planted when the old trees were cut down in the 1990s and 2000s and replaced by "investment" (Uy: *kapital*) trees. In many cases, the communes sold the rights to these young trees to villagers. At a certain point, decades from now, they will be permitted to cut down the trees and enjoy the profits of their lumber. The old man sighed at this point and said, "What those people who are buying and selling trees are forgetting is that the trees hold the spirits of our ancestors within them. We have always used wood to build the thresholds of our houses, but we did so out of respect for the trees and as a way of guarding our home from evil spirits. Now that respect is lost." In essence, he was saying that, when people begin to treat sacred landscapes like natural sources of capital, they are dispossessed of their relationship with the deep history of the land.

This material transformation of the value of trees in the minds of Uyghur farmers was representative of broader structural adjustments to, and transformations of, Uyghur social reproduction. These broad transformations were signaled first by the consolidation of homesteads into communal villages in the 1950s and 1960s and then by the arrival of highways and railways in the 1990s and 2000s throughout the Uyghur heartland. This second wave of hard infrastructure transformations were built primarily as a way to target the oil and natural gas reserves that the nation had not yet been able to expropriate to fuel the growing industrial economy in Eastern China.

Here again, it is important to emphasize that acts of expropriation are never simply a neutral function of state capital in service to the economy; they are also a relationship of domination over nature and minoritized others (Moore 2015). When new infrastructure is built on Native land and, along with it, new service sectors and market economies are put in motion by settler populations, the expropriation of natural resources becomes a schema of social domination, a more general form of dispossession, as well. It produces subjects that are enclosed and separated from their place in the world and increasingly drawn into new modernist economies where land-based people's labor can begin to be exploited as contingent workers in service and domestic sectors. It is only if they are privileged enough to be granted civil protections that they can enter the formal labor market and have their waged labor exploited in a more regularized manner.

In the 1990s, as the state moved in fits and starts from socialist development to capitalist accumulation and the accompanying suppression (Cliff 2016b, 91) of so-called separatism, the displacement of Native lifeways became more acute. Many Uyghurs refer to the decade prior, the 1980s, as a Golden Era when the possibilities of life seemed to open up. The relative economic, political, and religious freedom that accompanied the Reform and Opening Period seemed to promise a brighter future. Many Han settlers who had come to the northern part of the region during the Maoist campaigns to secure the borders were permitted to return to their hometowns in Eastern China. But with the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 and the independence of the Central Asian republics, the state in China was suddenly faced with rising tensions regarding Uyghur desires for greater self-determination. At the same time, the fracturing of the Soviet Union—China's long-term colonial rival—offered new zones for building Chinese influence. Even more importantly, it created opportunities to access energy resources. A chief concern among state authorities in the region was that the new freedoms Uyghurs had enjoyed in the 1980s threatened to flower into a full-throated independence movement. As Uyghur trade relationships increased in emerging markets in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan and cultural and religious exchange with Uzbekistan was rekindled, Chinese authorities became increasingly concerned that Uyghurs would begin to demand the autonomy they had been promised in the 1950s. As a result of these concerns, an underlying goal of the Chinese state's attempts to control Central Asian markets and buy access to its natural resources became that of ensuring "that these states do not support the Uyghur cause in Xinjiang or tolerate exile movements on their own soil" (Becquelin 2000, 66).

During the of time that the state in China was extending its control in post-Soviet Central Asia, it also announced in June 1992 a new policy position that would turn the Uyghur homeland into a center of trade, capitalist infrastructure, and agricultural development capable of further serving the needs of the national economy (Becquelin 2000, 71). One of the main emphases in the new proposal was the need to establish Xinjiang as one of China's primary cotton-producing regions. Given the exponential growth in commodity clothing production in Eastern China in the 1980s (see Rofel and Yanagisako 2018), state authorities and market-oriented state-owned textile companies were determined to find a cheap source of domestic cotton to meet the accelerating demand for Chinese-produced T-shirts and jeans around the world.

As a result of this initiative, infrastructure investment in Chinese Central Asia expanded from only 7.3 billion yuan in 1991 to 16.5 billion in 1994.

Over the same period, the gross domestic product of the region nearly doubled, reaching a new high of $15.5 billion (Becquelin 2000, 67). Much of this new investment was spent on infrastructure projects that connected the Uyghur homeland to the Chinese cities to the north. As Ren Qiang and Yuan Xin (2003, 97) note, over this time Xinjiang became the fourth largest receiver of Han migrants in the country, ranking just behind Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangdong. By 1995 the Taklamakan Highway had been completed across the desert, connecting the oasis town of Khotan (Ch: *Hetian*) to Ürümchi, cutting travel time in half. By 1999 the railroad had been expanded from Korla to Aqsu and Kashgar, opening the Uyghur heartland to direct Han migration and Chinese commerce. During this time, the capacity of the railways leading from Ürümchi to Eastern China doubled, allowing for a dramatic increase in natural resource and agricultural exports from the Uyghur region to factories in Eastern China.

As infrastructure was built, new settlement policies were also put in place. Like the settler policies from the socialist period, these new projects were intended to both alleviate overcrowding in Eastern China and centralize control of the political frontier. But unlike those earlier population transfers, this new settler movement was driven by capitalist expansion as well. For the first time, Han settlers in Xinjiang were promised upward mobility through profit in the lucrative natural resource economy and capital investment. Initially, this enterprise—formally labeled "Open up the Northwest" (Ch: *Xibei kaifa*)—was centered around industrial-scale cotton production. State authorities put financial incentives in place to transform steppe and desert areas for water-intensive cotton cultivation by both Uyghur farmers and increasing numbers of Han settlers (Toops 2004). As part of this process they introduced incentive programs for Han farmers to move to Xinjiang to grow and process cotton for use in Chinese factories. By 1997 the area of cotton production in Xinjiang had doubled relative to the amount of land used in 1990. Most of this expansion occurred in what had been Uyghur territory between Aqsu and Kashgar (Becquelin 2000, 66). In less than a decade, Chinese Central Asia had become China's largest source of domestic cotton, producing 25 percent of all cotton consumed in the nation—a proportion that increased over the following decades. By 2020, 84 percent of Chinese cotton was produced in the Uyghur region (Gro Intelligence 2019).

Yet, despite this apparent success, important concerns began to emerge as well. Chief among these was the way the new shift in production and settlement was affecting the Native population. Many Han settlers profited from their work in the Xinjiang cotton industry as short-term seasonal workers who received

high wages, as settlers who were given subsidized housing and land, and as managers of larger-scale farms. But many of the Uyghurs who were affected by the shift in production did not benefit to the same degree. Using threats of land seizures and detention, local authorities, who acted as brokers with state enterprise buyers, often forced them to convert their existing multicrop farms to cotton in order to meet buyer-imposed quotas. In the same manner, they were also forced to sell their cotton only to these buyers. These corporations in turn sold the cotton at full market price to factories in Eastern China. In this way, many Uyghur farmers were pulled into downward spirals of poverty and dependence, while many (though not all) Han settlers continued to benefit from the shifting economic trends (see Cliff 2016b). Labor exploitation coupled with dispossession gave rise to intensifying feelings of oppression and occupation as the need for cheap sources of energy and raw materials increased in the rapidly developing cities of Eastern China. Recalling the classic Marxist image of the American slave plantations that stood behind the cotton mills of Manchester (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018), behind the textile factories of Shenzhen stood the cotton fields of the Uyghur homeland.

As the historian James Millward (2021) notes, although the economy has grown at exponential rates across China, Uyghur rural incomes have grown at declining rates and they have been pushed into tenant-farming positions. Building on the pioneering work of the Uyghur economist Ilham Tohti (2009, 2015), he shows that systematic blockage of Uyghurs from lines of credit, business credentialing, and the obstruction of free movement, while incentivizing Han settlement and capital accumulation, has built a racialization of ethnicity into the economic development of the region. This has resulted in what anthropolgists Ildikó Bellér-Hann and Chris Hann (2020) have termed "the great dispossession" of the Uyghurs—an overwhelming threshold movement within the broad sweep of the colonial history of the region (242).

For Tohti (2015), the most important factors associated with Uyghur dispossession were "blatant ethnic discrimination in hiring, a rural labor surplus, overconcentration of economic resources in Han Chinese–dominated urban areas, 'stability maintenance policies' that restrict population mobility and exacerbate rural unemployment, and severe underinvestment in basic education" (2014, 1). As James Millward notes (2021), "What Tohti described—without using the word—is a colonial system of settlement and extraction in Xinjiang." This process has been fostered by state capital, which subsidized the development of natural resource and industrial agriculture sectors by injecting billions of yuan into the region. As Ching Kwan Lee (2018) has shown, Chinese state capital often acts as a subsidy in securing long-term economic interests

even if they are not immediately profitable. By investing in the Han settlement of Xinjiang, putting settlers to work in natural resource extraction and overseer positions on industrial farming plantations, and fostering a service sector that supported this development, the state was assured of a permanent reserve of domestic energy and raw materials essential to economic growth.

By the early 2000s, the Uyghur homeland had come to resemble a classic peripheral colony. In the context of the nation as a whole, the primary function of the province was to supply the metropoles of Beijing, Shanghai, and the Pearl River Delta to the east with raw resources and industrial supplies. Cotton production continued to grow as it had in the 1990s, but by the early 2000s, industrial tomato production had also been introduced as a primary export product. By 2012 the region was producing approximately 30 percent of world tomato exports.[7] At the same time, as in most peripheral colonies, the vast majority of manufactured products consumed in Xinjiang came from the factories in Eastern China. The clothes manufactured using Xinjiang cotton were thus purchased by Xinjiang consumers from clothing companies in Eastern China at inflated prices. The same was true of the natural gas and oil that began to flow to Eastern China from Xinjiang after the completion of pipeline infrastructure in the early 2000s (Becquelin 2004). In 2014 Uyghur protests against these obvious forms of West–East wealth transfer were officially outlawed as one of seventy-five signs of religious extremism (United Front 2014).

In the 2000s the buildout of infrastructure for natural resource extraction that followed behind the new road and rail projects of the mid- to late 1990s again began to shift the center of Xinjiang's economy. Within a few short years, oil and gas sales came to represent nearly half of the region's revenues (Becquelin 2004). At the same time, given the push to reduce the nation's dependence on foreign cotton, oil, and gas, and to accelerate the settler colonization of the Uyghur homeland, the central government continued to provide nearly two-thirds of the region's budget in the form of state capital investment. In the early 2000s, the Hu Jintao administration took the older regional project "Open up the Northwest" to a new level, rebranding it as "Open up the West." Now all of peripheral China, including Inner Mongolia and Tibet, became the target of settlement and development projects, though Chinese Central Asia continued to receive a greater number of new settlers relative to other regions. Given the way the older "Open up the Northwest" project had resulted in rapid and sustained economic growth of over 10 percent per year since 1992, state authorities were eager to take the development projects further, opening new markets and new sites for industrial production (Becquelin 2004, 363). By the early 2000s, the Uyghur homeland had become the country's fourth largest

oil-producing area, with a capacity of 20 million tons per year. Given that the area had proven reserves of petroleum of over 2.5 billion tons and 700 billion cubic meters of natural gas, there is little doubt that the region is thought of as one of China's primary future sources of energy, even though extracting Xinjiang oil has proven to be logistically difficult (Becquelin 2004, 365). As of 2016, the average cost of oil in the region was approximately forty-five dollars per barrel.[8]

Between 1990 and 2000, the population of Han settlers grew at twice the growth rate of the Uyghur population. By the late 2000s, it had grown to almost the same size as the Uyghur population, though many areas in Southern Xinjiang still had a high majority of Uyghurs. As Tom Cliff (2016b) and Emily Yeh (2013) have demonstrated, the development of state capital investments and industrial agriculture export production that accompanied the "Open up the West" campaign had the effect of rapidly increasing the rate of Han settlement in Uyghur and Tibetan areas. New infrastructure—railroads, pipelines, and real estate—have vastly benefited the millions of new Han settlers and produced exponential increases in the cost of living and widespread dispossessions of Uyghurs from land and housing. Migrants to the city told me that, over this period, the cost of basic staples such as rice, flour, oil, and meat more than doubled. Urban housing prices doubled or tripled, while projects to urbanize the Uyghur countryside placed Uyghurs in new housing complexes that were dependent on regular payments for centralized heat and power. The land-based means of production in small-scale Uyghur mixed-crop farming with small herds of sheep and garden plots were also often enclosed and turned into corporate farming through this process. Underemployment was further exacerbated by the widespread consolidation of Uyghur land into industrial farms and, more recently, restrictions on labor migration.

All these public and private economic interventions produced a new kind of Uyghur farmer. One of the primary goals of the "Open up the Northwest" (Ch: *xibei kaifa*) state development campaign that began in the 1990s was to increase the production of commodity goods—such as rape seed, tomatoes, cotton, and other commodity crops—on an industrial scale. Based on my interviews with farmers and their relatives, within just a few short years, many Uyghur farmers were forced to sign debt-inducing contracts that did not meet their basic living expenses or their seed and farming equipment expenses. Farming itself was turned into a form of tenant farming in which farmers could not decide for themselves what they were to grow as centralized industrial farming took over their land. Millward notes, "Under the system of the 'five unifieds,' plowing, sowing, management, irrigation and harvest were all centralized under county

and township control. Uyghur farmers had to buy seeds, fertilizer, pesticide, and plastic film (for water retention) from the local government, which determined the price for these inputs; the government also set prices for the harvest it purchased" (2021, 365). As the Uyghur scholar Bakhtiyar Tursun, a social scientist based at Xinjiang University, notes in a systematic study of farming economy in the Uyghur heartland of Khotan, Kashgar, and Aqsu, rural farmers were nearly always forced to pay a percentage of their profits to work brigades (Ch: *dadui*) who signed contracts with state and private buyers. As one local official in Khotan Prefecture described it to him, "If a farmer grows 10 acres of wheat, according to the local standards for harvest yield and grain sales price, the farmer should receive an income of 4,500–5,000 yuan. However, the farmland fee, planting fee, water fee, fertilization fee, management fee, land tax, township and village fund payment, public welfare payments and other expenditures will total around 4,000 yuan. After deducting these expenses, the farmer will only receive around 500–1,000 yuan" (B. Tursun 2003, 77). As a result, by the early 2000s, in many counties in the Uyghur homeland of Southern Xinjiang, the rights to a high percentage of arable land were owned by a few powerful individuals within local party institutions. For example, according to a number of farmers I interviewed, in a county near Turpan a single individual owned rights to an estimated 60 percent of all available farming land. In a county near Kashgar, a single family of local officials owned rights to nearly 80 percent of all arable land.[9] This meant, in effect, that the majority of Uyghurs in these counties were living as sharecroppers: their land and work were largely owned by local officials.[10] Many Uyghur farmers, or their children, were forced to look for work elsewhere either as migrant agricultural workers or as small-scale traders and hired hands in local towns or, at times, the big city of Ürümchi.

In 2003 local authorities began to implement labor transfer programs among rural Uyghur farmers as a way of countering the extreme poverty and underemployment that was fostered by the system (Memet 2011). These programs required farmers to spend significant portions of time away from their home farms working at state-owned farming colonies elsewhere in the province picking cotton or working in factory positions in Eastern China in cities such as Shenzhen, Beijing, Tianjin, and Qingdao and smaller towns in Jiangsu, Shandong, and Zhejiang ("Transfer of 400,000 Young Uyghur Women" 2008; Hess 2009). These programs provided cash incentives for such work, but there was frequently a certain amount of coercion as well. Village leaders were asked to find a quota of workers from their jurisdiction. Often poor farmers felt as though they had no choice but to follow the directive to enter the migrant

labor economy. In Peyziwat—a county with a population of 385,000 people in Kashgar Prefecture, 98 percent of whom were Uyghur—the program began in 2003 with only 2,000 workers sent out to work as migrant laborers. By 2010 over 81,000 people, 21 percent of the total population of Peyziwat County, had been sent to work in fields and factories away from home as part of organized work teams (Memet 2011, 23). Other counties, from Khotan to Turpan, sent similar numbers of workers to the cotton fields in Xinjiang farming colonies and to industrial factories in Eastern China. Over the course of the decade, hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs were forcibly moved off their farms and into the market economy as wage laborers.

Over the same period, the number of "self-sent" (Ch: *zifa*) migrants began to increase as well. Since these migrations were not facilitated by the state, the numbers of rural Uyghurs who migrated to cities across Xinjiang and the nation are harder to track. By 2013 the official total number of ethnic minority migrants in the region was around 412,000.[11] It is likely, however, that many "self-sent" migrants were not included in this number. What is clear is that, over this period of time, informal settlements of twenty to thirty thousand people from places like Peyziwat and nearby counties such as Yupergha were formed on the outskirts of Ürümchi. Similar communities sprang up in smaller prefecture-level cities across the province. These settlements often took on the name of the counties these migrants came from. Often a nearby mosque became a center of community life and came to be associated with the particular native place of origin and class positions of the community. They formed tight-knit communities of traders and businessmen, craftworkers, entrepreneurs, and, in some cases, knowledge workers. Many migrants in these communities—as was the case with Mahmud and Aziz, whose stories I will tell later in this chapter—came as individuals, detached from immediate family. They delayed the marriages that people their age typically aspired toward and saved money for their families back in the countryside while they pursued an urban life.

As the Uyghur scholar Mijit Memet, a social scientist associated with Xinjiang Normal University, has noted (2011), in Uyghur Islamic thought, poverty and personal suffering have long been considered to be predestined by God. The difficulty of land-based life was thus something of a test of one's character. It was not something to be overcome but endured. In the past, this attitude led to an acceptance of one's vulnerability and, in turn, a dependence on the will of God, one's community, and the benevolence of local authorities. Memet noted that most Uyghur farmers placed little value in long-term planning

and investment and instead took one day at a time. He argued that, traditionally, Uyghur farmers have not stressed self-reliance and thus spent what little money they had as soon as they received it. Memet is not arguing that Uyghur farmers are lazy—as is often the case in Chinese discussions of the work ethics of unassimilated minorities in China (Yeh 2007b). Instead, he is pointing out that, when Uyghur farmers are pulled into the market economy, they are forced to give up their reliance on the community and the benevolence of God, and instead claim a self-motivated subjectivity. As a Uyghur woman from a village near Kashgar told me in an interview in 2020:

> [The farmers understand] that this is our ancestors' land, so you feel as though you are safe there. The land is yours, so you are not dependent. You don't have to listen to anyone else's orders. If you give it up, you lose your freedom. If you grow up in the village, people feel this kind of freedom. Farmers have their own opinions, to some extent they live according to their own rules.

Leaving the village often gave farmers a feeling of giving in to the new economy of self-reliance and failing the test they have received as Muslims. Memet writes that, in the early 2000s when the labor transfer programs were first put in place, "some migrant workers did not even tell their families at home at first, instead they secretly went to the colony farms and picked cotton" (Memet 2011, 40). Because of these feelings and their wariness of entering into dependent relations with Han settler employers, many Uyghurs were, at least initially, reluctant migrants.

Yet Memet also notes that, as a growing minority of former Uyghur farmers were given access to cash and capital, these mentalities began to shift. As some were able to move into the Chinese economy, feelings of communal and family reliance were mixed with feelings of individual achievement. The opportunities that came from travel, technical training, wage labor, and investment began to take shape in the minds of farmers, particularly those of the younger generation. Yet what felt like new forms of freedom and autonomy were also mixed with new forms of dependence and inequality. As young Uyghur migrants began to see a larger horizon of possibility, they also began to receive messages that much of that larger world was not there for them but rather for those with more ethno-racial privilege. Money could not make their lives count in the same way as it did the lives of Han settlers, nor would it buy them freedom from their fear of state violence. Through the process of integration, they found that they were losing parts of their Native way of life and were being exposed to new forms of dispossession.

Dispossession through Media Infrastructure and Self-Fashioning

In addition to its relationship to material possession, dispossession can also be thought of as a relationship of the mind to the self. As Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou argue (2013), the idea of being fully in possession of one's self as an individual is a particular capitalist modality. It centers around the perception of control or autonomy on the part of the individual subject. By increasing more and more control over one's self through processes of self-discipline and self-responsibility, the capitalist subject assumes that the choices she or he makes are not enclosed by larger social forces or supported by processes of unpaid social reproduction; rather, they are acts of freedom. Possessing the self produces a disavowal or misapprehension of the community and infrastructures that enable a life to be lived. Although there is a great deal of variation across sectors of the global capitalist economy, ideas of self-possession have increasingly taken precedence over feelings of communal forms of belonging. This site of conflict, what Nancy Fraser refers to as a "boundary struggle" (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018), between the communal and the enclosure of the individual reflects the way capital accumulation attempts to eat into social reproduction itself (Federici 2004).

As the Uyghur economy responded to state-directed land expropriation, television and social media seemed to offer ways of possessing the self and escaping from material dispossession. Young Uyghur men in particular began to think of themselves as having control over their life paths in a way that previous generations did not. They began to pursue careers, lifeworlds, and life partners they chose for themselves. The trajectories of these life paths were often both in tension and agreement with the desires of parents and other members of previous generations. On the one hand, by moving to the city they accrued status and, at times, capital that they could invest in their families back in the countryside. On the other hand, through their pursuit of cosmopolitan social networks and romantic partnerships—which were mediated by social media—they were moving both outside the control of their families and into an intimate "second enclosure" on Chinese social media platforms (Boyle 2003) and tight proximity to the city and people who were strangers to their lifeworld in the countryside. As a result, their parents often felt a sense of abandonment while the young men felt a sense of alienation in both the village and the city. Through this process Uyghur young men were moved from a condition of communal interdependence within a Uyghur lifeworld, to the world of a capitalist urban future. But, unlike the rural Uyghur lifeworld, this new world was not simply one they shared in common with their Uyghur neighbors and

Uyghur state officials. The horizon of the city was shared with Han settlers and the institutions of the state in China. The urban world of self-fashioning promised freedom through individual striving on the free labor market, but often these promises were enclosed by larger social forces as Uyghur labor was devalued relative to Han settler labor.

An important aspect of Uyghur self-possession began in the early 2000s when state authorities and SOEs first brought electricity to rural Uyghur households and then began to provide every Uyghur household with a free television and cable connection. As Mahmud—the young social media content producer I introduced at the beginning of this chapter—told me, he still remembers when the first TV appeared in his neighborhood soon after electricity arrived. For several months, he and dozens of other villagers crowded into their neighbor's small home to watch Xinjiang Television broadcasts of the news, Uyghur music performances, and Chinese historical dramas that were overdubbed in Uyghur. Since neither he nor many of his neighbors spoke Chinese (at that time), they avoided the Chinese-language channels and focused instead on Uyghur-language representations of life in the city. Mahmud found the images he saw on TV, like the foreign and domestic films that he had seen occasionally in town, deeply inspiring. They began to open up a world of possibilities apart from his family's farm and life in the village. Since—like many Uyghur men in the 1990s and early 2000s (Dautcher 2009)—with increased access to Chinese liquor his father had developed an alcohol dependency, the images also promised a way of escaping the violence of his family life and the poverty that alcohol and broader structural adjustments had brought to his family.

Around the same time, Mahmud was forced to drop out of high school to help his father and mother on the farm. Because of his father's drinking problem and his inability to keep up with the farm work, Mahmud's family simply could not afford to continue to send him to school. Mahmud said that he "did not feel sadness" about no longer going to school because he felt he was not learning much there anyway. Working at home gave him a chance to read books that he wanted to read: novels about the world outside. He also continued to watch a lot of TV and would occasionally go to the local bazaar to watch VCDs that shop owners would show in order to attract customers.[12] The technologies of cultural dissemination and the aggregated desires they mediated became a significant part of his life. When he was seventeen, Mahmud began to write his own stories in a notebook while watching his family's flock of sheep. The stories were based on his own life experience and the things he was watching on TV. Eventually, he developed a storyline that tied them all together. His story, which he imagined as a screenplay for TV called "Life on the

Road" (Uy: *bayawandiki toghirak*), was about a young Uyghur farmer who went to the city in pursuit of fame and fortune. Along the way, he helped a beautiful young woman escape from the abuse of a drug dealer. The story was a Uyghur drama in a Uyghur city in which the hero overcomes the complexities of modern life. It brought to life the way Uyghurs were drawn into drug and sex trafficking as other paths to economic success were blocked,[13] but it also promised success for young men who worked hard and took personal responsibility for their lives. There was no direct animosity toward the Chinese state and SOEs in the story—Mahmud said he felt too afraid to allow those feelings to surface in public. Instead, it was a story about a Uyghur farmer becoming legible as a cinematic superstar.

When Mahmud's neighbors found out that Mahmud had written a 100-page novel about his imagined life, they told his parents that it would be a shame if a talented young man like Mahmud was not given an opportunity to work in the city. By this time, the allure of the city with its promise of distinction and achieved quality was on everyone's minds. They began to put pressure on Mahmud's family to send him off to school. They told his family to pay attention to the advertisements for vocational schools they had seen on Uyghur-language state television. The schools promised to train students in how to use computers and how to speak Chinese. Some of them even taught English and prepared students to study abroad. One of his neighbors had a daughter who had gone to college, so they asked her to look into the schools and make sure they were legitimate. They found out that one of the advertised schools only cost 2,800 yuan per semester, that it accepted farmers without high school diplomas, and that the medium of instruction was Uyghur. For two years, Mahmud's family saved money. Facing increasing pressure from the community, Mahmud's parents finally sent Mahmud on the bus to Ürümchi with 3,200 yuan (around $500) in his pocket. The community was thrilled that a young man from their village was going to the big city to make a name for himself. By pursuing his desire to achieve "quality" (Uy: *sapa*), he was building prestige for everyone he knew.

For the first few months, Mahmud struggled. He hardly had enough money for food and it took him a while to find friends and distant relatives in the city. But he thrived in the school. As he put it: "When I arrived, I just studied Chinese. Every day I would memorize texts. By the end of the first year I had memorized over fifty-three texts. Using this method, I learned Chinese very quickly." With his new-found language skills he was able to begin to navigate the city. Eventually, he introduced himself to the editors of a Uyghur-language literary journal and showed them his notebooks. They were impressed with his

ambition. After reading through his work, an editor recognized the cinematic quality of what he had written. He saw in Mahmud's novel the dialogue and scenes of a movie script. Looking back at it, Mahmud realized that because he was writing in response to what he saw on television, he had written his dreams into cinema. Over the next few years, after the arrival of 3G networks in 2010, he found a place in the emerging industry of Uyghur-language internet media. Mahmud taught himself how to make music videos, short films, and commercials and began to cobble together a career in cultural production as a freelance worker for Uyghur businesses in the city.

Islamic Contemporaneity and Self-Fashioning

Mahmud's first exposure to television and its effects on his imagination resonated in the stories of many of the young Uyghur migrants I interviewed. But, for many, there was also a religious component to the desires that drew young men to the city. As Talal Asad (2007) has noted, spiritual economies are the outcome of the intersection of global economic development and what he terms "a global religious revival." Throughout the developing world, emerging forms of religious practice have been linked to economic development, new media, and the individuation of work ethics (Hirschkind 2006). In Indonesia and Taiwan, Islamic and Buddhist courses centered around training neoliberal workers in the individual responsibility of time management and productivity through "spiritual reform" are widespread (Pazderic 2004; Rudnyckyj 2009). Pentecostalism has produced new forms of ethical practice and economic striving in Africa and Latin America (Bornstein 2005; O'Neill 2013). Scholarship in the Middle East has also queried the way Islamic practice is being adapted to capitalist frameworks (Tripp 2006; Kanna 2010; Schielke 2012). In my reading of this scholarship, the sorts of religious economies that emerge tend in two directions. On the one hand, there are formally organized projects, such as those analyzed by Rudnyckyj in Indonesia, that "seek to simultaneously transform workers into more pious religious subjects and more productive economic subjects" (2009, 106). On the other hand, as in the case of Kanna (2010) in Dubai, there are more flexible assemblages where reformist religious practices are pulled together in a highly subjective manner and then circulated among a collectivity. Due to their political and historical circumstances, the emergent religious economy that drew Uyghur migrants to the city tended toward the latter form. This was a product of the Chinese authorities' decision to eliminate all but one highly controlled madrassa as it implemented the project of Maoist multiculturalism. This restriction was followed by the eventual prohibition of

all forms of unapproved Islamic instruction, such as training in modern Arabic and Turkish or translating unapproved texts into Uyghur from languages other than Chinese. These forms of religious control were further extended by state control of all Uyghur forms of Islamic practice, such as Sufi rituals and pilgrimages to shrines (Thum 2014). These prohibitions have prevented Uyghurs from developing formalized religious training courses that center on economic productivity. Instead, Uyghur migrants have been compelled to rely on the covert circulation of online language teachings from movements within the global Islamic religious revival.

Another young migrant, Aziz—whose hometown near Khotan was around a thousand kilometers away from Mahmud's village—said that television was also the first thing that inspired him to want to leave home. Unlike Mahmud, Aziz came from a deeply religious family, so the pressures he received were pointed in a slightly different direction—toward a Muslim contemporaneity. This new source of attraction, the cultural and religious imagery that were coming from Istanbul and Cairo, brought a new complexity to the desires of young Uyghur migrants. Yet, despite the differences between the impulses to become a movie star versus a contemporary pious Muslim, within both of these trajectories the self-fashioning impulse and the lure of the cash economy resonated with a generalized desire for an urban life. The young men who began to participate in piety movements in the 2010s when ideals of Islamic piety began to circulate via new 3G networks, often came to the city simply wanting to be "modern," just like Mahmud. The turn toward an Islamic contemporaneity that arrived with the social media phenomenon of WeChat propelled many new migrants, like Aziz, toward urban life and provided a new form of social reproduction for those, like Mahmud, who were already in the city.

Aziz described his journey to the city as a process of finding his future:

> During my last year of high school in 2003, I dropped out because I and my father [a self-trained religious teacher] felt like I wasn't learning anything. I was just studying on my own at home. I worked as a construction worker for a year earning 1,000 yuan per month. At the time, it seemed like a lot of money since I had no expenses and since it was my first job. But during that year, I saw a commercial for a vocational training school in Ürümchi called "885" when I was watching my family's new TV. It was one of the first Uyghur-run private training centers.

Aziz said that within a few months, like Mahmud, he decided that he wanted to leave his village and go to the school in Ürümchi. He said that the ads made him feel for the first time that it was possible for someone without a high school

degree and formal training in Chinese to participate in the modern life he had seen on TV. He recognized that the advertisement was pitched to farmers just like himself who had few resources but great ambition to be successful members of the modern Uyghur community. Since so many people were beginning to leave farming life in the early 2000s, many young people were beginning to talk about trying to make it in the city. The advertising fed this imaginary; it made young people believe that it was possible to escape the material enclosure of rural Uyghur life. Aziz said:

> Actually the school was nothing like the advertisement. They shot the advertisement at Xinjiang University, but actually the school was next to the university and the buildings were really old. The tuition was 1,600 for one semester including tuition and housing. My parents sold their donkey for around 2,000 yuan and we used that money to pay for the tuition and my living expenses. My mother also began working as a seamstress in the county-level bazaar so she used the money she made to support me. The very first day when my father and I came, we paid the money, and then I sat in on a class. I loved it. That was the happiest day of my life.

Aziz said that he felt as though he had been given ownership of his future. As a Native Uyghur speaker whose father was both a farmer and an unauthorized Islamic teacher (Uy: *mullah*) or "wild imam" (Ch: *ye ahong*) as the surveillance system would categorize him, he had given up on living as part of the knowledge economy, which seemed dominated by non-Islamic Chinese content. He had thought he would be a manual laborer on his family's farm his whole life.

Now he realized that, even though he did not speak Chinese and had not passed the college entrance exam, he could still compete with other businessmen and entrepreneurs in the city. In his first few years as a migrant, he found part-time work as an Amway salesman selling cookware and beauty products to other Uyghur migrants while he studied at the vocational school. He told his customers that he was a student and that he had used the knowledge he learned in school to research the highest quality American products. He said that, by selling himself as an expert on American culture, or "Amway: the American Way," he learned a lot about marketing and using cultural knowledge to create commercial value. Aziz shifted his focus though around 2011 when the market for American products began to disappear. Many Uyghurs began to listen to the piety teachings that circulated via WeChat and through this came to believe that American products were not "halal" (Uy: *musulmanche*). Instead, many Uyghurs came to understand that Islamic products imported from Turkey or

Malaysia or Native products that were produced in a verified halal manner had more "quality" (Uy: *sapa*). Uyghur desires were increasingly shaped by an imaginary that centered around Islamic contemporaneity.

Around the same time, in his typing class at the vocational school, Aziz found that he had an affinity for computers. With the help of a few of his more advanced classmates, he began to teach himself the language of software engineering. The Latin script and logic of computing made sense to him. Within several years of his arrival in the city, he began designing Uyghur-language online advertising and e-commerce applications for smartphones. As Islamic piety movements gathered force, he also began to work with WeChat-based companies to find ways to monetize and expand religious and language instruction for Uyghurs outside of the city. It became important for him to present himself as an urbane Muslim. He began watching Turkish movies. He divorced his wife, who he had met not long before through his Amway sales. He said he wanted a wife who would be more pious and would be willing to stay at home and care for his children while he worked with Uyghur internet companies.

Aziz's story demonstrates a desire for achieved quality as an urban, yet pious and patriarchal, Uyghur Muslim, which became common among many young Uyghur men at this time (Byler 2015). This caused a nested, further dispossession of Uyghur women who were slotted into a subordinate role, their value indexed to the public-facing economic value of the work of pious Uyghur men. In an echo of capitalist frontier making in other contexts, the expropriated work of women—shopping, cooking, cleaning, the emotional and physical work of caring for children and the elderly, maintaining the status of the family through the constant work of hosting Uyghur visitors to the city—was devalued relative to the largely male work of wage labor and capital accumulation outside the home. In the past community-oriented village life, women's work both in the home and in the fields had a higher value. In the new market economy, the higher cost of living combined with the increased role of consumption produced a greater strain on domestic relationships. These rising forms of misogyny were exacerbated by the violence and devaluation that men, and Uyghurs more generally, experienced in the Chinese marketplace. Uyghur male control and domination were often off-loaded on the household in the form of imposed restrictions on the appearance and movement of women and children. Men and others in the Uyghur community often pressured women to dress in a pious manner. Of course, many Uyghur women also actively embraced new forms of piety as well (Huang 2012; Tynen 2019a). Both men and women taught children to pray, study the Quran, and do work for the dead at family graves (Uy: *yerlik*), which were understood to be the center of their Uyghur

Islamic identity. Women also actively built pious public personas via WeChat and found ways to use the religious quality they accrued as forms of social value within the Uyghur community (Huang 2012; see also Mahmood 2005).

Shifting Uyghur Urbanities in a Chinese City

As Lily Chumley (2016) has demonstrated, across China "self-styling" has been a central element in the development of the Chinese economy (see also Rofel 2007). Culture producers are now involved in *all aspects* of Chinese material life. Chumley argues: "The aestheticization of the world required and engendered a new kind of aesthetic subjectivity: an interest in style, a susceptibility to the attractions of commodities, *a desire for contemporaneity and anxiety about lacking it*, a habit of looking at and making small talk about commodities and their appearances" (Chumley 2016, 11; my emphasis). As young Uyghur migrants continued to arrive in the city in the early 2000s, they were influenced by the aestheticization done by Han cultural workers they saw in the city and online. They began to build their own brands and aesthetic forms for Uyghur audiences in the countryside. However, unlike the Han art students Chumley observed, for these Uyghur culture workers the feeling of "lacking contemporaneity" was complicated by the feeling that they lacked the quality of Han and Western culture producers; they felt the pressure to transform their ethnic difference into both an Islamic contemporaneity and a politically acceptable Chinese cosmopolitanism. The push and pull of their personal histories, their Uyghur audiences, and the digital enclosure generated by state-supported technology companies complicated their desire to build a self-styled individual life.

Many of the Uyghur-medium vocational schools in the city served as incubators for the Uyghur migrant knowledge economy. The Uyghur schools gave students an opportunity to network with each other and build new styles and aesthetic subjectivities. The owners of the schools were almost universally recognized as Uyghur television personalities; some of them were popular musicians. These owners built up the brands of the schools by advertising on television and by hosting widely viewed talent-show spectacles in which their best students demonstrated the skills they had learned in the schools. The vocational schools thus offered young farmers a point of entry to the upper echelons of Uyghur society. By performing well in a Uyghur-language vocational school, some students were able to circumvent the stringent Chinese-language requirements that faced them in Chinese university settings and the widespread discrimination of the Chinese private sector.[14]

Many migrants, like Yusup in the previous chapter, were not able to achieve an economically successful self-fashioning. Although they also were drawn to the city by the allure of Uyghur-language television advertising, they had less success finding jobs in the knowledge economy in the city. One young migrant told me that he was never able to really learn Chinese or computer programming in the vocational schools because his family could not help him with his tuition. Ablikim had to work full-time just to afford his living expenses, so he had little time to study and find the job he dreamed of as an entrepreneur. Some of those I interviewed did develop culture production skills but were unable to find jobs or start their own businesses because they lacked the connections and capital to do so.

As I have signaled in the preceding pages, one of the issues regarding the evaluation of Uyghur migrant self-fashioning had to do with changing gender values, as wider exposure to Islam led to a widespread reconsideration of Islamic contemporaneity between 2010 and 2014. Paradoxically, the same technological development that allowed Uyghur migrants access to cultural production through online publishing and video production also offered Uyghur farmers in the countryside greater exposure to global Islamic piety movements. As much as the schools acted as incubators of Uyghur modernization, the cultural production they enabled paled in comparison with the Islamic media production that many rural Uyghur farmers viewed from sources in Turkey,

FIGURE 3.3. A mural from a village near Mahmud's home that was painted in 2014: "Wearing ethnic costumes is a way of carrying forward ethnic culture, wearing a burka is a betrayal of ethnic culture." Image by Zheng Yanjiang.

Central Asia, and the Middle East via the internet (Harris and Isa 2019). The TV shows and teachings dubbed in Uyghur or produced by Uyghurs in the diaspora had a powerful effect. They were often seen by young migrants such as Aziz as "true" (Uy: *rast*) Islam, unfiltered by the Chinese state-directed public sphere.

Like the urban advertising they had seen on TV in the previous decade, this worldly Islamic content interpellated Uyghur farmers. It asked them to imagine themselves as members of a modern global Islamic community. As Mahmud put it:

> When I started at the school, there were forty-three of us Uyghur students. Now [four years later] there are just twenty-eight [still in the city]. Most of the students who dropped out were women—and a lot of them were from Khotan. The people down there are actually becoming more and more opposed to education. They just don't see the purpose in sending women to the city. They think it is better if they just get married. I have one distant cousin who also came to the city. She was doing really well here and then her father suddenly changed his mind. She said it was because her job wouldn't allow her to wear a veil that covered her neck. I told her, this is not important. Your faith is something you carry with you on the inside. You shouldn't let a small thing like this change the course of your life. But she said, this is what "true" [Uy: *rast*] Islam means. She said she was at peace with it. Of course, there are deeper reasons for why, when they hear these Islamic teachings on the internet, it makes sense to them not to allow women to be educated. They don't want them to think for themselves; and they don't want them to be influenced by Han ideas.

Exposure to contemporary Islamic teachings online and widespread social dispossession expressed through enclosure and devaluation combined to produce intensified forms of masculine control. The cloistering of women—relegating them to devalued forms of domestic labor—while at the same time men pursued devalued work outside of the home, produced emergent forms of sexism in the midst of dispossession.

As Uyghur farmers across the Uyghur homeland began to gather in small group discussions about the forms of Islamic orthopraxis that were common in the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, the impulse to move to the city began to change. Now, instead of talking about economic and cultural opportunity, people began to talk about the religious freedom of the city. Many of the rural-to-urban

migrants I spoke with said they came to the city simply to escape the religious policing that was becoming so intense in rural communities. They said that in the city no one noticed if migrants went to the mosque five times a day or not. Young migrants could attend illegalized prayer-room discussions and, beginning in 2011, online WeChat groups without police coming to their door.

But at the same time, with that freedom, the allure of non-Muslim culture in the city was more intense for migrants like Mahmud. For a time, particularly in the years after the violence of 2009 when internet technology was built out and it became increasingly clear that Chinese state authorities viewed Uyghur migrants as disposable, young Uyghurs in the city lived in a tension between two ideological magnetic fields. On the one hand, the technological life of the city pulled them into the market economy and the task of making one's self legible in urban society, while, on the other hand, the same technological life pulled them toward new forms of Islamic orthopraxis and identification. Both of these forces of dispossession and reorientation have been introduced just over the past two decades. These competing forms of self-fashioning, ways of making the self sensible, pulled Uyghur migrants in competing directions. The qualities associated with Chinese and Western cosmopolitanism competed with Islamic piety. For some, each of these forms of contemporaneity felt like a dispossession of "Native" (Uy: *yerlik*) forms of knowledge and practice even as they found new ways to fashion themselves as contemporary.

At the same time, both Mahmud and Aziz felt strongly that because they had adapted to city life they had begun to "think for themselves" (Uy: *özum dep oylimen*), unlike the rural farmers they grew up around. They saw themselves as fashioning a life for themselves. They felt that their fluency in the systems and aesthetics of the urban world signaled a kind of success. In their home villages, people spoke of them with a sense of pride. They had made it in the big city. Both Mahmud and Aziz were highly aware of their need to perform their success and maintain a public persona of sophistication.

One of the ways they signaled their urbanity was through their style of dress and grooming. Neither of them had facial hair since this was read as a sign of Uyghur rural masculinity and Islamic piety as the People's War on Terror began. Both of them dressed in name-brand clothes—Aziz consciously chose a Turkish cosmopolitanism while Mahmud wore European designer clothes. Both of them noted that their appearance was a large part of their success as Uyghur migrant entrepreneurs. They said that, unlike Han settlers, they always had to prove that they were not imposters in the city. As Aziz put it:

> Just last week I bought a new suit from Caravanchi [a Uyghur-run Turkish import store]. It is a blue Turkish suit made of wool that cost 2,000 yuan [$320]. I've tried other suits like Dior and stuff like that, but they always make me look old. The Turkish suits make people look cool. They have a slim fit and are very flexible. I first started wearing suits when I was selling Amway. At that time I thought that it made me look more impressive. Later I realized that it just made me look like a cheap salesman because it was a cheap suit, so I stopped for a while. Last year I bought my black suit at a place in Xiao Ximen [a commercial district in the city] for around 1,000. I thought that if I was going to be an entrepreneur, it was important that I look the part. So for the past year I have worn that suit every day.

Aziz said that dressing like a young businessman from Istanbul was a way of demonstrating his affinity for Islamic fashions and halal consumerism while still not appearing too pious as surveillance intensified.

Mahmud, on the other hand, wanted to be perceived as Western. He had his hair cut in a high fade. When he walked the streets, he was careful to drape his Apple-brand white headphones over his shoulder to signal that he was a person with means. He wore black aviator sunglasses and a maroon T-shirt that said "ARMANI" in bold white letters for weeks at a time. But in both of their cases, there was something more to their appearance than simply a way of signaling their sophistication. For both of them, the threat of policing was always hanging over them. Dressing like an urbanite, rather than like a pious Islamic farmer, was a tactic of survival that eventually would be undermined by the digital enclosure.

Dispossession by Terror

As Timothy Cheek (2015) and Lisa Rofel (2007) have noted, since the 1990s ideological-aesthetic production across the Chinese nation has in large part turned from the propaganda state of the Maoist period toward a "state-directed public sphere" (Cheek 2015, 9). This state capital–directed public sphere, a form of Chinese governmentality, allows for greater latitude in public speech, though such speech has not been granted full legal protection. Under the People's War on Terror, the freedom of the directed public sphere began to subtract. Now, Uyghurs were *directed* to consume Chinese-language commercial television and attend Uyghur patriotic talent shows as a way of demonstrating their loyalty to the state. The People's War on Terror—which began in May 2014 as a response to a series of violent incidents involving Uyghur and Han

civilians—brought much tighter restrictions on what farmers could view on the internet and in their homes. Not only was viewing or listening to illegal materials a criminal offense punishable by long prison sentences but—as I described in the opening pages of this chapter—prohibiting or refusing to watch state TV was also considered to be an act of so-called extremism on the list of seventy-five signs of extremism that was codified in 2014 (United Front 2014). Suddenly, Mahmud and Aziz found themselves working in a media environment where everything they produced was directed against religious extremism and toward Uyghur assimilation.

At the same time, back in their home villages, their loved ones began to face the threat of detention for unauthorized religious or political media they had consumed over the past five years of internet access. The trauma began for Mahmud in early 2015, just two weeks after the visit to his home that I described at the beginning of this chapter. He told me:

> My dad called me two days ago and told me to be very careful, to not communicate with anyone over the phone; he said that something had happened but that he couldn't talk about it. Then yesterday a friend came from a town near my village and told me what had happened. This is the first time there has ever been any violence in my hometown. I think things will get a lot worse there now; a lot of trouble for me and my family.

Mahmud sighed and began rubbing his temples. His father had told him that he and the rest of the family were now just sheltering in their house. The stretch between their house and the location where sixteen Uyghurs had been killed was on lockdown. He asked his father if he should return home to be with the family over this time. His dad said no. If he were to come back now, he might not be able to leave. We all sat there for long moments of silence trying to process the gravity of what had happened and how those sixteen lives that were lost would affect such a large group of people. "Sixteen people. That is not a simple thing," Mahmud said.

Over the next few days, we pieced together what had happened. Several of Mahmud's neighbors had attempted to grab a Uyghur police officer's gun during a home inspection and turn it on the inspectors. The police, with the support of police volunteers, had been threatening to arrest the neighbor's wife if she did not stop wearing an illegalized Islamic covering. The gun's safety was set, so the neighbor was not able to harm the officer or the farmers who had been conscripted into the security detail, but the neighbors and others in his prayer group had attacked the police with knives. Within several minutes, armed security forces arrived and began to shoot indiscriminately in the home

and the street in front of the home. According to official reports, more than a dozen people were killed, including the neighbor's wife and six-year-old daughter, as well as one of Mahmud's middle school classmates. Talking a few days later about what had happened, Mahmud said: "This is unimaginable; it is not Islam. People should not kill other people under any circumstance. Life on this earth is a gift from God. Only He can give it or take it away. If humans do these sorts of things, it changes them from a human to something more like a monster."

State authorities used the incident as a pretext for going house to house to arrest people who seemed suspicious. In an enactment of the murals that had been painted across the Uyghur homeland (see figure 3.4), within several weeks over one thousand people were arrested on suspicion of conspiring in the plot against the police or for questioning the use of force by the police. Five of Mahmud's uncles were arrested during this time on charges of inciting ethnic hatred; the evidence used against them was recorded messages of Hanafi Islamic teachings on their phones and forced confessions. Over the next few weeks and months, they were given sentences that ranged from five to twenty years. One of Mahmud's uncles simply disappeared; Mahmud now assumes he died during his interrogation. But the terror and subtraction within Mahmud's family did not stop there:

> After they were arrested, we were all numb with fear and pain. My mother was devastated. Despite the pain they felt, my parents decided to adopt two of my uncle's children since my aunt couldn't manage the farm work on her own or find a job and therefore didn't have any source of income. After several weeks of caring for the kids, the police came again and made all of my family members come with them to the police station. They accused them of "caring for the children of terrorists" and opposing government policies. At the police station, they asked, "Why did you act in this illegal way?" My parents answered, "These kids were living under difficult circumstances, so we lent a helping hand. We had no other motive." In the end they made my parents sign a "legal pledge" not to care for my nieces and nephews. Since then, my mom has been detached and in kind of a haze. She has nightmares when she sleeps. Later we tried to see [the children] many times at the address where they said they would be, but they always told us that the children were not there. Even now, we don't know what has happened to them.

Over the next week, the local authorities began to conscript those who had not yet been arrested to participate in apprehending suspects who had fled

FIGURE 3.4. A mural near Mahmud's home: "Crack down on the 'three forces' to maintain social stability!" The "three forces" referred to here in the euphemistic rhetoric of the terror state are "National Separatism, Religious Extremism, Violent Terrorism." In fact, what they refer to are Uyghur self-determination, religious piety, and all resistance to Chinese sovereignty. Image by Zheng Yanjiang.

from the police. They required that every household provide one person to assist in the manhunt. They said that whoever did not cooperate would be treated in the same way as those they were attempting to find. Since Mahmud had already returned to the city, his brother was sent to join the manhunt on behalf of his family. For months he walked with groups of police and other conscripted young men in search of their neighbors who were in hiding in the mountains.

Back in the city, Mahmud found it difficult to focus on his work. He said that now he found making online advertisements meaningless. Every day he received reports from his family of what was happening to the people who had sent him on his journey away from rural life.

> After I returned to school in the city, I heard that a lot of people who were forced to join the search were imprisoned for not cooperating. Going back home is not an option because the situation, particularly for young men, has become simply horrible. Like many other families, my family has been placed on a list of suspicious families. They are no longer allowed to leave their village.

Some of the stories he heard were deeply troubling.

> My family is fine, but everything around them is terrible. Already over one thousand people have been arrested. Every day they see more and more people being dragged down the road at gunpoint. There is absolutely no way that all of those people had connections with what happened back in February. My family thinks that this is just an opportunity for them to grab more people. If they can get the numbers up then it looks better for them. Now my younger brother is back from the mountains and working for the local militia, which means he has to go out most nights to check houses. He also has to go to the local town once a week for training [he demonstrated what that training looks like by doing some lunges with his arms extended as though holding a club]. My father tried to prevent it from happening, but the police said that if he wouldn't allow him to go, then it would mean that he had "a problem with your priorities." The police came and interviewed my mom as well after they arrested her five brothers. They asked her what she thought of the situation; whether she had anything to say in their defense. Of course, if she had defended them she would have been arrested as well. So she just said, "You are doing the right thing, the party knows best." She had to disown her own family. Now, if you are a young man you have either been arrested or they have made you work for the police. There is no one else left. Women are the only ones left in many houses. Some of them are really old and some of them are pregnant or have small children. No one is planting crops. Everyone is just trying to survive each day. Some of my close friends have been taken. The rest are working for the police now. The armed police come by every day, hunting people. At this point, they can just shoot without any consequences, so many people are just shot if they run. At least six people we know have died from torture in prison. My father saw that, on the day of the incident, there were actually dozens of bodies lying in the courtyard of the local police office. So when they say there were only sixteen, they are just trying to make it sound as though they handled it better than they did. These days everyone is afraid. No one is doing any work. They are just trying to keep a really low profile and go to all of the meetings. My little sister has been pretty traumatized by everything. When she goes to school [in a larger town over twenty kilometers from Mahmud's village], the Han kids call her "a little terrorist." She comes home crying.

Over the next few months, Mahmud heard of things that were happening in his community that were previously unimaginable. Every day his parents

were required to go to the local village center, watch instructional videos, and learn patriotic songs. State authorities began to raise a Chinese flag at the local mosque every Friday when they opened the mosque for the weekly prayer service. His mother was forced to burn her prayer rug in the village center. All his family members were asked to write and publicly recite loyalty pledges to the Chinese state.

Although Mahmud's brother was not initially detained, in March 2017, as the mass detention of as many as 1.5 million Muslims began, one of his brother's friends from the neighborhood confessed that he and Mahmud's brother had listened to illegal Islamic messages on his phone several years prior. Soon after this, Mahmud's brother was also detained in a camp. Many people began to crack under the pressure. Two months after the mass disappearances began, Mahmud told me:

> Two days ago my cousin's uncle and his wife passed away suddenly. My cousin's relatives found them hanging from trees behind their house. It seems as though they planned it because they had just bought all of the white burial clothes and had placed them on the sleeping platform in the house. The reason everyone says that the government caused it is because everyone knew that the police had been going to their house every day demanding that they make their son come home. Actually no one knows where that son is. He could be in Eastern China, he could be in prison, he could already be dead. He doesn't have a green card like me,[15] so the government suspects that he is an extremist. But because this couple didn't know where their son was, the police were constantly harassing them. They were sixty-five and fifty-nine years old. Maybe the pressure had gotten even stronger recently, because of what happened in February. Of course, this kind of act is forbidden in Uyghur society and Islamic teaching—a person can never take a person's life—that is why people never talk about these kinds of things and if they do, they say that it is the government that killed them. This is the first time something like this has happened to people I know, but I'm sure it is happening all over the South. Everyone's "spirit has been broken" [Uy: *rohi sulghundi*].

Mahmud worried about his own safety in the city. He worried that because he lived away from home, his family would be put under greater suspicion. He worried that because so many of his relatives had been arrested, someone would accuse him of not being patriotic and submissive.

> The police always want to know where every family member is. They will make you responsible for everything your children do. They always

> ask my parents where I am. They tell them "he is working in Ürümchi" and show them a copy of my green card. But now my green card is not enough. They ask them "Can you prove that he is not doing illegal work?" So then they show them my commercials on their phone and pictures of me. They can see in the commercials that I am an urban person and that I have a stylish haircut. So then they believe them. If they weren't able to do this, they would put a lot of pressure on my parents to make me come home. This is happening all over Southern Xinjiang from Khotan to Kashgar to Aqsu; every place is like this now. That is why so many young people in the city have been forced to leave. Someone who is part of the city-level Public Security Bureau told me that already three hundred thousand Uyghurs have been forced to leave the city because of these kinds of pressures. If you don't have your household registration [Ch: *hukou*] here you are forced to leave. They tell them to return to your hometown and apply for a green card and then you can come back. But actually most people can never process this card. You can never come back. Everyone knows this. That is why young people have so much pressure to go back these days.

For Mahmud, the pressure forced him to maintain a particular aesthetic. It made him stop going to the mosque even on Fridays. Instead, he prayed privately in his apartment. He kept working, producing video commercials for Uyghur companies. Increasingly, the narratives of these commercials began to be pitched not just to a Uyghur audience but to a Chinese-speaking audience as well. It was now important that everything spoken in Uyghur be subtitled in Chinese. The symbolism of the Chinese flag began to suffuse Uyghur-language commercials. Often the rhetoric of "ethnic solidarity" (Uy: *milletler ittipaqliq*; Ch: *minzu tuanjie*) was included in the slogans for Uyghur products. The parameters of the newly implemented digital surveillance system began to partition Uyghur public media consumption and desire toward political goals. The directed public sphere was turned back toward the surveillance capacities of terror capitalism (see figure 3.5). The digital enclosure project of the People's War on Terror was mapped on top of the marketization that had pulled Uyghurs into the city. Their data was building the system. Toward the end of 2018, Mahmud's brother was transferred from a camp to a tightly monitored textile factory owned by a corporation based in a city in Zhejiang Province. He has not been able to visit his home. His basic needs are cared for by the reeducation system, but he does not receive more than several hundred yuan per month to spend in the store in the factory. Mahmud worries he will never see him again.

FIGURE 3.5. A mural near Mahmud's home village. The inscription reads: "The use of the internet to download and disseminate violent terroristic audio and video content will be subject to 'severe' [Uy: *qattiq*] legal punishment." Image by Zheng Yanjiang.

Aziz was also affected by the aesthetics of the People's War on Terror. Like Mahmud, he was a green card holder whose household registration was in Southern Xinjiang. He said his family was also under pressure because he was away from home. He continued:

> I know [the police in my hometown] are watching me, but I just feel like I have nothing to hide. I am an urban person, anyone can see that from just looking at me. On my WeChat account, I actively weed out the people that I think are what they call "separatists" by posting patriotic and ethnic harmony things on my accounts. If someone complains about it, I delete them immediately. Many times those people that are pretending to be really proud of their Uyghur identity are just plants trying to get you to agree with them and say stuff that they can use as evidence against you.

Despite Aziz's proactive stance in maintaining an acceptable public persona, his family was also affected by the counterterrorism campaign. His father was also taken to a reeducation camp because he had studied Arabic, had some knowledge of Islamic law, and had taught others even though he was not authorized to do so. Aziz did not know if they would give him a prison sentence

or if eventually he would be sent to a reeducation factory. He said that now his mother was barely getting by. He was providing for her as best he could in the city, but he was also worried about what would happen if he went back to his village.

> My mom is just barely getting by on her own. We opened a small store where she sells daily necessities and noodles. Actually, after Ramadan I need to go back to my village and renew my green card. I don't know if I will be able to come back or not. Now they are saying that it is really hard for people whose relatives have been arrested to get the card. I have a lot of friends in the police department and I also have money so I think I should be able to do it. But you never know for sure. I would have no reason to live if I went back to the countryside. All of my work is here. If I was there, I would just be a farmer.

For Aziz, the thought of life as a farmer was no longer a possibility. Although processes of dispossession can never be finalized, his home had been taken away from him while at the same time the promise of possessing his own life path by moving to the city in pursuit of economic success was never fully available. His life was not his own; and the support he had known in his home village was no longer available to him either.

Conclusion

The process of dispossession that Mahmud and Aziz experienced encompassed both material displacement and a conversion of their sociality via the digital knowledge economy. They found that technology systems mediated their lives, calling them to transform their appearance and interests and, through this process, they were pulled into a new world. At the same time, the push of state terror in the countryside both tethered them to the suffering of those they loved and made it impossible for them to consider returning to it. The risks were simply too high.

The digital enclosure mediated the aesthetics they were permitted to produce. As the system intensified, the knowledge they produced began to be slotted into a new regime of truth that ignored the trauma both of them were facing. Now, human surveillance compelled Uyghur farmers to leave their TVs on and surveillance checkpoints obligated them to carry their smartphones at all times. The knowledge economy they helped build now became compulsory. Following directives from their home village work brigades (Ch: *dadui*), they used their WeChat app to publicly denounce forms of pious Islam and ethnic pride and proclaim their love of the Chinese state. Increasingly, they

were terrified that the digital footprint of their past online activity would be found through scans by assessment machines that could be plugged into their phones. Mahmud and Aziz felt they had no choice but to carry on business as usual to support their remaining family members in the countryside, as if the imprisonment of their loved ones had no effect on them. Their urban aesthetics had become a ruse, a grotesque parody of the freedom they had hoped for when they left their villages. They now felt in a much deeper way that their lives and appearance were being expropriated. As I show in the next chapter, the disappearances of precriminals and the parameters of the newly imposed forms of digital and biometric surveillance pushed Uyghur young men to turn to their friends for social support.

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