

Empty Uyghur Mosques During Ramadan in China

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A deserted mosque in Ürümqi in 2018. Image by Darren Byler

In 2014 Uyghur college students secretly fasted during Ramadan. Many of them would wake up early in the morning to eat the cold pilaf and nan that they had hidden away on the bookshelves on their bunk beds before they went to sleep. They ate in the dark by the light of battery-powered reading lights, listening for the [sound of footsteps](#) outside of their dorm

rooms. The authorities in their Chinese university had told them that anyone caught eating before the sun came up would be expelled. They told them in some cases that their parents would be called and the police would be notified. They were told that fasting during Ramadan was a sign of religious “extremism.”

Despite these tight controls, many young Turkic Muslims continued to fast across the Uyghur Autonomous Region in Northwest China. At night restaurants were packed with students waiting with slices of watermelon and pieces of bread that had been distributed throughout the restaurant for those who were breaking the fast. The students waited for a silent signal from restaurant workers that it was time for *iftar* and that they could begin to eat and drink. Few people talked openly about the fast. Those who fasted were the silent majority.

Since 2016 and the arrival of a massive, purpose-built, “reeducation” [camp system](#), this practice too has stopped. Now any adult of military age who is caught fasting can be detained. In the universities and high schools the students are now forced to eat and drink in front of school authorities. There is no way to dodge these forced violations of Islamic piety. All restaurants must serve food throughout the day. Everyone must act as though Ramadan is not happening. They know that the police and their informants are everywhere.

The Uyghur mosques that have not yet been [destroyed or closed](#) are empty aside from a few elderly men. At the entrance to each mosque, face-scan checkpoints match state-issued IDs to faces and, in some cases, capture [identifying information](#) from their electronic devices. Since they know that they can be detained if they enter a mosque, most Uyghurs no longer attend mosques to pray and study the Quran during Ramadan or any other time of the year.

Uyghurs from across the region have told me that they have been asked to burn prayer rugs and religious texts, including Qurans, in public displays of loyalty to the state. Uyghurs have been informed that any mention of the name God, including the common phrase “God willing,” any sign of prayer after a meal, even using the common Arabic greeting *asalam alaykum* can result in detention and interrogation.

Over the past two years, over ten percent of the Uyghur population of 11 million people has been sent to “reeducation camps.” The same has happened to more than ten percent of the Kazakh population of the region. The vast majority of those who were detained were those who were young men who were determined to be [too pious](#) in their religious practice. They were said to be guilty of having unauthorized religious knowledge: perhaps they had studied Arabic or listened to messages from an Islamic teacher on their phone. It could simply be that they prayed on a daily basis or went to the mosque regularly. That, combined with their age, ethnicity and employment status, was used as evidence of their so-called “extremism.”



A checkpoint at the entrance to the Aq Masjid, one of the key Uyghur mosques in Ürümqi, in 2018. Uyghurs under the age of 65 who enter the mosque on a regular basis can be sent to “reeducation camps.” Image by Joanne Smith Finley.

In the camps, which resemble medium security prisons, Uyghur language and religious practice are policed by cameras and recording equipment. Even attempting to wash one’s face is seen as religious ablution. There are very few blank spots outside of the gaze of the cameras inside the camps. Uyghurs in detention tell each other to “[pray on the inside](#).” No one is permitted to fast. In fact, many are asked to openly and publicly [denounce](#) their faith on a regular basis. In some cases, Uyghurs have been forced to eat pork as punishment for their recalcitrance.

In any discussion of Islam in China it is important to note that there are three major groups of Muslims in China, and that these groups are treated quite differently by Chinese authorities. There are approximately 10.5 million Hui, 1.5 million Kazakhs, and 11 million Uyghurs in China. Only around 1 million Hui—Chinese-speaking Muslims who are not of Turkic descent—live in the Uyghur autonomous region. The majority of the Hui, or Chinese Muslims, live throughout China with larger concentrations in Gansu and the Ningxia region.

Because Hui do not have historical claims to a territorial homeland, speak Chinese as their first language, and can pass as Han, in the past they have not faced the same kinds of ethno-racial discrimination as Turkic Muslims. Unlike Uyghurs, they are not regarded as suspicious, denied jobs and denied the right to rent or lease property in Han majority areas. They can move freely throughout the country, get passports and many go on the Hajj to Mecca. In most cases they are also permitted to fast during Ramadan. The same is [not true](#) for Muslims who live in the Uyghur autonomous region. As in state-instituted [Islamophobic projects](#) around the world, the lives of Uyghurs and other Muslims in their region are being destroyed by a “war on terror.”

Instead of a period of spiritual renewal, in recent history Ramadan has been time of heightened oppression throughout the region. The local authorities fear that the policing of fasting will result in Uyghur protests as it has in the past. The 2015 mass killing of hundreds of Uyghurs who were protesting restrictions on fasting is the [most obvious example](#) of the horrific scale of state violence in the past. As is nearly always the case in Uyghur homeland, the numbers killed in these types of incidents were likely significantly higher than was reported. Uyghurs who I interviewed regarding this incident told me that perhaps as many as two thousand mostly unarmed protesters (some were carrying farm tools) were shot by police armed with automatic weapons. Women, children and the elderly were [also killed](#) by the police. A Han person living in the area [told reporters](#), “it is a bit like Iraq over here.”

Darren Byler’s work focuses on emerging forms of art and politics among Uyghur migrants and Han settlers in urban Northwest China. His co-translations of Uyghur fiction and poetry have appeared in *Guernica*, *Pathlight* and *Banango Street*.