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## Reimagining the Silk Road

“Reimagining the Silk Road” is a collection of photographs I have taken during travels throughout northwest China from 2004 to the present. In recent years, the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Chinese scholars, and foreign observers have touted the development of the “New Silk Road” (*xin sichouzhilu* 新丝绸之路). Despite some difference in views about what this term means, interpretations fall within a bandwidth that conceptualizes the slogan as an emblem of China’s reconnection with Central Asia for mutual commercial and national security interests. When commentators refer to the New Silk Road, it is often through the language of developmental economics: small commodities, oil, natural gas, hydrocarbons, and uranium.

Alongside multilateral trade and investment between China and Central Asian states, the New Silk Road stands for geopolitical stability. As seen in the increasing number of joint military exercises between the PRC and Pakistan as well as Uzbekistan, the New Silk Road connotes counterterrorism. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), founded in 2001 by the PRC, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, is emerging as a would-be counterbalance to the European Union

and NATO. India (an observer to the SCO) and Turkey have expressed interest in joining. Energy acquisition, regime instability, and the threat of militant Islam have bound together nations that otherwise disagree on a number of platforms.



Map of the Silk Road. Source: British Library.

The point of departure of these photographs is to illustrate—in snapshot—the lived experience of those who dwell along or near what is imagined to be the New Silk Road. As historians have told us, the Silk Road was not a single superhighway connecting Beijing and Istanbul, but rather a network of routes that permitted local trade and were linked to allow for transregional commerce. While the Silk Road's commercial aspects are important, its legacy is manifold. Within the various circuits that linked together to form the Silk Road, Chinese Muslims, Turkic Muslims, Tibetans, Mongols, Han Chinese, and a number of other groups traded,

intermarried, converted, and waged war against one another. The result is a high degree of linguistic, ethnic, theological, and architectural syncretism.

The Silk Road thus provides an apt window through which to envision Islam in China/China in Islam. The Silk Road was one vector for Islam's entry into China shortly after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century c.e. After military campaigns and migrations led by Genghis Khan in the early thirteenth century c.e., communities of Muslims formed along the Silk Road in areas like Gansu Province, along the Qinghai-Tibet plateau. Whereas Zoroastrianism, Manicheism, and shamanism predominated in the area today known as Xinjiang, Islam spread into Xinjiang in the tenth century c.e. As those who became known as Uyghurs maintained strong ties with Central Asia, populations of Chinese Muslims in "inner China" had closer ties with Han Chinese, Tibetans, and others. These different orientations are reflected in Islamic practice by Uyghurs and Chinese Muslims today.

Taking advantage of religious liberation in the late 1970s, Muslims in China have begun to reconnect with historical ties linking them to coreligionists outside China. These networks are religious in nature, but they are also commercial, intellectual, and educational. Through Sufi pilgrimage, the hajj, and trade, Muslims in China are reimagining the Silk Road. As with their predecessors, the "new" Silk Roads are local, regional, and transnational linkages—both material and imagined—that build and sustain communities. From rural Sufis in Ningxia to urban Uyghurs in Kashgar, Muslim minority populations not only localize Islam in China but also reconnect China with the global community of Muslims.

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