

There is no news from Kashgar Old Town. It is not news that every person must go through x-ray security at every entry point into the old town; it happens every day. It is not news that police patrol the old streets; you are reminded every five or ten minutes. It is not news that many businesses are shuttered and gone, while others have been tidied up and prettified; it's been like that for a year or more. It is not news that local children no longer congregate and play in untidy laneways; it is silence.

I was recently back in Kashgar, in the Uighur heartland of far western China. The change in the once-vibrant Old Town in three short years was depressing. When I say 'Old Town' I mean the reconstructed, new Old Town that was built with wider streets and safer structures after 90% of the original ancient Old Town was razed by authorities between 2009 and 2015. The most obvious change in three years was the extreme increase in police presence and security checkpoints.



Kashgar Old Town three years ago, full of local activity

Images by Rob Morgan ARPS

At one corner I recognised the late afternoon kebab vendor. He was one of the few still there. The baker nearby was gone, as was the friendly butcher in another street. Three helmeted riot police officers arrived at the corner and positioned themselves in a line beside a shuttered business, opposite. The kebab vendor viewed them with what looked like a mixture of apprehension and contempt. After about five minutes in silence these armed and shield-carrying 'public security' officers headed off to work their magic at

another intersection. Before they'd get there, they'd pass other police in an electric buggy and one on an electric scooter; they'd also pass under several new highly visible public security cameras.

I'd been told before arriving that it's OK to photograph anything, except the police. That seemed normal for this part of the world (not just China), until I needed to put it into practice. I pointed my camera at a corner I'd photographed three years earlier. Now it was a police post, with a police vehicle. I went back past another occupied police vehicle, then past riot police at the next corner and over a busy road and into the main Old Town. Now, to get in, there's an x-ray security point and police with metal detectors. Three years ago there was unhindered entry. Three years ago the only intimidation in Kashgar was an armed personnel carrier and a few riot police opposite the statue of Mao; now they are everywhere. The daily message is obvious.

Yet the main streets of the Old Town aren't empty: instead of the previous buzz of routine local activity, the streets are now full with a new attraction: Han Chinese tourists – on foot or in electric buggies, with guides showing them what I know to be no longer there. It has all been tidied up; pot plants line each street, cute wooden 'gateways' have been built and in anticipation of National Day celebrations there were little Chinese flags everywhere. The Old Town has been turned into a soulless, half-empty, ethnic minority theme park, completely safe for Chinese tourists. Mind you, I'd found it completely safe – and friendly – three years before, but I'm not Han Chinese.

Three years earlier there'd been one original mud brick section of the Old Town on high ground near the river, still intact and inhabited. I had wandered through it, unhindered. Now it is closed off and empty, apparently due to earthquake damage in 2017. With two or three earthquakes a year in this area and the old town surviving for centuries, how true that explanation is I do not know. It will be reconstructed, I was told, though apart from works to stabilise its base there was no activity, just decay. If its higgledy-piggledy collection of laneways is replaced by neat and tidy streets, with security cameras and enough width for tourist buggies, that will not be news.



Kashgar Old Town, now with domestic tourists, public security cameras and police patrols

There is no news from Kashgar Old Town. Only tears.