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*Borders & Territories 20/21 – Research Plan*

## **Today's show, live from Xinjiang: Death of a Territory**

*Passive spectators to the destructive spectacle, how can the Uighur population re-appropriate of what is left of the Tarim Basin?*

### **Abstract:**

The research began with a comprehensive analysis of the Xinjiang region, with specific attention to the area defined by the Tarim endorheic basin. The preliminary context analysis led to the definition (through the paper which is delineating the theoretical framework) of the **'death of the territory'**: death defined by the relentless exploitation of the land, the people and the culture. For each of the topic presented, an A1 drawing was executed for P1 research presentation.

#### *Exploitation of land:*

Following the Great Leap West of the 1960s (mass migration of Han Chinese communities to Xinjiang, in an effort to abate ethnic tension by the increasing economic importance of the region), the Tarim Basin has witnessed an extensive act of exploitation of its resources. Starting from the uncontrolled growth of the farming land and the establishment of oil fields in the desert, that has caused the demand for water to exceed the natural supply available, therefore leading to the engineering of water supply infrastructures with a tremendous outcome on the environment. Numerous rivers have dried out in the course of the past 100 years because of their deviation, which has caused the disappearance of small oases and lakes: (in)famous is the disappearance of the Lop Nor lake, a clear backlash of the human interventions. But the apex of the exploitation was witnessed with the 50 years of nuclear tests executed in the north-east of the basin, which have unavoidably destroyed the ecosystems and the natural stability of the area.

#### *Exploitation of culture:*

The recent history of the region is entirely shaped by disputes, violence, repressions and destruction. The aforementioned mass migration of Han has led to several riots and violence exploding at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In an attempt to avoid further violence and attacks the Chinese Communist Party has been forcing an agenda of re-education and de-extrimification of thoughts. A cultural saturation (even to the point of erasure) at a concrete level, being carried via the demolition of heritage as well as the 'disneyfication' of specific areas in order to enhance tourism. This 'urbanicide' has affected traditional cemeteries, being replaced by 'more hygienic' ones, and Mosques, being de-domed, or even demolished, because regarded as dangerous or not legitimate. More disputed is the debate over the re-education centers' infrastructure which was introduced to educate the local population to the Chinese traditions and culture, but instead there are claims that these are nothing more than detention centers acting to culturally brainwash its prisoners; allegations that the government of China has repeatedly disregarded and denied.

#### *Exploitation of bodies:*

The notably disputed crisis of the Uighurs minority is the epitome of the exploitation of people. Witnesses and leaked documents support the theory of a possible enforcement of labor over the Muslim population of the Xinjiang province, beside the aforementioned allegations of mass incarceration within the 'de-extrimification camps'. If we were only to focus on the publically stated intensions for these 're-education centers', leaving aside allegations, we would still be talking about a clear intention to homogenize the culture of the area with

the Han Chinese traditions and habits over the different ethnic groups. Creating this forced homogeneity of people stand to lose completely the territory, and the memory of it by forcing, in this case, a re-territorialization of thoughts.

In order to investigate and define such process I started looking for 'anomalies' within the territory, studying the areas where the anomalies have occurred, or are still occurring. Some examples are the mentioned nuclear test zones, the re-education camps, the oil extraction facilities placed in the very middle of a vast desert, the 'wandering' lake of Lop Nor (now disappeared), the destruction of cultural cemeteries. What the research aims is to do, is to understand what kind of new territory is being defined by these 'anomalies' and interventions, while also understanding what is left for the people that were originally inhabiting freely in the Tarim basin. The population is a sort of passive spectator to the current agenda of the Chinese government, not having an active role within it and also being the injured party in the process.

### **Problem statement:**

The combination of such processes unavoidably leads the territory to a 'plane of immanence', to cite a Deleuzian concept, an undefined state that I tried to connote as the death of it. An irreversible death from all possible aspects, tangibles and non: deconstructing its characteristics, altering its meaning and replacing its memory.

Once all the processes of de-territorialization are completed, the permanent changes to the territory leave nothing but a dying land, with no culture and a homogenized population that can only spectate to this horrific play of destruction. Little to no opportunities remain for the people, spectators as well as passive actors to the act, in a suggestive new role for them to discover, a new land to re-appropriate and a culture to rebuild.

It is exactly the relationship between the exploited, or dead, territory and the 'passive actors – spectators' which has triggered my research questions. A minority deprived of land, culture and rights which is trying to gain back as much as possible of the little that remains of the once prosperous and flourishing oases of the ancient Silk Roads. What is more to be acknowledged: the exploitation is still an active process within the territory of the Tarim Basin, which keeps the Uighurs in a passive role during this destructive spectacle. Is there any way for them to 're-gain' the territory? Or are they destined to only sit back and 'enjoy' the show? This situation raises questions of the future shape and role which architecture can take inside of the conflict and the specific conditions of the context.

### **Research questions:**

What role does a population have once it has been deprived of their own land, culture and rights? Given the contemporary history of Xinjiang, what is left of the exploited land? Is it only 'dead' territory? Can the Uighur minority re-appropriate of what is left of (what once used to be) their land? If yes, how? To what extent? What is the role of architecture in a territory of such strong conflict?

The questions trigger a suggestive intervention within a territory of conflict, a land of almost extreme conditions, isolated from any urban settlement. The role of the project will be the most important step of the proposal, since the architecture becomes the medium for the re-appropriation of the land, culture, and finally freedom.

Alongside theoretical condition, the design must confront the extreme weather and nuclear pollution of the area, which both calls for an attentive approach to the surrounding. Design assignment will investigate how architecture can be a medium to either exacerbate or preserve, how it can be a symbol of its society and their status, and how it can be elevated to a milestone for the re-appropriation of the territory.

## **Methodology:**

Specifically based in Xinjiang, the North-Western region of China, the research is confronted by an enormous lack of information and obstacles on every level. From the very basic language barrier, that confines the research to the only available translated materials, to the lack of updated satellite images and the impossibility to travel or get in contact with people from the area.

To a certain extent the methodology is formally phenomenological, based on an investigation of the available materials, and given the subject of such investigation, one could effectively reconnect it to Weizmann's 'forensic' approach to the research: studying buildings, urban environments and territories to find architectural and spatial evidences which support speculative theories and visions for the area.

A speculative approach is therefore part of the methodology, which requires intensive reading of the geopolitical and social situation in order to imaginatively project (or foresee) possible current and future scenarios that are hidden, or of which no distinct and clear information/resource is available.

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