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## **Physical and Social Spaces ‘Under Construction’**

### ***Spatial and Ethnic Belonging in New Residential Compounds in Aksu,<sup>1</sup> Southern Xinjiang***

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#### **Abstract**

Urbanisation in Xinjiang in the last two decades has been accompanied by immigration, a real-estate construction boom and changing residential patterns. This paper discusses how the construction of new residential compounds occurs simultaneously to the construction of social, spatial and ethnic belongings in oasis towns in southern Xinjiang with a particular focus on the city of Aksu. While investment considerations and the promise of a modernised urban lifestyle motivate citizens to purchase housing, the market-oriented real-estate business since the end of the 1990s also offers opportunities for Han and Uyghur residents to draw ethnic boundaries. The choice of a neighbourhood as well as the preference of interior design are frequently used to mark ethnicity. However, ethnic residential choices are restricted by work unit affiliation and the available socio-economic means. Thus, although discourses of Han and Uyghur residents display clear tendencies of ethnic segregation, urban residential spaces are in fact often ethnically mixed.

#### **Keywords**

Xinjiang – urban spaces – *xiaoqu* – residential areas – ethnic spaces

In the post-reform era, China’s cities have faced tremendous spatial transformations. Large-scale immigration from rural areas and a construction boom are two of the major challenges for urban areas today. While urban development and its impact on society are extensively researched for eastern China (e.g. Friedmann 2005; Wu *et al.* 2007), comparable data for Xinjiang are scarce. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Chinese government

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<sup>1</sup> For place names I use the place denominations suggested by the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names regularly organised by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names.

has increased the investment in infrastructural development of this border region to, among others, facilitate China's access to Central Asia and its abundant natural resources (Becquelin 2004; Dillon 2004). Attracted by favourable policies, large numbers of Han investors and individuals from all over China have since migrated to Xinjiang to participate in the economic boom that has been further accelerated through the Open Up the West Programme (Ch. *xibu da kaifa*) launched in 1999 (Holbig 2004; Joniak-Lüthi 2013). In recent years, the Chinese Communist Party has initiated the Central Work Forum on Xinjiang (Ch. *Zhongyang Xinjiang Gongzuo Zuotanhui*), aiming at boosting economic growth while at the same time calming down increasing ethnic tensions between Han and Uyghur inhabitants (Leibold 2014). Additionally, Xi Jinping's New Silk Road initiative launched in 2013 re-emphasised the importance of the region's infrastructure development. All these policies and initiatives have had an obvious impact on the built environment: urban population in Xinjiang's capital Ürümqi, for example, increased from 1.46 million in 1990 to almost 3 million in 2010 (Geohive 2015). The city area increased from 10 km<sup>2</sup> in 1949 to 230 km<sup>2</sup> in 2008 (Dong & Zhang 2011, 115).

While a number of studies address the ecological problems caused by the unprecedented growth of Xinjiang's cities (Halik 2003; Toops 2004), only a few studies deal with urban spatial transformations and their social and ethnic implications in southern Xinjiang (Li 2010; Ma 2003). However, ethnic relations are a crucial factor to be considered in urban development and investment scenarios. Current urban transformations include the demolition of old town housing; the enlargement of urban areas; the construction of new multi-storey and high-rise buildings; and the re-modelling of urban sites for tourism. This is accompanied by the disappearance of cemeteries, mosques and bazaars from the former Muslim-dominated oasis towns. All these processes of urbanisation and modernisation in Xinjiang cannot be analysed without attending to notions of ethnic and local belonging. Besides the introduction of broad roads, large squares, river promenades and Chinese restaurants and shops, the construction of new residential compounds (Ch. *xiaoqu*) – discussed here – indicates a further assimilation to urban development processes happening all over China (Hassenpflug 2009). Still, despite the similar organisational form, some aspects of how *xiaoqu* are perceived and used in Xinjiang are unique. Crucially, the choice of housing area is here used to articulate belonging to not only different social, but also different ethnic groups. At the same time, both Han and Uyghur local residents connote the construction of *xiaoqu* with a sense of overcoming regional 'backwardness'.

Based on participant observation, real-estate promotion analysis and interview data collected during a total stay of 10 months in Xinjiang in 2011 and 2012,<sup>2</sup> this paper discusses how the construction of spatial and ethnic belonging in the city of Aksu occurs simultaneously with the construction of *xiaoqu*. Where useful, I refer to complementary data from Ürümqi. In 1983, Aksu had become the political, economic, and cultural centre of the same-named district (Ch. *diqu*)<sup>3</sup> located on the northern rim of the Taklamakan Desert in southern Xinjiang (Akesu Shi 2007, 25). The entire city area, including urban and rural areas, had a population of roughly 530,000 inhabitants in 2010 (Geohive 2015). Aksu has played an important role in the history of expansion of the Chinese Communist power in southern Xinjiang. The first division of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (Ch. *Xinjiang Shengchan Jianshe Bingtuan*, hereafter Bingtuan) was established in and around the city in the 1950s. Along with expansion of the urban area came a massive population increase achieved through the demobilisation and settlement of the soldiers of the People's Liberation Army and recruitment of migrants from inner China. The area around Aksu was formerly predominantly inhabited by Uyghur, but today Aksu city is one of the those with the largest Han population in southern Xinjiang. The Han migration into Aksu is closely related to the changing morphology of residence.

### ***Xiaoqu*: Notions of Spatial Belonging in the Neo-socialist Era**

Architecture and the built environment both considerably affect urban space use, residential patterns and senses of belonging. As a transmitter for ideological state values, the role of architecture is often addressed with regard to socialist buildings and urban planning in Central Asian countries (e.g. Borén 2009; Stronski 2010). Exploration of the relations between the built environment and processes of social identity formation help to grasp the ideas and values inscribed in the material environment, or the 'ideology in infrastructure' (Humphrey 2005). However, the grand narratives of Soviet and Chinese architecture are partly fragmented by social practice and perceptions of architectural spaces which are much more mundane. Urban residents use and incorporate their material surroundings into their own social worlds and

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<sup>2</sup> Fieldwork for this article was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. The author would in particular like to thank Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi, Uradyn Bulag, Heinzpeter Znoj, Ellen Hertz, Peter Finke and two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on the content discussed here.

<sup>3</sup> Aksu District has a population of 2,370,809 people (2010), covers an area of 128 km<sup>2</sup> and is divided into nine sub-divisions, one of them being Aksu city (Geohive 2015).

create plural senses of spatial – and in the case of Xinjiang, ethnic – belonging. Discourses and social practices of people living in the changing urban environment of southern Xinjiang mark and construct their social space.

Since the mid-1990s, the emergence of *xiaoqu* has added a new element to urban residential organisation in southern Xinjiang. The morphology of *xiaoqu* represents a mix of post-socialist residential districts and gated communities. These residential compounds accommodate the growing middle and upper class and are built either in inner-city areas (where they replace single-storey housing) or on former agricultural land in suburban areas. My attention was particularly drawn to the marked spatial delimitation of *xiaoqu*: walls and gates draw clear and perceivable boundaries that separate the residential community inside from the outside. Gated urban spaces were already present in imperial China and again emphasised during socialist city planning since the 1950s, where work units (Ch. *danwei*) were surrounded by walls with a few gates (Friedmann 2007). Such a partition of residential areas through architectural means regulates not only the relationship between domestic and public space (Kent 1990), but can also delimit ethnically inhabited spaces in ‘divided societies’ (Calame & Charlesworth 2009). Still, even though certain socio-cultural similarities among people living in the same neighbourhood might be expected, Harvey (1989: 109) draws attention to the ‘difficulty of defining “similar” and of ‘showing whether people are similar because they live close to each other or live close to each other because they are similar’. Compounds can facilitate the establishment of a shared sense of belonging. However, factors like class, ethnicity and professional affiliation may also both expand and fragment it.

In the real-estate driven urbanisation in China, *xiaoqu* are often organised along socio-economic criteria, as the price of a real estate defines who can afford to live in a given area. Considering the heterogeneity of middle-class groups in China (Chen & Goodman 2013), in this paper I primarily define the middle class as a group with the necessary economic means to invest in house property. This mechanism of social stratification is, obviously, not unique to China, as the emergence of gated communities in North and South America (Caldeira 2000; Giglia 2014), South Africa (Beall 2002) or gentrification processes elsewhere indicate (Dörfler 2010; Herzfeld 2010). In southern Xinjiang, it is in particular the wish to mark ethnic belonging through the choice of neighbourhood that adds a new dimension to the existing literature on China’s urbanisation which generally focuses on *xiaoqu* as a marker of social status (Fleischer 2010; Tomba 2004).

Elements of the built environment – such as *xiaoqu* – have a specific temporality. Ma (2002: 1558–9) argues that urban landscape reflects the ‘social and economic reproduction of the time’, and Schloegel (2003) points out that time can be read in the places we live in. The often long-lasting materiality of architecture creates spaces that recall former eras and political occurrences. The morphology of *xiaoqu* resembles that of Mao-era’s urban work unit compounds (Bray 2005). The introduction of *xiaoqu* – an architectural influence from eastern China – is hence a marker of a place- and time-specific spatiality in oasis towns in southern Xinjiang which were until recently organised mainly along the spatial boundaries of Uyghur *mähällä* community.<sup>4</sup> The strong presence of the private sector in forming and transforming *xiaoqu* in the recent construction boom is yet another element of this specific temporality.

This paper explores how *xiaoqu* and new apartment spaces in Aksu are embedded in the larger narratives of market, state, modernisation and ethnicity. First, I will explore the role of a new apartment as a capitalised investment opportunity in a neo-socialist era with declining state support. Second, my analysis will focus on the forms of advertisement for the new residential communities as a way to overcome the sense of ‘backwardness’ that Xinjiang residents often assume to live in. And third, I will contextualise the choice of housing as an expression of ethnicity.

### **‘My new apartment is an investment’<sup>5</sup>**

Since the 2000s, construction companies have become one of the most visible transformative forces in urban areas in southern Xinjiang, with residential compound projects accounting for most of the newly emerging built environment. Since the Chinese state encourages city administrations to generate their own incomes, leasing land to private developers is one of the most lucrative ways to do so. Land can be leased from the state for 70 years for a residential construction and for 40 years for a commercial or other type of construction (Zhang 2010: 18, 43). In the mid 2000s, 44 per cent of the urban land in Aksu was used for residential purposes,

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<sup>4</sup> *Mähällä* is a Muslim community organisation form in Central Asia and is mostly organised around a central mosque. *Mähällä* may regulate administrative affairs like the issuing of passports or the organisation of financial and juridical committees for the representation of children, women and veterans. It also assumes the role of a moral community responsible for life-cycle events, communal solidarity and Muslim religious identity (Bellér-Hann 2008; Dautcher 2009). See also Pawan and Niyazi’s paper in this special issue.

<sup>5</sup> Quote from a fieldwork interview, June 2011

which is a high ratio compared to the 20–32 per cent in other Chinese cities.<sup>6</sup> While real-estate prices are on the rise in all major cities in China, the price level in Xinjiang is considerably lower than in the east. Still, the construction and selling of apartments has become a booming business in Xinjiang and apartment prices have risen rapidly in the last two decades (Zhang *et al.* 2010: 278). In Ürümqi they reached 10,000 RMB/m<sup>2</sup> in central areas and 5000–7000 RMB/m<sup>2</sup> in suburban areas in 2011. A Uyghur resident from Ürümqi commented:

My apartment in Ürümqi is located in the old inner city area near People's Square. I purchased it through my husband's work unit in 2005 for roughly 3000 RMB/m<sup>2</sup>. Today, I could sell the apartment for 10,000 RMB/m<sup>2</sup> or more. Prices for apartments have risen enormously, so all my friends are trying to scrape up the money to purchase an apartment now. Already half a year later, one can sell the apartment at a profit. A few years ago, one could get an apartment in central Ürümqi for 2000 RMB/m<sup>2</sup>. Today, even an apartment on the outskirts of the city is more expensive. (Interview, Ürümqi, September 2011)

This account reflects the general attitude among both Han and Uyghur middle-class citizens in Xinjiang, where real estate has become one of the most desirable investments. Considerations of easily earned money overlap with wishes to generate financial security. Compared to the situation in Ürümqi and cities in inner China, apartments in Aksu are much cheaper. The average price in the city centre was between 2000 and 3000 RMB/m<sup>2</sup> in 2011, the most expensive compounds selling for roughly 4000 RMB/m<sup>2</sup>. But reaching the goal of having one's own apartment and thus ensuring one's belonging to the community of middle-class residents costs more than that. These prices do not include the substantial additional costs for interior design. These additional investments entail paying for sanitary equipment for kitchen and bathroom, interior design, furniture and the salaries of the workers, which may mount up to an additional third of the apartment's initial price (Zhang 2010, 69). Alongside other mundane expressions of ethnic boundaries (Smith Finley 2013), interior decoration is the field where ethnic distinctions are marked. The Uyghur tend to choose other forms of decoration (e.g. woodcarving) and different wallpapers from their Han neighbours.

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<sup>6</sup> In addition, the average per capita use of housing space in Xinjiang is also very high (68 m<sup>2</sup> as against 18–28 m<sup>2</sup> in other Chinese cities) (Akesu Shi 2007, 10).

Those chosen by the Uyghur are stylistically close to Turkish and Central Asian interior decor. Furthermore, one room of the apartment usually features an elevated floor covered with carpets and mats to accommodate guests staying overnight – an element adapted from traditional Uyghur courtyard housing (Dautcher 2009, 12–15).

The demand for new apartment space in Aksu was constantly high in 2011 and in part driven by real-estate speculators who, it is feared, may bring the market to overheating. In Aksu, each of the new residential compound projects provides enough apartment space for several thousand people<sup>7</sup> – a number that appears rather large for a city population of roughly 500,000. The new compounds may attract immigrants from the countryside or other regions, but it is also possible that they will end up as ghost towns, whose only purpose was to keep the investment and construction machinery going.

Since the price peak in 2014, apartment prices have decreased and the real estate development of the coming years is yet unclear. Nevertheless, the real-estate business still offers formerly inexistent means to generate profit for those who can dispose of the necessary seed capital. The tripling of real-estate prices within a few years is no exception and motivates both local people and people from other provinces to buy apartments in Aksu. One of my informants, an interior designer from Guangzhou who came to Aksu to invest in property, claimed that he could earn up to 50,000 RMB per year by buying and reselling apartments. Buying an apartment was equal to making an investment (Ch. *touzi*) – a practice that drives up real-estate prices and significantly disadvantages the less wealthy Han and Uyghur residents of Aksu.

As my research data further demonstrate, apartment purchase is regarded as a social insurance. Work unit employees can purchase apartments built by their work unit at prices significantly lower than those in privately built *xiaoqu*. Those not employed by the state purchase apartments without this advantage. For example, my research participant from Ürümqi – a female taxi-driver in her 40s – purchased her first apartment as a kind of old-age provision and the second in order to enhance her financial security in the future. At the time of the purchase, the real-estate price was considerably below 5000 RMB/m<sup>2</sup> – the price for her apartment at the time of our talk in 2011. In Aksu, the considerably wealthy Uyghur cotton farmers who profited from high cotton prices in 2010 are an important group among apartment purchasers, also in the most exclusive residential compounds of the city. Hence,

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<sup>7</sup> Probably the largest compound about to be built was the Dolan Micropolis that, according to the real-estate agent, provides apartment space for up to 40,000 people.

individuals from different social classes – speculators from eastern China, state employees, taxi drivers and cotton farmers – invest in real estate. While some individuals invest now to buy themselves social security for the future, others seek a quick profit. Both modes of investment became possible in the neo-socialist urban economy with waning state regulation of the housing market.

The shift from state-provisioned housing to a more privatised real-estate market has transformed the individual's affiliation with a residential community from a state-allocated into a market good. The examples of Han and Uyghur individuals purchasing apartments show how the market-oriented real-estate business opened new doors for personal enrichment. Though the process appears neo-liberal, the Party-state remains closely involved in the present urban infrastructure development through the work unit (Ma 2002: 1547). Citizens with permanent urban household registration (Ch. *hukou*) and work unit employment can benefit from subsidised housing. The self-employed Han and Uyghur have no choice but purchase apartments on the privatised market.

While both Han and Uyghur middle classes deem real-estate a safe investment for their new wealth, ethnicity is by no means absent in these processes. First, it is mainly Han speculators from eastern China who artificially drive up the prices. This affects lower-class local Uyghur and migrant Han workers in particular. For them, it has become difficult to find affordable accommodation in city centres. Second, Han and Uyghur homebuyers clearly draw ethnic boundaries through the interior decoration, displaying different tastes and preferences.

### **‘We bring international city standards from Guangdong to Xinjiang’<sup>8</sup>**

Besides their role as investment opportunity, *xiaoqu* are increasingly promoted as a way to modernise urban areas in southern Xinjiang. The oasis towns around the Taklamakan Desert, far away from China's economic centres, are often perceived by local Han and Uyghur residents as places of ‘backwardness’ (Ch. *luohou*). For some, the sense of geographical distance from the economic and political centres creates this sense of backwardness. Others highlight the deficient condition of Xinjiang's infrastructure. Urbanisation – and the new *xiaoqu* as its essential component – is promoted in state discourses as the means to improve it, alongside living standards. However, in Aksu, discourses of modernisation and development are not only held by governmental institutions to legitimise large-scale urbanisation projects,

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<sup>8</sup> Quote from a real estate flyer in Aksu, collected in June 2011.

but are also adopted by residents and construction companies. The flyers advertising residential projects demonstrate this connection between new housing and modern lifestyle.<sup>9</sup> The following episode from my fieldwork notes illustrates the advertisement strategy of *xiaoqu* promotion:

After walking in the dusty streets of one of the newly built neighbourhoods at the Dolan riverside in Aksu, I reach the office of the ‘Blue Lagoon’<sup>10</sup> compound. Referring to the Chinese imperial architectural tradition in which stone lions are positioned on either side of the entrance gate as protectors, the doorway of this office of an eastern Chinese company is protected by two plastic lions. The interior of the office is designed in a way that highlights the contrast between inside and outside: whereas the feel outside was dominated by the heat, the sun, and the dust of summery Aksu, inside the office, a cool breeze, relaxing music, and friendly employees cater for a pleasant atmosphere. It seems to me as if this eastern Chinese company brought along a sense of ‘civilized city’ (Ch. *wenming chengshi*), praised in Chinese urbanization campaigns, while the local scenery outside physically represents the ‘backwardness’. At the same time, I reflect that this may be just one of the many allusions to a modern Asian standard of modernity. Inside, sofas and tables at the sides invite customers to make themselves comfortable while consulting the different housing options. In the middle of the large room, a huge plastic model of the planned residential compound is exhibited. The size and room division of the apartments are displayed in separate showcases. The compound provides several kinds of housing, from duplex apartments with a floor area of 180 m<sup>2</sup> to single-room apartments with 48 m<sup>2</sup>. The standard apartment has three bedrooms and one living room on a total living space of 120 m<sup>2</sup>.

The residential project advertised by this office was scheduled to be finished in 2014. By 2012, roughly 40 per cent of the apartments were sold. The apartments in six-storey houses were more expensive (4500 RMB/m<sup>2</sup>) than those in the high-rise buildings (3780 RMB/m<sup>2</sup>).

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<sup>9</sup> My accumulated collection of flyers, booklets and brochures of construction projects contains roughly 25 printed items from different residential compound projects under way in Aksu in 2011.

<sup>10</sup> This is a fictitious name, but it fits the generally flowery and creative naming of such residential compounds: see Zhang (2010: 84).

Because of the recently passed government policy which forbids the construction of six-storey buildings in the city centre – all new houses must be higher in order to optimise land use – these six-storey houses, approved for construction before the new regulation was passed, acquired a unique value.

<Figures 1 & 2 near here>

The ‘Blue Lagoon’ compound is located in New Market, an area dominated by Uyghur shops and restaurants, and both Uyghur and Han are among the apartment buyers. However, neither here, nor in most other selling offices, were advertising materials available in the Uyghur language. In fact, the Dolan Micropolis (Ch. *Duolang Xiaozhen*) compound was the only real-estate project in Aksu that provided complete written information in both Chinese and Uyghur, thus clearly addressing Uyghur customers without a good knowledge of the Chinese language. In other booklets, headlines may be bilingual. The focus on Han customers was also reflected in terms of human resources: despite its location in New Market, the overwhelming majority of the ‘Blue Lagoon’ staff were Han without knowledge of the Uyghur language.

Experiences in the different real-estate agencies in Aksu were similar: creating a pleasant and easy-going atmosphere seemed to be the formula for selling apartments successfully. The large model of the compound, the tea, and the clean and modern feel are strikingly similar to how real estate is promoted in Ürümqi, eastern Chinese cities and abroad. Along with the physical appearance of such agencies, the pictures and brochure complete the promoted image of a ‘modernised’ and ‘sophisticated’ lifestyle within these *xiaoqu*. When discussing a new apartment purchase, my Uyghur and Han respondents often mentioned aspects of luxury and modernity as involved in their considerations. The physical space of the apartment was invested with the meaning of a marker of belonging to the prospering urban middle class.

In the glossy advertising brochures and booklets, the emphasis is primarily laid on the resemblance to other Chinese cities. The promise of ‘modernity’ is an inherent element of *xiaoqu* advertising. One compound promises to bring the ‘international city standards of luxury residence’ from Guangdong to Xinjiang; another promotes its collaboration with a company specialising in Shanghai-style architecture and design. Some leaflets establish linkages to the construction style of Suzhou and Hangzhou – cities known for their architectural beauty. The leaflet of the Golden Stone (Ch. *Jin Shi*) compound establishes a

historical connection to the Han dynasty by placing inscriptions on bronze and other metals as well as on stones in the public area of the compound. However, foreign cities also figure as models for residential lifestyle. The Tianshan Garden (Ch. *Tianshan Mingyuan*) compound promotes its Spanish architecture (Ch. *Xibanya fengjing jianzhu*), while the Lily Garden (Ch. *Baihe Yuan*) attempts to convince the customers of its resemblance to European-style architecture (Ch. *Oushi jianzhu fengge*). One brochure underlines its compound's international character by highlighting a coffee shop and a cake shop as parts of the compound in striking similarity to the promotion of residential compounds in eastern China. In Aksu, the reference to eastern Chinese cities often seems to provide enough glamour to give a residential compound a modernised and attractive look. Two important east-to-west flows appear to shape the construction of residential compounds in Xinjiang: the influx of planners and architects from eastern China<sup>11</sup> and the influx of planning principles and designs. This creates a situation where sensitivity for local architectural elements is low.

<Figures 3 & 4 near here>

Unlike the overwhelming majority of Aksu's new residential compounds, the Dolan Micropolis explicitly emphasises its connection to local cultural traditions through its incorporation of a mosque, performance areas for ethnic singing and dancing, and 'minority features' (Ch. *minzu tese*) in the architecture along the main roads inside the compound. According to a Uyghur representative of the Dolan Micropolis real-estate agency, the compound addresses people from both ethnicities, but, in fact, mainly attracts Uyghur buyers. The inclusion of 'minority features' in architecture is indeed unique in Aksu's real-estate market. Other Uyghur-dominated cities in southern Xinjiang like Kashgar or Hotan, as well as Ürümqi's southern neighbourhoods, spearhead the implementation of 'Uyghurised' real-estate projects.

The brightly coloured advertisement of *xiaoqu* promises a better life and a modern lifestyle. Many of my Han and Uyghur respondents emphasised their aim of creating a new way of living for themselves and their families, embracing 'consumer habits that respond to the hegemonic ideal of "middle-class Chineseness"' (Zavoretti 2013: 15). Local (Uyghur) 'backward' living conditions are to be improved through the import of new 'modern'

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<sup>11</sup> Among the many real-estate projects currently being implemented in Aksu, the majority are led by a local Han real-estate company, while architects, planners, design specialists and investors are often from eastern China.

residential patterns from eastern (Han) China. Indeed, in the housing market in Aksu, Han and Uyghur apartment purchasers buy apartments in order to increase their social status and confirm their belonging to the successful middle class. The real-estate developers, judging from the flyers, fare well selling this rhetoric. In this process, the real-estate machinery creates new mechanisms of differentiation between those who can afford and those who get left out. While some people are proud to overcome the sense of ‘backwardness’, others can only dream of the apartments promoted in glossy brochures.

**‘Uyghur live in “Red Bridge” neighbourhood – Han live in the east of town’<sup>12</sup>**

The notions of apartment as an investment and as a gateway to model lifestyle play a significant role in the perception of new residential compounds. However, Aksu’s inhabitants’ residential choices are also influenced by their wish to mark ethnic belonging. It is tempting to generalise that the old town areas in southern Xinjiang are inhabited rather by the Uyghur and the new town areas rather by Han (Ross 2012: 5; Smith 2002: 13). In fact, however, a greater spatial diversity within the neighbourhoods exists. As Bellér-Hann (2002: 62) observes, though neighbourhoods are sometimes presented as homogeneous by local residents, ‘behind the apparent spatial segregation lies a more complex reality of shared spheres and interaction’.

Indeed, in Aksu, both Uyghur and Han middle-class residents live in *xiaoqu* in the centrally located new town, while Han migrant workers and impoverished local Han and Uyghur residents inhabit single-storey houses in the old town or in the city’s outskirts.<sup>13</sup> Middle-class Uyghur in Aksu clearly favour multi-storey and high-rise buildings, but the choice of housing is also affected by their ethnicity (Erkin 2009). My Uyghur respondents tended to buy new apartments in same-ethnic neighbourhoods and close to restaurants and shops that could cater for their ethnically distinct consumer needs. Tilley (2001: 266) argues that choice and consumption of ‘things’ is connected to a performed, perceived and embodied attachment to other people, groups, social networks, places and times. In Aksu, residential choices are an element of the performances of ethnicity. On the other hand, they are also affected by the wish for convenience in terms of shared language, religion and culture.

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<sup>12</sup> Quote from a fieldwork interview, October 2011.

<sup>13</sup> However, unlike the more historical single-storey houses in the urban centres, the single-storey houses in the suburbs are often newly constructed.

Though my Han and Uyghur informants emphasised the importance of living among people of the same ethnicity, they simultaneously recalled that, two or three decades ago, Han and Uyghur residential spaces were more mixed. Today, even if Han and Uyghur live in the same compound, boundaries are maintained and are even enhanced institutionally; for instance, in some *xiaoqu* managed by work units, apartment houses are divided into distinct Han and Uyghur floors, or separate buildings are constructed for Han and Uyghur employees. This is probably done to avoid neighbourly tensions between Han and Uyghur, which in Xinjiang easily run the risk of being ethnicised. For instance, the future apartment of Aygül from Aksu will be in an apartment block reserved exclusively for Uyghur employees of the work unit:

My husband's work unit constructed two new buildings with twenty floors each. The building with the larger apartments is reserved for Han employees and the other one for Uyghur employees. The apartments are distributed according to how long the employee has been working for the work unit. Because my husband has only been employed for five years, we merely got an apartment on the fourth floor.

Whether larger apartments are indeed reserved for the Han was difficult to verify during the fieldwork, as the houses were under construction. If so, it could reflect the fact that indeed more Han than Uyghur are in the leading positions, but it may also reflect the Han purchasers' better personal relations with the apartment distributing unit.

Though work-unit compounds are thus heterogeneous social and ethnic living spaces, at the same time a certain segregation of employees according to ethnicity is sought. Where the work unit does not provide housing, and when having a choice, Uyghur and Han like to live in same-ethnic spaces. As a Uyghur informant in Ürümqi illustratively stated, 'After work, the Han go to the north and the Uyghur go to the south of the city', reflecting the ethnicised spatial distribution of shops, restaurants and residential areas (cf. Erkin 2009; Smith 2002). In Aksu, many informants confirmed that they preferred to live close to supermarkets and restaurants that cater for ethnically different needs. At the same time, Map 1 demonstrates that residential spaces and ethnic businesses do not completely overlap, meaning that Han and Uyghur respondents do not live in completely segregated areas.

**<Map 1 near here>**

It appears that parts of the districts in the west and northwest of the city are predominantly inhabited by Uyghurs – but Han live in these areas, too. Even though Uyghur residents theoretically prefer to live close to shops offering *halal* foods, in fact many of Aksu's urban residents dwell outside their respective ethnic business areas. As a consequence, people reside in one place and socialise in another. My Uyghur interlocutors often preferred to do errands or to meet up with friends in areas where Uyghur restaurants and shops were located. Aygül, for instance, in 2011 lived with her husband and son in a work-unit apartment in the eastern part of Aksu, where there were no Uyghur shops. Because of this, more or less on a daily basis, she frequented the Uyghur neighbourhoods in the west of the city in order to visit her family members, to buy food, or to eat out, and returned to her apartment only for the night. Aygül emphasised that the wish to live closer to the Uyghur business spaces and her kin played a major role in her family's decision to buy a new apartment in the west of Aksu. This suggests that, when given a choice, residents of Aksu prefer to live among same-ethnic neighbours. This is, however, not always possible due to socio-economic restrictions or work-unit affiliations. In Aksu, my informants mostly identified the neighbourhoods of Red Bridge, Wangsan Road and Saddle-makers' Place as Uyghur residential areas. A Han real-estate agent in the office of one of the most expensive compounds in Aksu commented:

In the 'Bright pearl on the left shore' compound [northeast], almost all the homebuyers are Han. The Uyghur prefer to live in the new compounds along Dolan River [western part of the city] where apartments are a bit cheaper. Han buy in the eastern part of the city. (Fieldwork interview, May 2011)

This spatial distribution has its reasons: in the central-eastern and eastern part of the city, there is a clustering of Bingtuan buildings like a school, a hospital, an insurance company and several administrative buildings. These are housed in characteristic socialist four- to six-storey buildings constructed between the 1960s and the 1990s. One of my Uyghur informants, when asked whether she would like to live in one of the new compounds in the Han-dominated area, replied that she preferred to live in the old city where there were still some Uyghur. Interestingly, after a while it occurred to her that some of her Uyghur friends actually did live in these new compounds which at first appeared so 'Han' to her. This statement illustrates the prevailing perception of government-built work-unit compounds as 'Han spaces'. The discursive contrasting of the (Han) state with (Uyghur) non-state

residential communities emerges as one of the major ways of imagining ethnic boundaries, notwithstanding that they accommodate both Uyghur and Han employees.

Uyghur notions of spatial and residential belonging combine ethnicity and the desire to mark socio-economic status. Though clear ethnic residential preferences exist – Uyghur and Han both prefer to live near their ethnic shops and restaurants – in fact there are a number of ethnically mixed residential community forms, most importantly the work-unit compounds. Thus, although ethnic belonging affects housing choices, the wish to enhance one's social status by living in newly built *xiaoqu* appears equally desirable for individuals of both ethnicities.

## **Conclusion**

Urbanisation in China is closely influenced by the transformation from state-regulated to market-oriented economy and to the commodification of a number of services like housing. Residents with available economic means have obtained more liberty in choosing where and how to purchase housing. The newly built *xiaoqu* in Aksu clearly stand for this neo-socialist period. The *xiaoqu* represents a booster for the construction industry, a trigger for changing patterns of urban belonging based on residence rather than work, and a desirable lifestyle for middle-class residents. The changing spatial community forms in the urban built environment, as we observe them in Xinjiang in the morphological form of the *xiaoqu*, establish a link between present and historical community forms like the socialist work unit.

Though factors affecting localised forms of spatial segregation and stratification differ, the spatial ordering of social communities in urban areas is a way for city residents worldwide to position themselves in the urban social and cultural complexity. In Aksu, while socio-economic status determines the kind of housing one can afford, ethnicity tends to affect the choice of location. The purchase of an apartment is a means of improving living conditions and offers a way to articulate one's ethnicity spatially. It also functions as a form of social insurance or generates an extra income through renting. The growing presence of the *xiaoqu* reflects the growing presence of the private market in the housing sector which has emerged in the last two decades. This private market has, to a certain degree, opened ways to articulate one's ethnicity through residential preferences and led to more pronounced discourses of spatial segregation between Han and Uyghur homebuyers. However, against this discursive segregation, the observations of residential practices reveal that the actual segregation is not

very pronounced. Because of socio-economic restrictions and work-unit affiliations, only a few districts are dominated by one ethnic group.

In Xinjiang, the main actors in the construction and promotion of *xiaoqu* are companies from eastern China who drive the current, historically specific ‘development’ of Xinjiang’s urban spaces. In their promotion materials, targeting in overwhelming majority the Chinese-speaking clientele, living in a *xiaoqu* is advertised as a decisive step towards modernity – eastern China and ‘abroad’ being represented as locations of this desired modernity. In one of its many dimensions, the purchase of an apartment is indeed a ritual confirmation of the transition into a modern, middle-class citizen. The modernising rhetoric of urbanisation promoted by the Chinese state appears to a significant degree to have affected the ways construction companies and many of the possible Han and Uyghur buyers perceive the investment in the real estate.

This article argues that the construction of the built environment is paralleled by an ongoing construction and manifestation of social and cultural identities. These identities are not only formed through discursive boundary-making, but find their ways into the material environment. The erection of walls and fences around residential areas physically demarcates and partitions social spaces. In another way, urban space is partitioned by the residents by way of imagining some neighbourhoods as ‘Uyghur’ and others as ‘Han’. By highlighting three aspects of how *xiaoqu* is used in social, ethnic and national projects, it was my aim to point to the mutually constitutive processes between social and physical spaces. As one informant said: ‘There is of course a change taking place in Aksu and many new houses are being built, but this visible, material change is only one aspect, more important is the complementing change that is taking place in peoples’ minds’.<sup>14</sup> The visible changes refer to the new apartments and the related change in living amenities for urban residents; on the other hand, there is the social change that comes along with the changes in the built environment. Uyghur research participants often felt they were disadvantaged in urban infrastructure projects. Contrary to this, my research material demonstrates that affluent residents of both ethnicities share an interest in and can afford purchasing new apartments. For less affluent residents, the steady increase of apartment prices, partly driven by speculators from eastern China, poses serious challenges to benefit from the current real-estate development.

The case study of Aksu shows that, though spatial transformations like urbanisation manifest most visibly in the built environment, they are also directly linked to social transformations and, in multi-ethnic societies, to processes of articulating ethnic belonging.

The incidents of inter-ethnic violence in Xinjiang are the more visible outbreaks of the growing divide, but this process is also visible in much more mundane activities, like the choice of a residential area. Hence, it is unlikely that economic development will do away with the divide and ethnic tensions. Rather, although the general increase of wealth satisfies basic consumer needs of both Han and Uyghur, ethnic boundaries are at the same time projected onto new spaces, like that of the emerging middle-class housing. In the case of residential compounds, the import of design and planning principles from eastern China has, so far, rather intensified the wish to maintain ethnic boundaries in urban residential spaces than done away with them.

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FIGURE 1. *Model of a xiaoqu in a real-estate agency.*

FIGURE 2. *Promotion wall in front of a new xiaoqu.*

FIGURE 3. *Residential compound in Aksu.*

FIGURE 4. *Entrance gate to Shangrila xiaoqu in Aksu.*

MAP 1. *Ethnic business and residential spaces in Aksu in 2011. (Map by Fabian Rüdy.)*