

Shoppers through the carpet bazaar in Hotan Sunday market. Located to the west of the Yurungkish (white jade) River, so named because of the alluvial deposits of the stone that were once regularly found along its banks, Hotan is famed for the quality of its silk and handmade rugs. This carpet bazaar is one of the market's busiest sections

# PEOPLE OF THE NEW FRONTIER

With a population of more than eight million people, the Uygur (meaning 'united' or 'allied') are one of the largest ethnic minorities in China. Originally descended from a group of Turkic-speaking tribes from the Altai mountains, the majority of Uygur people now live within the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, a province in the north of China that shares its borders with eight countries. Xinjiang (literally 'new frontier') has a long history of intermittent independence – it was only officially incorporated into China in 1950, becoming an autonomous province in 1955. Although the region has always been relatively isolated, the creation of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps in 1954, a semi-military government organisation established to increase industry and agriculture within the province, brought modernisation and an influx of Han chinese in its wake. Xinjiang still retains a unique cultural and social structure, but these traditions are slowly being eroded. Photographer Norberto Cuenca recently travelled to the province, hoping to capture traditional life within Xinjiang's Uygur communities before it disappears

All photographs: Norberto Cuenca/The Widangle



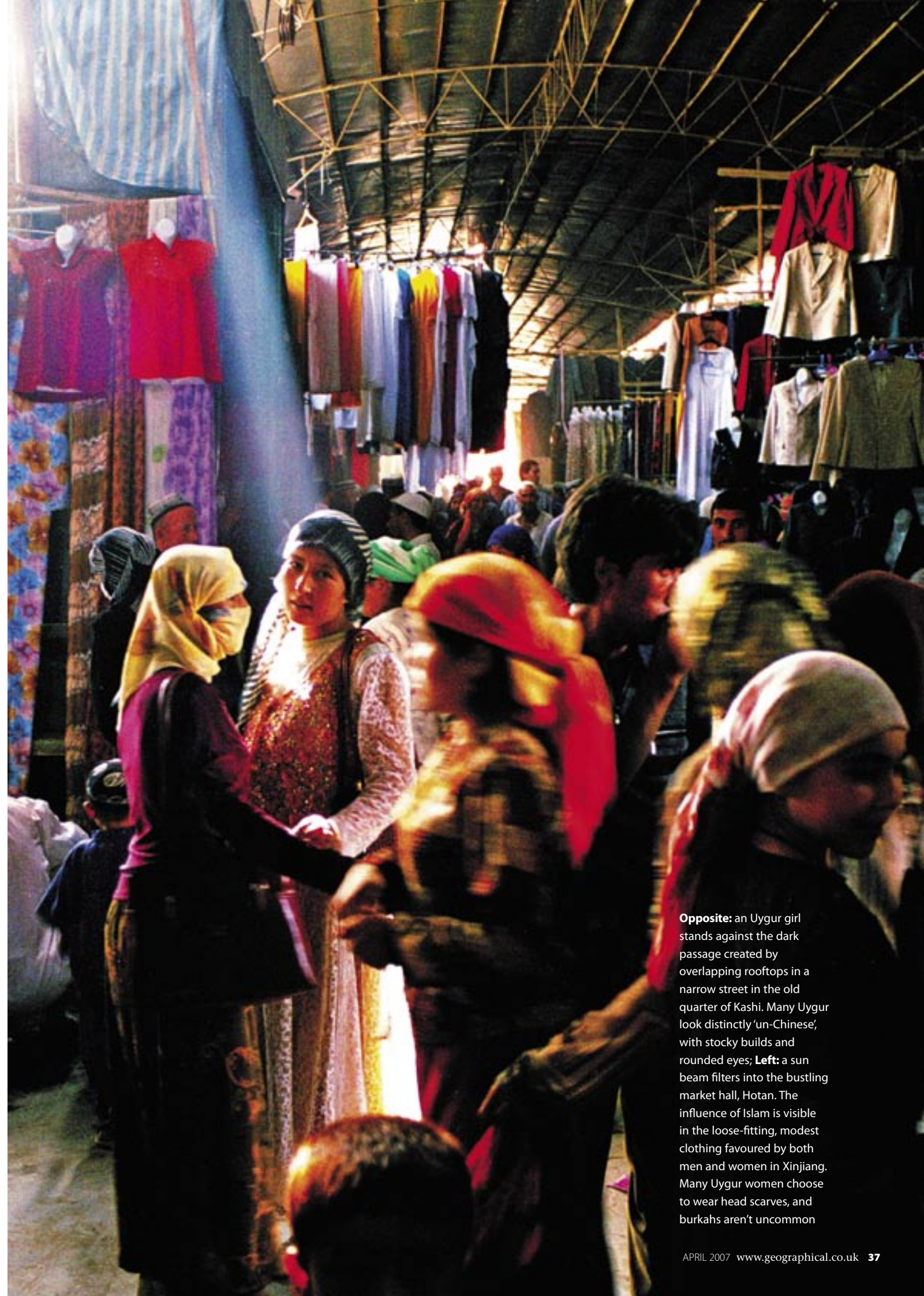


**Above:** handmaking noodles or *la mian* in Kashi Sunday market. Dough is repeatedly stretched and folded to create these thin noodles, which are here made using wheat – rather than rice – flour. Wheat forms the basis of most staple foods in the drier parts of northwestern China; **Below left:** gilded chests in the market at Yarkand. Situated in the Tarim Basin, Yarkand was an important staging post along the Silk Road. Today, it's famous for its craftsmen, who still handmake most of the commodities needed for everyday life; **Below right:** an Uygur man in the Sunday market at Hotan

**Above left:** a glazed-tiled window in the Abakh Khoja mausoleum in Kashi. Built in honour of Abakh Khoja, Kashi's Islamic leader during the 17th century, the mausoleum is a masterpiece of Uygur architecture; **Above right:** an Uygur reads the Koran, Yarkand. A recent survey by Shanghai University suggests that religion has enjoyed a resurgence since the Communist party relaxed its stance on religious observance. While Buddhism is China's main religion, the majority of Uygur are Muslim; **Below:** an Uygur canteen near Id Kah mosque, Kashi – the largest mosque in the province







**Opposite:** an Uyghur girl stands against the dark passage created by overlapping rooftops in a narrow street in the old quarter of Kashi. Many Uyghur look distinctly 'un-Chinese', with stocky builds and rounded eyes; **Left:** a sun beam filters into the bustling market hall, Hotan. The influence of Islam is visible in the loose-fitting, modest clothing favoured by both men and women in Xinjiang. Many Uyghur women choose to wear head scarves, and burkhas aren't uncommon





**Above:** a father and son wait in front of the main branch of the Bank of China in People's Square, in the new part of Kashi. Large sections of the city have been dramatically modernised as part of the Chinese government's ongoing push to increase trade and, according to some sources, 'sinocisation' within the predominantly Muslim city; **Right:** Uygur tombs on the edge of the desert, Turpan. Located in a depression that sinks down to 154 metres below sea level, Turpan is the second lowest area of land on the planet. It's also one of the hottest, with summer temperatures of around 47°C, climbing to as high as 82°C on the surface of the sand



**Above:** a barber works late into the night, Kashi. A shaved head and long beard is the most common hairstyle for Uygur men; **Left:** a shoemaker takes a break in his workshop in the old quarter of Kashi. Established around an oasis at the foot of the Pamir Mountains, Kashi marks the point where the northern and southern routes that encircle the Taklamakan Desert meet. It has been a major trading centre for almost 2,000 years, and the market area still covers more than 2.5 square kilometres of the city