

SOAS ICOP Policy Briefings

To Inform Government and Parliamentary Debates

Whitewashing Genocide in Xinjiang: The Responsibilities of UNESCO by *Professor Rachel Harris (SOAS)*
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Since 2017, links between the Muslim peoples of China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and the outside world have been severed and they have been subject to intrusive high-tech [surveillance](#). **Over a million people have been incarcerated in a huge system of [mass internment camps](#) and subjected to degrading and brutal treatment designed to break their will, faith, and identity.** Soaring [prison sentences](#), forcible and ethnically targeted [birth control policies](#), a system of [boarding schools](#) for Muslim children, the [destruction](#) of mosques, shrines and graveyards, [forced labour and the uprooting of communities](#) all provide **evidence of a high-level coordinated strategy of cultural and physical destruction amounting to the crime of [genocide](#).**

Given this context, it is entirely unacceptable that UNESCO continues to acknowledge China's role as "protector" of Uyghur and Kazakh cultural and ecological heritage items through their inclusion in its heritage [lists](#). Concerned parties **must bring pressure to bear on UNESCO to urgently investigate the situation of heritage in Xinjiang, and withdraw its support for items which are directly implicated in crimes against humanity.**

China is a [key player](#) in the international heritage sphere, and has developed a unique approach to heritage. Cultural heritage is linked to political goals; it serves as an asset to boost local economic development, and a resource for political legitimacy and soft power. **In Xinjiang, the management of [heritage](#) has been tightly tied to government attempts to deepen control over the region's peoples, and to exploit its natural and cultural resources.** Of particular concern are two items of heritage included on UNESCO's lists:

- The Uyghur Meshrep: community gatherings which include food, music, religious storytelling, and an informal community court were enshrined on UNESCO's lists in 2010. Subsequently, as research by Rachel Harris has shown, staged Meshrep shows have been used as tourist entertainment and for cultural diplomacy while grassroots community gatherings have been criminalised, Meshrep leaders detained, and their communities uprooted.
- The Xinjiang Tianshan Mountain range, included in 2013 on UNESCO's World Heritage List as an area of outstanding natural beauty and ecological diversity. Work by Guldana Salimjan has documented the forcible displacement of Kazakh communities and the sale of their ancestral lands to Chinese tourism companies for commercial development.

UNESCO's continued support for China's stewardship of these heritage items is a problem not only because of the specific issues raised, but also more broadly because it serves to legitimise and whitewash the egregious and ongoing abuses in the Xinjiang region.

We urge UK MPs and Peers to lobby:

- UNESCO to develop and implement a review mechanism with a focus on the human rights aspects of safeguarding heritage.
- UNESCO to introduce consequences for state parties to UNESCO conventions on heritage who fail to abide by international human rights instruments, particularly when those rights violations touch on the heritage items included on UNESCO's lists.
- The UK government to be vigilant about their involvement with China's heritage and other cultural initiatives, and raise private and public concerns over the destruction, appropriation, and commodification of Xinjiang's cultural heritage in bilateral and multilateral exchanges.
- The UK government, educational and cultural institutions to provide funding to preserve, document and support Uyghur and Kazakh cultural heritage in the diaspora.

For further information contact the author at: rh@soas.ac.uk. Contact Prof Alison Scott-Baumann for access to other experts at as150@soas.ac.uk, and visit [our website](#) for more information. *The views expressed in SOAS ICOP Briefings are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of SOAS.*