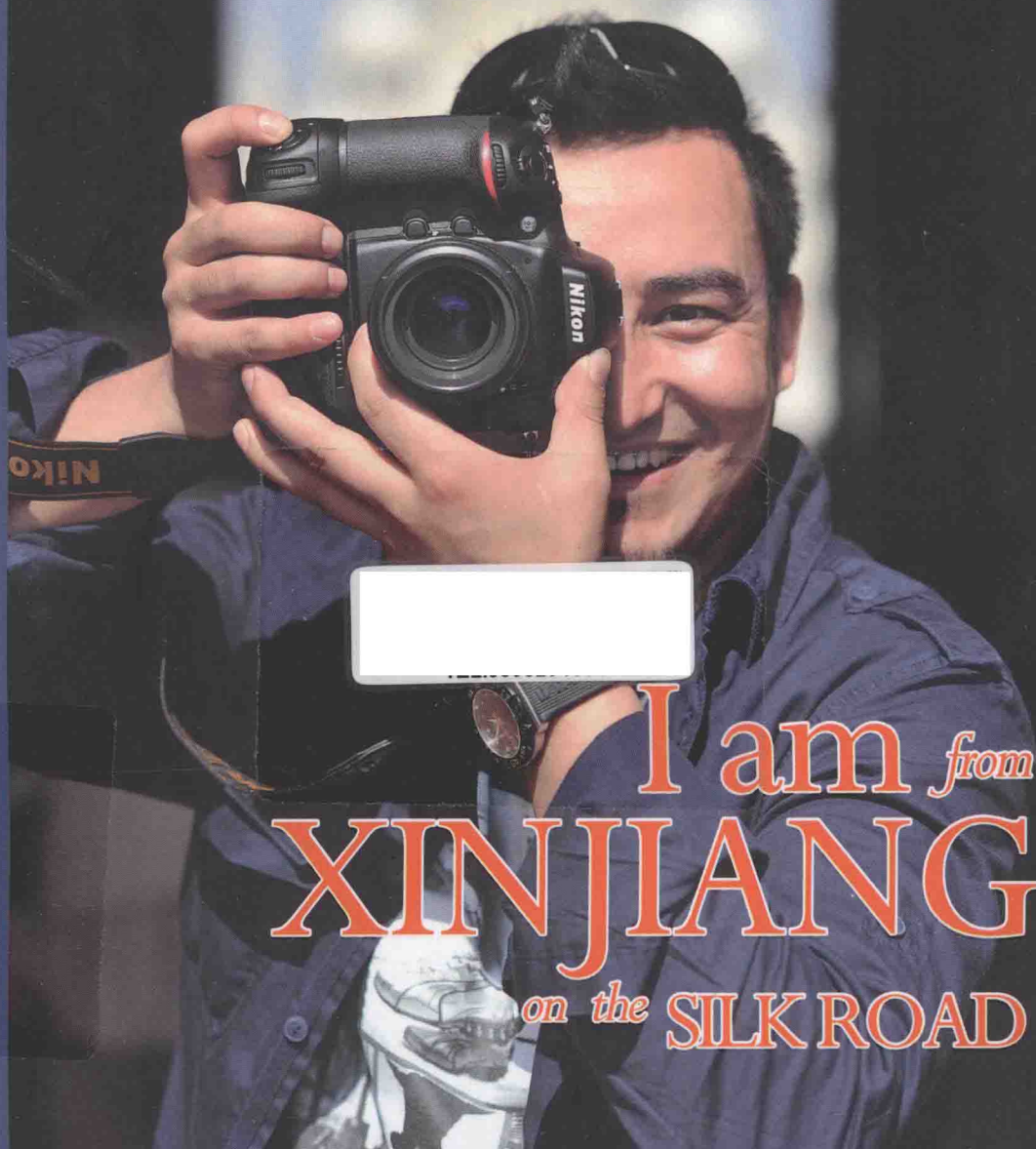


by Kurbanjan Samat



I am *from*
XINJIANG
on the **SILK ROAD**



NEW WORLD PRESS

مەن شىنجاڭدىن كەلدىم

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Preface 1

The Brightness of *I Am from Xinjiang on the Silk Road*

Half a century ago, when our country was going through trials, I settled down in rural Xinjiang and lived with people of different ethnic backgrounds, including Uyghur farmers and intellectuals. They welcomed me with open arms and received me with kindness and trust. I was immersed in the liveliness and vitality of the Uyghur language. I reveled in the love and friendship among different ethnic groups and relished the region's uniquely multi-ethnic culture. Under limited circumstances, I spent my prime years (between 29 and 45) in the best possible way, peacefully sailing through the turbulence of the Cultural Revolution, acquiring as much knowledge as I could, and building up experiences that were radically different from those of my earlier years. Moreover, I completed my "postdoctoral" studies in the Uyghur language, which I consider as the crowning moment of my "adult ceremony." As I used to brag in a joking manner, I began to take on a sense of boldness and pride typical of the people of Yining.

I used to tell the Hong Kong media that "The people of all ethnicities in Xinjiang are my greatest benefactors!" My words caused the eyes of those present to glisten with tears.

Nonetheless, headlines in recent years concerning various parts of our country have been very worrisome. People began to wonder what is happening in Xinjiang. Just in time, a handsome and well-educated young Uyghur named Kurbanjan showed up. He is a seasoned photographer from Xinjiang who works at CCTV, China's predominant state television broadcaster based in Beijing. He has travelled extensively both in and outside China, visiting cities in Europe, North and South America, Asia and Africa. He is energetic, smart, capable and optimistic. He is trailblazing his career path, broadening his horizons at home and abroad and enjoying life just like any other Chinese national. He has met hardships but has prevailed; he has had resentment in his heart but has decided to let go; he has run into traps but has managed to get out and begun to move on in big strides. He has produced beautiful pictures and texts to show us how Xinjiangers of different ethnicities in both rural and urban areas spend time working and studying, how they improve themselves and merge with those in their locality, how they forge ahead to pursue goals and triumphs, and how they manage to live a happy,

healthy and peaceful life. Some of them have already gone on the express trains or speedboats of modernization, others are striding along the sweet and smooth road of seeking an affluent life. Full of positive energy, they are contributing their sweat, living out their best and savoring the bliss of life.

The author wants to drive home the following ideas: 1) China is big just as the world is big, 2) life is broader than we think, 3) development induces improvement, 4) optimism begets self-respect, 5) confidence creates miracles, and 6) friendship and goodwill harvest the same in return. He wants to tell the world that Xinjiangers are kind, diligent, sharp, and committed to what they do, that the policy of reform and opening has provided Uyghurs and other ethnicities with unprecedented potential for development and that, faced with unparalleled opportunity, the Chinese people can go from pettiness to tolerance, from poverty to wealth, from backwardness to development and from bewilderment and anxiety to sober-minded command of their own destiny.

The pictures and first-person narratives in the book remind us that in order to bring about a bright future for Xinjiang, we should resolutely eradicate external terrorist forces and a limited minority of extremists. More importantly, we should equip Xinjiang compatriots with fast tracks of modernization, or in more concrete terms, provide them with scientific knowledge, information about the rest of the world and concepts of modernization, while fully respecting the cultural traditions and customs of all ethnic groups.

We must expand our vision and capacities and let the light of knowledge disperse the shadows in our hearts. We must encourage ourselves by giving ourselves a round of applause for the breathtaking changes we have made. We must look with open eyes at the future of the world and of our country and at our process of modernization. The short-lived nonsensical and evil words and acts will by no means kidnap the destiny of Xinjiang. We are broadening our horizons; we are taking big strides; we are clearing up all hurdles and getting ready for a bright and sunny future!

Cheers to Kurbanjan! Cheers to all outstanding Uyghurs, Kazaks and all other ethnicities of Xinjiang! Cheers to the publication of this wonderful book!

Wang Meng
writer and scholar

Fellow Members of the China Family

In the past, I was unfamiliar with Xinjiang. In the 1980s, college classmates back from their visit to Xinjiang used to tell me how they would live on fruit alone when their money was running out, just because fruit there was so cheap. That made my mouth water, as I kept thinking about honeydew melons, raisins and apples.... Indeed, in my imagination, Xinjiang had been a remote and mysterious realm no less beautiful and tempting than heaven. After reading "The Deserted Road of Heroes," an essay by fiction writer Zhang Chengzhi describing the Mongols' West Expedition, I was inexplicably drawn near to Xinjiang as a sense of awesome barrenness rose in my heart. I began to assume that my newly uncovered feeling of proximity must have come from my Mongolian blood. Later on, I got to know more about the region through business trips and numerous Xinjiang friends I had made.

One of these friends was Kurbanjan, who came to see me one day in 2011. He told he was planning a photo exhibition called the "Great Beauty of Hotan" and asked me to take a peek at his exhibits. I knew very little about him except that he was a video cameraman for *Time & Light*, a TV series shown on CCTV's documentary channel. I knew even less about his gifts in photography.

Kurbanjan brought with him works of three Uyghur photographers, including those of his own. These were all exceptional people. For years, I had been looking for quality photographs done by talented Uyghur natives of Xinjiang but had not been quite fruitful. The exhibition made me understand in a deep way the innate gifts of Uyghur photographers and their plain feelings about their ethnic background. I felt as if I had detected pure jade out in the wilderness.

Most of the pictures of Xinjiang I had previously seen were landscapes and unnatural "local flavors" largely done by non-native photographers. Pictures depicting the real life and ethnic culture of Xinjiang were very rare. The greatest fallout of those exaggerated landscapes is how they block us from the real Xinjiang – the sense of life and history and the human interest scenes of villages, fields, pastures, families, and cultural tradition, which we finally get to see from the lenses

of native Xinjiangers like Kurbanjan and Gheytrat.

After the exhibition, I had frequent chats with Kurbanjan, and I got to hear many of his stories of growing up, including his metamorphosis from a juvenile jade dealer to a professional photographer. Although he has suffered many wrongs, I seldom see him fretting or whining about anything. For the past few years, with a big smile on his face, Kurbanjan made painstaking efforts to illustrate, as part of a special photography project dubbed “I Am from Xinjiang,” the itinerant lives of Xinjiangers scattered in such big cities as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. What we see from these Xinjiang profiles are qualities similar to those of the photographer himself: steadfastness, optimism, diligence and wisdom. Most importantly, they share a common love for their birthplace.

A series of incidents that have happened in Xinjiang in recent years has triggered grisly and repugnant feelings toward the region. This gives me special incentive in recommending *I Am from Xinjiang on the Silk Road*. From this good book you will read a diversity of Xinjiangers – Uyghurs, Han Chinese, Kazaks, Mongols, Xibes, and Tajiks – who have moved to different parts of China. Just as all fellow human beings, they have a fair share of life’s weal and woe and they all work hard for their goals. To put it in a few words, they are fellow members of the big China family.

Na Risong
curator and director of Inter Art Center and Gallery



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My Past 30 Years





Above: Riding with Dad on his motorcycle, Eid al-Adha, 1985
Below: My mom, 1985



My name is Kurbanjan Samat. I was born in an Uyghur family in Hotan, Xinjiang, in the early 1980s. I want to start this book by telling my own story because I see so much commonalty between me and the characters in this book. By introducing myself, I hope readers will get some clue or sense of direction about this book. Here we go.

“Naughty Little Devil”

I weighed 11 pounds at birth, so carrying me around was quite a task for my mom, who brought me up by “hand” – raising me with one and spanking me with the other, because I was a downright “devil incarnate.” I never had to go to kindergarten. Prior to third grade in primary school, I had been a manageable kid overall, as evidenced by good grades and proper behavior toward the old and the young – except that, to please the palate of the little girl next door, I would occasionally steal the meat from customers at barbecue stands.

My family lived next to a bazaar that I visited frequently, and I greeted the women peddlers as I walked from one end to the other. Sometimes I would help these “apas” (*apa* is the Uyghur word for “mom”) sell ice suckers, melon seeds, bean jelly, sheep chop suey, etc. The *apas* typically rewarded me with “goodies.” They all liked me, so my mom had to live with that. Even after I grew up and moved out of Hotan, the *apas* would ask Mom about me and tell those anecdotes. From the third grade on, as if demon-possessed, I started acting like an outlaw. To help me cut ties with truants in the neighborhood, my dad decided to move near a prison, so that my siblings and I could have a quieter environment for learning. Contrary to his wishes, however, I started dropping out of school a lot more than before, even leading my younger siblings astray. Worse still, I “took care” of my third younger brother by bullying him. “You beat me up so often back then,” he would remind me even today. In addition, I grew bold enough to steal dogs from neighbors and pigs from the army camp nearby. Spanking from Mom was inescapable, but it wasn’t going to cause me to repent.

By the time I was a fourth grader, my family got financially better off and we were able to move into a neighborhood consisting of families of officials and intellectuals. Nevertheless, I was just as unbridled and mischievous as ever. For example, kites were normally flown from the ground, but I chose to fly them from rooftops. On one occasion, a kite flying in the wind lifted me off a roof and made me “fly” with it before

dropping on the ground. I was much into cursing and mocking too. One of my victims was my next door neighbor, a little girl who was attending Chinese school. She ran home crying, and in no time, her elder sister came out and gave me a full course of sharp rebuke (She became my first date as we got to know each other later on).

In bouts of defiance, I would get out of the house as a way of escape. One day when I was 10 years old, I got so mad at my mom that I made up my mind to travel a long distance to my grandma's house in Atush. I borrowed 100 yuan from a relative, claiming that my mom was sick and needed the money for medical treatment. I ran to the bus station to buy a ticket, but the conductor wouldn't sell me any. So I asked a big guy next to me for help. He assented and led me onto the bus, pretending to be my elder brother. As he tried to drag me off the bus when we arrived at Shache County Station in Kashgar, I said out loud I didn't know him. Passengers on the bus began pelting him with questions, but he kept saying I was his younger brother. After a while, a woman holding a baby pulled me away from the man. Otherwise, I could have been kidnapped and sold as a thief trainee. The kind woman took me to her home, gave me food and let me stay in her house for the night. The following day, she had her younger brother send me to Atush. Soon after I arrived at Grandma's house, Grandma had a telegram sent to my family in Hotan telling them I was safe. Despite all of my wrongdoings, my mom always trusted me to be a good boy. She thought I just didn't know how to get along with people.

Later I was enrolled into the No. 1 Middle School of Hotan, but I grew tired of it just two months into my first year. So I went to the No. 2 Middle School and told them that I wanted to transfer to their school. Back then, the rules for middle school education were pretty simple, and it was easy for me to get permission to enroll in this school.

By that time, my family's financial condition began to improve, and my father frequently flew to the inland provinces on business. Every time he returned home he would give me "giveaways" from the airlines, including neckties. So my standard outfit was suit and tie. I knew it was very hot wearing those during the summer, but I withstood it all just to look better.

I've had my fair share of down moments in my life. I used to be bugged by a big fat bully. In order to beat him, I practiced long-distance running and boxing on a

daily basis. On the day I was to take my pledge of allegiance for joining the Youth League – a big day for me because it came only after repeated applications – I finally got a chance to get back at him. I gave him a slap in the face by mistake while fooling around with friends. I had already said sorry, but his fist fell on me anyway. By then I had been practicing boxing for a long time, and I beat him in the very first round. At the oath ceremony in the afternoon, just as the teacher was reading out my name, the big guy came to pick up a fight again. I went on stage to take the oath after pinning him to the floor. Next, I had to eat humble pie and be expelled from the League. Back in the classroom, we fought another round, and the big guy got beaten again. He came to class with a bruise on his face the next day. From then on, he dared not bully me anymore. Still later, he became a friend of mine. Meanwhile, my boxing skill got sharpened all the more. I even got invited to teach boxing at the County Sports Commission.

My grades got much better by junior middle school, but my temper did not. I beat up my classmates, quarreled with my teachers and the principal and gave my mom mean looks at home. By late 1998, my first love parted ways with me because she could not tolerate my bad manners toward my parents. It was quite a shock for me.

The Uyghurs in Hotan are kind of old-fashioned, while my family is more on the “open” side. Neither my siblings nor I ever attended any Koran study sessions. For this reason, none of my mom’s siblings ever bothered to contact her. And if they did see her, they would humiliate her by asking: “Do you need translators when you talk with your kids?” By saying that, they were implying that we were infidels because we did not speak our mother tongue, when in fact we spoke Uyghur very well.

My parents were average farmers, even though my dad left home for business at age 14. His frequent visits to the inland provinces opened up his vision and made him very inclusive. His long-term absence from home made life very burdensome for Mom. She was having a hell of a time taking care of four naughty kids headed by me. Each time he left home, Dad would give us plenty of money, but it was hard to tell when exactly he would be back. One winter, my family was strapped for cash because Dad had been gone for more than a year without sending money back. In order to pay my tuition, Mom sold fruit in a push cart sitting out on the street. Clad in a leather jacket, she waited patiently for customers as she held my youngest brother in her arms. She



My portrait, 1985

wouldn't accept any help from me because she wanted me to focus on my studies.

Filial Piety and Love

In 1998, I was admitted to a junior college in Bortala Mongolian Autonomous Prefecture, majoring in Chinese. That was the first time I stepped away from my home in Hotan. My dad knew all the places we were passing by as he sent me to school and I admired him for that. I wanted to learn from him and go to a lot of places. "What do you go to school for, son?" he asked me. "For money," I said. "Then don't go to school," he said, "You go to school because you want to have knowledge and comprehend life better." Because he had suffered a lot for lack of schooling, he wanted all of his kids to receive a good education even if it meant he had to sell everything he had for it. After that talk with Dad, I suddenly realized that it was high time I did some serious learning.

On arriving home when my first semester in junior college was over, I felt my heart break with repentance as my eyes fell on Mom at the door. I went down on my knees and crawled all the way to her, asking her to forgive me for having been a prodigal son and for failing to share the burdens of life with her. The change within me had a lot to do with the consistent and detailed love my mom had given me over all those years because I felt the difference once I was alone by myself in school. I felt the real weight of home and family in my life. I also gave flowers to all the teachers I had hurt before and I apologized to them face to face. Although I hated being a teacher to begin with, I now had a passion for teaching because I found it to be an awesome profession.

Hotan wasn't a great place for learning Chinese. At junior middle school, I only knew a few simple words, like "I," "you," "he," and "love." These words stuck with me because I wanted to use them to express my love for my girlfriend. In order to learn Chinese, I made a plea with the school authorities, requesting Han ethnicity roommates so they could help improve my Chinese proficiency. The authorities initially turned me down for fear of potential ethnic conflicts. After I won a free combat championship at the prefecture level, the school authorities became more accommodating to me, so I negotiated with them and threatened transfer if my request was not met. Ultimately, I got what I wanted. My roommates were all willing to teach me Chinese. Some even taught me how to write Chinese letters to my girlfriend, who ended up turning back to

me after seeing positive changes in my life.

By then, my dad's business peaked and we were living in style as a family. I had a portable audio cassette player early in my college days and was using a cell phone by 1999. On my birthday that year, I was going to buy a guitar for 3,000 yuan but fell in love with a Phoenix d2000 camera at first sight as I passed by a storefront. So I skipped the guitar and bought the camera on the spot. I used it to take pictures of my schoolmates and got my money back in just one semester. That was when I learned the basics of photography. I taught myself simple concepts of aperture, speed, and depth of field. In April 2000, I held my very first photo exhibition at the school at my own expense.

Looking for Myself in the Shadow of My Father

Things were now getting better and better, but Allah seemed to have predetermined a tortuous route for my family. My dad was robbed of two million yuan while doing business in Russia. He returned home penniless from Russia at midnight, smiling, with a broken sack on his shoulder. This left a deep impression on me. We had no idea what had happened, but were glad to see him back. "Allah has taken away what was from him," he said. Not long after, he headed for the inner provinces again, carrying with him nearly all of our jade, in hope of recovering what was lost. Ironically, what he reaped was yet another heavy blow – all of his jade got stolen. With a strong sense of guilt and self-reproach, he chose not to come home until he got everything back. But the more he wanted to get it all back, the harder it became. When he couldn't take it anymore, he simply hid from us. Hence, for four years running we had no clue where he was.

By then, I was about done with college and I was en route to a job as a teaching intern in a school. Regrettably, I got derailed due to a confrontation with a fellow teacher who was in the habit of verbally bullying her students. I admonished her not to be given to verbal abuse but to give consideration to the rural children's lack of access to Chinese learning resources. She reacted badly, saying that as a mere intern I had no right to "educate" her. The conversation soon escalated into tart bickering. We both had nasty things to say about each other, and she ended up informing the principal against me. The principal then scolded me without bothering to know what was going