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Architecture
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of Evil

Showcase
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'Modernizing'
Amsterdam's
Bijlmer

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PLUS MAELSTROM IN CHINA

WITHOUT MERRY

**New Model Army:
Steve Graham on URBAN WARFARE**

**Hatemail to Libeskind:
Markus Miessen on 9/11**

Stability through resettlement

Text and photography by Christian Müller

When describing the development of urban planning in China, eyes turn automatically towards Beijing or the country's east coast. The reasons for urban growth are of economic provenance. Ürümqi, capital of the autonomous region of Xinjiang¹, grew due to political pressure to a city of over a million inhabitants.

Central Asia had been a region prone to abrupt changes and political instability until the end of WW II. It never existed as a state with fixed frontiers and was often subject to its neighbouring countries' power games. Upon its foundation in 1949, the People's Republic of China felt threatened by Turkey and the former USSR along its Eastern frontiers. Turkey, in order to secure itself a place in Central Asia's market, supported Xinjiang's largest ethnic group, the Turkish-Islamic Uygurs, in their strive for territorial and religious independence, whilst Xinjiang's peripheral location rendered intervention through Chinese police and military impossible in the event of endemic troubles.

In 1955, the authorities in Beijing began to systematically deport Han Chinese from the east of the country to the unviable Xinjiang. The capital Ürümqi rose high above the desert sand. By 1995, the population of Han Chinese immigrants had risen from 10,000 in 1955 to over one million, with the autochthonous population remaining the same at 80,000.² All politically and administratively important positions in the city were staffed by Han Chinese. Ürümqi mutated from an Uygur town with a Chinese quarter to a Chinese city with an Uygur quarter. Whereas the first immigrants were resettled under coercion and prohibited from leaving the city without permission, their successors were lured into coming by offers of higher salaries and tax benefits. Ürümqi was officially declared a sea port in 1992 in order to be granted an especially low tax rate. A remarkable occurrence, considering the distance of 2250 km to the nearest ocean.

All together, more than seven million Han moved to Xinjiang, either by force or for monetary compensation, and stabilised the region politically.³ The Chinese call this phenomenon 'adding sand', analogous to thickening cement with sand.⁴ To manage this vast resettlement logistically, railway tracks were built from Lanzhou to Ürümqi in 1963. With a length of 1800 km and following the historical silk route, this infrastructure ties geographically remote Ürümqi economically and psychologically to the People's Republic.

Unlike its models in the former USSR, where newly established immigrant cities fell into communist depression, Ürümqi developed into a prosperous economic capital with steel, coal, oil, chemical, mechanical engineering and cotton processing industries. Today, Ürümqi is Central Asia's most modern city. Planned with foresight, the city has streets up to 60m broad and a well-functioning administration. Lately, a large middle class has developed, with a vital interest in stability and maintaining order. Astana and Islamabad may also have been founded for political motivations and may be the capitals of their respective countries, but they will never achieve the economic power and vitality of this town in the Chinese province.

Contemporary China's potential is well illustrated by this example of town development in Ürümqi. A radical approach to problem solving, far from metaphysics and idealism, in combination with pragmatic implementation. Contrary to the prejudiced Eurocentric claim, the Chinese elite no longer act monolithically. In the future, Chinese agility will grow stronger and extend its influence also beyond national boundaries.

Notes and references

- 1 Xinjiang, formerly East Turkistan, became an autonomous region in 1955. This status does not entail political autonomy, but includes the right to its own language in school and media.
- 2 Alfred Schinz, *Cities in China*. Gebrüder Borntraeger, Berlin, 1989.
- 3 *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, 'Latent conflict in Central Asia', August-September, Paris.
- 4 Nicolas Becquelin, 'Tensions interethniques et pauvreté endémique', *Perspectives chinoises*, Paris, no. 39, 1997.