

IN FOCUS: TURNING DESERT INTO GREEN WEALTH P.14

FEATURES: BUILDING FUTURES THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS P.46

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MORE THAN MELONS

Hami's journey to become an economic
and cultural powerhouse

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A Great Wall Against the Desert

By Yan Wei

For those who believe that ecological collapse is irreversible, the story of Kekeya offers a powerful counter-narrative. Located on the northern fringe of the Taklimakan Desert, China's largest desert, Kekeya, a town in Wensu County, Aksu Prefecture, was once a symbol of environmental despair. Four decades ago, it was a barren gravel wasteland so ravaged by sandstorms that residents often had to keep their lights on during the day. Today, thanks to a sustained afforestation campaign, a 50-km-long and 47-km-wide "Green Great Wall" of forests and fruit orchards holds the desert at bay. This transformation is not merely a local victory; it is a masterclass in long-term ecological restoration that holds vital lessons for arid regions worldwide.

At a moment when desertification threatens parts of Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia and southern Europe, Kekeya deserves attention beyond China because it underscores that ecological restoration initiatives require political endurance, economic integration and mass social participation—three lessons often absent from global climate discussions.

The first lesson is that environmental recovery in extreme climates cannot rely on short political cycles. Kekeya's transformation emerged from sustained commitment across four decades. In the beginning, workers dug irrigation canals by hand, crushed hardened saline soil with hammers, and repeatedly replanted failed seedlings until survival rates improved. The project survived leadership changes, economic transitions and shifting development priorities.

This continuity is especially significant in a world where environmental programs are often judged by quarterly budgets or election calendars. Kekeya shows that degraded ecosystems recover on ecological time, not political time. Governments seeking to combat desertification must therefore build institutional frameworks capable of maintaining commitments for generations.

The second lesson is that ecological projects survive only when they create economic value for local communities. Anti-desertification programs fail if they ask populations to sacrifice livelihoods in the name of environmental protection. Kekeya took the exact opposite approach. Local authorities developed what became known as the "using forests to sustain forests" model: Protective shelterbelts were combined with orchards producing

apples, walnuts and red dates. Farmers received long-term management rights and shared directly in the economic returns.

Forests were no longer external projects imposed on rural communities; they became income-generating assets. Today, Aksu's fruit industry is among the largest in Xinjiang, with "sugar-heart" apples—possessing a translucent core resulting from high sugar content—and thin-shell walnuts popular among consumers. Ecological restoration generated tourism, processing industries, renewable energy projects and rural employment. Incomes in the Kekeya area rose from extreme poverty levels in the 1980s to 26,000 yuan (\$3,840), 30 percent higher than the per-capita disposable income in Xinjiang's rural areas. Restoration succeeds only when residents see themselves as long-term stakeholders.

The third lesson concerns social mobilization. Kekeya's success is the product of a collective movement, involving government agencies, workers, farmers and military units. It demonstrates ecological restoration requires more than technical solutions and financial investment. Durable progress depends on broad social mobilization, inclusive participation and the creation of mechanisms through which ecological protection becomes integrated with livelihoods, cultural identity and development goals.

Kekeya's story debunks simplistic assumptions about development in arid regions. Conventional thinking often frames ecological protection and economic growth as competing goals. The Kekeya experience suggests that restoration can become a development engine. Recovered ecosystems have improved air quality, expanded biodiversity, stabilized agriculture and attracted tourism investment. Environmental resilience has become a source of regional competitiveness.

None of this, however, means Kekeya offers a perfect or universally transferable blueprint. Large-scale afforestation in dry lands remains debated in academic circles, especially regarding water consumption and long-term sustainability under climate change. At a time when climate discourse is increasingly dominated by pessimism, the project is a heartening sign that severely degraded landscapes are not necessarily permanent losses. Human intervention, when sustained over decades and aligned with economic incentives, can reverse environmental decline even under harsh natural conditions. **XT**

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Cover Photo: A scenic area in Hami, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, China
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Xinjiang: Beyond Imagination

An aerial photograph of a vast, open landscape. In the foreground, a wide, shallow river with a rocky bed flows from the bottom right towards the center. A large herd of horses is wading through the river. To the left of the river, a grassy field contains several dark-colored horses. In the middle ground, a small cluster of white, dome-shaped tents or yurts is situated on a green plain. The background features rolling green hills under a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds.

SNAPSHOTS

A GRASSLAND IN THE SKY

August is the peak month for visitors at the Nalati (Narat) resort. Located in the Tianshan Mountains in Yili (Ili) Kazak Autonomous Prefecture, the resort is home to a picturesque alpine meadow, as well as breathtaking peaks, spruce forests and clear streams. Tourists visit not only for its scenery, but also for its Kazak culture. **XT**

Yurts and horses dot the scenery along one of the resort's streams (WEI YAO)

SNAPSHOTS





Tourists arrive at the Nalati resort on August 4 (WEI YAO)

SNAPSHOTS





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1. Nalati's distinctive alpine grassland scenery (WEI YAO)

2. Tourists ride across the grassland at the Nalati resort (WEI YAO)

3. Stalls on the grassland rent traditional Kazak-style costumes to tourists seeking local culture-themed photo experiences (VCG)

Economic Performance in the First Half of 2026

(All growth rates are y.o.y, 1 yuan = \$0.14 as of August 4)

Regional GDP

**1.03 trillion yuan,
up 3.7%**

GDP (gross domestic product) is a comprehensive measure of economic activity

Value added of Three Major Industries:

Primary industry (agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry and fishery):

**64.185 billion yuan,
up 2.8%**

Secondary industry (mining, manufacturing, the production and supply of electricity, thermal power, gas and water, and construction):

**404.937 billion yuan,
up 4.4%**

Tertiary industry (services):

**562.232 billion yuan,
up 3.2%**

Living Standards

Per-capita disposable income:

**13,867 yuan,
up 4.8%**

after adjusting for price factors

Urban per-capita disposable income:

**24,373 yuan,
up 3.6%**

after adjusting for price factors

Rural per-capita disposable income:

**3,402 yuan,
up 6.2%**

after adjusting for price factors

New urban jobs created:

**275,300,
achieving 71.69 percent**

of the annual target



Shoppers browse home appliances covered by a government-subsidized trade-in program at an Urumqi mall on January 15 (VCG)

FACTS & FIGURES

Consumption

Per-capita consumption expenditure:

**12,476 yuan,
up 4.6 percent**

after adjusting for price factors

Total retail sales of consumer goods:

**187.109 billion yuan,
down 1.2%**

Online retail sales by leading retailers:

**11.239 billion yuan,
up 40.7%**

Sales of computers, communication devices and consumer electronics by leading retailers:

up 46.6%

driven by trade-in subsidies

Investment

Total fixed assets investment (excluding investment by rural households):

down 11.3%

Infrastructure investment:

up 1.5%,

accounting for 23.3% of the total

Hi-tech investment:

up 2.3%,

accounting for 4.8% of the total

(Source: Information Office of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Regional Government)



A cornfield in Xinyuan County, Yili (Ili) Kazak Autonomous Prefecture, on July 29 (VCG)



IN FOCUS

GREENING THE GOBI

How Kekeya transforms a desert into a legacy By Xiang Yuting



Shelter forests in Kekeya, Aksu Prefecture (VCG)



At the northwestern edge of the Taklimakan Desert, the largest desert in China and the second largest shifting desert in the world, lies a stretch of land once battered by wind and sand, now draped in green.

This is Kekeya in Aksu Prefecture.

Forty years ago, it was nothing but a barren expanse of Gobi wasteland. Sandstorms swept across the terrain, threatening nearby settlements and farmland. Through the perseverance of several generations, a vast green belt has gradually unfolded there.

Amid this sea of forest stand two trees known to local people as “Love” and “Hope.”

What makes them special is not their species, but a story that began four decades ago.

The clock turns back to 1986.

Zhao Tuanwa was on military service in Aksu. Just before he was due to return to his home province of Shaanxi to marry Yang Xiaoyan, he learned that his unit would join a large-scale desert greening campaign in Kekeya. Zhao wrote to his expectant bride, telling her he would stay on the Gobi front line to plant trees and fight desertification—and proposing to postpone the wedding.

Far away from Kekeya, Yang waited anxiously for Zhao’s return. “Could he have fallen for someone else?” Carrying her doubts, she boarded a train heading west.

When Zhao brought Yang to Kekeya and she saw the desertification control work underway—people toiling under the scorching sun, planting trees across the barren ground—her eyes filled with tears. She told Zhao that she wanted to stay and plant trees alongside him.

Witnessed by Zhao’s fellow soldiers, the couple tied the knot right there at the afforestation site. After the ceremony, they planted a tree together. People later called it “Love.”

A decade later, Zhao, who had already left the military, and Yang returned to Kekeya with their child. The once desolate land had been transformed into a landscape of green. Together, the family planted another tree and named it “Hope.”

From a single sapling to a vast forest, from a wedding ceremony in the Gobi Desert to a lifelong commitment, the two trees carry the choices and dedication of an ordinary family. More than that, they mark the beginning of Kekeya’s decades-long journey to hold back the desert.

A miracle of life

Faced with destructive sandstorms and a fragile ecological environment, Aksu launched the Kekeya Desertification Control Project in 1986 after extensive surveys and careful assessments.

The first challenge was water.

The Gobi Desert had long endured severe

drought and lacked reliable natural water sources. To make large-scale afforestation possible, workers first had to build an irrigation system capable of bringing water into the barren land.

In April 1986, a team of more than 250 workers headed to Kekeya to dig canals. After four months of relentless labor under harsh conditions, they completed a 16.8-km anti-seepage canal, along with 505 supporting structures including bridges, culverts and water gates. The canal became a lifeline, bringing stable water supplies into the desert.

The second challenge was the land itself.

The soil in Kekeya had been hardened by millennia of sediment accumulation and salinization. Under the project plan, workers had to level nearly 135 hectares of barren land within one month. The task fell to project leader Li Zhongkang.

The ground was so hard that pickaxes sparked against the surface and bulldozers could barely leave a mark. After repeated trials, Li and his team devised a practical approach: soaking the saline soil with water to soften it, then using machinery to strip away the loosened earth layer by layer. Through this combination of persistence and innovation, the seemingly impossible task was eventually accomplished.

The third challenge was keeping the trees alive.

Bi Kexian, then Director of the Aksu Prefectural Forestry Department, led a team of forestry technicians through years of soil improvement experiments. By analyzing soil samples and testing different restoration methods, they gradually brought the soil's salt content down from an inhospitable level to 0.8 percent, creating the conditions necessary for afforestation.

Years of working directly with the earth left a lasting mark on Bi. To assess soil moisture, salinity and fertility, he often tested the ground with his bare hands. Decades of such labor made the thumb, index finger and middle finger of his right hand thicker and rougher than those of his left, with hardened, deformed nails resembling a small iron farming tool—a quiet testament to his dedication to restoring the desert.

Generation after generation of desert fighters devoted themselves to the land, allowing Kekeya's green cover to gradually expand outward, reclaiming areas once dominated by barren Gobi.

During the first decade of the project, 2,200 hectares of artificial afforestation were completed. In the following decade, the green area grew further, with an additional 4,360 hectares of forests planted.

To date, 54 large-scale tree-planting campaigns have been carried out in the Kekeya area, drawing 3.9 million participants. Along the edge of the desert, a “green belt” stretching approximately 50 km in length and 47 km in width has emerged, forming a vital ecological barrier against sandstorms.

This transformation has changed more than just the color of



The Kekeya Memorial Hall recreates the massive tree-planting campaign launched in Kekeya in 1986 (VCG)

the land. It has also reshaped the relationship between people and nature.

Building on the Kekeya project, Aksu has continuously advanced ecological restoration efforts, prioritizing the integrated protection and restoration of mountains, rivers, forests, farmland, lakes, grasslands and deserts.

Over the past four decades, the prefecture has carried out afforestation across more than 390,000 hectares and more than 560,000 hectares of desertified land have been reclaimed. The local forest coverage rate has increased to 9 percent.

Meanwhile, wetland areas have expanded to more than 150,000 hectares and biodiversity has gradually recovered. Aksu is now home to more than 270 species of wild animals and over 520 species of wild plants.



New growth drivers

Desertification control is not merely about planting trees to hold back the sands. More importantly, it is about letting greenery truly transform people's lives.

As the ecological environment improves, Aksu has explored a path where environmental protection and economic development reinforce each other. Trees that once served only as a shield against wind and sand have now become new sources of income for local communities.

Among these achievements, the development of a specialty fruit industry stands out as one of the most striking examples.

After years of development, Aksu now has orchards covering 300,000 hectares, constituting what locals call a "sweet industry." Specialty products such as apples, thin-shelled walnuts and

dried apricots have developed into large-scale industries, with annual output exceeding 3 million tons, the highest in Xinjiang.

Official data show that fruit production accounts for nearly 30 percent of the per-capita disposable income of local farmers. For many farming households, fruit trees have enabled a transition from "protecting greenery" to "harvesting the benefits of greenery."

To generate greater value from these fruits, Aksu has continued to extend the industrial chain, expanding from cultivation into processing and brand marketing. The prefecture has established 12 agricultural product deep-processing parks, with an annual capacity of 1.67 million tons for forest and fruit products.

Meanwhile, the digital technology is injecting new vitality into the traditional fruit industry.

In the past, hampered by inadequate transportation infrastructure and limited sales channels, many high-quality fruits from Aksu and other parts of south Xinjiang struggled to reach wider markets. Today, the rise of e-commerce is changing that. A growing number of young people have returned to their hometowns to start businesses, leveraging livestreaming and online promotion to connect local products with consumers across China.

Li Bo, President of the Aksu E-commerce Association, is one such entrepreneur, driven by the desire to help quality products from his hometown reach more consumers. In the past, "even the best fruits had difficulty making their way out of south Xinjiang," he said.

In his view, e-commerce has not only expanded sales channels but also accelerated local industrial upgrading. Feedback from consumers has encouraged growers to pay greater attention to standardized production and branding, helping fruit farmers adapt to the digital economy.

The benefits brought by ecological improvement have also extended into tourism.

In recent years, Aksu has made full use of its ecological and cultural resources to develop eco-tourism, rural tourism and other new initiatives. Its annual revenue from sightseeing services has exceeded 22.1 billion yuan (\$3 billion).

At the same time, ecological restoration has created employment opportunities. Nearly 3,700 positions in environmental conservation have enabled local residents to participate in the effort while increasing their incomes.

At a press conference marking the 40th anniversary of the Kekeya project, held on July 16, Ayixianmuguli Atawulla, Director of the Aksu Prefectural Forestry and Grassland Bureau, said the prefecture has actively embraced the concept that "lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets," promoting a transition from simply protecting greenery to achieving common prosperity through ecological development.



Farmers harvest apples in an orchard in Awati (Awat) County, Aksu, in October 2025 (VCG)

Seeds of spirit

At an exhibition celebrating the 70th founding anniversary of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region in September 2025, a collection of striking satellite images vividly capture the dramatic transformation of Kekeya over nearly four decades.

The 1986 photographs show a landscape deeply scarred by erosion, with gullies cutting through the alluvial plain. Thick layers of saline soil blanketed the surface, reveal-

*Self-reliance, unity,
perseverance,
hard work and
dedication*

—the Kekeya Spirit

ing a barren desert terrain.

By contrast, pictures from 2025 present a completely different scene. At the foot of the Tianshan Mountains, the land once ravaged by wind and sand had been transformed into a green expanse of fields.

These images, spanning four decades, record more than ecological improvement. They also bear witness to the spirit of generations of desert fighters—self-reliance, unity, perseverance, hard work and dedication. Known as the “Kekeya Spirit,” this



Satellite images showing the transformation of Kekeya from 1986 to 2025 (XIANG YUTING)

legacy has grown alongside every sapling planted in the desert and has been carried forward through generations of sustained efforts.

Yimamu Maimaiti was the first director of the Kekeya Three-North Shelterbelt Forest Management Station and one of the earliest participants in the desertification control project. During the early stages, he led his team in planting trees despite sandstorms, saline soil and water shortages.

Aisikaer Yimamu is Yimamu’s son. Inspired by his father, he joined tree planting activities in Kekeya while still in middle school. Later, he chose a career in forestry and grassland management, taking over his father’s “green relay baton.”

“To improve the ecological environment, afforestation requires the dedication of successive generations,” Aisikaer, now a senior technician at the Forestry Development Service Center of the Aksu Prefectural Forestry and Grassland Bureau, said.

This green legacy is far from an isolated family story; it has become a shared tradition across Aksu.

Aynigul Eymail, Deputy Director of the Kekeya Memorial Hall, is one of the many who carry on this mission. Her grandfather once planted trees in Kekeya with a shovel. Her father later took up the mantle of ecological conservation, and today she shares with visitors the story of how the desert was transformed.

For her, tree planting has become a shared memory among local residents. “Every year, I take my children to plant several trees as well. In Aksu, it is difficult to find an adult who has never participated in voluntary tree planting. It is a common experience shared by everyone living on this land,” she said.

Today, the Kekeya story continues to spread farther.

Building on the experience of the Kekeya project, Aksu has launched a series of large-scale ecological restoration projects since 2015, including those in the Aksu River Basin, the Weigan River Basin, Kongtailike and Aishiman. Covering more than 260,000 hectares in total, they have expanded greening efforts from individual sites to broader watershed-based management.

Located about 80 km southwest of Kekeya, Aishiman in Awati (Awat) County was once the last major source of sandstorms within the Aksu oasis.

In 2021, the Aishiman Ecological Restoration and Desertification Control Project kicked off. To date, ecological restoration across more than 52,560 hectares of land has been completed. Through coordinated efforts, vegetation coverage has increased from 4.5 percent to 45 percent, while wetlands have expanded and biodiversity has notably improved.

From Kekeya to Aishiman, from a single tree to a vast forest, from the perseverance of one generation to the relay of many more, the story of green transformation continues along the edge of the Taklimakan Desert. **XI**

IN FOCUS

PUTTING DOWN ROOTS IN THE DESERT

A forester and the 40-year green miracle of Kekeya By Ji Jing

O

On July 15, at the Kekeya Memorial Hall in Kekeya Town, Aksu Prefecture, 62-year-old Song Jianjiang bent down to gently touch a rusty *kantuman*, the most popular iron farm tool among Xinjiang's Uygur people used for plowing, digging irrigation channels and weeding.

As a first-generation Kekeya forester, Song has spent over 30 years planting trees in the Kekeya area, witnessing the miracle of

this barren Gobi Desert transforming into tens of thousands of hectares of lush forests. This *kantuman* accompanied him as he dug countless tree pits and built dozens of kilometers of irrigation canals.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the launch of the Kekeya greening project. Four decades ago, this place was choked by flying yellow sands. Today, a “green wall” that is 50 km in length and 47 km in width



The Kekeya Memorial Hall in Wensu County, Aksu Prefecture, on September 23, 2021 (VCG)



Song Jianjiang is interviewed in Kekeya, Aksu, on September 23, 2021 (VCG)

stands like a bulwark along the northern edge of the Taklimakan Desert.

Chasing a dream

In the spring of 1987, Aksu drew foresters from several counties to support the newly launched Kekeya greening project. A then 23-year-old Song was a worker at a forest farm in Wensu County of Aksu. He had a stable job and life, but the perennial yellow sand outside his window left him restless. “Kekeya is the main battlefield for sand control in Aksu,” he told newspaper *Xinjiang Daily*. “Only by going to a place like this could I truly accomplish something.”

When he shared this idea with his father,

*“I’m determined
to go. No matter
how harsh the
Gobi environment
is, I need to go out
and temper
myself.”*

—Song Jianjiang

he met immediate resistance. In his father’s eyes, his son had never ventured out on his own, and Kekeya was a desolate wasteland of salt flats and howling winds without even decent housing.

However, Song did not compromise. After numerous earnest talks, his father finally asked, “Are you really going?”

“I’m determined to go. No matter how harsh the Gobi environment is, I need to go out and temper myself.”

His father slowly nodded. On March 17 of that year, right after lunch, Song packed his bags and headed for Kekeya. Turning back to wave goodbye, he caught his father wiping away tears. Unable to bear saying anything ▶

more, Song stepped on the tractor accelerator and drove toward Kekeya. Poplar trees on both sides of the road flashed past. The future was unknown, but Song's heart was filled with longing.

Yet, life in Kekeya proved even harsher than he had imagined.

There were no houses. They dug pits, laid down a few wooden beams and covered them with grass mats to create *di-wozi* ("makeshift caves"). More than a dozen people squeezed into each one, so tight they could barely turn over. There was no clean water; they drank muddy water thick with silt. Meals were even simpler: dry naan bread eaten with salted vegetables. When they were too busy to stop, they would just gnaw on a piece of hard naan in the fields.

Yet no one complained. Every day before dawn, brothers of all ethnic groups, Han, Uygur and Kazak, slung their *kantuman* over their shoulders and headed out. The saline-alkali soil was as hard as stone. A strike with a *kantuman* left only a white scratch. When the skin between their thumbs and forefingers cracked from the vibration, they simply wrapped a piece of cloth around their hands and kept working.

The biggest challenge was water. Without water, newly planted trees would not survive. Water was channeled from major canals several km away. Once the water arrived, someone had to guard it day and night; a single leak or misdirected flow would doom the saplings. Song and his coworkers took turns on night patrols, armed with only a flashlight for illumination. The Gobi nights were bone chilling, with cold piercing straight through thick cotton coats. When sleepiness overtook them, they would catch a brief nap right by the canal before getting back to work.

"Back then, there was only one thing on our mind: As long as the trees could live, nothing else mattered," Song said.

Years of gripping a *kantuman* left Song's palms thick with calluses, his fingers scarred but sturdy.

From manual labor to smart governance

Today, the retired Song has settled near Kekeya. This land, to which he contributed his youth, is his favorite place to visit in his spare time. Sometimes, he walked into the memorial hall to pick up that old *kantuman* and tell tourists stories of the old Gobi days; other times he strolled through the forests with his wife, gazing at the rolling shelterbelts and vast orchards, and looking down at the crisscrossing irrigation canals beneath their feet.

Whenever he stands amid the sea of green, Song is filled with deep emotion. He is proud to be one of the countless young farm workers who rushed to the barren sands with burning passion more than 30 years ago and forged this green wall along the northern edge of the Taklimakan Desert.

Stepping out of the memorial hall, not far away in a forestry



and fruit base, young forestry technicians were operating drones to spray liquid nutrients, while managing the entire forest's automated drip irrigation system with a single tap on a smart-phone app. Further away, at the frontlines of the broader battle to contain the fringes of the Taklimakan Desert, intelligent tree-planting robots shuttle across the sand sea, precisely handling entire processes like pit-digging and sapling planting.

More than three decades ago, such scenes were beyond Song's wildest imagination. Back then, people of all ethnic groups relied on physical labor to dig canals and wash away alkaline salts, guarding saplings day and night. Today, technology empowers ecological management, boosting efficiency dramatically and the younger generations are writing a new green chapter.



Farmers work at an almond nursery in Wensu County in April 2021 (VCG)

The actual numbers speak volumes about the transformation: The per-capita annual income of farmers in the Kekeya region increased from 300 yuan (\$44) 40 years ago to 26,000 yuan (\$3,842) today.

“Our generation suffered the worst of the Gobi’s hardships so that our future generations could live happier lives,” Song said.

The Kekeya Spirit

Inside the Kekeya Memorial Hall, that rusty *kantuman* sits quietly. Song has raised it countless times to recount the reclamation years of the 1980s to young people. Looking out the window at the boundless sea of green, young visitors are invariably awed.

Ayinigeer Aimaier, a guide at the memorial hall, told

Xinjiang Daily that after hearing Song’s stories, many students take the initiative to participate in voluntary tree-planting. The Kekeya Spirit, characterized by “self-reliance, unity, perseverance, hard work and dedication,” has never faded.

The Kekeya greening project is no longer just a single afforestation project across the Aksu Prefecture; it has become a model guiding Aksu’s other ecological projects. Hundreds of species of wild flora and fauna now inhabit and reproduce here. The “Kekeya experience” of arid zone ecological governance has spread beyond Xinjiang, providing a valuable blueprint for global desertification control. **XT**