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**CONSUMING IDENTITIES: THE CULTURE AND POLITICS OF FOOD
AMONG THE UYGHUR IN CONTEMPORARY XINJIANG**

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Abstract

This research is a study of food and identity among the Uyghur, a Turkic-speaking Muslim people who live in the north-western region of Xinjiang (Chinese Central Asia) and are today one of the largest minorities in the People's Republic of China. It is based on fieldwork carried out from May 1996 to September 1997 among Uyghur urban intellectuals in Ürümqi, the provincial capital of Xinjiang. The underlying argument is that food, in all its related practices, is a powerful form of identity creation and maintenance. Through the preparation, the exchange, and the consumption of food social relationships are created, rules of inclusion and exclusion are established, boundaries are negotiated and maintained. In a context of volatile relations between the Uyghur Muslim minority and the dominant Han Chinese population, food represents a fundamental resource available to Uyghur intellectuals, who find themselves at the vanguard of both assimilation and differentiation and are currently engaged in a difficult process of negotiation and affirmation of their distinctive identity. In this context, food becomes a privileged arena for negotiation, providing an excellent vantage point to explore the dynamic and complex nature of social and cultural interaction in contemporary Xinjiang. In particular, the same tension between differentiation and assimilation is at work in the realm of food. If, on the one hand, a narrative of continuity, tradition, and discrete identities can be detected in the way Uyghurs talk and write about their food, on the other hand practices as well as discourses also show the syncretic nature of a culinary tradition.

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Preface

This account aims at providing the context in which my research started and took place. My personal involvement with the people and the events that occurred while I was living in Xinjiang have inevitably affected my fieldwork. As a result, I have often found myself in the ambiguous position of being at the same time an outsider as well as an insider, with all the strengths and weaknesses that such ambiguity implies.

I had been studying China for five years as an undergraduate; i.e. China as Han culture in the People's Republic. I was aware that there were other peoples, different from the Han, living in the PRC: the "Chinese minorities", as they are usually referred to. However, at that time China was still a relatively mysterious universe and in the Italian academic world very little attention, if any, was paid to non-Han as well as to non-mainland China.

From 1990 to 1991 I spent one year at Shandong University studying Mandarin. It was then that I had my first encounter with the Uyghur. Virtually everywhere in China one could find Uyghurs selling kebab (*yangrouchuan* for the Chinese). With their beards, deep eyes, high noses, and broken Mandarin they were just as exotic as us *laowai* ("old foreigners"). There was an unspoken bond which became explicit every time they asked if I was a Muslim.

Soon I became tired of constantly being an 'anthropological' object and I decided to challenge the assumption according to which people were divided into 'us' Chinese - in fact Han - and 'them' foreigners. Every time I was asked the ritual question "*Ni shi na ge guojia de?*" (What country do you come from?) - sometimes even twenty times in a day - I said I was Chinese (*Zhongguo ren*), waited for the astonished expression on my interlocutor's face and then specified that I belonged to a minority from the north-west, the Uyghur. I was encouraged by my local friends and acquaintances, who were sympathetic and unanimously agreed that I could easily pass as a Uyghur. This turned out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy during my fieldwork in Xinjiang six years later. There the two main reference groups were the Han and the Uyghur and people often assumed that I was a Uyghur, rather than a *laowai*.

My first experience in China awoke my interest in the 'Chinese others', these colourful peoples who sing and dance - as they are usually represented in Chinese discourse. I also felt the need to take an anthropological approach. I wanted to find out how *they* perceived and represented themselves. Therefore, I did an MA at the School of Oriental and African Studies, where I was able to combine the study of the discipline - social anthropology - with a specific area - China.

Xinjiang had been one of the remotest and least accessible regions of the PRC. In recent years, as a result of major internal and international transformations - namely the economic reforms in China and the break-up of the Soviet Union which led to the independence of the Central Asian Republics - Xinjiang has gained a centrality unknown since the foundation of the PRC in 1949. The Uyghur were no longer simply one of the 55 colourful minorities within the Chinese state; their identity was also defined against the other Central Asian Turkic peoples, who now had a state of their own. Very little material based on fieldwork had been published in the West. On the other hand, Chinese sources only provided a depoliticised representation of the Uyghur in terms of folkloristic traits. I wanted to let the Uyghur speak for themselves. I wanted to find out what it meant to be a Uyghur in Xinjiang at the end of the twentieth century. That was the question I had in mind when I started my PhD.

The newly acquired strategic importance of Xinjiang within the PRC, was also accompanied by the harshening of the already volatile relations between the local people - mainly Uyghur - and the Han population that had moved into Xinjiang, mostly since the late 1940s early 1950s. Moreover, in the last few years Uyghur independence movements had become more and more active both in China and abroad. This meant that my research was potentially very sensitive. The study of Uyghur identity as defined in relation to the Han, while not being specifically focused on ethnic relations, certainly implied them as a background. Food provided an interesting and relatively safe angle to look at my question.

I was aware of the difficulties of doing research in the PRC, and in Xinjiang in particular. It was a relief when Dr. Cui Yanhu, a member of the Unit for Cultural and Social Anthropology at the Xinjiang Normal University in Ürümqi, offered to help organise my fieldwork in Xinjiang. I had corresponded with Dr. Cui for about two years, since he was a visiting scholar in Cambridge as part of the Mac Arthur project. He had encouraged my interest in "non-Han groups" in Xinjiang, as he preferred to call what are normally referred to as national minorities, and was pleased to inform me about the Unit, newly formed upon his return. Dr. Cui and I agreed that I would register as a language student at his University for the first two or three months. While being introduced to the Uyghur language, I would also be able to identify a suitable fieldwork site. I did not want to be based in Ürümqi during the whole period, between Spring 1996 and Autumn 1997, but it was easier to make arrangements while in Ürümqi, rather than from England. I arrived in China in May 1996 with a student visa.

During the fourteen months that I spent in Ürümqi, my attitude to China radically changed. Though I did not consider Chinese presence in Xinjiang entirely

legitimate, I was fairly unbiased when I arrived. My previous experience in Shandong had been very positive, especially in terms of human relations. Six years later, in the "western region" I encountered a very different China. Living standards had definitely improved, at least for most of the urban population. But I felt that the quality of life was much worse compared to what I had experienced before. Money had become the dominant value and there seemed to be a general dissatisfaction, since the great majority of the people could not afford the living standards that the socialist market economy was now proposing. Somehow people in Xinjiang were experiencing the worst of both socialism - with its bureaucracy and state control over people's lives and minds - and capitalism - with its insatiable consumerism and lack of welfare. What I found most striking, however, was the rising Chinese nationalistic sentiment, in fact Han chauvinism. This reached its climax on July 1st 1997 with the celebration of the "return of Hong Kong to the motherland" which allowed the Chinese to "wash white one hundred years of national humiliation", as slogans posted everywhere recited.

While my research interests were mainly focused on the Uyghur, I was equally open to meet and interact with the Han, as well as with members of any other group living in Xinjiang. But before long it became evident that once I had entered a Uyghur network there were not many chances to meet and associate with the Han. It was a question of 'loyalty', but also of time and opportunities: there is very little overlap between Uyghur and Han networks and this usually occurs within the working environment. Since I was spending most of my time in a Uyghur scene, I inevitably started sympathising and sharing their resentment for the Han 'occupiers'. I tried to be as objective as possible in my analyses, but I could not help being outraged by every episode of discrimination or symbolic violence that I witnessed. In Ürümqi, along with coal dust, one could breath tension and hatred. On the other hand I could not blame those Han who lived in fear of being murdered by a Uyghur. Hatred, violence, and repression prevented almost any form of dialogue between the two groups and most Han and Uyghurs could not go beyond a stereotyped representation of each other.

Young educated Uyghurs, while being proud of their Uyghur identity, felt helpless and frustrated. From their point of view, in the new Chinese society all the chances for a good job and success were reserved to the Han. I have hardly met any Uyghur student or graduate who was not dreaming, if not actually planning, to go abroad. I was constantly faced with a very difficult choice, whether to support them or not. On a personal level, I could perfectly understand their sense of frustration and wished they could have more chances than wasting the rest of their lives in a dusty office knitting or reading the newspaper. On the other hand, these were among the

brightest and most educated Uyghur youth. I believe that, if there is still a chance for the Uyghur to survive as a group with their distinctive culture, the battle has to be fought with pens rather than with bombs. For this reason, I deeply admire those Uyghur intellectuals who have accepted the challenge of reviving and promoting Uyghur culture within Xinjiang, despite the immense difficulties and frustrations with which they are constantly faced.

Many have contributed in various ways to this work. I would like to begin with those who have helped me to reach the end. I want to thank first of all my family for always being there. Attilio and Giuliana Cesàro have also contributed their very generous financial support throughout my PhD and especially during the writing-up. Many thanks to Anna Lisa Cesàro for 'technical' advice and for her precious help in editing maps and illustrations. Guilherme Werlang shared some of the worst time of my writing-up, and always trusted that I would finish. I thank him above all for convincing me that it was worth. And for a lot more.

I owe Stuart Thompson - who first introduced me to the anthropology of food - endless gratitude for his generous support and constant encouragement throughout my Master's and my PhD, which helped me not to give up. Stephan Feuchtwang accepted the difficult task of reviving my motivation and leading me to the end when it was most unlikely for me to finish. I am most grateful for his empathic reading and thoughtful comments, which have helped me to interpret my own work. Many thanks to Chris Hann, who shared my initial enthusiasm and guided me in the first stages of my PhD. I am very grateful to Peter Parkes for generously accepting to carry the burden of my supervision, and for his useful comments and suggestions.

Cui Yan-hu offered his precious help in organising my fieldwork and assisted me during my initial stay in Xinjiang. My deepest gratitude goes to all the Uyghur people, who have welcomed me into their homes and into their lives. In particular, I want to thank my Uyghur teachers and my friends Äziz, Nurnisa, Saniyā, Sabi, Alim, and Eli for sharing pride in their culture, and for taking care of me and making me feel at home.

At different stages, I have shared my fieldwork experience with other 'Uyghur scholars'. I am most grateful to Rachel Harris, Ildikó Bellér-Hann, Arienne Dwyer, and Gardner Bovingdon for sharing their knowledge and their ideas, and for their precious help and constant support during the writing-up. I value their friendship even more than their academic contributions.

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I cannot conclude without remembering the late Paul Stirling. He deserves my deepest gratitude, above all for his understanding and sympathetic support, which made more bearable the difficult post-fieldwork transition. Finally, I would like to thank all the friends who have kept me sane in the various stages of writing-up; I am particularly grateful to Holly Harris also for her help with proofreading and copy editing.

INTRODUCTION

Journey to the West¹

Outside the carriage window there is nothing. Or *gebi*, as they call it here. A wasteland of sand and stones. Occasionally a tuft of yellowed grass. It is a totally new feeling here in China, where it seems impossible even to imagine a place without people, let alone without any trace of them.

The train left Lanzhou last night at two and entered the Gansu corridor, the main route for land travel between central China and Xinjiang. We have been travelling for more than thirty hours now, and have covered only half the distance separating Beijing from Ürümchi, our final destination. This single rail line was built in the late 1950s and was a fundamental step in the attempt to integrate the “western regions” into China. Thanks to this rail line, masses of Han Chinese have moved, and are still moving, into Xinjiang, to the extent that the proportion of Han population has risen from about 5% in 1949 to over 38% in 1995. I am told by a fellow passenger that the construction of a second track on the Lanzhou-Ürümchi section is about to be completed, thus shrinking the distance between Ürümchi and the rest of China. “This will make the trip much faster”, she says.²

Ürümchi - our destination - is the capital and main urban centre of what is currently known as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, one of the five autonomous regions of the People’s Republic of China. However, most people in the West are probably more familiar with names such as Eastern Turkestan or Chinese Turkestan. It is the region comprised between Mongolia and Tibet, on a north-south axis, and the Central Asian Republics and China proper, on a west-east axis. In short, Chinese Central Asia. If very few people have ever heard of Xinjiang, the “Silk Road” - which from the Tang capital of Chang’an (today Xi’an) crossed this region and eventually reached the Mediterranean - and the “Great Game” - played here by the Russian and British empires at the turn of this century - are definitely more evocative

¹ *Xiyou Ji* (Journey to the West) is the title of a 16th century novel based on the Buddhist monk Xuan Zang’s travel to India through the region today known as Xinjiang (7th century, Tang dynasty). The best known English translation is Wu Ch’êng-ên, *Monkey*, translated by Arthur Waley, 1942, Penguin.

² The second track was completed during the summer 1996. In fact the trip from Beijing to Ürümchi now lasts about four hours less than it used to: sixty-five as opposed to sixty-nine.

to Western readers. Today, once again, this region has become crucial in Chinese trade and politics.

After the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, Soviet influence in Xinjiang had been growing, reaching its climax in the 1930s during Sheng Shicai's rule. The efforts made by the Chinese Communist government to (re)orient this region towards Beijing have been successful, especially after Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated in the late 1950s. For three decades Chinese Central Asia has been isolated from its Soviet counterpart. Artificial boundaries have cut across peoples who shared language, history, and traditions, while having hardly anything in common with their Russian and Chinese dominators (McMillen 1979:8; Paksoy 1994). Today such boundaries have become much more permeable, as a consequence of more or less radical transformations in the world's biggest socialist countries. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 has led to the creation of five Central Asian independent states, while in neighbouring China socialism - or its ghost - has so far managed to survive by transforming itself into "socialist market economy" (*shehui zhuyi shichang jingji*). The economic and social impact on Xinjiang of the post-Mao reforms that were launched in the early eighties has become particularly visible in recent years, especially in terms of cross-border exchange. Ethnic ties have facilitated border trade between China and Central Asia, while at the same time being reinforced by renewed and increasing contact.

Despite the fact that Xinjiang lies almost half way between Europe and Beijing, the easiest way to get there for a European is still via the Chinese capital. In other words, travel eight to nine thousand kilometres east, and then nearly four thousand kilometres back west. One could choose an adventurous shortcut, via Almaty in Kazakhstan or Islamabad in Pakistan, both connected by air and by road to Xinjiang, only to find out that it is a lot more complicated (visas, bad connections, etc.) and considerably more expensive.

I chose to reach Ürümqi from Beijing, and to do so by train rather than by plane. Not only because of the prohibitive air fare (at that time £220 single, £440 return, double the local price for the privilege of being a foreigner). The route of my journey was also a metaphor. My interest for Xinjiang and the Uyghur people had started from (Han) China. I wanted to experience the physical distance of the western region; to gradually plunge into such a different reality, rather than diving into it on a plane. To appreciate the continuity, and yet the difference. Three days and three nights on a train offered such an opportunity. I chose a "hard sleeper" (second class) rather than "soft sleeper" (first class). Though undeniably less comfortable, I found it much

more interesting. It is a fair compromise between the hell of “hard-seats”, where nevertheless one encounters a more representative - at least numerically - sample of the Chinese population, and the ivory tower of “soft-sleepers”, where government officials, business people, and foreigners travel in the padded comfort of a first class compartment, and where socialising generally occurs only with the other three occupants of one’s compartment and, occasionally, with the train attendant, if it occurs at all.

I had been planning this trip for months, if not years. Finally, there I was, on my journey to the West. The friend I stayed with in Beijing - a European working for a foreign company, who had been to Xinjiang a few times because of his work - could not believe, let alone understand, how I could possibly want to spend more than a year in Ürümqi, or worse, in a small town in Xinjiang. My Han friends and acquaintances’ reactions covered all the range of stereotypes associated with Xinjiang and the Uyghur. The most optimistic ones thought it was a very exotic place, inhabited by very hospitable and good looking people. These were my friends. As to the acquaintances, the most common reaction was one of concern: Xinjiang is not a safe place, they told me, and Uyghurs are a backward and violent people. Why should I bother going there and even learning their language which, unlike Mandarin, is totally useless? The only genuinely positive and informed comment came from a woman working at Shandong University. She said that she was from Xinjiang (*Xinjiang ren*). She was born and grew up in the Ili region, the daughter of Han settlers who had moved there in the 1960’s. Since she had married and moved to Shandong, some ten years before, she had never had a chance to go back. When she learned I was going to Xinjiang, she got excited and started describing in a nostalgic tone the wonderful landscapes in the Ili and Altai area.

The stereotypes that I had been offered were rather benevolent, compared to what other foreigners on their way to Xinjiang had been told by immigration officers, according to a Uyghur friend. “Beware of the Uyghur. They are wild and always carry their knives. You say a word too many and they won’t hesitate to kill you on the spot.” The same friend continued “Someone I know was naive enough to actually keep away from the Uyghur, until to his surprise he realised that we are really friendly people.” It is not fair, however, to entirely blame individuals for their prejudices when they obviously reflect the government’s ambiguous propaganda: while the walls are covered with slogans stating the equality and the unity of all the nationalities, the official target in minorities areas such as Xinjiang has always been one of “development”. Moreover, within the evolutionary approach adopted in the social sciences, minorities have been regarded as representatives of primitive forms of

society, as opposed to the more evolved Han (Harrell 1995:15-16). What I find most disturbing, though, is the patronising tone that underlies every Han discourse on “their” minorities. But am I not being just as patronising, trying to defend a rather different image of the Uyghur? The answer comes in the shape of a knife.

Ömär shows me his knife. The blade is about four inches long, with an upward point, the handle is inlaid with coloured stones, or glass. He keeps it in a leather sheath hanging from his belt. “It’s a Uyghur knife, all handmade” he says while slicing a melon. A couple of Han passengers lean to look at the knife. Before long they ask him the expected question, “How much does it cost?” “Three hundred yuan [ca £25 then]” says Ömär. One of them, a woman, takes it in her hands and inspects it carefully. She starts bargaining, as if she was going to buy it. Or perhaps just out of habit. After they have left, Ömär smiles at me maliciously and whispers “In fact I only paid for it twenty yuan. I bought it in Ürümchi, not even in Kashgar.” Then he and his two Uyghur friends start questioning me, “How do you say knife in Italian? And gun? Do many people have a gun in Italy? You know, we Uyghurs like to fight.” Scars on their hands, arms, and faces, seem to support this statement. I think they may not be as violent and aggressive as they try to advertise themselves. What matters, though, is that they take pride in it. They actually look down on the Han (men) as unmanly and naive, just as much as the Han look down on the Uyghur as wild and uncivilised. In a way there is a symmetry in their mutual representation and in its underlying values.

I had met Ömär earlier in the morning, as I was going to fill the thermos from the boiler situated at the end of our carriage. He was sitting in the aisle by the window. I noticed him because of his non-Chinese look. He probably thought the same of me, since when I passed he addressed me with a question I had never been asked before: “What is your ethnicity?” (*Ni shi na ge minzu de?*).³ I immediately started to unpack the assumptions behind his question. First of all, I was expected to have an ethnicity. Second, he probably thought I belonged to some “Chinese minority”. In any case, for the very first time in China I was not asked “What country do you come from?” (*Ni shi na ge guojia de?*).

Ömär invites me to sit down and introduces me to his two Uyghur friends, Äli and Adil. They are all from Qumul, the easternmost oasis town in Xinjiang, known in Chinese as Hami. They say they are working in Beijing as *kawapchi* (kebab sellers)

³ The translation of the term *minzu* is extremely problematic. In China (i.e. in English-language material published in China) it is normally translated as “nationality”. However, in as much as it implies ascription to one of the categories identified by the state to classify its citizens, here it is probably more accurate to translate it with “ethnicity”. In this context, “nationality” would rather imply citizenship of a nation state, i.e. holding that country’s passport. On the term “*minzu*” see also Harrell (1990), where he chooses not to translate it.

and as *dollarchi* (money-changers on the black market). In other words, they are among those Uyghurs who live in the capital that are normally associated with exotic food and illegal activities. While we are chatting, Äli disappears only to come back a few minutes later with a small packet. He hands it to me, inside there is a cake made with brown sugar and dried fruit (*baqali*) and some small mutton dumplings (*pärmudä*). “We don’t eat the food they sell on the train because we are Muslim. Even if it’s pork-free, it is still cooked in the same pans (as pork)”, he says. Just then the loudspeaker announces that because some of the passengers belong to Muslim minorities, the restaurant on the train offers also a *qing zhen* (Chinese for *halal*) service. “I don’t trust them. I’d rather eat the food that I’ve made myself” is Äli’s comment.

Äli looks very gentle, especially compared to the other two. In the evening he comes along with four bottles of beer, the only thing they don’t mind buying on the train, and invites me to drink with him. His Mandarin is pretty good, he says that’s because he has always had a lot of Han friends, since he was a child. Food is not a problem with them, they usually eat in “*qing zhen*” restaurants or, if they ever eat in a Han home, his food would be cooked in a special pan not contaminated by pork. Apparently, it is a question of trust.

While we are drinking beer and smoking, an older man comes and addresses Äli in Uyghur. It is his father who had gone to Beijing because he needed medical care, Äli is escorting him back home. Äli looks embarrassed. After his father has left and returned to his compartment, he explains “According to our custom, it is not polite to drink alcohol and smoke in the presence of an older person. This is a Uyghur custom, the Han they don’t care.” “So, what does it mean to be a Muslim to you?” I ask. “It’s like that, it’s a tradition. In practice, it means going to the mosque on Friday, avoiding pork, and being clean... after all, faith is in the heart. If you are a Uyghur you must be a Muslim, otherwise you’re not regarded as a person and nobody wants to have anything to do with you, you’re not part of the community any longer. But we are different from the Hui, they are basically Chinese who believe in Islam, they don’t have their own language and even the food they eat is different from what the Uyghur eat.”.

Adil and Ömär join us with more bottles of beer. There’s no way they are going to let me buy some beer. I am their guest, they say. Moreover, I am a woman and as such I am not supposed to pay for the men. I am also not supposed to drink alcohol, but in this case I am a foreigner. The conversation moves on to football, Italian football of course. I ask about Uyghur football. “Uyghurs are excellent footballers, they are excellent at any sport. But the Chinese don’t allow us to have our own team,

they don't want us to be famous abroad. We hope that after you have learnt our language you will let the world know about the Uyghurs", says Ömär. Then Äli continues, "our land does not belong to us, we are like American Indians, you know what I mean? If we were independent, we would be very rich because there's only few of us and plenty of natural resources. We wouldn't need to travel by train since each of us would have their personal plane. Xinjiang is extremely rich in oil, somewhere there is a well that after two hundred years is not exhausted yet. After Saudi Arabia and Iraq, which are Muslim countries, Xinjiang is the biggest oil producer."

I find the whole situation extremely fascinating. There is plenty of food for thought here. The train arrives in Qumul the third day, at 6:30 in the morning local time, two hours later according to Beijing time, which is the official time. I have to refuse Äli's invitation to get off and hang out in Qumul for a couple of days; I am expected in Ürümchi later in the afternoon. As we say goodbye I think to myself that not only have I had a pleasant journey in their company, but I have also had a good introduction to the region and its problems, despite the fact that most of their statements cannot be taken at face-value and need to be calibrated.

A few hours later, as the train is approaching Ürümchi, the loudspeaker announces the coming attractions: "Ürümchi is the capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Among the local Uyghur specialities are *kaoyang rouchuan* (mutton kebabs) and *latiaozi* (hand pulled noodles) ...". Before entering the Ürümchi railway station, the train crosses the south-western end of the city, an area known as *yamanliq shan*. The view on either side could not be more contrasting. To the left, mud barracks and barefoot children playing in the midst of rubbish. In the distance, to the right, 'modernity' and 'progress' exemplified by shining white tiled skyscrapers, ... though it is better not to look too close.

Fieldwork in Xinjiang

While preparing my research proposal, I was aware of the difficulties in doing fieldwork in the People's Republic of China, and particularly in Xinjiang.⁴ From other people's experience, as well as from mine, I knew that keeping a low profile was probably the most effective way to get things done, though with some obvious restrictions. There are mainly three ways of doing research in the PRC for an extended period of time, one is applying for a research permit/visa, the other two are being

⁴ Cf. Thurston and Pasternak 1983; 'Prologue' in Chan et al. 1992; 'Methodological Notes' in Whyte and Parish 1984; 'Preface' in Potter and Potter 1990.

either a student or a teacher (normally the subject being learnt or taught is a language). Ideally, one would have a status which corresponds to the actual purpose of one's stay, i.e. research. In theory, this might also allow certain freedoms which would otherwise not be permitted to other foreign visitors, such as having access to "closed" (*wei kaifang*) areas.

The first problem with an official research permit is that the application tends to be rather time consuming as well as expensive, since it often implies collaborative research with local institutions, where the foreign party is required to fund the whole project. Secondly, the research freedom that one is granted is often deceptive. In fact, knowing exactly what one's purpose is allows a much stricter control on the part of the authorities, which can be easily implemented through one's local research partners. There can be space for negotiation, but this depends almost entirely on one's local connection; that is, it is a matter of *guanxi*. Paradoxically, one might enjoy more research freedom while being a student or a teacher. Since I had to learn the Uyghur language anyway, I chose to be a student.

When I left for fieldwork in early May 1996, I intended to spend the first couple of months in Ürümqi as a student of Xinjiang Normal University. This would have enabled me to get started with the language as well as to look around for a suitable fieldwork site, ideally a smaller town in the region, where I would have moved in the summer. My arrival in Ürümqi was perfectly timed with the beginning of a "strike hard" (*yanda*) campaign, following unrest in southern Xinjiang. I soon realised that I probably had to revise my plans. First of all, as a student I was only allowed to reside at the University's guest house and nowhere else. This meant I could not arrange any form of private accommodation, for instance with a family, let alone reside in a different town or village. Of course I could have gone through the "back door" (*hou men*), as they say in China, but I did not have enough *guanxi* (connections) nor the time to build them; moreover I was very concerned that I might get other people into trouble.

I started considering the idea of moving to a university situated in a different town, possibly Khotän or Ghulja, only to be discouraged by the staff at Xinjiang Normal University. There were rumours, I was told in a confidential way, that as a consequence of recent unrest only universities in Ürümqi and Kashgar would be entitled to accept foreign students. I was not sure to what extent such advice originated with the concern of losing 700 US dollars a term (of which less than half was used to pay the teachers), or whether it was to be understood as a warning not to try and avoid control. In any case, I got the message and I started experiencing the feeling that I could not really trust anybody, a feeling that was going to be fed throughout my

fieldwork. I decided to leave it until the end of the summer. During the holidays I travelled extensively in Xinjiang, including to Khotän and to Ghulja where I checked with the local universities the possibility of studying there. In Khotän they said they never had foreign students before; therefore I should go through the Regional Education Committee based in Ürümchi. In Ghulja they said there was no problem; clearly they could not foresee that within a few months that city in northern Xinjiang would become the centre of Uyghur upheaval.

At the end of the summer, on the ground of my first three months' experience, I came to the conclusion that while Ürümchi was possibly the ugliest place one could pick to live in, and not the ideal fieldwork site especially in terms of size, it still had a number of advantages. The most important of these was that as a foreigner I would have probably enjoyed a greater degree of freedom, or at least a lesser degree of control, than in other parts of the region. Moreover, I had already established a network of friends and acquaintances; had I moved somewhere else I would have had to start from scratch. I decided to stay in Ürümchi and moved to Xinjiang University, mainly because of its location in the Uyghur part of town, where most of my friends lived and where I was more likely to practice my Uyghur and to observe Uyghur ways of life. However, the same rule applied: I had to live in the "foreign students dormitory".

The other plan I had to give up was the idea of working both with Uyghurs and with Han. I had always been aware of the problematic inter ethnic relations between the two groups, but I could not really imagine what this meant in terms of practical everyday life until I arrived in Xinjiang. Even the most trivial situation, such as going out for a meal, turned out to be very controversial. Indeed one of the most embarrassing situations I can possibly think of is to be 'caught' by a Uyghur friend while entering a Han restaurant. For in Ürümchi, and in Xinjiang in general, Uyghurs and Han do not mix - except in working places - and they run separate networks. If and when they do mix, this has a number of implications which are outside individuals' control. In other words, one is constantly dealing with categories of people, friends and foes, and it is extremely difficult to relate to someone as to an individual outside such polarisation. As a consequence, I had to focus only on one group, namely the Uyghur, not only for a question of loyalty but also because I did not have the time and the energy to develop and maintain two separate networks. This does not mean that I did not interact with the Han, as well as with other groups, at all. However, my network was a Uyghur-centred and Uyghur-compatible one. Interaction outside such networks was often casual and not as in depth.

Given such conditions it was unthinkable to carry out 'traditional' fieldwork, where I would have my neat 'unit' of study that I would objectively observe and survey. Anyway, that was not what I wanted to do. I wanted to experience as closely as possible what it means to be a Uyghur in Xinjiang today, being aware that it might have many different meanings depending on one's age, gender, educational background, place of origin, etc.. However, I did not try to 'go native'; I have always been myself and simply tried to make the best out of the situation I was in. I was a student, therefore I led the life of a student. I was also lucky to be accepted despite, or perhaps because of, my difference. I often felt that I was perceived as different enough to be interesting but not enough to be threatening. The fact that I could easily pass for a Uyghur definitely helped. There are limits beyond which one's identity cannot be manipulated; in my case I was within those limits and this often resulted in a fascinating experience, besides making my life a lot easier.

Language, or perhaps time, was a problem. When I arrived in Ürümqi, I hardly knew half a dozen words of Uyghur. In little more than a year I had to learn a fairly complex language as well as conducting my research. In fact, I could easily live in Ürümqi and communicate with almost anybody in Mandarin, whereas the same could not be said of the Uyghur language. So, as every Han said, why bother? The answer is that, I was not so much interested in 'interviewing' people, as in participating in their lives, and in this case language, however badly I spoke it, was a crucial element. There is a whole range of issues raised by and connected to language in the specific context of studying contemporary Uyghur culture in Xinjiang (cf. Dwyer 1998). To me, it is above all a question of respect: if one is a guest in someone's 'home' - I will not deal here with the political implications of such a statement, such as the legitimacy of Han people living in Xinjiang - I believe one ought to make an effort and try to speak the host's language, or at least show a genuine interest in it. I have the same kind of resentment for those Han who go to Xinjiang and expect every Uyghur, or Kazakh, or Tajik, etc., to speak Mandarin, as for those English native speakers who go to Italy and complain because nobody can speak English. There were also some Uyghurs who could not understand why I needed to study such a useless language as Uyghur when I could easily communicate in Mandarin. However, most of them were very pleased that someone was interested in their language, especially when its very existence is at issue in the contemporary socio-economic context (I'm referring for instance to the dilemma faced by most Uyghur parents in Ürümqi as to whether send their children to Han schools or to Uyghur schools).

It was not easy to learn Uyghur in Ürümqi, especially while being fluent in English and Mandarin. Most of the times I had to choose between a meaningful conversation (i.e. 'research') and an occasion to practice my poor Uyghur. As a result, I was almost fluent only by the time I had to leave. However, this did not prevent me from communicating with people for whom Uyghur was the only language we had in common. Moreover, I saw the process of learning the language as part of the research, after all my teachers were Uyghur and I spent quite a lot of time with them, often reading and commenting on material relevant to my research topic.

My initial, as well as subsequent, frustration at an institutional level was balanced by an excellent entry to the field. I met Abdurehim one week after I had arrived in Ürümqi.⁵ He was running the representative office of a foreign company in Xinjiang, I was given his office number by a friend working for the same company in Beijing. I knew nothing about him, except that he was not a Han, as one could easily tell from his Chinese name (Abudereyim). I phoned him one day and he invited me to meet for a meal that evening. He spoke excellent English, with an American accent, and seemed to be very familiar with Western ways. As many other young Uyghurs, who had a similar educational background and similar aspirations to leave the country, he was well into the foreigner's - mostly American - network in Ürümqi. Four years before he had graduated in Chinese from Xinjiang University. He had been the best student in his year and was allocated a job as translator in the Regional Government. Two years later, tired of wasting his life in an office where most of the time he was doing nothing but reading the newspaper, he resigned from what was considered to be the best job one could get in the state sector. He then worked for a year as a waiter in the Western dining hall of a Hotel. It was not an ideal job, but at least he did not have to deal with a slimy Uyghur boss who "had sold himself to the Chinese", and he had a chance to practice his English and meet foreigners. Finally, less than a year before, he was employed by this company.

Like me, he used to eat most of his meals out, so we began to meet very often for lunch or dinner and soon developed a friendship. He also introduced me to many of his (male) friends and before long I was involved in a Uyghur young men's network, the centre of which was Abdurehim. That was not what I had expected to happen in a Muslim society, somehow I felt both privileged and frustrated. Privileged because I was a woman in an entirely male scene, in a society where women do not have easy access to male networks, and yet I felt accepted and I participated as a peer. But I was frustrated because of the lack of women in my network. My status, as a single independent student, did not fit with my age. Women of my age were all

⁵ All proper names are fictional, except where people are already well-known.

married with children and had no time and freedom to hang out the way I was doing. Moreover, women's and men's networks seemed to run parallel so that I did not have a chance to meet women through Abdurehim's network, not because he did not know any but because they did not hang out with him and his friends.

The other arena for socialisation was the university. In the beginning, my expectations of entering a student network were deceived. I was physically segregated from other students, since I was living in the guest house, basically a hotel that was empty most of the time, situated across the road from the university campus at the entrance of the staff housing compound. Moreover, I had one to one language tuition, usually either in my room or in my teacher's house. Therefore there were not many chances to meet other students. On the other hand I immediately developed a close relationship with my two teachers, who were both women.

Things changed over the summer. Abdurehim unexpectedly (for me, but not for him) left for the United States, and in September I moved to Xinjiang University, where one month later I met the person who was going to become my closest friend, Nurqiz. She was in her last year chemistry course and lived in a student dormitory, a few yards away from the foreign students guest house. A mutual friend introduced us and it was 'love at first sight'. Nurqiz means "a radiant girl" (*nur* means "light"), and this name, though apparently not very trendy anymore, suited her perfectly. Our friendship meant that I could thoroughly participate in Uyghur life, as I had never been able before. There was nothing artificial in our interaction, it was the most genuine relationship that I had during my fieldwork, and this generally applied also to all the people that I met through her.

In many ways, my fieldwork can be divided into two phases, where moving from Xinjiang Normal University (*Shida*) to Xinjiang University (*Xinda*) may be taken as the formal watershed. In fact, the most important change was not so tangible; it was rather a change in mood. In retrospect I regard the first phase as a very positive period, as opposed to the increasingly negative mood of the second. There are a number of reasons for this, both internal and external, and I find it difficult to establish a precise relationship between them; that is, to what extent my mood affected the way I perceived external events and, vice versa, how external events determined my mood. My initial optimism was dampened by the growing awareness of being constantly under control, until I felt as if I was living in an Orwellian nightmare. The metaphor of the Big Brother is particularly pertinent here, given that sometimes Uyghurs refer to the Han as "older brothers", parodying the government's patronising claim to the brotherly relationship among all nationalities. My aim was to keep sane and not to be

paranoid, and I knew the successful strategy consisted in being always aware that after all I had nothing to hide.

However, I think the Foucauldian notion of surveillance is one that best describes the situation I felt in. Like in Bentham's panopticon, I could not see my surveillors, I only knew that potentially I was constantly under surveillance. Perhaps my room was bugged and one of my closest friends was a spy; these were not fantasies but real possibilities. Moreover, it was never clearly stated what were the boundaries that, as a foreign student, I should not cross. Once, in a police station, while being threatened to be deported for having supposedly moved to Xinjiang University against my previous University's instructions, I was shown a pamphlet containing all the laws regulating foreigners' residence in the PRC. Nevertheless, such rules are constantly updated by unwritten "rules for internal use" (*neibu guiding*) which can be arbitrarily applied at any time. Nothing new: knowledge, or other people's ignorance, is power. When one does not know where exactly the line that should not be crossed lies, it is very likely that one will keep well below that line. This is a strategy which does not apply exclusively to foreign guests in the PRC.

My main concern was not so much about my personal safety, since the worst that could happen was having to leave the country. More important, there was the risk that any of the people I knew would get into trouble because of me. In fact this was beyond my control, since the charge for being arrested or removed from one's position, if there is a charge at all, can be just an excuse to get rid of an "inconvenient" person. I was told the story of a group of teachers being removed on the ground of their anti-government statements, that had been recorded during an informal meeting. The person who did the recording (a European) was searched when leaving the country, the tape was found and used to identify the people in question. Whether this story is based on a fact or is a myth, it tells something about the atmosphere reigning in Xinjiang during the period I was there.

Given restricted access to information, it is difficult to produce an accurate estimate of the proportion of unrest in the region between 1996 and 1997. Besides rumours, there are a number of indicators that can be used as a measure, such as the level of repression, the display of armed forces, the amount of propaganda on the "unity of all nationalities" and the "indivisibility of the country" fed to the people, and the general atmosphere of fear and suspicion among the people themselves - which in fact is rather a result of repression. On the grounds of such indicators, the situation was definitely worse than in previous years. The climax was probably reached during February 1997 with widespread unrest throughout the region and, in particular, with

the “Ghulja incident” and the bombs in Ürümchi, followed by the implementation of martial law.

The tension and unease that characterised the second phase of my fieldwork were also accompanied by the dreadful Ürümchi winter. By late October the temperature had dropped below zero and everything was covered with snow, which soon turned into ice. What was worse, snow and ice were in turn covered by a thick layer of coal dust, the same coal dust that people breathed until late March, when finally winter gave way to a short spring before the summer.

Abdurehim and Nurqiz somehow are the central persons that mark respectively these two phases. Around and besides them there are many other people who have contributed to my understanding of the Uyghur ‘world’, as well as of Xinjiang. Throughout my stay I developed a rather extended network of accumulated friends and acquaintances with whom I interacted on a more or less regular basis and who represented my main source of direct experience of local life. While it is impossible to force such network into an exhaustive classification, three broad groups can be identified: a group of young people/peers who were students at the university and generally were not from Ürümchi; another group of mainly male peers who were university graduates and had a job outside the university; and a much less homogeneous group of ‘adults’ of various age and profession who generally had in common a university degree and the fact that they were married and had children (these were predominantly female). With very few exceptions (including some Uzbek, Mongol, and Kazakh friends and acquaintances), they were all Uyghur. On the whole they can be loosely defined as urban intellectuals, in the sense that the great majority of them had gone through higher education and they were all involved in ‘intellectual’ activities in various sectors (education, medicine, judiciary, administrative, etc.). In other words, they were not farmers, nor factory workers, nor were they in business. However, this is an *a posteriori* definition for the purpose of describing the group of people with whom I worked. Such a group was not intentionally singled out according to a number of specific characteristics; therefore I believe it is best represented with its margins blurred.

There are a number of considerations behind the fact that I concentrated on this group of urban intellectuals. First of all, I do not think that any group or person is more representative than others. Any ‘unit’, however it is defined, is arbitrary in as much as it is extrapolated from a wider context. Focusing on a network has the advantage of providing a relatively wide context. Moreover, because of a number of structural restrictions (political situation, urban context with problems of time and distance, my status, etc.), such a group was the most accessible for me and I decided

to make a virtue out of the constraints. This allowed me to approach the study of Uyghur identity from the angle of what we may call the urban intellectual's paradox. This approach proved extremely fertile and stimulating, as I hope to show in the following chapters. Indeed, what makes special the group of intellectuals among whom I have conducted my research is that they find themselves at the vanguard of both assimilation and differentiation. Because of their occupation, and because of the context in which they live (that is, a city where at least eighty percent of the population is Han), Ürümqi intellectuals are constantly exposed to 'Han ways' which, to some extent, they inevitably have to adopt - the most blatant example of this being language. At the same time, they are also confronted with their being different and with the need to constantly define and affirm such difference. However, I should point out that their being intellectuals was not the main focus of my interest - unlike Rudelson (1997), for instance - I was not primarily interested in their intellectual production as much as in their daily lives. In fact, from a methodological point of view, with this approach I intend to blur the distinction between grass-root and intellectual.

The choice to look at issues of identity and ethnic relations from a food angle proved to be very productive once in the field. Food provided an unobtrusive as well as 'politically correct' (in the sense that it was not perceived as a sensitive topic) focus for research. People devote a great deal of time to activities related to food (shopping, cooking, eating at home or in restaurants, etc.) as well as to talking about it. I met most of the people over a meal and in over two thirds of the time I spent with Uyghur people food was involved, and not because I was looking for it. Often people would volunteer useful comments or information without even knowing the topic of my research. The space occupied by food in Uyghur society is somewhat visually measurable by the number of restaurants and food stalls lining the streets. Moreover, food is an arena where Uyghurs draw obvious boundaries between them and the Han. They regard food as a fundamental aspect of their identity both in terms of categories of inclusion and exclusion, defined by (the manipulation of) taboos and dietary prescriptions, and as a distinctive feature of which they are proud. Thereby utmost hospitality is usually expressed by treating one's guests to what is considered quintessential Uyghur food.

During my fieldwork, food was an essential facilitator for interaction as well as the object of it. In fact this is merely an analytical distinction. Similarly, I believe that the distinction between person and researcher is an arbitrary one. In my case it was constantly blurred. Given the nature of the relationship I had with 'my' group, most of my research was informal, consisting of unstructured interviews, usually unplanned. I wanted to listen to what people had to say rather than having them answer my

questions. I would direct a conversation towards general topics that were of interest to me, while leaving its scope open to unpredictable digressions. In other words, I tried not to force the reality I was observing and experiencing into a grid. Thanks to the frequency and to the depth of my interactions, I was not too worried about filling in possible gaps. I used to meet people, individually or in a group, either in my room, or in their homes, or for a meal out. Most of these meetings involved the sharing of food. Besides eating, I was also involved in a wider range of activities, including entertainment, shopping, visiting people, etc.

Due to the political atmosphere as well to the unplanned nature of most of my interactions, I did not use a recorder. I also tended not to take notes while talking with people, unless these were of a linguistic nature. I found that note-taking would have interfered with the flow of the conversation by shifting my role to that of an external observer more than a participant and by creating a sort of inequality in status between me and my interlocutor/s. Therefore I used to take non-verbatim notes shortly after an interaction or any other significant experience had taken place. Taking photographs was a supplementary method to create a kind of visual diary of my fieldwork. I find this extremely useful as an *aide-mémoire*, an efficient and evocative way of recording details that would otherwise be lost or require time-consuming note-taking.

I usually did not show an explicit interest in “politics” (as they say there), first of all because that was not my focus, but rather its context. Moreover, it was not safe and often counter-productive to express such an interest. I could not always be hundred percent sure of whom I was talking to, and even when I was sure, I knew that people did not like to be addressed with political questions (i.e. everything one is not supposed to talk about) and that they felt uncomfortable and became very suspicious. This does not mean that people did not talk about politics, they actually did all the time, and the more I appeared to be not interested the more they tried to convince me that it was a real issue.

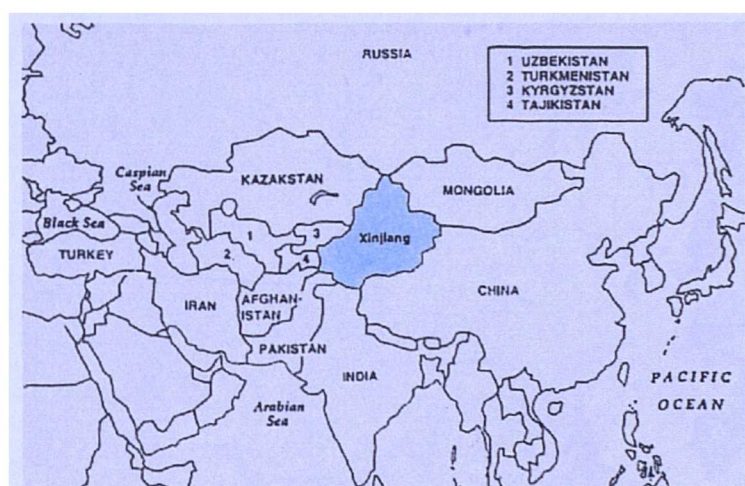
In conclusion, if I had to weigh these fourteen months of fieldwork in Xinjiang in the balance, I am not sure I would want to go through all this again. For sure, I would never dream of spending another winter there. However, I do believe it has been an extraordinary experience which gave me the opportunity to meet some wonderful people and to learn about them as well as about myself.

CHAPTER 1

A GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE REGION, THE PEOPLE, AND THE FIELD.

1.1. Xinjiang: the region and the people

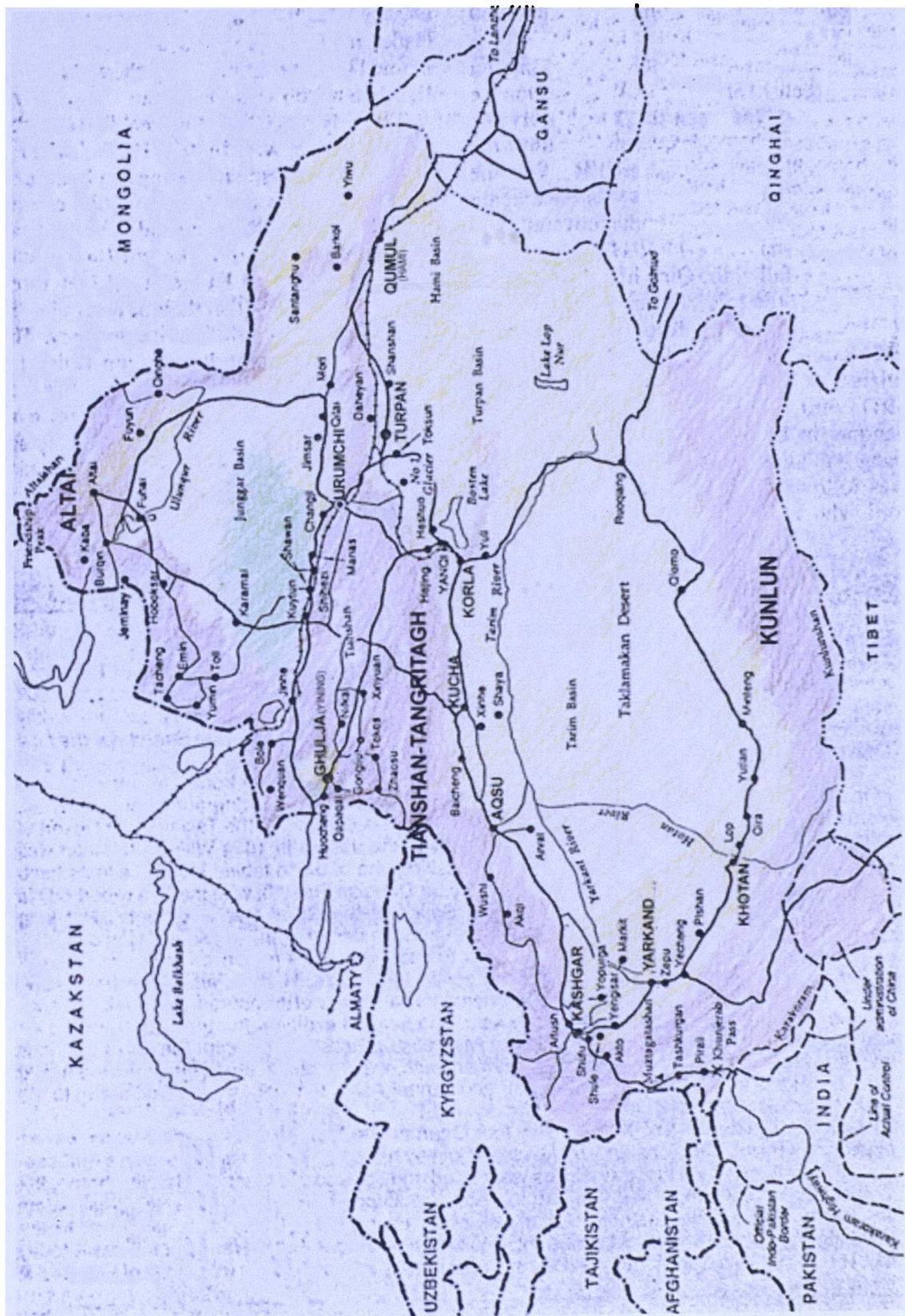
The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) lies in the middle of the Eurasian continent, in the north-western corner of the People's Republic of China. It is the largest province in the PRC, accounting for one sixth of its total territory. With a border of 5,400 kilometres, the longest international boundary line in China (XUAR 1989:112), today Xinjiang constitutes a Central Asian crossroads, with inner China and Mongolia to the east, Russia (Siberia) to the north, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan to the west, and Tibet, India, Pakistan, and a small section of Afghanistan to the south.¹



Thus Xinjiang, also known as Eastern or Chinese Turkestan, is geographically part of the ill-defined region of Central Asia (Akiner 1991, Ferdinand 1994), an area characterised by dramatic landscapes with high mountains, deserts, and grasslands.²

¹ For a general introduction to contemporary Xinjiang see Dillon (1995a). Xinjiang is one of the five Autonomous Regions of the PRC, the other four being Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, Tibet Autonomous Region, and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.

² While "Turkestan" is a taboo, if not illegal, word in the PRC, the names "Chinese Turkestan" and "Eastern Turkestan" are still used in world atlases outside China to refer to this geographical area (e.g. "Chinese Turkestan" in *The Times Atlas of the World*, 1967; "Turkestan orientale" in *Atlante Geografico del Mondo*, Touring Club Italiano, Milano, 1996).



In this region we find one of the lowest places on earth, the Turpan depression (Aydingköl, -154 m), as well as some of the highest peaks, in the Pamir and the Karakorum mountain ranges. The geography of Xinjiang is summarised in the Chinese phrase *san shan liang peng*: three mountain ranges and two basins. In the north-northeast, the Altai mountains separate Xinjiang from Mongolia, while in the south the Kunlun range divides it from Tibet. The Tianshan/Tängri tagh range cuts across the region, dividing it into northern and southern Xinjiang, two climatically and historically different areas, dominated respectively by the Jungar and the Tarim basins.

Only twelve percent of the total surface of the region (200,000 km² out of 1,640,000) is inhabitable. The Jungar basin, in northern Xinjiang, is a vast grassland, historically inhabited by pastoral nomadic people. However, between 1901 and 1990 the cultivated area has increased by seventy times, gradually reducing the grazing land available to Kazakh and Mongol herders who live in the area. Southern Xinjiang is dominated by the Taklamakan desert, the second biggest desert in the world after the Sahara. It is a wide oval-shaped desert, 1,000 km long (east to west) and 500 km wide (north to south). Many erroneously believe that "Taklamakan" means "if you go in, you don't come out". Such a phrase in fact refers to the shifting sand dunes and frequent sand storms which are characteristic of this desert. Popularly, this desert tends to be equated to the better known Gobi Desert, although "Gobi" originally meant a type of desert with a gravel rather than sandy surface, which is mostly farther to the East.³ The economy of southern Xinjiang is traditionally based on trade and agriculture, mostly fruit, cotton, and wheat. In such a dry area, the people living in the oases along the rim of the Taklamakan desert rely on the water produced by the melting snow for irrigation and daily life needs. For over two thousand years the Taklamakan desert was elliptically skirted by the Silk Road, that complex of roads which connected China in the East with the Mediterranean in the West, through Persia, Mesopotamia, and Anatolia. In fact, silk was only one of the items which travelled through this system, and the name "silk road" was not coined until the 19th century.

Although China claims a continued history in the region, in fact steady control and integration of what is today Xinjiang did not occur until the communist period, that is, in the second half of the twentieth century (Fletcher 1968, Mc Millen 1979).⁴ At times, during the Han (206 BC. - AD. 220) and Tang (618-907) dynasties, the Chinese empire had extended its military control into Central Asia, and of course

³ *Gebi* is the Chinese transliteration for "Gobi". It is generally used in Chinese to refer to all pre-desert areas, rather than to a specific desert. The *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian* (Contemporary Chinese Dictionary) entry reads: "This is how the Mongolian call desert areas. Such areas are covered with sand and stones and are characterised by lack of water and very scarce vegetation."

⁴ The Xinjiang - Lanzhou Railroad, which was completed in early 1961, was a fundamental step in the integration process (McMillen 1979:11).

China and Central Asia had been unified under the Mongols, notably during the Yuan dynasty (1234-1368). In the latter case, however, it was rather a Central Asian empire that controlled China.⁵

Chinese historical claim over today's Xinjiang is partly based on the fiction of the "tributary system" that regulated imperial China's foreign relations, and according to which foreign states were seen as vassals that sent regular "tributes" to the emperor. Fletcher (1968) traces the relationship between the Chinese empire and Central Asia during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, relying on Chinese historical records as well as on Persian and other sources. In the early Ming dynasty Zhu Di, the Yongle Emperor, recognised Timurid supremacy in Central Asia and addressed Shahrukh Bahadur as a fellow monarch. From 1424, when the Yongle Emperor's son acceded to the throne, until the end of the Ming dynasty China's relations with Central Asia were substantially of the "tributary" type (i.e. trade) and gradually loosened, as Central Asian merchants started carrying out much of their commerce through the Mongolian "tributary" trade (1968:212,217). By the end of the Ming dynasty both China and Central Asia were little concerned with each other. While the Ming court was rather worried about developments north of the Great Wall, from a Central Asian point of view the Chinese Emperor was only one among other great rulers, such as the Crimean, the Russian, the Indian Moghul, and the Ottoman. By the time the Manchu took over in China (Qing dynasty, 1644), the great Central Asian empires had disintegrated into a number of smaller kingdoms (see also Craig-Harris 1993:112-13).

Chinese influence in what is today known as Xinjiang was consolidated during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). Historically, the Chinese referred to the eastern part of Central Asia as Xiyu (the Western Regions). The name Xinjiang, meaning "new frontier" or "new dominion", was introduced in 1768 by the Qing administration (McMillen 1979:15, 17). The region was formally incorporated into the Qing empire in 1884, with the suppression of the Muslim insurrection led by Yakub Beg (1878).⁶ At the end of the nineteenth century, Xinjiang was the scene of the 'Great Game' between the Russian and British empires for control in Central Asia (see Skrine and Nightingale

⁵ Bovingdon (2000) points out that "[u]ntil this century, the state-name "China" (*Zhongguo*) would have been unfamiliar to the overwhelming majority of inhabitants of the territory we now know by that name. Instead, when people referred to the territory, they would use the name of the imperial house ... Thus the very application of the name "China" to the polities ruled by the various dynasties is anachronistic and misleading. But it is not accidental. ... It has been critical to the project of the CCP leadership to claim a direct lineage from the Han dynasty (206 BCE - 220 CE) to the PRC, so as to be able to lay claim to the territories, peoples, and histories of all intervening states." (2000:8). For a history of Central Asia see Grousset (1970).

⁶ For an historical background see Lattimore (1950), Forbes (1986), Millward (1998). Bovingdon (2000) provides an account of the debate that accompanied the process of incorporation and the shift from "Western Region" to "Xinjiang" in the Chinese name of the region.

1973, Hopkirk 1990). After the 1911 Chinese revolution a warlord government controlled the region which, like the rest of China, was plagued by civil war until 1949, when the People's Liberation Army took control of Xinjiang.⁷ On October 1st 1955 the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region was established.

Population and migration

The creation of an autonomous region was a way to acknowledge the specificity of Xinjiang, especially in terms of the composition of its population. Before and in the first years of the communist take-over in 1949, 95% of the population of Xinjiang was not Han. Of the 3.7 million people that were registered in 1941, 80% were classified as Uyghur and just under 9% were Kazakh (Toops 2000:159).⁸ Since the communist take-over the population of Xinjiang has been consistently classified into thirteen *minzu*, which are recognised by the government as indigenous to the region. The 1996 Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook provides a breakdown of the population from 1952 to 1995 into fourteen categories: Uyghur, Han, Kazakh, Hui, Kirghiz, Mongol, Sibe, Russian, Tajik, Uzbek, Tatar, Manchu, Daur, and a generic "other *minzu*" (Xinjiang... 1996:47). In 1995 half of these groups numbered less than 40,000 and only three groups, the Uyghur, the Han, and the Kazakh, had more than one million (respectively, 7.8 million, 6.3 million, and 1.2 million). Below is a table showing the change in the ratio of Uyghur and Han population between 1952 and 1995.⁹

⁷ Many western travellers, missionaries, and explorers visited and sometimes lived in Xinjiang during the first half of the nineteenth century. Their accounts constitute a rich literature and provide insightful descriptions of republican Xinjiang. See, for example, Cable and French (1947), Holgate (1994), Fleming (1936), Hedin (1931), Stein (1933), von Le Coq (1985), Lattimore (1930). For a Chinese account see Wu (1940). Hopkirk (1984) is based on western archaeological campaigns to the "Silk Road", led by explorers like Stein, Hedin, and von Le Coq.

⁸ Millward argues that "the ratio of 'outsiders' to natives' at the turn of the nineteenth century was close to two to three, and not so far from the Uyghur-Han balance that is a political issue in the 1990s" (Millward 2000:123). However, not only, as he himself admits, are such comparisons somewhat artificial and, I should add, leave unexplained how the Uyghur population increased from 320,000 in 1818 to 2,984,000 in 1941 while the Han population figures for the same years are 155,000 and 187,000, respectively. But the real issue here is the abrupt increase in the Han population in less than three decades: from 187,000 (5.01% of the total population of Xinjiang) in 1941 to 3,861,200 (39.54%) in 1970. During the same period, the percentage of the Uyghur population dropped from 80.00% to 47.85%.

⁹ Although we must bear in mind that figures and statistics cannot be taken at face value, and possibly even more so in the case of China, nevertheless these data undeniably show a very clear trend.

Year	Xinjiang total population	Uyghur		Han	
1952	4,651,700	3,500,900	75.26%	326,000	7.01%
1957	5,580,100	3,867,100	69.30%	821,500	14.72%
1962	6,989,700	4,004,700	69.30%	2,077,200	29.72%
1970	9,765,800	4,673,300	47.85%	3,861,200	39.54%
1975	11,545,300	5,266,000	45.61%	4,780,100	41.40%
1980	12,832,400	5,764,600	44.92%	5,310,300	41.38%
1990	15,291,600	7,249,500	47.41%	5,746,600	37.58%
1995	16,613,500	7,800,000	46.95%	6,318,100	38.03%

Adapted from Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook 1996.

Yuan Qingli has analysed population changes in Xinjiang between 1949 and 1984, showing a clear link between population growth and migration, as well as between migration and urbanisation (Yuan 1990). The first point that the author makes is that, during this period, the average annual growth rate in Xinjiang's population has been much higher than that of China as a whole, largely owing to inter-provincial migration (1990:50-51). Yuan then identifies five phases of population development in Xinjiang. The first phase (1949-1953) corresponds to the period of the communist take-over. During this first period the government's policy was "to establish control over this mainly non-Han settlers' area of which more than 90 per cent were Muslim" (1990:52). Thus the second phase (1953-1961) is characterised by a dramatic increase in migration: between 1954 and 1958 the explosion of migration to Xinjiang is linked to the establishment of the Production and Construction Corps, while from 1958 to 1961 migration coincided with the Great Leap Forward and the subsequent famine. During those bitter years many people from inner China took refuge in Xinjiang, where the economic situation was still relatively stable. The only year that showed a decline in population was 1962, which Yuan identifies as a third phase. A number of factors determined this decline, most notably the "Redundancy Movement" of 1962, aimed at "persuading" many migrants to return to their original areas, and the Ili-Tarbagatay uprising when some 70,000 Kazakhs and Uyghurs fled to the Soviet Union (1990:52,63).¹⁰ The fourth (1962-1976) and fifth (1976-1984) phase

¹⁰ In 1962 Kazakhs and Uyghurs with a Soviet passport attempted to escape China's famine by fleeing across the border to the Soviet Union. There was a demonstration of those wishing to leave the PRC (the 'Ili-Tarbagatay' uprising) and, despite the intervention and repression by the Production and Construction Corps, several thousands managed to escape, often with their livestock (Seymour 2000:173; see also McMillen 1979:122-23).

coincided, respectively, with an explosion in the birth-rate and the promotion of widespread family planning among the Han population, the latter contributing to a relative normalisation in the population development.

Although since 1977 the number of immigrants into Xinjiang has been limited by restrictions of the household registration system and improvements in rural life in other parts of China, subsequent reforms in rural policies have allowed surplus rural workers to move anywhere without permanent registration. "Xinjiang is one of the most popular regions, since opportunities for work are good. Temporary migrants have therefore increased in recent years in Xinjiang. A recent report estimated that such temporary migration in Xinjiang has reached about 200,000 per year" (Yuan 1990:64). During the 1990s this kind of immigration to Xinjiang has dramatically increased, fuelled, among other things, by the growing number of laid-off workers produced by the economic reforms everywhere in China. It is important to point out that while all these non-registered people (mostly Han) are not included in the official population figures, they are nevertheless extremely visible in the streets of Xinjiang cities, above all Ürümqi.

Today it is difficult to estimate the actual ratio of Uyghur and Han populations in Xinjiang. Regardless of the actual figures, many Uyghurs are convinced that in Xinjiang there are now far more Han than Uyghurs. In the late 1990s, Han migration to Xinjiang was a big issue among the Uyghur urban population, one at the origin of diffuse discontent and resentment or, in some extreme cases, even violence. The argument, put forward by some Uyghurs, that the Chinese government has been deliberately 'swamping' the Uyghur with a flood of Han (Millward 2000:122) seems to be supported by the history of Han migration to Xinjiang since 1949, not only in terms of figures but also as far as the modes of such migration are concerned. In considering the effects of migration on Xinjiang, Yuan states that "[t]o strengthen its control over this region, the government has sent large numbers of cadres and other personnel of Han stock to Xinjiang. Han immigration has considerably changed the content of Xinjiang's population". Moreover "[t]his migration has also affected population distribution in Xinjiang. Historically, southern Xinjiang had always been the centre of economic activity. ... [T]he increase in population growth in the sixties and seventies resulted in the north possessing the majority of the population by 1980." (Yuan 1990:64-5).

The Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps

Even a cursory history of Han migration to Xinjiang cannot fail to discuss in some detail one of its main institutions: the Production and Construction Corps (*shengchan jianshe bingtuan*, usually referred to as ‘bingtuan’). In a recent article Seymour provides an exhaustive account of the history and current developments of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (PCC), and describes it as “a major institution for the ethnic Han (Chinese) colonisation of Xinjiang”.¹¹ Indeed, Xinjiang Bingtuan is one of the three main administrative organs of the XUAR, after the provincial-level government and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Today, its 2.8 million members constitute 14 percent of Xinjiang’s total population (Seymour 2000:171).

Xinjiang Bingtuan started effectively in 1954, when over 100,000 PLA officers and soldiers that were in Xinjiang were transferred to civilian work in the new Xinjiang PCC. Despite its military origin, the Bingtuan has been primarily an economic organisation; in the beginning it was mainly a collection of state farms, but recently its industrial enterprises have been growing significantly. Besides playing an important role in the defence of the frontier against both internal and external enemies, throughout the 1950s it was crucial in the agricultural development and colonisation process, aimed at easing eastern crowding and sinifying the frontier (Seymour 2000:172-73). In fact, “[o]ver time, ‘defending’ continued to be more a matter of repressing non-Hans and occupying real estate than bearing arms against foreigners. And despite its militaristic-sounding name and organisational structure, the Bingtuan quickly became a largely civilian organisation” (2000:173). However, its workforce was still considered insufficient, despite the fact that during the mid-1950s many Han civilians, both peasant and educated, joined the Bingtuan from the eastern provinces of China, adding to the former-PLA members and the over 100,000 prisoners.¹² Thus cadres were sent to the east persuading young peasants, students, and workers to join the frontier movement and move to Xinjiang. Reportedly, by 1967 over a million youths had moved to Xinjiang from eastern cities. These migrations were crucial in promoting Xinjiang’s development (2000:174).

After an initial period of ‘development’, from 1958 to 1966, Xinjiang Bingtuan started to decline. Not only was it hit particularly hard during the Cultural Revolution, but also, from the beginning, the central government had made very little contribution to its economic viability. On the other hand, all the other bingtuan in the country had

¹¹ On the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps see also McMillen (1981).

¹² On the Bingtuan’s ‘Prison Business’ see Seymour (2000:186-87) and Seymour and Anderson (1998).

not been doing well and were all dissolved between 1972 and 1975. Xinjiang Bingtuan lasted longer than the others merely because of its frontier-guarding role. Otherwise it was a failure in all other respects and it was formally dissolved on March 25, 1975. The 'Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Reclamation Bureau' took over its major land holdings (Seymour 2000:175-80). For Bingtuan members life had never been easy in Xinjiang, a part of the country which was often considered inhospitable. Moreover, for the Han who had been persuaded to move from the east, conditions often fell short of what had been promised. Now they became the first victims of the Bingtuan's decline. Many seized on any opportunity to return to the East, producing a sharp decline in the Han population of Xinjiang.

With the worsening of ethnic unrest in Xinjiang in the early 1980s, the abolition of the Bingtuan was viewed as a mistake. "Whatever economic shortcomings the old Bingtuan might have had, the central government at least seemed to have more confidence in it as a bulwark against minority nationalism than it had in the XUAR government, in which many posts were occupied by Uyghurs". Thus it was formally re-established at the end of 1981 and, although "keeping Xinjiang Chinese" was Beijing's priority, "security and economic development seemed to be given equal weight" (Seymour 2000:181-82). In fact, there was no contradiction, since ethnic stability was finally understood as closely intertwined with the region's economic development. After its re-establishment, there have been ups and downs in the Bingtuan's economic record. However, given its ever more important task of "defend[ing] China against the forces of central Asian nationalism" it can now rely on conspicuous subsidies from Beijing, to the point that "in the mid-1990s the Corps was receiving about nine-tenths of its budget directly from the central government" (Seymour 2000:1983-86).

This discussion of Xinjiang's population and, in particular, of migration may appear exceedingly long and redundant, nevertheless it is extremely important in order to set the background against which the theme of this thesis - the negotiation of Uyghur identity by urban intellectuals in the realm of food - will be developed. In order to understand the context in which this process of negotiation unfolds, it is necessary to bear in mind the dramatic impact that Han migration has had, and still has, on Xinjiang's population landscape in general and on urban Uyghur's self-perception in particular. Indeed, in terms of daily life, if the rural population is relatively unaffected or affected to a much lesser extent, given that rural areas tend to be ethnically homogeneous, the constant influx of Han immigrants to Ürümqi and other urban centres is strongly experienced by urban Uyghurs as a threat to the preservation of their distinctive identity.

Who are the peoples of Xinjiang?

While any discussion of Xinjiang in general, and its population in particular, almost inevitably focuses on the Uyghur and the Han components, because these are the largest groups and because their relationship at present is the most problematic, the context in which such interaction occurs is far more complex than this simple dichotomy, to which it often tends to be reduced. The contemporary population of Xinjiang results from a mix of Iranian, Turkic, Sinic, and Tungusic components.¹³ In the seventh century BC the Tarim basin was populated by Iranian peoples, including the Saka. It was only after 600AD that the region began to be Turkicised, first with the Western Turks and, in the 800s, with the Uyghur kingdom of Turpan. Once the Turkicisation was complete, the Chingisid Mongols came to control the area in the early thirteenth century. However, most of the population was still Iranian and Turkic. During the fifteenth century the peoples of the Tarim and Turpan Basins were unified in a Turko-Iranic Muslim civilisation. These were joined by the Kazakh Turks, who came from the north in the sixteenth century. Finally, there was the advent of the Oirat Mongols in the seventeenth century. When the Qing took over, in 1757, the Mongols were wiped out of the Ili valley, which was repopulated with Kazakhs from the north, Uyghurs from the Tarim Basin, Han and Hui from Gansu, and Sibe from Manchuria. Thus at the turn of the twentieth century the distribution of Xinjiang's population roughly was: Uyghur in the Tarim Basin, Uyghur and Hui in the Turpan Basin, Kazakh in the Jungar Basin, Uyghur, Hui, and Kazakh in the Ili valley. The Han were in Ürümqi, Turpan, Qumul, and in the Ili valley. There were also some smaller groups, such as the Sibe in the Ili valley, the Mongols on the northern slope of the Tianshan, the Tajik in the Pamir, the Kirghiz in the southern Tianshan, and the Uzbek and Tatar in the cities.

As Yuan points out, “[o]ne of the chief characteristics of the main non-Han ethnic groups in Xinjiang is their concentration in this area. According to the 1982 census of the 55 non-Han ethnic groups in China, seven have more than 90 per cent of their total population in Xinjiang” (1990:58). Moreover, there is a clear distributional pattern among the ethnic groups in Xinjiang, which has basically remained the same as at the turn of the twentieth century. In particular, the south is dominated by the Uyghur (82% of the population), while the Kazakh are mostly concentrated in the north (especially in the Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture).

¹³ The following overview is based on Toops (2000:157-59).

The neat classification of Xinjiang's population into thirteen groups, as reproduced in the statistics, is largely the result of the Communist classificatory effort that was carried out in the 1950s (see Fei 1990). However, such classification does not accurately describe the situation on the ground, where some of the boundaries are rather fluid and often tend to blur. In other words, the degree of differentiation between one group and the other may vary substantially, depending on the groups in question. For instance, in terms of language, religion, and cultural practices smaller groups like the Uzbek and the Tatar tend to be assimilated to the Uyghur. Moreover, given the frequency of intermarriage, the classification of a person as, say, either Uyghur or Uzbek is to some extent arbitrary. On the other hand, while Islam can be one of the unifying factors among Turkic-speaking Uyghur, Kazakh, Kirghiz, Tatar, and Uzbek, as well as Persian-speaking Tajik, the commonality of religious belief is not sufficient to soften the boundary between these groups and the Hui. Because they share language and a great deal of cultural practices with the Han, the Hui are often regarded by these groups as Chinese before being Muslim. Indeed, according to Yuan, between the 1950s and the 1980s intermarriage between Han and Hui was more common than among others (1990:57). Mongols, while not being Muslim, share to a great extent the pastoralist semi-nomadic lifestyle of the Kazakh and the Kirghiz. Moreover, they tend to identify with the dominated Uyghur and other Turkic groups vis-à-vis the dominant Han, particularly in an urban context where the degree of inter-ethnic interaction is high. Vice versa the Sibe, while proudly preserving their distinctive identity, have a much less problematic relationship with the Han and intermarriage between the two groups is relatively frequent. In any case, ultimately the Uyghur and the Han are the two reference groups, being the most numerous ones and those among whom inter ethnic relations are most conflictual.¹⁴

The role of Xinjiang in contemporary China and Central Asia

Despite the low density of its population, Xinjiang occupies an extremely important position in contemporary China from a number of perspectives. Being a frontier region, its strategic importance has always been a concern for the Chinese government. Today, given recent developments on both western and eastern sides of the border, that is in the PRC and in the former Soviet Union, its strategic role cannot be overestimated. From an economic point of view, Xinjiang's oil, mineral and other natural resources represent an essential reservoir for the whole country, although there

¹⁴ Hoppe (1998) provides a survey of ethnic groups in Xinjiang.

are contradicting reports on their actual size (Dorian et al. 1997:469-70). Moreover, since the economic reforms started in China in the 1980s, foreign trade, especially with Mongolia, Central Asia, and Pakistan, has become a major economic activity in the region, reviving the tradition of the Silk Road. Economic control over Xinjiang's resources is of paramount importance both for Chinese internal development and to attract foreign investment. As a consequence of China's opening to the outer world and of the new geopolitical configuration of Central Asia, the role of Xinjiang is becoming more and more relevant also in terms of communications. Despite the still underdeveloped state of internal communications, Xinjiang has become an important gateway to and from China. In particular, the Karakorum highway, linking Gilgit in Pakistan to Kashgar in Xinjiang through the Kunjerab Pass, is a major trade as well as tourist route - at least it was until September 2001. The other major connection is with Kazakhstan, mainly through the Eurasian railway between Ürümqi and Almaty, through which most of the trade with the former Soviet Union is carried out. Indeed, "most China-Central Asia trade is between Xinjiang and Kazakhstan, [and] China's two-way trade with Kazakhstan is greater than Turkey's trade with all five Central Asian republics" (Dorian et al. 1997:4-5).

At the dawn of the new millennium, Zhao Yueyao looks at Xinjiang from the twofold perspective of pivot and periphery, describing it as "sitting at the crossroads of a spatial and temporal pivot" (2001:224). Zhao's article starts with a discussion of China's regional policies, from the Maoist approach, which emphasised self-sufficiency more than interregional integration, to the reform era, during which Chinese leaders have gradually embraced capitalism and the market economy as the means to achieve rapid development. This second phase started with a coast-oriented strategy and was characterised by imbalanced regional policies, predicated on the assumption that the prosperity of the coastal regions would produce diffusion effects. However, this was clearly not the case and central and western regions were effectively penalised by such policies. Moreover, increasing regional inequalities also raised concern about stability and unity in the ethnic areas, such as Xinjiang. This led in the mid-1990s to a shift toward a more balanced development policy, predicated on an integrated national market economy. Therefore, Xinjiang's development has become not only an economic priority but also crucial to ethnic unity and political stability. Whether Xinjiang can be considered an 'internal colony' or not (Gladney 1998; Sautman 2000), so far its development has been perceived by local non-Han people rather as mere exploitation of its natural resources. According to Zhao, "[t]o fence off such criticisms effectively, the government needs to strengthen Xinjiang's resource-processing capabilities and raise the level of welfare for ethnic people"

(2001:219). The real challenge for the government is how to balance concerns for equity, security, national unity, and efficiency. While the outcome of this shift in regional policy is still uncertain, there is no doubt that Xinjiang occupies a pivotal position in terms of economic and trade relations with Central Asia.

Therefore, the relevance of Xinjiang to China has to be situated within two wider contexts: the 'new' Central Asia and the Islamic world.¹⁵ In recent years many social scientists have analysed the political and economic role of Xinjiang within China and Central Asia, often by focusing on the interplay between geopolitics, economics, and transnational ethno-religious identities (Christoffersen 1993, Craig-Harris 1993, Dorian et al. 1997, Ferdinand 1994, Zhao 2001). Central Asia is one of the new regions that has re-emerged from the geopolitical earthquake that took place with the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. As Ferdinand remarks, "[t]he epithet 'Central Asia' is not an indigenous term, but was imposed on the region by nineteenth-century Europeans in a vain attempt to establish at least a territorial identity for this protean, tantalizing stretch of land that had for so long survived uneasily in the interstices of great empires" (1994:1). Since the independence in 1992 of the five ex-Soviet Central Asian republics, a more definite Central Asian identity has started to coalesce, mainly around Muslim and Turkic identities. With the increase in cross-border trade and communications in general, Turkic peoples in Xinjiang are forging closer political, economic, and cultural ties with their central Asian neighbours, thus reinforcing their non-Chinese identity. Despite some three decades of complete isolation,¹⁶ resumed contact among peoples with a largely shared historical background has exposed the artificiality of the Sino-Soviet border, which has arbitrarily cut across linguistic, cultural, and even familial ties. It is therefore not surprising that, following recent developments on both sides of the border, Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples of Xinjiang have reoriented their attention westwards.

Recent developments both in Central Asia and in China aroused an increasing interest and competition among Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan for political, economic, and spiritual influence in Xinjiang. China is obviously in favour of foreign investments and deeply interested in selling arms to these countries. Indeed the Chinese government strategically plays the card of Islam, displaying tolerance toward the Muslim population, for the sake of good foreign/trade relationships (see Gladney 1992: 7-13). However, it is equally worried by any threat to its control on the region.

¹⁵ On 'new' Central Asia see Ferdinand (1994) and Rashid (1994). Hostler (1993) focuses on Turkic identity, Turkism and Pan-Turkism.

¹⁶ Sino-Soviet relations had started deteriorating in 1956 with the debate over Stalinism. In 1960 the USSR government cancelled 600 contracts with the PRC and withdrew its technicians (Collotti Pischel 1991:174, 176). The Sino-Soviet border was sealed in the early 1960s.

This threat could be represented by a too strong and politicised Muslim identity on the one hand, and by Pan-Turkism on the other. Thus the Chinese government is engaged in the difficult task of formulating a well-balanced policy towards the Muslim nationalities of Xinjiang in order to maintain good relationships with the above-mentioned countries and, at the same time, to keep control on the region. It is in this perspective that China has been expanding relations with the Central Asian states, not only to promote economic and trade relations but, most importantly, to establish regional security arrangements with Central Asia and Russia. To this end, the leaders of the so-called 'Shanghai Five' (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, and Tajikistan) have met in Shanghai in April 1996, inaugurating a series of annual meetings to discuss security issues. On the agenda of the July 2000 meeting, which was held in Dushanbe, was the fight against terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism (Zhao 2001:222-23). Since June 2001, Uzbekistan has become the sixth member of the group, which has been renamed 'Shanghai Co-operative Organisation' (Achcar 2001:13). In actual practice, these agreements mean that the PRC government has secured the support of Central Asian neighbouring countries in its struggle to suppress any form of real or presumed opposition among the peoples of Xinjiang (in particular, the Uyghur). Current developments in Central Asia, that is, the American war in Afghanistan, have brought even more to the fore the strategic role of this region, including Xinjiang, suggesting a scenario where civil rights of the local populations will be nonchalantly encroached on by all parties in the name of the fight against terrorism. In fact, what is at stake is strategic control of Central Asia (including oil and pipelines): we are watching the latest episode of the "Great Game" between Russia, China, and the United States. As far as Xinjiang is concerned, the Chinese government has seized the opportunity of the "global war to terrorism" launched by the United States after the attack on the Twin Towers. According to a press report, the Chinese Foreign Secretary Sun Yuxi has asked for international support in the Chinese government's fight against Uyghur Muslim separatists in Xinjiang, stating that they have links with international terrorist organisations.¹⁷

¹⁷ 'La Cina chiede sostegno contro gli Uiguri' *Il manifesto* 12 Ottobre 2001, p.4. See also Gilbert Achcar's essay published on the December 2001 issue of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, according to which Chinese leaders have set two conditions for their support to the 'anti-terrorism' campaign: a) they asked that the response to the September 11 attacks should be carried out within the UN and b) they demanded reciprocity, that is, support to the Chinese government's fight against "Islamic terrorism" in Xinjiang and "separatism" in Taiwan (Achcar 2001:13).

1.2. The Uyghur

The Uyghur are the largest *minzu* in Xinjiang, numbering almost eight million in 1995, and the largest Turkic-speaking group in China. Their language belongs to the Eastern, or Chagatay, branch of the Turkic language family and is closely related to modern Uzbek.¹⁸ The modern Uyghurs adopted, or were ascribed, their ethnonym as recently as the early twentieth century. Historically, the name *Uyghur* has been applied to related peoples of three different periods, namely the ancient Uyghur qaghanate (8th-9th c.), the medieval Uyghur kingdom of Turfan (late 9th-16th c.), and the Uyghur *minzu* of what is today Xinjiang. The modern Uyghur have resulted from the historical assimilation of the ancient and medieval Uyghur Turks with other Turkic groups, as well as Turkicised Iranian and Indo-European (the so-called “Tokharian”) populations.¹⁹

The ancient Uyghurs were first mentioned in Chinese records in the 8th c., as one of the vassal tribes of the Eastern Turkic confederation. Upon the dissolution of this confederation, in 744, the Uyghur created an independent state which lasted for about a hundred years, with their capital at Ordubalig - on the upper reaches of the Orkhon river. In 840 they were attacked and defeated by the Kirghiz tribal confederation. This event forced the Uyghur and their Turkic subjects to flee southward, dividing themselves into three main groups. The first settled in the area comprised between what is today western Inner Mongolia and Gansu. These Uyghurs eventually assimilated to the other peoples (mostly Mongol and Chinese) who lived there. A small group fled toward Kashgar, in the west, and finally the third group,

¹⁸ For a description of the Uyghur language see Dweyer (1997). Hahn (1991) is a conversation course in modern Uyghur, while Dillon (1995b) and Dweyer (1994) survey Uyghur language textbooks and dictionaries published in China. Bellér-Hann (1991) discusses script changes in Xinjiang, focusing in particular on the Uyghur language. On Uyghur literature, see Friederich (1997), Naby (1991), and Sultan (1993). Bellér-Hann (2000) provides a very informed and in-depth discussion of literacy and oral transmission among the Uyghur. Dweyer (1998) focuses on language policy and the politics of language in China.

¹⁹ History is a very controversial issue in contemporary Xinjiang. For instance, the publication in 1989 of *The Uyghur*, a book claiming a Uyghur history independent of China, earned its author, Uyghur historian Turghun Almas, heavy and prolonged public criticism. The book was banned and Turghun Almas, then in his 60s, was placed under house arrest while his family has suffered discrimination and police harassment since then. The book was criticised for being “erroneous” on several counts, including for having “elevated the historical importance of the Uyghurs” and “denied the harmony of the coexistence of the Chinese and Uyghur people” (XASS 1994: 47-48, cited in AI 1999:12). On the politics of Xinjiang history see Bovington (2000). Grousset (1970) is probably the best source to appreciate the complexity of the history of Central Asia and the peoples who have lived and met there. Contemporary Chinese sources, that is those published in the PRC (for instance, Ma 1981, 1989; Tian 1991), are biased by the ‘unitary-state dogma’ which dictates a narrative of continuity and linear evolution for the Uyghur *minzu*, thus inscribing their history within Chinese history by stressing (if not inventing) continuity of contact with China. For a summary of Uyghur history, though mostly based on Chinese sources, see also Schwarz (1984).

which was by far the largest, fled to Turfan in the south-west. There they established a Uyghur kingdom, with their capital at Qarakhoja, which at its height extended from Kucha in the west to Qumul in the east. These Uyghurs absorbed the Tokharian and Sogdian groups residing in the area, adopting in turn Buddhism from the former and Manichaeism and the Sogdian script from the latter. Islam, which was introduced in the Kashgar region during the 10th century, only spread to these easternmost areas as late as the 14th-15th century. Following the adoption of Islam, the Sogdian script was replaced by the Arabic script.

By that time the Tarim basin, from Kashgar to Turpan and as far as Qumul, was predominantly inhabited by sedentary Turkic and Turkicised Iranian people. These oasis dwellers have been ruled, over the centuries, by the Qarakitay, the Mongols, the Junggars (Western Mongols), and a number of local oasis rulers. In the nineteenth century, this region came to be seen as the 'pivot of Asia' and was contended among three large empires - the Russian, the British, and the Chinese - in an attempt to create a buffer zone in order to prevent the others' expansionist designs. As we have seen, the Qing court established Chinese control of the region in 1884, when Xinjiang - as it was then called - was formally incorporated as an imperial province.

Until the early twentieth century, the sedentary population of Eastern Turkestan/Xinjiang strongly identified with their oases and referred to themselves as 'Qumulluq', 'Turpanliq', 'Qashqarlik', etc. that is, by place name rather than by ethnonym (e.g. 'Uyghur'). As late as the 1930s, western missionaries and travellers who visited the region usually referred to its sedentary non-Chinese residents as 'Turki' or 'Chantow' (see for instance Holgate Lattimore 1994, Cable and French 1947).²⁰ Indeed the ethnonym 'Uyghur' was not revived until 1921, when it was officially sanctioned during a Soviet meeting in Tashkent. In China it was adopted in the 1950s, as part of the ethnic identification process carried out by the Communists. As linguist Arienne Dwyer points out, today the modern ethnonym 'Uyghur' also subsumes a number of small groups in the Tarim Basin who were not necessarily Turkic speakers in origin. These include the Dolan (along the Tarim River), who are probably Mongol in origin; the Eynu of Khotän and Pâyziwat and the Paxpu/Shixpu of Guma and Kökyar, who are both Iranian-speaking in origin; and the Loplik of Lop Nur.²¹

²⁰ Cable and French use 'Turki' and 'Chantow' indistinctly for those who today would be referred to as 'Uyghur'. For example, they write of "a wealthy Moslem Turki" (1947:221); "chantow bread" (1947:222); "a business quarter for both Chinese and Turki"; "Turki farmers" (1947:223); "the Turki"; "The Chantow"; "Turki shops"; "the Chantow farmer" (1947:225). We can infer that they are also familiar with place-names, as in the same page they write "Melon cultivation has been carried by the Kumulik [Qumulluq] to a fine art" (1947:225).

²¹ Arienne Dwyer, personal communication.

Opposition to Chinese rule

Behind the Communist rhetoric on “the unity of all nationalities” and “Xinjiang having always been part of China”, there is justified concern for internal opposition on the part of local non-Han people, particularly the Uyghur. Chinese rule in the region has been seriously challenged throughout the twentieth century. Before the Communist takeover, not only were ethnic relations between Han and ‘Turki’ anything but peaceful (as we learn from travellers’ and missionaries’ accounts), but there were two attempts to create an independent Eastern Turkestan state. In 1933 an Eastern Turkestan Muslim Republic was established by Uyghurs in southern Xinjiang, with its headquarters in Kashgar. The Republic was soon suppressed by Sheng Shicai, the Xinjiang military commander, who subsequently established himself as the local warlord. As soon as Sheng left Xinjiang in 1944 for a new post in Beijing, the so-called Ili Rebellion broke out in north-western Xinjiang, leading to the establishment of the East Turkestan Republic (ETR) on November 12, 1944. The Republic lasted until 1949, when its leaders all died in a mysterious plane crash, while they were on their way to Beijing to discuss their autonomy with Mao Zedong.²²

After 1949, while the inseparability of Xinjiang from the rest of China has never been questioned by the central government, Chinese policy in the region has been oscillating between the two extremes of pluralism and ethnocentric (Han) hegemonic repression, as discussed elsewhere (1.4.; see also McMillen 1979). After the bitter years of the Cultural Revolution, the introduction in the 1980s of relatively liberal policies, including tolerance of important expressions of cultural identity, was welcome by the non-Han people living in the region. However, there is still a great deal of friction between the Chinese government and the local people, and between the Han Chinese and the non-Han Chinese (mostly Uyghur) population of Xinjiang. Not only are incidents of violence between individuals - such as knifings - very common, but also broader protests and terrorist incidents have occurred with regularity throughout the second half of the twentieth century. It is very difficult to obtain accurate and reliable information on this subject, since in Communist Xinjiang organised political opposition has necessarily been clandestine. Most information can either be inferred from statements of Chinese policy on the suppression of this opposition, or is provided by émigré supporters (Dillon 1995a:17). Clearly, neither of

²² On the two East Turkestan Republics, political opposition, and ethnic unrest in Republican Xinjiang see Forbes (1986). On the Ili Rebellion and the ETR see also Benson (1990) and Wang (1999).

these sources can be defined as 'independent', but both can provide a relatively complete picture. In a document compiled for 'internal use' (*neibu*) by a government-sponsored research group it is stated that "according to statistics, 19 counts of revolts and riots and 194 cases of counter-revolutionary separatist activities occurred in the whole Autonomous Region in the 30 years between March 1951 and May 1981".²³

During the 1990s dissent, resistance, and repression in Xinjiang appear to have been increasing, becoming a major concern both for the Chinese government and for pro-human rights organisations, most notably Amnesty International. It is hard to establish to what extent such perceived increase in the activity of separatist and other dissident organisations may be actually due to a greater 'visibility' and access to information, following the progressive opening up of Xinjiang to the outer world. However, in the 1990s all the Uyghurs I have met in Xinjiang agreed that "in the last four or five years things have been getting worse", and for most of them this was related to a) the creation of independent Central Asian republics just across the border of Xinjiang, and b) relentless Han migration from the interior of China to Xinjiang.²⁴

This troubled decade was inaugurated by riots at Baren, in the Kizilsu Kirghiz Autonomous Prefecture in southern Xinjiang. On April 5 1990 a group of Kirghiz men, who had gathered at a mosque, began criticising central government policies in minority areas, including birth control, nuclear weapons testing (at Lop Nor, 800 km south-east of Ürümqi), and the export of Xinjiang's resources to China proper. Soon this developed into a mass protest, calling for the driving out of the Han and the establishment of an East Turkestan independent state in Xinjiang. According to a *neibu* document published in 1994 by the Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences, behind the riots was the 'Islamic Party of East Turkestan', one of the clandestine opposition parties that had been formed and crushed over the years (AI 1999:12). While it is difficult to assess the scale of support for the Baren uprising, it can be seen

²³ Zhang Yumo, 'The Anti-Separatism Struggle and its Historical Lessons since the Liberation of Xinjiang'. Most interestingly, the document was translated by a group of Uyghur émigrés and posted on the 'uyghur-l' discussion list on 4 February 1998, the first anniversary of the 1997 'Ghulja uprising', to commemorate "those brave sons and daughters of Uighur who bravely stand[ed] [sic] up against that satanic regime and laid down their young lives for the sake of truth and justice".

²⁴ While incidents have evidently been occurring throughout the 1990s, it is extremely difficult to know exactly what goes on. The most reliable sources, that is CCP *neibu* documents, are usually the least accessible. In general, the BBC Summary of World Broadcast (SWB) is a very useful tool, in that it provides a wide range of both Chinese and foreign media reports. Other important sources are those published by the Uyghur émigrés network, such as the on-line journal *Turkistan Newsletter*, or the electronic newsletter *World Uyghur Network News*, published by the East Turkestan Information Center. Dillon (1995a) devotes a chapter to "Turkic Opposition and Communist Response", providing a rather detailed account of events that occurred from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s. As to the second half of the 1990s, the 1999 Amnesty International report *People's Republic of China: Gross Violations of Human Rights in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region* includes a very informed background section, where the 1995 "Khotän incident" and the 1997 "Ghulja incident" and its aftermath are dealt with in great detail (AI 1999).

as a watershed in that on that occasion “the issue of an independent East Turkestan Republic has been brought into the open for the first time since 1949” (Dillon 1995a:22).

Incidents have occurred on a regular basis in the following years, although only few were reported. In February 1992 there was a bomb attack on a bus in Ürümqi; a mass protest against the main Chinese nuclear test site at Lop Nor was staged in mid-March 1993; a bomb went off in Kashgar in June 1993; to mention but some. Another major incident occurred in the summer 1995, in the predominantly Uyghur town of Khotän, on the southern rim of the Taklamakan desert. This protest was sparked on July 7 when Abdul Qäyum, the charismatic Imam of the Baytulla Mosque, did not appear at the Friday prayer and was reported to have been arrested the previous day. Quoting unofficial sources, Amnesty International reports that “several hundred people were detained on the spot on 7 July 1995 and many more during the following weeks, both in and around Khotan. ... [M]ost of those detained on 7 July 1995 were held without charge for periods varying from 2 weeks to 3 months” (AI 1999:14). Expressions of often violent dissent continued throughout 1996. That same year the government launched a national ‘strike hard’ (*yanda*) anti-crime campaign, which in Xinjiang - where it was aimed primarily at “ethnic splittists” (*minzu fenlie zhuyizhe*) - led to large-scale arrests and numerous executions.

This spiral of dissent and repression reached its climax in early February 1997 in the north-western city of Ghulja (Yining in Chinese), where a demonstration was held by the local Uyghur population on 5 February, followed by two days of rioting. The initially peaceful demonstration was repressed with unprecedented brutality by Chinese security forces. Hundreds of demonstrators and bystanders were arrested and many people were killed or injured. On 6 February a curfew was imposed and the city was sealed off for two weeks.²⁵ The protest had originated from the growing discontent of the local Uyghur population. In 1995 the authorities had banned the *mäshräp*, a traditional form of social gathering which had been revived in 1994 by Uyghurs in Ghulja as a way to tackle social problems, especially among the youth.²⁶ While these gatherings reportedly continued secretly, arbitrary arrests increased over the following eighteen months and Uyghur discontent grew in proportion with repression. The 5 February demonstration was apparently provoked by a series of incidents during the Holy month of Ramadan - whose conclusion that year coincided with the Chinese Spring Festival - which was marked that year by a heavy police presence.

²⁵ For a detailed account of the “Ghulja incident”, including gory details of the repression, see AI (1999:17-22).

²⁶ On the “*mäshräp* movement” see also Roberts (1998a).

The Ghulja incident however was not an isolated event. According to rumours, in the same period there were 'minor' incidents, such as knifings and attacks against Han residents, throughout the region. In Ürümqi, the climate of fear and repression that had accompanied the celebration of the *Roza* festival (end of Ramadan) and the Chinese New Year culminated with the bombings of 25 February. While the whole country was mourning Deng Xiaoping's death, three time bombs went off on three different buses, causing civilian casualties. According to a press report, the bombs were planted by the "United Revolutionary National Front".²⁷ The crackdown against suspected "separatists" and "terrorists" intensified across the region, especially during the weeks that preceded the Hong Kong handover (1 July 1997). Between January 1997 and April 1999, when the Amnesty International report was published, at least 210 death sentences were recorded in Xinjiang, of which 190 were executed shortly after sentencing. The vast majority of those sentenced to death and executed were Uyghurs and had been accused of offences related to clandestine opposition activities, street protests, violent clashes with the security forces, or terrorist incidents (AI 1999:54).

While only a minority of the Uyghur population of Xinjiang is directly involved in such extreme forms of opposition and repression, these have a tremendous impact on most people's daily life. Not only do many Uyghurs share, to some extent, the feelings of frustration and discontent that lead some - mostly young men - to engage in an active fight against the Chinese government.²⁸ But, most importantly, this spiral of repression and dissent affects everyone, if anything because it generates a climate of widespread fear and suspicion, where everyone feels a potential target and where trust becomes a luxury that often one cannot afford. It is in such a climate that my research was carried out and it is against this background that the main theme of this thesis, that is the negotiation of Uyghur identity in the realm of food, needs to be set.

1.3. Ethnicity and ethnic identity

Terms such as 'ethnicity' and its derivatives have become increasingly popular in the last two or three decades. These words have been introduced by mostly English-language academics to help describe and analyse a wide range of contemporary political and cultural behaviour and events. Today they are also used in popular, political, and media discourses to describe and explain world events. The use of

²⁷ SWB/FE/2855 G/12 28/2/97.

²⁸ On less overt forms of everyday resistance to Han rule see Bovington (2002) and Cesaro (2000).

'ethnic' in British popular discourse to refer to exotic food, music, clothing, etc., further adds to the confusion. As a consequence, these terms have ambiguous referents. Often it is by virtue of this ambiguity that actors with a specific agenda - such as members of minorities, political parties, governments, the media - use them to describe their own or others' activities.

As Chapman, McDonald and Tonkin have pointed out in their introduction to *History and Ethnicity*, "the term [ethnicity] proves to be of interestingly limited value. ... It is also a term that invites endless and fruitless definitional argument among those professional intellectuals who think that they know, or ought to know, what it means. ... As a term, ethnicity is a product of a long-standing feature of English sociolinguistics - the tendency to look to Greek, Latin, French, or more generally, Romance models, when a new word is needed to fancify a plain idea or expression" (Chapman et al. 1989:1, 11). Interestingly, their analysis of the Greek etymology of the term and its use by ancient Greek and Roman authors shows how it originally implied an 'us' and 'them' distinction, where 'them' were the 'ethnic' ones (1989:12-13). Somehow the use of the term 'ethnicity' and its derivatives has come to a full circle, at least in popular and media discourses: while being first introduced into the English language as a 'neutral' analytical term, today 'ethnicity' is something that only the 'others' have. No matter what word we use, it is always a (politically, culturally, economically, etc.) dominant majority that defines a minority as 'ethnic'.

The current concern with ethnicity among social anthropologists, and the consequent ubiquity of this term, reflects both changes in the social world - above all increased contacts between communities - and changes in the dominant way of thinking in social anthropology - that is, a shift from regarding 'societies' and 'cultures' as more or less isolated, static and homogeneous units, to an attempt to render flux and process, ambiguity and complexity. In social anthropology, ethnicity refers to aspects of relationships between groups which consider themselves, and are regarded by others, as being culturally distinctive.

There is a close but complex relationship between 'ethnicity' and 'nationalism', which is reflected in the frequent association of the two terms. Like ethnic ideologies, nationalism stresses the cultural similarity of its adherents and, by implication, it draws boundaries vis-à-vis others, who thereby become outsiders. What distinguishes nationalism is its relationship to the state, that is, the claim that cultural and political boundaries should be coterminous. Therefore, the aspiration of an ethnic group to a state is labelled as nationalistic - although many ethnic groups do not have such a demand. It is useful, however, to distinguish between two kinds of nationalism, that is, between the ideology of a majority legitimising an existing nation-state (and

involving the suppression of the political and often cultural identities of minorities), and that of a minority within a state aspiring to considerable autonomy, if not to a state of their own. Chinese and Uyghur nationalism could be taken, respectively, as an example of these two kinds of nationalism. In other words, 'ethnic' and 'national' are categories which partly overlap. While they both involve cultural as well as socio-political aspects, the former tends to be regarded more as a cultural category - often the bias towards culture has the deliberate effect to devoid it of its political content - whereas the latter is more often considered as a socio-political category.

From what has been said so far, it would be not only undesirable but also impossible to define, in a strict sense, what ethnicity is. However, while bearing in mind that we are dealing with a complex and often ambiguous process, Eriksen's very general and tentative definition may help to identify the scope of this area of anthropological inquiry:

Ethnicity is an aspect of social relationships between agents who consider themselves as culturally distinctive from members of other groups with whom they have a minimum of regular interaction. It can thus also be defined as a social identity (based on a contrast vis-à-vis others) characterised by metaphoric or fictive kinship ... Ethnicity refers both to aspects of gain and loss in interaction, and to aspects of meaning in the creation of identity. In this way it has a political, organisational aspect as well as a symbolic one. (Eriksen 1993: 12)

Thus, 'ethnicity' subsumes a whole range of very different social phenomena. While there can be a certain degree of uniformity in the mechanisms of ethnic processes, the social contexts in which they occur may be very different and the relevance of ethnicity may vary substantially depending on the society, the individual, and the situation.

Ethnicity, as a social identity, is relational and to some extent situational. It is one among the many possible identities and statuses available to an individual, and it is an empirical question when and how ethnic identity becomes the most relevant one. Given this fluid and ambiguous character, ethnic identity can be seen as being constantly negotiated, and to a certain degree manipulated, by the actors themselves in their interaction. It is precisely this view that constitutes the starting point in this thesis. Drawing in particular on the work of Stevan Harrell (1996), I consider ethnic groups as resulting from an ongoing process of negotiation.

Most anthropological work on ethnicity has been focusing on the crucial question: what are the criteria for ethnicity? For a long time, an ethnic group was considered a category of people who had a 'shared culture'. That is, the criteria for

ethnicity were held to be identifiable and essentialised cultural traits (language, religion, customs, economy, etc.).²⁹ Today, it is hard to maintain such a position: not only are cultural boundaries anything but clear-cut, nor have they ever been, but they also do not necessarily coincide with ethnic boundaries. In the social sciences there seems to be a fairly general agreement in considering ethnicity as an aspect of inter-group relationships, rather than as the cultural property of a group.

From Leach (1954) onwards, many anthropologists have convincingly argued that the focus should be on social interaction and social organisation rather than on 'cultural content'. Fredrik Barth is regarded as a pivotal figure in the study of ethnicity and ethnic relations. His focus is on the boundaries that delimit a group, rather than on its 'cultural content'. For him, groups are by no means isolated and the maintenance of ethnic boundaries is far from being unproblematic. The criterion for ethnicity is the members' sense of belonging, and therefore definition of the group, with the aim of being socially effective. In this view, ethnic groups are categories of beneficial interaction where people do not originally share certain characteristics but they may have advantages by virtue of being members of a group and, as a consequence, submerge contrasts and differences. In other words, it is not that people belong to a group because they share the same traits, but rather the other way round. That is, interaction precedes the creation of cultural distinctiveness (Barth 1969). Abner Cohen, on the other hand, views culture as a set of resources and argues that ethnic groups arise in situations of competition over scarce resources, whereby cultural distinctiveness would mark off a group from the other. Thus ethnicity becomes a means for competition over scarce resources, based on ideologies of shared culture, shared origins, and metaphoric kinship. For Abner Cohen 'ethnicity' is essentially political: he focuses on how groups - especially elites - use their cultural identity to exclude others and to monopolise certain resources or power (A. Cohen 1974). Both Barth and Cohen have the merit of contextualising ethnicity by focusing on social interaction. However, they tend to overemphasise the 'utilitarian' aspects of ethnic identity, failing to account for a number of situations where belonging to a group is far from advantageous, and yet ethnicity is a relevant social identity for the members of that group. For instance, this is evident when we consider the Uyghur of contemporary Xinjiang, who retain their distinctive identity despite discrimination and, in some case, even prosecution. Comaroff indeed considers both these approaches correct but incomplete, and devises a set of propositions for understanding the

²⁹ These were the criteria adopted for the 'ethnic identification' process that was carried out by the Chinese Communists since the 1950s - the so-called '4 Stalinist criteria': "common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture" (cited in Fei 1990:17).

phenomenon. In particular, for him ethnicity originates in the asymmetrical absorption of groups into a single political economy. In other words, he introduces a notion of hierarchy, whereby groups remain unequal even within a single political economy (Comaroff 1987).

Besides the difficulty in defining the criteria for ethnicity, there is a further problem of translation. According to Tapper, “[e]thnic group, a term brought in from western sociological discourse, is a poor translation of indigenous categories in Iran, Afghanistan and elsewhere, and hinders the analysis of their subtleties and ambiguities” (1988:31). In China the situation is similarly complex: *minzu* is a sort of blanket term, usually translated as ‘nationality’ but is often used to refer to groups that western scholars would term as ‘ethnic’. However, the problems that the translation of *minzu* raises also reveal the inadequacy of western theories of ethnicity when dealing with the Chinese reality. Stevan Harrell, having pointed out this issue, decides not to translate the term *minzu* (1990:517).

We may conclude that ethnic groups, like nations, are constructed categories which stand in a dialectical relationship with the phenomena to which they refer, in the sense that the latter both determine and are determined by the former. Once a category is created, it affects the way the phenomenon to which it refers is perceived, experienced, and even consciously shaped by the relevant actors. These categories can be analytical as well as political tools. Particularly in this field, there is a close relationship between academic and political and media discourses, as the events occurring in many parts of the world have shown in recent years. It is therefore important to question not only the analytical validity of such universal categories in describing often very different phenomena, but also the role that they may play in imposing a discourse in certain areas and on certain events, as well as in legitimating certain power relations. Moreover, while these categories are predicated on variation among human groups and the presumed specificity of a particular group, their use may result in the negation of internal differences within the group itself.

This is the kind of theoretical approach that has inspired my work among the Uyghur. Far from aiming at a new model and/or definition of ethnicity, my main concern has been to look at ethnicity in context, on the ground. For, I argue, in this area of anthropological enquiry models are particularly inadequate; it is only by considering the specificity of each situation that we may begin to understand and describe such a complex phenomenon. Within this approach, I have also paid special attention in trying to give voice to plural perspectives within the group. Hence my concern to let individual persons speak as much as possible. Indeed, there are many different ways of being Uyghur. Far from seeing this as a contradiction that questions

the 'validity' of Uyghur identity (cf. Rudelson's (1997) argument discussed in Chapter 2), I rather consider it as 'added value' in the negotiation of identity (in terms of power of negotiation).

Before concluding this cursory discussion of ethnicity and ethnic identity I would like to add that, while it is useful to consider the status of ethnic group as the expression of power relations (majority - minority/ies) within the boundaries of a state (see Comaroff 1987 and Harrell 1990), the analysis of the relations between the majority and a minority cannot be confined within the boundaries of a single state and possibly not any state as such. Such relations can be affected and determined in/by a wider context, as can be the meanings involved in the construction of a particular identity. In other words, relationality and situationality of ethnic identity is not confined to reference to any one state, nor to the politics of states, important though they are for ethnicity. The majority in one state may not be the only significant other. As we shall see, this is especially true of many minority nationalities (*minzu*) in China, and particularly of the Uyghur.

1.4. Ethnicity and the state in China: Group definition and China's nationality policies

In this section I would like to situate discourses on ethnic identity in a Chinese context, and subsequently discuss issues of group definition and China's nationality policies. According to Crossley, in China ethnic consciousness "was a product of imperial disintegration, ... a corollary of whatever we may understand as China's modernization" (1990:27). If we accept this view, then the systematic definition of ethnic groups that was carried out in the 1950s needs to be situated against the background of the intellectual debates on Chinese identity that took place in China at the turn of the twentieth century.³⁰

During the nineteenth century, the confrontation with the modern western nation-states demonstrated the relativity of the Chinese world view based on the assumption of Chinese cultural superiority. This produced an intellectual debate - at the end of the nineteenth century - seeking to redefine Chinese identity in order to cope with such confrontation. Two strands can be singled out of this debate: the redefinition of "being Chinese" (Cohen 1991), and the creation of a Han majority. These two processes can be distinguished according to the oppositions they entail. In the first case, the 'other' is outside China, while in the second it is within China itself. In other

³⁰ On "ethnic identification" in Communist China see Fei (1990).

words, we have the creation on the one hand of a Chinese national identity - vis-à-vis other nation-states - and on the other that of a Han (as majority) ethnic identity - vis-à-vis other ethnic groups. However, in practice such a distinction is blurred and the use of terms such as “Han” and “Chinese” is often ambiguous.

Indeed the question of terminology is extremely relevant here. The attempt to translate between terms such as “*minzu*”, “*shaoshu minzu*”, “*zhongzu*”, etc., and “ethnic group”, “nationality”, “ethnic minority”, “race”, reveals a great deal of ambiguity. This is partly because the phenomena and processes these terms refer to are ambiguous in themselves, and partly because these categories have developed in different contexts. As David Wu points out, “[i]n order to create a modern identity to cope with conditions created by China’s confrontation with the Western world, the Chinese were obliged to deal with foreign concepts, including that of nation, state, sovereignty, citizenship, and race; more recently, with cultural and ethnic identity” (1991:159). Once such concepts had been adopted, they were consequently shaped in the Chinese context, further complicating any translation.

Thus, ideas about a Chinese race and a Chinese nation started to dominate the intellectual scene in China at the end of the nineteenth century. Dikötter has described the “transition from cultural exclusiveness to racial exclusiveness in modern China” (1990:421; see also 1992), thus framing the intellectual debate on Chinese identity in terms of race. When the Chinese assumption of their cultural superiority was relativised in the encounter and confrontation with the West, one of the consequences was the gradual appearance of a racial consciousness during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Fitzgerald, on the other hand, tackles the question from a different point of view, focusing on the idea of China as attached to the ideal of a unitary state (1995). According to Fitzgerald, the state that survived the death of Confucianism was a “nationless state”, and the slogan “save the country” (*jiu guo*) raised the question as to which Chinese people, i.e. what “nation”, would be rescued with the state (1995:84-85). “There is no one word in the Chinese language referring to ‘nation’, as distinct from state (*guo*), and the want of a definitive name has encouraged state-builders to define the nation in ways consistent with their state-building efforts” (1995:85). A variety of terms, including “citizen” (*guomin*, *gongmin*), “people” (*renmin*), “race” (*minzu*), and the derivatives “Han race” (*Hanzu*) and “Chinese race” (*Zhonghua minzu*), have been used, each implying a different nation.

The question of Chinese identity has been the object of a number of scholarly publications in the early 1990s.³¹ Continuity in Chinese identity has been sought and explained in various terms, including Confucianism, ideographic script, unitary state, orthopraxy in performing rites. Cohen (1991) has focused on the cultural dimension of Chinese identity. Traditionally, “[c]onsciousness of being a full participant in the total political, cultural, and social arrangements of the Chinese state and Chinese civilization was what being Chinese was all about” (1991:125). Like others, Cohen too finds that the major crisis in self-identification occurred in the nineteenth century, as a consequence of ‘the assault by Western powers’. According to him, “[t]he new definition of being Chinese is firmly rooted in nationalism, in a conception of China as a nation-state with interests that must be protected and advanced in competition with other nation-states” (1991: 126).

Within this debate, David Wu (1991) has looked at the twofold dimension of Chinese identity as perceived by the Chinese themselves. If, on the one hand, as *zhongguoren* they identify with the fate of China as a nation, at the same time, they also regard themselves as being members of the *zhonghua minzu*, “the Chinese race” or “the Chinese people” - a translation that Wu finds close but inadequate (1991:160-61).

Minzu is the keyword in contemporary discourse on ethnicity in China. This term was introduced in China at the turn of the century. It was derived from the Japanese *minzoku* (“people”, or “nation”), and was often associated with nationalistic writings (*minzu zhuyi* is translated as “nationalism”). Its shift of meaning in terms of ethnic group is parallel to the progressive definition of a Han ethnic majority within the general “Chinese people”. Officially, today the term *Zhongguo ren* (“Chinese”) refers to “the people of China” and includes 56 *minzu* (“nationalities”), among which the *Hanzu* represents the majority. However, as I have already said, in actual practice the distinction between “Chinese” and “Han” has been, and still is, both linguistically and conceptually blurred. According to David Wu, in the beginning of the twentieth century “[the] concept of a ‘Chinese people’ included four major non-Chinese races ... the Man (Manchus), the Meng (Mongolians), the Hui (ethnic groups of Islamic faith in northwestern China) and the Zang (Tibetans)” (1991:162).³² It was not until the 1960s that a new concept of being Chinese was established by clearly demarcating the Han and the non-Han (1991:166).

³¹Among others, Anagnost (1993); Ditter and Kim (1993); Duara (1993b); Waldron (1993); Watson (1993); and two special issues of the journal *Daedalus* (Spring 1991 and Spring 1993).

³² Wu’s use of terms such as “race”, “Chinese”, and “ethnic group” gives a measure of the confusion that reigns about these issues.

While the notion of “Han person” (*Han ren*), as descendant of the Han dynasty, has existed for centuries, the concept of the Han as a unified nationality representing over ninety percent of the Chinese population became popular under Sun Yat-sen. In Sun’s view the Han not only were one of the five Peoples of China, they were also the majority: “for the most part, the Chinese people are of the Han or Chinese race with common blood, common language, common religion, and common customs - a single pure race” (Sun 1924:5; cited in Gladney 1991:83).

The nationality policy of communist China was first formulated in the 1930s, mainly during the Long March.³³ In that situation, self-determination was explicitly promised to minorities in order to gain their support against the nationalists. However, the right to secede was withdrawn by 1940, with a shift of emphasis on ‘national unity’. “The contradiction between a policy that promotes both autonomy and assimilation is an irony that continues to plague China’s nationality policy” (Gladney 1991:88).³⁴ While the right to secession was soon withdrawn and the minorities were incorporated in the “Chinese nation”, the institution of national identities, and the consequent definition of these identities, took place in the early 1950s, just after the foundation of the People’s Republic of China (see Fei 1990).

The recognition of a nationality can be seen as a process of ‘invention’ and institutionalisation of an identity. As Wu has remarked,

[t]o classify a group as non-Chinese in China today is to reinterpret the meaning of minority culture rather than to preserve parts of a past tradition. ... The new classification of nationalities in China officially emphasizes that each of the minorities has its own language, culture, and history. China’s State Council of Nationality Affairs has even published an official ethnography, linguistic study, and ethnohistory for each nationality. Furthermore, one can observe

³³ For a ‘documentary’ discussion of Communist nationality policy see Mosely (1966). McMillen provides an overview of the policies toward the minority nationalities in Xinjiang between 1949 and the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, in 1966 (1979:113-29). More recently, the book *China’s Minorities. Integration and Modernization in the Twentieth Century*, by Colin Mackerras (1994), surveys China’s minorities addressing three main issues: 1) the nature and extent of changes which have affected China’s minorities during the twentieth century; 2) the extent to which, during this century, the minorities have amalgamated, integrated, or been assimilated into the Han and how the revolutions that have swept China over the twentieth century have affected the relationship between the Han and the minorities; 3) the relationship between integration and modernisation, that is, whether modernisation assists integration. In particular, Mackerras devotes two chapters (3 and 6) to policy towards the minorities in Republican and Communist China respectively.

³⁴ As Lucien Pye points out, “[i]t has been considerations of national security which have forced the Chinese to vacillate in their minority policies”, since the great majority of minority population is concentrated in border territories (1975:493). It was precisely during the Long March that the Chinese Communists realised how complex the politics of minority interests was and that the deeply rooted distrust of Han power among these populations could not be overcome merely by means of ideological proclamations (1975:494-95).

officially sponsored festivals, officially sanctioned religious celebrations, and officially approved songs, dances, and costumes in minority regions to represent the distinctiveness of the newly named non-Han groups. (Wu 1991:167)

Since the foundation of the People's Republic in 1949, nationality policy has been oscillating between the two extremes of pluralism and ethnocentric (Han) hegemonic repression. The pluralistic policies of the 1980s, which entail a sort of 'affirmative action', have made the minority nationality status in many ways a privileged and therefore desirable one. Thus some people have been willing to accept ascribed identities defined by the state in order to take advantage of the privileges that these involve.³⁵ However, where considerations of national security prevail, particularly on the north-western frontier, local non-Han people find themselves in the highly vulnerable position of being simultaneously targets of suspicion and subjects of courting. In fact, it is somewhat misleading to generically discuss 'nationality policies', since there is a considerable degree of variation in their actual implementation in specific contexts, and in the way these affect different groups. To put it plainly, today there is a huge difference between being a Manchu in Beijing and a Uyghur in Xinjiang. Not many Uyghurs, if any, would think that, on the whole, being a minority is a privilege.

In short, as far as Chinese Communists are concerned, there has been a shift from an initial ideological approach, formulated before their take-over in 1949 on the basis of Lenin's view that minorities should have the right of self-determination, to the adoption of harsher assimilationist policies dictated by their experience of minorities' resistance to Han rule. The latter policies were in line with previous governments and were predicated on the assumption of Han cultural (or 'social') superiority. In other words, it was yet another "civilising project" (Harrell 1995). Part of the strategy to achieve control, in order to "civilise", was to train cadres from each minority community. To this end the Central Institute of Nationalities (*Zhongyang Minzu Xueyuan*, now *Zhongyang Minzu Daxue*) was established in 1951. Besides language training, propaganda, and political education, minority cadres were also trained in "their own folkways" (Pye 1975:503-08).

I would like to conclude this cursory discussion of ethnicity in China and policy toward the minority nationalities (*shaoshu minzu*) with a pertinent quote from Lucien Pye's article:

³⁵ This can be the case for many Manchus whose remarkable increase of population is not due to fertility but rather to the fact that, under these new circumstances, many people have decided to claim their Manchu identity, once considered as stigmatising.

[I]t seems highly likely that as the processes of social change proceed in China and as more members of the national minorities come closer to the Han in cultural and economic circumstances, the greater will be their concern about their ethnic identities and the power status of their communities.

... In its very first years the CCP would have welcomed the idea that the national minorities were increasing in both cultural development and a sense of autonomy and self-identification. The *paradox* has been that with the need to maintain the territorial integrity of China the Communists have moved toward more and more aggressive assimilationist policies. In order to *facilitate penetration for spreading their control they have also helped maintain cultural forms and thus the basis for separate identity*. (1975:509-10, my emphasis).

This is precisely the paradox of Communist minority policies: that of promoting (or producing) assimilation and, at the same time, differentiation. Today, Uyghur urban intellectuals find themselves in the same paradoxical situation of being at the vanguard of both assimilation and differentiation.

1.5. The anthropology of food

The cultural and social aspects of food - and its related practices - are at least as important as its nutritional value. By eating, people do not simply satisfy a biological need, they choose what to eat, when and how, with whom, etc., displaying a certain pattern of behaviour. Thus cooking and eating are also cultural processes and social activities.

Some of the most influential anthropological work focusing on food and eating has been produced within a structuralist theoretical framework. For Lévi-Strauss cooking can be analysed as a language, in which the universal structures of human mind are encoded. Thus he devises a 'culinary triangle' whereby the constituent elements of each cuisine may be organised according to certain structures of opposition and correlation (Lévi-Strauss 1968). Unlike Lévi-Strauss, Mary Douglas allows a certain degree of variation within mankind and does not expect to find a universal structure underlying the language of food. However, she argues that different dietary rules mirror different schemes of classification, corresponding to the characteristics of the society in which the classification takes place (Douglas 1966). Consequently she classifies groups according to their way of classifying. Probably, Douglas's most important contribution lies in viewing food categories as encoding social events,

expressing hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across boundaries (as in Douglas 1975).

The weakness of a structuralist approach is that, rather than providing an explanation of food preferences or choices, it offers mainly a classificatory scheme. Furthermore, not only are the codes and deep structures depicted as static and unchanging but so are the patterns of social relations which they are supposed to express. Moreover, the homogeneity and uniformity of the groups in question are exaggerated. Jack Goody (1982), another eminent figure within anthropological approaches to food-related practices, has tried to counterbalance such a tendency. He remarks that by focusing on the homogeneity of specific groups, one might neglect important aspects of a culture which are linked with social or individual differences. In general, more recently there has been a greater concern among anthropologists for historical change and social relations, including politics and economics, as well as for the meanings that people construct around the food they consume (cf. Caplan 1997; Teti 1999).

It is precisely the link with social or individual differences which makes food relevant to the construction and expression of identity. In other words, 'you are what you eat'. Or, to unpack this rather simplistic statement, choices - not necessarily in an active sense - about food, table manners, rules concerning commensality, etc. may be used to situate oneself and others culturally and socially, defining membership or non-membership to a group. Here food may symbolise different subsegments - regional, economic, religious, ethnic, occupational, etc. - in a given society.

At a different level, food and food-related practices are often used in ethnic or regional stereotyping, where a particular group becomes associated with particular culinary habits. Within this process, cookbooks written both by insiders and outsiders may play an important role in crystallising and reinforcing such stereotypes. The writing of such books often implies a selection from among a large number of different recipes, thus contributing to the construction of a culinary representation of the other (Appadurai 1988) - as well as the self. Indeed, it is the notion of selection that is paramount in the shaping of identity. Whoever is the actor, identity is constructed by selecting a number of 'authentic' traits. These are by no means permanent but constantly subject to negotiation between the relevant actors. Thus the construction of a 'national cuisine', by distilling a corpus of dishes and rules related to eating, can be situated within the broader process of nation-building. As we shall see, the definition of what constitutes Uyghur diet and cuisine is an important aspect in the daily process of identity creation, and it is perhaps on this terrain that Uyghur identity is more explicitly negotiated.

Studying food and eating as cultural and social processes acquires a particular relevance when dealing with such a food-oriented culture as the Chinese. Eating usually is a social activity, and this is particularly true of China. The very way in which a Chinese meal is conceived implies collective eating. In China the social dimension of eating is emphasised by the role of food as a social language: sharing food is a great social bond, and the food shared communicates the forms and contents of social interactions (Chang 1977, Anderson & Anderson 1977, Cooper 1986). It is not surprising, then, that a remarkable amount of work has been produced on this topic exploring the role of food in different aspects of Chinese culture, such as death rituals (Thompson 1988), Chinese traditional medicine (Anderson & Anderson 1975), or, more generally, Chinese concern with harmony (Anderson 1988).

While I am not aware of any similar work exploring the role of food in Uyghur culture, studies that focus on food in other Muslim communities may help in providing a framework. For instance, Pillsbury (1975) examines pork avoidance as a strategy for boundary-maintenance between Han and Muslim Chinese in Taiwan. While in their article on the Durrani Pashtuns, Tapper & Tapper (1986) consider how boundaries of ethnic groups are defined by rules relating to commensality. They then proceed analysing Durrani evaluations and treatment of food within the koranic domain according to the binary opposition permitted/ forbidden. A recent collection of essays on the 'Culinary Cultures of the Middle East' also provides some useful insights and a valuable source of comparative material on various aspects of food and eating among peoples that are to some extent culturally and/or geographically contiguous to the Uyghur (Zubaida and Tapper 1994). These range from a discussion of ingredients, dishes, and cuisines (Fragner 1994a, 1994b; Perry 1994; Zubaida 1994b; Aubaile-Sallenave 1994), to issues of social hierarchies (Yamani 1994), gender relations (Maclagan 1994), cultural boundaries (Rodén 1994, Bromberger 1994), changing eating habits (Chase 1994), or semiotic and symbolic aspects of food (Marín 1994; Tapper 1994; Diouri 1994; Hafez 1994).

Feasts and banquets - for regular religious festivals and for weddings and other personal celebrations - are occasions in which meanings and symbols condensed around food and eating are probably displayed at their best. Here culturally appropriate food is served in the appropriate amount and manner. Focusing on the social dynamics involved in such occasions allows one to identify notions of inclusion and exclusion (who are the participants) and to observe social distances and hierarchies within the group (who sits where, who is served when and how, etc.). Hence feasts and banquets, while providing rich meals within a normally simpler diet, are extremely important social events, where bonds, hierarchies of status, and networks are stated,

reinforced, or created. Bonds and networks may become relevant in other contexts (e.g. business, politics, etc.). Indeed, this has been an important leitmotiv in my work among the Uyghur.

Commensality is probably the most important social aspect of feasts and banquets. It means sharing a table and a meal (Latin, *cum - mensa*). Such apparently very ordinary situations can be loaded with symbolic value. Indeed within a group there are rules relating to commensality, and in these rules social meanings are encoded. Commensality can also serve to define boundaries between groups. Here both social and cultural aspects are relevant, and often cultural practices concerning food and eating may be used to state and to reinforce social distance. For example, pork avoidance is a cultural practice among Muslim groups. In certain contexts such a practice may impinge on social relations by preventing to share, or allowing not to share, a table with members of a group which do not observe the same avoidance - as we shall see, this is definitely relevant in Han-Uyghur relations. This can be a way of asserting one's membership - or non-membership - to a group, having consequences beyond the realm of food and eating, given that commensality provides access to social networks.

Ideas and beliefs about food, as well as dietary rules, may also be analysed as an aspect of a group's cosmology, and in this sense as part of their identity. Harmony and balance are central concerns for the Chinese, who regard the world as an harmonious place in which harmony must be maintained: in the cosmos by correctly performing the rituals, that is, offering the appropriate food to the appropriate spirit; in the body, by a balanced intake of *yin* and *yang*, or *liang* and *re* food; finally, in society, where the maintenance of social harmony also relies on food, in that social relations and hierarchies are constructed, displayed, and must be respected while eating (Anderson 1988). As to the Uyghur, the work of Gladney on Muslim Chinese (Hui) can possibly be used as a guideline. Concepts of ritual purity and pollution seem to be central to Hui identity (Gladney 1991). These can be translated into dietary rules framed within a major opposition between that which is permitted and that which is forbidden (cf. Tapper & Tapper 1986).

While all the above mentioned issues point in the direction of boundary-setting and boundary-maintenance between groups, it may be worth considering also the role of 'western' or other 'exotic' foods and drinks within this context. What sort of people, if any, consume them and how does this situate them in their community? On the one hand, it seems likely that the adoption of 'imported' lifestyles cuts across boundaries, thus weakening to some extent the sense of belonging to either of the groups and creating an elite who possibly share the ideals of modernity and progress

which are often associated with the West in non-western contexts. Considering the new trends in Chinese society brought about by two decades of economic reforms, such a perspective may be particularly relevant to this study. On the other hand, however, it is not at all clear where the boundary with 'the West' lies, particularly when looking at Uyghur food practices. In fact, stressing continuity - including food items, dishes, and food-related practices - with European culture is part of the Uyghur strategy to differentiate themselves from the Han Chinese and to claim prestige vis-à-vis the dominant Han majority.

1.6. Food and identity among the Uyghur

This thesis is a study of food and identity among the Uyghur. The argument underlying my discussion is that food, and all its related practices (i.e. cooking, eating, offering, etc.), is a powerful form of identity creation and maintenance. Through the preparation, the exchange, and the consumption of food social relationships are created, rules of inclusion and exclusion are established, boundaries are negotiated and maintained. Food - meant as all the activities revolving around it - has the unique advantage of being the most common daily activity for all members of a community and, at the same time, of having strong cultural and historical connotations. The choice of intellectuals as my main interlocutors highlights the potential of food as both a non-verbal language available to everyone to create identity, and the subject of a meta-discourse of identity. In a context of volatile relations between the Uyghur Muslim minority and the dominant Han Chinese population, food represents a fundamental resource available to Uyghur intellectuals, who are currently engaged in a difficult process of negotiation and affirmation of their distinctive identity.

As we have seen, in Xinjiang the economic and political transformations of the post-Mao era combined in the early 1990s with the break-up of the Soviet Union and the subsequent independence of the neighbouring Central Asian Republics. This has resulted in the re-emergence of a (Turkic) Central Asian region with the reorientation of Xinjiang from the periphery of China to the heart of Central Asia. The Uyghur of Xinjiang, now increasingly aware of their Turkic and Muslim identity, have been feeling threatened by Central Government assimilating policies, as well as by relentless Han migration into the region. They feel that, while being denied in the name of (Han) national unity the possibility to establish their distinctive historical and cultural

tradition, they are at the same time discriminated vis-à-vis the Han in their access to the resources made available by economic development.

In this study I take as a starting point the work of Stevan Harrell, which views *minzu* in China - like ethnic groups and nations in general - as resulting from an ongoing process of negotiation, and not as “historically inevitable collectivities”. As with ethnic groups and nations elsewhere, in China too “the shifting and fluid process of negotiation that is the real nature of ethnic relations” is often hidden - by government, ethnic leaders, etc. - behind a “narrative of unfolding”. That is, a story of “the processes by which an ancient people has come down through the ages as ... a unity” (Harrell 1996:1-6). Indeed, in the increasingly Han cities of Xinjiang, above all in Ürümqi, identity is the object of daily negotiation. The focus here is on the negotiation of Uyghur identity by Uyghur urban intellectuals, who find themselves at the vanguard of both assimilation and differentiation. This paradox, rather than representing a weakness, can be seen as providing a privileged position within this process of negotiation. I look in particular at such a process as it unfolds in the realm of food, which I consider a privileged arena for identity creation and maintenance, especially in a context, such as that of contemporary Xinjiang, where other arenas for negotiation are unavailable or highly restricted.

The intellectuals’ paradox stems from their ambivalent position with respect to their own people, on the one hand, and the Chinese state on the other. Hence for instance their ambivalent attitude towards Tarim oases peasants, which they both praise as the true repositories and defenders of Uyghur ‘tradition’ and, at the same time, despise as backward (i.e. ‘non-modern’). Such an attitude underscores another aspect of the intellectuals’ paradox: they are both champions of (Uyghur) tradition and, simultaneously, of (Han) modernity. This discourse is based on a number of assumptions, which can be roughly summed up into two opposing equations: differentiation=Uyghur=tradition vs. assimilation=Han=modernity. Yet Uyghur intellectuals’ view that the ‘real’ (U. *sap*, Ch. *chun*) Uyghurs are those from rural areas in the South reproduces the Han/state representation of the Uyghur - and of *shaoshu minzu* in general - as ‘traditional’, an intentionally ambiguous concept which implies also being backward. It follows that, when Uyghurs ‘develop’ and ‘modernise’ (cf. Harrell’s ‘civilising project’), they become less ‘authentic’ and more ‘like the Han’ who, of course, set the standard. Hence the dilemma: to retain one’s traditional identity, but stay backward, or to ‘modernise’, but lose one’s traditional identity.

This dilemma, however, is largely predicated on the Chinese Marxist-evolutionary approach to *shaoshu minzu*, and as such can be questioned and

deconstructed, by questioning and deconstructing the categories of 'modernity', 'tradition', 'authenticity', etc.; in short, by unveiling the political agenda and the power relations which lie behind the Chinese discourse on *shaoshu minzu*. Within such discourse, the target for each *minzu* is to progress towards the higher step of the evolutionary ladder, which, of course, is the one reached by the Han. It follows that they should all become 'like the Han', in other words, assimilate. Here, clearly, there is no space for an 'evolution', or rather a trajectory, independent of the Han. In short, it is such discourse that traps Uyghur and other *minzu* intellectuals in the above mentioned dilemma, by inscribing their history and their very existence in a Han-dominated linear evolution.³⁶ However, if we step out of the constraints imposed by the Han/state discourse, this dilemma becomes meaningless: of course Uyghurs too can change (or 'modernise', if they like) while retaining their distinctive identity and remaining different from the Han. Moreover, while today the Han provide to some extent the most readily available sources of 'advancement', Uyghurs also have access to a whole range of alternative sources by virtue of their Turkic and Muslim identity, as well as of their recent history of Russian/Soviet influence. In other words, Han China is by no means the only model for modernity. On the contrary, many Uyghurs look at their 'relatives' across the western border in the Central Asian Republics and as far as Turkey. Some even put forward the argument that, had they not been 'liberated' by the Chinese Communists, they would not be as backward as they are today.

In short, in this work I consider Uyghur intellectuals who, while at the cutting edge of both differentiation and assimilation, are in the process of negotiating Uyghur identity. In order to do so, I question the assumption that views them as caught between modernity and tradition, as this is predicated on the equation 'modern' equals 'Han'. Once such equation has been deconstructed by revealing the agenda behind it, what looked like a dilemma may become, in fact, a privileged position for negotiation. Within this framework, I posit food (foodways etc.) as a structural boundary par excellence in Han-Uyghur relations. This is not only about pork avoidance and *haram* food but includes the whole 'food culture', which I consider as a privileged terrain where the negotiation takes place, given also the impossibility to articulate a public discourse on identity in other, perhaps more conventional, spheres (cf. Bovingdon

³⁶ A most telling example, though just one among many, is that of the museum in Ürümqi, which has an 'ethnographic' section on Xinjiang (*shaoshu minzu* - predictably, the Han are not on display. This is something like a human zoo, where each *minzu* is reproduced - with life-size dummies - in its 'traditional' dress, dwelling style, etc. Nobody - including the organisers, the visitors, and the members of the *minzu* represented - seems to notice the blatant anachronistic bias: to mention but one point, the dummies wear dresses that nobody wears anymore. For example, the representatives of the Russian *minzu* are dressed like 19th C Europeans. It is as if the Han were dressed in Qing clothes!

2002). Here a number of principles of distinction between the two food cultures come into play, allowing to incorporate some elements while keeping differentiation.

What makes food a privileged site is, first and foremost, its being a medium of sociality. Besides this simple but fundamental point, we may consider a number of other aspects that make food so special in the negotiation of Uyghur identity: Food is pervasive, in the sense that cooking, eating, feeding, etc. are activities that inevitably take up a good part of everybody's daily life. Secondly, as I have already pointed out, it is 'versatile', being at the same time the most common daily activity as well as an object of intellectual speculation. Moreover, food is to a great extent outside the reach of state control, especially in the post-reform era. It is also 'flexible', in that principles of distinction allow a great degree of negotiation, that is, assimilation while retaining differentiation. Finally, food is the one realm where Uyghurs set the rules in their interaction with the Han, unlike for instance language, where they must adapt and speak Mandarin.

The first part of this thesis is devoted to Uyghur identity and differentiation. Starting from a critique of Justin Rudelson's book *Oasis Identities* (1997), I discuss the notion of an over-arching Uyghur identity and argue that this is neither invalidated nor contradicted by oasis attachments. The latter have become subsumed into it by differentiation from and by the Han in the PRC. I then proceed to analyse in greater detail the dynamics of Han/Uyghur differentiation in the context of late 1990s Ürümqi.

The second part deals more specifically with food and food-related issues among the Uyghur. Here I analyse and describe such process of differentiation as it unfolds, in all its variability and paradoxes, in the realm of food. Despite local variation, there is a shared notion of Uyghur collective identity in contemporary Xinjiang, which may nevertheless be individually 'performed' in different ways - a successful business-woman in Ürümqi who speaks fluent Mandarin can be just as Uyghur as a Khotänese peasant who does not even speak standard Uyghur. While a certain degree of assimilation and exchange with the Han is evident in food vocabulary, menus, and meal patterns, this collectively shared notion of Uyghur identity can definitely be observed in the realm of food and food-related practices, where Uyghurs draw clear boundaries between them and the Han: in the form of shared beliefs concerning food, shared notions of hospitality, manners, accepted/non-accepted behaviour, shared ritual practices involving food. Last but not least, in attitudes towards food and in food choices one can also read a covert political statement, a subversive message against Han domination which could hardly be articulated in a language other than food.

The affirmation of Uyghur identity, as opposed to other more local self-identifications, is prominent in particular for intellectuals in the capital city. In fact, while I often talk about Uyghurs in general, and some of my observations indeed apply to Uyghur people at large, I should make clear once again that the main setting for my discussion is Ürümqi in the late 1990s. That is, an increasingly Han Chinese *and* cosmopolitan city, at the cutting edge of Xinjiang urban culture, as opposed to other mostly Uyghur urban settings such as, for instance, Kashgar or Khotän. As I have already pointed out, it is particularly important to contextualise my ethnography and my understanding of certain practices and discourses in terms of both place and time. The year 1997 marked a turning point for the whole People's Republic: the death of Deng Xiaoping in February, the Hong Kong handover in July, and the 15th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in October. In Xinjiang these events intertwined with an escalation of violence and repression which had already started the year before. While many Han Chinese were murdered by Uyghur "ethnic terrorists", and many Uyghurs were executed by the Chinese state after summary proceedings, the state propaganda obsessively promoted "ethnic unity" (*minzu tuanjie*). It is in this temporal context that my ethnography is situated. As to place, Ürümqi is a overwhelmingly Han city (70-80%), where Uyghurs (c.15%) tend to construct their identity mostly in opposition to the Chinese. These two groups do not interact in a vacuum, as there are also a large number of other groups - as well as foreign communities. However, most of these are not numerically significant, hence Uyghur and Han inevitably are the two reference groups. While the other groups do have a role in the process of Han-Uyghur interaction and are a constituent part of the broader context in which such interaction occurs, they do not come to the fore as often. Indeed, most of the time Uyghurs talk of themselves and the Han in polarised terms, to the exclusion of all other groups.

Food provides an excellent arena to explore the dynamic and complex nature of social and cultural interaction in Xinjiang, in this case from an urban Uyghur perspective. If, on the one hand, a narrative of continuity, tradition, and discrete identities can be detected in the way Uyghurs talk and write about their food, on the other hand practices as well as discourses also show the syncretic nature of a culinary tradition. What we observe at a particular moment in time is in fact a constant process, where the boundaries of a cuisine are not only permeable but also blurred. Not only is the core of what is regarded as traditional Uyghur food the result of a long term process of borrowings, exchange, adaptation, and reinterpretation, but also many signature dishes are in fact shared by people who, at this particular moment in time, belong to different groups. The 'multiple identity' of these dishes can be

acknowledged - most Uyghurs would declare that Uzbeks are masters (*U. usta*) in making *polo* - or contested - as with *naren* - depending on the context. Moreover, new trends (*ganpan, so säy, dapanji*) can be observed on the Uyghur table in the late 1990s. They are the result of recent Han influence and, although these dishes often figure prominently in urban Uyghurs' diet, they have yet to be fully incorporated into Uyghur cuisine. The transformation of Han food into Uyghur food involves a degree of selectivity, negotiation, and manipulation. This process of incorporation, which is not necessarily conscious, is extremely fascinating, especially when situated in the context of Han-Uyghur relations and compared to the way in which notions of contamination derived from Islamic dietary prescriptions function as a powerful ethnic boundary.

CHAPTER 2

UYGHUR IDENTITY

2.1. Uyghur identity or oasis identities?

For the last half a century Xinjiang has been basically inaccessible to non-Chinese scholars and, despite considerable relaxation in the last ten years or so, access to the area is still restricted.¹ Nevertheless, since the late 1980s, and particularly since the mid-1990s, an increasing number of scholars have been carrying out extensive fieldwork in the region, mostly among the Uyghur. Their work, often focusing on various aspects of identity, has resulted in a growing number of publications.² These scholars owe an enormous debt not just to explorers such as Sven Hedin, Malov, von Le Coq, etc., but especially to Ambassador Gunnar Jarring, who was the first outsider to systematically collect Uyghur ethnographic material. In the new wave of western interest in Xinjiang, that began in the 1980s, one of the first studies on Uyghur identity was Rudelson (1997). It was a time when westerners were very optimistic about being able to analyse complex geographic-ethnic interactions. In the author's own words, "[t]his book is the result of the first prolonged anthropological field-work ever conducted in Xinjiang - the first to provide an analysis of ethnic undercurrents there" (1997:4).³

Rudelson is concerned with the Uyghur intellectual elite's struggle to define their nationalist ideology. One of the book's central theses is that strong local identities hinder the shaping of a Uyghur national identity. He sees this strong oasis loyalty as part of a historical and geographical legacy, especially in as much as the location of an oasis affects the local population's access to particular cross-border cultural, economic, and religious influences. Thus Rudelson identifies four main Uyghur sub-

¹ One notable exception is the Russian linguist Tenishev, who carried out fieldwork in the region during the 1950s, at a time when Sino-Soviet relations were still peaceful.

² Scholars who have carried out prolonged fieldwork in Xinjiang include Ildiko Bellér-Hann, Gardner Bovington, Cristina Cesàro, William Clarke, Jay Dautcher, Arienne Dwyer, Chris Hann, Rachel Harris, Tooru Hayashi, Thomas Hoppe, Nathan Light, Sean Roberts, Justin Rudelson, Joanne Smith, Stanley Toops. Besides a number of doctoral theses (Rudelson 1992, Light, Clarke 1999, Smith 1999, Dautcher, Bovington 2001a, Roberts), published articles on the Uyghur include Bellér-Hann (1997, 1998a, 1998b, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c), Bovington (2001b, 2002), Cesàro (2000), Clark (2001), Gladney (1990, 1996, 1998), Hann (1999), Harris (2002), Roberts (1998a, 1998b), Smith (2000, forthcoming). With regard to ethnic identity, Hoppe (1998) describes thirteen ethnic groups in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, their cultural differences and their inter ethnic relations. In particular, a long section of the book is devoted to the Uyghur.

³ The book is based on Rudelson's doctoral thesis *Bones in the sand: the struggle to create Uighur nationalist ideology and ethnic identity in Xinjiang, China* (1992). Here I only provide a cursory treatment of some of the book's main arguments, which are particularly relevant to my discussion. For a review of the book see Benson (1998).

regions: the oases of Kashgar in the west, Khotän in the south, Turpan and Qumul (Hami) in the east, and the Ili (Ghulja) region in the north.⁴ The Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s, he contends, was crucial in the development of a modern Uyghur identity, since all cross border communications were closed off thus leaving the inhabitants of Xinjiang oases completely isolated for the first time in their history. However, as border ties and trade resumed in the second half of the 1980's, local oasis identity has become stronger as a result of the outward focus of the oases across the borders. This, Rudelson argues, is causing a weakening of the overarching Uyghur identity. In particular, his study points to the process of reification of Uyghur history and culture and argues that there is a lack of agreement on what the symbols of such an identity should be.⁵

Rudelson conducted his last period of fieldwork in 1989-90. Six years later, the context in which I conducted my own fieldwork was rather different. For the 1990s witnessed the dissolution of the Soviet Union with the subsequent rise of the independent Central Asian republics just across the border of Xinjiang, as well as an increasingly overwhelming Han migration into the region.⁶ According to many Uyghurs, as well as external observers, these are the two major drives that have, in the late 1990s, fuelled the Uyghur quest for independence. My research findings challenge a work such as Rudelson's; indeed the opening up of Xinjiang borders has not resulted in a weakening of Uyghur identity but, on the contrary, it has enhanced Uyghur people's awareness of their distinctive identity. The independence of the ex-Soviet Central Asian Republics has stirred the aspiration of many Uyghurs in Xinjiang

⁴ Cf. Rudelson 1997: 8-9, 24-32, 41-45. According to the author, "insufficient understanding of Xinjiang geography has clouded modern studies. For the most part, scholars have viewed the region as a single entity. I argue that Xinjiang is composed of four distinct geographic regions, each influenced by a different bordering culture." (1997:17). Later he reasserts this concept, stating that the persistence of distinct oasis identities and strong oasis loyalties "has not been stressed adequately in most studies of the modern Uyghur", among which he quotes Forbes (Rudelson 1997:45). In fact, in his study of republican Xinjiang, Forbes argues that before 1949 it is not possible to speak of a single region since, he contends, enduring local identities split Xinjiang into three regions: north, south, and east (1986); see also Bovingdon (2001b). Moreover, in Uyghur dialectology we find a long established tradition of dividing Xinjiang into four distinct regions, as in the work by Tenishev, Malov, and Osmanov (Arienne Dwyer, personal communication).

⁵ Cf. Rudelson 1997: 25-26, 40, and Chapter 6.

⁶ Not only had the Han population in Xinjiang risen by nearly ten percent between 1990 and 1995 (5,746,600 to 6,318,100, an increase of exactly 9.9%), but several thousands of Han migrants - the so-called floating population (*mangliu*) - had moved into the region, without their presence being recorded in the official figures (which also do not include soldiers). During the same period the Uyghur population had risen by 7.5%. In the previous five years (1985-1990) the Uyghur population had risen by 15%, while the Han by 7.5%. (Xinjiang... 1996:47). *Mangliu* literally means "to wander blindly". This expression has become common in contemporary China to refer to the masses of Chinese population, usually Han, moving from poorer rural areas to richer urban areas in search for casual work. This phenomenon of large scale internal migration is a direct consequence of the economic reforms that began in the early 1980s. The Chinese government has been trying to contain the afflux of rural population into the cities. However, in Xinjiang it seems that Han migration is much more tolerated, if not openly encouraged.

for a country of their own. Resumed contact with fellow Turkic people, and often with relatives, across the border has confronted them once again with the realisation that they do not belong to China and its culture, and that they have more to share with their neighbours than with their fellow countrymen. In this context, the level of identification vis-à-vis the Han Chinese, the Uzbek, or the Kazakh, is that of being Uyghur, as much as *Qāshqārlik*, *Qumulluq*, or *Khotänlik* (i.e. oasis identities).⁷

The second point that I would like to make concerns Rudelson's claim that there is a lack of shared symbols of Uyghur identity. He argues that, as a result of competing local identities, Uyghur intellectuals tend to promote their own oasis of origin and there seems to be no agreement on symbols that could be shared by all Uyghurs. I will argue, however, that this is not the case. The very fact that there is a quest for national symbols, however competing these might be, suggests that there is at least a shared ideal of Uyghur collective identity. In the last section of this chapter I will look at the consumption at grassroots level of three Uyghur symbols, respectively a *Qumulluq*, a *Dolanliq*, and a *Qāshqārlik*, showing that in everyday practice - even among the urban intellectuals among whom I conducted most of my fieldwork - symbols of Uyghur identity are shared regardless of their local origin. In other words, I will show that, from a 'popular consumption' perspective, local identity biases are by no means competing with an overarching pan-oases Uyghur identity.

Today, 'Uyghur' is a category to which people in Xinjiang consistently resort in order to define a person's identity. Of course, this does not rule out a whole range of other identities and loyalties. The same person may describe herself as Uyghur, as well as Muslim, or Turk, or Kashgari. These are not exclusive, but rather complementary identities. The notion of multiple identities is widely accepted in current anthropological debate. Gender, religion, ethnicity, class, are only some of the lines along which such identities can be formed. If we consider identities as relational and situational, the identity to which people ascribe is clearly dependent on the context of interaction. For example, in his discussion of Hui, Uyghur, and Kazakh identities Gladney devises a diagram where different identities, such as Muslim, Turk, Uyghur, Chinese, etc., coexist in a hierarchy of "relational alterities" (1996:455). That is, each of these identities is situated at a different level of opposition: e.g. *Qāshqārlik* vis-à-vis *Turpanliq*, Uyghur vis-à-vis Kazakh, Turkic vis-à-vis non-Turkic, Muslim vis-à-

⁷ On cross-border Uyghur identity in the post-Soviet era see Sean Roberts' excellent article *Negotiating locality, Islam, and national culture in a changing borderlands: the revival of the Māshrāp ritual among young Uighur men in the Ili valley*. With reference to Rudelson's argument that distinct cultural groups among the Uyghur are becoming increasingly differentiated by the opening up of border areas, Roberts notes that "the trade opportunities in the borderlands of the XUAR attract more and more Uighurs from throughout the region, making the borderlands a lightning rod for the negotiation and reconciliation of various cultural differences" (1998:697).

vis non-Muslim, etc. This model, based on Evans-Pritchard's notion of hierarchical segmentary systems (1940), is rather useful in understanding how identities are constructed and articulated in Xinjiang. However, I would like to stress that these identities coexist and operate simultaneously, in a non-hierarchical fashion. In short, it is not a question of Uyghur identity *or* oasis identities, but rather of Uyghur identity *and* oasis identities.

2.2. "Modern" north vs. "traditional" south

Amangiül, a woman in her thirties, is a teacher of Uyghur and Chinese at the university. She is originally from Ghulja and, like other "northerners", she looks down on "southerners", that is, Uyghurs from the Tarim basin. Despite being married to a man who comes from the south, she is very straightforward and does not miss a chance to express her belief in northern Uyghurs' superiority and to describe her husband's relatives as backward and uncivilised. One day I offered her a cup of tea, apologising because the mug was chipped. For her, that was a pretext to start a monologue on this subject. "Don't worry about it. But you know, in Ghulja when a mug or a plate is chipped we replace it with a new one as soon as possible. In southern Xinjiang they just don't care. They don't care about cleanliness at all. In fact, they are quite dirty. Women there only care about clothes and make-up. Their husbands earn, and they spend. Once I went to Kashgar and people were astonished that I, a university teacher in the capital, wore such ordinary clothes ...".

During my fieldwork, more than by local oasis loyalties I was struck, rather, by a north-south divide, which can be further simplified in terms of Ghulja vs. Kashgar. Perhaps because it echoed a very familiar situation, that is north vs. south in Italy, where the stereotypes that are involved are surprisingly similar. The north is developed, educated, hardworking, open-minded, sophisticated, while the south is backward, ignorant, uneducated, lazy, narrow-minded, naïve. Clearly, not every *Ghuljiliq* (a person from Ghulja) would share such strong stereotypes. However, regardless of a person's origin, I found a fairly general agreement that the north is more developed and sophisticated - possibly as a result of Russian influence - while the south is backward and 'traditional'.⁸ At the same time, though, every Uyghur I have met would point at the south, epitomised by Kashgar, as the place to look for 'pure' and 'authentic' Uyghur culture, on the grounds that northern and eastern oases,

⁸ Standard Uyghur, the language taught in schools and used by the media, is based on Ghulja and Ürümqi dialect, that is a northern dialect. I wonder to what extent this contributed to create and reinforce the image of the north as more "civilised".

such as Ghulja, Turpan, or Qumul, have been corrupted by continued ‘foreign’ influence, namely Russian and Chinese. These considerations, while adding to the complexity of loyalties and identities in Xinjiang and among the Uyghurs, at the same time also support the argument that there exist a shared notion of what being Uyghur means, however differently one might relate to it.

The theme of the south as backward and authentic recurred in many of the conversations I had while in Ürümqi, often in a context that could be traced back to a tradition-vs.-modernity discourse.

Today the Uyghur don’t have a culture [Ch.*wenhua*] anymore. Five hundred years ago Uyghur culture was very advanced [*fada*]. Then, from the 17th-18th centuries onward the Han came and the decline started. Before, our civilisation [*wenhua*] was even more advanced than the Han because we had intensive contacts with the West and we received all innovation first ... Now, I have been to Turkey, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, and “in the mouth” [*kouli*, i.e. China proper], and I’ve seen that all these people have a much more developed culture than the Uyghur. Uyghurs are backward [*luohou*], as you will see when you go to Khotän, or Kashgar, in short to southern Xinjiang. ... Anyway, I’m very pleased that abroad there are people interested in the Uyghur. But listen, if you want to find pure [*chun*, Uy. *sap*] Uyghurs you must go to southern Xinjiang, to places like Khotän, Kashgar, Kucha... Although I’m from Kucha, I’m not a genuine Uyghur because I have travelled, I’ve studied in Beijing, and I’ve been influenced by these places.

Eli, a Uyghur doctor in his thirties, shared these thoughts with me one night, while sipping a soft drink in a restaurant just outside Ürümqi’s main hospital, where he worked. I had met him in a restaurant shortly after my arrival in Ürümqi. At that time I was staying at Xinjiang Normal University, located in the northern part of town, within walking distance of the Medical College and the annexed hospital. This was a predominantly Han area, except for a cluster of Uyghur restaurants which catered to all the Uyghurs related to these work units (patients, visitors, staff, students). From a socio-economic point of view, Eli was a rather successful Uyghur; he was perfectly bilingual and made good money working also in a private clinic. We met several times, either in his clinic or for a meal. At first I was a bit puzzled and wondered what his motives might have been: while, on the one hand, he declared from the beginning that his marriage was unhappy, at the same time he was clearly interested in discussing “politics” with me. For some time I was totally paranoid and thought he was a spy. However, with time I began to appreciate the perceptiveness of his analyses, especially

when compared to the emotional outburst which typically accompanied any discussion of these issues with my younger Uyghur friends. Later that same night, once we had moved from the restaurant to his office, Eli lucidly analysed the Uyghur situation:

The Uyghur are disadvantaged vis-à-vis the Han, first and foremost from a linguistic point of view. This is a fact, and I can only see two options: either the Uyghur should reject their culture and assimilate to the Han, or they should try to be independent. However, I believe the latter option is hopeless. Most Uyghurs are unwilling to receive the culture of the Han, their language and their habits. But, on the other hand, in the present context they cannot express their own culture either. When I was a child I refused to learn Chinese, but when I went to university in Beijing I had no choice but learn it. I had to study Chinese for two years before I could start my degree. In this way I was twice disadvantaged: I stayed two years behind, during which I forgot most of what I had studied that far, and, despite all my efforts, I was still disadvantaged vis-à-vis my class-mates, who were all Han, because I was studying in a foreign language. As a result, once I graduated I wasn't able to get a job in Beijing. On the other hand, the Uyghur language lacks specialised jargon, so I often find it very difficult to communicate with my Uyghur patients. I could give you lots of examples. For instance, yesterday I was in an examination panel and we had to examine a Uyghur candidate. I let him speak in Uyghur, since he wasn't very confident about his Chinese. The other examiner, who was Han, went mad and protested that it was not fair, that everyone should have equal treatment ... Now many Uyghurs are beginning to realise how useful Chinese is, and more and more begin to study it. But the point is that, one way or another, whether they speak Uyghur or Chinese, the Uyghur cannot fully express themselves.

Ninety percent of Ürümqi's residents are Han. I'm talking about the resident population: you see all those Uyghurs in Erdaoqiao, but nine out of ten are not residents, they come from other towns. Take my work unit, out of fifty people only five are *minzu* [minorities], all the others are Han. In some work units they are *all* Han. ... In my opinion, though, there is no point in fighting. It would be much better if some Uyghur went abroad and studied politics. Then they could come back and face the situation with their brains instead of using arms. But that's not easy either. A friend of mine, who is a writer, was arrested and kept for twenty days, apparently for no reason, nor was he given any explanation. Once he was released, he decided that he didn't want to live here any longer and that he wanted to go abroad. He was about to go to Beijing to study English,

but his work unit did not allow him to go: orders from the Police, no explanation.

This long monologue exemplifies with rare clarity the dilemma that many Uyghurs, particularly the intellectuals, are facing: to “stay” Uyghur, whatever that might cost, or to assimilate to the Chinese? This dilemma is evidently borne from a definite and shared notion of a Uyghur overarching identity; furthermore it reveals the strength of such an identification. Although Eli wishes a political and peaceful solution to the current situation, this sounds more like an utopia. For the Uyghur, he seems to see no alternative to assimilation to the Han, given that independence is not a viable solution. Moreover, from the very beginning, Eli introduces the theme of modernity vs. tradition: the south is authentic and traditional, but backward. It should be stressed how here he is reproducing Chinese modernising discourse, using the vocabulary of backwardness commonly referred to rural and remote China. What is striking is that while today, for him, contact and contamination with other cultures seem to inevitably imply a loss of identity, at the same time, when projected in the past, contact is a value in that it is a source of advancement which, at least retrospectively, reinforces Uyghur identity as distinct from the Chinese.

On another occasion, Eli went back to these same themes. First, though, he stressed the difference in relating to the Han either as a group or as individuals. While, from his point of view, a friendly relationship between the Han and the Uyghur as peoples was inconceivable, individual relationships were something else and for him it was perfectly normal to have Han friends.⁹ “The problem is that most Uyghurs, especially in rural areas, are backward and ignorant. I can see two reasons for this: the first is that they identify “progress” with the Han and therefore have an attitude of refusal; the second is that the schooling/education rate is very low. I think that’s because once they have a degree they can’t find a qualified job, so what’s the point? For most people studying is a waste of time, better start working as soon as possible and earn a living.” Clearly, this is the point of view of an urban intellectual, even if with rural roots. Hence we should not take these statements at face value, but rather as the expression of a Uyghur urban intellectual’s views and attitudes. Then he suddenly asked: “Can you see any solution for the Uyghur of Xinjiang?” “Well, that’s not an easy question ... - I said, desperately racking my brains to find the ‘right’ thing to say - anyway, I think you have to live with the Han: there’s too many of them, and some have lived here for generations, you can’t just kick them out!” He agreed “Too right ...

⁹ It should be stressed that Eli studied in Beijing. Most Uyghurs who have met Han from China proper have noticed not only how different their attitudes are from the Han in Xinjiang, but more importantly how different “inter-ethnic” relations are outside the Xinjiang context.

as I've said before, there seems to be only one alternative to assimilation, and that's independence. But I wish we could find a political and peaceful solution, something like real autonomy rather than independence."

In fact, I suggest that there can be a less drastic solution to this dilemma - where the two alternatives are: either fight a hopeless battle to stay 'uncontaminated' as Uyghur, or assimilate. However, in both these cases they would disappear. As we shall see in the second part of this thesis, a possible answer comes from the domain of food, where Han "contamination" does not seem to jeopardise "Uyghurness", and where we find adoption without assimilation. But now, let us consider one theme, which recurs more or less explicitly through most of my conversations with Eli, and which is particularly relevant within the scope of our discussion. This is the role of education.

2.3. Tradition, modernity, and the role of education in the shaping of modern Uyghur identity

We have seen how a tension between modernity and tradition emerges from the north vs. south 'rivalry'. The north, where Uyghur settlement is relatively recent, is perceived as advanced and modern while the south, where authentic Uyghurs are said to be found, is backward and traditional. While, in fact, this is not a real rivalry, the terms in which it is framed hide, or perhaps reveal, a discourse on Uyghur identity. Somehow, the real issue here is what the project, or the agenda, for Uyghur identity should be: to preserve Uyghur tradition but stay backward, *or* to modernise but lose authenticity? In other words, which simplified model should prevail, the modern north or the traditional south?

As already discussed in chapter 1, the pair modernity/tradition does not need to be such an irreconcilable dichotomy, in the sense that one of the terms does not need to exclude the other. However, any discourse on these two values - it is important to stress that we are talking about values, not about some sort of 'objective' traits - is usually framed in exclusive terms (either/or). Hence tradition is easily conflated with being backward, undeveloped, and static, thus obliterating the dynamic dimension, which in fact can be an equally important aspect of tradition. Indeed, tradition could as well be seen as a strategy to allow change without disruption. However, if tradition and modernity appear as two exclusive values when inscribed within the relationship to the Chinese state and within its discourse on the Uyghur (and on minorities in general), this is not the case when looking at daily practice. In everyday life, tradition -

as the preservation of a distinctive identity, shared symbols, etc. - and modernity - as change, coming to terms with the 'outside' world, technology, etc.- do coexist and indeed go hand in hand. This should become clear in the last section, in particular when discussing personalities like Abdurehim Ötkür, or Abdulla.

In order to better understand the intellectuals' paradox, it is necessary to consider the role of (secular) education in the shaping of modern Uyghur identity. Despite some notable attempts at reform carried out by members of the elite in the early twentieth century, prior to 1949 education among the Uyghur was substantially provided at the local level by the Muslim clergy, in the *mäktäp* and the *mädräsä*. This situation dramatically changed with the Communist take-over, when secular mass education became the norm (Bellér-Hann 2000:42-73). For the Communist leaders, centralised education was a privileged means to integrate Xinjiang into the People's Republic of China. However, I would argue that it also had the unintended consequence of promoting, or at least creating the conditions for the consolidation of a Uyghur 'national' unitary consciousness. If, on the one hand, state education was a powerful vehicle to promote and implement the Communist "civilising project" (Harrell 1995) - among other things by providing the 'form and content' that Uyghur identity should have - on the other hand, such discourse was unquestionably based on the assumption that there was and there had always been a people called the Uyghur. However unintentionally, centralised secular education not only contributed to, if not determined, the creation of a Uyghur "imagined community", but more specifically, it also produced an educated elite that shared the same "context-free language" (Gellner 1983:19-38). These secular intellectuals have become engaged in a process of definition and negotiation of Uyghur identity, and have been claiming a role as leading actors in such a process.

Bovingdon (2001b) has indeed stressed the role of the "educational pilgrimage", as described by Benedict Anderson (1991), in the awakening of modern Uyghur identity. According to Bovingdon, "Uyghur nationalism as an idea has been present for decades. What is at issue here is the diffusion of nationalist ideas among a broad segment of the population, and the spreading recognition that Uyghurs all over Xinjiang confront similar problems" (2001b:10).¹⁰ Indeed, centralised education also implied a sort of geographical hierarchy, whereby the higher students went in the system, the closer they drew to the centres of power, thus participating in a community of fellow-students, regardless of their origin. By the mid-1990s the number of non-

¹⁰ In this article Bovingdon provides a lengthy and well documented discussion of education in Xinjiang and its role in the shaping of a pan-Uyghur identity. Bellér-Hann too gives a very detailed account of education among the Uyghur, both before and after 1949, in her monograph *The Written and the Spoken. Literacy and Oral Transmission Among the Uyghur* (2000).

Han students (mostly Uyghur) in higher education had massively increased, accounting for nearly half of the total student population in Xinjiang. As Bovingdon put it, “a large and growing cohort was now coming together at the apex of the educational pilgrimage” (2001b:13).

If we take into account the role that central secular education, and the “educational pilgrimage” that it implied, played in the shaping of modern Uyghur identity, then it is easier to understand the intellectuals’ paradox. Especially when considering that after 1949 the (Han) Chinese Communist state has had the monopoly of secular education - and in fact, it has the monopoly of ‘legal’ religious education too, through the Islamic Institutes. Through secular education intellectuals have recognised their belonging to the Uyghur “community” and have participated in the definition of a pan-Uyghur identity, thus finding themselves at the vanguard of differentiation. Yet they have equally been the most exposed to assimilation by the Han state. The tension between the two values of tradition and modernity, which emerges forcefully in conversations I had with college-educated Uyghurs like Eli, can be read as an expression, or a variation, of this paradox.

In short, my fieldwork data suggest that among Uyghur urban intellectuals there is a shared notion of Uyghur collective identity, which is not at all challenged, but rather complemented, by local loyalties. As we have seen, the role of secular education in the shaping of modern Uyghur identity has been very important. Indeed, today such collective identity is so strongly felt and, because of the current political context, sometimes repressed, that individuals and events may act as catalysts for its expression. Below I will propose three such instances. Drawing from very different domains, such as literature, pop music/culture, and sport, we shall look at how such notion of an over-arching Uyghur identity is performed and negotiated in the daily consumption of shared Uyghur symbols.

2.4. Three Uyghur ‘heroes’

Prologue

Midday in Ürümqi. I’m sitting with Nurqiz in front of two steaming bowls of *chöchürä*, a soup of small meat dumplings which, to me, look remarkably similar to *tortellini*. My friend Nurqiz has taken me to this *ashkhana* (small restaurant) in the Uyghur district of Erdaoqiao. It is famous for serving the best *chöchürä* in town, and she knows this is one of my favourite dishes. As I lift my head from my empty bowl,

Nurqiz points at the poster hanging on the wall above our table. It is the same poster she has just bought for me in the local Xinhua bookstore; the same poster one finds in most Uyghur *ashkhana*, along with pictures of alpine landscapes and breakfast tables. But, unlike the latter, this poster is not merely a touch of interior design. On the contrary, the poem in Uyghur that it reproduces - *Iz* by Abdurehim Ötkür - has a profound meaning for the beholder.

Iz (Trace)

When we started this long journey we were young;
now look at our grand-children, they are old enough to ride.
When we left for this difficult journey we were few;
now we have left a trace in the desert and have become a big caravan.
A trace was left between deserts, sometimes even on the hills;
so many brave men lie without a grave in the desert.
Do not say they lie without a grave, in the open country where willows turn red
our graves will be covered with flowers in the early spring.
A trace is left, a destination is left, everything is left far from us;
the wind may blow, the sand may shift, but our traces will never be covered.
Though the horses are exhausted the caravan will not come to a halt,
until one day our grand-children or great-grand-children will find this trace.¹¹

Abdurehim Ötkür

Abdurehim Ötkür has been one of the most prominent contemporary Uyghur intellectuals and today he is considered a sort of literary father of the nation.¹² A poet and a writer, he was born in Qumul in 1923. In 1985 he published *Iz (Traces)*, a historical novel which, as Abdurehim explains in the introduction, is his tribute to Tömür Hälpä, leader of a rebellion in Qumul at the beginning of this century. This novel, he writes, should be “a mausoleum of white paper and black ink that could endure any storm and would be passed on from generation to generation. ... Tömür

¹¹ Ötkür (1996a:1); my translation.

¹² See also Bovingdon (2001b). Rudelson too provides a profile of Abdurehim Ötkür, where he describes him as “One of the most respected of recent Uyghur nationalist intellectuals” (1997:163). I suggest that the fact that we all mention Abdurehim Ötkür when discussing Uyghur identity, far from being a coincidence, proves that he is a cultural icon among the Uyghur. In other words, Ötkür is a Uyghur ‘hero’, one of those symbols shared by all Uyghurs, regardless of their oasis of origin.

Hälpä [is] a heroic personage in the bloody pages of recent Uyghur history. ... This book at least will start bringing to light the traces left by our heroes.” (Ötkür 1996a:5-7) The introduction to *Iz* opens with a quotation from the Compendium of the Turkic Dialects by Mähmut Qäshqiri (Mahmud Kashgari) - “Trace: shows that someone has passed” - followed by the poem translated above. In short, the significance of such a title could hardly be missed.¹³

After *Iz*, Abdurehim Ötkür published a novel in two volumes with an equally evocative title, *Oyghanghan zemin* (*Awakened Land*). He had planned to write a third volume but, as he explains at the end of the second volume, he did not have the opportunity to do so.¹⁴ It was probably ill health that prevented him from completing his work, as he died of cancer in 1995. However, in the late 1990s the political atmosphere in Xinjiang was so charged that I have heard many Uyghurs suggest that his work might have been censored. In their opinion, the obviously evocative and allegorical nature of his writing, as well as his increasing popularity, had alerted the authorities to its subversive potential.

According to PRC orthodox historiography, Tömür Hälpä is an approved ‘Chinese national hero’, a revolutionary who acted in the wake of the Xinhai revolution, to fight the feudal regime with the support of the peoples of all nationalities.¹⁵ This makes *Iz* a ‘politically correct’ novel. Nevertheless it is difficult not to read between the lines and to recognise its subversive potential. Today many Uyghurs, especially among intellectuals, are struggling to overcome their sense of helplessness and to envisage a viable and positive future for their people, on their own terms. It is not hard to imagine the effect that a poem like *Iz* has on these people, to envision what feelings and emotions are stirred when they read it. However beautifully Abdurehim Ötkür may write, it is clear that his popularity is not only due to his artistic talent: his work represents an empowered image of Uyghur identity. When he died in Ürümchi in 1995, his funeral was attended by a huge crowd. The square in front of the main Uyghur mosque was packed with people mourning the death of a ‘Uyghur hero’. They carried his bier all the way to the graveyard, an honour reserved for few other people since 1949.¹⁶

¹³ About *Iz* Sultan says: “*Iz* deals with the political and historical events that took place in Eastern Turkestan, mostly in Komul, between 1912 and 1944. The heroes of the novel are Tömür Helpe Amankul and Hoja Niaz Haji. Yang Tseng-hsin and Nezer Veng are the representatives of the forces of evil and oppression. Tömür Helpe is a historical personality who defeated the joint forces of the Chinese government and Kumul principality and is one of the genuine heroes of the Uighur historical scene who gave the Uighur people courage and national consciousness” (Sultan 1993:582).

¹⁴ The full title is “*Awakened land. Historical novel in three parts*” (Ötkür 1996b, 1996c).

¹⁵ The Xinhai revolution overthrew the Qing empire and established the republic in 1911.

¹⁶ An amateur video was shot on the occasion, showing the funeral, and the celebrations (*näzir*) on the third and the seventh day after his death. On Abdurehim Ötkür’s funeral see also Bovingdon (2001b:8).

While being an intellectual, Abdurehim Ötkür has also been fully incorporated into popular culture, through a process that clearly cuts across local boundaries and is the expression of a sense of Uyghur unity. “Our master died, the world died ... the land is mourning ...” goes a famous song that Ömärjan, probably the most popular singer in the traditional style and himself a *Ghuljiliq* (from Ghulja), dedicated to Abdurehim Ötkür.¹⁷ Dilnur, a *Khotänlik* in her forties and a teacher at the university, played this song once. As she was going through the lyrics for me, she nearly had tears in her eyes. The content of the song, as well as her quasi-religious attitude, was striking against the very poor quality of both the tape and the tape recorder, which nevertheless seemed to be an essential characteristic of Uyghur popular music.¹⁸ Some of Abdurehim Ötkür’s most famous poems have been turned into posters and are sold in bookshops. Predictably, the most popular is *Iz*: one can find a copy of it hanging on the walls of Uyghur restaurants all over Xinjiang (photo 3), as a reminder to the Uyghur people that they are not finished, and as an encouragement to go ahead.

Abdulla

Within the field of popular culture, Abdulla is a rather different kind of ‘Uyghur hero’. Unlike Abdurehim Ötkür, he has not undergone the same process of canonisation, perhaps because he is still hale and hearty. Probably most people in Xinjiang would not consciously describe him as a Uyghur symbol, though he is effectively acting as such. As with Abdurehim Ötkür and Adiljan, whom I will discuss later, the consumption of Abdulla as a symbol functions as an ‘emotional surrogate’ for the expression of an unauthorised Uyghur sense of belonging, one that cannot be explicitly articulated, especially within the political arena.

Abdulla is a *Dolanliq* in his thirties.¹⁹ While having a permanent job at the Xinjiang Song and Dance Troupe in Ürümchi, he has also been on the scene of

¹⁷ This song, “*Qaldi iz*” (“A trace is left”, quoting the poem *Iz* by Abdurehim Ötkür), is part of a tape by the same title, published by the Minorities Press. The tape also contains a number of other songs quoting Abdurehim Ötkür’s most famous poems. On Ömärjan and the Uyghur music industry see Harris (2002).

¹⁸ Low quality cassettes and sound systems are a feature of Uyghur popular music, to the extent that the hiss of the cassette becomes an essential part of the sound (Harris 2002).

¹⁹ Although the Dolan are likely Mongol in origin (see 1.2. on the Uyghur), according to a Uyghur linguist at Xinjiang University, the Uyghur do not consider the Dolan as a separate ethnic group, or a Uyghur sub-group. In fact they never talk of a person as a *Dolan* but rather as a *Dolanliq* (“Dolaner”), that is, someone from the Dolan region. This roughly covers the area of the Tarim river, from Shayar to Mekit. Nowadays, *Dolan* is commonly used as an adjective to refer to a music or dance style (*Dolan mäshripi*, *Dolan usuli*, *Dolan muqam*). Very rarely people from that area may be referred to as *Dolanliqlar* or *Dolan Uyghurliri*. Indeed, when I asked Abdulla’s brother about the Mongol origin of

Uyghur pop music, and entertainment in general, for quite a few years.²⁰ His popularity probably started in the early 1990s, and increased remarkably during the period I spent in Xinjiang. He is well known by the Uyghur-speaking public not only as a singer but also as an actor of *episod* (comic sketches), and as a promoter for a brand of tea, smiling at people from shop-windows with a steaming cup of tea in his hand.

His fame as an actor was mainly associated with an *episod* called *Ana til* (Mother Tongue) in which he plays the part of a *minkaohan* (a Uyghur who studied in Han schools) who meets his prospective fiancée, a 'Soviet' Uyghur girl (from ex-Soviet Central Asia, typically Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan). The attempted conversation between the two has an hilarious effect, since both of them are basically unable to speak Uyghur and keep slipping into Chinese and Russian respectively. Apart from Abdulla's and his partner's wonderful performance, the success of *Ana til* is due to the fact that it deals with one of the most controversial issues among the Uyghur - at least among Uyghurs in Ürümqi - that is, assimilation through education. Like many other peoples who have a minority status, the dilemma they are facing is whether a certain degree of assimilation, instrumental to 'success' if not survival, is compatible with the preservation of Uyghur language and culture. In other words, *Ana til* encapsulates, not without a good dose of healthy irony, important aspects of what we have called the intellectuals' paradox.

In early 1996 Abdulla joined the *Taklamakan*, a newly formed rock band which featured some of the best Uyghur pop musicians of those years, and they began working on a tape. In the summer a promotional tour of the band throughout Xinjiang was hindered on the grounds of bureaucratic quibbles: the band could go but Abdulla had to stay in Ürümqi. The tour was cancelled. Nevertheless, Abdulla started performing the new album in live shows that took place in the early autumn in Ürümqi universities. The tape - *Süküttiki sada* (Sound in the silence) - was finally released in December and was a great success. For the following eight months (until I left Xinjiang in September 1997) one could hardly hear anything else being played in restaurants, taxis, buses, hotels, and at weddings. On campus, groups of Uyghur students played Abdulla's songs on their guitars.

Although Abdulla is most popular among urban Uyghur youth, his success also cuts across age and gender, as well as locality boundaries; for instance, I found that he was very popular also in Kashgar and Khotän. I believe that the reason lies not only in his voice and in marketing strategies, and that the political dimension in his activities

the Dolan he was rather defensive, if not annoyed, and insisted that the Dolan are just Uyghur, like every other Uyghur.

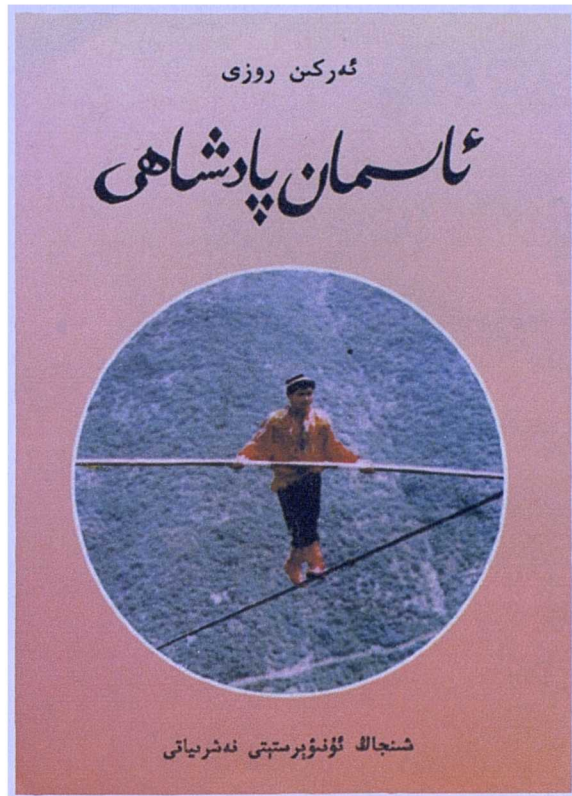
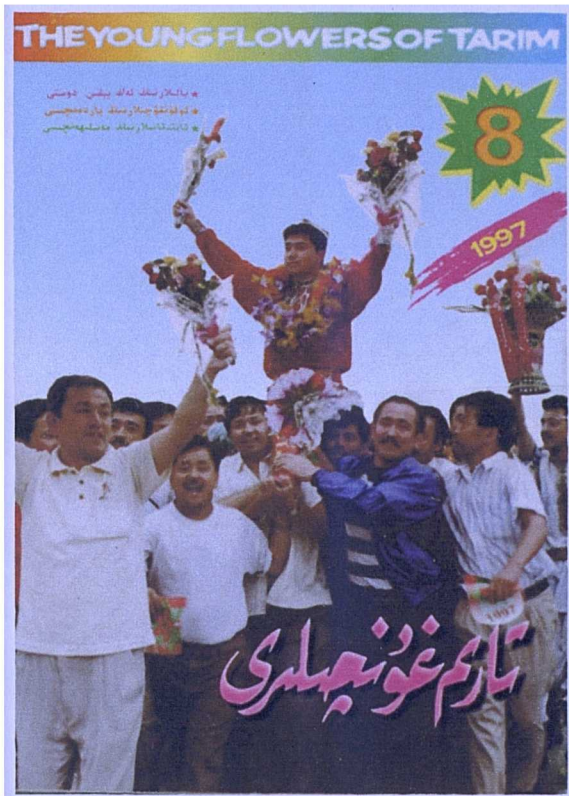
²⁰ On Abdulla see also Harris (2002).

also plays an important role. He is a perfect combination of entertainment and engagement, modernity and tradition. *Shükür didim*, one of the songs in *Süküttiki sada* which was reportedly written by Abdulla's younger brother, has surprisingly survived the censorship scrutiny. The main message is "no matter what awful things they do to me, I'm content (*Shükür didim*)"; the reference to the political and social situation in Xinjiang is more than obvious to anyone who lives or has lived there. The tape cover itself represents the various components of Abdulla's success: religion, technology, modernity, and tradition, as well as a strong evocative element. It features a photo of Abdulla in a suit against the background of a rosy dawn - the very same dawn that appears on the cover of Abdurehim Ötkür's *Oyghanghan zemin* - along with a photo of the band - portraying five trendy young Uyghur men with their equipment (drums, amplifier, electric guitar, etc.) - next to a rather surreal photomontage showing Abdulla again in a suit, kneeling before an immortal (*khezir*) against the background of two monumental tombs in a desert landscape (photo 4). The 'Abdulla phenomenon' can thus be seen as an attempt to envisage a solution to many Uyghurs' dilemma, by promoting an idea of Uyghur culture that combines 'modernity' with 'tradition', as opposed to the dominant discourse which tends to equate 'modernity' exclusively to the Han, and hence to assimilation. Thus his success is also due to the fact that he touches upon crucial issues that are a shared concern for most Uyghurs in contemporary Xinjiang. In this sense, he can be seen as a symbol of Uyghur collective identity, or rather, as a symbol around which this identity coalesces.

Adiljan

With a very different history, Adiljan (Adil Hoshur) has been similarly consumed in popular culture as a Uyghur symbol - regardless of his Kashgari origin. The first time I heard of Adiljan was in early April 1997. I had been invited for lunch at a friend's house and my host, being a sporting man, spent most of the time talking about sports. Football was of course one of the favourite topics, a common affliction for an Italian abroad, especially in China. The most interesting aspect of the conversation, for me, was the often heard argument that Uyghurs are better sportsmen than the Han Chinese, and yet they are usually excluded from the national teams. "There is no Uyghur player in the Chinese football team ... and what about basketball? The best player in the Chinese team is a Uyghur, but they didn't allow him to go to Atlanta last year. They were immediately disqualified, it serves them right!"²¹ Towards the end of the meal he

²¹ The 1996 Olympic games were held in Atlanta.



Anticlockwise from top right:

Photo 1 - Cover of the book *Asman padishahi*, by Ärkin Rozi.

Photo 2 - Cover of the magazine *Tarim ghunchiliri* featuring Adiljan in triumph.

Photo 3 - Poster reproducing the poem *Iz* by Abdurehim Ötkür on the wall of a Uyghur restaurant.

Photo 4 - Cover of the tape *Süküttiki sada* by Abdulla.



Xianggang huigui (The return of Hong Kong)



Photo 5 - "Eight days left." Huadu department store, Ürümchi.

Photo 6 - "Welcome the return of Hong Kong to the motherland!" Billboard at Xinjiang University (Law Dept.).



Photo 7 - "The child is coming home!" Billboard at Xinjiang University (Biology Dept.).

Photo 8 (right) - "Wash a hundred years of national humiliation, welcome the return of Hong Kong."



eventually moved on from football and basketball: “You absolutely must not miss the event of the year. On June 22 Adiljan *darwaz* (the ‘tightroper’) will cross the Yangtze river at the Three Gorges and will break the time world record.²² He will also perform some acrobatics while on the rope. Before him, a Canadian had crossed the Three Gorges, but without any acrobatics. Apparently, the rope has to be delivered from abroad since there isn’t such a long one in China.”

As June was getting closer, more and more Uyghurs started talking about Adiljan. However, by that time the big issue inevitably was the “return of Hong Kong” (*Xianggang huigui*, in Chinese), due on July 1. One could not possibly spend an hour without being reminded how many days were left until the day when “a hundred years of national humiliation would be washed white”, as one of the slogans created for the occasion put it. Adiljan could not compete with the Hong Kong hand-over, and he was basically ignored by media and propaganda coverage. His undertaking was a topic confined to Uyghur informal circles. I did not pay too much attention to it myself, as I was bombarded with all the brainwashing slogans about “the return of the child to the motherland” and “the indivisibility of the nation” (photos 5-8). Only once did it cross my mind that these two events might be seen as somewhat related.

On June 24, in the late morning, I was on a bus driving along the main road in the Uyghur part of town. We had almost reached the end of that road when the bus stopped, it looked as if we were caught in a traffic jam. After a while we saw a crowd of children coming on the other lane in the opposite direction. At first I thought it was a demonstration, because they were all shouting. As they got closer I realised they were all Uyghur children. A Han in the bus cheered and said “The return of Hong Kong!”. When they passed next to us it became clear that it was a spontaneous rally. Behind the swarm of children there were some men, in the middle of which a young man was being carried on their shoulders in triumph. He was wearing a *badam doppa* (a Uyghur skull cap) and a red silk shirt. The procession, of about a hundred people, passed us very quickly and the traffic started moving again. Nobody on the bus seemed to know what was going on. Later, Nurqiz told me that it was Adiljan. A few days earlier he had crossed the Three Gorges walking on a tightrope in 13 minutes and 48 seconds and had entered the Guinness Book of Records. He had also performed some acrobatics such as lying on the rope or suddenly falling seated on it, in order to create a suspense effect. Unfortunately there was no live television coverage, so

²² In recent years the Three Gorges have often made the news, both in China and abroad, in connection with the construction of a dam. The dam has now been completed, making any attempt to break Adiljan’s record impossible.

Nurqiz and her family had followed the event on the radio. She said they were so moved that they had had to cry.

That same morning, not far from this joyous rally, nine Uyghurs were being taken to be executed. A friend who was waiting for me by one of the biggest shopping centres had seen a very different kind of procession passing by. Six or seven police cars followed by three open trucks and another three or four cars. In the back of each truck there were three prisoners, kneeling, with their hands tied behind their back, a soldier standing by each of them, pointing a gun at their heads. They were going north. After parading the prisoners along the high street, the procession would have turned west towards Xishan, one of the execution camps just outside Ürümqi. According to rumours (the only available source of information in these cases), they were being executed as political criminals.

All this was happening in the asphyxiating atmosphere of the 'Hong-Kong-return fever'. That day, I could not help juxtaposing the triumph of Adiljan to the execution of nine Uyghurs, and then this to the celebrations, slogans, and films to welcome Hong Kong. In fact, given the climate of conspiracy theories and generalised paranoia, it was tempting to speculate that there was a connection, if not a design: to allow Uyghur passions and emotions to concentrate on Adiljan's undertaking, as a way of depoliticising Uyghur identity;²³ to discourage any political and rebellious action by displaying the strength and the power of the state on individuals' lives; and, finally, to focus everybody's attention on Hong Kong so as to reinforce patriotism, as well as Chinese nationalism. In such a hypothetical design, though, Uyghurs were denied any agency.

After a year of escalating violence in Xinjiang, to which the government had responded with even tighter control and repression, it was difficult not to speculate that there might have been such a plan on the part of the Chinese authorities. Indeed, everybody was making a more or less explicit connection between the Hong Kong hand-over and Xinjiang/East Turkestan independence. I have heard many Uyghurs say "The day Hong Kong returns, Xinjiang becomes independent". In fact, it was not so unlikely that some terrorist action was being planned for that occasion. This is certainly what the Chinese authorities were fearing, and what they were trying to prevent by all means necessary, from hammering out propaganda on the unity of all nationalities and the indivisibility of the country, to a massive display of armed forces.²⁴

²³ Hann (1991) on ethnic games in Xinjiang suggests that sport can be a way to depoliticise ethnic identities.

²⁴ As discussed in Chapter 1, the year 1997 had started with episodes of violence throughout the region. As to the connection made between the Hong Kong hand-over and Xinjiang independence, the

However, Adiljan's undertaking was used by the Uyghur in a rather different way, that is, to state and reinforce their unity, their sense of belonging to the Uyghur people. The comments I gathered during the following days pointed in this direction. Bahargül was indignant: "The Chinese refuse to believe that he really did it!". For most people this had been an entirely Uyghur matter, and Adiljan had had no support whatsoever from the state. According to many Uyghur accounts, his undertaking was made possible thanks to a collection of 150,000 yuan among the Uyghur people; the rope alone had cost 50,000 yuan. On the other hand, they said, once he had succeeded and had entered the Guinness Book of Records, the government gave him 100,000 yuan and tried to appropriate his undertaking. In other words, in the end he had done it as a Chinese citizen, not as a Uyghur. But it did not work, at least not at a grass-roots level. The Chinese did not believe it or they simply did not care, if they knew at all, while the Uyghur turned him into *their* hero.

In the following weeks, this process became more and more evident and the photo of Adiljan in triumph, with his red shirt and *badam doppa*, began to appear everywhere in the Uyghur part of town, from the shop windows to the cover of magazines in Uyghur language. In one of these magazines he was described as "king of the Uyghur" (*Uyghur padishahi*),²⁵ and by the end of July a book dedicated to the "king of the sky" (*asman padishahi*) had already come out (Rozi 1997; photos 1-2). A couple of weeks later I bought a pop music tape, *Tängritagh bürküti* (The eagle of Tianshan), featuring Adiljan on the cover and entirely dedicated to him. No doubt its symbolic value was far greater than its artistic value!

bottom line of the argument was: like Hong Kong is being returned to those to whom it belongs, so should Xinjiang be returned to the Uyghur. The oddest occasion on which I witnessed such a connection being made was on 8 May 1997 when, while wondering in Kashgar's old bazar, I had a very strange encounter. A Uyghur woman, roughly in her late forties, approached me with suspicious manners; she pulled out a pen and started scribbling something on a small notebook. She then tore the page and gave it to me, while muttering something concerning the Hong Kong hand-over and Xinjiang independence. Before I could ask any question, she left still muttering to herself. With the help of a Uyghur friend, I managed to decipher her note: "Concerning Allah. *Bismillahi räkhman räyim. Salam* to the kings of the whole world Xinjiang will be independent on June 1 Hong Kong will not leave [2 illegible words] I am collecting safflower and hemp". Despite the apparent nonsense, in fact it made almost perfect sense to those I showed the note who, clearly, shared at least some sympathy for such an argument.

²⁵ *Tarim ghunchiliri 1997-yil 8-san* (The Young Flowers of Tarim), Ürümqi Shinjang yashlar-ösmürlär nashriyati, 25 July 1997. p.8.

CHAPTER 3

BEING UYGHUR IN ÜRÜMCHI

3.1. Ürümchi: from beautiful grassland to modern city

The road was now excellent and we could see on a hill in the distance the twin pagodas which are the famous landmark of the city. Soon the low walls were in sight and we could see the people crowding out to meet us. After 36 days of travel I was now in the heart of Sinkiang, my journey was now at an end. Here before me lay the mysterious city of Urumchi. It had, I was aware, a dark history, but I was full of hope ...

The walls of Tihwa make a circuit of eleven *li*, that is, rather less than four miles. There are seven gates in all, two facing each point of the compass except the north, on which side there is only one. These gates are narrow and rounded, admitting only one stream of traffic. The wall is about fifteen feet in height and is of baked clay, reinforced by stone. In colour it is a dull ochre, a drabness which blends with the surroundings. Nevertheless, the provincial capital is far from drab; the Urumchi river gives fertility to the soil, and in summer the green of the trees delights the eye. From the pagoda of the Red Temple, situated upon a windy eminence to the north of the city, the course of the river can be seen, bridged at this point by the rough highway to Tacheng along which we entered. To the south-west lie the Tien-shan or Celestial Mountains, whose peaks when I first beheld them were white with snow. Through a pass to the south runs the road to Turfan; eastwards the great range continues, rising in height, to culminate in Bogdo Ula, the Holy Mountain, black crags surmounted by three sharp summits, frowning upon the peaceful city. Northward lie the great plains, where the meandering river loses itself first in marshland and then in barren sands. This region is the vast Dzungarian steppe, where between marsh and desert are herded the huge flocks which supply the wants of the capital.

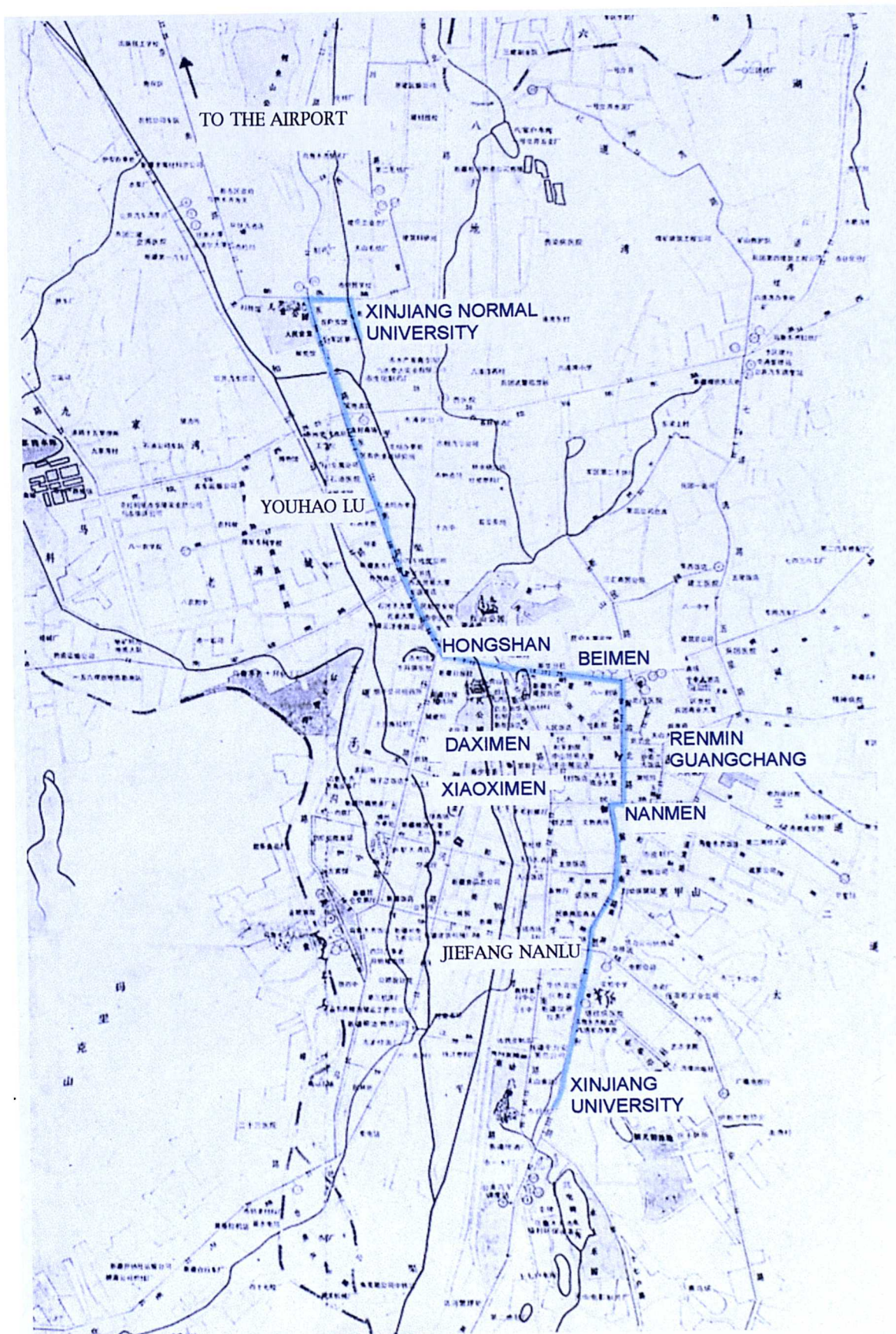
Fully one third of Tihwa lies outside the walls. Entering from the north the traveller first passes into the Chinese city; then comes the Moslem city, still within the walls; lastly, on the far side, lies the nan Kuan, the 'southern suburb', where the Russian merchants dwell. On my first crossing of the city I was struck by the contrast between one quarter and the next. In the Chinese quarter all was

familiar to me, the walled *yamens*, the neat wooden houses, the seething bazaars. This was China as I knew it; but within a distance of a few yards I was plunged into an alien atmosphere. Here was the vigorous life of a city of the southern steppes, where Turk and Tartar meet - the mosque, the market, the endless rows of stalls. And passing beyond the fortifications I came into another world, the bare spaciousness of a Russian market town, the walled compound of the Soviet Consulate serving as its focus, from which it straggled to the south. (Wu 1940:31-33)

This is how Ürümchi appeared to Wu Aichen in 1932, when he was sent there to advise the Governor. His excellent description is in many ways still valid, despite the radical 'architectural' changes that have occurred during the second half of the twentieth century, in particular since the end of the eighties. Today the walls are no longer there and the buildings from that time are being systematically destroyed and replaced by "modern" high-rise buildings. However, the structure of the city is roughly the same: stretching north to south and surrounded by the Tianshan mountains. One can still imagine the contour of the walled city, since the names of the gates are still used to identify a particular area. While there is no road or square officially named after the gates, not only do people normally refer to these areas as *beimen* (north gate), *daximen* (big western gate), *xiaoximen* (small western gate), and *nanmen* (south gate), but these are also the names written on the bus stops. Today these gates are marked by big road intersections, which in the case of *beimen* and *nanmen* have developed into a square.

Ürümchi can be said to have more than one centre, however *the* centre lies within *beimen*, *nanmen*, *daximen*, and *xiaoximen*. This is the geographic, as well as the administrative and commercial centre of the city and, although today it is definitely more Chinese (Han) than anything else, it can be seen as a 'neutral zone' between the expanding Chinese town to the north and the shrinking Uyghur town to the south. Three of these gates are marked by an administrative building: the main office of Air China is at *beimen*, at *daximen* stands the China Telecom building, while the main branch of the Bank of China is at *nanmen*, opposite the People's Theatre, the biggest and most important theatre in Ürümchi and one of the few gracious buildings left up. In the middle, slightly to the east, lies *Renmin Guangchang* (the People's Square), normally referred to as *Guangchang* (The Square). Here lies the heart, or rather the mind, of Ürümchi and of the entire Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region: the People's Government (*Renmin Zhengfu*).

Nanmen is somehow the invisible border to the Uyghur part of town. However, the Chinese and the Uyghur town are not discrete and self-contained and a visual



TO THE AIRPORT

XINJIANG NORMAL UNIVERSITY

YOUHAO LU

HONGSHAN

BEIMEN

DAXIMEN

RENMIN GUANGCHANG

XIAOXIMEN

NANMEN

JIEFANG NANLU

XINJIANG UNIVERSITY

representation of such continuity are perhaps the groups of *dollarchi* (Uyghur money changers) hanging outside and inside the Bank of China. North of *beimen* there is *Hongshan* (the Red Mountain), a competing city centre developed around a red hill topped by a pagoda, the latter being a landmark of Chinese presence, as Abdurehim once pointed out: "They put a pagoda wherever they go, to mark their territory; if you come from Kazakhstan by train the first thing you see when you approach the Chinese border is a pagoda!".

Urumchi first comes into historical prominence under the name of "Bishbalik", the capital of the kingdom established by the Uigurs in southern Dzungaria. Driven out from their first home in the northern part of this province, they wandered south until they found a resting-place on the slopes of the Celestial Mountains, and also in the watered land as far as Hami, which territory they transformed so as to make of it the fertile district which it is to-day. The middle of the eighteenth century marks the period when, under the great Emperor Chien Lung, Chinese ascendancy finally asserted itself in Dzungaria.

Urumchi is situated at the junction of four great trade routes. One crossing Mongolia, another leading through Hami to Kansu, a third connecting it with Ili and Russia, and a fourth with Kashgar. It thus occupied a position obviously suited to make it the capital of the New Dominion, called by the Chinese "Sinkiang". The city has been the battleground of many contending forces, having been taken and retaken by Mongols, Chinese and Mohammedans, (...).The word "Urumchi" is of Mongolian origin; to the Chinese the town is known as "Tihwa," but colloquially it is referred to as "Hungmiaotz" - "The Red Temple." (Cable & French 1947:259-260)

"Ürümchi" is commonly believed to be a word of Mongolian origin, meaning "beautiful grassland" (Niu 1994:119). As Cable and French point out, the Chinese used to call it "Dihua", until in the early 1950s the Communist government introduced a Chinese transliteration of its indigenous name: *Wulumuqi*. The name "Dihua", which could be translated as "lead to civilisation",¹ encapsulates Han Chinese attitudes towards this region and its indigenous inhabitants, and reveals their "civilising project". Stevan Harrell has coined this phrase to describe a kind of interaction between peoples based on some sort of

¹ *Dihua* is composed of the Chinese word *di*, meaning "to guide, to lead" (Xiandai Hanyu Cidian - Contemporary Chinese Dictionary) or "to advance, to progress; to enlighten, to teach" (Far East Chinese-English Dictionary), and the suffix *hua*, which indicates a process implying some sort of change, something like the English "-isation".

inequality. "In this interaction, the inequality between the civilizing center and the peripheral peoples has its ideological basis in the center's claim to a superior degree of civilization, along with a commitment to raise the peripheral peoples' civilization to the level of the center, or at least closer to that level." (Harrell 1995:4).

During the three days I spent on the train that took me from Beijing to Ürümqi, I borrowed a copy of the Lonely Planet guide to China from a fellow-traveller and did a bit of background reading. "In the centre of Ürümqi is a desolate rocky outcrop called Hong Shan. Steps to the top lead to a small pavilion from which you can get a panoramic view of the great expanse of dusty roads, shimmering apartment blocks and smokestacks that have sprung out of the surrounding desolation. Ürümqi is an interesting place to visit but it's got to be one of the ugliest cities on the face of the earth! ... The [Soviet] inspired concrete-block architecture of socialist eastern China has been imported lock, stock and barrel, and Ürümqi essentially looks little different from its northern Han China counterparts 1500 miles east - just uglier. There are few 'sights' as such, but there's an intrinsic interest to the place which makes it worth visiting." (Samagalski et al. 1988:769; photo 9).

I arrived in Ürümqi on a sunny afternoon in mid-May. A car from the Xinjiang Normal University (*Xinshida*) met me at the railway station, which lies in the southwest end of the city. To reach the University in the north we crossed a big chunk of the city longitudinally. Despite the background reading, my first impression was one of disappointment: apart from some occasional Uyghur writings, there was nothing I saw outside the window that made me think I was in Central Asia rather than in any eastern Chinese city. During the next few days my disappointment grew: in the area surrounding the Normal University compound the population was almost exclusively Chinese, with the exception of a cluster of Uyghur restaurants which lined the street outside the Medical College and the annexed hospital, not far from the Normal University. Until, one day, I embarked on a trip to the other major university, Xinjiang University (*Xinda*).

To reach *Xinda* from *Xinshida* there is a direct bus, number 101, which crosses the whole city north to south. The journey lasts between forty minutes and one hour, depending on the traffic and the driver. This was my first trip on this route. We passed the Kunlun Hotel, a Russian building commonly known as "*Balou*" (Ch. eight-storey) because until the 1980s it was the tallest building in Ürümqi. Now it looks very small

compared to the Taihe Hotel, two blocks down the road, which was completed in 1995. From *Balou* the bus drives all the way down *Youhao Lu* (Friendship Road, in Uyghur *Dostluq yoli*) to *Hongshan*. Apparently the name of this road refers to the friendship between China and the Soviet Union; I was told that with the interruption of Sino-Soviet relations in the late 1950s the name was changed, and it was resumed only recently, after the “friendship” between the two countries was re-established. As we approach *Hongshan*, the urban landscape is a very familiar one in China: wide orthogonal roads, concrete blocks and building sites everywhere (photo 11), masses of people buying and selling and shouting on every square inch of the pavements. The bus is in fact a private minibus (*zhongba*), faster but possibly more dangerous due to the F1 driving style of the driver. The competition is fierce and every driver wants to make sure that they get to the next stop before all the other minibuses, to do so there seem to be no rules. At every stop the conductor shouts what at first sounds like an incomprehensible singsong, and which turns out to be “*Yaolingyao yaolingyao, kongche you zuowei*” (One-o-one one-o-one, empty car, free seats). I suppose their notion of space must be different because of the overpopulation in China. The “empty bus” is already crammed with some thirty people and the “free seats” are a cushion on top of the engine, just where it is written “do not sit on the engine”. The great majority of the passengers are Han Chinese, and so are the driver and the conductor. The few occasional Uyghur passengers have to speak Chinese in order to buy their ticket. At times, the young woman conductor gets impatient because a Uyghur passenger is mispronouncing his or her destination, which is therefore incomprehensible. Funny, I think, her strong Sichuanese accent sounds just as incomprehensible to me. And, by the way, is this not the “Uyghur Autonomous Region”? Yet a Uyghur who has lived here for generations must speak Chinese to a young Sichuanese migrant, who probably got here only a few months before.

After *Hongshan*, as we go through *Beimen* heading towards *Nanmen*, the number of Uyghur passengers begins to increase. The bus stops at *Nanmen* and drives around the glass pyramid which stands in a flower-bed in the middle of the square - I wonder if it intentionally imitates the one at the Louvre (photo 10). Leaving the Bank of China and one of the oldest Mosques in Ürümqi on the right,² we turn into *Jiefang Nanlu* (South Liberation Road, in Uyghur *Azadliq yoli*). Suddenly, like Wu Aichen, I am “plunged into an alien atmosphere”. The road is relatively narrow and winding, compared to the large and straight avenues I have seen so far, and it is lined mostly with low old-looking

² This Mosque dates back to 1906 (K. Hopkirk 1993:276).



Photo 9
Ürümqi: view from Yamanliq shan. In the background the Tianshan mountains.



Photo 10
Nanmen: the pyramid and, at the back, the “People’s theatre”, a rare example of pre-1949 architecture.



Photo 11
“Modern” Ürümqi: a downtown junction.

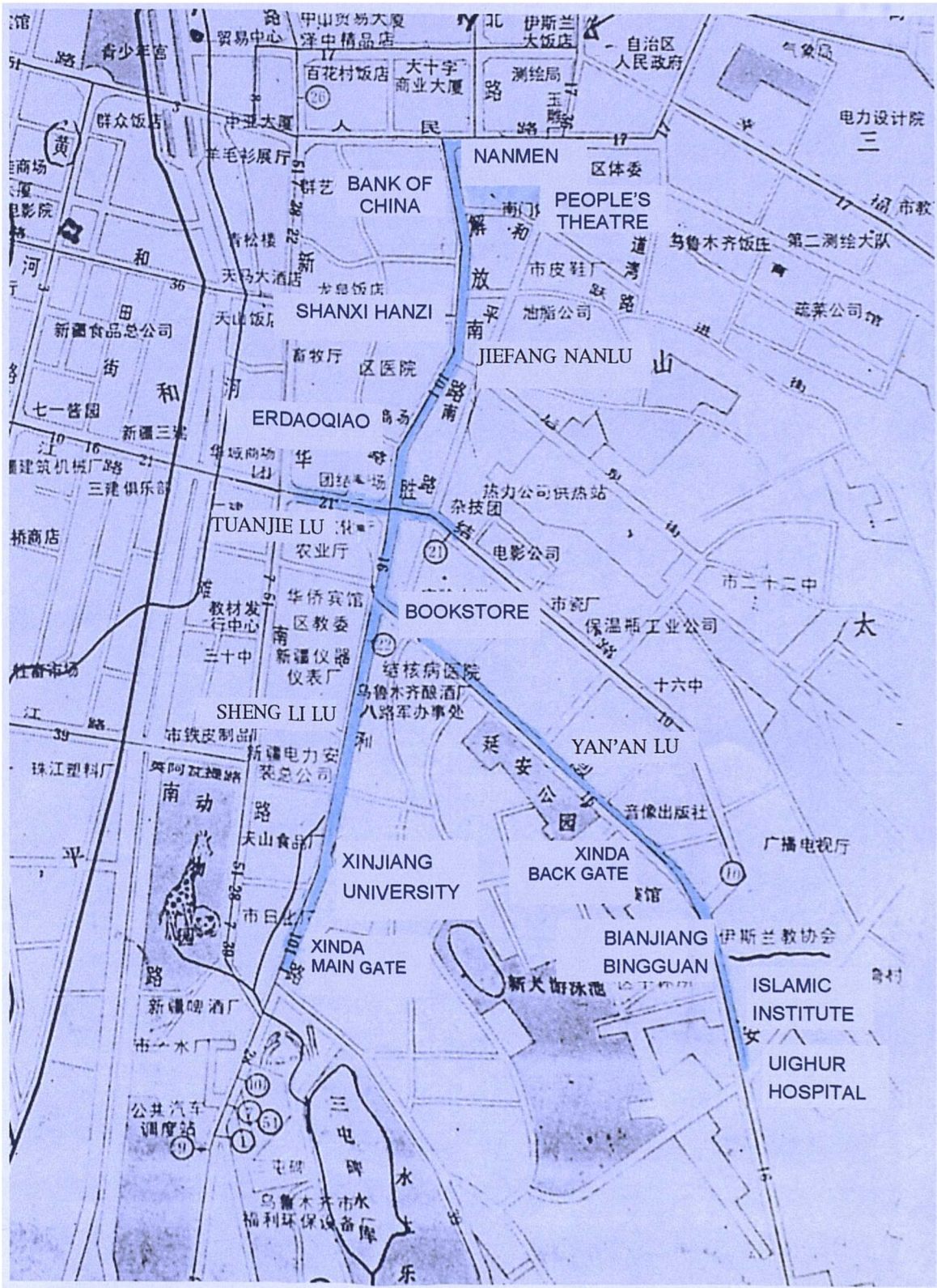
buildings, the ground floor of which is occupied by shops and small restaurants. The pavements are bustling with hawkers and with a very colourful crowd. This is now the “Uyghur town”, not within the imaginary city walls anymore but being pushed south by the modern, and predominantly Chinese, Ürümqi. In fact also this part is undergoing major architectural change and will probably look very different already in a few years.

From that first trip I remember vividly the colours of the rags, scarves, and cloths hanging outside the shops and the loud Uyghur music, simultaneously played by each of the numerous cassette shops along the way. This is probably what strikes most the eye and the ear when visiting this area for the first time. By the time I moved to this part of town, four months later, I was already accustomed to all this and my attention was rather caught by endless smaller details.

3.2. The “Uyghur town”

The area between *Nanmen* and Xinjiang University can be regarded as the Uyghur town, with the district of *Erdaoqiao* at its heart. *Jiefang nanlu* is the highstreet, which later splits into *Yan’an lu* (Yan’an Road)³ and *Shengli lu* (Victory Road, in Uyghur *Ghālibā yoli*; photos 12-14). A series of narrow alleys branch out to the east side of *Jiefang nanlu*. Despite the fact that it is relatively new, since it lies outside of what was the walled city, this is arguably the “old town”, since it is the only part of Ürümqi where winding roads, narrow alleys, and low buildings have been preserved. However, it is misleading to think of this part of Ürümqi as the “old” and “traditional” Uyghur town, as opposed to the new Chinese town; in fact, Ürümqi as a modern city has developed from what were the Chinese headquarters in the region (see quotation from Cable and French above). Somehow in the last two or three centuries it has always been a Chinese - rather than Turkic - town, although at that time the population might have been predominantly Turkic. Moreover, as Wu Aichen points out in his description, before the communist take-over (in 1949) the Turkic town lay north of *nanmen*, within the walled city. In any case, this area is also slowly, yet inexorably, being reclaimed to modernisation by the Han “civilising project” (photo 16). In March 1997 I counted ten building sites along *Jiefang nanlu*, which stretches for less than a mile. There seems to be a standard technique: an area is cleared from the old buildings (its inhabitants being forced out, reportedly with bulldozers

³ Yan’an, Shaanxi province, was the communists’ base after the Long March, during the civil war.



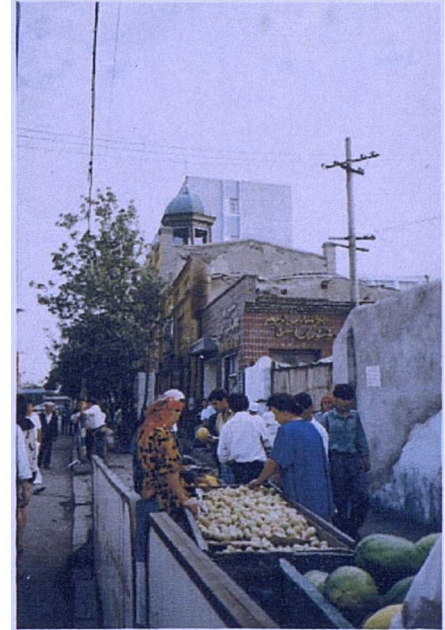


Photo 12-13-14
(clockwise from top left)
Jiefang nanlu: the 'highstreet' of the
Uyghur town.



Photo 15
Night market in *Erdaoqiao*.



Photo 16
The entrance to *Erdaoqiao* market (right), dominated by a building site.

Photo 17
An old building on *Jiefang nanlu*. Behind, a new building under construction.



Photo 18
Shanxi hanzi : *Rabiyä Qadir* shopping mall.

if they try to resist), while preserving the buildings facing the main road (photo 17). These will be torn down when the new building has been completed, thus suddenly changing the urban landscape. None of these new buildings had been completed by the time I left and I am not sure about their intended function, although it seemed very likely that they were going to be employed for business use (shopping centres, offices, hotels, etc.). I suspect the Uyghur town I saw will soon be very different - if there will still be a Uyghur town at all.

Shanxi hanzi and *Yan'an lu* are the other two focal areas of the Uyghur town, respectively north and south of *Erdaoqiao*. *Shanxi hanzi* (see Liu 1996:44-45) is mostly a shopping area, dominated by the *Rabiyä Qadir Bazar*, a six-storey building in a sort of 'neo-socialist-Muslim style' which dates back to the early 1990's (photo 18). Each floor of *Rabiyä Qadir Bazar* is crowded with small shops selling all sorts of goods, though shoes, especially boots, and cloth are by far the most popular. On the ground floor one can also find several stalls selling Uyghur music tapes, henna, custom jewellery, and all sorts of goods mostly imported from Pakistan, obviously addressing a Uyghur public. Rabiyä Qadir, now in her early fifties, is a well-known Uyghur businesswoman and the mother of ten children. Besides her domestic assets, her international interests include a leather factory in neighbouring Kazakhstan and a department store in Uzbekistan. Business, however, is not the only priority on her agenda. During my stay in Ürümchi, on the last floor of the shopping complex foreign language classes, mainly English, were regularly held. These were taught by young Uyghurs and addressed a Uyghur public, aiming at providing an affordable opportunity for all those people who having been educated in Uyghur schools, did not have a chance to learn a foreign language other than Chinese.

Indeed Rabiyä Qadir has been a key public figure in Xinjiang, especially since the late 1990s. Until 1997, she was referred to in the Chinese press as the "millionaire woman of Xinjiang" and had an entry in the Chinese volume of "Who's Who in the World". In 1995 Rabiyä had been a delegate to the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, which was held in Beijing. Moreover, she has been a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC).⁴ However, since early 1997 Rabiyä has suffered

⁴ The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) is a political organ representing the united front which traces its origins back to the anti-Japanese war (1937-45). "Since 1949 the CPPCC has proved to be essentially a united front weapon for building legitimacy and influence among leading non-communist democratic parties and non-aligned intellectuals. It is also a transmission belt for conveying CCP [Chinese Communist Party] principles and policies to these same groups. All along it has been led and controlled by the CCP, with its successive chairmen being party-state leaders ..." (Forster 2001:69).

harassment and restrictions due to her husband's alleged opposition activities abroad, as well as her own efforts to promote the advancement of Uyghur women by launching, in November 1997, the "Thousand Mothers Movement", a venture aimed at building businesses run by women. Shortly after the Movement's third meeting in December 1997, its assets were frozen by the authorities and the group have not met since. Moreover, since March 1997 Rabiya has been deprived of her passport, she was administratively detained for a short time in April 1997 and, at the end of December 1997, was held for a few days in a police station and subsequently placed under restrictions involving the obligation to report to the authorities on a weekly basis. In early 1998 she was barred from re-election to her seat in the CPPCC. The XUAR Communist Party Secretary Wang Lequan publicly commented on this decision, putting forward reasons such as the fact that Rabiya's business had supposedly run into difficulties but also, most importantly, that her husband, a lecturer at Xinjiang University who has been residing in the US since 1996, had been engaging in activities aimed at "splitting the motherland and endangering the state's security". He concluded that Rabiya is not in a position to declare that she is patriotic and that she maintains the unity of the motherland.⁵

Hence *Shanxihanzi* and the *Rabiya Qadir Bazar* can be regarded on many levels as a symbol of Uyghur resistance to the Han "civilising project". The first and most visible reason being that this *Bazar* stands as the Uyghur alternative to the growing number of "modern" department stores that, significantly, are all located north of *Nanmen*. Not only are both vendors and customers exclusively Uyghur (or, anyway, non-Han), but most of the goods sold here - such as henna, *ätläs*, embroidered cushions, copper teapots, rags, leather boots, etc. - be they imported from neighbouring Central Asian countries or produced by local artisans, are targeted specifically to a Uyghur public. The Central Asian trading network, which is the background to this *bazar*, points to a host of transnational connections that are predicated on linguistic, cultural, religious, and historical grounds, which suggest that Han China is definitely not the only available source of "modernisation" and advancement. Finally, and most importantly, Rabiya Qadir embodies the living example that there can be an "advancement" for the Uyghur not only without, but despite, the Chinese.

⁵ From "Amnesty International Appeal for Uighurs arbitrarily detained" (AI Index: ASA 17/02/99) published in *Turkistan Newsletter* Volume 3:020-05-February-1999, Special issue on the anniversary of Khulja (Yining) Uprising 4 February 1997.

Going south along the high street, the area known as *Shanxihanzi* blurs into *Erdaoqiao*.⁶ With its *bazar* (market), mosque, restaurants, and night market, this is the very centre of Uyghur social life. The most striking feature of this area is the number of *ashkhana* (small restaurants) lining both the high street and the side alleys. This is where the most ‘authentic’ Uyghur food is to be found, each restaurant specialising in one or two dishes. In summer, and to a much lesser extent in winter, the pavements are crowded with *kawapchi* (kebab sellers) inviting people into their restaurants “*Kelinglar! Kelinglar!*” (Come! Come in!). Besides the restaurants, there are a number of other small shops typically addressing a Uyghur public, such as pharmacies, selling both traditional Uyghur medicines and ‘western’ drugs, barbershops, dentist shops (making false teeth), etc. People, especially men, do not necessarily come here with a purpose; often they simply hang out, sitting inside or outside a friend’s shop, drinking tea, smoking, and chatting. The *Erdaoqiao bazar* is the best place to buy local produces such as raisins, walnuts, almonds, rock sugar, dried apricots, as well as Uyghur knives, carpets, skull caps, etc. Next to the *bazar*, at the junction with *Tuanjie lu* (Unity road), is the *Tuanjie juchang - Ittipaq teatri* (Unity Theatre, in Chinese and Uyghur respectively). At dusk the area before the theatre gets covered with foodstalls, each with its table and benches, selling kebab, mutton heads, *tonur kawap*, *öpgä hesip*, and similar ‘delicacies’. This is the *kechlik baziri* (night market), where Uyghur social life goes on until late at night, regardless of the season (photo 15).

Tuanjie lu separates *Erdaoqiao* from *Yan’an lu* (Yan’an road). By this name people normally refer to the area surrounding the junction with the actual *Yan’an lu*, its landmarks being the minority language bookstore (i.e. the local branch of the Xinhua bookstore), the *Gewutuan* (Song and Dance Troupe) compound, and the Tatar mosque. Next to the mosque is the “Consulate alley”, recalling the times when this was the Imperial Russian, and later Soviet, diplomatic compound. Today, however, this alley is better known for its (Uyghur) restaurants, which make it a privileged destination when eating out, regardless of one’s budget. Here one can find both rather expensive *restoran* as well as cheaper *ashkhana*, which nevertheless serve the best *qoldama* or *naren chöp* in town.⁷

Further south along *Yan’an lu* stand the Uyghur hospital, which is the institutional centre for Uyghur traditional medicine in Ürümqi, and the Islamic Institute, where *imam*

⁶ *Erdaoqiao* literally means “two-way bridge”. The Uyghur equivalent is *Döng köriük* (lit. “low bridge”), though everybody refers to it by its Chinese name and, according to one of my teachers, younger Uyghurs probably do not even know the Uyghur name. My younger Uyghur friends, though, did not agree.

⁷ *Qoldama* and *naren chöp* are Uyghur dishes (see chapter 6). For a discussion of *restoran* and *ashkhana* see chapter 7.

are trained. The latter is the only government-authorised religious school where, unsurprisingly, the conditions for admission include “being patriotic” (*ai guo*). Also on *Yan’an lu* is the back gate of the Xinjiang University compound, the main gate being on *Shengli lu* (Victory Road). The area now covered by the university campus used to be the Russian town described by Wu Aichen in the 1930s, as witnessed by a number of vaguely neo-classical buildings, the only gracious buildings left on campus. Unfortunately, since the University entered the 211 project in 1996,⁸ these buildings are being destroyed in order to be substituted by “modern” white-tiled concrete blocks.

“The Han and the minority nationalities: one breath, one fate, one heart!” reads a huge bilingual (Chinese and Uyghur) poster at the junction between *Tuanjie lu* and *Jiefang nanlu*, white ink on a red background (photo 19). “Unity, friendship, co-operation, development” echo the big red Chinese characters on the wall opposite Xinjiang University main gate (photo 20). In March 1997, at the end of one month of violence during which reportedly hundreds of Han and Uyghurs were killed and thousands of Uyghurs were arrested, the propaganda department of Xinjiang University too launched a new campaign. The billboards along the main path within the campus were urging to “strengthen the unity of all nationalities and defend the integrity of the motherland” and invited everyone to “serve as an example in defending the unity of all nationalities and safeguarding social stability” (photo 21). Such propaganda on the “unity of all nationalities” is in sharp contrast with the fact that Uyghurs overtly resent the Han, and that the Han in Xinjiang both despise and fear the Uyghur.

Uyghur resentment can be expressed in a variety of more or less subtle ways. For example, the officially approved word in Uyghur to refer to the Han Chinese is “*Khänzu*”, clearly a calque from Mandarin possibly introduced in the 1960s or 1970s in line with the language policies of the time, which were aimed at introducing as many phonetic calques of Chinese words as possible. Before then, Uyghurs as well as the other Turkic peoples of Central Asia had called the Chinese “*Khitai*”, from the Russian word *Kitai*, meaning “China”. Today “*Khitai*” is still used, although, since the government has obliterated it from Uyghur vocabulary, it has taken on a transgressive and derogatory connotation. Such a word would never appear in print or in an official speech, but it is commonly used

⁸ “211” is a project aimed at identifying (through audits) and promoting (with special funding) what will be the 100 best Universities in the country in the 21st century. According to a Han teacher at Xinjiang Normal University, although Xinjiang University was below the national standard, if compared to Universities such as Beida or Fudan, at least one university in Xinjiang had to be included in the project for political reasons. In other words, its inclusion should be situated within the “development policies” being implemented in the region by the central government.



Photo 19 - “The Han and the minority nationalities: one breath, one fate, one heart!” Bilingual poster at the junction between *Tuanjie lu* and *Jiefang nanlu*.

Photo 20 - “Unity, friendship, co-operation, development”. Across the road from Xinjiang University main gate.



Photo 21 - “Everyone serve as an example in defending the unity of all nationalities and safeguarding social stability”. Billboard at Xinjiang University (March 1997).



شىنجاڭ ئۇيغۇر ئاپتۇنوم رايونى مۇزېيى
 مىللىي ئۆرپ-ئادەتلىرى كۆرگەزمىسى
 خىتتەي ئۇيغۇر ئاپتونوم رايونى مۇزېيى
 مىللىي ئۆرپ-ئادەتلىرى كۆرگەزمىسى
 خىتتەي ئۇيغۇر ئاپتونوم رايونى مۇزېيى
 مىللىي ئۆرپ-ئادەتلىرى كۆرگەزمىسى

票价： 元

Photo 22 - Admission ticket to the exhibit of “Xinjiang *minzu* folk customs”. Note the showcase with life-size dummies (left).

in everyday speech. This is one of the ways in which Uyghur people try to turn language inequality into an advantage, even if it is just a small revenge. For example, Tursun shared an office with a Uyghur and a Han colleague. Once their Han colleague asked “What is this word *Khitai* that you two always say when you talk in Uyghur?” Tursun’s reply was “It’s ‘Hitachi’, you know the Japanese electronics brand?”. In my interactions with Uyghur people, I have come across a whole range of “non-official” terms which are used with a ridiculing, if not derogatory, intention. These include *Chineselar* (produced by adding the Uyghur plural suffix to the English word), *ular* (them), *buyaqlar* (these ones), *aka millät* (the older-brother nationality), *kapirlar* (infidels), *choshqanlar* (pigs), and more.

While the propaganda inside and outside the university campus celebrates the unity of all nationalities, the very way in which the university is set up, from student dormitories and staff lodging to curricula, seems to declare, if not promote, differentiation. Everything on campus is organised along the lines of a *Hanzu/minzu* dichotomy. The quota of students admitted to university from each of the two groups corresponds to the ratio between the respective population in the region. Once they’ve entered a course, *minzu* students will be assigned to a *minzu* class, sleep in a *minzu* dormitory, and eat at the *minzu* dining hall. Needless to say, the great majority of *minzu* students are Uyghur.

Like other universities in China, the campus is a self-contained institution. Closer to the main gate are the administrative buildings, the library, and some departments. Further on there are the student dormitories, with separate buildings for male and female students, and often for *minzu* and Han students too. I visited several times Nurqiz in her dormitory, which was right next to the *lao zhaodaisuo* (old guest house) where some of the foreign students, including myself, were lodged. She shared a room with seven classmates of hers, four of which were Uyghur, one was Uzbek, one Khazak, and one Hui. The room was crammed with four bank beds and several boxes and suitcases. While we were sitting on her bed chatting, some of her room-mates were sleeping, some were reading, some were having a snack. They basically shared every moment of their life for four years. I once asked Nurqiz how she felt about this. To my surprise, she replied that she loved it and that she was going to miss this life once she graduated. She often discussed the current political situation with her room-mates, but always made sure that the Hui and the Khazak girls were not around. It was a precaution, she explained; in those days Han-Uyghur relations were extremely volatile and, while Khazaks and Hui to some extent

shared Uyghur resentment towards the Han, on the other hand it was not obvious that they would embrace the Uyghur cause.

Roughly half of the university compound, to the east, is occupied by a vast expanse of tidily lined-up four-storey concrete blocks (Ch. *lou*, Uy. *bina*) where teachers and other staff live. Here too, by and large, *minzu* and Han occupy separate blocks. The first time I went to see one of my teachers I got lost and ended up in the wrong *bina*, since they all looked the same to me. When I later found my teacher's flat I explained to her the reason for my delay. She laughed and said "How could you not notice you were in a Han *bina*? The stairs there are so dirty, while the *minzu* ones are tidy and clean!". I suppose after all it would not be such a good idea to have Han and Uyghur share the same block... Between the student dormitories and the staff lodgings there is a lake, which in fact is an artificial reservoir. The "new guest house" stands right next to the lake. Not far, there is a market area with a few shops and half a dozen restaurants, some Uyghur, some Hui, and some Han.

Ironically, during the early 1990s, as a result of the political and economic changes brought about by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a new "Russian market town" has developed on *Yan'an lu* outside the University's back gate. Everything is contained in a relatively small but self-sufficient area, where the *lingua franca* is Russian - and vodka. In 1996-1997 the multi-ethnic trading community from the CIS numbered a couple of hundred men and women from countries such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Russia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan. They lived in the *Bianjiang Bingguan* (Border Hotel), worked in the adjacent *Bianjiang pifa shichang* (Border wholesale market), and ate chicken cutlets and mashed potatoes with vodka in a "Baku" or "Katiusha" restaurant across the road. Everything can be found *in situ*, provided by entrepreneurial locals (both Han and *minzu*), from early products such as winter strawberries to translators and prostitutes. As a consequence, most *laomaozi* - literally "old hairs", a slightly derogatory Chinese term used to refer to the Russian, obviously more hairy than the Chinese - hardly ever go to town, if not to reach the airport or the railway station.

Given a choice, Uyghurs in Ürümqi would live south of *nanmen*, in the 'Uyghur town'. Indeed a lot of them do, since most *minzu danwei* (work units) are there, from the Uyghur hospital to the Song and Dance Troupe, to the Islamic Institute. A large number of Uyghurs living in the capital come from other oases, and this is particularly true among college-educated Uyghurs. When I asked these people how life in their hometown compared with that in Ürümqi, they would almost invariably reply that, if on the one

hand they enjoyed better living conditions in the capital - such as running water, central heating, etc. - on the other they felt alienated from 'traditional' ways of life. They normally identified the different dwelling styles as the main reason for this. Be they originally from the countryside or from urban areas, back in their hometown their families usually still lived in what they called *öy* (*pingfang* in Chinese), that is a self-contained one-storey house developed around an inner courtyard, usually inhabited by an extended family. Whereas in Ürümchi they had no choice but live just with their nuclear family in tiny flats within multi-storey concrete blocks (*bina*, in Chinese *loufang*). Here too we can clearly identify the tension between tradition and modernity, with all the ambiguities it implies. In other words, the price for 'modernity', including better living conditions, seems to be drowning in a sea of Han and feel alienated from one's origins. In fact different dwelling styles simply epitomise such alienation, which is actually due also to things such as having to speak a 'foreign' language (Mandarin) all the time, or else having to adhere to a working schedule which is incompatible with religious observance. In short, these Uyghurs have an ambivalent attitude to the capital. While, on the one hand, they are fascinated by everything they perceive as symbols of modernity - such as skyscrapers, shopping centres, consumerism, etc. - at the same time they deeply resent the fact that Ürümchi is not very Uyghur - as opposed to other towns in southern Xinjiang - and is even becoming more and more Chinese.

3.3. 'We're not Chinese!'

In official discourse, *Zhongguoren* (Ch., lit. "person from China") refers to any Chinese citizen, be they Han or belonging to any of the *minzu* that make up the *Zhonghua minzu* (Chinese nationality). However, this is little more than sheer rhetoric. In fact, in popular discourse and in everyday life things are rather different, and this is particularly true of a place like Xinjiang. Here the multi-ethnic composition of the PRC population is an extremely visible fact, rather than just a theory studied in a propaganda textbook, as can be the case for many Han living in China proper. Hence in casual conversations *Zhongguoren* is usually synonymous with *Hanzuren* (a Han person), and *Zhongwen* (language of China) is interchangeable with *Hanyu* (Han language).

In the introduction to his *Zhonghua Minzu*, a survey of Chinese nationalities, Tian states: "Our great *Zhonghua minzu* is composed of 56 *minzu*. Every single *minzu* has

contributed to the formation and development of the *Zhonghua minzu*.” (Tian 1991:1) The same principle is also stated in the Foreword to the PRC 1982 Constitution: “The People’s Republic of China is a unitary multi-ethnic state jointly founded by the people of each *minzu* in the country.” (XUAR 1995:728). Due to the ambiguity which is sometimes characteristic of the Chinese language, the phrase *Zhonghua minzu* can be translated both as “Chinese nationality” and as “China’s nationalities”. The title of Tian’s book - *Zhonghua Minzu* - reflects the changes in Chinese nationality policy that have occurred since the publication of Ma Yin’s *Zhongguo shaoshu minzu* (China’s minority nationalities) in 1981. This book “systematically surveys the 55 minority nationalities who inhabit vast areas of the People’s Republic of China” and significantly does not include the 56th *minzu*, that is the Han majority (Ma 1989:i).

When talking to people in Xinjiang, I became particularly aware of the ambiguities implied by this taxonomy and terminology, and especially of the mismatch between theory and practice. “Chinese” can mean different things, its broadest meaning being “something or someone that belongs or is related to China”. Most of the times, though, this term is used in a narrower sense, i.e. to refer simply to Han China and the Han Chinese. My use of the term “Chinese” reflects current practice in Xinjiang - and elsewhere - hence, when I talk about “Chinese” I usually mean “Han”.

“I don’t like China because we’re not Chinese! You’ve studied Uyghur history, right? You know that we’ve nothing to do with them. Therefore I don’t like their culture, I find Beijing opera revolting.” Since our very first encounter, Abdurehim, a young Uyghur man in his late twenties, would not spend a day without pointing out how much he dislikes the Chinese and how different Uyghur are from the Chinese. He is ready to imagine remote connections between Uyghurs and Italians - possibly through Marco Polo - but opposes vehemently any possible relation with the Chinese. This is our first meeting and he has invited me to dinner. He wants to make sure that I know where he stands, right from the beginning. He pours some black tea “You see? Chinese [i.e. green] tea is ‘cold’, it’s bad for your health, whereas black tea is ‘hot’.” I then start enquiring about the use of food in Uyghur traditional medicine, and in what ways it is different from the Chinese. Abdurehim does not know much about this, but he is positive that Uyghur medicine is better than the Chinese. From traditional medicine he moves on to the next topic “You know, they’re crazy ... despite the fact that we are two time-zones behind, they insist in

using Beijing time and they're convinced that noon is at two o'clock.⁹ I know of a Chinese woman who keeps using Beijing time even after she has moved to the States, can you imagine?" Abdurehim concludes his 'lecture' by addressing me with a question, to which he promptly replies himself: "Can you tell a Uyghur from a Han? I'm sure you can, there is such a big difference ... we're bushy [sic] whereas they have no hairs, we can whistle while they can't ...".

Abdurehim was born and grew up in Ürümchi; his mother is a *Ghuljiliq* while his father comes from Kashgar. Having earned a first class degree in Chinese at the local university, he later resigned from a prestigious but boring job in the government in order to pursue his own aspirations. As many other educated young people, both Uyghur and Han, he thought that these could be better fulfilled abroad. Thanks to his intelligence and the fact that he was perfectly fluent both in Chinese and in English, he could have enjoyed a privileged position if he stayed in Ürümchi, nevertheless he felt alienated from the Chinese society he was living in. This is a common feeling among those young educated people in contemporary China who share neither their parents or grandparents genuine belief in the ideals of communism, nor the prevailing aspiration to economic success, which often appears to be the one and only value in China today. I would say that the mid-1990s have brought about a radical shift in many Chinese people's motivation to go abroad. In my experience, in the very early 1990s "leaving the country" (*chu guo*) was seen primarily as an opportunity to a better life, above all in terms of access to material goods and economic success. By the mid-nineties similar opportunities have become increasingly available in China itself, thus obliterating the need to go abroad for all those who are happy with economic reforms without political reforms. In Abdurehim's and in many other Uyghurs' case a further dimension contributes to their feelings of alienation: the fact that, from their point of view, they live under a "foreign domination" and they cannot foresee any realistic future improvement. On the contrary, they can only predict assimilation as a sort of cultural genocide, the only alternative to which is resistance, however suicidal this may be. The reason why some of them are "ready to die" for the Uyghur cause - no matter how literal such statement is - is that they *know* they are different and they are not ready to give up such difference, to barter it with an easier and "better" life.

⁹ Indeed I have heard Chinese people in Xinjiang say "noon" (*zhongwu*) and, when I asked if that meant 12, they replied in a rather surprised tone that they meant 2.

Abdurehim's resentment for the Chinese goes back to his childhood. In 1970, when he was only a few months old, his father was arrested and detained for ten years. At the age of 25 his mother was left with four children to raise and had to start working as a teacher in a primary school. Because she was the wife of a "counter-revolutionary", she was assigned to a school one hour by bus away from where they lived. Today, both Abdurehim and his mother are very proud of the dignified manner in which they dealt with all the hardships. "My mother is very proud of us children. We could have become hooligans or drop-outs, instead we're all decent and respectable people." When Abdurehim's father was released he was a different person, so much so that his marriage did not survive long. "After all those years in jail my father was not able to love anymore, he had become a selfish person, and my mother was not ready to put up with it." Abdurehim blames the Chinese for all the hard times that he and his family have endured. "They must leave! We've had enough, in Uyghur we say *göshtin ötüp söngäkkä taqashti*, it means that 'it pierced the flesh and has reached the bone'". Once, after yet another of Abdurehim's bursts against "the Chinese", I dared to remark that he cannot blame individual Chinese for what has happened to his family and for the situation in which the Uyghur are today. After all, many Chinese have equally suffered and are still suffering under the same totalitarian regime, and Uyghurs and Chinese are all victims of the same system. "No, it's different, because we're not Chinese. They are oppressed by their own people. I want to be ruled by my own people, no matter how bad they might be."

There may be different degrees of bitterness; nevertheless all the Uyghurs I have met agree in stating their difference vis-à-vis the Chinese, whom they definitely perceive as *the other*. But what are the key signifiers of such difference? Or, in other words, how can one tell a Uyghur from a Han? To a foreign visitor the first most striking difference, and certainly one which is emphasised in Uyghur discourse, lies in the physical appearance.

Two and a half days up the rail line from Xian and in the same country, you couldn't come across a people more different from the Chinese than the Uygurs. Ürümqi is the first place where you'll see these swarthy-skinned Turkic descendants in any number; larger and heavier than the Han Chinese, they have features resembling those of Caucasians and many of them could easily pass for southern Italians or Greeks. The Uygur women wear skirts or dresses and brightly coloured scarves, in contrast to the slacks and baggy trousers of the Han Chinese, and they pierce their

ears - a practice which repels the Han. The Uygur men must be the only men in China capable of growing beards. (Samagalski et al. 1988:769-71)

It is true that most Uyghurs have “high noses” and “deep eyes”, and that they are definitely more hairy than the Chinese. There is, however, a great deal of variation in physical types. These range from very European-looking types, with their blond hair and blue eyes, at one end of the spectrum, to those almost indiscernible from the Chinese at the other end. To some extent, phenotypes co-vary with geographical location; hence among Uyghurs in Qumul it is probably easier to find Chinese-looking types than, say, in Kashgar. However, the stereotypical look of a Qumulluq or Turpanliq as opposed to a Qäshqärlük or Khotänlik tends to be exaggerated in popular discourse. For example, I had a friend from Qumul who could definitely pass for a Sicilian, but never for a Chinese.

Most of the Chinese I have met share the cliché that Uyghurs, both men and women, are very beautiful (*zhangde hen piaoliang*). This fits in, and at the same time is the result of, the hegemonic discourse on minorities in China, a discourse which tends to emphasise their exotic, primitive, and feminine characteristics. In other words, it is an example of what Harrell calls “the sexual metaphor”, that is, an “eroticization and feminization of the peripheral” whereby sexual relations become, at different levels and in different contexts, a metaphor for a relation of domination. At a very simple and direct level, this involves on the part of the civilisers a view of the peripheral peoples both as erotic and promiscuous and as objects of sexual desire. In any case, according to Harrell, “the sexual metaphor is one of domination, in which the literal or figurative femaleness of the peripheral peoples is one aspect of the act of defining them as subordinate.” (Harrell 1995:10-13). Not only are the Uyghur themselves aware and proud of being considered physically attractive, which could be interpreted as a successful co-option into active participation in the civilising project, but there is also a general consensus among them that the same cannot be said of the Chinese. Indeed one of the worst offences for a Uyghur is to be called a Chinese. This usually implies that s/he is ugly, as well as expressing moral contempt. Hence mistaking a Uyghur for a Chinese, however unintentionally, can be a source of major embarrassment, as I could witness when a Uyghur melon-seller addressed my Uyghur friend in Chinese because he thought he was Han.

As pointed out in the above quotation from the Lonely Planet guide to China, dress, and to an even greater extent accessories, can be powerful markers of Uyghur identity vis-à-vis the Han. Here too there is obviously a great deal of variation among the Uyghur themselves, depending on age, gender, rural or urban residence, occupation etc. While it

is impossible to generalise and reduce to a uniform the great variety of clothes that Uyghurs wear, however we can perhaps identify a particular Uyghur style, or taste. In Ürümqi the difference is mostly visible in mature women. While it is common to see their Han counterparts wearing trousers and short hair, elder Uyghur women have their long hair arranged in a bun or in long thin plates and covered with a head scarf tied behind their neck. They almost invariably wear a wide loose frock (*pörlängä köyinäk*), the pattern and the material of which depend on the season. In summer most Uyghur women wear *ätläs*, a brightly coloured silk or synthetic lozenge-patterned material which is common across most of Central Asia, though older women tend to wear a more sober black and white or blue and white *ätläs*. In winter older women usually wear dresses made of imprinted velvet. The most common outfit for Uyghur men is shirt and trousers, often a suit; most of the time, what makes it distinctive is their *doppa* (skull cap) or flat cap. Older men sometimes wear a *chapan*, the 'traditional' gown, and leather boots, though this is not a common sight in Ürümqi. When it comes to younger people, however, ethnic differences in their dress code tend to be blurred in favour of the latest fashion. Although Uyghur women are usually more modest than their Han contemporaries, they all compete in having the trendiest outfit and some do not hesitate to wear breath-taking mini-skirts. Nevertheless, a certain difference is still noticeable as far as accessories are concerned. Regardless of their age, Uyghur women would almost invariably wear pure-gold earrings. If they are married, they would also wear matching pure-gold bracelets, necklace, and rings. Similarly, what makes Uyghur men's dress code distinctive is, as already mentioned, the fact that they usually cover their head with a cap or a hat.

I have spent many a trip on the local minibuses trying to establish each passenger's ethnic background. While this led me to reflect on what could be the markers of difference, at the same time it made me even more aware of the way in which labels and categories inevitably freeze and simplify the complex and dynamic reality in which people constantly negotiate their identity. And yet in Xinjiang - as elsewhere in China - everyone must be "something". Not only is this established by the entry "*minzu*" on their ID, but this is a generalised assumption whenever dealing with people. In Ürümqi, usually the two categories into either of which most people are expected to fall are "Uyghur" or "Han". It did not take very long before I interiorised such an assumption and began to place people into either of these. Hence for instance the "identification" exercise in which I used to engage while on the bus. However, while most of the time I could easily tell a

Uyghur from a Han, I found it much harder to establish what made the difference, and concluded that often it is a combination of various factors in the right proportion.

Time

As Abdurehim pointed out during our first meeting, time too is a very important marker of Uyghur identity vis-à-vis the Han. Although Ürümqi and Kashgar lie several thousand kilometres west of Beijing, officially there is only one time zone in the People's Republic of China. This means that in late December the sun does not rise until eleven in the morning, Beijing time, and in June it does not set before eleven, or even midnight, always Beijing time. The fact that Xinjiang should be at least two time zones behind Beijing seems to be acknowledged, more or less explicitly, by everybody in the region. If, on the one hand, virtually everything, from transport to post offices and schools, runs on Beijing time, on the other hand their daily working schedule begins and ends two hours later than in Beijing. Thus the single time zone is nothing but a fiction, as those who work in daily contact with China proper know very well: by the time they start their working day, people in the rest of China are about to go to lunch.¹⁰

As a consequence, an unofficial "Xinjiang time" (sometimes also said "Ürümqi", or "Kashgar" time), more consonant with the rise and fall of the sun, is commonly used by Uyghurs and by most of the other non-Han groups. This runs two hours behind Beijing time and, occasionally, it may be granted semi-official status, as for instance in Ürümqi's main post office which closes at "8 p.m. Beijing time (6p.m. Xinjiang time)", as the label at the door reads. While most Han in Ürümqi are hardly aware of the existence of "two times", this is usually an issue and a source of confusion among the Uyghurs. One must often switch between the two times, depending on the situation and on the interlocutor.

By looking at what time (i.e. whether Beijing or Xinjiang time) people use in speech, as well as what time their watch is set on, one can infer their assumptions and consider what strategies some of them adopt to cope with such an awkward situation. At the two ends of the spectrum there are those who are consistently set either on Beijing time or on Xinjiang time. The latter are extremely rare in Ürümqi, where it is basically

¹⁰ On the issue of time in Xinjiang see also Dwyer (1998:74-75). Smith (forthcoming) devotes a paper to symbolic, spatial, and social boundaries between the Uyghur and the Han, including a long section on time. Also on boundaries and markers of difference is Bellér-Hann (2001c), which examines Han-Uyghur relations in a southern oasis.

impossible to leave one's doorstep without having to come to terms with Beijing time. Whereas the former are by all means the majority, given that more than 80% of Ürümqi's population is Han, and I have never come across a Han in Ürümqi who used local time. Hui (Chinese Muslims) too tend to use Beijing time; having spent more than a year in Xinjiang, I was extremely surprised when I met an old Hui whose pocket watch was set on local time and who explained to me that "here in Xinjiang there are two times: Beijing time and Xinjiang time".

Most Uyghurs stand in the middle, that is, they are those who switch. Whether their watch is set on one time or the other often depends on their job. For instance, Abdurehim's watch was set on Beijing time, since he was working for a foreign company based in Beijing, but he always made a point of using local time with other Uyghurs and with anybody he regarded as "loyal to the Uyghur cause". In other cases such choice may indicate a different stance with regard to the assimilation process, as in the case of two of my teachers. While Bahargül, who used Beijing time, insisted in speaking Mandarin to her child so that he could attend Han schools, Dilnur, who instead used Xinjiang time, sent her daughters to Uyghur schools and had a much more uncompromising attitude to Chinese culture in general. However, she confessed that her choice of Xinjiang time was ultimately dictated by practical reasons: "Once I used to switch from one time to the other, until one day I got up, dressed my daughter and took her to school, only to realise that we were two hours early! It was too confusing, and at that point I decided to only use Xinjiang time." As a consequence, I had to cope with classes set on two different time zones, which was not easy at all. For those who switch it is indeed confusing, since every time one has an appointment one has to assume what time the other person is on, or what time the other person assumes one is on. Therefore, it is common practice among those who switch to specify the time zone whenever there is a possibility of doubt. In any case, as I've already pointed out, this is never an issue for the Han, who generally fail to acknowledge the fact that some people use local time, almost as if this made Xinjiang closer to the capital Beijing.

Language

After food, which will be discussed in detail in the following chapters, language is probably the most important marker of differentiation, and one which functions as a

powerful ethnic boundary. Hence many Uyghurs' dilemma, particularly in Ürümqi, as to whether they should send their children to a Uyghur or a Han school. Indeed, while many *minkaohan* are in fact perfectly bilingual,¹¹ there are also some who are basically unable to speak Uyghur. These are looked down upon by other Uyghurs to say the least, but most importantly they are as a matter of fact excluded by most Uyghur networks. The following discussion should further clarify when and how language, as well as other markers of difference, become relevant boundary setters among Uyghurs in contemporary Xinjiang.

Tursun, who told his Han colleague that *Khitai* means "Hitachi", represents an interesting case of ambiguity and hybridity among contemporary urban Uyghurs. He was born in Ürümqi in 1971, at the height of the Cultural Revolution. Soon after his birth his father, an Uzbek driver, and his mother, a Uyghur doctor, were "sent to the countryside" (Ch. *xia xiang*):

When I was 40 days old my mother gave me to a Khazak family who lived in Nanshan because she and my father had been sent to Turpan.¹² It was then the height of the Cultural Revolution and my mother, who is a doctor, was required to work for the cadres. In the beginning she refused, she didn't want to leave me, and yet there was no way she could take me with her. But she was "criticised" for this and, eventually, she had no choice. I've been raised in Nanshan by a Khazak mother until I was six. As a child I was very blond. My Khazak mother shaved my head and my eyebrow twice, until my hair got darker. She was afraid that they might see a symbol of "capitalism" in it and do something bad to me.

Although Tursun attended Uyghur schools, he declares himself a "half-*minkaohan*" in that he had his secondary education at the Ürümqi 17th Experimental Middle School, apparently the best *minzu* school in town and one where half of the subjects are taught in Chinese. Thanks to his fluency in Chinese, Tursun did his university degree in central China, at the Xi'an School of Law. In short, he is perfectly fluent both in Uyghur and in Chinese, a degree of bilingualism rarely achieved among Uyghurs. Moreover, due to his educational background and to his linguistic skills, he is remarkably familiar with both the

¹¹ *Minkaohan* (lit. a *minzu* testing into university in Mandarin) refers to a Uyghur, or any other non-Chinese native speaker, who was educated in Han schools, as opposed to a *minkaomin*, who went to *minzu* schools.

¹² The "Southern Mountains", a pastoral area south of Ürümqi, now also a holiday and sightseeing resort.



Uyghur and the Han world. Today Tursun too, like Eli, can be regarded as a “successful” Uyghur. He has a good job in the judiciary and he knows how to make the best of it. Because of his job, as well as his educational background, he has a lot of Han “friends” - although in many cases I would call it a patron-client relationship rather than a friendship - and he is perfectly comfortable in both the Uyghur and the Han world. Seemingly, he has no personal reason to complain, nor any interest to change the *status quo*. Yet, along with a genuine friendship, he shares with Abdurehim feelings of anger and resentment, which nevertheless he articulates in a humorous rather than bitter vein. Tursun looks everything but Chinese, so much so that the first time I have met him I thought he was American. Many Han assume he is a foreigner and he has a collection of favourite anecdotes on this subject.

Last week I was in Guangzhou on a work-trip. On the way back, when I went to check-in at the airport the employee addressed me in English. I gave her my ticket and ID while keeping my mouth shut. When she looked at my ID she said in a rather surprised and disappointed tone “Oh, you’re from Xinjiang!? I thought you were a foreigner ...” At that point I told her in perfect Mandarin “You’re wrong Madam, for you [plural] I am a foreigner!” Now this is my standard reply ...

I was lucky enough to witness one of these incidents. It was an early spring day and Tursun and I had gone shopping. While in a stationery shop, we were being served by a Uyghur attendant when a Han attendant came over and addressed me in a very tentative English. While I was trying to make sense of what she had said, she turned to her Uyghur colleague who was talking to Tursun in Uyghur and told her in a low voice “His Uyghur is not bad, isn’t it?” “We are speaking our own language!” was her colleague’s reply. “Really?! He’s Uyghur?! I thought he was a foreigner...”. I got my notebooks and we moved to a different counter where they sold pens. In a bad English, Tursun asked the Han attendant to see some markers. When I asked him why he was speaking English, he replied “To her I’m a foreigner anyway!”. This witty remark in fact conceals some sort of truth and can be read in two ways. In a passive sense, it refers to the fact that many Han think that he, as well as other Uyghurs, are “foreigners”, i.e. European or North American, because of the way they look. But it may also be read as a not too subtle suggestion that the Uyghur are a foreign people in China, thus implying that Chinese rule in Xinjiang is illegitimate, on the grounds that Uyghurs are not Chinese. In short, despite his many Han acquaintances, whom he sees quite often, Tursun is loyal to what he

regards as “his people”. To the extent that he tries to keep his Han network separated from his Uyghur network. While the first is mainly predicated on the Chinese notion of *guanxi*, the second relies mostly on family and friendship ties.¹³ Although I was a more integral part of the second, where I definitely felt more comfortable, I was easily admitted to both thanks to the fact that I was situated outside the Han/Uyghur dichotomy.

3.4. The *Hanzu/Minzu* dichotomy

It is important to stress that in Xinjiang, and particularly in Ürümchi, Han-Uyghur interaction does not occur in a vacuum. As already pointed out in previous chapters, while Uyghurs and Han represent by far the biggest groups, they are just two of the thirteen different *minzu* into which Xinjiang population is officially classified. However, such classification does not accurately convey the complexity and the dynamic aspects of ethnic identities in this region. Rather than being described as discrete and self-contained collectivities, perhaps these groups could be better represented along a continuum. While the position of a group, as well as that of an individual, along such continuum would obviously vary depending on the context, given the current situation we could tentatively situate the Han and the Uyghur at the two ends. The indigenous Turkic Muslim groups, such as the Uzbek, Tatar, Kirghiz, and Khazak, would be the closest to the Uyghur end. In particular, considering the high rate of intermarriage among Uyghurs, Uzbeks, and Tatars, as well as their linguistic and cultural proximity, I would argue that today in Xinjiang the boundaries between these three groups are in fact almost totally blurred, or at least very permeable. Equally closer to the Uyghur end are the Tajik. While they speak an Indo-European language and therefore cannot be labelled Turkic, they are usually educated in Uyghur since there is no script for the variant of Tajik they speak. Hence, given also their numerical exiguity, they feel close to and often tend to identify with the Uyghur, not least because, as a Tajik friend put it, “we are all Muslim”.

Peoples of Mongolic stock, such as the Mongol and the Daur, lie somewhere in the middle, but still closer to the Uyghur end. While most of them are Buddhist and therefore do not share the Uyghur’s Muslim lifestyle, they too speak an Altaic language and for them Chinese usually is their second language. Moreover, they share with the Uyghur the

¹³ *Guanxi*, literally meaning “connections”, is a crucial concept in Chinese society. See Yang (1994) and Yan (1993).

experience of being an often 'oppressed' minority, as well as a certain resentment for the dominant Han majority. Literally in the middle stand the Hui (Muslim Chinese), who are Muslim like the Uyghur but share the Han's tongue. Hence they are generally alienated and mistrusted by both the Han and the Uyghur. Finally, groups such as the Manchu and the Xibe are definitely closer to the Han and often hardly discernible from them, especially as far as their appearance is concerned. They all speak Chinese as a native language, although Xibe usually also speak their own language (also of the Altaic family), and in many aspects they share the Han's culture. Indeed intermarriage among these three groups is generally unproblematic and fairly common. Moreover, they tend to share the Han's negative stereotypes about the other *minzu*, in particular about the Uyghur.

While this is inevitably a gross generalisation, which certainly does not accurately describe the shades and subtleties of Xinjiang's ethnic landscape and interaction, at least it may help to convey a sense of the complexity of the social landscape in this region, and of the context in which identities are negotiated, by the Uyghur as well as by other groups. In other words, when we talk of the Uyghur vis-à-vis the Han, one has to bear in mind that the picture is often much broader and more detailed than that. It is only for the sake of brevity and clarity that I do not always refer to it.

On the other hand, while in official discourse it is constantly stressed that Xinjiang population is made up of thirteen different *minzu* and that these are all united as one in their effort to modernise and develop the region, in daily practice things are rather different. In fact, there is a constant awareness that Han and non-Han represent two distinct categories and enjoy different status in the taxonomy of all the peoples of China; although, as we have seen, not every non-Han *minzu* has the same status, nor does it relate in the same way vis-à-vis the Han. The *Hanzu/minzu* dichotomy is sometimes implicitly stated, and therefore promoted, by those very slogans which apparently argue the contrary, such as the one declaring "The Han and the minority nationalities: one breath, one fate, one heart!" (see above). What we learn is that China's population is divided into two broad categories: the Han and the non-Han minority nationalities, which in turn are sub-divided into different groups. According to the latest trend in minority policies this slogan sounds a bit outdated, since in official discourse the phrase "minority nationalities" (*shaoshu minzu*) has been substituted by "nationalities" (*minzu*), which in theory should include the Han. However, the fact that the equal status of all 56 *minzu* is true only on paper is reflected in the use of such terminology in everyday language, where everything is conceptualised in terms of the *Hanzu/minzu* dichotomy. The case of Xinjiang

University, which I have discussed above, is but one example. Here it is perfectly normal to talk of *minzu* students, *minzu* classes, *minzu* dormitories, etc., and there is no doubt that what is meant is “non-Han”. In other words “Han” is the default and “*minzu*”, that is the non-Han, is the marked category. Indeed *minzu* (in Uyghur *milliy*) is a synonym for “non-Han”, both in popular discourse and in more or less official expressions, as for instance in *Minzu Chubanshe*, the publishing house which publishes material about non-Han peoples, or in non-Han languages. While this is true throughout China, it becomes particularly striking in a region like Xinjiang, where one is constantly confronted with such dichotomy.

The case of the Museum of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is exemplary. The Museum includes three sections: a display of “cultural and historical relics”, one of “ancient mummies”, and an exhibit of “*minzu* folkways”. Leaving aside the first two - which are predictably inscribed within a sinocentric historical narrative based on the postulate that this region has always been part of China - we shall consider the third, which is the most relevant to our discussion. The best way to introduce this is to quote the “Brief introduction to the exhibit of Xinjiang *minzu* folk customs”, which is printed on the back of the admission ticket:

Since ancient times, Xinjiang has always been an inseparable part of our great motherland. On this piece of land live the following *minzu*: Uyghur, Han, Kazakh, Hui, Mongol, Kirghiz, Xibe, Tajik, Uzbek, Manchu, Daur, Tatar, and Russian. Through the display of architecture, dress and personal adornment, tools, artistic objects, and utensils, this exhibit depicts the outstanding cultural heritage and social customs that each *minzu* has developed over a long period of time. By enhancing mutual respect, help, and knowledge among each *minzu*, and by promoting the common goal of development, this exhibit will let the magnificent flower of each *minzu*'s culture blossom even more splendidly in the “hundred-flower garden” of our motherland.

Leaving aside the fact that this region was not called Xinjiang until the late 18th century, what is most striking is that in the actual exhibition there is no sign of the Han! What we find is a sort of human zoo, where each non-Han *minzu* has been distilled into a number of essential characteristics and displayed in a glass showcase. The content of each showcase includes two life-size dummies, representing a male and a female specimen of the relevant *minzu*, dressed in their *minzu* costume. A number of other supposedly

representative objects are also displayed, ranging from agricultural implements to carpets, harnesses, and cooking utensils. The centre of the exhibition hall is occupied by some examples of *minzu* “architecture” (photo 22). These include a life-size section of a Uyghur house, complete with carpets and a carved wooden veranda, and two yurts which look extremely similar, except that one is supposed to be Khazak while the other is meant to be Kirghiz. The overall impression is that of a very static representation of these *minzu*. With their “traditional” dresses - which nowadays nobody wears, except in Song and Dance Troupe performances - “traditional” houses, “traditional” agricultural implements, etc., the image of backwardness usually associated with non-Han *minzu* is subtly reinforced. In short, it is as if they were ‘frozen in history’. In this sense this could be taken as an example of what Harrell describes as the “historical metaphor”, whereby peripheral peoples are constituted as ancient by the civilising centre. According to Harrell, by adopting a social evolutionist approach the Communists have developed the historical metaphor to its fullest (Harrell 1995:15-16). In any case, such an exhibit testifies the existence of two distinct categories: the Han, i.e. the civilising centre, and the *minzu*, i.e. the peripheral peoples to be civilised.

Be it because of the size of their population, or on the grounds of historical and political circumstances, not only are the Uyghur the majority group in the region, but they are also the ones who most overtly oppose the Han and have a very specific claim to self-determination. Today, while the Kazakh, Kirghiz, Tajik, Uzbek, and Mongol in Xinjiang can look across the border at countries named after their people, the Uyghur are the only large group with some sort of national consciousness who do not have a country of their own. Thus, the Han and the Uyghur inevitably are the two reference groups at a regional level, and in most cases also at a local level. It follows that in the *Hanzu/minzu* dichotomy the latter term is often interchangeable with “Uyghur”. This is particularly true of Ürümqi, where every interaction tends to be conceptualised in terms of the Han/Uyghur binary opposition. For example, when listening to a conversation where a person is being mentioned only by a personal pronoun, the most usual question would be “Is s/he Han or Uyghur?”. Sometimes such mental process of classification can be unconscious, and one automatically assumes that the person which is the object of a conversation is either Han or Uyghur. The fact that there are also other groups often seems to be forgotten. This is partly due to an inevitable tendency to simplify, but more importantly it reflects the fact that those two groups play a dominant role in the ethnic mapping of the region. In short, while the Han/Uyghur dichotomy subsumes a much more complex reality, at the same

time, such complexity tends to be ordered according to this dichotomy. Hence the idea of a continuum stretching from the Han end to the Uyghur end, with each group sometimes implicitly subsumed under the closer end, depending on the context.

In conclusion, as already pointed out by Lucien Pye (1975:510, see 1.4.), at the heart of Communist nationality policies there is a basic contradiction between an assimilationist approach and, at the same time, one that de facto promotes differentiation. Such contradiction derives from the paradox inherent in the Communist civilising project, that is, the definition of its objects, i.e. the peoples to civilise, as both inferior, and therefore in need of civilisation, and civilisable (Harrell 1995). In other words, in order to carry out the process which should ultimately take the “civilisees” to the level of the civilisers (assimilation), the former must be first defined as inferior, that is at a lower stage on the scale of civilisation, and therefore different. The Uyghur’s reaction to such a project is inevitably informed by the same paradox, given that this is the framework within which they negotiate their identity. Hence the tension between tradition and modernity and the dilemma between assimilation and differentiation, in which many Uyghurs find themselves. However, I suggest that by looking at the negotiation of Uyghur identity in the realm of food we may envisage a positive, that is non-disruptive, solution to this dilemma.

CHAPTER 4

FOOD AND CEREMONY

In this chapter I begin to explore the construction and the negotiation of Uyghur identity in the realm of food by looking at ceremonial aspects of Uyghur life which inevitably revolve around food. Starting with a discussion of hospitality, both as a value and as a practice, I proceed to examine some of the main festivals and ceremonies that are celebrated among the Uyghur, focusing in particular on weddings. From my fieldwork experience, these seem to occupy a prominent position in Uyghur social life, providing a good vantage point to explore the themes of identification and differentiation that are the object of my discussion.

While the perspective is always that of urban intellectuals in Ürümqi, there are constant references to southern rural Xinjiang. Here too we find the same recurrent theme: the nostalgia for an ideal 'tradition' which is situated in a more or less mythical south and, at the same time, a quest for 'modernity', of which Ürümqi is the symbol, which seems to inevitably obliterate 'tradition'. This dilemma is not at all specific to Uyghur society, on the contrary, it is more or less common to any society facing the challenge of 'modernity'. However, among the Uyghur such a dilemma acquires a specific connotation in that it is inscribed within the context of a Chinese hegemonic discourse which equates Uyghur *minzu* identity with tradition (and backwardness). Within this logic modernising amounts to the loss of such a traditional identity and eventually the adoption of a Chinese (i.e. Han) identity, in short, to assimilation.

Here I am concerned above all with real people, each with their own specificity. Through the analysis of ethnographic material, I try to suggest that while there is indeed a solid core of shared norms and ideals, the complexity and the degree of variation we find in actual practice provide scope for the negotiation of Uyghur identity beyond such exclusive dichotomy. Moreover, such variation is by no means random but can be traced to some sort of structure which allows change while preserving a sense of continuity. Hence, for instance, the adoption of Chinese-style dishes (*säy*) in the wedding menu does not jeopardise its distinctively Uyghur character.

4.1. Uyghur hospitality

“The Uyghur are famous for their warm hospitality; in Uyghur society both guests and hosts should adhere to a specific etiquette.” (Tian 1991:174-75). Thus begins the section devoted to Uyghur customs in *Zhonghua Minzu*. Indeed, in China any introduction to the Uyghur *minzu* would almost invariably mention hospitality (*haoke*) as one of their most characteristic traits: “Respecting the elderly and loving the young, attaching importance to manners, warm hospitality, being able to sing and dance, and being fond of plants, are among the most important Uyghur values.” (Chen 1986:84). It is therefore not surprising that native discourses on Uyghur identity are equally articulated around the notion of hospitality (*mehmandostluq*), although it is difficult to establish to what extent native representations are informed by the dominant discourse or, conversely, to what extent this reflects a native discourse.

4.1.1. Being a guest in a Uyghur home

I had my first ‘practical’ lesson in Uyghur hospitality shortly after I arrived in Ürümchi, when I was invited for dinner by my teacher Bahargül. When she opened the door of her flat and welcomed me inside, I was full of curiosity not knowing what to expect. As soon as she closed the door against the squalor of a concrete stairway in one of the forty-odd concrete apartment blocks where the university staff are lodged, I felt suddenly plunged into another world. She showed me the living room and invited me to take a seat.¹ I noticed the carpets on the floor and the pile of shoes at the entrance of the room, so I took my shoes off and walked in barefoot.

The room was small but very carefully furnished and decorated, and most of the space was taken by a sofa and a coffee table. Although I was the only guest, she showed me where to sit before leaving to get some fresh tea. Only later did I learn that rules of hospitality dictate that a guest should have the best seat, that is, the most central one facing the entrance to the room. Shortly after, Bahargül returned with a beautifully engraved copper teapot. She poured some tea in a bowl and offered it to me with both hands while inviting me to take (*eling!*) some *gezäklär* from the table. This was literally covered with small silver plates and crystal bowls full of raisins, walnuts, almonds, biscuits, dried apricots, sweets, meringues, cakes, and fresh fruit (cf. photo 23 showing a *dastikhan* laid with *gezäklär*). “I’m terribly sorry, I don’t have any *nan*

¹ By living room here I refer to what the Uyghur call *mehmankhana* (literally “guest room”), that is the room where guests are entertained.

(bread). You can do without all the rest, but *nan* should never be missing when you receive a guest” she apologised before leaving the room again. I was left there, dunking biscuits into my tea and wondering whether I would be expected to eat something else after all those good things. I started looking around: hand woven carpets on the floor and on the wall, behind the sofa; bright orange synthetic velvet curtains; embroidered cushions and white lace on the purple sofa; facing the sofa a glass-fronted cabinet with silver and crystal-ware carefully displayed ... The decor was not my taste, but I felt surprisingly cosy. That was the cosiest place I had been since I had arrived in China two weeks before.

My gaze was caught by a big *samovar*, complete with matching cups, when Bahargül walked into the room with a huge plate of steaming *polo* and a spoon. She placed it in front of me and invited me to start eating: “*yäng!*”. Before I could protest that it was far too much for me, she had left and come back with her own portion - at least four times smaller than mine - and sat down on a chair on the other side of the table. “*Polo* is made with rice, mutton, onions, and carrots. First you fry the onions and mutton in very hot and abundant oil, then you add the carrots, chopped into ‘match-sticks’, the rice, some water, and cook it covered for about thirty minutes. This is the basic recipe, I added some raisin and dried apricots too, I think it tastes nicer” explained Bahargül while we were eating, and added “*yäng!*” (eat!), as I had paused for a moment to listen to her.

I had already heard so much about *polo*. Virtually every Uyghur I had met had described it to me proudly as the Uyghur food *par excellence* and the most delicious food on earth. So much so that I was anticipating a disappointment when I would finally taste it. On the contrary, I found Bahargül’s *polo* absolutely delicious. In fact, a year - and hundreds of *polos* - later I would still rank it top of the list. “For Uyghurs, a guest should be treated with *polo*, as a sign of respect. It’s a rule of hospitality, when you invite someone for the first time, or on any special occasion, you should make *polo*” continued Bahargül. “Of course nowadays you can eat *polo* anywhere in the street, but it’s not the same as home-made *polo*. For instance, at home *polo* is always served with *salat*, a cold dish of fresh tomatoes, green peppers, cucumbers, and onions, seasoned with salt and vinegar. Like this ...” She shovelled a spoonful of such salad on my *polo* and I had to agree that a side dish of fresh vegetables matched perfectly such a fatty main course.

This was the most delicious meal I had in a long time but, despite Bahargül’s pressure, I had to leave nearly half of my generous portion. In the complex language of hospitality, I could never work out whether it was more polite to clean up one’s plate, showing appreciation, or to leave half of one’s portion there, stressing the host’s

generosity. In more than a year, I learned that in this realm almost nothing is straightforward. Fortunately, as a foreigner, I was not expected to be a competent speaker of that silent language of etiquette.

Indeed, interpreting the language of hospitality is not always easy and it can lead to amusing misunderstandings. For instance, when I met a friend or acquaintance in the street, we would stop to greet each other and exchange civilities; then, before parting, they would invariably say “*öygä keling!*” (come to my house!). In the beginning I interpreted this as an invitation and I used to reply “When?”, which must have provoked their amusement. It took me a while to realise that, most of the time, what they were actually implying was “good bye”. Nevertheless, sometimes people do want you to go along; hence it is difficult to shed all ambiguity and recognise a real invitation from a farewell. Usually the degree of familiarity, as well as the context, are useful indicators. Perhaps prescriptive notions of hospitality are operating when this kind of ‘symbolic’ invitation is made. At the same time, an implicit subcode allows people to get across their real intentions while being polite and hospitable. Hence we can look at hospitality as a marker of Uyghur identity, in the sense of shared meanings and norms of behaviour. In other words, being Uyghur also means knowing what is the right thing to do, or to say, both as a guest and as a host.

4.1.2. *Dastikhan* and *mehmandostluq*

Dastikhan is one of the keywords, if not *the* keyword, around which Uyghur notions of hospitality revolve. It literally means “table-cloth” and, due to a metonymic shift, its second meaning is “food” (*Shiyong* ...1996). However, *dastikhan* is seldom used in its literal meaning, for instance, the expression *dastikhan selish* (spreading the table-cloth) immediately conjures the image of a guest, possibly unexpected, being attended by the host; although nowadays the actual table-cloth is rarely used.² It is above all in this acceptation that the term *dastikhan* is strongly associated with notions of hospitality, such as in the expressions *dastikhan chong* or *dastikhan käng* (lit. having a large table-cloth), used to describe a very hospitable person, and its antonym *dastikhan yoq* (lit. without a table-cloth), meaning “stingy”, “mean”. Other

² In fact, the spreading of the tablecloth refers to the ‘traditional’ eating style, where people sit (or kneel) on carpets and mats around a tablecloth, on which the food is served (cf. photo 24). Today, sofas and coffee tables - on which usually no tablecloth is spread - have become very common in urban areas. Here too, however, there is a considerable degree of variation. While I have never come across a ‘traditional’ guestroom (with *supa* covered with carpets on which people sit) in Ürümqi, in Kashgar, for instance, the two styles coexist and one can find sofas and coffee tables in “traditional” houses (*öy*) as well as *supa* and carpets in ‘modern’ flats (*bina*).

occurrences of this word include *dastikhan aparmaq* (to send gifts of food), *dastikhan täyyarlimaq* (to prepare gifts of food), *dastikhan chaqirmaq* (to invite for a meal). Here too the stress is on social aspects of food. The 'table-cloth' is charged with meanings implying a whole range of food exchange whereby relationships are forged, maintained, and reinforced.

Mehmandostluq, the Uyghur word for "hospitality", is a similarly evocative term, where the two words *mehman* (guest) and *dost* (friend) are combined to convey the quality of being 'guest-friendly'. *Uyghur örp-adätleri*, a book on Uyghur customs published in Uyghur and therefore addressing a Uyghur public, devotes a whole section to this institution and provides some rules of hospitality:

Hospitality is the most precious tradition of the Uyghur people, who regard the arrival of a guest as the arrival of happiness. Hospitality is expressed in a number of ways.

- 1) As a sign of respect for the guest, a new table-cloth is spread. The guest is then treated with tea and corn-flour bread, at the least. Uyghur hospitality is displayed at its best during holidays and festivals.
- 2) Guests deserve respect. When serving tea or food to a guest, a serving tray should be used. If for any reason one is unable to use both hands, one should apologise by saying "Please forgive my single hand". Equally, both hands should be used when taking something from a guest's hands. This is a custom shared by all Uyghurs. When pouring tea or serving a guest, the right hand is used. Using the left hand is a sign of great impoliteness towards the guest.
- 3) When receiving a married couple, a female host should not serve tea or food directly to the male guest. The latter should be served only through a man.
- 4) Special attention should be paid in order to make sure that the bowl into which tea is poured or food is ladled out for the guest is not chipped. If tea or food is inadvertently served in a chipped bowl, once the host has realised this, s/he should eventually replace the bowl and apologise to the guest. When pouring tea to a guest, the bowl should not be filled up completely. Moreover, it is a sign of bad manners to pour tea in the middle of a bowl, so that it bubbles into a froth. In order to avoid this, tea should rather be poured against the side of the bowl. Never pour fresh tea on top of the old one, this should first be removed and then replaced with the fresh one.
- 5) If a guest is received in a house with *kang* and *supa*,³ s/he should be given a cushion to sit on.

³ See note 2.

- 6) Guests are welcomed and escorted outside the door or the gate. It is a big sign of disrespect sending a guest off without leaving one's doorstep.
- 7) If a guest comes riding a horse or a donkey, the host besides going out to welcome him or her should also take the animal from the guest's hand and tie it. Later, when the guest is leaving, the host should untie the animal and help the guest to mount. (Rakhman et al. 1996:113-114)

This sort of 'decatalogue for the Uyghur host' tells us that there are shared rules that should be respected when entertaining a guest. Some of these rules are described in great detail. However, this may just give us an indication of the complex role that hospitality plays in Uyghur society. In actual practice, the ways in which hospitality is performed vary considerably, from the most basic to the most elaborated, depending on the context.

4.1.3. Variation in hospitality

Since my first formal invitation at Bahargül's, I realised that the Uyghur code of hospitality can be very complex. In the following months I began to appreciate the great deal of variation in the display of hospitality. In fact, from the very beginning I could also experience a much less elaborated kind of hospitality from my other teacher Dilnur. We had only met twice when, at the end of our first class, she invited me to go to her house and have lunch with her. On our way home we stopped at the market to buy some vegetables, "I am going to make *pörä*" she said. The informality of this invitation became even more apparent when we got home. As we walked in, Dilnur showed me the living room to the right, then she gave me a pair of slippers and let me follow her through the corridor to the kitchen, where she started preparing the filling for *pörä*. She had kneaded the dough in the morning, since she used sourdough which needed at least a couple of hours to rise. Once the filling was ready, she spread the dough into wide circles, put some filling in each and then folded them into half. In the meantime she kept talking to me, explaining what she was doing and asking questions about my country. While she was frying the *pörä*, Anargül, her ten-year-old daughter, came home from school. Dilnur introduced me and asked her to make some tea. I followed Anargül in her mother's bedroom, just opposite the kitchen, where we sat on a carpet drinking tea and watching television, until Dilnur walked in with a steaming plate of *pörä* and we ate. This was the room where they normally sat as a family, to eat or watch television. Although at that time I could not fully appreciate the degree of informality in Dilnur's hospitality, I could feel that she wanted me to feel at home.

When she later said “this is your home, you can come any time”, I knew she really meant it.

The hospitality I could enjoy at Dilnur’s was probably the most ‘basic’, in terms of elaboration but certainly not in terms of warmth. At the other end of the spectrum I would situate the kind of hospitality displayed during the major Uyghur festivals, namely *Roza heyt*, *Qurban heyt*. Both are well known Islamic festivals: *Roza*, literally “fast”, closes the month of Ramadan, while seventy days later *Qurban*, literally “sacrifice”, commemorates Abraham’s sacrifice. During these festivals, which last three days, people are expected to visit relatives, friends, and acquaintances. The sequence of these visits should be ordered according to priority of moral respect, for instance one should first pay a visit to elderly and sick relatives. These occasions pose high demands in terms of hospitality, not only because of the huge number of visits that are exchanged, but also because people must perform the role of the host as well as that of the guest.

I was lucky enough to spend *Roza heyt* in Kashgar with my friend Nurqiz - although at the time I was not always sure this was a luck. That year, 1997, the end of Ramadan coincided with the Chinese Spring festival. This meant that the Uyghur and all the other Muslim peoples of China could enjoy, for once, a much longer holiday than the two or three days that they are normally granted on these occasions. Like all the other students at Xinjiang University, Nurqiz too had gone home to spend the holiday with her family and friends. When I arrived in Kashgar, a couple of days before the festival, I found that not only her family but all her friends were expecting me. The kind of hospitality I experienced during those days combined that reserved to an old friend who lives far away, as in the case of Nurqiz, with that reserved to a foreigner, probably the most valued and prestigious guest in Uyghur society. These days in China, and especially in this part of China, foreigners are often seen as a potential resource, as the key to access a world otherwise precluded to most people. This perception inevitably informs, in a more or less conscious way, most interactions with the local population. However, whenever I have been a guest in a Uyghur home I could clearly feel that, regardless of any possible ulterior motive, people were also truly honoured and felt genuine gratitude for the arrival of a guest from so far away. In other words, in this realm the boundaries between value and practice are blurred in a complex and sometimes contradictory mix of motivations - prescriptive norms, genuine feelings, interiorised values, pragmatic reasons, etc. - that hospitality encapsulates.

When I arrived in Kashgar, short before the end of the holy month of Ramadan, the streets were bustling with people selling and buying, getting ready for the festival.

In every home women were busy cleaning the house, making *sangza*,⁴ and preparing the *mehmankhana* (guest room) by “spreading the tablecloth” - literally or metaphorically - and covering it with all sorts of *gezäklär* (sweets, fruit, biscuits, bread, dried fruit, etc.); cf. photos 23-24). Nurqiz’s mother was even busier, since on top of all that she also had to cook two extra meals a day for Nurqiz and me who, unlike the rest of the family, were not fasting. These meals were very informal in terms of etiquette, in contrast with the formal visit I had to perform a couple of days later by sitting for “at least twenty minutes”, as Nurqiz instructed me, in her family’s *mehmankhana*. At dawn on the day of the *hey*t, all men converged to the Idkah Mosque, the biggest in the whole province, for the *namaz*. According to Nurqiz’s father, the giant square in front of the Mosque was completely covered with men who were praying. This *namaz* marked the break of the fast and the beginning of the festival. Later that morning Nurqiz wore the new dress she had bought for the occasion and we set out for our first visit. She explained that in most cases people sit for no longer than half an hour, just enough to drink some tea and exchange a few words with the host. However, for us it was different and we had a long list of people, mostly Nurqiz’s old school mates, who were each expecting us to stay for a meal, no matter if that would have been the third or fourth meal for us in a day. In the beginning I was very excited by the prospect of such an intense fieldwork session, but by the end of the second day I began to feel tired and suggested that perhaps we could have declined some of the invitations that we had lined up for the following day. “That’s impossible” said Nurqiz “it would be very impolite. We must go ... we don’t need to stay that long and you can eat just a little, to be polite”. I was aware that these people were making an extra effort, in those busy days, to show me their utmost hospitality. However, it is a lot easier to appreciate this retrospectively. At the time I felt extremely relieved when we finally bid farewell to the last of our hosts.

The same pattern of short formal visiting (in Uyghur *hey*t *pätisi*) is repeated during the Qurban festival, except that on this occasion guests are also expected to eat some of the *qurban göshi* (“sacrificial meat”), that is the meat of the sheep that each family is supposed to slaughter on the first day of the festival. In 1997 the Qurban festival was celebrated in April and this time there were only three days of holiday. I stayed in Ürümchi and the first day I followed Nurqiz, who was visiting those among her many relatives who lived in town. We paid our first visit to Gülnur, a cousin of her mother’s who lived not far from the University. It was still early and the whole family was busy getting ready to entertain guests and to go out and visit other people.

⁴ A sort of fried crunchy noodle made with sheep fat and arranged in the shape of a spiral. These are made exclusively during the two festivals of *Roza* and *Qurban*.



Photo 23 - *Mehmankhana* (guestroom) in a Uyghur house prepared to attend guests during the Roza festival. In the middle of the *dastikhana* (tablecloth) *sangza* and, behind, a stack of *nan*.



Photo 24 - Attending guests in a Uyghur house during the Roza festival.

While she was laying the table, Gülnur complained to Nurqiz that all her Han colleagues wanted to visit the following day. "There's so many of them, and it's not even their festival! As if we didn't have already enough to do ... I stayed up all night to make *sangza*. They should give us a holiday *before*, not after the festival, to have enough time to prepare everything."

Compared to a place like Kashgar, in Ürümqi, a predominantly Han and 'modern' city, adhering to norms and values of hospitality can be a much heavier burden for a Uyghur woman, who is faced with the difficult task of mediating between often contrasting demands. Besides a working schedule which is not at all designed to accommodate Uyghur traditions and values, Gülnur's remarks also point to what we may call the 'politics of hospitality'. That is, that subtle game by virtue of which from 'patients' who feel obliged to extend their hospitality to the Han, Uyghurs turn into 'agents' who are empowered by this very same situation, as discussed in the following section.

In short, we have seen that hospitality is a shared value among the Uyghur, and that it is considered a marker of identity both by Uyghurs themselves and by the Chinese, in official rhetoric as well as in popular discourse. But what does it entail being hospitable? How is hospitality performed? The above accounts suggests that the answers to these questions are rather complex and that it is reductive, if not impossible, to summarise them in a set of rules. It is necessary to make a distinction not only between hospitality as a value and as a practice, but also among different 'degrees' of hospitality, that is from the most basic to the most elaborated, depending on the guest and on the occasion. Such variation can be manifested in a number of variables, such as the type and amount of food, from simply tea and bread to a more or less elaborated meal; the space where a guest is entertained, which could be the *mehmankhana*, the room where the family normally hangs out, or even the kitchen; or else time, both as duration as well as time of the day in which a visit is paid.

In particular, it seems that the degree of elaboration increases with the 'social distance' between the guest and the host. Such distance may be determined by a variety of factors, such as difference in age, gender, social status, etc., or simply by the occasion (a casual visit as opposed to, say, the Qurban festival). In other words, it depends on the role that each actor is playing in each particular context. The kind of hospitality will also vary depending on the extent to which it is dictated on the one hand by genuine feelings for the guest - and for the host - and on the other by prescriptive norms of behaviour. Indeed hospitality, as a practice, is a combination of these two elements and, when normative considerations prevail, it can be a painful chore for both the host and the guest. I often experienced Uyghur hospitality both as a

pleasure and, at the same time, as an obligation: the higher the distance and hence the scale of elaboration, the more the interaction had to be mediated by the appropriate code of behaviour. In practice this meant, for instance, feeling obliged to eat even if I was not hungry at all. For me, this was further complicated by 'social ignorance', as it is not always easy for an outsider to discern politeness from actual intentions - to understand, for instance, when people mean what they say and when instead they are performing the role of the host - and to know how is one supposed to react as a guest. To give but one example, not only should one know that when a guest manifests the intention to leave the host is expected to stop him from leaving, but one also needs to know how many times this polite dialogue should take place before the guest can actually leave. This is not so straightforward but will depend on the context, that is on the degree of elaboration.

It is above all in this sense that hospitality is a marker of Uyghur identity: as an interiorised value which is manifested also through normative behaviour. The competence in decoding such behaviour may function as a boundary, hence an outsider can be defined by the complete or partial lack of this competence. However, things are not so clear-cut and even within the community successful decoding may be affected by a whole host of factors. Here too it is useful to consider 'competence in hospitality' as a tendency rather than an objective and universal trait among the Uyghur.

4.1.4. The politics of hospitality

Hospitality is a universal value among Uyghurs. However, we have seen that in actual practice it can be performed in a variety of ways and take on a variety of meanings. Hence it is not easy to disentangle all the different narratives embedded in the practice of hospitality. While at the core there certainly is genuine friendliness and generosity, another important dimension is a prescriptive notion: one is expected to behave in a certain way and will be judged accordingly. This tension was often articulated by Uyghurs in Ürümqi, both taking pride in their people's renowned hospitality, but equally complaining about it as a chore. I have heard several times Uyghur women complaining about all the work and inconvenience entailed by the presence of a guest. These were all women who had a job outside their home and found it often difficult to combine their urban lifestyle with "traditional" Uyghur values, such as that of a housewife's hospitality, to which they nevertheless subscribed. A common remark was "In southern Xinjiang" or "In the countryside it is different, people there are truly

hospitable. They can afford it because women usually don't have a job and even those who work, including the men, can take it a lot easier, they can take time off, or even a day, whenever they want. They don't realise that in Ürümqi it's not like that. Our working schedule is much tighter and we can't take time off simply because we have a guest." Such comments were usually elicited by the presence of a relative or friend from that person's hometown.

Notions of hospitality are so pervasive in Uyghur culture and society that they are also used to articulate a (political) discourse of resistance. "We are hospitable, but not stupid" a friend once told me "when, during the holidays, our Han colleagues come to our houses, we offer them tea and food with a smile on our face. But in our heart we cry." She then pulled out a tape hidden behind a draw and played it to me. "You must listen to this, it's really interesting...":

"*Sulayman Guwah*, a poem by Takhir Talip" announced emphatically a male voice, creating an amusing contrast with the poor quality of both the tape and the tape recorder. A cheerful tune, a sort of traditional-style electronic tune, introduced the poem, somehow anticipating its comic tone, then the tune faded in the background and the male voice started reciting:

"There's a guest!" children shouted
I also greeted him with happiness
I spread the table-cloth for him generously
I asked him to feel at home throughout

I offered and kept him at the guest's seat
I gave him food until he refused
I took him to the gardens and orchards
He truly enjoyed himself

He got fatter and his belly got bigger
By eating the *polo* and meat I provided
He sat there and never moved
No mention of leaving at all

"What kind of guest is this?" I wondered
As I have never seen a guest who doesn't leave
The characteristics of this guest have taken me aback

Later I learned that he is my big brother⁵

My father had him on his way to Mecca [with another woman]
We hugged again after learning the long kept secret
My stepmother cheated him and told him to follow
his stepfather's footsteps
She gave him a jar filled with fragrances and sent him
to find his little brothers

He is still sitting at the guest's seat
I think I've done enough for our brotherhood
But I keep my head down all the time in front of him
And I do not hide anything from him

Now I feel a guest in my own home
I feel obliged to be grateful to him even for a cup of tea
He started giving me orders
I virtually became his servant

I am in this situation now
I, kind and obedient
I am even willing to be a resting place for birds
Sulayman could prove all this⁶

The tape was a collection of fifteen poems written by contemporary Uyghur writers. *Pighan* ("Sigh"), one of these poems, gave the title to the collection, which featured well known masterpieces, such as *Oyghan* by Abduwaliq Uyghur and *Iz* by Abdurehim Ötkür, along with less famous but equally meaningful pieces. This tape came out in 1993; one of the poems, *Häykäl* (Statue) was first published on the *Wulumuqi Wanbao* (Ürümchi Evening Standard). In this poem a Uyghur veteran of the Ili rebellion, which in Communist China is officially called "the three provinces revolution" (*sanqu geming*), stands at the foot of a statue dedicated to the Unknown Soldier (a Han). He remembers the times when they were 'brothers', fighting together against the nationalists to liberate Xinjiang, and regrets the present, when all the promises that were made then seem to be forgotten. They are no longer brothers and

⁵ See chapter 3 on the Han being the *aka millät* ("older-brother nationality").

⁶ Many thanks to Mamtimyn Sünnät for helping with the transcription and translation of this poem.

while one is 'up there', the other stays 'down here', "eyes red with anger and a sigh in my heart".

"In the beginning, *they* didn't realise what this was all about ... when they finally did, the poem and the whole tape were banned and the statue, which was at *beimen*, was removed. ... Well, you know, this tape is basically all against the Han ... these lyrics are full of meaning, although not everybody can understand them. For us it's obvious, perhaps because metaphors are a privileged form in Uyghur literature. These poems talk directly to our hearts."

Despite the fact that this tape is now illegal, like all similar publications, both printed and recorded, it probably enjoys an even wider circulation than when it was openly sold in shops. I asked my friend if I could borrow that tape in order to copy it. She hesitated and then said that hers was already a copy of a copy that a friend had given her, and that I probably would not have been able to understand a word had I made a further copy of it. I wondered to what extent her hesitation was due to genuine concern about sound quality, or if it was rather dictated by the nature of the tape and the atmosphere of suspicion and fear that was reigning in Xinjiang. Therefore I suggested that I would try to find a better copy first, and I would use hers only as a last resort. I needed someone I trusted and who trusted me, preferably someone 'on the ball', with an extended network: Tursun was the ideal person. We met for lunch the following day and, after making sure that nobody could listen to our conversation, I told him what I was after. He had never heard of the tape but said he would find it for me. Few days later he turned up in my room and put the tape on my desk "This is the tape you wanted, *Pighan*. It's an original, I borrowed it from a friend. In fact, it's his father's and we have to give it back as soon as possible. Don't show it to anybody and make me a copy too, all right?"

This was the atmosphere in Ürümqi in 1996-1997. It is not surprising, then, that virtually every word and every act, even those apparently insignificant, could be loaded with symbolic meaning. The harsher the censorship and repression, the subtler and more sophisticated the strategies for daily resistance. The less people are allowed to openly articulate a political discourse, the more innocent activities such as eating or feeding a guest can become politicised. The metaphor of the guest is a particularly powerful one, given the role that the value of hospitality plays in Uyghur society. Here a discourse of resistance is played on the subtle ambiguity of the host-guest relationship. On the one hand, the Uyghur portray themselves as victims of an abuse, committed by a guest who takes advantage of their hospitality. But, on the other hand, by depicting themselves as hosts they give an empowered image of themselves, even when they are reluctant hosts to a guest that never leaves. As we shall discuss in later

chapters, their role as hosts is made even more powerful by the fact that they refuse to be the Han's guests, thus establishing an asymmetrical power relation by condemning the Han to the impossibility to reciprocate.

4.2. Food in rituals and ceremonies

"Perhaps we [Uyghur people] are poorer because of all the ceremonies prescribed by our religion, like weddings, circumcisions ... each time one has to invite hundreds of people." This was Bahargül's conclusion to a long digression on ethnic inequality in Xinjiang during one of our first classes. While being a consciously simplistic explanation, this statement is significant here in that it points out the frequency and the size of such celebrations in Uyghur society. In these occasions food plays an important role, both symbolically and socially. Often a particular food item is charged with ritual meaning and, almost invariably, the offering and sharing of food is used to mark the event.

"Before I die I must settle my debt" Bäkhtiyar's father once said, meaning that he wanted to have him married. "A father has two duties towards his son: he must have him circumcised and he must have him married, then he can rest in peace" explained Bäkhtiyar. It follows that the two main events in a man's life that require adequate celebrations are circumcision (*sünnät toy*) and wedding (*qiz-yigit toy*). According to Uyghur custom, girls are also celebrated, on the fortieth day of their birth, with a *böshük toy* ("cradle party"). While this is a Uyghur, rather than Muslim, tradition, for the purpose of our discussion this celebration can be assimilated to the *sünnät toy* in that, at least in Ürümchi, it involves the same kind of food events.

For urban Uyghurs today a circumcision or a wedding imply a huge banquet, with hundreds of guests, held in a work-unit dining hall or, more prestigiously, in a restaurant. To my question "what is the difference between a *sünnät toy* and a *toy*?" the reply was "There is no difference, except that in the former you greet the boy while in the latter the groom and the bride; the rest is the same: food, spirit (*baijiu*), and dances". Whatever significance these ceremonies may have for those directly involved - such as the boy, the newly married couple, and their families - to an external observer the most striking social content is the display of prestige and affluence. Privately many seem to complain, both among hosts and among guests, about the obligations they feel with respect to such ceremonies: for the host they represent a huge expense, while the guests say that there are too many of them and most of the time they attend simply because they feel obliged to. Yet more and more money are

spent on these occasions, hosts are easily offended if one does not attend and guests are resentful when they are not invited. In short, these events largely dominate urban Uyghurs' life.

At the other end of the life cycle, death is also marked by food events. According to the Muslim custom, on the same day that death has occurred, the dead is taken to the mosque for the *jinaza namizi* (funeral) and then buried in the cemetery. A commemorative *näzir* (a gathering involving a meal) is held on the third, the seventh and the fortieth day as well as after one year. With the exception of close female relatives, only men take part in the *näzir*. On those days mourners start visiting the dead's family from the morning and are offered food, usually *polo*. In Ürümqi, since flats are very small, a *näzir* may be held in a public space (a restaurant or a dining hall), especially when the dead is a public figure and many guests are expected. Besides the *näzir*, during the forty days following a person's death, friends and acquaintances are expected to visit the family (*ölüm pätish*) and bring a "tray" (*tawaq*), that is, some ready-made food such as *manta* (steamed dumplings), *samsa* (baked dumplings), or at least some boiled eggs, on the assumption that family members are mourning and need to be fed.

A recently introduced custom is that of celebrating birthdays. As in the rest of China, this has been adopted from the West and has become popular especially during the 1990s. However, birthday parties tend to be reserved to children and younger generations. As Bäkhtiyar, who was then in his mid-twenties, put it "I don't even know what day I was born, my mother claims it was during the apricot season, my father swears it was in the grape season ... in the end on my ID they wrote 20 June. Anyway, I don't care because I don't celebrate. Traditionally Uyghurs don't celebrate birthdays, in my household only my younger brother and sister, who are seven and twelve, celebrate their birthdays, it's because they have learned from TV."

Uyghur parents in Ürümqi celebrate their children's birthday with a dinner party. The magnitude of this may vary, from a meal at home where other children and their mothers are invited, to a banquet in the most expensive restaurant in town, worth a few thousand yuan. During a five-year-old's birthday party, which her parents held at home, I could observe a fascinating contamination of cultures: while children were quietly playing in the smaller room, adult guests, mostly their mothers, were entertained according to Uyghur rules of hospitality with tea and *gezäklär* in the living room. Once everybody had arrived, they served a western-style birthday cake and performed the 'cake ceremony' (with candles etc.), while a plastic birthday gadget was playing an obnoxiously loud 'happy-birthday-to-you' tune which seemed to go on forever. After the cake, which tasted rather like greasy toothpaste, they served a meal

consisting in a number of Chinese style stir-fried dishes (*sāy*). At the end of the meal rose wine (*meiguixiang*) was offered to the women, while the few men who were there drank *baijiu* (Chinese distilled spirit).

I will now turn to a detailed discussion of the wedding, this being the ceremony that I have had the opportunity to observe more closely, perhaps because most of the people I was involved with belonged to an age group where this was the most relevant event. Moreover, it illuminates a whole range of pertinent issues concerning contemporary Uyghur society.

4.2.1. Uyghur Weddings

Weddings (*toy*) occupy a central role in Uyghur life, both as a religious institution and, even more so, as a social event. They often represent the most conspicuous expense in a household budget, since they are *the* opportunity to display a family's wealth and/or power thus confirming or acquiring a certain status and prestige in the community. Weddings can also be a privileged means for establishing or reinforcing a social network, through affinal relationships. Moreover, wedding celebrations can provide an arena for the definition and reproduction of social hierarchies. From the 1980s, and especially since the early 1990s, with the rapid introduction of new values, new models, and new life-styles, things have been changing relatively fast throughout China. This is true also of Xinjiang where, although perhaps at a slower pace, change has been particularly evident in big cities like Ürümchi. Marriage too, both as an institution and as a ceremony, has been affected. Young people are getting more and more independent and, sometimes, they may even earn more than their parents. Young women start thinking about their career too and their perspectives on marriage are rapidly changing. Both age and gender relations are thus undergoing a process of redefinition. With the following accounts I intend to illustrate such dynamic situation and to look at weddings not as an archetypal institution but rather as intimately bound to the socio-cultural context of contemporary Uyghur (urban) life. For this reason I have chosen to reconstruct Uyghur weddings as a process. Through the words of some Uyghur young people, as well as by giving an account of my own experience at a wedding party, I intend to convey both the complexity and some degree of variation. Moreover, by providing a multiple perspective on this event, I hope to represent Uyghur weddings as a lived experience.

The pattern of Uyghur weddings may present a great deal of variation, especially between different areas. In order to make the following descriptions more intelligible, I

will briefly sketch the main stages of what I regard as the wedding process, before introducing native accounts. The actual wedding starts early in the morning with the religious ceremony (*nikah*) performed by an *imam* at the bride's house. Later that day, friends and relatives are invited to celebrate. Celebrations - mostly involving a banquet - occur in different stages and involve different groups, divided according to gender and age. Older people take part to the earlier part of the celebration, starting in the late morning, and give way to younger guests in the early afternoon. Moreover, the bride and the groom start two separate parties and only later, in the afternoon, the groom and his bestmen go to fetch the bride and her party joins the groom's party. Other events precede and follow the actual wedding, respectively the *mäslihät chay* and the *chong chay* before, and *salam* and *chillaq* after the wedding. This is a basic pattern, which roughly reproduces what can be observed in Ürümchi.

Last Saturday I went to one of my best friend's wedding - began Gülbahar. Only a month ago she swore she wouldn't get married before a year or two ... I didn't even know her boyfriend, they've been going out only for three or four months. Anyway, these days it's fairly common that girls get married so quickly, I think they marry as soon as they find a good match, it's not about love. At the wedding I had a lot of fun and I danced all day. From eleven in the morning until four in the afternoon we were at the bride's restaurant, then the men came to fetch the bride and we moved to the groom's restaurant, where we stayed until ten in the evening. I went there so early because the bride was one of my best friends, we went to college together. If the groom were my best friend I would have gone to his restaurant, but only to greet him, I wouldn't have stayed because they are all men and they drink. I would have gone back in the afternoon. After we moved to the groom's restaurant, his mother kissed the bride and gave her a ring. Then the older people left and we danced all night *usul* [Uyghur dance], disco, and *tangsa* [waltzing] ... but mostly *usul*, unlike other weddings. If you don't know any of the male guests it's a bit boring, you don't get many chances to dance since it's very rare that a stranger invites you and you cannot dance if you're not invited.

Gülbahar is twenty-four and is doing a Master's in economics. She has clear ideas about her future. Although she is aware of all the difficulties - being a Uyghur and a woman - she wants to study and, ultimately, her dream is becoming a woman manager. She says her parents support her choice and she expects a prospective partner to support her too and to grant her a reasonable degree of independence. She thinks it is not easy to find such Uyghur men because "usually they don't want a

girlfriend who is 'better' than them", although it turns out that her two room-mates apparently have found such men. On the other hand she feels social pressure for having a partner and getting married soon, lest people think that nobody wants her.

Gülbahar says that until the late 1980s weddings were 'traditional', the bride wore a 'traditional' Uyghur costume, like those that *usul* professional dancers wear today. Then the white wedding dress was introduced. Today, ten years later, someone in Ürümqi may choose to have a 'traditional' wedding. She knows of a friend of a friend who made this choice: no alcohol at her wedding, only tea; no modern dances like *tangsa* and disco, only Uyghur *usul*. However, she says that guests do not appreciate much.

Once people used to give lengths of material or silver and crystal ware as a wedding present. Nowadays in Ürümqi everybody gives money, both the guests and the bride and groom find it more convenient. By law women must be eighteen and men twenty before they can get married. However, in the countryside girls can be married when they are only fourteen or fifteen, sometimes even thirteen. Often the groom is forty or older, usually he is someone who has money and is willing to help a poor family if they let him marry their young daughter. Girls don't agree, but they have no choice because their parents force them. Sometimes an older man doesn't need to be rich in order to marry a young girl, she can be the daughter of a friend. In the countryside, for instance in Aqtu county, people are so poor ... they may have more than ten children and they have nothing to live on because they must sell to the state at subsidised prices everything they produce.

Gülbahar likes to talk about marriage and relationships in general. She believes in romantic love, as well as in women emancipation, and she feels that most of her friends do not share her views, but rather value status, money, success. Her ideas about peasant women's condition may be that of an educated urban dweller; however, she does have first hand experience of rural areas since her family is from Kashgar and she goes there often to visit her grandparents, who "live near Aqtu in a traditional Uyghur house with grapes, apricots, figs, sheep, two cows, and a donkey for the cart".

The wedding process

When Uyghur people talk about a wedding (*toy*), most of the time like Gülbahar they refer to the party. In fact, there are different stages in a Uyghur wedding and not everybody takes part in all of them. Today the precondition to celebrate a wedding is to obtain a marriage certificate (*jiehun zheng*) from the relevant office. This may happen several months before the actual wedding ceremony and, by law, a couple who has such certificate is already married. However, people do not perceive this as part of the wedding, and a couple is considered married only after the religious ceremony (*nikah*) and the public party have taken place. “Dilbär and Shireli had their marriage certificate for two years before they could get married” explained Nurqiz, “finally their parents agreed and they celebrated their wedding a month ago”.

Food plays a role in each stage of the Uyghur wedding process, both symbolically and as the core of a socialising event. I asked Gülbahar and Nurqiz to give me a complete account of the wedding, since, as a guest, I had only attended the final celebration.

Early in the morning, around six Xinjiang time, the *imam* goes to the bride's house to perform the *nikah*. The groom is there with his father and close male friends, together with the bride's family and close friends. Only a few people take part in this stage. The *imam* recites the *Qur'an* in a room together with the groom and his friends, while the bride is in the next room, where she can hear unseen. At the end the *imam* asks the couple whether they agree on getting married, and they reply “*maqul*” [yes]. Then the *imam* dunks some *nan* in salted water, breaks it into two and gives one piece each to the groom's and the bride's friends. They, in turn, give it to the bride and the groom, who must both eat the *nan*, in order to get off to a good start. If the bride eats it first, because her friends are faster, she will be the one to run the household.⁷

After the *nikah* everybody goes home, only to meet again a few hours later at the respective parties, which start at around eleven in the morning. There are basically three parties: the bride and her friends meet at her place or in a restaurant, if her house is small - which is almost always the case in Ürümqi; another party is held by the bride's parents for their friends and older relatives; while the groom's parents entertain their own friends and older relatives, in a restaurant or dining hall. In the early afternoon, the groom's

⁷ This description roughly corresponds to that in *Uyghur örp-adätleri* (Uyghur Customs). In particular the book says: “Uyghurs believe that salt strengthens the young couple's love. ... It is said that the side who takes it [the *nan*] first will not fear the other side” (Rakhman 1996:129).

friends join this last party and most of the older guests leave. Then the groom, with a group of friends, goes to fetch the bride and her guests - mostly women. Originally he went on a cart, with a band playing *naghra-sunay* [kettle drums and shawm]; nowadays they use fancy cars, but they still have a pick-up truck with people playing *naghra-sunay* to open the procession. At this stage the party becomes one, mostly of young people, with the exception of older family members. After people have eaten, the groom's mother welcomes the bride to the family by kissing her and giving her a ring, then the older people leave and the young keep celebrating.

Weddings in Kashgar

According to Nurqiz weddings in Ürümchi have inevitably adapted to the city's lifestyle and rhythms, the two main factors being lack of space and time, compared to other parts of the region. "For instance" she says "weddings in Kashgar, especially in rural areas, are very different from here, they usually last two days." The morning of the first day the *nikah* is performed at the bride's house. Not many people take part and, apart from the bride and a few close female relatives, all the other participants are male. After the *nikah*, a *nāzir* is held at the bride's house and all the men of the local mosque community (*mahalla*) are invited to eat *polo*, which is provided by the groom's family. During the morning, the men also visit the groom's house. In the afternoon the bride's female guests go to her house, while the groom's female guests and his closest male friends celebrate at his house. Later in the afternoon the *toy* (party) is held at the groom's house, with male and female guests. Food, such as *polo*, *manta*, *samsa*, is shared in fours and is usually eaten with fingers. Men dance Uyghur *usul* to live 'traditional' music and drink discretely. In the evening, the groom and his male friends go to fetch the bride and take her to his house, usually on a horse or a donkey cart. Three female relatives - but not too close - of the bride go with her and prepare the nuptial bed. That night they sleep in the room next door and the next morning they go and check that there is blood on the sheets. The second day the bride does not wear white anymore but red, to symbolise the transition from *qiz* to *ayal*, in short her new status of (married) woman.⁸

⁸ For the Uyghur a woman who is not married yet is a *qiz* ("girl", but also "virgin"; *qizliq*, "the quality of being a girl", means "virginity"). Being an *ayal* ("woman") implies being married. It struck me that Nurqiz included this detail in her description. In fact, virginity was an issue that was discussed and possibly challenged among urban youth in Ürümchi, at least among those I knew.

On the second day there is *nashtiliq* in the morning and *yüz achqu* (unveiling) in the afternoon, the latter includes *tartishmaq* (skirmish). *Nashtiliq* lasts half a day and is a sort of brunch where close female relatives and friends of the bride bring a wide variety of foods, such as *polo*, *manta*, *öpgä hesip*, *kawap*, to the groom's house. The afternoon, always at the groom's house, is devoted to the *yüz achqu* (unveiling) ceremony, to which the groom's young male friends and both sides' female guests participate. The food offered is simpler: *polo*, *manta*, and *qordaq*. Before the actual unveiling, *tartishmaq* (skirmish) takes place, either in the courtyard (*oyla*) or in the hall (*mehmankhana*): the groom and his mother-in-law (*qeyin ana*) want to exchange presents, usually lengths of material, but her friends prevent her from reaching him, on the grounds that now that he is her son it is he who must come to her. Similarly, the groom's friends stop him from approaching her saying that she is his mother now, therefore she must come. This skirmish lasts about half an hour and eventually they meet half way. The actual unveiling (*yüz achqu*) is performed in the hall. The bride seats in a corner, usually on the *supa*, and her mother covers her head with a long precious drape. The groom's younger sister - or a cousin, or a niece, provided that she is younger than eighteen - while dancing *usul* slowly pulls the drape until the bride is completely unveiled, at which point she kisses her.

A wedding party in Ürümchi

None of my closer friends got married while I was there, however, since weddings are large-scale social occasions I had the opportunity to attend several of them. Below I give an account of my experience at a wedding in Ürümchi.

It is a Saturday afternoon in mid-June and I am getting ready to attend a wedding party. I have no idea who is getting married but Yasin, a friend who studies in the literature department, has insisted that I should go. "It's an 'upper class' wedding, you may meet interesting people, they work at the TV station". He had been invited and asked to take a foreign friend with him. This will probably give prestige both to him and to the hosts, I think to myself. On the other hand, he believes that it would be an interesting experience for me. When I protest that I do not know any of the women there, he says that he has arranged everything: Rahilä, a friend of his from the language department who claims to know me, will take care of me.

The wedding party is held in the *zal* (hall) of the Xinjiang Central Television station, just across the road from the studios. It is four o'clock when we get there and people are still arriving, some lingering outside for a while before getting in. A young

woman meets us at the entrance, it is Rahilä. She greets Yasin and takes me to a table. We cross the entire hall diagonally until we reach the last table in the corner on the (young) women side. There are already some eight or ten young women sitting there. Rahilä introduces me and leaves to meet other guests.

The women's side is fairly crowded, while the men's is nearly empty. They have all gone to fetch the bride. The nuptial table has been arranged just two tables behind us, right in the middle of the women's side. I look around: the young woman on my left seems approachable and I start a conversation. She studies literature at Xinjiang Normal University. She and the woman to her left have been friends with Rahilä since they were children, they grew up together. After a while, I gather that Rahilä is the *qiz beshi* (literally "head-girl"), that is, she is in charge of the women side. Yet I am still not clear as to her relationship with the newly wed, perhaps she is a relative. Later Yasin would tell me that she is the groom's younger sister.

While we wait for the bride, we chat and munch the usual *gezäklär* - biscuits, sweets, raisins, walnuts, etc. - that are always served to entertain guests before a meal. For some reason the serving of tea is delayed. Short before the bride arrives, Rahilä opens the dances and some women join her. They start with Uyghur *usul* and after a while men join them too. Before food is served, there is a solo performance by a woman *usulchi* (professional *usul* dancer) in her late forties, probably a guest, and a few more rounds of *usul* danced by couples. Dancing will be resumed after eating and it will be mostly *tangsa* (waltzing).

All in all, the twelve young women who are sitting at my table are not an exciting company. They spend their time looking into their mirrors, making themselves up, and arranging their hair. I wish I could sit with the older women, who are much more talkative and far more interesting. Moreover, I am closer to their age, although I do not share their status: for them I am still a *qiz* (girl) and not an *ayal* (woman). All the guests are dressed up and I surprise myself being shocked by the arrival of a young woman wearing a vest and dungarees. I love her casual style but, as I look around, I find her totally out of place among all those frills. I have partly internalised local fashion and modesty standards and I find myself staring at her naked shoulders with a mixture of admiration and disapproval.

Finally, around five o'clock, the bride and the groom arrive. The bride is wearing a white long wide dress and is accompanied by her *qiz qoldash* (maid) who wears a very similar dress, only bright red. They reach their seats at the nuptial table with some difficulty, given the width of their dresses. The groom and his best man are the only men at that table. Meanwhile, the band, which includes a synthesiser, an electric guitar, and a singer, keeps playing Uyghur pop songs by Abdulla, M.

Sulayman, and others, while the photographer and cameraman keep shooting. Shortly after they have arrived, the bride, groom, best man and maid of honour, move to the middle of the hall. Here the groom's mother unveils the bride, whose face so far has been covered by a white wedding veil, gives her a ring, and covers her head with a red veil, which symbolises her new married status. Later, the bride and groom are called out again, they must dance while their friends spray them with streamers and urge them to kiss. Their third outing is for the group photographs (photo 26).

I keep staring at the bride while she sits with a very serious, almost sad, expression and her maid clears the make up which is melting on her face. I wonder if she is performing, if she is simply behaving as a bride is expected to behave on her wedding day, or if she is really sad or, most probably, tired. I look at the whole wedding as a performance, the bride sad and serious, the girls making themselves up. I cannot help recalling some older women's comments that weddings are an unavoidable bother. Yet, younger people seem to enjoy them, at least according to Gülbahar.

At about six they start serving food. Since this is a work-unit hall and not a restaurant, they have hired some cooks. As usual, it is guests - close friends and relatives - who serve. This happens also when the party is in a restaurant. The menu follows what seems to be a standard wedding meal pattern in Ürümchi, starting with Uyghur 'traditional' food followed by *liangsäy* (cold dishes) and *sosäy* (stir fried dishes; cf. photo 25). However, this is not as rich as at other weddings I have attended, where they had more Uyghur dishes and more *säy*. Here they serve first some *qordaq* (a mutton stew), then three *liangsäy* (cucumbers, tripe, soya noodles), a *dabanji* (chicken stew), and finally four *sosäy* (meat with peppers, meat with green beans, scrambled eggs and mushrooms, spinach).⁹ The actual meal lasts roughly half an hour, then people start dancing again. At this stage men intrude the women's space and 'shop' around for a dancing partner. Women do not seem to have a very active role, they cannot dance if nobody invites them, nor is it always easy to refuse an invitation.

Once the meal is over, they bring a tray with bottles of champagne, *baijiu*, boxes of cigarettes, and tins of Sprite, to the nuptial table. As far as I see it stays there untouched. Meanwhile, two women - and two men on the men's side - start collecting gifts: they stop at each table and, while one collects the money from each guest, the other records on a notebook the name and the sum that has been given.¹⁰ By eight o'clock some guests are already leaving. I cross the hall through the men's side, where

⁹ For a discussion of dishes, menus, etc. see chapter 6.

¹⁰ I was told that the standard offer at a wedding banquet was around 30 yuan.



Photo 25 - A women's table at a Uyghur wedding in Ürümqi.



Photo 26 - Group photograph at a Uyghur wedding in Ürümqi.

they have started the drinking session, and I go out. There I find Yasin, my friend, who is sitting at a long table with a dozen men in their fifties. As I get closer he tells me that these are intellectuals and that if I am ready to drink a few glasses it might be interesting to sit with them for a while. After I am introduced, they first insist that I look Uyghur, then suddenly ask me if men and women are equal. I say yes. "Then sit down and drink!" I protest until we reach a compromise: I will only drink a glass of beer. After a couple of toasts I realize that they are quite drunk and decide to leave. Later, Yasin's comment is "If these are Uyghur intellectuals ... we are hopeless!" But after all, who says that intellectuals cannot have fun?

The material and the moral economy of Uyghur weddings

So far, I have proposed different accounts of what happens at weddings. In fact, the process that culminates on the wedding day actually starts at least a week before, with the *mäslihät chay* and the *chong chay* (or *ashsoy*, in Kashgar). The *mäslihät chay* (lit. "advice tea") is something like a stag or hen-night, a meal organised about a week before the wedding by the groom and the bride separately, each with his/her own friends, in order to collect money and organise the practicalities of the wedding, such as who is going to serve tea and food, who is going to arrange the cars, etc.. If weddings mean a huge expense for the groom's family, they may also have financial consequences on the bride and the groom's closer friends. This is particularly true for a very popular person like Tursun. He once showed me his empty wallet and told me he was broke "It's because of all these *mäslihät chay*. Last night I had one and I gave 200 yuan. This month I've attended three. At one I gave 300 yuan, at another I arranged a couple of cars for the wedding. My salary is 700 yuan a month, which is not bad for a young person, but still, it's not a lot of money. If a good friend gets married, one gives 500 yuan. The least one can give, for not too close friends, is 100-200 yuan."

After all, there might have been some truth in Bahargül's statement that Uyghurs are poorer because of all their ceremonies. When considering all the money that is spent on weddings, one wonders how people can afford it. However, this is not incomprehensible from a Uyghur perspective. As Bäkhtiyar remarked above, 'marrying' a son is a father's duty, therefore this is not an unplanned and unexpected expense. On the contrary, a family starts saving money for their son's wedding long before he is old enough to get married. Sometimes there may be a hitch: "we had saved twenty thousand yuan for our son's wedding. It's not much, but we've told him, this

is what we can afford. Then our work unit told us we must buy the flat we live in. It's small, but we can't afford a bigger flat. Of course we had to use that money ... now we can forget about our son's wedding for a while." In Ürümqi, twenty thousand yuan is not that much for a wedding. I have heard of an old professor at the university who spent thirty thousand yuan on his son's wedding.

Like elsewhere, also among Uyghurs the bride brings a trousseau for the house. However, it is the groom's family who has the biggest financial commitment. Roughly a week before the wedding, the groom's parents visit the bride's parents - even if they live in another town - and bring the *toyluq* (betrothal gift), consisting of a set of pure-gold earrings, bracelet, ring, and necklace for the bride, plus some lengths of material and some clothes both for the bride and her family. They also bring food, such as meat, fruit, grains (rice, corn), sweets (*kempit*), assorted biscuits and cakes (*pichinä*, *baqali*, *bala pirenik*, *qat-qat*, *bälish*) raisin, walnuts, etc.. This event is called *chong chay* (lit. "big tea") and the food which is given on this occasion is meant to be used by the bride's parents to entertain their guests on the day of the wedding, before the groom comes to fetch the bride. If the bride's parents do not want food, then the groom's family gives them money.

If it is the groom or, often, his family who chooses the bride, the bride's family has the possibility to negotiate the wedding by setting the *toyluq*. "My brother has been engaged for some years" told me a young woman in Kashgar "but he hasn't married yet because the bride's family asked twenty thousand yuan and he hasn't got all that money." According to Nurqiz, a man today needs at least five to ten thousand yuan in order to get married. However, there are some exceptions like Dilbär and Shireli, the couple mentioned above, who decided to get married despite their parents disapproval and, in the end, their parents had to agree.

The 'wedding process' continues also after the *toy* (actual wedding), with still more food exchange. According to Patigül, who got married in Ürümqi in the summer of 1997, the day after the wedding there is an exchange of visits which is called *salam*. First the bride's female relatives visit her at her in-laws bringing hot food, then the groom with his *qoldash* (best man) and *yigit beshi* (head-boy) visit the bride's family and are offered food. On day two the newly wed visit the bride's family together, accompanied by the *qiz qoldash* (bride's maid). Finally, the last event is *chillaq*, which takes place on the third and fourth day, when the in-laws invite each other's relatives.

Uyghurs' attitudes to weddings may vary considerably, from criticising the waste of time and resources to praising weddings and related activities as an expression of a specifically Uyghur culture. In fact there is no contradiction but,

rather, people consider and evaluate different aspects. "I've been to Han weddings," said Tursun once, "of course it was in a *qingzhen* [*halal*] restaurant. It's very simple: guests greet the bride and the groom and hand them a red envelope with money in it, then they sit down. They eat, there are a few toasts to the newly-wed, and that's it. It is much better than Uyghur weddings because there is not so much waste and the couple can use the money to buy electrical and household appliances, like a TV set, or a hi-fi. A table at a Chinese wedding costs about 200 yuan, whereas at a Uyghur wedding it costs at least 300 to 400 yuan because Uyghurs want a lot of dishes." Moreover, not only are meals more expensive, but at Uyghur weddings the number of guests seems to be considerably bigger. Someone told me that there may be up to seven hundred guests. While this may be an exaggeration, I have counted about three hundred guests at the wedding I described above, and this did not include all the guests that had been entertained in the morning; it is a fair guess that altogether at least four to five hundred people had been invited. On the other hand, as Gülbahar pointed out, nowadays in Ürümqi guests always give money as a gift. Leaving the moral economy aside, ultimately it is as if they paid for their own meal.

Weddings may pose a high demand on people's time and resources, especially between September and December. "This is the busiest time" complained Dilnur once; "During these months one cannot do anything else but attending weddings, every weekend there is at least one, sometimes even three or four." During the rest of the year they are less frequent, while between the two *heyit*, *Roza* and *Qurban* (*ara-ay*), there is a taboo against getting married, lest the couple may be divided because of the two 'barriers' represented by the two holidays. However, I know of at least one wedding celebrated during that period.

If Uyghurs sometimes complain about, if not criticise and condemn, the waste of time and resources, they still remain proud of their values of hospitality and of their ability to enjoy life and have a good time. At a wedding someone asked what I thought about Uyghur weddings. Before I could reply he remarked "we have fun, the *Khitay* [Chinese] have a toast with *baijiu* and that's it". At another wedding a friend who had invited me to dance made a similar comment "the Chinese do not have fun at weddings, they don't 'let their hair down', they just eat and drink but never dance." While watching people dancing *usul* at a third wedding, Bäkhtiyar, who incidentally cannot dance, went as far as stating that "Uyghur *usul* is the most beautiful dance in the world." When I remarked that there are many other equally beautiful dances in the world, he capitulated but concluded "Yes, but China doesn't have such a dance and the Chinese can't dance!"

Food in weddings

From the *chong chay*, through the wedding party, to the *chillaq* food appears in every stage of the wedding process. The role of food may be analysed along a continuum stretching from symbolic to cultural and social aspects. Starting from the symbolic end, we find *nan* dipped in salted water, used to 'seal' the marriage, as part of the *nikah*. Furthermore, despite the adoption of a set of Chinese-style 'stir-fried dishes' (*so säy*) as the core of the wedding meal in Ürümchi, Uyghurs cling to at least one or two Uyghur dishes, which according to Tursun, is one of the reasons why their wedding banquets are so expensive. Here several symbolic elements can be identified. The number and selection of Uyghur dishes may vary, however, *qordaq* and/or *polo* will be inevitably served at every wedding. Somehow these dishes can be said to symbolise the event - although *polo* may be associated also with other values and events, such as hospitality or funerals - and have been kept in the wedding menu as representatives of Uyghur culture. *Polo*, I was told, should always be served at a wedding because, being 'hot' (in the hot/cold/neutral classification of foods), it 'strengthens' the men, in particular the groom. This additional meaning alludes to the fact that a newly-wed couple is expected to have a child as soon as possible, lest people think that there is something wrong with them. Also the position of Uyghur dishes within the meal structure lends itself to a symbolic interpretation: being served at the beginning, as a sort of preamble leading to the core of the meal, they mark the event as unquestionably Uyghur.

Moving towards socially informed aspects of food in weddings, we can identify a whole set of economic and social relations being expressed and reinforced through the exchange and the sharing of food. In the *chong chay*, for instance, the relationship between the groom's and the bride's families is established through a food exchange that is performed before the wedding. Such a relationship is reaffirmed after the wedding, with a further food exchange between the two families, during *salam* and *chillaq*. It is the parents who are the main actors in this event, thus pointing to the fact that a wedding involves not just two individuals, rather it establishes a bond between two families. We could also speculate a structural symmetry in the direction of the exchange: while in the *chong chay* it is the groom who gives food to the bride - through their families - once they are married it will be the bride who will feed the groom; or, from yet another perspective, the groom's family gives raw unprocessed food to the bride's family, who will then transform it into cooked/ edible food. Such a division of labour will be reproduced in the married couple. While these may be little

more than mere speculations, the role of food in the negotiation of social relationships is undeniable.

Besides the exchange of actual foodstuff, commensality is another arena where social relations are displayed, established, manipulated or reinforced. While the sharing of a meal can be an expression of solidarity among the participants and a marker of their common identity and equality, social structures along gender, age, and ethnic lines are also discernible (Zubaida and Tapper 1994:12). This is particularly evident in the space arrangement of a Uyghur wedding banquet. The first and most striking criterion of division here is gender: even in secular and 'modern' Ürümqi, the communal dining hall is clearly divided between the men and the women side, with a sort of neutral ground in the middle where the dancing takes place. Space is further defined within these two areas, where participants are distributed according to their age, that is, people of the same age set share the same table. Finally, a table is specially devoted to the few Han participants, usually colleagues from the bride and/or groom's working place. This arrangement, in fact, marks their exclusion more than their inclusion, given that this is usually the only ethnic division. Uzbek, Kazakh, and even Mongol and Hui guests are usually incorporated in the 'Uyghur' tables, suggesting that the relevant distinction is Han/ non-Han. A distinction that may even precede the gender separation, since usually Han men and women share the same table, further stressing their extraneousness and reproducing categories of ethnic (Han vs. minorities) segregation operating in the wider social context. Last but not least, notions of pollution (*halal/haram*) may also serve as a key to interpret this distinction, as we shall see in chapter 6.

CHAPTER 5

THE PRIVATE SPHERE: FOOD, GENDER, AND THE FAMILY

Last Saturday I had lunch at Dilber's. When I arrived, she announced that we were going to have *kawa manta* (pumpkin dumplings). "To let you taste something different ... it's not one of the usual meat-based dishes" she said. Her husband was preparing the filling in the kitchen. That was their daughters request, as they think their father can do that better than their mother. Then the three of us sat in the living room, the TV inexorably on. While we chatted, Dilber rolled out the dough and her husband filled and sealed the dumplings. Meanwhile Muhabät, their older daughter, was cleaning the house. When their younger daughter Anargül came home, her mother told her to offer me some tea, but she said there was no boiled water ready. "Then give her some fruit" said Dilber. Anargül came back from the kitchen and handed me a mandarin. "Arrange some fruits in a plate, don't do like the Chinese who give things directly in your hands!" scolded her mother.

Previous chapters have introduced a series of dichotomies and apparent contradictions surrounding urban Uyghur identity: ambivalent attitudes to change; antinomies of tradition and modernity; the tension between ideal models and practice; different degrees of elaboration in food-related practices. In this chapter I would like to pursue some of these themes by introducing a new dimension: the construction of gender identities and the management of gender relations in the domain of food. In particular, I intend to focus on the private sphere, that is, home and the family, and I shall look at how relationships and roles are defined, shaped, or challenged, in the production and consumption of food.

5.1. Food at home and gender relations

Once I visited a friend who was a lecturer at Xinjiang University. He lived in one of those old Russian buildings where single or newlywed employees are lodged.¹ Those flats have no kitchen, only a bedroom and a bathroom, so everybody cooks in the corridor. It was dinner time and, as I was looking for his door, I noticed that the Uyghur who were cooking were all women, while the

¹ The work unit provides accommodation, the size of which depends on one's position at work as well as one's marital status.

Han were all men. I recognised my friend's wife, who was making dinner just outside their flat, and I asked her the reason for this. "Our men satisfy us, so we cook for them; Han men cannot satisfy their women, so *they* cook for them."

I was told this anecdote by Abdurehim. It provides a good starting point to look at food and gender relations among urban Uyghur intellectuals. In popular discourse, Uyghurs are described by outsiders, especially the Han, as wild, violent, and male chauvinist, a typical remark being "they beat their wives up". As usual, such a simplistic stereotype conceals a more complex situation, both in terms of ideal values and actual practices. Leaving aside outsiders' representations, here I look at gender relations, particularly in relation to food, as constructed by Uyghur men and women. The ways in which urban Uyghurs talk about these issues provide an insight into what are perceived as accepted values and norms of behaviour. As is often the case, actual practices do not always correspond to these ideal patterns. Moreover, both women and men's attitudes present a degree of ambiguity: if women often complain about men, at the same time they are proud of their manly behaviour, especially when compared to Han men; similarly, some men would like women to be more independent, but at the same time they expect them to abide by conventional roles, (e.g. cooking, not drinking, etc.).

Despite the ritual complaints, especially on the part of women, Uyghur men and women also tend to be proud of each other, by virtue of their counterpart adherence to what is commonly understood as their role, as the above anecdote exemplifies. It may be significant that the latter was mediated by a male perspective, although I have heard myself similar remarks made by women. Nevertheless, there is a degree of gender inequality even among the most emancipated urban Uyghur, for instance in terms of job opportunities, housework and family responsibilities, accepted behaviour, leisure opportunities, sexual freedom, and the degree of independence in general.

In Uyghur society, as in many others, food production and consumption provide an excellent vantage point to look at gender relations. The work of Maclagan on food and gender, based on field research conducted in a Yemeni community between 1981 and 1983, points to a number of relevant issues.

Food is one of the main idioms through which gender relations are expressed. The women's world and the men's world meet at food. Men buy it, women prepare it. Men and women eat it but often separately: men in contexts of public display and women privately. They also eat together as a family group. Women's relation to food - what they are able to eat, how much of their time must be spent preparing it - is defined by their relation to men. Men's relation to

food is also delimited by women, through whose labour the food must pass after purchase (or production) and before consumption. ... Men's and women's obligations to each other are defined largely in terms of food. Men owe women their subsistence. ... Women's obligations towards men also centre round food. A woman's day is structured by obligations towards men concerning food preparation. (Maclagan 1994:159-160)

Maclagan's depiction of how gender relations are structured around food and food events in a Yemeni community suggests several lines of enquiry, which may help to frame an analysis of food and gender in Uyghur society. However, before focusing specifically on food, I would like to start with a broader discussion of issues of gender among the Uyghur. This needs to be situated within the framework of some of the relevant literature on gender in general, and more specifically in a non-Western context, such as Muslim societies, or China and rural Xinjiang. While an exhaustive discussion of gender issues in non-western contexts is far beyond my scope, here I simply intend to report some lines of argument, in order to problematise the issue and to provide a critical framework within which the material I am going to present can be situated.

5.2. Gender in non-western societies

The debates within feminist scholarship in the 1980s have produced a gradual but significant shift from 'woman' to 'gender' as a central analytic category (Kandiyoti 1996:6). With specific reference to anthropology, Henrietta Moore wrote "the concept 'woman' cannot stand as an analytical category in anthropological enquiry, and consequently there can be no analytical meaning in such concepts as 'the position of women', the 'subordination of women' and 'male dominance' when applied universally" (Moore 1988:7).

It is indeed very important to situate issues of gender historically and culturally and understand these categories in their own context. Women, as Leila Ahmed put it, "are those whom the societies under review defined as women and to whom they applied legal and cultural roles on the basis of these definitions" (Ahmed 1992:7). For instance, as Anagnost points out, "[the Western] notion of "woman" as an autonomous entity, a female being, separable from familial roles, had little or no referent in Chinese society outside a small circle of theorists. ... Women themselves continued to identify with their kin and family roles, and therefore were motivated to restore the integrity of

the family that had been rent by decades of economic and political crisis” (Anagnost 1989:319).

Mernissi seems to make a similar point when she argues that “the Muslim system is not so much opposed to women as to the heterosexual unit” (Mernissi 1985:8). Therefore, “at stake in Muslim society is not the emancipation of women (if that means only equality with men), but the fate of the heterosexual unit” (Mernissi 1985:20). According to her, sexual inequality in Islam is not justified in terms of women’s biological inferiority. On the contrary, it is based on the assumption that women are powerful and dangerous creatures, in that the involvement between a man and a woman represents a threat to man’s allegiance to God. Thus the women’s liberation movement in Muslim countries would be concerned with the kind of relationship between the sexes, rather than claiming women’s equality with men, and would consequently be couched in terms of a generational rather than sexual conflict (Mernissi 1985:20).

In her review of feminist scholarship and Middle East studies, Kandiyoti situates Mernissi’s position within the debate on “the compatibility of Islam with women’s emancipation”. She identifies two strategies, both representing an important departure from stereotypical, Orientalist depictions of subjugated Muslim women: one, with potentially conservative implications, denies the necessarily oppressive nature of Islamic practices, while the other, more radical, claims that oppressive practices are not necessarily Islamic. According to Kandiyoti, the work produced within the latter, such as Mernissi’s, “challenges uniformly patriarchal interpretations of Islam by presenting more radical alternatives as part and parcel of Islamic tradition” (Kandiyoti 1996:9-10).

5.3. Work and gender in Southern Xinjiang

In 1997 Bellér-Hann conducted fieldwork in villages close to Kashgar. Through a discussion of an extremely rich and valuable ethnographic material, she explores gendered economic relations, mostly among peasants in the Kashgar region, in two articles (Bellér-Hann 1998a, 1998b). The first focuses on Uyghur peasants’ perceptions of work in three periods: the pre-socialist period (before 1949), the collectivised period (roughly 1949-1980), and the post-1980 reform era (Bellér-Hann 1998a). The pre-socialist period is reconstructed through older people’s recollections, as well as indigenous accounts in manuscripts dating back to the first decades of this century. By combining these two sources, Bellér-Hann highlights the divergence between actual practice and values. Her informants tend to stress the value system

prevailing at the time, rather than actual practice. For instance, while they usually claim that women did not work in the fields, written evidence shows that many women did in fact perform agricultural work. "Informants concede that this may have been the actual practice, but it was not the ideal situation" (Bellér-Hann 1998a:96-97). She concludes that before 1949 a gender division of labour assigned different tasks to men and women, but equally valued both.

[On the whole,] men and women played complementary, symbiotic social roles. Certainly these were profoundly marked by Islam; but to conclude simply that men exploited and dominated women is a gross simplification not only of the social diversity, but also of the underpinning cultural constitution of male and female personhood. Moreover, the incidence of high divorce rates indicates that even if Islamic cultures generally can be construed as patriarchal, the position of women in Eastern Turkestan was markedly different from norms elsewhere. (Bellér-Hann 1998a:99)

When we come to recollections of the collectivised period, both men and women's experiences are largely negative. While official ideology still holds that women have been the beneficiaries of socialist gender policies, in actual practice men and women carried out the same tasks, but men received greater credit. Moreover, the support services that were meant to ease women's burden were often inadequate and sometimes represented an additional burden on them. "What for my Chinese co-researchers represented a great advance for women" notes Bellér-Hann "was remembered with great bitterness by the people themselves". Besides the practical outcome, the mass mobilisation of women represented a radical break with the past, in that it subverted the ideal that women should not work outside, as well as disregarding the traditional modesty code which regulates men and women's daily interaction (Bellér-Hann 1998a: 99, 101).

This evaluation of gender dynamics in Communist China, albeit among a non-Han group, is consistent with Anagnost's work. After assessing a number of studies which show that patriarchal structures have been reproduced if not strengthened in post-Liberation China, Anagnost suggests that the goals of such political campaigns may have been other than raising women's status. "The invention of "woman" as a political category must be seen as part of the larger emergence of a discourse of modernity in 20th-century China, one that helped to empower the socialist state." The question that Anagnost asks is: "to what extent the radical promise of the Chinese revolution for the transformation of gender relations was in part a projection onto the Chinese experience of Western feminism" (Anagnost 1989:318-19).

Indeed, according to Bellér-Hann, in the reform period women continue to be regarded as primary carers, and have withdrawn once again into the domestic domain. Although the participation of women in nearly all areas of production is significant, this remains masked and undervalued. Moreover, women usually have no direct access to the income they generate. Also in official discourse, as represented by the All-China Women's Federation, women's contribution to the household economy tends to be overlooked and their performance is acknowledged mainly in the domestic sphere. Bellér-Hann concludes that in the 1990s "local and Maoist legacies combine in the new context of 'socialist commodity economy' to ensure that women's work remains undervalued. It is curious that local Han scholars in Xinjiang ... continue to pretend that patriarchy flows only from Islam" (Bellér-Hann 1998a:111).

5.4. Gender relations among urban Uyghurs

Issues of gender were often at the forefront of my fieldwork experience, even though gender was not one of my intended areas of research. In this section I would like to give a brief account of my experience and my reflections, bearing in mind that I have been dealing almost exclusively with urban educated women. Clearly, an adequate treatment of gender among the Uyghur, even if limited to an urban context, would require a much more accurate research and analysis. Here I just want to give some sense of the dynamic situation and follow some of the themes that have emerged so far. Indeed, the process of negotiation and redefinition of gender roles among Uyghurs, which often unfolds in the realm of food, is part of the broader process of identity negotiation which is the object of this study.

I am aware of the difficulties and dangers of such a cursory discussion, first of all that of imposing western categories and discourses on a non-western context (Moore 1988). Moreover, while there is a wide literature on gender in Muslim societies, this tends to focus on the Middle East and north Africa. When looking at a so-called "peripheral" Muslim society within the boundaries of a (post-) socialist state, there are a number of factors that need to be taken into account. On the one hand, it is useful to consider recent feminist scholarship, which has shifted from a focus on "women" to one on "difference", thus recognising the relevance of other categories often overlapping or intertwined with gender, such as ethnicity, class, etc.. "Gender has therefore been transformed into an increasingly inclusive category denoting an expression of difference within a field of power relations" (Kandiyoti 1996:6). On the

other hand, it should also be considered how issues of modernity, nationalism, and globalisation are articulated in the local context.

In other words, besides understanding and adopting “indigenous” categories and idioms, an exhaustive treatment of gender relations in Uyghur society should also historicise and contextualise the issue by addressing a number of questions, as the work Bellér-Hann suggests. For example, to what extent are such relations informed by Islamic values and practices and what is the role of ‘autochthonous’ Central Asian/Turkic traditions? How have gender relations been affected by Chinese communist policies after 1949, and by the economic reforms and modernising tide that have swept mainland China since the early 1980s? How relevant is the status of “minority nationality” (*C. shaoshu minzu*) and to what extent does ethnic discrimination overlap or add to gender discrimination? Finally, what is the influence, especially in an urban context, of ‘global encounters’ - through media, tourism, missionaries, expats, trade, etc. - with different experiences and traditions? While I do not address all these questions systematically, it is useful to bear them in mind, given that change, and particularly the management of change, is one of the themes at the core of our discussion.

In order to give a vivid sense of gender dynamics among urban educated Uyghurs, I report what I perceived as a crucial episode in my experience of and reflection on gender issues among the Uyghur. This occurred while I was in Kashgar visiting Nurqiz during the *Roza* festival. As I have said before, on this occasion not only her family but all her friends were competing to show their utmost hospitality. Two other male foreign students were with me, and during the first two days of the festival we familiarised ourselves with a large number of Nurqiz’s friends, including both men and women. On the third day they had organised a trip to Mahmud Kashgari’s mausoleum, situated near the village of Opal, roughly twenty miles outside Kashgar. We spent a very pleasant morning and I felt completely at ease in such friendly company. In particular, I found Anargül, a young woman who was working as a health carer, particularly charming. She was extremely outgoing and had a sharp tongue, defying all the stereotypes of the submissive and subjugated Muslim woman. I enjoyed observing the relationship she had with her husband, who was also a health worker. It definitely seemed like a peers relationship and she did not hesitate to bully him jokingly. Despite her pretty skirt, it seemed she “wore the trousers” - just to borrow yet another stereotype. I wonder if on their *nikah* she was the one who ate the *nan* first! On the way back Nurqiz had to leave us in order to attend to some personal matters, so we stayed with her friends. We stopped in a small restaurant for lunch and then proceeded to further sightseeing in Kashgar. At the end of our tour, my two male

companions and I were left with Anargül, her husband Änwär, and Adiljan, who was driving. We dropped Anargül at their house and stayed with Änwär and Adiljan, who had some errands to do. Half an hour later, we all went to Änwär's house, where I experienced one of the most frustrating moments of my fieldwork.

Änwär lived with his extended family in a *öy* ('traditional' house), in one of the alleys of the old town adjoining the new bazar. From the road, the door opened onto a relatively small courtyard. We were led straight to the *mehmankhana* ("guest room"), which was already fairly crowded. Most of the room was occupied by a carpet, and most of the carpet by the *dastikhan*, laid with all sort of *gezäklär*. All around the *dastikhan* a dozen young men, roughly in their twenties, were sitting or kneeling on some thin padded cushions. I recognised Abdurehim among them, an ex-schoolmate and close friend of Nurqiz's that we had already met several times in the previous days. After a while more people arrived, but they were all men. In other words, I was the only woman in the room. Needless to say, I felt out of place! Soon it became clear that, despite my efforts to take part in the conversation, and despite one of my (foreign) companion's strenuous attempts at involving me, nobody dared to talk to me. In fact, it seemed that everybody ignored me pretending that I was not there, even those I had been talking to no longer than a few hours earlier. Ironically, my other companion, who unlike me did not speak any Uyghur at all, being male was yet the recipient of some attention, despite his inability to follow the conversation and to communicate. My heart rose when I saw Anargül appearing at the door. But it did not last for long. She just handed two plates of melon seeds to the man who was closer to the door and then disappeared, only to reappear some time later to serve *polo*, and disappear again in some other room. I stayed there, utterly frustrated and feeling trapped, thinking with a mixture of resentment and envy "She's back into her Uyghur woman role ... but somehow she is enjoying a greater freedom than I am". But what is a "Uyghur woman's role"? Or, rather, roles? What about the role she performed in the afternoon? Was not that equally, if not more, 'authentic'? I think what I was trying to put my finger on was the fact that the sexual segregation that I was experiencing in that moment was not necessarily the expression of gendered power dynamics. It was more a question of being or not being in the right place.

Meanwhile everybody's attention kept being focused on my Uyghur-speaking companion, sitting to my left, who became the target of a hail of questions. In fact, the questioning was dominated by two or three particularly eager individuals. I started steaming ... The last straw came when they began to talk about smoking. One of the eager three asked my friend whether many people smoke in the US. "Very few" he said "what about here?" They claimed that ninety percent of the people smoked. "Does

that include women?" "Of course not!" They looked outraged, then one of them added "Normal women [*normal ayaliri*] don't smoke." "What about abnormal [*binormal*] women?" asked my friend sarcastically. There was general laughter. At that point I was about to explode: my first instinct was to light a cigarette and observe their reaction. I resisted the temptation, out of respect for my hosts and, above all, for the sake of Nurqiz's reputation. But I could not take anymore of this and I decided to leave. "It's been a long day and I'm tired" I excused myself politely, and I reached for the door. Predictably, nobody insisted that I should stay a little longer (*yänä olturung!*), as hosts normally do when a guest is leaving.

After a long walk, I was able to consider the episode with more detachment and look at it in perspective. I should probably not have been there in the first place. It was a very anomalous situation indeed, being the only woman in an exclusively male gathering. Perhaps they simply did not know how to relate to me and decided not to relate at all. My friend's attempt at involving me may have had the unintended consequence of making my presence even more obtrusive and intimidating. In that context, I was defying the 'ideal' pattern of male and female roles, even though, as individuals, in actual practice they might have not subscribed to such ideal. But this was, in a sense, a formal gathering and even those who had, earlier that day, freely interacted with me, in this context found no space to shape their own mode of interaction and adopted the 'ideal' behaviour, i.e. that considered proper and acceptable by the society at large. I thought again, with some envy, of Anargül: excluded by that gathering but, on the other hand, presumably free to mind her own business. Whereas my 'freedom', as a foreign woman, to attend such a meeting had turned out to be deceptive. After all, more than anything else my frustration was due to my own assumptions about gender roles, which clearly clashed with those prevailing in that context. Ultimately, it seemed somewhat unfair to resent those men, who were performing a role just as much as Anargül was. Rather, what I resented was being caught in a situation where I did not have a role.

In Ürümchi I had been in an exclusively male company on several occasions. However, these had been informal and smaller gatherings, typically held in public places, such as bars or restaurants. While this was a much more formal and elaborated occasion: not only was this gathering part of the celebrations for the *Roza* festival, but we were in a private home, where 'traditional' codes of behaviour tend to be strictly adhered to, if anything out of respect for senior family members. To some extent, this generation of young Uyghurs epitomise the transition to different models of gender relations. They can be seen as negotiating between conventional roles - such as that they performed at Änwär's - and more informal modes of gender interaction - such as

hanging out in a mixed company. It is important to stress the role of education in the redefinition of gender relations. If anything, because it provides the context for forging long lasting cross-gender relationships. Indeed, these were all ex-schoolmates and the bond between them originated in this shared experience during their adolescence.

5.5. Food and gender among urban Uyghurs

When we arrived Nurmamät was on his own. As we walked into his flat an old man, roughly in his sixties, walked in and sat with us. While my friend and I were being entertained by Smitilla *bowa* - this was the man's name - Nurmamät took Dilshat aside. Before long Dilshat, who had subsequently left, was back with a bag full of *samsa*. Nurmamät apologised: that day his wife was attending a wedding, so he could not offer us a proper meal. The *samsa* were for us, since both he and Smitilla *bowa* had already eaten. On our way back Dilshat remarked "Well, we had a good time. But it's a shame that his wife was not there to make dinner. In fact, when I called him this morning to say that we wanted to visit him, he did sound a bit hesitant ...".

Dilshat, a kind and gentle Uyghur man in his early twenties, was a post-graduate student at Xinjiang University. For a long time he had been wanting me to meet his friend Nurmamät, whom he described as a fine intellectual, despite his young age. They had known each other in Qumul, where they both came from. Nurmamät, now in his late twenties, was working for a literary magazine in Ürümqi. He lived with his wife and their one-year-old girl in a tiny flat consisting of just one bedroom, where most of the space that was not taken up by the bed was occupied by a cupboard full of books. They had to pay an outrageous rent for this place, since his work unit could not provide any accommodation facilities.

This episode somehow epitomises the generational transition which is taking place among urban Uyghur intellectuals as far as gender roles are concerned. As Maclagan, writing about Yemen, has pointed out, food plays a very important role in the definition of gender identities. Hence it is useful to consider how educated urban Uyghurs are redefining gender relations in the realm of food. Both Dilshat and Nurmamät are highly educated. Relating to women as peers apparently is not an issue for them. At the same time, they both seem to take for granted that it is Dilshat's wife who does the cooking; consequently her presence is necessary in order to adequately entertain guests. This, at least, should be the ideal situation, even if in practice Nurmamät equally entertains us while his wife is absent.

A number of real-life situations may give some sense of what are the actual gender dynamics revolving around food. It must be stressed that we are talking about urban educated Uyghurs. Indeed, both education and urban living conditions are two important, if not determining, factors in the redefinition of gender roles and gender relations. Not only, as already pointed out, have these men and women all shared in their adolescence and early youth a formative experience which to a great extent cuts across gender distinctions. But they have also been interacting on a daily basis with 'the other sex', namely their classmates, on a more or less equal basis. While their perspective on gender roles may still be largely influenced by 'traditional' reference models, at the same time it has also been affected by such an experience. Furthermore, as already pointed out when discussing hospitality, practical living conditions in Ürümqi almost inevitably imply a departure from traditional models. Particularly among intellectuals, nuclear families where both parents work tend to be the norm, where time and space constraints often conflict with what may still be regarded as ideal models.

On a Saturday morning Tursun came to pick me up and took me to his house. His parents were at a wedding. In the living room the table was laid with the usual *gezäklär*, including *nan*. There was also a pot containing the soup for *suyuq ash* and a note that his mother had left with instructions. Tursun invited me to take a seat, switched the TV on, and went to the kitchen to make lunch. Rather than watching TV alone, I preferred to hang out in the kitchen with him. The dough had already been prepared and rolled into thick long pieces by his mum. He rolled them out, then started pulling small squares of dough and throwing them into the piping soup. He said that his mother had prepared everything in advance because she knew I was coming and she was afraid that he would be unable to make me lunch. I remarked that it was really sweet of her to cook for us before she went to the wedding, where she would have eaten anyway. "Today Uyghur women are not like they used to be" replied Tursun "today girls [*qizlar*] are lazy and they can't do anything." I pointed out that perhaps it is not a question of laziness but of independence. After all it was he who complained about the lack of independence among Uyghur young women.

One night we were invited at Adil's, a friend of Tursun's who lived with his parents in the Uyghur hospital housing compound, behind Xinjiang University. We were entertained in the living room by Adil alone. Every now and then his mother would turn up with tea or food. All the other members of the household did not show up and I'm not even sure who was in and who was out.

Tursun and Adil are both university graduates in their mid-twenties. They both have a good job but, as they are not married yet, they still live with their parents. They belong to that generation of educated urban Uyghurs who have grown up in the reform era. A generation which has been consistently exposed to more or less non-mediated external influences, especially from the west, which have inevitably affected or at least questioned their views on gender roles. At the same time, though, in their daily lives the reference model for gender relations is their parents' generation. In particular, their mothers represent the primary model - to imitate or question - for their ideas and attitudes about women's roles. Their mothers are women in their late forties or early fifties, who have therefore lived all the stages of Communist China, with all the contradictions in terms of gender policies that we have mentioned before. That is, they have been "emancipated" - the passive voice is intentional - according to western models mediated by Chinese socialism. As we have seen for women in rural Kashgar (Bellér-Hann 1998a), such emancipation was carried out primarily through work outside the household, while gender roles within the family were largely unaffected. However, in the case of women like Tursun and Adil's mothers, access to higher education was also a determining factor. Today these women are often respected professionals, as in the case of Tursun's mother who, as a doctor, possibly enjoys a higher status than her husband who is a driver. At the same time, their role within the household is still that of primary carers and they regard themselves and are regarded by others as those responsible for feeding both family members and their guests. Hence their sons find themselves in the ambivalent position of both desiring to imitate the new models of gender roles to which they are constantly, although somewhat superficially, exposed, and at the same time of fearing the disruption of the model embodied by their mothers, which they have been experiencing on a daily basis and have therefore interiorised. The following account further exemplifies what is these young men's reference model by looking at their mother's attitudes.

Dinner at Änwär's, a friend of Yasin's. Their front door opens on a sort of entrance hall which is used as a living room, where guests are entertained. There is a couch, a carpet, a TV, and a table laid with *gezäklär* (biscuits, walnuts, raisins, etc.) plus a loaf of home made bread, black currant and strawberry jams, and cream. Änwär's mother has baked the bread in an electric oven, and she has also made the jam. Everything is delicious. When she serves tea, she apologises repeatedly because she has come home from work very late and the house is not tidy (in fact, everything is perfectly tidy). She also apologises for the dinner which, she says, is not very good since her son only

told her that morning that he was having guests. Despite this, dinner is excellent and rather elaborate too.

Paradoxically, it is among Uyghurs slightly older than Tursun, Adil, or Änwär that an actual redefinition of gender roles within the family, in particular as far as food is concerned, may be taking place. I am thinking of couples in their thirties with young children, where both partners are university graduates. Born in the 1960s, they grew up during the Cultural Revolution, which surely must have affected their views on gender. However, a more obvious difference with Tursun's generation is that they are daily engaged in the negotiation of gender roles with their partners within the context of a nuclear family. That is, at a significant distance from the reference model represented by their parents. In other words, unlike Tursun and his peers, they are not caught between two contradictory ideal models, but rather they are directly involved in the daily management of gender relations. In this kind of households I have observed a clear trend towards the redefinition of gender roles. In most cases it was common that men helped in the kitchen, although their contribution was often seen as an exception. While these may indeed be exceptions, nevertheless they represent a departure from the pattern prevailing among older generations. In other words, it is possible to identify at least a tendency towards a redefinition of gender roles, both in terms of ideal models and in terms of practices. More significantly, I remember at least a couple of occasions in which men were entirely in charge of cooking and attending guests.

Last Wednesday Abliz invited me for lunch. When I arrived, he was preparing *polo* in the kitchen and a (male) neighbour of his was also there. Rather than watching TV on my own in the living room and wait for the meal to be served, I decided to chat with them in the kitchen. Perhaps this was inappropriate, given my guest status, but there was no strong objection on their side. After all it was a rather anomalous situation according to Uyghur codes of behaviour: a female guest being entertained by a male host while neither his wife nor other women were around. The anomaly was possibly due to the fact that I was a foreigner, as well as to Ürümchi residential patterns and lifestyle. In rural areas, and even in most urban settings outside Ürümchi (such as Ghulja, Khotän, Kashgar), Uyghur people usually live in big houses (*öy*) with their extended family. Almost at any time there would be at least one woman at home to entertain female guests or to take care of male guests 'from the kitchen', by preparing tea, food, etc.

Once the meal was ready, Abliz's neighbour left carrying a large portion for him and his children. Abliz's wife was at her parents', who live at the other

end of town close to her working place. She did not usually come home for lunch. In fact, she stayed there with their child for two or three days during the week. Abliz learnt to make *polo* by watching other people making it. He said that *polo* is the only food he can make, but he makes it better than his wife. This in fact was a common claim among urban Uyghur men, often confirmed by women too. This time, as before, we had an 'informal' meal, that is, without all the preambles - the coffee table laid with all the *gezäklär*: sweets, dried fruits, *nan*, etc.. Abliz's *polo* was memorable, I would rank it among the five best *polo* I had throughout my stay in Xinjiang.

There are a variety of factors which can be used to explain such a situation, from living conditions and residential patterns to personal inclination, but what matters is that the ideal that cooking and feeding guests is inevitably a woman's role has been challenged. Even if these may be considered exceptions, they are not seen as reproachable deviations to be condemned. The fact that it is acceptable that a man cooks and entertains guests suggests that there is a shift not only as far as practices are concerned but also in terms of ideal models. Moreover, even if Abliz may be considered an exception, it was by no means an isolated case. On another occasion, I was invited for dinner by Nuriyā, a woman in her late-thirties who was a lecturer in mathematics at university. She had been awarded a grant to spend some time in an Italian university, so her younger sister Bärna, whom I knew from Xinjiang University, decided that we should meet. Nuriyā lived with their husband and their 11-year-old daughter Gulnar. When Bärna and I arrived, we sat in the living room with Nuriyā and her daughter. While we were chatting, Nuriyā's husband was in the kitchen making *polo*. Once it was ready, he went to eat in their bedroom while watching TV, while the four of us ate in the living room. I remember being rather surprised by this sort of role reversal, but it was even more surprising to see that for them it was perfectly normal. After all it made sense: it was Nuriyā who was interested in meeting me, that was the reason why I had been invited.

In conclusion, in urban intellectual households, if men rarely cook at home they often help. This is particularly common among younger generations. However, these are considered as exceptions, almost a sort of concession. Here we could tentatively suggest a structural symmetry with Bellér-Hann's observations in southern Xinjiang, where women's performance is acknowledged mainly in the domestic sphere while their contribution to income generating sidelines tend to be overlooked and to be seen as 'leisure' done in one's spare time (Bellér-Hann 1998a). Similarly, among urban intellectuals, men's contribution to domestic work may be overlooked because conventional models of gender roles tend to dominate, at least at an ideal level. Indeed,

the women I knew almost invariably complained about the unfair division of labour within the household and about gender relations in general among Uyghurs, despite the fact that many of them were still students, therefore unmarried, or had a 'helpful' husband. They usually spoke in general terms, almost referring to an archetypal Uyghur family ideally situated in some rural area of southern Xinjiang, which they perceived as the most representative of Uyghur society.

However, women should not be seen merely as passive recipients but as having an active role in the negotiation of gender roles. Those women who were married would hardly ever complain about their own husbands as individuals. They would rather make general statements on how difficult and demanding it is for a working woman to look after the house and the children. But they did not seem to question their role in the household and would take for granted that, however unfair, that was their job. Once I went out for dinner with a young married woman. She was a teacher at university and the mother of a three year old. By Uyghur standards she was very emancipated and independent. She was telling me about women's revolving *chay* parties and how often she attended them.² I asked her, half jokingly, whether she cooked for her husband and child before going to the party. "Of course!" she said, as if it was inconceivable that her husband might cook dinner for himself and their child.

Uyghur male chauvinism can be a common cliché among Uyghur themselves, at least among those I was familiar with. On a number of occasions, urban educated young men showed an awareness of this issue, which was rather unusual among Uyghur men at large. However, rather than being generated by their own observation and reflection on the society they lived in, it seemed that such awareness was prompted by their familiarity with western discourse on gender relations and women's emancipation, which they had acquired mostly through American films and television series, as well as through contact with foreigners, mostly American. Their statements were often contradicted by their behaviour, which was not always as 'liberal' as they wanted. In fact they seemed to be struggling between different models, neither of which they were able to accept *in toto*, both in theory and in practice. Tursun exemplifies this dilemma at best. He would act as a defender of women's rights and wish that Uyghur women were more independent. At the same time he would complain that nowadays Uyghur girls are lazy and cannot do anything at home, or he would declare that they should not drink alcohol. Similarly Abdurehim, despite his claims to be open-minded and influenced by western models, when speaking of the wife of one of his friends would occasionally come up with comments such as "She's

² These are parties, usually held on a monthly basis, each time organised by a different member of the party; in Ürümchi they are held in restaurants.

a good wife, she serves her husband well". Not to mention his strenuous defence of virginity, the preservation of which should be a girl's preoccupation and responsibility, a requirement that he did not perceive as clashing with aspirations to independence and emancipation.

In short, even among the relatively emancipated households I was familiar with in Ürümchi, on the whole women remain responsible for preparing and serving food at home, both to their family and to guests. Evidence suggests that this is even more the case in smaller urban contexts and rural areas. Despite an increasing awareness of women's rights, especially among young people of both sexes, and despite the tendency among many urban educated men to share some of their wives' burden at home, it is still accepted that cooking meals and looking after the house is a woman's job. However, we have seen that to some extent a redefinition of gender roles is taking place, especially among young educated urban couples.

CHAPTER 6

UYGHUR FOOD: CUISINE, DIET, AND BELIEF

In this chapter I focus more specifically on food, both solid and liquid: that is, what in Uyghur is *yimäk-ichmäk* and in Chinese is *yinshi* (literally “eating and drinking”). I start by discussing Uyghur diet and cuisine. With the former I refer to the actual foodstuff that people eat. By contrast, I understand cuisine not only as a corpus of dishes and cooking methods but also as the link between a community and its food: i.e. how people in a community feel about “their” food, the extent to which they identify with it, the meanings they attach to and construct around it. Despite the fact that boundaries between cuisines and food practices are to some extent permeable, in this realm too Uyghurs construct their identity in sharp opposition to the Han Chinese. Hence even food items and practices of clear Chinese origin may be incorporated into Uyghur cuisine and transformed into Uyghur. Moreover, as discussed in the second part of this chapter, notions of contamination derived from Muslim dietary prescriptions are manipulated to draw a sharp boundary and possibly articulate a discourse of resistance vis-à-vis the Han.

6.1. Uyghur diet and cuisine

A few days before returning to England I went to see my old teacher Bahargül. Her husband Dilshat, a social scientist himself, was also there. He had just returned from two months’ fieldwork in the Tarim basin and his advice for my research was: “If you want to know traditional Uyghur food, you should go to Southern Xinjiang. In fact, even Uyghur themselves don’t know what their traditional food is. For instance, *män pär*, the dough in *suyuq ash*, comes from the Chinese *mian pian*. But you can’t say that to a Uyghur ...”. “And what about *sangza*? They are originally Hui” added Bahargül. “Chinese”, corrected her husband. “No, they’re Hui” insisted Bahargül. “After all it’s the same, he said, how many years of history have the Han? More than 5000. And how many have the Hui? Only a few hundreds.”¹

It was too late to follow Dilshat’s advice, since that was the end of my fieldwork, and I tried to explain that I found equally interesting what I had observed in

¹ *Suyuq ash* (lit. “liquid food”) is a meat and vegetable soup with little squares of dough in it. *Mian pian* means “dough square(s)” (cf. 5.5.). *Sangza*, a sort of fried noodles arranged in a spiral, mark the holidays of Roza heyt (end of Ramadan) and Qurban heyt and are prepared in every household during that time (cf. 4.1.3.).

Ürümchi. However, I was grateful for his remark, since it encapsulates a number of questions that I shall address more specifically in this chapter. In a nutshell, he had renewed my awareness to the meaning of “traditional Uyghur food” and the implications of its definition. First of all, whose definition? That of a Chinese-trained Uyghur academic - twice authoritative, as a Uyghur and as an academic - or that of the “common Uyghur”? Moreover, in Dilshat’s advice was implicit the assumption that when studying Uyghur - or any other people’s - food one should be concerned with “traditional” food, a long history being the hallmark of tradition (on this see also *Uyghur Customs* below, quoting Qashqari). This reflected a certain Chinese essentialising discourse on the appropriate object of ethnographic research, especially when dealing with minorities. As already discussed, these are usually seen as more ‘traditional’ than the ‘modern’ Han. At the same time, by situating tradition in a relatively remote southern Xinjiang, he was also saying something about Ürümchi, implying that eating habits in the capital were not as purely Uyghur.² He further problematised this not only by pointing out the ‘foreign’ influences in foods that are generally regarded as traditionally Uyghur, but also suggesting that this knowledge may obliterate their traditional nature.

In fact, the practices and discourses that I had observed and recorded during my fieldwork were rather complex and could not be simply pigeon-holed as ‘traditional’/‘non-traditional’, or ‘Uyghur’/‘non-Uyghur’. The boundaries of a cuisine, like those of an ethnic group, are not static but constantly shifting and undergoing a process of redefinition. What follows is an attempt to make sense of such complexity, while preserving as much as possible the nuances that are part of everyday lived experience. I will first address the general question of what is a cuisine. Drawing on ethnographic material as well as on primary sources, I will then proceed to consider whether we can talk of a Uyghur cuisine and, if so, how and by whom it is defined. In particular, I wish to explore the ways in which Uyghur urban intellectuals talk and write about their food, as well as examining what, in actual practice, constitutes their diet. While many, more or less recent, external influences can be identified on the Uyghur *dastikhan*, I will argue that there is a strong sense among the Uyghur of having a distinctive cuisine.

² Cf. Eli on ‘pure Uyghurs’, 2.2.

6.1.1. Cuisine

“Cuisine” is a French word whose literal meaning of “kitchen” extends metonymically to that of “cooking”. It is used in English to refer to a style or method of cooking, usually of a particular country or region - as in French or Middle Eastern cuisine - or establishment - as in haute cuisine. While there is no question of the empirical use of this term, especially in popular discourse, it is worthwhile considering its meaning when used as an analytic category in scholarly writing. Is a cuisine regional, or national? Is it possible for a society not to have a cuisine? Sidney Mintz (1996) has addressed these questions and explored what is meant by “cuisine”. According to him, what makes a cuisine is not only a set of dishes or cooking methods, but the existence of a community of people who eat those foods and, more important, have feelings about them. “In spite of the variability of individual differences in [food attitudes], there is a point in trying to link people’s feelings about food in some one particular culture with the foods that people in that society customarily eat - what gets called, more or less imprecisely, its ‘cuisine’.” (Mintz 1996:94).

According to Mintz it is questionable whether it makes sense to speak of a national cuisine at all. In fact, he concludes that “a ‘national cuisine’ is a contradiction in terms ... a holistic artifice based on the foods of the people who live inside some political system” (Mintz 1996: 94, 104). He claims that cuisines are regional, indeed “when seen from the perspective of people who care about the *foods*, [cuisines] are never the foods of a country, but the foods of a *place*” (Mintz 1996: 95-96, emphasis in original). While his assumptions concerning the authenticity of a regional cuisine, as opposed to the artifice of a national cuisine, can be questioned, his stress on the links between a community, the food they eat, and the way they feel about this food, in the definition of a cuisine proves insightful. In fact, he seems to contradict his own argument when he states that “a cuisine requires a population that eats that cuisine with sufficient frequency to consider themselves experts on it. They all believe, and *care* that they believe, that they know what it consists of, how it is made, and how it should taste. In short, a genuine cuisine has common social roots; it is the food of a community - albeit often a very large community.” (Mintz 1996: 96). I could not think of a better definition; what is not clear is why such a community could not be a nation, however “imagined” it may be (Anderson 1991).

Leaving aside the question of what a national cuisine is, and how to make one (Appadurai 1988), here I intend to focus on the links between a community and its food. Like ethnic consciousness, a cuisine is defined both by a process of identification - of a community with its food - and, simultaneously, by one of

differentiation - in opposition to other cuisines. Regardless of its actual content, which is subject to constant change, what matters is that people *believe* that they know what it consists of, how it is made, and how it should taste. In her discussion of Jewish food in the Middle East, Claudia Roden (1994) mentions a number of foods and dishes which are not exclusively Jewish but are shared by most Middle Eastern people. However, she concludes that “[b]ecause these dishes have such a powerful hold on the emotions of Jews, are so much part of their ancestral memories and so tied to their culture and identity, I believe that they should be considered Jewish.” (1994:158). We can then talk of a Uyghur cuisine, in as much as Uyghur people *believe* their food is distinctive. Through an analysis of primary sources and ethnographic material I intend to explore the ways in which the idea of a Uyghur cuisine is constructed, as well as the processes of negotiation that lie behind its definition.

6.1.2. Uyghur cuisine

At the end of January 1999 the City authorities in Beijing evacuated and demolished what had become known as the “Uyghur Village”, in the north-west district of Ganjiakou. The “Village” had developed since the mid-1980s, when Uyghur migrants from Xinjiang started a number of catering businesses, mainly aimed at visitors from that region who stayed in the nearby Xinjiang Centre (*Xinjiang Banshichu*). Within a decade, the road, lined with restaurants, bakeries, and kebab stalls, had become the centre of a lively Uyghur community, attracting not only Uyghur residents and visitors but also a large number of Chinese and foreigners who went there to experience Uyghur cuisine. Sadly, the year 1999 brought bad news for the Uyghur Village: the owners and workers of more than 30 Uyghur restaurants there were ordered to leave their establishments by the end of January. The order was issued less than three weeks before the deadline to move and there were no proposed compensations. According to a Beijing city official, the reason for the order was “to repair the road which runs through the village”.³ Given the reputation that Uyghurs have in China, and the threat that they have represented in recent years to the stability of the country, it is very likely that reasons of public order and security also instigated this decision.

Without dismissing the political implications of this incident, here I want to consider the aspects of a “cuisine” that I have outlined above. That is, the link between a community and its food and the sense of belonging inspired and enhanced by such

³ From an AFP report posted to the Uighur-I on 28 January 1999.

food. Food that can also have an evocative power, helping to remember or recreate a homey atmosphere. To illustrate this I use the words of a Uyghur émigré living in the United States. His “Tribute to the Ganjiakou Uyghur Village” was sparked by the news of its demolition.

I feel very sad at the recent news that Beijing City authorities have begun demolishing the Uyghur village in Beijing's Ganjiakou district. One of the best memories of my college years in Beijing is going out for dinner with my friends at the Uyghur restaurants in the Xinjiang Village which is just a couple of blocks away from the school. It had been a place for me to fight the homesickness at the weekends and holidays.

When I first went to Beijing in 1983, there was only one Muslim restaurant in the entire Beijing city. The state owned restaurant had only beef dumplings. Short after I arrived in Beijing, I went to that restaurant with several friends to take a break from the Chinese food at the school cafeteria. We had to wait for 4 hours on line to get the food. Uyghurs are very conservative about food, we are very reluctant to try new tastes. It was very hard for me to get used to the Chinese food at school. ... At the second year of my college, some Uyghurs, mostly farmers from the Eastern Turkistan countrysides began to come to Beijing in search of a better way of making money. They had quickly made the Uyghur kebab a household name in Beijing. Soon after, Beijing people began to call every Uyghur person a “lamb kebab”, some innocently, some to ridicule us. I witnessed many conflicts caused by this nick name. Selling kebab turned out to be a good business in Beijing and other Chinese cities. ...

As the Uyghur population increased, several Uyghur restaurants were opened to serve the increasing Uyghur population. Those restaurants immediately became the favorite hangouts for Uyghur students, businessmen and government officials on business trips. ... As result, Uyghur restaurants spread all over the city. But a little street named Ganjiakou boasted the most restaurants because of its proximity to Xinjiang Center where most of the Uyghur visitors stay. Beijing people began to call the street “Xinjiang Village” or “Uyghur Village”. After a long day work, Uyghur merchants, shish kebab sellers and other businessmen would come to the village to have dinner and hangout with other Uyghurs. For them, it became a place to feel at home in a foreign land 2,000 miles away from home.

I left Beijing in 1989 after my graduation from the college. Five years later, I stopped by in Beijing on my way to the United States. While I was waiting for visa, I stayed in Xinjiang Center and ate in the Xinjiang Village. I also spent

the Kurban heit (the biggest Muslim holiday) there. ... Last time when I was in Beijing it was December 1995. I stayed in Beijing over night. As I walked into the village to have a lagman (my favorite Uyghur dish), I had a warm coming-home feeling. After the restaurant owner found out I just came from United States where I was a graduate student, he insisted to treat me free. I kindly refused his offer, but the warm feeling stayed long after the delicious lagman was digested. ... Now the place where many Uyghurs found prosperity and peace will be gone. ... Without the Uyghur village, Beijing will be a very different place for me. I am sure all Uyghurs who have visited Beijing will share my feelings.⁴

A number of themes that are relevant to our discussion of Uyghur cuisine can be singled out from this passage. First of all, Uyghur food is characterised in opposition to Chinese food. Moreover, specific items can be read as signature dishes (*läghmän*), or function as ethnic markers (kebab). What emerges even more strongly though, is the sense of a community which unites around food, both physically and metaphorically. These feelings are clearly heightened by the somewhat displaced status of most Uyghurs in Beijing, who are “in a foreign land 2,000 miles away from home”. While this is, in a sense, an extreme case, it helps to set the scene and begin to understand how Uyghur people feel about their food and identify with it, in the context that I have delineated in the first part of this thesis. In other words, Turdi’s account exemplifies that emotional link between a community and its food, which we have identified as a fundamental dimension of a cuisine. The evocative nature of his account can be contrasted with the analytic approach adopted by some Uyghur academics 2,000 miles west of Beijing, back “at home”. While here too the link between a community and its food is established, the focus is rather on the material aspects of a cuisine and on its content.

Eating and drinking habits are a constituent part of a people’s culture and are reflected in people’s daily lives, as a result of the development of certain productive forces. During their long history, on the ground of their eating habits and of their climatic and living conditions, Uyghur people have created a rich culinary art and a variety of traditional foods suitable for the peculiarity of their lives. Uyghur people have always given great attention to the art of cooking, to hygiene, as well as to taste in food. There are many kinds of Uyghur food, among these meat- and starch-based foods play a prominent role in Uyghur diet. In Mähmut Qäshqäri’s “Compendium of Turkic Dialects” a

⁴ This message was posted by Turdi to the Uighur-I on 1 February 1999.

number of relatively ancient traditional Uyghur foods are described.
(Rakhman et al. 1996:26)

Thus starts the long chapter (25 pages) devoted to “Uyghur eating and drinking habits” in the book *Uyghur örp-adätleri* (*Uyghur Customs*, Rakhman et al. 1996). The book has that encyclopaedic ethnographic flavour common to most publications of this kind in the PRC. But with a significant difference: it is written by Uyghur academics, in Uyghur, for a Uyghur public. Because of the position of both the authors and the audience with respect to the subject, I would say that in such a book pride in one’s own culture replaces the exoticising if not patronising tone that we often find in similar publications in Chinese, usually written by Han Chinese.⁵ The book met remarkable success as soon as it appeared, at the end of 1996, in the few bookstores that sold non-Chinese language material in Ürümchi. In particular, it became very popular among educated Uyghurs, suggesting that it was not perceived as the usual propaganda. Indeed, the chapter on food in *Uyghur örp-adätleri* includes 36 entries devoted to “traditional” Uyghur foods, ranging from *nan* (bread) to *polo* and *murabba* (fruit preserve). Besides a detailed description of ingredients and methods of preparation, indicating a producer rather than a consumer readership, it also provides an accurate and in depth discussion of social and cultural aspects of food. This, besides obviously language, makes this book Uyghur. Especially when compared, for instance, to Lu (1992) where the author concludes the short section on Uyghur “Holiday food” declaring that today the Uyghur, besides the Roza and Qurban festivals, also celebrate public holidays such as May 1 (Labour Day) and the foundation of the PRC with the same kind of food (1992:110) - which is blatantly false and mere propaganda.

Going back to the book *Uyghur örp-adätleri*, in the introduction to the chapter on Uyghur foods and drinks quoted above, the first concern of the authors is to establish a long history for Uyghur culinary art. An attitude which was also implicit in Dilshat and Bahargül’s comments at the beginning of this chapter, as already pointed out. Here evidence for such antiquity is produced by reporting a long list of foods that appear in what is considered a 10th century Uyghur “classic”, Mähmut Qäshqäri’s *Compendium of Turkic Dialects*.

⁵ See for instance *Xinjiang Meishi* (Lou 1995). When introducing “Xinjiang minorities eating and drinking habits” the author writes “by learning their eating and drinking habits we can further improve our understanding of each *minzu*” (1995:1). In the book “A survey of China’s nationalities eating and drinking customs” the chapter on Xinjiang does not include a section on the Han because their “eating and drinking customs are too rich and complex to be summarised” (Lu 1992:109).

The word *köwisäk* (I tome, p. 628) is explained as “leavened nan”, and the word *chökmän* (I, 578) as “a kind of steamed nan”. *Kömäch* (I, 567) is “nan cooked by burying it under ashes”, while *sinchu* (I, 544) is glossed as “*khulima nan*, a kind of nan between *girdä* and *hämäk*. (Rakhman et al. 1996:26)

This is only the beginning of the list, which continues with all sorts of foods and drinks, mostly featuring grains and starchy foods, but also milk, yoghurt, meat, fresh and dried fruits, oil, honey, sugar, and rice. In fact, this long quote from Mähmut Qäshqäri’s work has also the merit of helping to reconstruct the diet and cuisine of settled Turkic peoples ten centuries ago. Peoples who are supposedly the ancestors of, and certainly related to, modern Uyghurs.

Another point that the authors make in their introduction concerns the richness and variety of Uyghur cuisine:

The above foods mentioned in the Compendium of Turkic Dialects are only a small part of Uyghur foods before the 10th century. The book *Uyghur tamaqliri* (*Uyghur food*), published in 1985 by the Xinjiang People’s Publishing House, presents in detail nearly 300 different types of dishes, with their ingredients and methods of preparation. (Rakhman et al. 1996:27)

Finally, the concluding paragraph of this introduction acknowledges the dynamic nature of Uyghur food habits, as well as the emergence of new habits as a consequence of recent developments:

Such characteristics of Uyghur eating and drinking habits have formed in the course of long historical developments and they constantly change and renew following social developments. For instance, in ancient times Uyghur were not used to eat fried foods [*qoruma tamaqlar*]. Following the development of inter ethnic cultural exchange, several kinds of fried dishes [*qorulghan säy*] have started entering contemporary Uyghur eating habits. Nevertheless, these fried dishes [*qoruma säylär*] still have a specific Uyghur [*milliy*] flavour as far as ingredients and taste are concerned. Below a number of Uyghur own traditional foods and dishes are presented. (Rakhman et al. 1996:27)

Before proceeding to describe in detail a large number of “traditional” Uyghur dishes, the authors devote a few pages to Uyghur beliefs and social values concerning food. For instance, they mention the practice of exchanging gifts of food among relatives, close friends, and neighbours. Moreover, they devote a section to each of the following: daily food at home, food for the guests, food for religious holidays, healing

with food, and dietetic food. Here notions of hospitality and etiquette are discussed along with meal structures and folk dietetics. In other words, what defines Uyghur cuisine as distinctive is not just a set of dishes, but also a long standing tradition and a number of social practices and values expressed in the domain of food. In particular, here too there is a suggestion of different degrees of elaboration. For example, from the most basic food eaten daily at home, to more elaborated food offered to guests, or prepared during religious holidays. We can conclude that what makes Uyghur cuisine distinctive is also the practice of cooking and eating more or less elaborated food depending on the context, which implies the knowledge of what is the appropriate degree of elaboration in each specific situation.

6.1.3. Uyghur dishes

What then is this food that many Uyghurs feel so strongly about? We have learnt that there are a large number of Uyghur dishes that are considered traditional. However, the first three items that most people today would mention as typically Uyghur are *polo*, *läghmän*, and *kawap*. *Polo* is probably regarded as the most typical Uyghur dish by both Uyghurs and Han Chinese (photo 30). As already discussed in previous chapters, it is the food normally served to guests, or at weddings, funerals, and similar celebrations. In Chinese it is called *zhuafan*, which can be translated as “rice eaten with fingers”, although most Uyghurs in Ürümqi have abandoned this habit and have introduced the use of a spoon. It is a rice dish of which there are a number of different versions, depending on the other ingredients. In the cookbook *Uyghur tamaqliri* (*Uyghur food*) we find twenty-four different recipes for *polo* (Baqi 1984). According to the most common version, carrots and mutton are first fried in abundant oil with onions in a *qazan*, a thick cast iron pan, then rice and water are added and the whole concoction is covered and steamed. Some like to add raisins and dried apricots.

In fact, *polo* can be found throughout Central Asia (*polau*, *plof*, etc.) and it is particularly popular among Uzbeks. In Iran we find *polow*, which is evidently related to the Uyghur *polo*. *Polow* is prepared by mixing tasty ingredients with boiled rice and steaming everything together. According to Fragner (1994a), the use of rice probably spread from China to Central Asia during the Mongol conquest and may subsequently have been brought to Iran by migrating Turks. In an early 16th century Persian cookbook, written by a professional cook possibly of Turkic origin, the word *polow* is used in the sense of ‘rice with something’. By comparing this use to that of a cookbook written seventy years later, Fragner concludes that “the modern Iranian

conception of *polow* came into existence during the first century of Safavid rule [16th century]. ... [This] new and very sophisticated method of preparing *polow* did not cross the frontiers to the Uzbek khannates of Central Asia” (1994:58-59). Ironically, the dish which Uyghurs today consider their most representative dish, laden with symbolic meaning for identity, hospitality, and ritual purposes, is found, in a more or less similar version, in most of Central Asia as well as in Iran. It is even more ironic that the origin of its main ingredient, rice, could possibly be traced back to that same Chinese civilisation which Uyghurs today consider totally alien and against whose assimilating policies they are trying to defend themselves. Such a paradox, however, is not uncommon. For instance, writing about red chilli among southern Italian immigrants in Toronto, Teti says “Oddly enough, in the New World southern Italian immigrants display as an emblem of identification and self-representation precisely an ‘American’ product.” (Teti 1997:45).

If *polo* may be considered the most representative Uyghur dish, that which is normally served to an invited guest, *läghmän* (sometimes also *längmän*) is the most common ordinary food among Uyghurs (photos 28, 32). *Läghmän* are hand-pulled noodles made with wheat flour, boiled and eaten with a stir-fried topping, usually made with tomatoes, green peppers, mutton, and other vegetables. While in Xinjiang and in ex-Soviet Central Asia they are usually associated with Uyghurs, *läghmän* are most probably of Hui (Muslim Chinese) origin. According to Ablikim, a Uyghur linguist, the phonetic structure of the word suggests that it is a loan-word as no Turkic word in Uyghur language starts with “l”. The most likely etymology is its derivation from the Chinese “*leng mian*” (cold noodles) or “*la mian*” (pulled noodles).⁶ *Läghmän*, as a dish, is also an interesting example of syncretism in food, where ingredients of different origins, such as tomatoes and peppers, are combined to create what is regarded by many as a distinctive Uyghur dish.

Kawap (*kebab*) are similarly far from exclusive to Uyghur culinary culture. They are found, with a similar name or an equivalent, throughout Central Asia, as well as in Turkey, Greece, and even beyond the Balkans in Croatia and Slovenia. In fact *kawap* is a general term for grilled meat, although the most common kind in Xinjiang is what in Uyghur is sometimes called *gösh kawap* (literally meat *kebab*), that is, pieces of mutton on a skewer grilled on a characteristic brazier and seasoned with ground cumin and, sometimes, ground chilli (photos 31, 40). The use of ground chilli on *kawap*, which is conspicuous in Ürümchi, may be a recent habit possibly adopted

⁶ I am not aware of the existence of a Uyghur etymological dictionary; this etymology is derived from a Khazak etymological dictionary (*Qazaq ...* 1987).



Photo 27 - Selling *nan* in the street.

Photo 28 - Making *lāghmān* at home.



Photo 29 - *Shorpa*

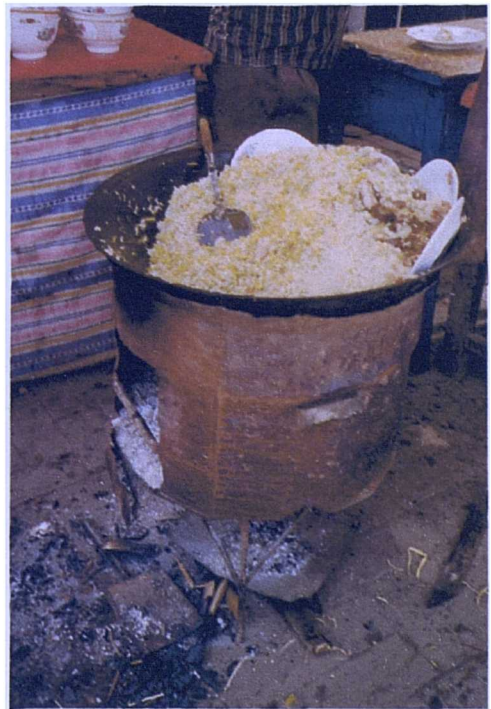
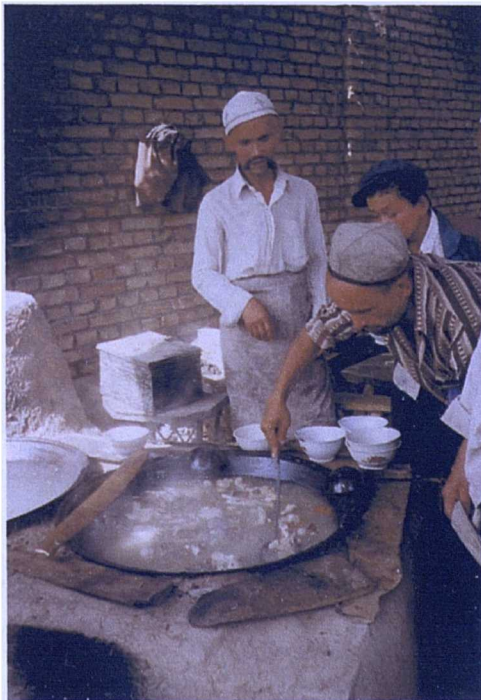


Photo 30 - *Polo*



Photo 31 - A *kawap* brazier outside an *ashkhana* in Ürümchi.



Photo 32 - Making *lāghmān* at the Kashgar Sunday market.



Photo 33 - *Chöchürä*

from the Chinese, as I have noticed that it was hardly used in southern oases such as Kucha or Kashgar.

As Turdî has pointed out in his “A tribute to Ganjiakou”, in Chinese people’s imagination this *kebab*, which they call *yangrouchuan* (mutton skewer), is generally associated with the Uyghur; so much so that in China proper the most common stereotypical image of the Uyghur is that of the kebab seller. Whether Uyghurs in Xinjiang have appropriated this image or not, in any case they consider *kawap* as a typically Uyghur food.⁷ The section of *Uyghur tamaqliri* devoted to *kawap* has nineteen entries (Baqi 1984). Among these the most popular are, along with liver or kidney *kawap*, *qiyma kawap* and *tonur kawap*. *Qiyma kawap* are made with lean mutton mince mixed with chopped onions, eggs, flour, ground cumin, black pepper, and chilli. This mix is then wrapped on a skewer and grilled. In fact, they are not very different from the *köfte kebab* one can eat in any *kebab* shop in Britain. While *tonur kawap* consists of a whole sheep roasted in a *tonur*, which is a clay oven where also *nan* is baked. Clearly, this is a rather expensive and time consuming dish which is normally served at banquets.

Other dishes commonly found in Uyghur homes, as well as in street stalls and restaurants, usually involve some kind of dough, often with a filling of minced (fat) mutton, chopped onions, and spices, typically cumin and black pepper. For instance, *petir manta*, *bolaq manta*, *samsa*, *pärmudä*, *chöchürä* (photo 33), *khoshän*, *pörä*, *gösh nan*, all feature more or less the same ingredients but they differ in the kind of dough used (leavened or unleavened), the size and shape, and the method of cooking: they may be steamed, as for *manta* and *khoshän*, boiled in a soup, as for *chöchürä*, baked, as for *samsa* and *pärmudä*, or fried, as for *pörä* and *gösh nan*. Among these, *manta* are probably the most common, both at home and in the street. *Petir* (thin) and *bolaq* (thick) refer to the dough, respectively unleavened and leavened. They roughly correspond to Chinese steamed *jiaozi* and *baozi*. Indeed it is likely that they are Chinese in origin, as their name suggests. *Manta* is a calque from the Chinese word *mantou*, a steamed bun which in the Xinjiang variant of Mandarin is called *momo*, presumably to avoid confusion.

Besides these, various kinds of *suyuq tamaqlar*, which literally means “watery foods” and can be translated as “soups”, are also very popular at all seasons. I would stretch this category to include all kinds of more or less ‘liquid’ foods, from *shorpa*, to *ügrä* and *suyuq ash*, and to *qoldama*. Dough, of various shape and size, characterises all these dishes, except for *shorpa*, which is a clear meat soup (photo 29). *Ügrä* and

⁷ Recently, I had a conversation about food with a Kurdish refugee, who came from Turkish Kurdistan. He insisted that *kebab* is a Kurdish dish. I believe in this case what Claudia Roden (1994) says about Jewish food may also apply.

suyuq ash are basically the same dish, except for the dough, which is in the shape of very thin noodles in *ügrä*, as opposed to flat squares of dough - the *män pär* that Dilshat mentioned at the beginning of this chapter - in *suyuq ash*. *Qoldama*, the less watery of these dishes, is made with a characteristic dough, roughly in the shape of small dices, which is called precisely *qoldama*. Besides dough, other ingredients used in these dishes are meat and vegetables, such as tomatoes, carrots, potatoes, onions, chillies, and green peppers, though in much smaller quantities.

6.1.4. Uyghur diet

Grenard gives a detailed account of eating habits in Chinese Turkestan at the end of last century (1898:103-109). We learn that at the time corn and wheat flour formed the basic diet for the majority of the population, mainly in the form of bread and noodles. Meat, mostly mutton, was a luxury, but most people would eat it at least once a week. This suggests a variation among meals, from simpler starch-based meals to more luxurious ones that included also meat. Onions were the most popular vegetables, followed by carrots and turnips. Potatoes, as well as various kinds of Chinese vegetables, like cabbage or spinach, were known but rarely used. Fruit, on the other hand, was consumed in large quantities. His account is consistent with the description of food found in Mähmut Qäshqäri's tenth century *Compendium of the Turkic Dialects*, cited by Rakhman et al. (1996).

Today the staples of Uyghur diet still are "flour-based food" (*un tamaq*) - such as noodles, dumplings, *nan* (bread; photo 27), etc. - and meat. However, in practice meat still is to some extent a luxury and its consumption varies considerably according to income and gender. Fruit is still consumed in large quantities, especially in summer. I was often entertained by people praising the variety and the quality of the fruit in their homeland. As already mentioned in chapter 2, each place has its own speciality. Turpan grapes and Hami (Qumul) melons are renowned throughout China. Less widely known but equally tasty are apricots from Kucha, figs from Atush, pomegranate from Kashgar, apples from Ghulja, pears from Korla, almonds from Yärkäänd, walnuts and peaches from Khotän. Compared to a century ago, a wider variety of vegetables have entered Uyghur diet. However, these are still consumed in relatively small quantities, and were mostly introduced by the Han, as many of their names reveal. For example, the most common word for cucumber is *khuangga* (from the Chinese word *huanggua*), while aubergines are usually called *chäyza* (from the Chinese word *qiezi*). The indigenous Uyghur words for cucumber and aubergine,

respectively *tärkhämäk* and *pedigän*, are rarely used, if known at all, at least in Ürümchi. The most characteristic spice in Uyghur cuisine is definitely cumin, along with a wide range of peppers and other spices. Uyghurs in Ürümchi have recently developed a taste for hot chillies, which they call *laza*, a calque from the Chinese colloquial term *lazi* (*lajiao*). These were reportedly introduced in the region by Han migrants from Sichuan. Finally, black tea is the most common beverage among Uyghurs. They often ‘cure’ it with *chay dora*, a mixture of spices which is also believed to have therapeutic qualities.

A meal usually consists of a cooked dish and, on the whole, *läghmän* noodles probably rank as the favourite and most popular daily meal among Uyghurs. I would say that today dough is still at the core of Uyghur diet. Despite her tight working schedule, Dilber would knead a sourdough nearly every morning and use it at lunch or dinner to make *khoshän*, *pörä*, *bolaq manta*, or simply *nan*. Each time she would remove a small piece of dough and put it in a jar in the refrigerator. Thus she would keep the natural yeast until the next time. It is not unusual, however, to lunch or dine simply on *nan* and tea, or *nan* and fruit. According to Amangül, in the countryside most people don’t eat a proper meal more than once or twice a week, the rest of the time they just have tea with *nan*. This view seems to be supported by the authors of the above mentioned book on Uyghur customs: “Uyghurs eat three meals a day, in the morning, at noon, and in the evening. Each household eating habits depend on their financial conditions. Usually, for their two daytime meals people eat *nan* with tea, while in the evening they have a cooked meal. Today the habit of eating a cooked meal at lunch too has become very popular.” (Rakhman 1996:28). Urban residents usually are better off than their rural counterparts and can afford a proper meal twice a day. But, besides the economic implications, cooking a meal is also time consuming and dining on bread and fruit can also be a matter of convenience. In Ürümchi this is especially true for students, who do not have cooking facilities in their dormitories and have to rely on the university canteen or small restaurants on campus, which can be both expensive and inconvenient.

Short after the end of the winter holidays, which that year coincided with the *Roza* festival, I went to visit Nurqiz in her dormitory, which she shared with seven class-mates of hers. While I was there, Gulsayra pulled a cardboard box out from under her bed. It was full of *nan*, that she had made herself when she was at home during the holidays, as well as other food items. She took some *kurut* [ewe’s milk cheese] and some sort of soft cheese. Shortly later, also Shämshinur pulled out a box of food and had a snack. She ate some

sangza and *müshükür* with *eris*.⁸ I asked Nurqiz if it was usual that they brought all that *nan* from home and whether it lasted. She said that everybody does and that it lasted very long because there was a lot of oil in the dough. After they baked it, they left it out for three days, so that it was completely dry before they packaged it for the trip.

Indeed, when visiting their families who live in other towns, it is very common that students and young graduates who live in Ürümqi take big boxes full of home-made *nan* and preserves with them. Besides nostalgic aspects, this means saving a considerable amount of money, given that in 1996-97 one *nan* from a bakery cost 1 yuan (more than an average bus fare). Moreover, most people believe that home-made bread is better than the bread bought in bakeries. In this way, students would have at least some basic but healthy meals guaranteed.

6.2. Chinese foods, Uyghur ways

The foods and dishes that I have described lie at the core of what Uyghurs regard as their cuisine, both in people's accounts and in written sources. Clearly this cuisine has not developed in isolation and has been influenced by interaction with other culinary traditions, incorporating individual food items as well as dishes. This is true of most if not all culinary cultures, which are usually the result of an ongoing process of food migration and syncretism (cf. Zubaida and Tapper 1994). The boundaries of what is considered traditional are permeable and, to a certain extent, arbitrary. For some the knowledge of the "foreign" origin of *läghmän* or *mänpär* may question their Uyghurness, for others there is no doubt that these are Uyghur and they would take offence if someone questioned this. However, on the whole there is a shared notion of what Uyghur cuisine consists of. Identification implies differentiation, and people very often discuss also what is not Uyghur. Recent developments in Xinjiang, above all the increasing influx of Han population in the last two or three decades, have also affected Uyghur diet and food habits. While some of these influences are still recognised as external to the core of Uyghur cuisine, perhaps it will not be too long before they are incorporated within its boundaries. Having discussed by and large what is Uyghur cuisine and what Uyghur diet consists of, let us have a closer look at what Uyghurs actually eat and how they talk about it.

⁸ *Müshükür* are small pieces of fried dough, while *eris* is a sort of toffee cream made of milk boiled with sugar, possibly of Russian origin. It is common in northern Xinjiang but not in the south.

After my class at Dilber's I stayed for lunch. I asked her what she was cooking. "So *säy* and *mifan*" [*mifan* is "rice" in Chinese] was her reply. That is, stir-fried vegetables with mutton and boiled rice. Then she added "We're not like the Chinese who use only one vegetable for a dish.". Her *so säy* had tomatoes, green beans, meat, and other vegetables. "The rice we make is also better, because we add salt. Moreover, Xinjiang rice is the best and I always buy that, even if it's more expensive". A few days earlier I had stayed for dinner and she had made a similar dish of stir-fried mutton and vegetables with rice, accompanied by a remark in the same tone "The Chinese make four or five different dishes, while for us one is enough."

When her daughter Anargül heard that we were going to eat "*mifan*" for lunch she was delighted. Her mother didn't miss this chance to tease her with a usual joke "You see? She's the daughter of some Chinese, she's not my daughter" she said. "When she was a baby two poor Han peasants knocked at our door and sold her to us for 500 yuan" and she laughed ...

That same night I had dinner at Bahargül's. She made *petir manta*. I asked her what was the difference between these and the Chinese *jiaozi*. "I suppose they are the same thing. Except that the filling is different, both for the meat - mutton as opposed to pork - and for the spices. Uyghurs mainly use black pepper and onion". I then asked whether this kind of food was introduced by the Chinese. "It's hard to tell ... anyway, this kind of foods made with dough are found almost everywhere, although with local characteristics." However, unlike the Chinese, we ate with forks. Bahargül said that to eat dumplings forks are much more convenient than chopsticks.

Uyghurs in Ürümqi are confronted daily with an increasingly large Han presence and this fact is reflected in most of the conversations I had. People would constantly compare Uyghur ways with Han ways, often implying or explicitly remarking the superiority of their own ways. This could be read as a counter-hegemonic discourse to that of Han superiority implicit in the Communist civilising project (see Harrell 1995). Food, with all its related practices, is a domain in which Uyghurs very strongly affirm their distinctiveness and, often, a sense of superiority vis-à-vis the Han. Some, like Dilber in the above quotation, are very vocal about this, while other, like Bahargül, have a rather moderate attitude while still recognising some difference.

I would like to situate Dilber and Bahargül's different approaches in a broader context. Dilber is a very outgoing and informal person, she likes to joke and always tries to look on the bright side of life. Whereas Bahargül is shier, as well as younger; compared to Dilber's straightforward ways, hers are somewhat sophisticated. Apart

from their very different personalities, their attitude to Han culture also varies considerably. They both grew up in southern Xinjiang, where their families still live, and they both have a degree in Chinese and teach Chinese and Uyghur language at the university. However, Dilber clings firmly to her Uyghur identity, she is extremely proud of Uyghur culture and, while also appreciating some aspects of Han culture, does not identify with it in any respect. Her two daughters went to Uyghur schools and, despite both Dilber and her husband are fluent in Chinese, it is a foreign language to them and they always speak Uyghur at home. Bahargül's attitude, on the other hand, is rather less uncompromising. For her too Uyghur ways are a very important aspect of her identity, but she is also attracted by Han culture as she recognises its higher status in Chinese society. Although she was educated in Uyghur schools and only learnt Chinese when she was at university, her Mandarin is perfect. She makes a point of speaking to her five year old son in Mandarin, as she wants him to be educated in Han schools. Her husband, who went himself through a Han education, was of a different opinion; but she fought fiercely and argued that it was a lot more difficult to learn Chinese at a later age, as she had to do. She does not seem to worry, as her husband did, that the boy might "lose" his Uyghur culture, and she clearly recognises and does not question the importance of mastering the language and culture of the Han. Eventually it was decided that their son would be educated in Han schools. In short, while Bahargül too is proud of her Uyghur culture, I never heard her dismissing Han ways as inferior when comparing these to Uyghur ones. At the same time, ironically, I never had *ganpan* or *mifan* at Bahargül's, perhaps because I have always been formally invited by her and this is usually not a dish that one would offer to an invited guest.

These sort of remarks, contrasting Uyghur to Han ways, are by no means confined to actual food. In general, claims that the Han have no manners are extremely common. During a class devoted to food vocabulary, my teacher Pärhät asked how people in Italy considered eating while standing. I was not sure how to answer his question, but I remembered that when I was a child they used to tell me that horses eat while standing whereas people eat while sitting. "Well, he said, for Uyghurs it's the same: eating while standing is no good, it's a bad habit, one has to sit down to eat. Whereas the Han don't pay attention to this and eat also while standing." When I reported this conversation to my other teacher Amangül she took the opportunity to launch in a vehement monologue on Chinese bad manners:

My mother used to say even worse, she used to say that donkeys eat while standing. She referred to people lacking good manners, like the Chinese. Donkeys make a very unpleasant noise, and they are dirty. Whereas horses

after all are beautiful animals. If you look at the Chinese, they eat while standing, even while walking. Moreover, while eating they sniff [she reproduced the noise], they clean their nose, they spit. When we eat we don't even speak, both because it could go down the wrong way and to avoid spitting some food inadvertently. So we keep silent and concentrate on our food. When we have finished, we drink some tea, we clear the table and then we chat.

She often voiced her rather strong opinions concerning the superiority of Uyghur manners when compared to the Han, who she thought totally lacked manners. I found this was a very common stereotype among Uyghurs, although most people would not phrase it in such extreme terms as she did. Often the Han would be blamed for having a bad influence and corrupting Uyghur ways, not only as far as manners were concerned. For instance, Dilber declared on more than one occasion that she makes her own bread since, she said, nowadays the bread you buy in bakeries is not good anymore. "It's not Uyghur bread, it's Han bread! Because they have learnt from the Han, they use artificial yeast like for *momo*. The *tonur* [oven] is Uyghur, but the dough is Chinese. Moreover, they use kneading machines." She was mildly disappointed when I told her that in Europe too they use baking powder.

6.2.1. Chinese food on Uyghur tables?

While Uyghurs in Ürümqi tend to construct their identity in opposition to the Han Chinese, Uyghur foodways have inevitably been influenced by increasing contact with the Han. However, despite a certain degree of exchange and borrowings, I would definitely make a clear distinction between the core of Uyghur and Chinese cuisine. Differences can be identified in terms of typical meal structure and patterns, ingredients (especially as far as meat, vegetables, and spices are concerned), and taste in general. Very roughly, the structure of a Chinese meal is normally conceived as a combination of *fan*, typically an individual bowl of rice, and a number of *cai* (dishes) shared with the other participants. Whereas a Uyghur meal usually consists of a single main course, where dough - as opposed to rice - normally plays a predominant role.⁹ This could be for instance *läghmän*, *gösh nan*, *polo*, or some kind of *suyuq ash*. Moreover, with the exception of *polo*, the main course is always served in and eaten off individual plates.

⁹ On Chinese food see Anderson (1988).

However, this divide between cuisines can be bridged. Recent years have seen innovative forms of borrowing and synthesis, exemplified in dishes such as *ganpan* or *dapanji*. *Ganpan*, a Uyghur word derived from the Chinese *ganfan* (lit. “dry rice”), is a typical example of a Chinese dish that has been adapted and incorporated into Uyghur diet, if not cuisine. A single dish of boiled rice topped with stir-fried vegetables and meat, it is basically a rice version of *läghmän*. This is what Dilber, in the above account, referred to as *so säy* and *mifan*. Her remarks on her daughter’s appreciation of this dish implied a recognition of its Chinese origin, if not status. At the same time, though, she treated it as a Uyghur dish when contrasting “our ways” to the Chinese. In fact, the introduction of *ganpan* into urban Uyghur daily diet is fairly recent. I remember Bahargül remarking how women from rural areas of southern Xinjiang cannot boil rice. Once she asked one of her students, who was at her house, to help her with lunch and cook some rice. “She couldn’t do it! Such a simple thing as boiling rice, she had never done it, since she was from a village in Aksu county”. In Ürümqi *ganpan* is rather popular, especially among working women, as it is much easier and quicker than any other dish. As already pointed out by the authors of *Uyghur örp-adätleri, säylär* (stir-fried dishes) are also penetrating Uyghurs’ daily as well as formal meals, as I shall discuss more in detail.

In the mid- to late 1990s *dapanji*, a truly inter-ethnic Xinjiang dish, gained increasing popularity in the region. It is a spicy hot chicken stew, which is served in a big plate shared by a number of people. After the chicken has been eaten, wide flat hand-pulled noodles are poured into the gravy. The story goes that it was invented in Savan, northern Xinjiang, by a homesick migrant from Sichuan who randomly mixed hot chillies, reportedly the staple in Sichuan cuisine, with chicken and potatoes, in an attempt to reproduce a homey taste. This dish combines elements of both Chinese and Uyghur/Turkic cuisine, both in terms of ingredients, for example chillies and flat hand-pulled noodles, and in terms of pattern: it can be eaten as a single main course, following a Uyghur meal pattern, or it can be incorporated in a set of dishes (*cai*) for a Chinese-style meal. In fact, rather than having a specific ethnic identification, it has become a regional dish equally popular among Uyghurs and Han. It is important to stress that there are no distinct ethnic variants; it is the same dish, be it in a Han, Hui, or Uyghur restaurant.

Despite some emerging ‘hybrid’ forms, such as *dapanji* and *ganpan*, in daily life Uyghur cuisine is usually predominant, both in terms of dishes and of meal structures. However, on special occasions this pattern seems to be reversed, at least in Ürümqi. Today for urban Uyghurs a prestigious meal, including a wedding banquet, usually consists of what they call *so säy*, or simply *säy* (from the Chinese *chao cai*,

stir-fried dishes).¹⁰ Nevertheless, they would not define such a meal as Chinese. Firstly because it is prepared by a Uyghur cook and is therefore truly *qingzhen*, as we shall discuss in the next section. But also because these dishes still have “a particular Uyghur flavour” (Rakhman et al. 1996:27). Only once did I hear a Uyghur refer to *so säy* as “Chinese”.

Eli invited me for lunch and he asked whether I preferred to eat Uyghur or Chinese food. He noticed my surprise and explained “We can choose between two restaurants, they are both run by Uyghurs. One is very good but they only serve Uyghur food, like *läghmän* or *polo*, while in the other Uyghur food is not so special, but they make excellent *so säy*.”

Indeed, the methods of preparation and the structure of these dishes are characteristic of Chinese cuisine, as outlined above, and their origin is acknowledged in the term that Uyghurs use, *so säy*, a calque from Chinese. In short, if *nan* with tea or fruit represents the most informal Uyghur meal, on the other hand *säylär* often mark a rather formal occasion. My experience suggests that they may be even competing with *polo* as a ‘guest food’. However, while their presence on Uyghur tables is acknowledged by Rakhman et al. (1996), they do not appear in their list of foods, perhaps because they are a recent phenomenon and are not considered as traditional food - which is regarded as the appropriate object of ethnographic research. Nevertheless, I would not be surprised if, perhaps in a few decades, *säylär* became part of ‘traditional’ Uyghur cuisine, just like *manta* or *läghmän* did in the past.

It is intriguing that Uyghurs in Ürümchi should mark special occasions by choosing what in many respects can be seen as a Chinese meal. As already discussed in chapter 4, at weddings and similar celebrations, ‘traditional’ Uyghur food, such as *samsa*, *manta*, *qordaq*, etc., is incorporated in the meal structure as a starter. But the meal mainly consists of three or four *liang säy* (in Chinese *liang cai*, cold dishes) accompanied by a number of *issiq säy* (in Chinese *re cai*, hot dishes) placed at the centre so that everybody eats from the same plate, in the Chinese manner. The latter usually include at least three or four meat and/or vegetables dishes, mostly stir-fried, and fish. More Uyghur food can be included in the meal, provided that it is ‘formatted’ as a *säy* and incorporated in the relevant set of dishes (cold or hot). For example, the menu at one wedding banquet I attended included: *ash manta* (*polo* and *manta*), *qordaq* (a beef stew normally served at weddings), and *pärmudä* (small baked dumplings) as ‘starters’; then four ‘cold dishes’: fried peanuts, cucumber salad, and

¹⁰ Some Uyghur restaurants divide their menus into *säylär* (dishes) and *tamaqlar* (lit. “foods”, these include Uyghur dishes that constitute main courses, such as *läghmän*, or *suyuq ash*).

two kinds of cold soya and rice noodles; finally, a large number of hot dishes, among which meat was predominant: tripe, sheep feet, roasted chicken, green peppers, *mini-kawap*, and others. In fact, a process of transformation is clearly evident, where both dishes and meal structures are manipulated and combined to create a new synthesis. This however occurs within a distinctive Uyghur framework, not only as far as ingredients and taste are concerned, but also in terms of manners, rules of commensality, norms of hospitality, as well as notions of contamination revolving around the concept of *qingzhen*, as we shall discuss later.

6.2.2. Uyghur or Turkic?

Due to their Chinese origin, *ganpan* and *säy* occupy an ambiguous position in the contemporary Uyghur culinary landscape. While such origin is acknowledged, although often only implicitly, they are subject to a process of reinterpretation which eventually may transform them into truly Uyghur dishes. In any case, while Chinese and Uyghur culinary worlds are bridged, they are also simultaneously marked as different, to make sure that there is no confusion between what is Chinese and what is Uyghur. This is even more evident when comparing the status of other dishes or foods which are not 'originally' or exclusively Uyghur. In fact, Uyghur cuisine and food ways, as defined in opposition to the Chinese, are to a great extent shared by other Turkic peoples in Xinjiang, as well as across the border in the Central Asian Republics or even in Afghanistan. As we have seen in the first part of this thesis, within the Chinese polity boundaries between different Turkic groups are often blurred. For instance, while Uyghurs today regard themselves as a distinct group, they also have a strong sense of their Turkic identity and often identify with other Turkic groups, especially in opposition to the Han Chinese. *Naren chöp*, a dish of short thin noodles in a meat gravy, provides a good example of the overlap, or rather continuity, between local Uyghur cuisine and a broader regional Central Asian Turkic tradition.

One night I was invited for dinner with two other foreign students and Tursun by his friend Adil. Upon our arrival we were informed that we were going to eat *naren chöp*. One of the foreign students said he liked that dish and that he had eaten it at his Sibe friend's house. Tursun and Adil immediately remarked that Sibe cannot make it because it is a Kazakh - Uyghur - Uzbek dish and only Kazakhs, Uyghurs, or Uzbeks can make it.

A few months later, I had dinner with a group of Uyghur friends at Kechik Yulghun, a restaurant which specialises in *naren chöp*. While we were waiting

to be served, Niyaz said he had never eaten *naren* before. Nurqiz then recalled her "grandfather's" birthday two years before when they had a meal at this same restaurant and he got angry because they told him these were 'Uzbek *naren*' when they weren't. According to him, an Uzbek born in Tashkent, there should also be onions and yoghurt. At this point Niyaz started a heated discussion arguing - as he had done on other occasions - that Uzbeks and Uyghurs are the same, and Kazakhs too; and that he was surprised that someone like her "grandfather", a well known writer whom he respected a lot, would make such a distinction. Nurqiz replied that nobody was denying a shared cultural background among Turkic peoples, but as a matter of fact there are different states called Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and so on, and there are expressions such as 'Uzbek *naren*' or 'Kazakh *naren*' to refer to different 'styles' of *naren*.

Today Uyghurs, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, and other Turkic groups share many foods and practices, which are unproblematically perceived as stemming from a common tradition. In other words, differentiation, where it occurs, is situated within a common Turkic framework. There is by no means the same urgency to create a distinction comparable to that between the Han and the Uyghur. Hence *naren* can be equally Uzbek, Kazakh, or Uyghur; but definitely not Sibe, a non-Turkic group which in the ethnic mapping of Xinjiang is often assimilated with the Han. Not only is the sharing of this dish among diverse Turkic groups perceived as unproblematic, but for someone like Niyaz there is not even the need to make any further ethnic discrimination.

In some cases, though, among the Uyghur we find foods that are clearly identified with a specific group. For instance, among the Turkic peoples in Xinjiang, Tatars have a reputation for making delicious cakes and biscuits, such as *baqaliy*, *qat-qat*, *pechinä - piränik*, *tort*, *bälish*, etc. In fact, many of these may be of European-Russian origin. These are among the *gezäklär* that are served with tea and dried fruits when a guest visits a Uyghur home. Abdulla Abbas, himself a Tatar, is a lecturer in the biology department of Xinjiang University. He learned to bake cakes and biscuits from his grandmother and he decided to share this knowledge; so in 1990 he published a recipe book called "Making *pechinä-piränik* at home". In the introduction he writes:

As a consequence of improved living conditions among the peoples of Xinjiang, today it has become a common habit to prepare *baqaliy*, *qat-qat*, all sorts of *pechinä - piränik*, *tort*, *bälish*, and similar sweet foods to entertain guests during holidays, parties, and when exchanging visits.

In hospitable Xinjiang the people of each nationality, in order to warmly entertain their dear guests, make every effort to prepare their *dastikhan* with nourishing, healthy, tasty, and exquisite foods. These are meant to accompany tea, which is served before or after the meal. In recent years, these kind of sweet foods, that used to appear on Tatars *dastikhan*, have been adopted also by other nationalities. (Abbas 1990:1)

The hybrid and syncretic aspects of Uyghur foodways were succinctly put by Dilber. Once while she was talking about these biscuits and cakes that are offered to guests, especially during the two main holidays, she commented: “And these are not even traditional Uyghur sweets; they’re western. We learnt something from the east and something from the west. We took *säy* from the Orientals and sweets from the Westerners.” However, while *vis-à-vis* the Orientals, namely the Chinese, Uyghurs manifest the urgency to differentiate and to mark disruption, when turning westwards, particularly to other Turkic peoples, there is no such need to differentiate and the stress is rather on continuity of cultural practices, in most cases supported by a common linguistic, religious, and historical background.

6.3. Uyghur notions of *qingzhen*

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, in the realm of food Uyghur differentiation *vis-à-vis* the Han is also constructed around notions of contamination, which are implicit in the concept of *qingzhen*. Indeed, this concept is central to Uyghur attitudes to food (in China), as well as to their interaction with the Han Chinese. Since the language of this interaction is Chinese, in order to discuss this notion I prefer to use a Chinese word, *qingzhen*, which includes the meanings of ‘*halal*’ and ‘Muslim’. As a matter of fact Chinese is the dominant language within the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and it is the *lingua franca* of most exchanges involving people with different linguistic backgrounds. For instance, Chinese would be normally spoken not only between a Uyghur and a Han Chinese but also between, say, a Uyghur and a Mongol. Chinese was also the language used in some of my interviews and in many conversations I recorded on the subject. Therefore it is less odd than it seems to use the word *qingzhen* in order to discuss a concept, or rather an area of belief and behaviour, which among the Uyghurs of China is often shaped precisely by such interaction. Moreover, for the purpose of this discussion, the choice of this term - rather than a Uyghur one - helps to shed some confusion. There is more than one Uyghur equivalent for this term, depending on the context in which it occurs. Furthermore,

there is no Uyghur equivalent in terms of connotation, that is, which evokes Islam and China at the same time. Lastly, the word *qingzhen*, by bridging the Uyghur and the Chinese 'universe', allows the relevant actors a greater negotiation and manipulation of meanings, this being precisely the focus of my analysis. In particular, I argue that Uyghur understandings of such concept are informed by their relations to the Han Chinese.

The concept of *qingzhen* - with all its equivalents - is central to Uyghur daily life, especially in Ürümqi where the great majority of the population is Han. Among Uyghurs, everybody seems to have very strong ideas about what is *qingzhen* and what is not, ideas which guide their food choices. But when directly asked what it means, very few are able to give a clear and coherent answer. *Qingzhen* is a Chinese expression which literally means "pure and true" and is inevitably associated with Islam, to the extent that, in Chinese, a mosque is called *qingzhensi* (literally "pure and true temple") and Islam (*yisilanjiao*) may also be referred to as *qingzhenjiao* (literally "pure and true religion"). Since the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1911) the word *qingzhen* has been used to describe Islam and its God, and it has slowly become a synonym for "Islam" (Cihai 1990:1078).¹¹ In particular, the concept of *qingzhen* is central to Hui (Muslim Chinese) identity (Gillette 2000; Gladney 1991; Pillsbury 1975). There is of course a great deal of overlap between Hui and Uyghur understanding of this term. However, my intention here is to focus exclusively on its use and its role in contemporary Xinjiang from a Uyghur perspective.

I shall start by considering some problems of translation between languages which often epitomise a mismatch between categories and cultures. As earlier noted, Uyghurs in Ürümqi must constantly switch between two languages - their native language, Uyghur, and Mandarin - and translate concepts which may be lacking, irrelevant, or have different connotations in the other language and culture. By trying to discuss the concept of *qingzhen* in a third language and from yet another cultural background, I am adding a further level of complexity.

¹¹ See, for instance, the entries "*qingzhensi*" and "*qingzhenjiao*" in the *Xinjiang Minzu Cidian* (XUAR 1995: 610, 345). In the same dictionary, see also the entry "*qingzhen*" for the origin and history of the term (XUAR 1995:337). Mathews glosses "*qingzhen*" as "used by Mohammedans for God"; "*qingzhenjiao*" or "*huihuijiao*" as "Mohammedanism"; "*qingzhensi*" as "the Jewish synagogue formerly at Kaifengfu in Honan" (Mathews 1943). At the entry "*qingzhenjiao*" in the *Ci Hai* we find: "Namely Islam. During the Ming and Qing period, in order to describe the doctrine of Islam, Chinese Muslim scholars used the following words to praise the "True Lord" [*zhenzhu*, i.e. Allah] worshipped by the above mentioned religion: "uncontaminated peace and quiet" [*qingjing wuran*], "the true and the only" [*zhennai duyi*], "deeply pure and deeply true" [*zhiqing zhizhen*], and "the True Lord [Allah] originally has the only respect, this is called pure and true" [*zhenzhu yuan you duzun, wei zhe qingzhen*]. Hence the name [*qingzhenjiao*]." (Cihai 1990:1078, see also the entries: "*qingzhenyan*" and "*qingzhensi*").

Among Uyghurs in Ürümqi, the word “*qingzhen*” is usually associated with food, and it refers to what they can eat. They must not eat anything which is not *qingzhen*. This word can be translated into Uyghur in different ways, depending on the context. When describing such food in Uyghur, they would normally use *halal* (allowed) as opposed to *haram* (forbidden).¹² This roughly translates *qingzhen* and non-*qingzhen* as adjectives of food. However, this is usually not an issue for discussion among Uyghurs, since the food they eat and talk about among themselves is inevitably *halal*, or *qingzhen*, by default. On the other hand, such categories may become extremely relevant in interactions where non-Uyghur-speakers and non-Muslims are involved.

Another common context in which *qingzhen/non-qingzhen* categories are used is when describing a restaurant, eating house, or dining hall, in short any premises where food is sold, served, or distributed. The use of such categories has been institutionalised by the introduction of *qingzhen* certificates issued by the Committee for Minority Affairs to be displayed on the premises (photos 34, 38). In this context *qingzhen* is glossed in Uyghur as *musulmanchä*, which literally means “Muslim style”. Besides the above mentioned certificates, most restaurants include this information in their signs. Along with their name, one can usually read “*qingzhen fanzhuan*” (*qingzhen* restaurant), “*qingzhen canting*” (*qingzhen* dining hall), etc..

For the purposes of this discussion, we can identify three broad categories of public eating places in Xinjiang: firstly, Han Chinese, which are not *qingzhen* and are usually marked by the characters *Hancan* (Han food); secondly Hui, which are *qingzhen* and whose signs are normally written in Chinese and usually include the characters *qingzhen* and/or *Huimin* (Hui people); and finally Uyghur, which are also *qingzhen*, although this may not be explicitly stated in their signs, written in Uyghur and/or in Chinese. In Uyghur signs we may find different words alluding to their being *qingzhen*, such as *musulmanchä* (Muslim style), *musulmanlar* (of Muslims), *milliy* (literally “of a *minzu*”, it may be translated as “ethnic”, however in this context it usually means “Uyghur”; photos 35, 36).

This sounds perfectly straightforward: Uyghurs in China can eat *qingzhen* (*halal*) food in *qingzhen* (Muslim) restaurants, which are normally marked as such and include both Hui and Uyghur restaurants. But how is *qingzhen* defined? What are

¹² “*Häram* [Arabic]: restricted (*chäklängän*). In contemporary Uyghur language ‘*haram*’. Things and activities strictly restricted for Muslims according to the Islamic law (*Shäri’ät*), like drinks and foods (*ozuq-ta’amlar*) that it is forbidden to eat.” “*Hälal* [Arabic]: permitted, clean, neat (*pakiz, taza*). In contemporary Uyghur language ‘*halal*’. Thing or activity allowed for Muslims, like drinks and food regarded as clean (*taza wä pak hesablanghan*).” (Hapiz 1994:178-179)



Photo 34 - Preparing *kawap* outside an *ashkhana* in Kashgar. Note the *qingzhen* certificate on the door.

Photo 35 (right)
A trilingual sign in Ghulja: *milli ashkhana* in Uyghur (top line), *musulmanski restoran* in Russian (bottom line), and *qingzhen canting* in Chinese (characters on the left).



Photo 36 (left)
Qaynam musulmanlar ashkhani (Ürümchi).

the criteria, if any, for deciding what is *qingzhen* and what is not? And for whom? The most obvious reference here is the Qur'an and the dietary rules contained in it.

[These] rules are based on the categories of pure (*tahir*) and impure (*rijs, najis*) and of lawful (*halal*) and unlawful (*haram*). ... Muslims are expressly forbidden from consuming carrion, spurring blood, pork, and food that has been consecrated to any being other than God himself. ... Each prohibited substance is declared to be extremely defiling, with wine being further distinguished as an instrument of Satan for sowing discord among the faithful. ... Transgression of dietary prohibitions temporarily invalidates acts of worship such as prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage. Mere physical contact with pork, carrion, or wine makes a person or object impure. (Campo 1995:375-6).¹³

There has been some disagreement on whether wine includes all intoxicating beverages, but all schools agree that consuming it is unlawful. However, “[t]hrough the centuries, the Islamic ban on intoxicants has been honoured in the breach.” (Campo 1995:376). If these are the only explicitly forbidden items, some flesh is preferred to other, for example domestic cattle, sheep, goats, and camels. Moreover, whether meat is lawful or unlawful largely depends on how it is obtained, that is ritual slaughtering as opposed to strangling. The Qur'an also provides the guidelines for deciding who can perform the slaughtering and from whom food can be received. Here, again, we find a wide range of different interpretations: “many hold that if there is doubt about the source of meat, a person need only “mention the name of Allah over it and eat it” (al-Bukhari). On the other hand, jurists have forbidden food obtained from known heretics, apostates, idol-worshippers, and atheists.” (Campo 1995:376). In short, very few things are explicitly forbidden for consumption: namely carrion, blood, pork, and wine, and some of these may be open to interpretation. In other words, this is a domain which allows some manipulation of rules, be it by legal schools, religious communities, or individual believers.

¹³ I am indebted to Maris Boyd Gillette for drawing my attention to this source. Cf. also the Qur'an as quoted in Merchant (1947): II. 168 “But that which dieth of itself, and blood, and swine's flesh, and that over which any other name than that of God hath been invoked, is forbidden you. But he who shall partake of them by constraint [life or death], without lust or wilfulness, no sin shall be upon him. Verily God is Indulgent, Merciful.” (Merchant 1947:101-2).

6.3.1. Uyghur practical definitions of *qingzhen*

Let us now move on to Uyghur perceptions and daily practice. I will focus on young Uyghurs, since it was primarily with them that notions of *qingzhen* emerged as an issue. Indeed, while this was never an issue when eating at home, it became often one when eating out. This was a situation that occurred most often among young people, be they student or young graduates. So, what does *qingzhen* mean for them? And what are the implications in daily practice? I begin with a short dialogue from my field notes, which illustrates the difficulties in translating between these categories, as well as in defining them.

As we were entering a small Uyghur restaurant just across the main gate of the University, I asked Nurqiz how is "*qingzhen*" translated into Uyghur. "*Musulman*", she said. I remarked that Hui do not say that. "It's because their mother tongue is Chinese", she replied. "What about *haram*?" I asked. "*Haram* means something else. For instance, dog is *haram*." "Is *haram* the contrary of *musulman*?" "No." "What is its contrary then?" She hesitated and then said she did not know. I suggested that perhaps the contrary of *qingzhen* is *Hancan* (Chinese food). She nodded.

In daily practice, however, definitions of *qingzhen* often transcend linguistic boundaries to encroach on ethnic categories and stereotypes.

Änwär is a young university graduate from Yärkänd, where his family still lives. He studied at Xinjiang University and, after he obtained his degree in Chinese, he was offered a job in a research institute and he stayed in Ürümchi. Like many other educated young people, he is studying English and dreams of going abroad. Nevertheless, unlike some of his contemporaries, he is reluctant to adopt western lifestyles and values, very selective to say the least. He clings firmly to his Uyghur identity, which he invests with a strong religious content. Once he asked me about my research and we ended up discussing the concept of *qingzhen*. He told me that when he was in Beijing with the university they went on a day trip to Tianjin. Before leaving Beijing, in the morning, he had *nan* and tea for breakfast in one of the many restaurants of the Uyghur village. Since in Tianjin there are no Uyghur eating places, at lunch time they stopped in a Hui restaurant. But he and two or three of his classmates did not eat. In fact, he did not even walk into the restaurant but waited outside, and stayed on an empty stomach until late in the evening when they returned to Beijing. I

asked him why he refused to eat. He said that, although Hui restaurants are *qingzhen*, he does not trust them because historically Hui people have been deceivers. So he prefers to fast than eat in a Hui place.

I then asked whether he would eat in a *qingzhen* French restaurant; in other words, whether he would trust the French more than the Hui. He said yes, to broaden his horizon. He then added that eating habits change as society evolves, therefore if they opened a French restaurant in Ürümchi, as a result of modernisation, he would try it.

When I asked how can one know what meat is *haram*,¹⁴ he said that all dietary rules can be found in the Qur'an. "For example, donkey, dog, and cat are *haram*, whereas horse is allowed; crow is *haram*, while duck is not. But this doesn't mean that all Uyghurs go and read the Qur'an to know what they can and cannot eat. One knows from other people." "But why Uyghurs don't eat anything which is not *qingzhen*?" "Otherwise one becomes a *kafir* [which he glossed as a "non-Muslim"]. Today some Uyghurs breach the Islamic law but they don't let other people know and keep calling themselves Muslims".

Although I rarely came across such strongly expressed mistrust towards Hui restaurants, I found that many other Uyghurs showed reluctance if not refusal when invited to eat in a Hui place. Most of the people I knew would eat there although, given a choice, they would rather choose a Uyghur eating place. What is striking in the above conversation is that Änwär seems to have strong beliefs about Muslim dietary rules and the consequences of transgressing them, beliefs that he claims are derived from Qur'anic prescriptions. Yet he admits that usually this is not first-hand knowledge. I noticed that when Uyghurs list forbidden foods, they would normally concentrate on meat and include items not explicitly mentioned as forbidden in the Qur'an, such as for example donkey, dog, or cat.¹⁵ In practice, however, there seem to be a shift from a focus on "*qingzhen*" as a quality intrinsic to food items, to an association of food with people, whereby categories of forbidden/allowed are defined according to what people the food is associated with, and how these people are situated in relation to the Han. In other words, it seems that for Uyghurs *qingzhen*, particularly when referred to a restaurant, is not so much about categories of food as about categories of people, the reference group being the Han. Hui, despite their notoriously rigid *qingzhen* standards, are inevitably associated with the Han. As one

¹⁴ By that time I had engaged in several - elicited and not - conversations on that topic. I had noticed that people would almost invariably concentrate on meat.

¹⁵ For an extensive list of forbidden items as well as direct quotations from the Qur'an see for instance Merchant (1947), in particular pp. 99-109, and Azimabadi (1994).

Uyghur put it, "We don't trust them, after all they're Chinese. Muslim, but Chinese."¹⁶ In short, more than any tangible criteria, the notion of trust plays an extremely important role in Uyghur food-related choices, as we see in the following account:

On a late-September afternoon Tursun and I were walking on campus. We stopped by a pedlar selling all sorts of biscuits and cakes, including moon-cakes, the characteristic round pastries stuffed with fruit preserve or red bean paste which are eaten during the Chinese Moon Festival.¹⁷ I asked Tursun if Uyghurs eat them too. "Of course not, they are not *qingzhen*." "What do you mean by *qingzhen*?" "Apart from pig, the meat of any animal that has been killed according to the Muslim method, i.e. that had its throat cut with a knife, is *qingzhen*. We must not eat anything which we know, or suspect, is not *qingzhen*, that is, unclean. In theory this includes anything which has been contaminated by pork, for instance that has been cooked in a pan where pork had been previously cooked, no matter how well you wash it. However, if we unknowingly eat unclean food, we don't commit a sin. Anyway, we never eat anything that has been touched by the Han because we don't trust them. Sometimes we're not sure about the Hui either." "What about the food I cook?" I asked "I can eat that because I know that it's clean."

It was true, I would have never wittingly fed him pork or food that had been contaminated by it. But how would he know, since he never asked? I wonder if he really believed that I was "clean" and never had anything to do with pork, or if he chose to overlook this issue for the sake of our friendship. Maybe he chose not to know because, in this way, he would not, to use his own words, "commit a sin". As in Änwär's case, who would eat in a French but not in a Hui restaurant, what strikes one most is the issue of trust applied to practical definitions of *qingzhen*. The shift between categories of food and categories of people is exemplified here: while Tursun

¹⁶ With few exceptions, Uyghurs' attitude towards the Hui is generally one of mistrust. A very common term used by Uyghurs to describe the Hui is "traitors". When I asked to elaborate, I was referred to an incident occurred in 1989, during some Muslim - both Hui and Uyghur/ Turkic - demonstration in Xinjiang: "When the police arrived, the Hui took their white cap off and dispersed among the Han, while the Uyghur were arrested". This remark points to the Hui's ambiguous position as both Muslim *and* Chinese. A position which can be seen as advantageous but which is also vulnerable, resulting often in general mistrust on the part of both the Han and other Muslim minorities (especially in north west China).

¹⁷ Chinese celebrate the Moon or Mid-Autumn Festival (*Zhongqiujie*), on the 15th day of the 8th lunar month, roughly at the end of September. "[It] is when people observe the biggest and brightest full moon of the year, the harvest moon. The Festival is marked by family reunions, moongazing, and the eating of moon cakes - round pastries stuffed with red bean paste and an egg yolk, or fruit preserves." (Dillon 1998:323)

refuses to eat the moon cakes on the grounds that they are not *qingzhen*, his definition at first mentions only meat, which was not even contained in the cakes.¹⁸ It is when he introduces the notions of contamination, of “clean” and “unclean”, that this shift occurs.

Some Uyghurs seem to be obsessed with pigs. Paradoxically, while there is a very strong taboo concerning this animal, at the same time they often talk about it. I have collected a number of anecdotes and stories revolving around the same theme: Uyghurs’ utter disgust for this animal and their fear that Han would contaminate their food and drinks with it. This fear may have its roots in the Cultural Revolution, a period renowned for the repression of any expression of difference and during which, reportedly, Muslims were forced to eat pork and the water of their wells was intentionally contaminated by pigs. Bäkhtiyar was particularly keen on this subject. One of the stories he told me concerns tea. “Before, we all used Uyghur tea, you know, that which looks like a brick. Then, about four or five years ago, a Uyghur businessman went “in the mouth” [in China proper], where they produced it, and discovered that they let pigs walk over the tea leaves and that the place was very dirty. He decided to document this with photos and a video, which he then broadcast in Xinjiang several times. Since then people don’t use that tea anymore but buy the one from India, which has been available only in the last few years [since the early 1990s.]” I suggested that it might have been just a marketing strategy, but Bäkhtiyar was adamant, “there is a video to prove that it is all true”. “A video that could have been shot anywhere ...” I thought to myself. In any case, what is interesting here is not whether the video and the story are true, but rather the assumptions and the implications that surface in this anecdote, which are in line with what has been discussed so far.¹⁹

6.3.2. What is a *qingzhen* restaurant?

It follows from their obsession with “unclean” food that some people would rather eat in a filthy place, provided that it is run by Uyghurs and therefore ritually “clean”, than in a possibly more hygienic Hui place.²⁰ Regardless of signs and certificates, when eating out with Uyghurs choosing where to eat is often problematic.

¹⁸ Incidentally, there are also *qingzhen* moon cakes, those produced by the Hui.

¹⁹ Cf. Smith (forthcoming), where the same anecdote is reported.

²⁰ In private, Uyghurs have very high hygienic standards, however, as they themselves admit, many public eating places are in a state that I would not hesitate to describe as filthy. In fact, this is true of the great majority of such places in Xinjiang, regardless of who is running them, the exception being Hui places, which are often much cleaner.

One night I met Abdurehim with one of his friends and we decided to have dinner together. We went to Beimen market where, as in most markets, one can find lots of small restaurants and food stalls, and we started shopping around in order to decide what to eat and where. We had finally made our choice and walked into a place to eat *läghmän*, when suddenly Abdurehim changed his mind and went out. We followed him and asked what was wrong with that place. "It's not *qingzhen*" he said. I objected that it was, and pointed to the *qingzhen* certificate hanging on the door. "Yes, but I think I saw some Chinese working inside".

Such episodes are very frequent when eating out with Uyghurs. Unless they are already familiar with a place, most Uyghurs are extremely suspicious when entering a restaurant which does not look one hundred percent Uyghur or, to put it in another way, which they think might be contaminated by a Han presence, regardless of the *qingzhen* certificate. According to the *Xinjiang Minorities Dictionary* definition, the "*qingzhen* plate" is a sign normally hanging outside Hui restaurants, "mainly to distinguish them from Han places" (XUAR 1995:337). In theory, the issue of such certificate is strictly regulated by law. Only catering businesses which comply with a number of requisites may apply for it to the issuing office, the local Committee for Minority Affairs (XUAR 1991:423). In daily practice, however, Uyghur perceptions of what is and is not *qingzhen* seem inextricably linked to the Han Chinese. This is further illustrated by Uyghur classifications of public eating places.

Once Bäkhtiyar and I were on the bus and we passed by a new fancy restaurant. Bäkhtiyar told me that it was owned by his (Uyghur) teacher's daughter. Remembering the conversation I had with Eli on the subject (cf. 6.2.1.), I asked if it was a Chinese restaurant, meaning that they offered Chinese style dishes, that is *säy*. Bäkhtiyar replied bluntly "No, it's not Chinese, it's *qingzhen*!". In Uyghur practical definitions of appropriate food and restaurants, *qingzhen* effectively equals non-Chinese (Han), and Chinese equals "unclean", that is, non-*qingzhen*. In this context, the phrase "Chinese food" is normally understood as "unclean food" rather than as "Chinese-style food items, dishes, meal pattern etc.". Hence a Chinese restaurant is not a place where one can taste Chinese-style cuisine but a restaurant where one eats "unclean" food. It is also evident from the above examples and discussion that the notion of trust plays a paramount role in Uyghur food choices. These choices, while being rationalised in terms of Muslim dietary prescriptions, are in fact often ethnically informed. Indeed, while I do not intend to dismiss the religious dimension, it must be noted that many of the Uyghurs who are so conscientious about *qingzhen* are not religious at all. As we have seen, the classification behind these choices seems to

concern categories of people more than merely food. We find a further example of this by looking at what we may call 'western diners'.

With the increasing popularity of the Silk Road among 'Lonely Planet tourists', a number of western-style cafés have appeared along this route, from Lanzhou to Kashgar. In Ürümqi there were two such places, John's Information Café and Tom's Café, both at walking distance from the newly built Holiday Inn and opposite the Hongshan Hotel - the backpackers' equivalent - defining the 'western quarter' of the city. Both John's and Tom's café were run by Han entrepreneurs. They addressed primarily a western public, providing a bilingual - English and Chinese - menu which ranged from Chinese to an ill-defined "western" cuisine (*xican*). However, they inevitably ended up catering for local residents as well: mostly youth, who wanted to associate with "the foreigners", and possibly have a chance to practice their English. Hence these cafés acquired a special status because of their association with the west, and became a meeting place also among local young people. Many of the Uyghur young men I knew used to go there often, usually for a drink, but sometimes also for a meal.²¹ For instance, Bäkhtiyar once told me very enthusiastically that he had been to Tom's Café and had tasted Italian spaghetti for the first time in his life. These cafés were definitely not *qingzhen*, they did not have a certificate, they were run by Han Chinese, and they also served pork. Yet for these young Uyghurs they seemed to fall into the "western" category and did not provoke the same suspicion that other officially - and perhaps also actually, that is, by Muslim standards - *qingzhen* places did.

6.4. "We don't eat Chinese!"

In the realm of food, as elsewhere, Uyghur attitudes towards the Han can be ambiguous. Indeed we observe a complex spectrum of strategies, varying from strict refusal to adaptation and almost full adoption. In actual practice boundaries are constantly shifting and blurred, despite government - and social scientists' - attempts to define and control them. Hence Uyghur attitudes to food and to the Han may appear occasionally ambivalent if not contradictory. On the one hand, Uyghurs show complete refusal of Chinese food, which they justify mainly on religious grounds. In fact, their fear of eating "unclean food" is also and perhaps primarily a fear of cultural and identity contamination. Somehow eating pork, the 'substance' that epitomises the Han and their food in Uyghur imaginary, symbolises a loss of Uyghur identity to that

²¹ It is interesting that, when discussing what is *qingzhen* and what is not with Uyghurs, there is no mention of alcoholic beverages. This is an issue that I do not address here, but certainly an area deserving further research.

of the Han. Bäkhtiyar told me on more than one occasion the story of one of his room-mates at the medical college who was always hanging out with Han students, and therefore was also eating with them. "One day they went to a Chinese restaurant. When he came back we teased him, insisting that he had eaten pork. He kept denying it, but the next day when he woke up his face was covered with red blisters and he had to admit that he had actually eaten pork." Both Bäkhtiyar and Abdurehim, who had in fact asked him to tell me the story the first time, insisted that it could not just be a coincidence. They were ready to provide a 'scientific' explanation, but would not question in any way the cause: "Surely it was an allergic reaction to pork. Since Uyghurs haven't eaten pork for generations, they probably lack the enzymes to digest it and therefore cannot metabolise it." Whether Bäkhtiyar's room-mate had actually eaten pork or not, it is clear that here food is perceived as the ultimate boundary vis-à-vis the Han.

Duara makes a distinction between hard and soft boundaries. "Hard boundaries" are those cultural practices that prevent the sharing or adoption of another group's practices, whereas "soft boundaries", while identifying a group, do not prevent it from sharing or adopting another group's practices. These, however, are far from static since "boundaries between communities exist along a spectrum between hard and soft poles and are always in flux." (Duara 1993:20-21). In other words, soft boundaries may harden and hard ones may soften. If, on the one hand, Uyghur refusal to eat Chinese food functions as a "hard boundary", on the other hand, we can also observe the adoption of certain Chinese food practices, particularly on public occasions and celebrations, such as weddings or circumcision parties, which are central to Uyghur identity. Here culinary habits seem to work as a "soft boundary".

As in most societies, there is a tension between what people say they do and what they actually do; between norm, or belief, and practice. In the first case the refusal, although rationalised in religious terms, seems to be addressed to the people, namely the Han Chinese, rather than simply to the food. We can situate this refusal in the realm of belief and charge it with metaphorical and symbolic meaning. In the social and political context of contemporary Xinjiang, I suggest that this can be seen as a form of resistance, though not explicitly articulated as such. Uyghur refusal to be fed by the Han Chinese can be read as an attempt to exercise control over their dominators, an attempt at empowerment, to insist that they are not the Han's guests. As we have seen in chapter 4, the metaphor of the guest is a very powerful one among Uyghurs in contemporary Xinjiang. Drawing on a native as well as Chinese discourse - or stereotypes - of Uyghur hospitality, people would refer to the Han as "guests who

came and never left”, to the extent that roles are now being reversed: the Han are becoming the “hosts” and the Uyghur their “guests”.

On the other hand, at the level of everyday practice, the adoption of selected items and habits of Chinese origin seems less problematic, and is sometimes openly acknowledged. In any case, here Uyghur agency is exercised, in the sense that the process of selective adoption is controlled by the Uyghur themselves. It is perceived as a matter of choice and not as an attempt at assimilation on the part of the Chinese, as it often is, for instance, with language. Indeed food, at least in its cultural and social aspects, is one of the few domains of Uyghur life in which the Chinese state does not exercise its totalitarian control. A great deal of agency is exercised by the Uyghur with respect to food choices, and if the role of state institutions in the ‘standardisation’ of food culture is not completely absent, it certainly is limited. While the production of books and articles defining and describing Uyghur food, along with that of the other *minzu*, is part of a Chinese hegemonic discourse on minorities, this may also result in a Uyghur counter-hegemonic discourse. Moreover, in this case there is no identification of the food with the people. As we have seen, Uyghurs normally would not call this food “Chinese”, nor do they perceive it as Chinese. Despite the undeniable Chinese origin of certain food items and practices, these are being transformed into “Uyghur food” and incorporated within a distinctively Uyghur structure, not only in terms of taste and ingredients, but also in terms of elaboration.

CHAPTER 7

FOOD IN PUBLIC: ETHNOGRAPHIC VIGNETTES OF EATING OUT

Abdurehim met me at the busstop in Dashizi. "Let's have dinner" he said, then waved at a taxi and dragged me into it. I had arrived in Ürümqi a week before and everything was new to me. It was hard to imagine that in a month or two I would have felt comfortably at home in the unfamiliar roads and alleys through which our taxi was driving. Abdurehim, this stranger whom I had just met and who was now sitting next to me in the car, was to become one of my closest friends. During our short taxi journey we passed what then seemed like an endless array of restaurants. Some had big promising signs and a fancy look, others had smoking kebab braziers and huge bamboo steamers on the pavement just before the entrance. While I was wondering what our destination would be and why we were not having dinner in any one of these restaurants, the car turned into an alley and stopped. We were in the "Consulate Lane", once the Russian headquarters in Ürümqi. We walked into a medium size restaurant and sat at a table. This place was somewhere in between those greasy places where one often shares a table with other patrons and the fancier restaurants where banquets are usually held. I asked Abdurehim why we had to come here and could not stop closer to where we had met. "You see, I run the office by myself. I can't afford to get sick; there's no one else to do the job. That's why it is so important for me to eat well. I know all the restaurants in this part of town, I know where you can get the best *polo*, or the best *läghmän*, or *chöchürä* ... In this place they make great *naren chöp*, one of my favourite dishes. That's why we came here, I hope you'll like it."

This was just the beginning of a long series of meals shared with Abdurehim in one of the many restaurants or eateries that crowd the streets of Ürümqi. I felt fortunate to have met someone who, like myself, had to eat out daily, apparently of necessity. His family background was rather unusual: his parents were divorced and he lived with his father and his older brother. He did not seem to spend much of his waking time at home. This was partly due to his job, which often required him to entertain visitors from Beijing beyond office hours. But he also claimed to have always been very independent, since he was a teenager. Later, with a mixture of fascination and incredulity, his best friend Bäkhtiyar would often remark how different their two families were. In Abdurehim's family everybody was independent and looked after

themselves, somehow subverting those common rules of mutual obligation which, on the other hand, seemed to exert a particularly strong influence on Bäkhtiyar.

However, it was not just necessity which lay at the origin of all this eating out. To an extent, it was a choice too, a choice made available by a relatively good salary and by the existence of a wide range of restaurants. As we have seen, for many other people who, for various reasons, did not have the opportunity to eat a cooked meal at home, it was not unusual to dine simply on *nan* and tea or fruit. In any case, Abdurehim was certainly not the only one in his age group to make use of restaurants and similar public places. Eating out was common among young Uyghurs in Ürümqi. A good part of my fieldwork was conducted at the dining table of a restaurant, and this was not only due to the nature of my research. Nearly on a daily basis, I would share a meal with one or more Uyghur friends in a small restaurant near the university or in Erdaoqiao, the heart of the Uyghur town. Indeed, if among all Uyghurs socialising is usually connected with eating and drinking, among young Uyghurs in Ürümqi this would happen very often in some kind of public place. In short, eating out was an increasingly common activity in late 1990s Ürümqi. There is however a great deal of variation in terms of establishments, clientele, occasions, modes and motivations. In this chapter I propose a number of ethnographic vignettes of eating out set in different kinds of restaurants. This will give us the opportunity to follow some of the themes that have emerged so far, by looking at these in context.

7.1. *Restoran* and *ashkhana*

As far as Uyghur restaurants are concerned, a preliminary distinction should be made between *restoran* - the Chinese equivalent of which could be *dajiudian* - and *ashkhana* - in Chinese *canting*. *Ashkhana* is a word of Persian origin, composed by *ash* (food) and the suffix *-khana*, indicating a room or premise (cf. *kitabkhana* bookstore). In modern Uyghur *ashkhana* means “kitchen”, but it is also used for “canteen” (of a school, or factory) and “restaurant” or, perhaps more precisely, “eating house”.¹ By contrast, *restoran* is a loanword from Russian - and, in turn, from French - suggesting that its use in Uyghur probably is much more recent.² *Restoran* refers to a more formal venue than an *ashkhana*. As its etymology indicates, a *restoran* is something closer to a modern European “restaurant”, in the sense that it is

¹ Uyghur ... (1990); Shiyong ... (1995).

² Uyghur ... (1992).

primarily the venue of a leisure activity. In other words, filling one's stomach is not the main motivation for going to a *restoran*.

These two kinds of eating place appear as different already from the exterior. An *ashkhana* normally has a hand painted sign hanging at the entrance, as opposed to the usually more sophisticated neon sign of a *restoran*. However, often the sign of an *ashkhana* is superfluous and one can easily identify such places from the cooking activities carried out on the pavement just outside the premises: kebab braziers, *tonur* (oven) where *samsa* or *pärmudä* are baked, big bamboo steamers for *manta* or *khoshän*, a huge *qazan* where a man is preparing *polo*, or a boy chopping kilos of onions in a big plastic basin (photo 39). In the unlikely event that one would not notice all this when walking past, one cannot miss the insistent invitation to eat at their place that one of the waiters shouts at passers-by. Some streets are literally lined with such restaurants, one next to the other; it seems as if each were competing with the others for potential patrons. On the other hand, while trying to conquer each other's clientele, there is also an ongoing exchange of ingredients between neighbours. More than once I have walked into an *ashkhana* after being told that they served, say, *läghmän*, only to discover that they had in fact finished the dough and that they were buying it from the restaurant nextdoor.

When eating in an *ashkhana* one would usually ask at the entrance what food they serve and then place one's order. The actual dining room is small and the decor is quite basic: square or rectangular tables with stalls or cheap chairs, whitewashed walls sometimes adorned with a poster, typically a Swiss Alpine landscape, or a picture of a breakfast table laid in Western style, even featuring eggs and bacon (photos 37, 38). It is quite surprising to see such an image on the walls of a *halal* restaurant, but both patrons and personnel do not seem to realise its association with pork, as it became clear on a couple of occasions when I tactfully tried to hint at it and they could not understand what my comment was all about.

By contrast, a *restoran* is bigger and smarter; more of a professional business. The dining room is usually spacious and, unlike most *ashkhana*, does not offer a view of the kitchen. The tables are typically round, with matching chairs around them. The decor is usually the work of an interior designer, no matter how dubious the taste might seem to a European eye. But the most substantial difference between a *restoran* and an *ashkhana* lies in their menus: while the latter only offers a limited choice of *tamaqlar* ("main courses") and does not even have a food list, when eating in a *restoran* one can choose from a long list of *säylär*. This implies another important difference: unlike the sometimes solitary experience of eating in an *ashkhana*, eating in a *restoran* is always a social activity. When entering a *restoran*, a waitress in a



Photo 37 - Posters on the wall of an *ashkhana*. Note the pictures of Uyghur popstars stuck on the poster in the middle, featuring a breakfast table laid with eggs and bacon.



Photo 38
An *ashkhana* in Ürümchi. Note the *qingzhen* certificate on the left door.

Photo 39 - A typical scene outside an *ashkhana*: freshly slaughtered mutton hanging at the entrance, steaming *manta* on the left, and cooking *polo* in the big *qazan* to the right.





Photo 40 - Making *kawap* outside the “*polo place*”.

Photo 41 - Inside the “*polo place*”.
Note the eggs and bacon (in the poster on the wall) right behind freshly slaughtered mutton.



Photo 42 - Eating *säy* in an upmarket restaurant (Ürümchi).

uniform ushers the party to a table. Once they are seated, the waitress serves tea, gives each person a menu and waits to take the order. A meal in a *restoran* requires plenty of time and usually involves more or less heavy drinking among the men. In short, it marks a special occasion, be it a celebration, a reunion, or a business meeting, and is not perceived as an ordinary activity (photo 42).

According to Patigül “eating out” (i.e. in a *restoran*) is a relatively recent habit which has become increasingly popular in the late 1990s. She remembers that in 1995, when she left Ürümchi to study in Europe, there were very few fancy restaurants and eating there was an experience unknown to most. Two years later, when she went back to visit her family during the summer holidays, she was stunned by the number of restaurants that had been growing like mushrooms, and by how popular eating out had become, especially among younger people. More and more often, formal meals were now moving from private homes to the hall of a *restoran*.

This is certainly an area that would deserve further empirical investigation. Unfortunately it was only towards the end of my fieldwork that I began to realise how critical that period was in terms of changing habits, as well as changing urban landscape. Here I only propose a tentative framework for future research. As far as upmarket Uyghur restaurants are concerned, their clientele could be divided along gender and generational lines: on a continuum, I would put younger men - mostly between twenty-five and thirty-five - at the most frequent end and older women - over forty - as least frequent. The attendance of younger women and older men seemed to vary more in terms of occasion, such as for instance women’s revolving *chay* parties, as opposed to business meetings.

Below I propose a sort of personal survey of (mostly Uyghur) restaurants in Ürümchi and specific eating-out situations, through which I address and illustrate broader themes. Far from being an exhaustive survey, the intention here is to provide a “live” description, where real people are represented in context.

7.2 The Pink House (*hancan*): *youyi minzu* and the you-are-what-you-eat philosophy

It is lunch-time on a late winter day; the Pink House is full and we have to share a table with two young women. A man sitting at a table next to ours complains that he has been waiting for over half an hour. The two women at our table, who are already eating from a plate in front of them, join his protest and tell the waiter to cancel the three other dishes that they had ordered. Not a good start ...

The “Pink House” is a small Chinese restaurant (*hancan*) just outside the main gate of Xinjiang University. Despite its filthy look, it has become a favourite among the foreign students’ community, thanks to the excellent quality of the food and the friendly atmosphere. Since they painted the door and windows pink, some time during the summer of 1996, it has been referred to as the “Pink House” among the English-speaking members of that community, although its actual name is *Furong Chuanwei* (Lotus Sichuan-style restaurant). Most of the time it is very quiet and foreign patrons are usually ushered to the “private room” at the back, which has led us to speculate jokingly that it might be bugged. However, one should avoid the lunch peak hour, when it gets very crowded with Chinese patrons from the neighbouring work units. This time we have come too late, but the anticipation of a selection of vegetable dishes, so rare in the Ürümchi winter, is mouth-watering and we are prepared to wait.

Minding other people’s business is a great way to kill the time. It is also the favourite national sport in China. So I turn to my two companions, who are also foreign students, and start speculating on how those two women could possibly eat four full dishes - they had not even ordered half portions! Soon the question is passed to the women themselves and the language of our conversation switches from English to Mandarin. One of them, whose “deep” eyes had caught my attention earlier, replies that they eat a bit of everything. “What about what is left?”, presses one of my companions. She hesitates, lingering in an almost embarrassed silence before the conversation moves on. She is surprised and at the same time very interested in the fact that two of us are studying Uyghur. I am even more surprised than she is, since it is the first time that I encounter such a positive reaction by a Chinese. But I am shocked when she declares that although she is Uyghur she does not speak the language at all. Instinctively, I am horrified, but also intrigued, at the thought of a Uyghur eating in a Chinese restaurant. My horror stems from what I have experienced so far as a socially accepted normative behaviour among the Uyghur, which is now being challenged by this encounter. Once again, I am painfully aware of the gulf separating Uyghurs and Han, and of how this could shrink if there were more tolerance and understanding on both sides, as this woman seems to prove. As if reading my mind, the woman clarifies her statement: “My mother is Uyghur, my father is Han. When people ask me what is my *minzu* I say *youyi minzu* (“friendship nationality”). My ID says “Han”, but I want to change it and become Uyghur because of the advantages.³ It’s a rather complicated procedure, among other things I have to go through the Bureau of Religious Affairs. Not that I must convert to Islam ... I am

³ She is referring to a sort of affirmative action policy, which, for instance, allows non-Han *minzu* to have an extra child.

free not to believe. Even if - she adds - Uyghurs would insult me if I'm not a Muslim and, above all, if I eat Chinese food (*hancan*)."

7.3 Lamb, *läghmän* and Bollywood: being "abroad within China"

Right opposite the University main gate - and across the road from the Pink House - there was an array of small Uyghur and Hui restaurants, mainly catering to *minzu* (non-Han/Muslim) students. With the exception of a Hui restaurant which also offered *jiaozi* (dumplings), the menu was standard: *läghmän*, *ügrä*, *suyuq ash*, *somän*, that is various kinds of noodles, boiled, stir fried, or in a soup. Despite the fact that the Hui places were ostensibly cleaner, my favourite place was a small Uyghur restaurant: it was filthy, the food was terrible - well, their *ügrä* was not so bad - but it had a great atmosphere.⁴ It was impossible not to notice it: in contrast with the tiny size of the door, two big speakers were hanging on either side of it, loudly announcing to passers-by and potential patrons what film (typically Bollywood) or entertainment program they were showing inside by broadcasting the soundtrack.

I often ate there when I had dinner with Uyghur friends from the university. It was one of those places - not at all rare in Xinjiang - walking into which felt like stepping outside China. From the entrance door few steps led down to an L-shaped room, slightly below the street level, crowded with wooden tables and benches. One was immediately hit by the warm smell of fat mutton and the clamour of dozens of students overlapping the soundtrack of the video being shown on a small TV set hanging in the corner of the room. Once I went there with Xiao Li, a Han friend who was from the Chinese north-east, in local terms a *neidi ren* (a person from the interior). He was temporarily in Ürümqi to attend some personal matter and stayed at the University guest house, where he had befriended a Uyghur student. Xiao Li was a very special and unusual person and would certainly deserve more than such a sketchy introduction. In particular, he seemed to be totally unaware, or rather unconcerned with the social gap existing between local Han and Uyghur people. That night we had decided to eat in this restaurant out of respect for his Uyghur friend, who did not feel very comfortable about eating in a Hui place. The restaurant was crowded with Uyghur youth watching a film in Uyghur on television: it was clearly a new experience for Xiao Li, who kept staring around repeating "this is being abroad within China!" Xiao Li's comment reminded me of how unusual, if not exotic, such an ordinary Uyghur restaurant appeared to the eyes of an outsider, that is someone from outside

⁴ *Ügrä* is a kind of *suyuq tamaq* ("soup") with thin noodles (cf end of 6.1.3).

Xinjiang. Even more importantly, the experience of eating there with him lead me to consider how exceptional it was that a Han ate in such a place and how such an ordinary experience was alien to the great majority of the Han population in Ürümchi.

Despite the filthy look of the kitchen, I found this restaurant cosy and welcoming, perhaps because of the collective ritual of TV watching. They usually showed videos, most often Bollywood films subtitled in Uyghur, but also entertainment programs recorded from the Uyghur television, which typically featured Central Asian singers and dancers. One night I was there with Nurqiz and Misha, a Russian student from Kazakhstan. While we were waiting for our *ügrä*, Nurqiz pointed at some dancers they were showing on television and said “this is a Turkish style dance”. Then she saw Misha’s disapproving look, and she added “but the song is Uzbek”; Misha nodded. I was rather puzzled: I could not tell that neither dance nor song were Uyghur! The entertainment program went on with an Indian male singer. Misha knew absolutely everything about him, from his name to the Indian language in which he sung. He said that this singer was extremely popular in Kazakhstan, just like Bollywood films. This time Nurqiz nodded “so they are in Xinjiang” she said, and the two of them started discussing Indian film stars. Although they both said they did not like these films because once you have seen one you have seen all of them, nevertheless, they knew absolutely everything about them.

Once again I was faced with the evidence that peoples across the border shared a lot more, for instance in terms of taste and popular culture, than those within the Chinese “motherland”. Even more fascinating was the complexity of cultural encounters: a Russian from Kazakhstan, who studied Chinese in a Turkish University in Turkestan,⁵ discussing Bollywood films and Turkish dance with a Uyghur woman, in Mandarin.

7.4. Hui restaurants: a good compromise?

Hui restaurants - *musulman* and Chinese at once - lie somewhere in between Chinese and Uyghur ones, both in terms of menu and food variety and in terms of the ethnic composition of their clientele. However, as already discussed, this hybridity can be an advantage as well as a disadvantage. I have heard Uyghurs complain that the *läghmän*

⁵ Turkestan is a small but historically important town in southern Kazakhstan (not far from the Uzbek border) where in the 12th C lived the Sufi saint and poet Khoja Ahmed Yasawi. Two centuries after his death, Timur (Tamerlane) built there a magnificent mausoleum, which has become an important site of pilgrimage. According to some, three visits to it were equal to a trip to Mecca. In recent years the mausoleum has been restored with Turkish money.

or *suyuq ash* one eats in a Hui place do not taste like the Uyghur ones. Similarly some Han find that their *chao cai* (stir-fries) taste too Hui. In other words Hui food is regarded as equally “inauthentic” by both the Uyghur and the Han - just as Hui people, rather than being regarded as a *trait d’union*, are alienated by both the Muslim Uyghur and by the Chinese Han. In short, while Hui restaurants are the best if not the only option to reconcile Han and Uyghur food preferences (and, for the latter, taboos) in fact they do not entirely satisfy either of them.

Despite the fact that part of their clientele seemed more resigned than enthusiastic, the Hui places in and around campus were doing very well. They were clean and, above all, they offered a great deal of variety. They ranged from those where customers could choose from a menu which, to the eyes of a lay person, resembled very closely that of a Han Chinese restaurant (*hancan*), to those offering what many regarded as the standard Uyghur canteen menu (*läghmän, ügrä, suyuq ash, somän, etc.*). The fact that many of these food items were possibly common among the Hui before they became popular among the Uyghur was irrelevant or, more likely, simply ignored by those complaining that Hui cannot make ‘proper’ Uyghur food. Likewise, their stir-fries were regarded as a bad imitation of Han food, rather than being considered simply Hui food.

Throughout my fieldwork eating was never an easy business. It often involved a delicate diplomatic action and sometimes a difficult mediation between different tastes and ethnic sentiment. Since our guest house had no cooking facilities and the students canteen’s opening hours were ludicrous, I had no choice but to eat out, unless I was invited at someone’s house. Of course this was true for other foreign students and, sometimes, for local students too. This meant that I always had company during my meals, but at the same time it was necessary to accommodate very different needs, to the extent that sometimes I had to hide from prospective companions whose needs did not fit the restaurant where I had decided to eat. While Uyghur and Hui restaurants were, in theory, accessible to everyone, be they Muslim or not, some did not like Uyghur food while others did not like, or rather trust, Hui restaurants.

One night Misha and I decided to have dinner at a Hui restaurant in the university bazaar. On our way out I proposed to invite Misha’s room-mate and his friend Yasin, who was visiting him. Misha was reluctant; he thought that Yasin would not eat in that Hui restaurant because “they really look Han!”. Incidentally, were it not for the white hat, I could not tell the difference between a Hui and a Han anyway. I decided to go and ask all the same, if anything to be polite. At first Yasin accepted, but he was hesitant. Eventually he admitted that he would have been happier if we had gone to a Uyghur restaurant. But Misha wanted to eat *chao cai* (stir-fries) and therefore was not

happy about a Uyghur restaurant. After a lengthy discussion we returned to our original plan and Misha and I went to the Hui place, while we left his room-mate with the unpromising prospect of a Uyghur meal, which he hated.

7.5. Eating in Erdaoqiao: a place for every taste

Fast-food in the heart of the Uyghur town

Erdaoqiao market, the heart of the Uyghur town, lay at walking distance from the University. This is where one would go to eat something “special” - although I must say the best Uyghur food I have eaten was always homemade. In fact, coming down from the University, the food-fair already started at Yan’an lu, more precisely along “Consulate lane”, and culminated with the *bazar* in Erdaoqiao.⁶ What was really special about this place was the choice available. Not only in terms of the status of the restaurant, ranging from the market stall or the cheapest *ashkhana* to the fanciest *restoran*, but also in terms of different foods and dishes. Here each *ashkhana* specialised in a particular dish, to the extent that there were places that only offered that dish, as for instance the “king of *polo* and *kawap*” right next to the mosque.

In the market, after the fruit and vegetable stalls, there was a long row of *kawapchi* (kebab sellers) with their smoking braziers and a pile of skewers of raw meat ready to be sprinkled with ground *zirä* (cumin) and *laza* (chilli) before being grilled.⁷ One could compare the meat of different *kawapchi* before choosing where to have one’s kebab. These were usually served on a ‘wheel’ of *nan*, which was particularly tasty after having absorbed the warm mutton fat leaking from the grilled meat. Besides the *kawapchi*, which certainly were the most conspicuous presence, there was a large number of other food stalls where one could stop for a snack while shopping. These offered a wide range of ‘fast foods’: from steamed *manta* and *khoshän* to baked *samsa* and *pärmudä*, or cold *längpung*.⁸ Due to its location, as well as to the wide range of food choice available, Erdaoqiao was the ideal place to meet friends for a meal, be it a quick snack in between errands or a slightly more formal lunch or dinner. Alternatively, one could easily walk there from the University to satisfy a sudden crave for a particular dish.

The “*polo* and *kawap* place” - as the sign in Uyghur read - or “king of *polo* and *kawap*” - in Mandarin - was a small *ashkhana* consisting of a narrow room, not

⁶ Cf. chapter 3 on the Uyghur town.

⁷ The stalls in this market were not exclusively Uyghur, but these were certainly in the majority.

⁸ *Längpung* are bean-flour noodles seasoned with a sauce made of vinegar, chopped garlic and chilli powder; also known as ... *liang fen* (a Chinese cold dish)!

bigger than a few square feet. Outside, on the pavement before the shop, there was a table laid with skewers of raw meat and a big brazier. At the entrance, on the right, a white-tiled block with a big *qazan* in the middle full of *polo*, leaving just enough space to walk in without bumping into the dead sheep hanging from a hook on the left. Further down, two long wooden tables covered with a colourful plastic cloth and two wooden benches on each side of them, where little more than a dozen people could sit. Over the glossy green walls were two big posters, one on each side. On the left wall a still life photograph featured a straw basket full of different varieties of grapes and, slightly in the background, a bottle of champagne emerging from an ice-bucket with a full glass in front, and a colourful composition of bananas, carrots, and red and yellow peppers (species unknown in Xinjiang). The poster on the other wall looked definitely blander, but in fact was even more striking. It portrayed a corner of a presumably American house with a white round table laid with breakfast for two, consisting of two plates full of scrambled eggs with bacon, complete with forks and knives, a jug of fresh milk, and a centrepiece of fresh roses and daisies; in the background a bright window was surrounded by green house-plants. Needless to say, to an European eye the picture was in stark contrast with the surrounding environment, but it was not perceived as such by the locals (photos 40, 41).

This was one of the first *ashkhana* I visited in Erdaoqiao, shortly after my arrival in Ürümchi, and it soon became a favourite, not only because of the atmosphere but also for the food. It was one of the few places where I truly enjoyed eating. Although their *polo* could not compete with some of those I have eaten in private homes, it was above average. Besides the *polo*, what made this place attractive were their *qiyma kawap*.⁹ Patrons would place their order on entering, to a man standing by the big *qazan*, who seemed to be in charge of the *polo*. As in every *ashkhana*, they would then take a seat and, while waiting for the food, would be presented with a teapot full of fresh black tea and a small bowl to drink it. One could choose between a full or a half portion of *polo*, with or without meat, and a number of skewers of *gösh* or *qiyma kawap*. Before long, I was addicted to *qiyma kawap* with *polo* and became a regular of the “*polo* place”.

This place was relatively popular also among the Han. In fact it was the only Uyghur place where I have regularly seen Han patrons, perhaps due to the lack of Chinese restaurants (*hancan*) in the area. Perhaps this was the most accessible place, in terms of food choice, for those Han who happened to be in that part of town. In fact, *polo* has become quite popular among the Han of Xinjiang, who have gradually got used to the taste of mutton. However, the view of Uyghurs and Han strangers

⁹ For a description of *qiyma kawap* see 6.1.3..

eating around the same table was very unusual. Even more so on a late-February night in 1997, after not only the city of Ghulja but most of Xinjiang had been swept by ethnic conflict. Reportedly, during the Spring festival, while in Ghulja hundreds of Uyghurs were arrested and several were killed, in many areas of southern Xinjiang Han citizens were murdered by angry Uyghurs. According to rumour such murders had also occurred in Ürümchi. It was really hard to tell what had actually been going on, but one thing was sure: fear and suspicion had spread among both the Han and the Uyghur.¹⁰

That February night, when I walked into the “*polo* place” with Tursun, the owner recognised me and started to chat with us. He told us that his family had been in Ürümchi for four or five generations, that is, over one hundred years. Then he went on commenting on how Uyghurs have a natural bent for foreign languages, and how they even look like foreigners. At this point Tursun stated: “For them we *are* foreigners!” “For whom?” I asked. “*Buyaqlar*” he replied, pointing at the table next to ours where five adults and two children, all Han, were eating.¹¹ Shortly after, a young Han woman walked in and sat next to me, behind her a young Uyghur couple. At first I thought they were one party, but that was not the case. The Uyghur man sat next to Tursun and soon we began to chat, in Uyghur. Suddenly he declared, in English, “everybody hates the Chinese!”. I felt very embarrassed because I was sure that the Han woman sitting next to me could understand. Tursun did not seem to share my embarrassment at all; on the contrary, he reasserted the concept, this time in Uyghur, “See? Everybody hates them.” In the background one could hear a TV program commemorating comrade Deng Xiaoping, who had just died. A big Uyghur man who was sitting at the other table commented “Mao Zedong was better”. A few days later, during Deng Xiaoping funeral, four bombs were left on public buses by Uyghur pro-independence activists. Three of them exploded, killing about twenty people and causing injuries to more than fifty people. The victims were both Han and Uyghur.

That was a particularly tense period and many Uyghurs could not refrain from expressing vehemently their anger, fear, or frustration. However, even before, when eating in a Uyghur *ashkhana* in Erdaoqiao it was not unusual to hear hostile or mocking comments about the Han, just like in private homes. The area around the Erdaoqiao market, even if its Chinese name had become more popular than the Uyghur *döng körük*, was still considered a Uyghur territory, despite being threatened by the encroaching Han modernising city planning. Perhaps making ostentatiously disdainful comments about the Han, even in their presence, was a way to emphasise Uyghur

¹⁰ Cf. 1.2. To understand the context in which the “Ghulja incident” took place, see Roberts (1998a).

¹¹ *Buyaqlar*, literally meaning “those ones”, is a derogatory term used by some Uyghurs to refer to the Han. Cf. 3.2.

ownership of that territory and to stress that the Han were undesired guests. Uyghur *ashkhana* like the “*polo* place”, as well as *restoran* such as those where wedding banquets were held, were the only public space in Ürümchi where I have seen the Han shed their confident superior attitude towards the Uyghur, as if they were out of their depth.

7.6. Affordable eating-out: middle-range *restoran*

Somewhere in between the cheapest *ashkhana* and the most expensive upmarket *restoran* one could find a number of middle-range restaurants that offered both *tamaq* and *säy* where one could go for a semi-formal meal. *Kechik Yolghan* (literally little *Yolghan*) was one of these. Everybody called it this way, because it stood right nextdoor to a famous upmarket restaurant called *Yolghan*; and its actual name was probably unknown to most people. *Kechik Yolghan* owed its reputation primarily to the fact that it was possibly the only restaurant in town where one could eat *naren chöp*. This was the very place where I had my first meal with Abdurehim. Later I went there a few more times with other friends, always to have *naren* as the main course, accompanied by a few cold and hot *säy*. It was a modest restaurant which occupied two floors in one of the low rise buildings that lined Consulate Lane. The main dining room, on the ground floor, was not too different from that of an ordinary *ashkhana*, while the first floor was divided into three or four private dining rooms for bigger parties.

A similar restaurant was opened during the autumn of 1996 not far from the “*polo* place”, next to the mosque in Erdaoqiao. The bilingual sign read *Chimbulaq ashkhanisi* in Uyghur, which was “translated” in Chinese as *Qingbulake canguan*. Interestingly, it was advertised as an *ashkhana*, although in many ways it could also have been defined a *restoran*. According to Dilmurat, who knew and occasionally helped the manager, this restaurant was owned by a Muslim association, which owned also a guest house and a travel agency. This might explain the label “*ashkhana*”; that is, it was meant to serve as a canteen for Muslim travellers, while also offering the possibility of a more formal meal. Their menu, which included both *tamaqlar* and *säylär*, would confirm this multiple function.

Like *Kechik Yolghan*, this place too had a main dining room and two or three private rooms. However, these were all at ground level and there was less contrast in terms of style and decor. The entrance door opened on the main room, which was rectangular. A big mirror, covering most of the right wall, made it look rather

spacious, although it was not very big. A few rectangular tables were neatly arranged along the wall, with nice matching chairs around them. The overall impression was that of a pleasantly clean and tidy room. Perhaps, the fact that the restaurant was newly opened helped to convey this impression.

Once I found out that Dilmurat sometimes worked in that restaurant, I went there on a number of occasions, be it a birthday, a farewell party, or a casual reunion. We could thus enjoy a special treatment as well as Dilmurat's entertaining company. He had spent a few years in Russia and in Kazakhstan and, according to Misha, he spoke not only fluent but very colloquial Russian. Dilmurat was Abdurehim's older brother and therefore knew some of the friends I had met through Abdurehim. Each time we went to this restaurant, he would entertain us with his amusing anecdotes. These often revolved around Han Chinese linguistic incompetence and usually played on the ambiguity of him being a (reluctant) Chinese citizen but not a Han, and therefore credible as a "foreigner". His Mandarin was excellent but he made a point of only speaking Uyghur and, when Misha was with us, he preferred to translate into Russian for him rather than speaking Mandarin, which was the language that everybody understood.

Dilmurat was an endless source of not very politically correct but extremely funny stories, possibly a good mix of facts and creative imagination, which nevertheless highlighted real and serious identity issues. One night he produced a series of stories set in Almaty, which he said he had witnessed while he was there for work. "Once, while I was walking in the street, I saw some Han Chinese who were trying to communicate with a taxi driver: they wanted to go to Lenin Square and they kept repeating "Niening ... Niening!", because they could not even speak proper Mandarin.¹² Since the taxi driver was helplessly staring at them, they started touching their heads and their bums, as to say "His head is like my bum", that is, he is bold. I watched them for a while, then I decided to intervene. "Qingwen, wo xueguo yidian Hanyu ..." [Excuse me, I have studied a little Chinese] I said, pretending to speak very poor Chinese. "Tai hao le! Ni dong guoyu!" [Fantastic, you can speak the "national language"!] they were delighted to have found a "local" who spoke their language!" The story ended with Dilmurat helping the Chinese with his translation, but recommending the driver to charge them double fares.

Why would he, like many other Uyghurs I have met, not miss a chance to claim Uyghur superiority over the Han? Perhaps because they have been systematically taught over the past fifty years that Uyghurs are inferior and need to be "civilised" by

¹² In Mandarin Lenin is Liening; however, in some local variant, as in the north-west, 'l' is pronounced 'n'.

the superior Han. Or, perhaps, because his father spent ten years in prison - throughout Dilmurat's childhood - for being a "counter-revolutionary"... There may be many reasons behind this kind of attitude, and they all contribute to a sense of frustration and anger, of wounded dignity, which some people repressed while other expressed, more or less vehemently. If one went to Ürümchi between 1996 and 1997 and talked to some Uyghur, one was left under the impression that there was not and never had been any contact between Han and Uyghur, that the two groups had nothing to do with each other and never would, that anything the Uyghur were the Han were not, and vice versa. In short, one had a picture of Han/Uyghur inter ethnic relations that was highly determined by the political context of that period. It was certainly a period in which many Uyghurs felt culturally, politically, and numerically threatened by the Han, both as a group and as individuals. Hence their need to constantly reaffirm their uniqueness and their very existence as a group, particularly *vis-à-vis* the Han. Their dichotomic distinctions between them and the Han at times sounded almost caricatural. However, this was not an exclusively Uyghur discourse, rather, it could also be traced back to the Chinese state's systematic classification of typical traits characteristic of each *minzu* that we have discussed in earlier chapters. Of course there was and there had been contact, especially in a place like Ürümchi. It was precisely those who were most exposed to contact that felt the need to state their difference. Hence those situations that, at a first glance, might seem paradoxical to an outsider. As for instance Dilmurat discussing the Han cultural incompetence while eating "säy" in a Uyghur restaurant, where the menu itself seemed to contradict his assumptions about the Uyghur and the Han as two discrete groups that have nothing in common.

A look at the *Chimbulaq ashkhanisi* menu might shed some light on the complex weave of cultural encounters that lies behind such statements. Like the sign on the door, the menu is also bilingual, Uyghur and Chinese. The food is listed according to a classification which is characteristic of Chinese restaurants, with some adaptation: *soghuq säy / liangcai* (cold dishes), *kala, qoy göshlüq säylär / niu, yang rou lei* (beef and mutton), *tokhu türliri / ji lei* (chicken), *alahidä säylär / tesecai* (special dishes), *göshsiz säylär / sucai* (vegetables; in Uyghur literally "dishes without meat"), *beliq / yu lei* (fish), *dingiz boyumliri / haixian lei* (seafood), *shorpa / fang lei* (soups), *tiz tamaq türliri / kuaican lei* (fast food). At a first superficial glance, the menu in Chinese does not look very different from that of a *hancan*. It even includes some typically Chinese - at least in the name - dishes, such as *yuxiang rousi*, *gongbao jiding*, or *mala doufu*. However, at a closer look the great majority of dishes are based on meat and very few include also vegetables, mostly onions and potatoes - the predominance of meat and the scarce use of vegetables being a feature

typical of Uyghur cuisine. Moreover, despite some beef and chicken dishes, meat is mutton by default. The “fast food” section, on the other hand, looks definitely Uyghur. Not only does it list all the Uyghur dishes usually served in an *ashkhana*, from *läghmän*, to *polo*, *chöchürä*, *samsa*, *manta*, *ügrä*, etc., but it also includes breakfast items typically found among the Uyghur, such as milk tea, honey, butter, and jam. In short, as discussed in chapter 6, while Chinese influence is obvious, this has been manipulated and incorporated into a clearly Uyghur structure of eating.

7.7. Folklore and business: Uyghur meet Han in an upmarket restaurant

On a warm spring afternoon I was sitting at my desk tidying up my field notes, when a loud banging on my door informed me that there was someone on the phone who wanted to talk to me. It was my friend Tursun. In his somewhat charming bossy way he invited me and a couple of other friends from the university (both Uyghur and foreign students) to a meal in a fancy restaurant. “Be ready at six! - he said - I’ll come and meet you there” and, without further explanation, he hung up. By six o’clock we were all ready, waiting for Tursun and wondering where exactly he was taking us. At six-thirty still no sign of him. Perhaps we should not have taken his instructions too literally... Finally, he turned up at about seven with his friend Adil and we all set out. Outside the main gate he stopped two taxis and we learned that our destination was *Yengisar restorani (Yanjisa dajiudian)*, the restaurant of a new luxury hotel, where two Han “friends” of his were already waiting for us. When I first met him, Tursun had a lot of spare time, which he often spent with me and a group of other Uyghur friends. At that time he was working as a judge in the criminal section of the regional law court, but it sounded as it was just a token appointment, to respect the Uyghur quota in the administration. However, since he had been moved to the office dealing with financial crimes, he had become extremely busy. Moreover, in his spare time he had started meeting socially a number of Han “friends” on a regular basis, possibly people he had met through his work. This was the first time that he was taking me to one of these meetings.

Once we got to the hotel, we were ushered to the lift by an attendant: the restaurant was on the second floor and the stairs were out of question ... *noblesse oblige!* The dining hall was very big. Some thirty round tables were neatly arranged and laid with proper white cotton tablecloths and luxury tableware - a rare view in Xinjiang, even in upmarket restaurants. One end of the hall was occupied by a stage in front of which a table-free space served as a dance floor. We were shown to our table,

only two rows from the stage, where a Han couple was sitting, clearly waiting for us. As we sat down, we hardly had time to say hello before a procession of dishes started landing on our table, as if our arrival had unblocked a jammed production line (obviously, jammed by our delay). Service was impeccable, almost asphyxiating - the contrast with all the discomfort, rudeness, inefficiency that prevailed in daily life was striking. This was so different from the small - and often not too clean - *ashkhana* where we normally used to meet.

Once our table was covered with a variety of cold dishes (U. *soghuq säy*, Ch. *liang cai*), Tursun decided that we were ready for introductions and started announcing our names and nationality. Then he warmly introduced his Han "friend" Xiao Wang, who was accompanied by his partner Xiao Lü. I was still not clear what the relationship between Tursun and this man was and why exactly we were sitting there. All I had gathered was that Xiao Wang was going to pick up the bill. I cynically thought that Tursun was earning face on two sides: on the one hand he was parading his foreign friends to Xiao Wang, on the other he was displaying his prestige - or power? - by inviting us to this meal, having himself been invited by Xiao Wang. Well, maybe he was also having some fun after all.

Meanwhile, Tursun and Xiao Wang were playing old mates. "I often come to places like this - remarked Xiao Wang - where one can have a taste of Uyghur culture ... the waitresses are all Uyghur, and they are all very beautiful." - Any stereotyping? - On the stage a man was singing a traditional style Uyghur song, while a woman was dancing professional Uyghur *usul*. They were accompanied by a synthesiser and an electric guitar. The tables around us were mostly occupied by mixed Han and Uyghur parties. I imagined this place as some sort of "neutral" ground, where Han and Uyghurs would meet for business meals, given that normally Uyghurs would never eat in a Han home, nor would they be happy if a Han ate in their homes. On the one hand, this restaurant seemed to be packaged for Han consumption, apparently reproducing Han discourse on the Uyghur with all its *clichés* - they sing and dance, and their women are beautiful. On the other hand, here Uyghurs played at home.

Before we started eating, Tursun asked the men what they wanted to drink and smoke. They eventually agreed on "Sanwu" (Triple five) cigarettes and *Yili tequ*, the most famous brand of local *baijiu* (spirit). They adopted a Han drinking style: each man had his small glass and they all drank together - as opposed to the Uyghur way, where the same rice bowl is emptied in turns by one man at a time, while the others keep drinking beer or tea. As the toasts proceeded, more dishes were being brought to our table. It was overwhelming, the menu must have included some two dozens different *säylär*. It was a mixture of traditional Uyghur food and some more or less

Chinese dish. The “cold dishes” included peanuts, cucumbers, cold beef, tripe, *samsa*, *gösh nan*. These were followed by predominantly meat dishes: roast chicken, *kawap*, sheep feet, *tonur kawap* (a whole roasted sheep), more chicken, etc., green beans being the only vegetable dish. Finally, a wonderful steamed fish with ginger and a big plate of fresh fruit. No doubt, the food was excellent. It was a shame that most of it would have probably ended up in the rubbish bin.

Once all the food had been served, the floor was opened to anyone who wanted to dance. Uyghur *usul* alternated to *tangsa*, as in all respectable Uyghur upmarket restaurants. From most tables, couples started moving to the floor. Unlike at weddings, there were no invitations across tables. Quite a few Han were joining the Uyghur dancing *usul*. However, despite their admirable efforts their performance was rather hilarious. In between dances Xiao Wang handed me his name card. He was the head of the advertising department in a local economic daily. Both he and his partner were born in Ürümchi, their parents had come to Xinjiang from inner China in the 1950s. Unfortunately, we had to be back to the University before they locked the gate to our building, at ten Xinjiang time. As we left, the band was playing a tango. A Uyghur man, who was dancing with a Han woman, stood out for his skill, as well as for the rose in his mouth. We were told he was an actor and, apparently, the Han sitting at his table came from Beijing. Was he part of their entertainment program?

7.8. Drawing the line

In this chapter we have seen a number of eating-out situations set in late 1990s Ürümchi where the protagonists are mainly young educated Uyghurs. The theme that emerges most clearly is that of identity creation and maintenance, which as we have seen implies above all differentiation *vis-à-vis* the Han. In this context, that is ‘public’ meals among young educated Uyghurs who are at the forefront of assimilation and at the same time differentiation, the “Uyghur intellectuals’ paradox” is exemplified at its best.

The first episode in our journey through different kinds of restaurants in Ürümchi is set in a *hancan*, that is a Chinese restaurant. It is a world alien to the Uyghur, among whom there is a very strong taboo on Chinese restaurants. During my fieldwork this was so compelling that I usually tried to tactfully avoid the topic. On a number of occasions, being directly asked, I found myself in the embarrassing situation of having to ‘confess’ to some Uyghur friend or acquaintance that I occasionally ate in Chinese restaurants. Indeed, eating Chinese food is the ultimate

taboo, as the woman we met at the Pink House plainly put it. No matter what her ID says, she will not be regarded as a Uyghur as long as she eats Chinese food, that is the food of the Chinese.

At the other extreme, and somewhat symmetrical, is the situation we find in the 'Bollywood' restaurant, literally across the road from the Pink House. This time it is a Han who, regardless of his open attitude, finds himself in a surprisingly alien context. What is most striking is the innocent discovery of a totally unknown world within one's backyard. It is the realisation that, regardless of all the efforts made by the Communist state in researching, defining, and describing each *minzu*, identity cannot be reduced to a number of characteristic traits, and that there is a whole world to which the great majority of the Han do not participate and which is precluded to them, above all because of cultural and linguistic incompetence. In Ürümqi, particularly as far as food is concerned, despite physical proximity, the Han and the Uyghur tend to be two separate worlds. They may share some food items or practices, but they are largely alien to the culture that revolves around food in each other's community. More than the food, what makes this restaurant distinctively Uyghur is the context in which it is eaten and the community that eats it. What emerges most effectively in this second episode is the disruption with the 'eastern motherland', namely China, in contrast to the continuity - exemplified by a shared popular culture - with the 'foreign west', that is central Asia and the Turkic world.

It is clear, then, that Uyghur food taboos need to be situated within the process of differentiation against the Han. Beyond religious prescriptions, food taboos operate as strategies of boundary maintenance. We have seen how among Uyghurs the notion of *qingzhen* is as much an ethnic as a religious category. Hence Muslim Hui restaurants, far from representing an ideal compromise where Han and Uyghur may meet, are equally the object of Uyghur mistrust. However, it is not only a question of *qingzhen*. When they agree to eat in a Hui restaurant, in any case Uyghurs perceive that cuisine as distinctively Hui, even where they serve seemingly the same dishes as those of a Uyghur restaurant.

In Ürümqi, food production and consumption largely defines Uyghur urban space. The heart of the Uyghur town, Erdaoqiao, is characterised by a concentration of Uyghur restaurants. One of these, the 'Polo Place', is also popular among the Han, thus becoming an inverted microcosm in which rules of dominance are subverted. Here not only is Uyghur the dominant language, but the Han become an effectively excluded minority. Even more striking is the paradoxical situation whereby Uyghurs assert their distinctive identity in opposition to the Han, while sharing food at the same

table. In this case commensality, far from expressing or creating bonds, becomes a way to underscore difference.

The Uyghur district of Erdaoqiao provides a good sample of Uyghur food culture, not only in terms of dishes but also in its different kinds of restaurants and eating situations. There are various degrees of elaboration, ranging from the most basic food stalls selling only one kind of 'fast-food' - such as *kawap* or *samsa* - to *ashkhana* serving a limited selection of *tamaqlar* - most typically *läghmän* - and to more or less fancy *restoran* where one can choose from among a variety of *tamaqlar* and *säylär*, depending on the formality of the occasion. A clear trend can be observed, whereby the elaboration of meals is indexed by the number of *säy* appearing in the menu, as in the episode set in the Chimbulaq restaurant. While this is an issue that certainly deserves further research, we can tentatively speculate that this might be because the model for eating out as a leisure activity, which we have seen is a fairly recent phenomenon in Ürümchi, comes from Han China, especially from the coastal provinces. In any case, most relevant to our discussion is that it is precisely in this kind of occasions that the "Uyghur intellectuals' paradox" becomes particularly evident.

The same paradox of being at the vanguard of combined assimilation and differentiation emerges also during a meal in an upmarket restaurant, such as the one at *Yengisar Restorani*, and even more so if this episode is contrasted to the one set in the "Polo place". Indeed Tursun, the protagonist in both episodes, possibly is the person that best incarnates this paradox. A place like the *Yengisar Restorani* provides an opportunity for the Uyghur to interact with the Han on their own terms. Regardless of who pays the bill, here Tursun acts as the host. In short, the food realm is a Uyghur world, where Uyghur rules operate and where the Han still are the guests.

CONCLUSION

Uyghur *sāy*: an oxymoron to encapsulate the paradox which has been a key issue in our discussion; that is, the simultaneous borrowing and drawing boundaries vis-à-vis the Han in the realm of food. A riddle that we may begin to solve above all by raising our gaze from the dining table of an upmarket restaurant laid with a meal of *sāy* to encompass the cultural, social, and political context in which such a meal is consumed.

Today, Uyghur urban intellectuals find themselves at the vanguard of a process of assimilation and, at the same time, differentiation. A process which needs to be situated in the context of contemporary Xinjiang, where the re-emergence of a Turkic Central Asian region, combined with increasing Han migration from China proper, has resulted in a strengthening of Uyghur self-identification. The discursive framework for the negotiation of Uyghur identity by urban intellectuals is determined by the “Communist civilising project” (Harrell 1995) which informs Chinese minority policies. The ‘intellectuals’ paradox’ stems from the same paradox inherent in such policies, which promote assimilation and at the same time differentiation. In particular, in order to be developed, or “civilised”, the civilisees are constituted as both civilisable and inferior. Hence the portrayal of “authentic” Uyghurs as traditional and backward. By inscribing Uyghur history within a Han-dominated linear evolution, this discourse traps Uyghur intellectuals in a dilemma: to stay Uyghur but backward or to modernise but become like the Han? This dilemma however can be deconstructed by revealing the “civilising project” behind it.

By exploring the various and changing ways in which Uyghur intellectuals draw a line with the Han in the food domain, I have shown that Uyghurs too can change, while retaining their distinctive identity. In other words, this dilemma is in fact overcome in food practices, where Uyghur intellectuals construct their difference despite a certain degree of contamination. Food, as an arena for the negotiation of identity which is largely outside the state control, can be a source of empowerment. Indeed, in the realm of food Uyghurs are agents of change and not merely passive recipients; they act - and interact with the Han - on their own terms. Moreover, change occurs within a pattern that guarantees continuity.

We may begin to analyse the broader context that makes this food Uyghur by considering hospitality, as a value which should be performed according to shared rules dictated by social hierarchies, or age and gender relations. Adhering to this value involves the knowledge of the appropriate degree of elaboration, depending on the occasion and the social distance between host and guest. Among the most elaborate

forms of hospitality is that prescribed during major Uyghur festivals (Roza and Qurban) and ceremonies, like weddings. These, in particular, seem to dominate Uyghur social life.

In Ürümchi weddings are celebrated more and more often in restaurants with a banquet consisting of a meal of *säy*. This would seem to imply a sharp departure from 'traditional' weddings. However, these 'modern' celebrations are inscribed - and are meaningful - within the whole wedding process, which starts with the *chong chay* and the *mäslihät chay*, to continue with the *nikah*, and end with *salam* and *chillaq*. In each of these events the exchange and the consumption of food is situated within specific age, gender, and affinal relations which regulate time, space, and modes of participation of the relevant actors. Hence, for instance, men in the same age-set as the groom take part in his *mäslihät chay*, while the bride's parents and women relatives of their generation visit the groom's family during the *chong chay*. Participation to the *toy* (wedding party) is also regulated, in terms of time and space, according to age, gender, and affinal status. Even in the last stage, when the party is united, women and men's space is separated and within each of these spaces guests sit with members of their age set. Despite a certain degree of variation, which is precisely where change may occur, this recognisable pattern - e.g. who should take part in what event, how, and when - guarantees continuity with Uyghur 'tradition' while, at the same time, slowly changing. Thus what makes Uyghur a meal of *säy* served at a wedding banquet is also the set of values, norms, and customs shared by the participants, and by the community at large, in which the consumption of such a meal is inscribed.

If values are largely shared, at the same time practices present a certain degree of variation. It is in this 'grey area' that we can observe change without disruption. This productive tension between value and practice is further exemplified in the definition and management of gender roles in relation to food among Uyghur urban intellectuals. On the whole, women are still considered responsible for the production of food within the household, in line with 'traditional' values. At the same time though, it is not rare that men participate in women's work, if not occasionally substitute them altogether. Changing practices, while not necessarily acknowledged at a discursive level, nevertheless contribute to a gradual redefinition of ideal models.

The same sort of dialectic tension between values and practices - which characterises the gendered modes of food production in urban intellectual households - is also found when looking at the actual food that is consumed. Change in food practices has been influenced by daily interaction with the Han. Hence, for instance, a dish of Chinese origin like *ganpan* has entered Uyghur households. Such a dish, however, is made Uyghur with reference to a notion of what constitutes Uyghur diet

and cuisine. Even in these urban intellectual households, 'dough' still dominates Uyghur diet. In particular, the staple food is *nan* (leavened bread baked in a *tonur*), as opposed to rice, which can be identified as the staple in most of Han China.

Another fundamental element in Uyghur diet which, together with *nan*, constitutes the most basic meal among Uyghurs is fruit. Both its nutritional and its symbolic importance may be underestimated due to a perception of this food as a complement in a meal, or a diet, rather than as the core of it. In fact, among Uyghurs fruit is the food that is consumed in largest quantities, besides dough. Moreover, it is not just any fruit but 'their' fruit; that is, locally produced by Uyghur peasants and consumed either fresh according to the season, or processed (typically dried or as preserve). The consumption of fruit imported from other parts of China - mostly tangerines and bananas - is very limited, compared to the consumption of what can be defined as "Uyghur" fruit, such as Turpan grapes, Qumul melons, Kashgar pomegranates, or Kucha apricots, to mention but some. As we have seen, each oasis is identified with one particular fruit and, conversely, each fruit is associated with a specific oasis, thus establishing a powerful symbolic link with 'the land'.

A third element which characterises Uyghur diet, at least ideally, is meat. If for the Han meat by default is pork, among the Uyghur it is mutton. This meat is obtained through ritual slaughtering. Besides the obvious implications in terms of belief, this involves the draining of all the blood, thus affecting also taste. In the preparation of dishes, such a distinctive taste is further defined by flavours such as onion, cumin, and black pepper, which are dominant in Uyghur cuisine.

Thus, a rice-based dish like *ganpan* occupies a somewhat marginal position within the broader pattern of Uyghur diet, compared for instance to the role that rice may have in Chinese diet. Moreover, it 'tastes' Uyghur. Not only due to the combination of *halal* mutton with specific flavours used in the topping of stir-fried *säy*, but also in the use of vegetables, which marks the dish as Uyghur in contrast to a Chinese dish. These are mixed - in terms of taste, texture, colour, and size - in ways different from the Chinese. Even the rice, which is cooked according to Chinese methods - as opposed to a Uyghur rice dish like *polo* - is made Uyghur through the addition of salt.

The use of eating implements too contribute to characterise the consumption of certain foods as Uyghur. While today chopsticks - which were introduced by the Chinese - are widely spread throughout the Uyghur population of Xinjiang, the use of spoons and forks - introduced most likely by the Russian - is not rare either. In particular, unlike the Han, Uyghurs do not eat rice with chopsticks but with 'western-style' spoons (i.e. different from the china spoons that the Chinese use for soups).

Similarly, tea is usually drunk from bowls rather than from glasses or mugs, be it at home or in a restaurant.

In short, a dish of Chinese origin like *ganpan*, while introducing an element of change in Uyghur eating habits, at the same time is incorporated within a pattern that can clearly be identified as Uyghur. Not only in terms of ingredients, taste, position within Uyghur diet, or the use of eating/drinking implements, but also, for instance, as far as notions and rules of hospitality are concerned (e.g. it is not considered the appropriate food for an invited guest).

This process of differentiation within assimilation, in which Uyghurs are agents of change, can be further analysed by looking at restaurants and public eating in general. Here the boundary is drawn first and foremost through the notion of *qingzhen*. As we have seen, among the Uyghur practical definitions of *qingzhen* are largely predicated on the notion of trust and need to be situated in the context of inter ethnic relations in contemporary Xinjiang. As far as public eating is concerned, it follows that restaurants which are officially classified as *qingzhen* are not necessarily perceived as such by the Uyghur. For some, only restaurants run by Uyghurs provide sufficient guarantees. In this case, categories of *qingzhen/non-qingzhen* are manipulated to function as ethnic boundaries.

This fundamental distinction serves as a first preliminary demarcation of Uyghur space in public eating. Within this space are situated *ashkhanas* and *restorans*, where more or less elaborate meals are consumed. *Ashkhanas* serve Uyghur food; that is, a limited selection of dishes which are regarded as typically Uyghur and are eaten as a main course, according to a Uyghur meal structure. Besides food, other elements contribute to define a meal consumed in an *ashkhana* as Uyghur; from drinking and eating implements (e.g. bowls for tea, or spoons for *polo*), to dominant language or entertainment programs shown on TV.

While in most *ashkhana* Uyghur identification - and differentiation from the Han - is very straightforward, it is in *restoran*, where more formal meals are consumed, that Uyghur management of change within the tension differentiation/assimilation can be best analysed. As we have seen, restaurant banquets usually consist of a meal of *säy*. Here borrowings from the Han can be clearly identified, as the word itself suggests. In particular, both the meal structure - a set of cold and hot dishes served simultaneously and shared by all the participants - and many of the dishes evidently are of Chinese origin. A meal of *säy*, however, is made Uyghur in various ways.

First of all, it is prepared by a Uyghur cook, which makes it truly *qingzhen* by Uyghur standards. Secondly, it is made Uyghur by the inclusion of 'traditional'

Uyghur dishes (e.g. *kawap*, *manta*, etc.). In wedding banquets, the meal is also inscribed within a Uyghur pattern in that it is preceded by the serving of tea with *gezäklär*, according to rules of Uyghur hospitality. Moreover, as already discussed with reference to *ganpan*, what makes these *säy* Uyghur is the use - and the distinctive combination - of ingredients and flavours which are at the core of Uyghur diet and cuisine. Finally, these meals are made Uyghur by the context in which they are consumed. Here too a number of elements, from dominant language to accompanying entertainment (including Uyghur 'traditional' music as well as pop songs, or the dancing of Uyghur *usul* and *tangsa*), define this context as unquestionably Uyghur. In short, it is by situating a dish, or a meal, in an ever broader context that its Uyghur identity becomes more and more meaningful.

In conclusion, an analysis of the ways in which food, despite borrowings, is kept Uyghur suggests a positive solution to what is perceived as a dilemma by many Uyghur urban intellectuals. We have seen that this dilemma is largely predicated on Chinese hegemonic discourse on *minzu*, which constitutes Uyghur 'tradition' and Han 'modernity' as two excluding alternatives, whereby change seem to inevitably imply a loss of identity. In the realm of food, however, Uyghurs are agents of change while at the same time constantly drawing lines to differentiate from the Han and to assert their distinctive identity, which can thus be consumed without being consuming.

In other words, food is a source of empowerment. Besides cultural and social aspects, its political dimension is at least as important, as I have shown in previous chapters. In the context of contemporary Xinjiang, food is an arena where Uyghurs articulate a discourse of resistance. Indeed, in the domain of food there is a reversal of power relations between the Han colonisers and the Uyghur colonised. This is epitomised by those situations where Uyghurs are hosts to their Chinese guests. We have seen how Uyghur intellectuals resort to both native and Chinese discourses of hospitality, and to the manipulation of Muslim dietary prescriptions, in order to operate this reversal.

Moreover, in their notions of *qingzhen*, not only do Uyghurs establish the impossibility for their Chinese guests to reciprocate their hospitality, but they also reverse the Communist civilising project. In considering the Chinese as unclean in food, that is not *qingzhen*, Uyghurs constitute them as uncivilised. The civilising project is further diverted by Uyghur references to other trajectories of modernity available to them across Chinese borders, as well as by emphasising continuity with the west, thus implying a more direct access to what ultimately is the source of Han modernity.

In conclusion, in this thesis I have shown food not just to be a medium for the constant redrawing of ethnic boundaries. In symbolic practice, food is also the field for a restoration of pride and a reversal of the political trap into which Uyghur intellectuals are thrust by the Han modernising project. In short, I have shown food to be a code of political discourse.

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