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## Uyghur customs: the genesis, popularity, productivity and demise of a modern Uyghur topos

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### ABSTRACT

This article traces the development of the modern concept of ‘Uyghur customs’ in Xinjiang, its rise to popularity in the 1980s–2010s and its demise after 2016. It argues that a certain modern notion of customs took shape in Xinjiang within the frame of modernization policies and the strengthening of formal bureaucracy. This notion, built on ideas introduced in the early twentieth century, defined customs as being distinct from politics, religion and economy. It provided Uyghur intellectuals with a politically safe space to write about local practices and construct Uyghur identity. These intellectuals were bridge builders between modern Chinese society and Uyghur communities. They used discourses around customs formulated in articles, books, TV-shows and teaching to envision a specifically Uyghur modernity. This cultural production ended abruptly with the detention of many of its protagonists and a general security clampdown on minority people and culture in Xinjiang from 2017.

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“We all fight for our place in the modern world [...] yet, regardless of how the world develops we still prefer our old jacket to the golden robe of another”

— Yarmuhämmäd Tahir Tughluq<sup>1</sup>

“Shall my life just pass like this? Like a bud that withered away before it ever came to bloom.”

– Uyghur folk song<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

According to Peter Finke and Judith Beyer, the notion of ‘tradition’ in Central Asia has mainly been understood in two, albeit not mutually exclusive, ways in the last century: ‘as a deficiency to be overcome (often in juxtaposition to an aspirational “modernity”) or as a quality to be embraced (often in alignment with nationalism).’<sup>3</sup> The concept of ‘Uyghur customs’ as adopted and developed by Uyghur scholars and intellectuals in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) can be seen as a specific sub-category of this notion featuring a similar tension. Customs are defined as explicitly non-modern and non-political practices, yet the concept is employed for very political and highly modern

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purposes: to effect economic transformation and to build ethnic identity.<sup>4</sup> In this article, I trace the trajectory of this modern concept: its historical formation, its rise to broad popularity and its subsequent decline.

I argue that between 1979 and 2016, the distinct, modern notion of ‘Uyghur customs,’ provided a safe space for Uyghur intellectuals to discuss social transformation, construct Uyghur ethno-national identity and propagate a distinctly Uyghur version of modernity. These writings addressed the key issues of economic transformation, state bureaucracy, modernization and identity in ways that did not seem challenging to the government, but rather reinforced its state-centric, modernist categories. The category of customs thus became central to and inspiring for Uyghur intellectual culture. After a handful of books focusing on Uyghur customs in the 1990s, the number of publications soared and diversified in the 2000s and early 2010s not least due to the rise of private Uyghur language publishing. In the mid 2010s, mounting political tensions and state violence led to a sharp decline. From 2017, the internment of a large number of intellectuals, publishers and bookshop keepers, and the removal, banning and sometimes even burning of books, brought an abrupt and tragic halt to Uyghur scholarship and publishing on customs.

The first part of this article demonstrates the significance of the concept of customs to Uyghurs during my fieldwork in southern Xinjiang in the early 2010s. I then trace its genesis back to the emergence of a modern conception of ‘customs’ in Europe and its different paths of transition as part of larger modernization packages through Turkey, the Soviet Union, Japan and China to Xinjiang. I discuss the development of state institutions connected to notions of Uyghur culture and customs and several generations of scholars within them, central to developing and defining a modern and ‘intentionally ambiguous’<sup>5</sup> concept of Uyghur customs. The last part of the article bears witness to the violent demise of research and publishing on Uyghur customs.

### Conceptualizing ‘Uyghur customs’

In 2010–13, as part of my doctoral fieldwork on kinship in south-western Xinjiang, I read local descriptions of the marriage process and other life-cycle events in a wide range of books, some from the 1990s but most published in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Some were used for teaching ethnology (*etnologiyä*), nationality studies (*millätshunasliq*), anthropology (*insanshunasliq*) or folklore (*folklor*). Others targeted general intellectual or popular readerships. A number of books addressing issues of morality, piety and proper behavior likewise referred centrally to customs. The books used varied terms such as *qa’idä-yosun* (customs), *än’änä* (tradition) or even *pärhiz* (taboos, restrictions), but all widely employed the terms *mädäniyät* (culture, civilization) and *örp-adät* (customs). The latter was the term I learnt to use when inquiring in book stores or explaining my research.

Unlike terms such as anthropology, folklore, social networks (*ijtima’iy torlar*) or even kinship (*tughqandarchiliq*), the concept of *örp-adät* was immediately understood and considered relevant by educated and less educated Uyghurs alike. Some university students in Ürümqi had even started a petition to have anthropology (*insanshunasliq*) and nationality studies (*millätshunasliq*) renamed *örp-adät-shunasliq* (custom-studies).<sup>6</sup> The category of customs was ‘experience-near’<sup>7</sup> to them, fitting well within their

conceptual universe and world view. It also suited the ideology of the party-state; customs have a secure place within both historical materialism<sup>8</sup> and CCP notions of society and ethnicity.<sup>9</sup> As a category explicitly construed in opposition to those of politics and religion, *örp-adät* also provided Uyghur scholars and intellectuals with a safe space to write about and discuss local non-state practices of social organization such as kinship traditions, informal labor support and community events. Labeled ‘ethnic customs,’ these practices had great potential for identity construction,<sup>10</sup> and allowed Uyghur intellectuals to visualize a Uyghur modernity in which being Uyghur was not opposed to being modern.<sup>11</sup> Yet this concept of customs, closely connected to modern ideology, is a fairly recent notion.

According to historian Ghäyrätjan Osman, the term *mädäniyät* only becomes common in Uyghur/Turki texts by the nineteenth century and *örp-adät* even later.<sup>12</sup> Terms employed to signify similar ideas before this had broad overlaps in meaning, unifying customs and culture into one complex that also connoted morality, regulation and law.<sup>13</sup> According to Uyghur scholars I have interviewed, the term *mädäniyät* was known among intellectuals but not ordinary people in the early twentieth century. It appears in the publications of Jadid Muslim educational reformers in 1915, but neither it nor *örp-adät* figure in Gunnar Jarring’s dictionary based on his fieldwork in Kashgar and Khotan between 1929 and 1930.<sup>14</sup> Both are, however, included in a 1956 handwritten word list for Uyghur learners in Beijing,<sup>15</sup> probably translated from Chinese. In books and journal articles published in the 1980s the terms show up repeatedly and after the 1990s often figure in their titles.<sup>16</sup> These terms and their conceptual distinction are parts of a wider semantic complex structured by a modern world view that clearly distinguishes between modern and traditional. This semantic complex includes related terms such as *än’änä* (tradition) and *qa’idä-yosun* (customs), antonyms like *zamaniwiy* (modern) and *täräqqiyat* (development) and value judgements such as *qalaq* (backward) and *khura-patliq* (superstition). However, in this article, my main interest is not foremost with the linguistic term *örp-adät* as such but with the cultural conceptualization behind it.

The historical differentiation of *mädäniyät* and *örp-adät* described by Osman, highlights the crystallization of a modern world view. In Europe, the modern concept of customs took shape during the transformation towards modern social organization in the middle of the nineteenth century. Eric Wolf describes how, amid romanticism, colonialism, industrialization and expanding capitalism, ‘inquiry into the nature and varieties of human-kind split into separate (and unequal) specialties and disciplines,’ one being ‘the new science of society.’<sup>17</sup> This produced what Wolf calls the invention of ‘the social’ as a distinct field of knowledge, which abstracted social relations ‘from the economic, political, or ideological context in which they are found.’<sup>18</sup> ‘Customs’ as a category is constructed as part of this field of knowledge. This conceptualization of an autonomous ‘social realm’ reflects modern ideology built on individualism, anonymized bureaucracy and laws aimed at keeping social relations out of political and economic decision-making.<sup>19</sup> Practices that transgress the distinction between the social and the political or economic are condemned as ‘corrupt’, ‘nepotistic’, ‘backward’ or ‘feudal’ depending on the prevalent rhetoric. Practices that remain within the ‘social realm’ and are compatible with the modern state and economy come to be seen as ideal, ideologically unproblematic ‘cultural customs,’ well suited for commercialization and modern identity construction but insignificant for the large-scale organization of social life. In nineteenth

century Europe this entailed a ‘discovery of the people’<sup>20</sup> and an interest in documenting local customs (ethnography abroad and folklore at home),<sup>21</sup> often marked by a ‘patronizing distance’<sup>22</sup> derived from the perspective of modern ideology which was a necessary pre-requisite for the concept in the first place.

For analytical purposes, I distinguish three notions of ‘customs.’ One is non-modern and two are ‘modern’ in that they take ‘customs’ to be part of the detached ‘social’ realm, and designate practices as ‘customs’ in dichotomous opposition to the modern.<sup>23</sup> The first, non-modern notion takes customary practices as essentially similar to law and morality, deeply saturated with economic, political and religious significance and central to the functioning of society and of people’s livelihoods.<sup>24</sup> This is the notion that Osman finds in older Uyghur/Turki words for customs and that E.P. Thompson identifies in pre-nineteenth century Europe.<sup>25</sup> The second notion, which I call modernist, introduces a strong value judgement idealizing the modern over the traditional. It depicts customs as backward, superstitious and belonging to a disappearing, pre-modern world, thereby still recognizing but simultaneously condemning their potential connection with law, politics and economy. The third notion, which I call mature-modern, does not devalue tradition or customs but recognizes as proper and legitimate only those practices that are not in conflict with modern institutions; the division between the ‘realms’ is not an aim but an unquestionable fact. ‘Modernist’ and ‘mature-modern’ are thus subcategories of modern ideology.

### **Institutionalizing modernity in Xinjiang**

Inspiration for developing modern notions of customs and society reached Xinjiang along several different paths connected to colonialism, the spread of modernist and nationalist ideology and the rise of modern capitalist (and socialist) states. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jadid Muslim reformers educated in Russia or the Ottoman Empire promoted modernist thought and new ideas about education and religion throughout Central Asia.<sup>26</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s, Uyghurs also sought inspiration in the Soviet Union’s modernization and nationality policies,<sup>27</sup> as well as in the Kemalist reforms in Turkey.<sup>28</sup> At the same time modern ideas and concepts arrived in Republican China in large part via Japan, manifesting in Sun Yatsen’s nationalism,<sup>29</sup> and in cultural movements such as the May Fourth Movement and the New Culture Movement.

Academic manifestations of modern ideology included the founding of the Department of Folksong Collection in 1918 at Beijing National University (BNU) and its successor, the Beijing University Folksong Research Society, in 1920.<sup>30</sup> These institutions laid the ground for the establishment of the ‘first division of Chinese ethnology’ at BNU in 1928,<sup>31</sup> which coincided with the adoption of the first codified modern civil laws from the late 1920s until the mid-1930s.<sup>32</sup> A modern conception of law and custom as distinct fields was being institutionalized. Uyghur intellectuals were influenced by these and parallel developments in Soviet Central Asia, where many Uyghurs received education and from where came influxes of people and ideas, not least carried by Tatars.<sup>33</sup> The consolidation of modern state law in Soviet Central Asia led to the criminalization of some customs, such as Barimta, a feigned stealing of livestock to provoke a dialogue about reparation payments in case of serious wrongdoing.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, customary

practices that did not violate state law or pose a threat to modern political ideology were made the topic of academic study. ‘Uyghur studies,’ including folklore and ethnology, came into being with the founding of the Kazakh Academy of Sciences in 1946.<sup>35</sup> In Xinjiang, in the 1940s, ‘Soviet, Turkic, and Chinese models of cultural progress’ were celebrated in so-called ‘enlightenment associations’ (*mädäniy-aqartish uyushmisi*).<sup>36</sup> Besides promoting and funding modern education these associations provided a space for local intellectuals to discuss history, language, culture and art and helped establish early Uyghur theater and cinema. The modern ideological distinction between relatively isolated political-legal, economic and ‘social’ spheres respectively was being consolidated and institutionalized.

In 1941, although not yet in power, the Chinese Communist Party established the Yan’an University for Nationalities to train their minority recruits.<sup>37</sup> In 1951, this was transformed into the Central Institute for Nationalities in Beijing. By 1956, six such institutes existed across China. Their main purpose was to train minority cadres, but they also promoted ethnography and minority studies. These institutes were the launch pad for the authorities’ massive ethnic classification project in 1954.<sup>38</sup> Although this monumental undertaking was inspired by Soviet policies, Thomas Mullaney convincingly demonstrates that it did not merely operationalize preconceived political notions of ethnicity; instead it employed then state-of-the-art ethnographic methods and mainly linguistic criteria to ‘identify’ China’s ethnic groups for administrative and policy purposes.<sup>39</sup>

In the early 1950s, the first groups of minority pupils from Xinjiang arrived at the Central Institute for Nationalities in Beijing for training in the sciences.<sup>40</sup> Among them was Mirsultan Osmanov, a linguist who went on to conduct fieldwork in Kashgar and Khotan between 1955 and 1957.<sup>41</sup> Along with authors like Zordun Sabir and Zunun Kadir he came to constitute the first PRC-educated generation of Uyghur scholars and intellectuals. Their initial careers were short-lived; in the 1960s many were imprisoned or sent to the countryside to work the fields.<sup>42</sup> During the radical decades of the Great Leap Forward (1958–62) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), research and publications on culture and customs were largely halted. According to Michael Friederich,<sup>43</sup> the literature published in Uyghur during this phase was very political and little concerned with local practices. During these years, the modernist notion of customs as backward traditions in conflict with modern rationality dominated. Customs and culture were seen as reactionary feudal remnants hindering development and progress.

### Uyghur customs reloaded

Following Mao’s death in 1976 and the subsequent implementation of reforms advanced by Deng Xiaoping, cultural issues once again became central to efforts to engage minority populations in the political apparatus and modern Chinese society.<sup>44</sup> Research centers and cultural bureaus were reopened or newly established and intellectuals slowly regained their position in society.<sup>45</sup> New groups of minority students were brought to Beijing for training in law, humanities and social sciences. In stark contrast to Cultural Revolution discourse, traditions and customs could now be seen as precious heritage (*änggüshtär*).<sup>46</sup> In the 1980s, this included religious traditions. Public Qur’an-readings were sponsored by the government, private religious teaching was widely tolerated and

Muslim cadres were encouraged to take the pilgrimage to Mecca to earn the respect and trust of rural Uyghurs and strengthen their loyalty to the party.<sup>47</sup> These practices were seen as cultural customs rather than ‘religion’ in any strong sense of the term.

The reception of Zordun Sabir’s play *Dolan Youths* (*Dolan yashliri*), demonstrates the new appreciation of traditions and customs. Sabir had studied classical Uyghur literature at the Northwest University for Nationalities and the Central Nationalities Institute in Beijing before being sent to the countryside as part of the late 1950s Anti-Rightist Movement.<sup>48</sup> He was rehabilitated in the late 1970s and resumed writing. *Dolan Youths* was published in October 1979 in the journal *Tarim*. It tells the story of a young Uyghur man who disregards his own people’s cultural traditions and holds on to the modernist spirit of the Cultural Revolution. This creates conflicts and problems for him that are only resolved when he ‘sees the beauty of these traditions [...] and embraces the ways of his people.’ The story won several prizes and was lauded for its ‘anti-Gang of Four message.’ Colin Legerton summarizes it as ‘a conflict between “old Uyghur” and “new Chinese” in which old Uyghur wins out in the end.’<sup>49</sup>

In the 1980s this narrative was praised and promoted by the government, turning the modernist notion of customs as backward on its head within the realm of the social. However, the modernist narrative was still strongly promoted in the realms of politics and economy, leading toward a stronger conceptual distinction between culture/customs and politics/economy, which strengthened the mature-modern notion of customs as belonging to a distinct realm of the social.

## The first books

The boundaries between culture and customs on the one hand and religion and politics on the other were redefined and emphasized during the 1990s. The euphoria of cultural freedom sobered following student protests in Xinjiang between 1985 and 1989, the Tian’anmen Square violence in 1989, the Baren uprising in 1990 and the dismantling of the Soviet Union.<sup>50</sup> The government pushed back against religious practices and claims to Uyghur independence, especially after the Ghulja Uprising in 1997.<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, by the mid-1990s the intellectual and academic environment in Xinjiang had matured in terms of both academic methodology and institutional infrastructure such as research departments and publishing houses. The government invested in ‘the publication of a large number of diverse Uyghur books’<sup>52</sup> including those addressing Uyghur culture and customs.<sup>53</sup>

Although the 1980s had seen the publication of some books on Uyghur folklore and customs, these were focused on oral literature or on documenting one particular custom or theme, such as carpets, dance, carving, architecture or food.<sup>54</sup> The first books dedicated to customs in general, which took ‘customs’ as a central concept to be approached theoretically, were published in the early 1990s. These were academic books meant to be used in research and teaching, but they were also targeted at a wider readership. In 1993 Abdurähim Häbibulla published *Uyghur Etnografiyisi* (Uyghur Ethnography). In the Introduction, he explains one major motivation for the work as follows:

There is no systematic material to introduce [Uyghur ethnography]. The Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences research institute recognized this and from 1986 they have made it a part



of their agenda and duty (*vāzipā*) to write about the ethnography of the sibling peoples in Xinjiang. Starting from this point on the towns and villages of south, east and north Xinjiang have been examined and studied.<sup>55</sup>

Abdukerim Rakhman makes a similar statement in his introduction to the popular and widely read *Uyghur Örp-adätliri* (Uyghur Customs), edited with Rāwāydulla Hāmdulla and Shārip Khushtar and first published in 1996:

Unfortunately, there is no work to date describing Uyghur customs in any systematic manner, so this book will try to fill that gap. 224 items of typical, special Uyghur customs made it into the book. This can be a first step for future research.<sup>56</sup>

Up until the mid-1990s, while folk-literature was taught at Xinjiang University and Kashgar Pedagogical Institute, no anthropology or ethnology had yet been established. Häbibulla and Rakhman were among the protagonists to change this. Rakhman, professor at the Uyghur literature department of Xinjiang University and a passionate fieldworker, became known as the ‘father of Uyghur folklore studies.’<sup>57</sup> He was educated at Xinjiang University in the 1950s, imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution and rehabilitated in the late 1970s. He returned to his *alma mater* to teach and in the 1980s published a number of books on Uyghur folklore.<sup>58</sup> These early books focused on oral literature following the previous decades’ preoccupation with language and linguistic expressions of ethnicity. The songs and tales were often ideologically edited,<sup>59</sup> and could be published without challenging modernist state authority. Folksongs and -tales were the first area in which a modern notion of customs as disconnected from politics, religion and economy was developed in both Europe and China.<sup>60</sup>

This understanding of folklore provided a model for the development of a general concept of customs that likewise did not conflict with state authority or modernist ideology. The construction of a distinct and popular category of ‘Uyghur customs,’ expanded the concept from particular art products and texts performed by specialists to include practices carried out as part of daily life.<sup>61</sup> In 1993, Häbibulla mentions the rising popularity of the term ‘*örp-adät*’ (customs) but finds it too narrow as it addresses too little of society.<sup>62</sup> In 1996, Rakhman’s book unapologetically centers around the term.<sup>63</sup> The concept’s narrowness and perceived political neutrality made it particularly compelling in the politically hardening atmosphere of the mid-1990s,<sup>64</sup> and well suited for the acceleration of Uyghur identity construction.<sup>65</sup> ‘The Uyghurs, [...] one of the ancient peoples playing an important role in the history of Central Asia,’ writes Rakhman, ‘have formed complex and dense (*qoyuq*) ethno-national customs.’<sup>66</sup> ‘Therefore,’ he concludes, ‘in order to shed light on the entire history of Uyghur culture this ancient people’s customs must be described minutely.’<sup>67</sup> Häbibulla also defines customs as an ethno-national phenomenon: ‘peoples (*millät*) are different on the basis of the psychological characteristics in their culture,’ which have been formed as they have developed through different modes of production.<sup>68</sup> For Häbibulla, these psychological characteristics find expression in a given people’s customs (*örp-adät*).<sup>69</sup> Both books recognize a certain variability in the customs of Uyghurs from different locations,<sup>70</sup> but explicitly aim to capture and formulate a body of common practices that identifies Uyghurs as a united people.<sup>71</sup> The mature-modern notion of customs thus defines a body of practices to serve in identity formation.<sup>72</sup>



## Publishing traditions

At the end of the 1990s, cultural research institutions received less state funding,<sup>73</sup> as government efforts were increasingly directed towards infrastructure expansion and boosting economic growth.<sup>74</sup> Instead, cultural production received private Uyghur investment, enabled by both a rise in wealth and political reform. This included private publishing. So far, all Uyghur publications had been state financed, subject to rigorous control, and published by state-run presses. From 1999, Qurban Barat and Yalqun Rozi were among the first to privately purchase ISBN numbers to publish Uyghur books. They were still using the state-owned presses and subjected to censorship, but decisions on what to publish were now made by private actors pursuing commercial gains and following their own political agendas. Private publishing became an outlet for a range of new ideas and desires including an explosion in books of various genres touching upon the topic of Uyghur customs. Some of these books were inspired by the rise in ethno-nationalist sentiment, others were a reaction to what was perceived as a moral crisis deriving from rapid social transformation. Some books targeted the Uyghur home education market: while parent's awareness of their Uyghur identity and language was strengthening at this time, formal schooling was heavily favoring Mandarin Chinese and state narratives.<sup>75</sup>

Private publications thus entailed a limited return to elements of the non-modern (first) notion of customs as being embedded in morality and politics. This can be seen as a reaction to the discrimination, alienation and violence experienced by Uyghurs as a group marginalized in the Chinese modernization process. It also reveals an inherent tension in intellectuals' 'intentionally ambiguous' efforts to present particular practices as 'customs' disconnected from economy, politics and religion. These authors were aware that many Uyghurs still relied on 'customary' practices for their livelihoods as they employed this 'unpolitical' concept in a process of identity construction viewed with returning suspicion by the government.

It is no coincidence that the authors, professors and publishers who were the carriers of these discourses counted among those Uyghur intellectuals most deeply embedded in modern Chinese society and formal institutions. For 'customs' to become a subject of study, a wide variety of very different practices needed to be construed as a collective and distinct body of phenomena defined in opposition to a 'modern' way of life. Since the category of 'customs' presupposes the modern gaze of a modern life world, its constructors were necessarily people deeply integrated in formal institutions who had internalized modern categories and desires. While not entirely uncritical of government policies and while certainly promoting Uyghur identity, most leading intellectuals writing about customs before 2017 shared many of the government's goals and values. They were generally staunch believers in modernist development, economic growth, a strong state and the rule of law. They certainly added some passages to please the authorities and avoided or packaged critical positions. Nevertheless, much of their writing expressed genuine conviction and a claim to personal agency in shaping the discourse around customs and thus also imagining a Uyghur modernity.<sup>76</sup>

Uyghur scholars occupied highly sophisticated positions in their discursive arguments. For instance, despite drawing on historical materialism, Rakhman places religion at the center of customs' genesis.<sup>77</sup> This seems paradoxical; Rakhman is a Communist

Party member and known proponent of secular modernization. Yet, his position is typical of Uyghur intellectuals in the 1990s. He pushes back against Cultural Revolution narratives of religion as something bad to be eradicated. At the same time, he opposes the tendency for global Islamic discourses to replace local religious traditions,<sup>78</sup> emphasizing that while Uyghur customs are clearly deeply influenced by Islam, they also carry traces of other religions.<sup>79</sup> He thereby signals that Muslim religious practice is a normal and unproblematic part of Uyghur custom, but also that Uyghur customs are much more than textual Islam and take primacy over ‘imported’ religious practices of Muslims elsewhere.

These intellectuals’ work made them conceptual modernizers of Uyghur culture and bridge builders for the many Uyghurs who did not share their high degree of integration into modern Chinese society or their modern gaze. This is one of the reasons their books became so popular – they addressed practices essential to many Uyghurs from a perspective acceptable to the government. On the other hand, their very relevance and popularity exposed as fictional the claim to political neutrality and economic marginality inherent in their concept of customs. It relied on many of these ‘customs’ precisely having deep-rooted economic and political significance.

### The end of customs?

In 1995, the government began to redefine certain ‘cultural customs’ as political or religious practices. This reflected a reversal of the liberal ethnic policies of the 1980s and was legitimated by the government as a protective measure against perceived separatist and terrorist threats.

In 1995 the traditional Uyghur male gatherings known as *māshrāp* were restricted and then temporarily banned in 1997, when the authorities deemed them to have been a ‘prime catalyst’ in the Ghulja Uprising.<sup>80</sup> *Māshrāps* featured dance and song performance, jokes and social commentary but were also spaces for teaching morality and religion to the younger generation and fora for the settling of community disputes. They were events that involved socializing but also socialization, entertainment but also education and community litigation. As such, they embodied elements of the non-modern notion of customs and provided a space where the state had not monopolized law, right and truth. In response, the government introduced a distinction between ‘healthy’ and ‘illicit’ *māshrāps*,<sup>81</sup> striving to turn the ideological imagination of the mature modern notion of customs as disconnected from religion and politics into a state-controlled reality. In 2010, a de-politicized *māshrāp* was designated a UNESCO Intangible World Cultural Heritage, while exoticized, feminized performances called *māshrāp* continue to be promoted as popular tourist attractions and via TV shows.<sup>82</sup>

Similarly, as China met the ‘legislative wildfire’<sup>83</sup> spreading from the US-led War on Terror in the wake of 9/11 2001, several former ‘customs’ in Xinjiang were marked by the government as ‘illegal religious activities’ (*qanunsiz diniy pa’aliyätlär*). This expanded in the years after the Ürümchi violence in 2009.<sup>84</sup> Some practices that had earlier been discouraged but tolerated came to be labeled as extremist behavior such as listening to Islamic sermons online, sporting beards, wearing headscarves, wearing long sleeved modest clothing or refusing to dance at weddings.<sup>85</sup> After the introduction of a Xinjiang-specific

‘People’s War on Terror’ in May 2014,<sup>86</sup> the government gradually re-categorized more and more ‘cultural customs’ as strongly religious or even extremist practices. This included Islamic naming practices, the *nikah* marriage ceremony, reading the Qur’an at home, praying at home, using the Islamic greeting *assalamu äläykum* in text messages, sending or keeping religious pictures and symbols and refusing alcohol and cigarettes. Up until 2014 the traditionally Sufi dance *sama* had been danced in sports classes in schools in Kashgar as an ethnic custom. In 2014, it was deemed a religious dance, taken off the curriculum and substituted with the Han pop dance ‘Little Apple.’<sup>87</sup> During fieldwork in Kashgar in summer 2016, I observed that the dancing of *sama* at weddings had also been restricted. Similarly in 2014, the performance of the *nikah* marriage ceremony, which had been seen as one of the core Uyghur customs up until this point, became a state regulated religious practice; after 2016 it was discouraged and, in some counties, prohibited for party members and cadres.

Many Uyghur intellectuals I talked to in the early 2010s insisted on a categorical difference between religion (*din*) and customs (*örp-adät*), defining many practices with recognizable religious symbolism as customs. This distinction served to protect practitioners from persecution by the state and discursively preserve certain practices for identity construction, but also contributed to their heritagization and even the exoticization or so-called ‘Disneylandization’ for touristic audiences.<sup>88</sup> Uyghur intellectuals’ embrace of the mature-modern notion of customs thus expressed both ideological adaptations and strategic concessions to the state. While certain practices shifted in and out of the category of ‘customs’, the category itself remained and provided a safe space until late 2016. In August that year, Chen Quanguo was appointed First Party Secretary of Xinjiang and immediately accelerated the securitization of the region.<sup>89</sup> By spring 2017 Uyghurs and Kazakhs were being detained on a mass scale.<sup>90</sup> Those arrested included a large number of scholars and publishers,<sup>91</sup> including Ghäyrätjan Osman, Abdukerim Rakhman, and several of their most successful students, among whom Rahile Dawut has garnered most international attention.<sup>92</sup> Uyghurs have reported participating in the private burning of books at their relatives’ homes, since owning Uyghur books – even those published with the blessing and support of the state – had become risky. According to reliable reports by visitors to Xinjiang and photographs taken in the region in 2019,<sup>93</sup> Uyghur books had all but disappeared from the shelves of public bookstores and private Uyghur bookstores had been closed by the government; many of their owners had received long prison sentences. The rich and manifold intellectual products that the category of Uyghur customs had inspired since the late 1970s have been reduced to elements in party propaganda celebrating a harmonic multiethnic Chinese society. Many of the practices that served as inspiration have been criminalized and their practitioners purged.

### Conclusion: striving for a Uyghur modernity

The development of the concept of Uyghur ‘customs’ and its changing meaning signify a process of deep cultural modernization in which local intellectuals became agents and carriers in the early twentieth century, in the 1950s and again from the 1980s till 2016. Many of these intellectuals were constructors of Uyghur identity who resisted assimilation, but they were also bridge builders to modern Chinese society and pushed for

integration and modernization. They opposed both romanticist cultural isolationism and political Islam. A mature-modern notion of customs conceptually emancipated from economy, politics, religion, law and morality, provided a safe basis for their vision of a Uyghur modernity within the Chinese state by uniting the modern with a Uyghur ‘national essence.’<sup>94</sup> This vision was destroyed by a surge in systematic state violence from 2014, and particularly after 2016.

By 2017, the category of ‘customs’ no longer provided a safe space for intellectuals to imagine a Uyghur modernity, nor did it shield any practitioner from state accusations of separatism, extremism or terrorism. Some of the most important intermediaries between Uyghur communities and the Chinese state apparatus had been purged; the bridges they built have likely been burnt along with their books. The most productive era of research and publication on Uyghur customs has effectively ended. It started in the wake of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), another period during which Uyghur cultural production had been halted. Whether the current state assault on Uyghur culture will again be followed by a phase of productive openness remains to be seen. For now, Uyghur language publication on Uyghur customs – an important part of the intellectual and political project to shape a distinctly Uyghur modernity within the PRC – has withered before coming into full bloom.

## Notes

1. Tahir Tughluq, *Oghlum Aldinggha Qara*, 2.
2. Uyghur Telewiziyesi, “Tarim Logäy Häsrät.”
3. Beyer and Finke, “Practices of Traditionalization,” 310.
4. Throughout this article, I restrict my analytical use of the term ‘identity’ to a narrow modern notion that designates an individual’s belonging to a given abstract imagined community of members with whom no personal relations exist, following Brubaker and Cooper’s critique of ‘identity’ as a social science concept. Brubaker and Cooper, ‘Beyond Identity.’
5. See note 3 above, 313.
6. Interviews 2013, 2019.
7. Geertz, “From the Natives Point of View,” 57.
8. Häbibulla, *Uyghur etnografiyisi*, 14; Rakhman, Hemdulla and Khushtar, *Uyghur örp-adätliri*, 2; and Tursun, *Uyghur örp-adätliridin örnäklär*, 2, 20.
9. Gladney, *Dislocating China*, 9-16; and Bovingdon *The Uyghurs*, 22.
10. Rudelson, *Oasis Identities*, 129.
11. See also Schluessel, *Thinking beyond Harmony*, 329.
12. Osman, *Uyghurlarning Tarikh*, 360.
13. Osman, *Uyghurlarning Tarikh*, 361-362. Such terms include *ärdäm*, *toru*, *törü-toru*, *mijöz*, *nizam*, *qanun* and *adat*.
14. Jarring, *Eastern Turki-English Dialect Dictionary*.
15. *Uyghur Dialekt*.
16. For example, Rakhman, Hemdulla and Khushtar, *Uyghur örp-adätliri*; Tursun, *Uyghur örp-adätliridin örnäklär*; and Rähimi, *Uyghur än’äniwi örp-adätliri*.
17. Wolf, *Europe*, 8-9; see also Burke, *Popular Culture*, 18-19.
18. Wolf, *Europe*, 8-9.
19. Dumont, *Essays on Individualism*, 9-19. See also Gregory, *Gifts and Commodities*; and Graeber, *Debt*. As Shmuel Eisenstadt and others have shown, modern ideology can take different forms in different economic, cultural and historical contexts. See Sachsenmaier and Riedel, *Reflections on Multiple Modernities*.
20. Burke, *Popular Culture*, 1-22.
21. Linke, “Folklore,” 118.

22. Thompson, *The English Working Class*, 2.
23. This distinction is drawn for heuristic purposes. It is not intended as an exhaustive treatment of the many different notions of ‘customs’ throughout history, nor does it imply any necessary or concrete historical progression; shifts between and hybridization of these notions occur both synchronically and diachronically.
24. Note that I conceptualize this as ‘non-modern’ not ‘pre-modern’; I take modern society as one historically constructed, very specific way to organize society, which is neither inevitable nor the end-product of history.
25. See note 22 above, 2.
26. See Brophy, *Uyghur Nation*; Khalid, *Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform*; and Bellér-Hann, *Reform des traditionellen islamischen Bildungssystems*.
27. Brophy, *Uyghur Nation*.
28. Light, “Uyghur folklore,” 334-336; Semet, “Die Uiguren”; and Schluessel “Thinking beyond Harmony,” 325.
29. Schluessel, “Thinking beyond Harmony,” 326.
30. Eminov, *Folklore and Nationalism*, 259-260.
31. Mullaney, *Coming to Terms*; and Hao, *How the Communist Party*, 60.
32. Bourgon, *Uncivil Dialogue*, 50.
33. See note 27 above.
34. See Martin, “Barimta.”
35. Kamalov, *Uyghur Studies in Central Asia*, 5.
36. Brophy, *Uyghur Nation*, 323; see also Freeman, “Uyghur Newspapers in Republican China,” 229.
37. Hao, *How the Communist Party*, 85-86.
38. Mullaney, *Coming to Terms*.
39. *Ibid.*, 42-54
40. Interview with former student at the Central Institute for Minorities, 2019.
41. Barat, “Mähmud Kashghäri izidin.”
42. Legerton, “Zordun Sabir’s “Dolan Youths,”” 6; Thwaites, *Zunun Kadir’s Ambiguity*, 19-22; and Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads*, 271-279.
43. Friederich, *Die uyghurische Literatur*.
44. Karrar, “Resistance to state”; Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads*, 276-284; and Clarke, “Xinjiang in the “Reform” Era,” 39.
45. Rudelson, *Oasis Identities*, 135.
46. See above 1. aldinggha qara, 2.
47. Rudelson, *Oasis Identities*, 129.
48. Legerton, “Zordun Sabir’s “Dolan Youths,”” 6.
49. *Ibid.*, 1-3.
50. Bequelin, “Xinjiang in the Nineties,” 69; and Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*.
51. Rudelson, *Oasis Identities*, 130; Dautcher, *Down a Narrow Road*; and Karrar, “Resistance to state,” 3-4.
52. Rudelson, *Oasis Identities*, 141.
53. Grose, “Uyghur Language Textbooks,” 376.
54. See, for example, Rakhman, *Folklor vä yazma ädäbiyat*; Tursun, *Khotän gilämchiliki*; and Mährulla and Qorban, *Uyghur ussul sän’iti*.
55. Häbibulla, *Uyghur etnografiyisi*, 3.
56. Rakhman, Hemdulla and Khushtar, *Uyghur örp-adätleri*, 3.
57. Anderson, “How is Abdukerim Rakhman Surviving?”
58. Rakhman, *Uyghur khälq dastanliri*; Rakhman, *Folklor vä yazma ädäbiyat*; and Rakhman, *Uyghur folklori häqqidä bayan*.
59. See the articles by Long, Sarkozy, and Anon., this issue.
60. Linke, “Folklore, Anthropology,” 19-20.
61. Rakhman, Hemdulla and Khushtar, *Uyghur örp-adätleri*, 3.
62. Häbibulla, *Uyghur etnografiyisi*, 13-14.

63. Rakhman, Hemdulla and Khushtar, *Uyghur örp-adätliri*.
64. Bequelin, “Xinjiang in the Nineties.”
65. Rudelson, *Oasis Identities*.
66. On claims to ancientness and primordiality as bedrocks of Uyghur identity construction, see Bellér-Hann in this issue.
67. Rakhman, Hemdulla and Khushtar, *Uyghur örp-adätliri*, 2-3
68. The ‘psychological characteristics’ of a people were among the defining traits of a ‘nation’ in the Soviet model, which continues to influence Uyghur imaginaries of identity.
69. Häbibulla, *Uyghur Etnografiysi*, 14.
70. See note 65 above.
71. See note 69 above, 2.
72. Light, *Intimate Heritage*, 8, 26; see also the articles by Sarkozy, Bellér-Hann, Anon. and Long in this issue.
73. Interviews with Uyghur scholars 2019.
74. Bequelin, *Staged Development*, 363, 374-376.
75. Dwyer, *Xinjiang Conflict*; and Grose “Uyghur Language Textbooks.”
76. Interviews with Uyghur scholars outside China, 2018-2019.
77. Rakhman, Hemdulla and Khushtar, *Uyghur Örp-adätliri*, 2-3.
78. On this tendency, see Waite, “The Emergence of Muslim Reformism.”
79. Rakhman, Hemdulla and Khushtar, *Uyghur Örp-adätliri*, 2.
80. Dautcher, *Down a Narrow Road*, 252; and Snider, “A Meshrep in Our Home,” 25.
81. Thwaites, “An Uyghur Meshrep Dichotomy,” 24.
82. On the transformation of *mäshräp* into state-sponsored ‘authentic’ heritage, see Anon., this issue.
83. Clarke, “Widening the Net,” 542.
84. On 5 June 2009, Uyghur demonstrations demanding justice for two Uyghur workers that had reportedly been lynched at a factory in Guangzhou were met with massive police dominance. The situation escalated into violence with officially two hundred dead and many hundreds injured. Local sources and Human Rights organizations claim that the casualties were much higher. See Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 167-170; and Dillon, *Xinjiang*, 93-115.
85. Obulqasim, *Din äsäbiylik*; and Xinguo, *Qaraqashtiki qorshap tutush*.
86. Klimeš, “Advancing “Ethnic Unity,””; see also Steenberg and Rippa, “Development for All?”
87. Brophy, “Little Apples.”
88. Fuller and Lipman, ‘Islam in Xinjiang,’ 322; see also Anon. in this issue.
89. Roberts, “Biopolitics of China’s “War on Terror””; and Smith Finley, “Securitization, Insecurity and Conflict.”
90. Zenz, “Thoroughly Reforming Them.”
91. UHRP, *Detained and Disappeared*; and UHRP, *Persecution of Intellectuals*.
92. Byler, *Heaviness*. For a Central Eurasian Studies Society statement, see <https://www.centralearasia.org/2019/statement-dawut/>; for testimonies, see <https://shahit.biz/eng/viewentry.php?entryno=1>.
93. Pers. comm. with Hanna Burdorf, Gene Bunin and others.
94. Schluessel, *Thinking beyond Harmony*, 329.

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