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## Chapter 9

### Education, Religion and Identity among Uyghur Hostesses in Ürümqi

Joanne Smith Finley

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I address identity constructions among a stigmatised group in urban Uyghur society: karaoke hostesses in Ürümqi. Research on hostess culture in contemporary China has focused on Han (majority group) hostesses in the cities of China proper, and explores socio-economic aspects of hostess work, including rural-urban inequalities and employment discrimination (Hershatter 1996; Xin 1999; Sun 2002; Zheng 2004, 2007; Jeffreys 2004); the re-emergence of gender asymmetry in reform China (Wang 2000; Sun 2002; Zheng 2006, 2008; Zhang 2011); health-related aspects of sex work (Gil et al. 1996; Zhang 2006); prostitution as a social threat (‘spiritual pollutant’) and the state’s attempts to regulate it (Jeffreys 1997, 2004; Wang 2000; Sun 2002; Zheng 2009, 2010, 2011); and the link between hostessing and official corruption (Zhang 2006; Jeffreys 2008). Here, I consider the situations of five Uyghur (minority group) hostesses working in the politically contested border region of Xinjiang, and explore how these young women make sense of their social, religious and ethnic identities. When the act of playing hostess to a Han majority male is construed by the Uyghur community as ‘immoral’ in religious terms,<sup>1</sup> and ‘traitorous’ in ethno-political terms, how do these women explain their choices? From which linguistic and educational backgrounds do they hail? Are they predominantly *minkaohan*, i.e. young women educated in Mandarin Chinese, and more used to interaction with Han classmates and neighbours? Or are they *minkaomin*, i.e. Uyghur-educated, and less familiar with Han peers? How do they

reconfigure notions of religious morality, ethnic identity and group loyalty? Data is drawn from ethnographic interviews conducted in Ürümchi in 2004. Interviews were conducted in the Uyghur language, or in a mixture of Uyghur and Chinese, as preferred by respondents.

### **The hostess industry in Ürümchi**

Like their Han counterparts in China proper, Uyghur hostesses in Ürümchi's karaoke clubs (Ch. *yezonghui*) described two types of hostess (Ch. *sanpei xiaojie*)<sup>2</sup>: those who 'sit on stage' (Ch. *zuotai* – accompany the customer at the venue) and those who 'go off stage' (Ch. *chutai* – return with the customer to his hotel). *Zuotai* girls earned a basic fee of 100 yuan per customer, although several hundred yuan could be earned from clients of a favourable disposition. Usually, a *zuotai* girl would 'sit' with one customer for a maximum of three hours. *Chutai* girls earned a basic fee of between 500 and 1000 yuan, but had to pay around 20 per cent of this to their 'PR manager' (Ch. *gongguan jingli*). The manager connected girls with customers, and received a separate introduction fee from the client (cf. Xin 1999, 1427; Zheng 2008, 445).

According to a Uyghur hotel employee in his thirties named Zunun, speaking in 2004, just a tiny percentage of Uyghur girls worked as hostesses in Ürümchi; yet he acknowledged that the number had increased since my previous field trip in 2002.

Viewed against the community taboo on Uyghur-Han intermarriage, which operates as the principal form of symbolic resistance to Han encroachment (Smith Finley 2013a, 2013b), what do we make of this seeming paradox? Does it signal the crumbling of ethnic

boundaries constructed by Uyghurs to separate themselves from Han Chinese and to express symbolic opposition to PRC political control? Or is it a new – and controversial – form of accommodation, given appeal by the promise of financial reward and enhanced social mobility? Finally, is this trend connected to the aggressive mainstreaming of the Chinese language and Chinese-medium education since 2002, and, if so, how? Below, I seek to answer these questions based on five case studies.

### **Five case studies**

*Mädinä (20, Uyghur-educated, born in Ürümchi)*

Mädinä<sup>3</sup> came from a broken family, and lived in an Ürümchi apartment with her grandfather, his second wife and a half-brother. Mädinä had a history of self-harm. Both her forearms were covered in scars, injuries she had inflicted on herself when her ‘old man’ (Ch. *laogong*; here, boyfriend) died from a heroin overdose. Mädinä first heard about the hostessing industry at the age of fifteen, when she ran away from home to Shanghai. Taking up residence at the home of a male Uyghur cousin, she was raped by his friend, then beaten by her cousin for ‘making him lose face’ (damaging his male honour). Mädinä subsequently fled with another of his friends, only to be beaten again when she had no choice but to return. It was then that a friend suggested she might support herself financially by becoming a hostess.

In the beginning, Mädinä explained, she could not bring herself to do hostess work, since ‘I’m a Uyghur, we believe in Islam.’ She confided that she had wanted to die after the rape took place, and contemplated committing suicide. While her sense of shame recalls

that commonly experienced by rape victims, regardless of religious background, for Mädinä it was closely linked to the importance of female purity in Uyghur culture.<sup>4</sup> During her second sojourn in China proper, Mädinä had finally succumbed to hostess life. Describing how a client had given her a 1500 yuan tip in sympathy after she burst into tears one evening in a Kunming club, she laughed at the memory, impressed in retrospect by what now appeared a scam. Several years into the lifestyle, Mädinä was clear about the instrumental - and temporary - nature of her occupation: ‘This work isn’t forever; it will end one day. Then I will have a job, a good husband, and a home’.

*Mälikä (20, Uyghur-educated, born in Ürümqi)*

Mälikä came from a one-parent family (father deceased). When her mother needed money to send Mälikä’s younger sister and brother to school, a friend had urged her to become a hostess.<sup>5</sup> She described her dread at the prospect:

I felt awful, ashamed of myself, like I was becoming two people. I was losing face in front of my best friend. I was terrified that I would be seen [entering a club] by people I knew, and I couldn’t bear that. Once people know *that* about you, you’re finished.

Unable to face the associated stigma, Mälikä wrote a pile of suicide letters, tidied the house, and took an overdose. When this suicide attempt failed, she tried again. The third attempt followed her break-up with her Uyghur fiancé, when his parents obstructed the marriage on the grounds of Mälikä’s adverse family circumstances. This time, she slit her

wrist.<sup>6</sup> By the time of our interview, Mälikä would go for long periods without doing hostess work, resorting to a few nights' here and there only when she ran into financial difficulties. She directed her earnings straight into her university fees, vowing that after graduation she would find a steady job (and a man with a steady job) and give up hostessing for good.

*Khalidä (18, Uyghur-educated, born in Ürümqi)*

Khalidä also came from a single-parent family (father deceased). Following the loss of the family head, her mother could not afford the tuition fees to send Khalidä's elder brother to university in Shanghai. Having passed the university entrance exam, the disappointment of having to give up his place was hard for him to bear, and he became addicted to heroin, later requiring hospitalisation. Throughout our interviews, Khalidä referred to her brother's medical condition as a 'heart problem', a euphemism frequently used for heroin abuse in Xinjiang, where the pathology claimed the lives of many disillusioned young men in the 1990s (Dautcher 2004). When Khalidä's brother fell ill, staff at the First Affiliated Hospital of Xinjiang Medical University (Ch. *Xinjiang yike daxue diyi fushu yiyuan* 新疆医科大学第一附属医院) refused to admit him unless medical costs were paid in advance.<sup>7</sup> At that point, a Han schoolmate suggested she get work as a hostess, remarking that some customers would pay several thousand yuan for a virgin.

Khalidä insisted in interview that she would never have entered such a club unless forced to by circumstance, and it is instructive that her first 'off-stage' experience was with a

Uyghur – not Han - client. She periodically wept during the course of her narrative, reverting from Chinese to her mother tongue whenever distressed. Tragically, while her earnings had enabled the family to get medical treatment for her brother, he later died to in hospital. Khalidä continued: ‘Then I hated myself, hated everything, and wanted to die. I took a lot of pills and tried to kill myself.’ Unable to reveal the depth of her shame to her family, Khalidä told her mother that she had attempted suicide out of grief for her brother’s death. Her second ‘ off-stage’ experience was with a Han client. Initially refusing to go through with the sex act, she had endured a beating and then a rape, too inexperienced to know that she could request the manager’s help in such circumstances.

*Aminä (18, Uyghur-educated, born in Ürümqi)*

Aminä came from a broken family (parents divorced). Her mother had struggled financially, pinching a living out of sweeping the streets (a line of work Uyghurs are traditionally too embarrassed to undertake).<sup>8</sup> Though Aminä had been accepted onto a course at the Xinjiang Medical University (Ch. *Xinjiang yike daxue* 新疆医科大学), she had found herself unable to pay the tuition fees, and had reluctantly become a hostess following an introduction by her friend, Khalidä (above). For Aminä, hostessing was a gruesome but necessary means to an end:

Basically, you feel afraid. Because some customers are nasty. Most of all, you just want to get it over with and get off home as quickly as possible. You sit with the customer for 30 minutes, get your 50 yuan or whatever, and escape before he starts trying to maul you.

*Tunisa (22, Uyghur-educated, born in Ürümqi)*

Tunisa also hailed from a broken family (parents divorced). Following his remarriage, her father had failed to protect her from her step-mother's hostility, with the result that she had fled to China proper at the age of seventeen. She described how she and ten other Uyghur girls were tricked into prostitution by domestic traffickers:

We went to Ha'erbin by train with two Han managers. They said we would perform Uyghur dance in restaurants. But we overheard them talking privately on the phone, and realised they planned to sell us as prostitutes [...] three of us were sold on for 2000 yuan each.

Tunisa first slept with a Han client at eighteen. Learning first how to 'sit on stage', she was told almost immediately that she would also be expected to 'go off stage'. In the first week, she slept with five or six Han men. When I asked how this had made her feel, she giggled nervously, covered her face in embarrassment, and replied: 'I just lay there with my arm across my eyes. I felt sick, disgusted. Most of them were old men in their forties or fifties. And they stank of pork.' Asked whether she would have felt differently if the clients were young and attractive, she responded in the negative: 'Even the good-looking Han guys can't compete with Uyghur guys [Uy. *yätmäydu*].'

Eventually, Tunisa and a companion were 'rescued' by a Uyghur client, who promised to help them. By pretending that the man's wife was their estranged mother, who now wanted her daughters back, they were able to leave the club and went to stay at the

couple's restaurant. The situation turned sour, however, when the couple tried to force them into arranged marriages, in an apparent bid to restore their 'fallen honour'. Finding their way to a Hui restaurant in Tianjin, they once again took work as hostesses, this time for a Uyghur female manager. Tunisa described how in four months she was paid just 1000 yuan. When she protested the poor conditions and threatened to return to Xinjiang, the manager demanded that she give the 1000 yuan back 'to cover her board and lodging'. Subsequently, Tunisa and the other girls were forbidden to go outside, and became virtual prisoners in the restaurant. Later, the manager demanded that they make contact with friends in Xinjiang and help her recruit them as hostesses. On a second sojourn to China proper, Tunisa undertook hostess work together with Mädinä in Beijing.

**Motivations: labour market inequality or pathology?**

A key issue in studies of sex work is whether women get involved in prostitution because they are in economic need or because they want to make easy money: 'Hostessing offers high incomes in the least amount of time' (Zheng 2008, 445; cf. Jeffreys 1997, 53). In Ürümchi, the picture is mixed. Uyghur hostesses frequently blamed their line of work on adverse employment prospects for ethnic minorities in a Han-dominated urban labour market. Mädinä and Mälikä, both lacking a university degree, explained:

Of course we don't *like* the work! What a thought. We do it because we have to. You get fed up of being rejected by one company after another... it's all private companies now, and they won't take Uyghurs. Those who are best

educated – usually *minkaohan* [Chinese-educated Uyghurs] – have a better chance. Otherwise, [employers] aren't interested.

In a follow-up interview, Mädinä added: 'We're uneducated [Ch. *meiyou wenhua*]. Wherever we go, we're told "We don't want minorities! [Ch. *Bu yao minzu!*]"'. They described how some Uyghur women undertook hostessing as a second job in the evenings because their regular jobs did not pay enough, citing one hostess who worked in the People's Courts by day. Jelil, a university graduate in his late twenties, confirmed this, observing: 'There is no other way for them to eat. They can't get [well-paid] jobs.'

Financial difficulties resulting from ethnic discrimination in the urban labour market were often further complicated by difficult family backgrounds. All of my respondents hailed from one-parent families. As Mälikä explained, 'Often, the girl's father is dead, or the mother is dead. Or the parents are divorced, and there is a step-parent who doesn't care for the child properly because he/she is not their own.' In this way, young women lacking a family head or committed carer seem more likely to wander into hostessing. The same may be true for women who lack a supportive male partner, or who have previously suffered abuse at the hands of men. As Mädinä observed, 'Why should I care about my self-respect if there is no relative, *no man* caring for me?' [my emphasis]. This reading was confirmed by members of the urban community. Patigül, a CD trader in her early thirties, explained: 'Most of these girls have come from troubled backgrounds. Either their parents are divorced ... or they don't have a mother or father. Or somehow they've ended up leaving home.' It is perhaps significant to note that Mädinä had not

been willing to work as a hostess when her boyfriend was alive, that is, when she had someone close by who genuinely cared about her.<sup>9</sup> At the time of our interview, Mādinā explained that her career goals rested entirely on the generation of capital through hostessing. With her accumulated earnings, she had so far been able to register for a computing course, and now she dreamed of saving enough to take driving lessons and buy a car: ‘Then I could set myself up as a private-hire driver.’ The gap between eking out a meagre subsistence and having disposable income that might be used to achieve social mobility is of crucial importance here.

For Mālikā, it was necessary to endure hostess work in order to secure a better future for herself and her family. She explained earnestly how she had worked hard to fund her first year at university, but was then unable to pay advance tuition for her second year. When the university asked her to discontinue her studies, a friend introduced her to hostess work. She related:

At first I was really reluctant; I felt I would be letting myself down ... I didn’t know what to do, how to dance, sing. I ended up in floods of tears! But the guy still gave me 200 yuan – he felt sorry for me ... Later, my friend said ‘See how easy it was to make 200 yuan?’

As Mālikā pointed out, since girls in higher education attend class by day, they need a job that does not require them to work during the day, or indeed every night, and this rules out employment in the service industries. Some female students therefore do hostess

work on Friday and Saturday nights, since there is no college the next day and students are therefore permitted to sleep off campus.

For her part, Khalidä eventually came to see hostessing as a necessary evil, which would allow her to raise university tuition fees (10,000 yuan per year), to support her mother (an independent trader of insecure income), and to secure a good education for her two younger sisters. The social and religious stigma attached to the work had caused her to repeatedly lie to her mother about the origins of the extra funds. At the same time, however, she presented her decision as an ‘act of selfless love’, exercised in the name of familial devotion (filial virtue), an argument often forwarded by prostitutes across Asia, and which may sometimes gain a degree of sympathy from society (cf. Do 2006: 178; Lindquist 2010: 293).

While all five girls claimed to have been forced into hostessing by circumstance, there were also indications that some had *chosen* to continue in the profession rather than enter the service industries. Generally, this was because of a disinclination to perform labour-intensive work. When I met Mädinä, she had just given up a hotel job because it was ‘too tiring’ (Ch. *tai lei*). On another day, she described how she had worked briefly in a pharmacy before resigning: ‘It was exhausting; you had to stand on your feet all day!’ Mälikä and Mädinä admitted on separate occasions that some Uyghur girls ‘don’t like heavy or dirty work’, an attitude corroborated by respondents from the urban community. Ghäyrät, a migrant worker in his thirties from Aqsu, commented: ‘If a girl can’t earn money doing a light job, she ends up doing this [hostessing] instead’.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, both

Mädinä and Mälikä insisted that a person could not make a ‘decent’ living by working a service job alone.

A portion of Uyghur hostesses, having fallen into hostess work when in financial difficulty, subsequently get used to the lifestyle. As Mälikä observed, ‘They get used to the money coming easily. They get a spending habit, want new clothes, and can’t go back to having no disposable income.’ Mädinä similarly remarked: ‘Take me, I spend money like water ... Girls want to wear nice clothes and eat well! [Ch. *Yao chuan de hao, yao chi de hao!*]’ This view too was reiterated among Uyghur members of the urban community. Though Patigül, a music trader in her early thirties, initially argued that such women were simply victims of employment discrimination, she later conceded that the city ‘had opportunities for everyone if they chose to take them’. Rāwiä, a state employee in her forties, similarly remarked: ‘It’s rubbish to suggest that they can’t do other jobs! It’s just that they *won’t*.’

### **Intra-group divides: social stigma and disassociation**

In China proper, the reform-era obsession with wealth accumulation and an increasingly liberalised attitude towards sex have meant that prostitution is less stigmatised among the majority Han than it once was (Xin 1999: 1428). The prevailing attitude is neatly encapsulated in the popular saying: ‘Laugh at a poor man rather than a prostitute’ (Ch. *Xiao pin bu xiao chang* 笑贫不笑娼). The same is not true for Uyghur communities in Xinjiang, where the involvement of daughters in the hostess industry is viewed with uniform horror.

The shame associated with the industry was brought into immediate relief by the way in which I first gained entry to that community. Observing a Uyghur prostitute meet a Han client in a city hotel one evening in 2002, I raised the issue of sex work with long-term respondent, Zunun, a male in his thirties born in Ürümqi. Zunun then revealed – with manifest discomfort - that his half-sister (whom I had known as a small child many years earlier) now worked as a hostess. Eager to speak to her, I was disappointed when Zunun was reluctant to arrange a meeting. It was only on a return trip in 2004 that I discovered the source of his reluctance: at no time had half- brother and -sister openly acknowledged to one another that *he* knew what *she* did for a living. The contentious issue had remained unspoken because, as Zunun sadly observed, he felt he had no right to intervene on behalf of the moral reputation of a *half-sister*. When he did finally set up a meeting, he did not broach the issue with his half-sister directly, but simply directed her to my hotel room, and implied that a simple conversation could earn her some money.<sup>11</sup> Following our first interview, his half-sister had implored: ‘Please don’t say anything to my step-brother! In his heart, he knows what I do. And he knows that I know that he knows! But we would never voice it aloud.’

While it is common for women in many parts of the world to conceal sex work from family members, an acute sense of social stigma caused Uyghur hostesses in Ürümqi to go to extraordinary lengths to keep their ‘night work’ secret. This was because, as in other Islamic societies, community supervision is deployed among Uyghur communities in Xinjiang to collectively enforce public morals (Ayubi 1991). Mädinä and Mälikä

revealed that they never smoked cigarettes in public, although both were addicted to nicotine owing to the nature of hostess work. They explained that if Uyghurs in the community saw a girl smoking in public, they immediately labelled her a ‘prostitute’.

Previously, hostesses had been easily recognisable since they had worn make-up and clothes that more obviously evoked the industry; recently, however, hostesses tended to look just like university students, using very little make-up and dressing in casual clothes. It has therefore become harder to tell whether a Uyghur girl out with a Han male in the evening is a hostess, his romantic partner, or his work colleague.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, my respondents lived in acute fear of another Uyghur seeing them emerge from a karaoke bar, an institution recognised across China as an illicit den of immoral activity (cf. Jeffreys 1997: 49-50; Jeffreys 2004: 95). Khalidä related:

Once, another hostess and I were coming home from a bar at about midnight, Xinjiang time.<sup>13</sup> I bumped straight into a [Uyghur] friend, who was out with her boyfriend. I don’t know if she saw me coming out of there. I lied and said I had been to call on another friend at home ... The trouble is, as soon as one person sees you, they tell someone else, and then that person tells someone else... You have to do what you can to not get seen. I’m afraid of being seen even by Uyghurs who *don’t* know me. Because they look at you as if to say ‘What are you doing out at this hour?’

The problem is not only of where but *at what time* a Uyghur girl is seen on the street, particularly if she is unaccompanied by a suitable male escort. ‘Decent’ Uyghur girls are subject to an evening curfew by parents, who are increasingly anxious to protect urban daughters from immoral pursuits in a rapidly modernising city. In order to prevent their parents coming to know of their activities, many hostesses would join forces. Mädinä and Mälikä explained how girls would tell their parents they were having a sleepover at a female friend’s house on a given night, then take turns to stay at one another’s homes, so that no one set of parents became overly suspicious on observing their daughter’s late return every night.

The fact that, despite working in close proximity with Han clients, Khalidä used Xinjiang rather than Beijing time tells us much about the strength of her ethnic identity. In 2012-13, even some Uyghurs who work at the People’s Courts in Ürümqi, a state institution which officially uses Beijing time, persist in using Xinjiang time (personal communication, Tim Grose). This suggests that workplace interaction with Han Chinese does not in itself determine whether an individual uses Xinjiang or Beijing time; rather, their level of ethnic consciousness does. Indeed, the obstinacy among Uyghurs in using local Xinjiang time may even have contributed to its increased use among Han residents. Visitors to the region have observed that some Han-managed hotels in Ürümqi now use Xinjiang time for check-in purposes (personal communication, Tim Grose).

The acute social stigma attached to the hostess industry meant that most urban Uyghurs were keen to disassociate themselves – and their social sub-group – from the activity.

Social divides of rural-urban, north-south and oasis origin, as well as *minkaohan-minkaomin* (Chinese- or Uyghur-educated) background were invoked to effect this.

Räwiä, a *minkaohan* state employee in her forties, asserted that most hostesses in Ürümchi are from south Xinjiang or Ghulja (Yining, another northern city), insisting: ‘Ürümchi Uyghurs don’t work here, they work in China proper. Nobody knows them there. The southerners can work in Ürümchi without fear of bumping into relatives or neighbours’.

Some members of the community suggested that it was predominantly urban *minkaohan* (Chinese-educated) girls who hostess. Tahirjan, a migrant worker in his thirties from Aqsu in south Xinjiang, argued:

Uyghur girls in this city grow up alongside Han girls, who mess about with their [Han] male classmates. Uyghur girls are influenced by them. You know, just as a blackened cooking pot leaves your hands black if you touch it. The Uyghur girls become ‘broken’ [Uy. *buzuq*, i.e. lose their virginity] and before you know it, they’re on the game [involved in sex work].

The implication is that the behaviour of Uyghur *minkaohan* may over time be affected by the more liberal gender relations they observe among their Han peers in the classroom. The latter are more likely to embark on romantic relationships while still in education; conversely, school-aged Uyghurs are routinely instructed by parents to avoid romantic relationships until they enter the world of work.

However, in my conversations with female *minkaohan* in Ürümchi, the suggestion that it is mainly *minkaohan* who hostess was firmly rejected. Gülshäm, a highly acculturated *minkaohan* aged twenty (who spoke very little Uyghur), protested vigorously: ‘Hostesses come from *Uyghur-medium schools*. Girls from Chinese-medium schools don’t do that, no way!’ She appeared extremely uncomfortable discussing this in the presence of her father, a *minkaohan* educated during the Cultural Revolution period, who conversed mainly in Chinese. Gülshäm asserted that such girls have a low educational level (Ch. *wenhua shuiping*), and thus have few other occupational paths open to them. Her comment corroborates the growing body of data pointing to an adverse employment environment for young urban Uyghurs, particularly those who lack fluency in Chinese. Gülshäm also blamed damaged family relations, arguing that most girls involved in hostess work had not received a solid family education and had ‘gone off the rails’ as a result. According to this argument, then, it is not linguistic acculturation - development of Mandarin Chinese as first language, and resultant familiarity with Han culture - that leads young Uyghur girls to engage in inappropriate interaction with Han men, but a poor state education (the result of financial constraints associated with a one-parent family) combined with a poor family education (the result of an absent parent).

The data gathered on the five hostesses interviewed for this study confirm much of what *minkaohan* respondents had to say, with one exception. While the hostesses confirmed that Uyghur girls will usually take hostess work in locations other than their hometown, all five were themselves Ürümchi-born and working in Ürümchi. The fact that they had

ended up undertaking this activity potentially under the noses of Uyghur relatives, neighbours and friends is likely a measure of the depth of desperation each had felt. Having lost (in one way or another) the male provider in the family, none had been able to enter university (where they would have been formally trained in Mandarin Chinese in the first year), and all had consequently struggled to subsist in an urban labour market that rejects all but the most heavily acculturated ethnic minority candidates. In this, the testimonies of *minkaohan* respondents - that hostesses hail from broken families and from *minkaomin* educational backgrounds (and are therefore disadvantaged in the job market) - ring clear and true. As the result of a departed parent, resultant financial difficulties, and a prematurely halted education, all five girls in this study had had to resort to hostess work, which in turn had led to severe conflicts of personal and group identity. The personal shame and social stigma attached to the hostessing profession by the Uyghur community, particularly in an environment charged with inter-ethnic tension, had driven them even to contemplate taking their own lives.

Yet each had subsequently picked herself up, dusted herself down, and determined to 'use' the hostess industry as a means to improve her future social position and that of her ethnic group, as we shall see below. The fact that the girls spoke mainly in Chinese or code-switched when talking about the details of the hostessing profession demonstrates that they placed this activity firmly in a Han linguistic and cultural frame of reference, creating a moral distance; that the girls reverted to speaking entirely in Uyghur when describing their feelings or when distressed

suggests on the other hand that they derived a sense of cultural belonging and emotional comfort from the use of the mother tongue.

### **Reconfiguring morality: religious and ethno-political boundaries**

Any study centred on Uyghur hostesses who work with Han clients must address the question of morality management, in both religious and ethno-political terms. Certainly, religious considerations were frequently cited by urban Uyghurs in their censure of the profession. Dilbär, for instance, described her mother's reaction on seeing a Uyghur girl standing outside a bar with a Han male: 'My mum was furious. Because those places aren't halal; and she was going inside... with a Han!' But how do hostesses reconcile themselves with the Islamic component of their identities?

In her studies of rural migrant hostesses in China proper, Zheng Tiantian used the phrase 'new moral vision' to describe how Han respondents fundamentally revised standards of right and wrong with regard to Confucian mores of female propriety. Within that vision, the deliberate commodification of romance, the body and intimacy is 'transformed from a denigration of female virtue into a route to empowerment' (Zheng 2008, 459). This process takes place in a context where rural hostesses have learned from painful experience that female purity is appreciated neither by urban men nor by society at large. Within orthodox Islamic law (including Sunni schools of jurisprudence), marriage is the central institution for 'sanctioned erotic pleasure.' As such, it defines premarital and extramarital sex – by men and women - as practices defiling the sanctity of the marital union (Gutiérrez 2012, 156). Because of the shame attached to an unmarried Muslim

woman ‘opening her face’ to a man who is not a blood relative, my respondents struggled with their conscience when entering the industry, and that struggle continued well beyond the first act of religious ‘betrayal’. Mädinä and Mälikä confirmed that they had bitterly reproached themselves at first, on the grounds that they were Muslims. Mädinä described how she had studied at a religious school (Uy. *mäktäp*) when she was of primary school age, and had kneeled behind her grandmother as the latter prayed. She retained a crystal clear memory of her grandmother’s loud and sonorous intonation of the prayers (Uy. *namaz*). Both girls denied any suggestion that they enjoyed the recreation afforded by hostess work (an admission made by some Han hostesses, see Gil et al. 1996, 144), and both vowed to give up drinking and smoking once they had earned enough money to change career, stating: ‘That will be a new start in every way.’

According to convention, a hostess can refuse to perform genital or oral sex acts (Zheng 2004, 128). This creates an important means for Uyghur hostesses to draw moral boundaries, based on religion, in relation both to Han clients and to Han hostesses. Mädinä grimaced as she explained: ‘Some clients want to grope (Ch. *luanmo*) your breasts and thighs, or kiss you; but not all [Uyghur] girls will do that.’ Mälikä, for example, reported that she did not ‘go off stage’, and never allowed clients to ‘maul’ her. While her customers sometimes lost their temper as a result, for Mälikä, this produced a good result, since they would frequently decide that she was ‘too prim and proper’ and dismiss her after paying the basic fee. Although some customers offered her as much as 10,000 yuan for sex – calling it ‘an investment for her future’ - she always refused. As she noted: ‘It’s important to be a virgin in Uyghur culture. If the family of the groom

finds you're not a virgin on your wedding night, it's a big problem.' I would suggest that, in fiercely protecting their chastity vis-à-vis Han clients, my respondents deliberately underlined ethnic and religious group membership. Thus, Mälikä was in a position to assert: 'I don't believe I have let myself down in any way [...] I have nothing to reproach myself for.' She succeeded in 'taking the moral high ground' while simultaneously 'occupying the economic low ground', to borrow Otis' (2008: 370) phrase.

While it appears that some Uyghur hostesses, possibly those who are hardened to the character of the industry, are less strict with regard to sexual fondling, even they maintain certain limits. Tunisa complained of 'uneducated and lewd' Han customers, who would 'maul' a girl without even speaking to her. While she admitted that once drunk (an occupational hazard), she might let clients touch her breasts or kiss her cheek, she was clear that she would never allow a Han client to kiss her mouth, because 'they are not Muslims and they eat pork.' Mädinä gave the same reason for her refusal to sleep with Han clients, raising the further problem that Han clients are not circumcised. This culturally conservative behaviour often caused Han hostesses to remark that the Uyghur girls did not know how to have fun [Ch. *bu hui wanr*]. At such times, Mädinä and Mälikä would evoke the counter-stereotype that Han people are introverts and killjoys, a charge based on the relative disinclination among Han people to perform (dance) for others (Smith Finley 2013a). Where a Uyghur hostess did consent to sleep with a Han client, that individual often had an extraordinary motivation. Khalidä slept (as a virgin) with a Han client out of desperation to raise money for her brother's medical care. A friend of

Mädinā's slept with Han clients regularly because she had epilepsy, and needed money to purchase her medication.

On the other hand, some Uyghur hostesses occasionally slept with a Muslim client, though this was rarely with the intent of earning money alone. As Zheng notes, 'ideal' exit strategies for Han hostesses include becoming an independent businesswoman, marrying a client, or becoming the mistress (Ch. *ernai*) of a wealthy client (2004, 142). These strategies hovered also in the minds of my respondents. I have earlier described Mädinā's aspiration to buy a car and become a private-hire driver. She also mentioned that she had come to genuinely care for certain of her Muslim clients, and to hope she might have a future with them. For instance, while hostessing in Kunming, she had met a Turkish jade merchant. As she related:

I didn't sleep with him right away, only after I'd 'sat' with him four or five times. But then I slept with him for 1500 yuan, and he got a bad impression of me, thinking I did that sort of thing all the time. But I genuinely liked him, so the second time I slept with him I didn't take his money. And his attitude began to change.

On another occasion in Ürümchi, Mädinā had become acquainted with a Tajik client from Central Asia, who worked as a commercial airline pilot. She confessed that she had 'utterly fallen for him', and, again, slept with him for no charge:

He really liked me. You know, Islam allows men to take four or five wives?

Well, he had a wife in Tajikistan. But he wanted to make me his second wife and ‘keep’ me in a flat here in Ürümchi. He said I wouldn’t need to hostess any longer, that he would pay for everything I needed.

Mädinä had even taken this lover back to her grandfather’s house (Uy. *chong öy*), although she had not dared to tell the old man the truth, introducing the pilot only as a ‘friend’. In this way, Uyghur hostesses sometimes sought to render their activities ‘sustainable in ethical terms’ and emotionally bearable by keeping a regular client with whom they had the possibility of a long-term relationship, a strategy also observed in southeast Asia (cf. Lindquist 2010: 297).

One might surmise that the religious boundaries drawn by these hostesses in relation to Han clients are the natural outcome of a *minkaomin* education, assumed to be less secularised than an education received in Mandarin Chinese. Yet the reality is far less clear-cut. For one thing, although *minkaomin* students received their education in the Uyghur language from native Uyghur teachers, the curriculum they studied will likely have been as devoid of religious content as that studied in *minkaohan* classrooms. It is more likely that the hostesses’ religious knowledge was absorbed in the family home during childhood, as in the case of Mädinä’s observations of her grandmother.

Furthermore, that knowledge will have deepened in the current climate of re-Islamisation in the Uyghur community at large. At the time when I interviewed the girls, Mädinä’s stepmother (her grandfather’s second wife) had embarked on a self-taught Quranic

education, and prayed by herself at home five times a day. I had never observed this person pray over the fifteen months I knew her back in 1996. Another explanation is that the religious boundary put in place when dealing with Han clients is to at least some extent politically motivated. After all, it can disappear when interacting with a Muslim client, although Islam strictly proscribes pre-marital and extra-marital sex.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

In this chapter I have documented the backgrounds and experiences of Uyghur hostesses in Ürümqi, and explored how they make sense of social, ethnic and religious identities. Based on my limited sample of five case studies, there is no evidence to suggest, as some members of the Uyghur community argue, that hostesses originate particularly from rural or urban Xinjiang, or from north or south. What does emerge is that girls can work more easily when operating outside of their hometown, since this allows them to evade the social supervision of parents and communities. Even so, this does not prevent some Uyghur hostesses from working in their home cities when in severe financial straits, as my case studies demonstrate: all five women are Ürümqi-born.

Regarding the popular assertion that *minkaohan* (Chinese-educated) women are more likely to enter this profession, data collected for this study casts doubt. It appears that better-educated and highly acculturated *minkaohan* are more likely than *minkaomin* to consider a genuine romantic relationship with Han schoolmates or colleagues. My earlier study on Uyghur-Han inter-ethnic courtship corroborates this claim (Smith Finley 2013b). However, *minkaohan* assign the ‘immoral’ world of hostessing firmly to the socially

‘damaged’ (those from broken families) and to *minkaomin*, whom they perceive as less well educated owing to their only partial fluency in Chinese and their education in less well-funded Uyghur-medium schools. It is notable that all five women interviewed for this study hail from broken families and are *minkaomin*.

At a time when a strict community taboo outlaws Uyghur-Han intermarriage, what does it mean when Uyghur females consent to work in close proximity to Han males in a sexually liberal environment? How far does it signal the collapse of inter-ethnic boundaries constructed by Uyghurs to claim cultural and moral superiority vis-a-vis Han Chinese? My sample suggests that young Uyghur women become involved in hostessing at times of severe economic need, often following the loss of the family head through death or divorce. They rarely have a university degree, although some use income from hostessing to fund university studies in the present or future. Having no degree, they fall victim to ethnically ordered employment discrimination in Han-dominated urban Xinjiang, where Han employers prefer Uyghur *minkaohan* (Chinese-educated) candidates over *minkaomin* (Uyghur-educated) candidates, and many will not countenance hiring Uyghurs at all. These young women resort to hostess work in the absence of more gainful employment, or in addition to their day job, as a means to pay the bills, become socially mobile, or amass disposable income.

For my Ürümqi respondents, as for Zheng’s (2004, 2008) Han rural migrant hostesses, the industry is a temporary means to an end. Fully aware that their ethnic group is disadvantaged by employment realities in urban Xinjiang, these young Uyghur women

justify what is seen by the broader Uyghur community (especially males) as an act of ‘ethnic betrayal’ as a defensible drive for upward social mobility. A key point to emerge is the gap between simply *subsisting* and *having disposable income* that might be invested towards personal social improvement (and, by extension, improvement of the social position of the Uyghur ethnic group). This may take the form of ownership of material/consumer goods, establishment of an independent business, or the pursuit of a white-collar career. Surrounded by Han peers who are better off and better able to consume a range of aesthetically pleasing products, some young Uyghur women aspire to do the same. For those who lack full fluency in Chinese or a sufficiently high level of education, the ‘rice bowl of youth’ (Ch. *qingchun fan* 青春饭, Wang 2000: 73) may be viewed as the only way to achieve this. Hostess work simultaneously constitutes a moral ‘sacrifice’ (here, a crossing of ethnic and religious boundaries) and a ‘stepping stone’ towards a young Uyghur woman’s life goals (cf. Zheng 2007).

So what does the decision to enter the hostess industry say about these young women’s sense of ethnic identity, and how do their experiences within that industry further impact on their level of ethnic awareness? Below I will discuss factors mitigating towards a weak and negative ethnic identity before going on to assess those that suggest a strong and positive one. First, a core contingency leading to a potentially negative ethnic identity is the nature of these girls’ broken family background. Several have been affected by heroin abuse among male relatives, including brothers and boyfriends. While this pathology can to a degree be seen sympathetically as the Uyghur male response to dwindling chances since the 1990s of political independence, for female relatives it

translates into an absence of male support and dependability and a severely compromised financial situation. Some fathers may be absent owing to arrest (even execution) for becoming involved in political separatist activities. Again, while a sympathetic view might cast these men as honourable martyrs, their actions may be viewed by Uyghur women (traditionally more practical when it comes to questions of the Uyghurs' future within the Chinese nation-state) as a failure to put family before ethno-national politics. The girls interviewed for this study had also formed negative views of Uyghur menfolk - and possibly of norms governing male-female interaction within Uyghur culture – as a result of their abuse by male relatives and boyfriends, and the fact of continuing high levels of divorce in Uyghur society.

Another potential source of low self-esteem among these girls is the ethnic discrimination suffered by all Uyghurs in the spheres of language use, education and employment, although this may conversely lead to a strengthening of ethnic awareness (see below). Having once entered the hostess industry (and decided to stay there despite the possibility of getting work in the service industries), it could be argued that these girls value consumer goods and money over their ethnic dignity. Indeed, the fact that they knowingly continue to place themselves in a position where some Han clients will subject them to ethnically-based humiliation could be construed as a sign of low self-esteem in group terms - and frequently is construed as such by male members of the Uyghur community.

Yet my sample also produced much evidence to the contrary. The girls' deep awareness of Islamic cultural mores, their keen desire to conceal their night-time activities from their families and the Uyghur community, and their deployment of a superior cultural morality in the face of Han clients and Han hostesses suggests a robust Uyghur ethnic identity, in which religion is the core element. Their indignation when faced with ethnic discrimination in the labour market demonstrates a keen awareness of inter-ethnic inequality. Meanwhile, their determination to do whatever it takes to better themselves, support their families, and achieve upward mobility suggests a strong sense of self-respect at both the individual and the group level. Khalidä described how some Han customers would tell Uyghur hostesses that they should 'forget any idea of taking an equal place in this society'. Yet when I asked whether she ended up believing them, she was clear: 'No. We have to do whatever we can to educate ourselves and match them.' Mälikä's response was equally defiant: 'If you believe them, that's the end of self-confidence, and the end of any chance of bettering yourself'. Asked whether they considered themselves 'servants to the Han' (as charged by many Uyghur males), Mädinä and Mälikä's counter-argument was convincing: 'Well, even if we work somewhere else scrubbing dishes or making beds, aren't we still being servants to the Han? What's the difference?' Furthermore, the more savvy of the five took advantage of the hostess scenario to reverse the ethnic hierarchy and mock unwitting Han males on both linguistic and cultural levels. The position taken up by the girls in my sample is perhaps most neatly described in this final comment from Khalidä:

Where is my sense of ethnic self-respect? Everything I've done, I've done for my brother, my mother and my sisters. What will happen to us, to me, if I

don't do this work? If I don't get myself a college education, how will I support my family? If my cultural level remains low, how will it be for my family, for Uyghurs as an ethnic group? We will always be inferior! What I'm doing is the best I can do, for myself, and for the Uyghurs as a group.

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<sup>1</sup> While courtship and marriage with an out-group member (non-Muslim) are frequently frowned upon in Muslim societies, it is important to note that romantic and sexual relations with an in-group (Muslim) man are equally proscribed when taking place prior to marriage.

<sup>2</sup> *Sanpei* denotes ‘three accompaniments’, and refers variously to chatting, singing, dancing, lighting of cigarettes (and smoking), and pouring of drinks (and drinking). It may also include heavy petting or sex. Cf. Jeffreys 1997, 50; Xin 1999, 1412, 1427-8; Wang 2000, 74; Sun 2002, 191; Otis 2008, 366.

<sup>3</sup> Respondents’ names are changed to protect their identities.

<sup>4</sup> Until quite recently, a bride’s mother-in-law would check the marital sheets for blood on the morning after a wedding. My Uyghur respondents in the mid-1990s acknowledged the continuation of this practice in some families, and described how a bridegroom might cut himself and let his own blood onto the sheets to protect his bride’s honour (Smith 1999). While young Uyghurs tend to deny the existence of this practice in the 2000s (personal communication, Tim Grose), in some cases this may stem from a desire to appear ‘modern’.

<sup>5</sup> While middle school education is free (no tuition fees), the miscellaneous costs relating to uniforms, books and other materials may prevent some Uyghur families from sending their children to school.

<sup>6</sup> For similar cases in which Han women became hostesses after being humiliated by their lover’s family and/or abandoned by their lover, see Zheng 2008, 457-8.

<sup>7</sup> This is common practice throughout China, reflecting the marketisation of healthcare in the reform era. This particular refusal did not occur because the patient was a drug addict, nor because he was a Uyghur (i.e. it was not based on social or ethnic discrimination).

<sup>8</sup> In 2012 and 2013, increasing numbers of Uyghur female street cleaners could be observed on Xinhua nanlu and Gongyuan beilu in Ürümchi, areas dominated by Han residents (personal communication, Tim Grose). This suggests that adverse socio-economic circumstances in Uyghur families (where males suffer a high unemployment rate) are increasingly driving the womenfolk to take formerly unthinkable work roles. It is instructive that such work is being undertaken in Han rather than Uyghur residential areas, implying a desire to avoid the negative social stigma attached to it by the Uyghur community.

<sup>9</sup> Probably, Mädinä’s boyfriend would not have allowed her to do hostess work (open her face to men), even had she wanted to. However, I did hear of occasional cases where male partners – Han and Uyghur - encouraged their girlfriends to augment the couple’s income through hostessing.

<sup>10</sup> See also Hasmath 2012, who provides statistical data on labour choices among urban Uyghurs.

<sup>11</sup> Respondents were paid 100 yuan per hour of interview, a ‘wage’ consistent with that they would have earned while hostessing.

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that, for some Uyghurs, there is little difference (in terms of shame) between ‘accompanying’ a Han male for money and embarking on a genuine, romantic relationship with him.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Xinjiang time’, which is two hours behind ‘Beijing time’, is the local time corresponding to the topographical position of the XUAR, and is used by Uyghurs and other Central Asian groups who consider themselves indigenous to the region (Smith 2002; Bellér-Hann 2002; Bovingdon 2010; Smith Finley 2013a).