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MAINTAINING MARGINS:
THE POLITICS OF ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK
IN CHINESE CENTRAL ASIA

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Introduction

In contemporary China, conditions for doing fieldwork are increasingly dependent on locality. The sensitive border region of Xinjiang, historically dominated by minority nationalities resistant to incorporation within the Chinese polity, has long been difficult.¹ Researchers gained unprecedented access to the region following the re-emergence of the social sciences as officially sanctioned disciplines in China in 1979. Yet that access has been under continual threat. The pro-democracy campaign and the Tiananmen incident of 1989, the collapse of Marxist-Leninist parties in Eastern Europe in 1989, the Baren uprising of April 1990 in south Xinjiang and the collapse of the USSR and formation of independent Central Asian states in 1991 fueled a growing desire for independence among Xinjiang’s majority Uyghur nationality.² Uyghur–Han tensions climaxed in the Ghulja [Ch. Yining] riots of 5–6 February 1997, leading

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¹ Three independent states were established in response to growing Chinese influence in the region from the 1800s: the Qāshqār [Kashgar] Emirate of Yaqub Beg (1864–77), the Turkish-Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkestan (1933–34) and the Eastern Turkestan Republic (1944–49). Recently, the proportion of Han Chinese in Xinjiang has increased owing to Han in-migration, see David Wang, “The Uyghurs and Disparity in Xinjiang’s Social Demography”⁷, paper given at the conference Situating the Uyghurs between China and Central Asia, School of Oriental and African Studies, 5-6 November 2004.

² The 1989 pro-democracy movement had a national impact; following its suppression, officials pointed to the influence of “bourgeois” social sciences on the student movement, arguing that social research identified negative social trends, fueling calls for reform, see Daniel J. Curran and Sandra Cook, “Doing Research in Post-Tiananmen China”, in Claire Renzetti and Raymond Lee (eds), Researching Sensitive Topics (London: Sage, 1993), p. 72.
to a sharp intensification of the “Strike Hard” anti-separatist campaign. Subsequently, the events of 11 September 2001 and the “war against terror” have in the view of some observers provided the state with a means of repackaging disaffected Uyghurs as “Islamic terrorists”. Under these steadily worsening conditions, field research in the region has come under intense state scrutiny.

State politics, moreover, are only one facet of the difficulties faced by researchers in the social sciences in Chinese Central Asia. The interpersonal politics of gender, culture, religion and values intertwine with state politics during the negotiation of research roles. This paper examines the intersection of state and interpersonal politics during fieldwork through the lens of shifting margins: the margins of the state, gender margins, intercultural and religious margins. It draws on a total of fifteen months’ research conducted between 1995 and 2004. After a brief discussion of the difficulties of survey research and secondary sources, I focus on the more informal methods I chose to rely on to collect my data.

**Domestic Politics and Data Collection**

In Xinjiang, official documents, scholarly sources, statistical information and media reports must be treated with caution. Since 1949, state censorship has meant that much published literature is little more than a vehicle for promoting CCP policy. As one Chinese scholar put it: “The publishing houses in China are in fact governmental ministries ... Basically the conditions are that you can’t oppose the Communist Party ...” An unusually high degree of censorship and self-censorship pervades official and academic publications in Xinjiang, where Chinese officials and scholars are extremely reluctant to discuss politically sensitive topics such as conflict between ethnic groups.

This is especially true in the field of history, where China’s scholars have generally been obliged to mold their interpretations according to the interests of the Communist state. In Xinjiang, the problem is exaggerated since the state must

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3 On the Ghulja riots, see Ming pao, Hong Kong, 10 February 1997 in BBC Summary of World Broadcasts (Asia Pacific), hereafter SWB (AP), 11 February 1997, FE/2840 G/1; Ming pao, 11 February 1997 in SWB (AP), 12 February 1997, FE/2841 G/1; Sing tao jih pao, Hong Kong, 11 February 1997 in SWB (AP), 12 February 1997, FE/2841 G/1; Sing tao jih pao, 15 March 1997 in SWB (AP), 18 March 1997, FE/2870 G/6; Kyodo News Service, Tokyo, 2 May 1997 in SWB (AP), FE/2909 G/7; “China’s troubled frontiers”, The Guardian, 11 February 1997.

4 Several scholars had visa applications denied in 2004, though grounds for denial remain unclear (personal communications).


represent history so as to legitimize its colonial presence. The dangers of drawing predominantly from official and scholarly Chinese accounts can be seen in Michael Dillon’s recent book. Dillon relies heavily on translated extracts from Xu Yuqi’s *History of the Struggle against Ethnic Separatism in Xinjiang*. While undeniably rich, these extracts present a “handful of separatists” as caring little about their people while Chinese security forces are presented in an artificially positive light. Dillon neither problematizes these passages nor compares the perspectives of Chinese officials with those of Uyghur actors. The lack of engagement seems to result from the author’s wish to approach the Xinjiang question with balance and objectivity, a task he admits is not easy given the “extreme partisanship of the protagonists”.

In China, officially released statistics are often incomplete, and the researcher must question whether data has been politically generated or edited. The risk of such distortion is high in Xinjiang, where the state places paramount importance on social and political stability. Figures on social and economic phenomena are always given for the population as a whole, making it impossible to compare circumstances across ethnic groups. Statistics which provide information on locally controversial subjects such as population composition may be especially suspect. Population figures for Xinjiang record roughly the same ratio (37–41 per cent) of Han Chinese compared with minority groups in 1970, 1990, 1996, 2000 and again in 2003, despite local anecdotal evidence pointing to accelerated levels of Han immigration. There are also discrepancies between data sources. The 2000 census revealed that the population in Xinjiang grew by nearly one third (twice the growth rate of the ethnic population) between 1990 and 2000 to stand at 40.6 per cent of the regional total. Yet the Statistical Yearbook put this figure at only 38.7 per cent. While the Xinjiang Statistical Yearbook may be the best resource currently available, statistical data arguably

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8 Uyghur émigré sources may be equally plagued by bias: “Documentary sources from both the official Chinese press and opponents of Chinese control ... have clearly defined and opposing political agendas ... ”, Michael Dillon, *Xinjiang—China’s Muslim Far Northwest* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), p. ix.


remain an instrument of propaganda in Xinjiang in cases where the political sensitivities of population issues have a direct impact on state security.13

The Chinese media has historically hidden or distorted facts to meet political requirements. While this situation may be changing elsewhere in China, in Xinjiang, where authorities are anxious to promote an image of prosperity, stability and equality among ethnic groups, regional media continue to avoid reporting negative social and economic trends for fear of encouraging ethnic separatism.14 Instances of civil unrest are often reported late, and in some cases are not reported at all. A prominent example in 1996 was the assassination of a local Uyghur official and three of his relatives by separatists in Kucha. This incident was barely reported in the domestic press, though it loomed large in the classified Document No. 7,15 which contained recommendations that Han Chinese be moved into the region to stabilize unrest, that the Qorla-Qäshqä railway be completed within three years to facilitate this, and that the political background of Uyghurs wishing to study abroad be scrutinized.16 Through the media, official discourse also distorts the scale of events. During the mid-nineties, when it was state strategy to contain separatists, unrest was played down. Against the background of the “war on terror”, these same events have instead been played up and the separatists labeled “Islamic terrorists” in order to justify the state’s crackdown.

Western journalistic sources may also distort the picture, firstly through selective reporting of events, and secondly by playing up certain aspects. As Bovingdon has observed: “In reporting on politics in Xinjiang, Western media err in the direction of either sensationalist accounts of episodic violence or depictions of the surface calm and economic vibrancy of the region”.17

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13 Stanley Toops, while stating that recent censuses accord with international standards of demography, acknowledges these sensitivities, and notes that figures do not account for military personnel; also that they tally only officially registered migrants, whereas after 1964 most Han migrants went to Xinjiang illegally: “The government either looked the other way or channelled and facilitated a movement of people … whose presence in Xinjiang ... promoted the policies of the Chinese Communist Party and the state” (“The Demography of Xinjiang”, in S. Frederick Starr [ed.], Xinjiang: China’s Muslim Borderland [Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2004], pp. 241-42, 257-58).

14 A discerning researcher can occasionally identify unusually candid news reports on regional problems such as the extent and detrimental effects of Han in-migration. See for instance Nicholas Bequeelin, “Staged Development in Xinjiang”, pp. 365, 369.

15 “Document No. 7” is the official record of a March 1996 meeting of the Standing Committee of the CCP’s Politburo when the Xinjiang question was discussed.


Nonetheless, valuable information can be obtained from both Chinese and Western media sources if one is prepared to read between the lines.

**Formal Survey**

Sociological analyses have traditionally been regarded by the Chinese socialist leadership as potential trouble. Prior to 1979, state control over formal surveys and interviews was intense;\(^\text{18}\) since 1979, while many restrictions have been lifted, state control intensifies at times of domestic unrest.\(^\text{19}\) Accordingly, though formal survey and interview may be viable methods when researching non-sensitive topics, they may not be the best means to study politically sensitive ones; this is all the more true where research focuses on borderland minority identities or on conflict between minority groups and the Han. Rudelson, working on identity in Xinjiang’s eastern oasis of Turpan in 1989–90, reported the “political difficulty of conducting systematic interviewing”, and adopted an *ad hoc* method of street interviewing.\(^\text{20}\) Since the mid-nineties, I have found that formal interviewing remains an unrealistic option when investigating sensitive identity issues. Following my arrival in the regional capital, Ürümchi, in 1995, cadres at the Xinjiang Social Sciences Academy (*Xinjiang Shehui Kexue Yuan*) agreed that I might conduct a formal survey; yet it soon became clear that interviews would be supervised and would thus have little validity. Respondents would probably be briefed on what to say, and would almost certainly be afraid to answer honestly in front of Academy cadres. As Thøgersen notes, power imbalances can sometimes render the official interview meaningless in China. Even where respondents are forthcoming, they will often give the interviewer a “nice rounded picture of reality as it ought to be” rather than providing real insights.\(^\text{21}\) Worse,

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\(^{18}\) In the mid-70s, only three English-speaking sociologists were working in China, see Daniel J. Curran and Sandra Cook, “Doing Research in Post-Tiananmen China”, p. 71; see also Wong Siu-lun, “Social Enquiries in the People’s Republic of China”, *Sociology*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (1975), pp. 459-76.

\(^{19}\) Following the Tiananmen incident, classified Document No. 598 barred Chinese academic institutions from collaboration with foreign scholars, see Daniel J. Curran and Sandra Cook, “Doing Research in Post-Tiananmen China”, pp. 75-76.

\(^{20}\) Justin Rudelson, *Oasis Identities: Uighur Nationalism along China’s Silk Road* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 11. He does not say whether these difficulties resulted from restrictions introduced after 4 June 1989, but does describe how, in March 1990 and following the collapse of Eastern Europe, he was told that his research had “gone beyond permitted bounds”, p. 15.

where surveys present politically unacceptable conclusions, their circulation may be restricted.  

Herbert Yee’s study on Uyghur–Han relations, conducted in 2001, provides another example. His team came under constant pressure from local officials “not to conduct fieldwork on sensitive issues such as ethnic relations and conflicts”; questions used in an earlier pilot study (2000) and designed to probe inter-group prejudices were dropped by local officials; others were “so thoroughly revised that they look more like propaganda slogans”; 40 per cent of those contacted declined to be interviewed; those who were interviewed “tended to give politically correct answers”; and the authorities held on to 200 questionnaires completed in Qumul [Ch. Hami]. Consequently, the author is forced to warn that the findings “may be seriously biased and must be read with great caution”.  

My Project

Generally speaking, when investigating sensitive issues surrounding identity and ethnic relations in Xinjiang, I found the most viable method of enquiry to be unstructured interview (in the shape of informal conversation), combined with direct observation and followed up by semi-structured interview. My research questions in 1995–96 were: How far have regional and social group identities among the Uyghur been eclipsed by a Uyghur national (separatist) identity since independence of the Central Asian states in 1991? What is the nature of contemporary Uyghur–Han relations? On subsequent trips in 2002 and 2004, research questions focused on polarization of accommodating and resisting Uyghurs in the post-1997 period. Thus, I wanted to know: Which factors are now leading some Uyghurs to accommodate politically or culturally to Chinese hegemony? And which are causing others to turn away from the state and back to Islam?  

Apart from the question of accommodation, the issues were highly sensitive: the first two because they investigated aspirations to independence and Uyghur–Han conflict, thus denying the official line of “nationality unity”; the fourth because it touched upon the potential link between Islam and politics in a region where the state has outlawed so-called “illegal religious activities” since the mid-nineties. In each case, I selected key informants strategically to yield

22 A social report entitled “The Communist Party and Socialism: Do People Believe in It?”, conducted at Beijing University in 1990, discovered that a sizeable number did not believe, and subsequently it was not made publicly available, see Daniel J. Curran and Sandra Cook, “Doing Research in Post-Tiananmen China”, pp. 77.

23 I would suggest that, in allowing the initial survey, authorities were testing the water, and also that they did not expect the findings of a pilot study to be published, though they subsequently were, see Herbert Yee, “Ethnic Relations in Xinjiang”, pp. 431-52.


25 See also Gold’s description of “guerrilla interviewing”.

26 Findings from both studies will be published in my monograph, Between Purity and Hybridity: Negotiating Uyghur Identities of Contemporary Xinjiang (work-in-progress).
views indicative of different social, age and gender groups.27 This approach allowed for an initial patterning of identity ascriptions. In terms of my 1995–96 aims, the comparison across generations was important in order to determine whether the sense of a national Uyghur identity had strengthened over time. Choice of additional informants and content of subsequent conversations was steered by information already gathered in a process of “progressive restructuring”.28 In this way, I built up the number of key informants within each group while introducing partial structure to subsequent interviews in order to probe emerging themes.

Gaining Access

For the first 12-month study in 1995–96, a letter of introduction to a named cadre and a fee of £5,000 gained me a research visa (code F) and affiliation to the Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences, located in north-west Ürümchi.29 Once there, however, I encountered many problems of access. The district was dominated by ethnic Han, while Uyghurs lived mostly in the south-east; and my hosts desired that I conduct all research on campus. My purchase of a bicycle was greeted with dismay, I was urged to adhere to a 10 p.m. curfew, and my request to have a telephone installed was denied “due to lack of funds”. Thus, the cadres in Waiban (Waishi bangongshi—office dealing with foreign nationals and organizations) seemed bent on keeping my research indoors and firmly away from Ürümchi’s Uyghurs. The problem was later eased by a pager, though my activities continued to be closely watched.30 While respondents can these days be contacted via mobile phone or email, access to sites such as Yahoo and Hotmail can be painfully slow owing to installed filtering software, and it should be remembered that monitoring and censorship of electronic mail is routine.31


30 Gardner Bovingdon, affiliated to Xinjiang University for 22 months during the mid-nineties, similarly described the experience as “like living in a fish-tank” (personal communication). A Chinese scholar, writing in 1989, noted: “In the Chinese academic world, library research has been traditionally the only form of research, and even today when someone speaks of empirical research, many people think of a busybody with a clipboard ... ”, W. Li, “The Sociology of Law in China: Overview and Trends”, Law and Society Review, No. 23, (1989), p. 907, cited in Daniel J. Curran and Sandra Cook, “Doing Research in Post-Tiananmen China”, p. 75.

Still more problematic was my decision to interview Uyghurs in the south. It is true that, despite being dominated by Han Chinese, Ürümchi is the best place to find a cross-section of Uyghurs from different oases and from urban and rural (migrant worker) backgrounds, and thus is a good base if forced to choose a single research location. That said, a trip to the south would enrich the range of perspectives studied by including peasants’ views. But as the time to leave approached, Academy colleagues informed me that “due to recent events” (the Kucha assassinations of May 1996), I could not go there as a researcher. Fortunately, I managed to negotiate a trip as a tourist, provided that I phone in to the Academy once a week. Here, gender and age worked in my favor; as Easterday et al. observe, young female researchers are less likely to be considered a threat than are male or senior female researchers in otherwise difficult or inaccessible research settings. The attitude of Waiban staff had been consistently relaxed toward me, while manifesting some degree of suspicion toward a young male researcher based at the Academy.

**Negotiating Research Roles**

According to Raymond L. Gold’s typology, four “master roles” are available to the participant observer: complete participant (covert research); participant-as-observer (both researcher and respondents know that their relationship stems from the research); observer-as-participant (the observer role is made public, but relationships established with respondents are brief); and complete observer (the researcher is entirely removed from interaction with respondents). During the first trip, it became clear that different roles needed to be adopted when dealing with different people. I alternated between the roles of complete observer, participant-as-observer and complete participant. Sometimes I revealed my research status, while at other times remaining covert. Well-educated Uyghurs often had some knowledge of sociological research methods and were more confident in volunteering views and helping me to gather information and make contacts. With other social groups, I often found it necessary to play down or conceal my identity. Initial attempts to take notes in front of respondents provoked negative reactions ranging from anxiety to suspicion and mild anger. Once, when jotting down points from an earlier conversation held with a respondent, I was greeted by her angry face and the mock-polite enquiry: “Haven’t you finished yet?” The act had clearly made her feel like a zoo animal.

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Uyghur peasants felt especially threatened by notebooks and diaries and I learned not to use them openly.

The fact that some information was gathered and recorded without respondents’ knowledge, and possibly without informed consent, raises the question of whether data collection was ethical. The covert approach may be justified when researching certain groups (for example, religious and sectarian groups) which might otherwise be inaccessible to study. In some fields, secret study may also be less disruptive, since it allows groups to be studied in their natural setting without being influenced by the researcher’s presence.34 The ethical question is difficult in the context of doing sensitive research in repressive states like China, since if one acted according to the code of ethics recommended by sociologists in developed, democratic countries one would fail to obtain any data at all. Informal (and sometimes covert) interviews are often the only way of gaining knowledge in a politically charged environment such as Xinjiang, where respondents are wary of the Chinese authorities, Han neighbors and even Uyghur compatriots, not to mention researchers and journalists. While I normally informed educated respondents of my research goals, to reduce anxiety and secure more information I sometimes did not reveal my researcher status to the less educated. I protected respondent identities by allotting each respondent a code, and altering personal details that might lead to identification. I decided that it was justifiable, in the interests of production of knowledge, to give respondents false assurances, provided that information had been offered willingly and identities were fully protected in case of confiscation of data.

Individuals who indicated that they were unwilling to disclose information were left alone. In 2002 I visited the home of a Uyghur singer famed for nationalist metaphor and allegory. I was initially served tea and snacks and shown music videos by relatives, who happily chatted about the singer’s career in general. However, when I began to ask sensitive questions concerning the political messages in his songs, my tea-bowl was gradually removed further away from me and no longer refilled—an unerringly unmistakable sign that I was no longer welcome. Though the questions had themselves been veiled, there was a definite line beyond which the family was not prepared to go, and out of respect for this I thanked them and took leave.

**Asking Questions**

Informal conversations did not entirely lack structure. I always had a basic framework of questions and issues in mind. Yet conversations also had to proceed naturally, since “it may be very threatening to hosts if one pumps them constantly about matters relating directly to research interests”.35 Referring directly to “interviews” or “surveys” provoked nervousness and paranoia. Nor

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was it possible immediately to focus conversations on issues I considered salient. Many Uyghurs disliked being asked questions altogether; early on, two respondents quoted the saying: “Asking questions of someone is like striking him”. Uyghurs preferred to volunteer information, and closed up if pushed too hard. Aware of the importance of establishing neutral ground with respondents where “mundane small-talk” can take place, I gradually learned to introduce natural topics of conversation. I asked a male farmer which crops he grew, or how much he had paid for his donkey. I avoided bringing up unnatural topics and waited until respondents touched upon relevant subjects. Then I kept the conversation focused on that issue, or steered it towards related areas of interest. In this way, the unstructured interview “assumes the appearance of a natural [and] interesting conversation. But to the proficient interviewer it is always a controlled conversation which he guides and bends to the service of his research interest”. Alternatively, I used non-directive questions, where I asked Uyghurs for their views on a general issue; this avoided the imposition of my own preoccupations and biases. Later, when hypotheses had begun to emerge, I checked hunches by using more directive questions.

The quality and quantity of information offered greatly depended on the environment. As Hammersley and Atkinson note: “Different settings are likely to induce and constrain talk of particular kinds”. While in the mid-nineties some respondents would happily speak to me in Uyghur within earshot of Han immigrants in markets or restaurants, assuming the latter did not understand Uyghur, others would not take that risk. Respondents were often afraid to talk in the company of other Uyghurs, saying one thing to me in private, then the opposite next time we met, when another Uyghur was present. This fear has increased following the post-1997 crackdown, with even the young (formerly very vocal) exercising caution in interactions with researchers and journalists. The fears are well-founded. An American Chinese journalist recently recounted the story of Setiwaldi “Dilkäs” Tiliwaldi, a young Uyghur man who was detained for talking to her about freedom of speech and providing a list of imprisoned or executed persons. Another high-profile example is Uyghur businesswoman Rabiyā Qadir, sentenced to 8 years imprisonment in 2000 for allegedly “leaking state secrets to foreigners” and strategically released in March 2005 ahead of a US diplomatic visit to China. She had sent freely available domestic newspaper

clippings to her exiled husband in America, and had tried to meet with a US congressional delegation in Ürümchi.41

In Ürümchi in 1995–96, I knew many respondents well enough to call on them in their homes, while others would visit me in my flat. Elsewhere, it was necessary to be more creative. For instance, Uyghur taxi drivers in Qäshqär would chat while ferrying me across town in their motorbike and side-car. It was impossible for others to hear our discussion over the noise of the engine and while we were in constant motion. In current times of greater political tension, it has proved wise to avoid meetings at either respondents’ homes or the researcher’s base, instead talking while conducting ordinary activities in neutral, public places.

Whose Truth?

People in the field may try to ascertain how far the researcher can be trusted: “The fieldworker may find him- or herself being ‘tested’ and pushed towards disclosure, particularly when the group or culture in question is founded upon beliefs and commitments ... ”42 In Xinjiang in the mid-1990s, the clear dichotomy between Han Chinese and Uyghurs on cultural, religious and political grounds meant that if one group saw you in the company of the other, it instantly regarded you with suspicion. New Uyghur acquaintances often opened a conversation by asking “what I thought of the Hans”. Since the project investigated Uyghur identities and ethnic identity is essentially a subjective issue, I decided not to compromise Uyghur trust by associating openly with Han Chinese; it made sense to listen mainly to Uyghur accounts. This decision, while leaving me open to charges of bias and partisanship, seemed the natural one to take. And as Becker famously pointed out, we must always look at the matter from someone’s point of view.43 By this, he did not advocate that we become partisan; rather, he recognized that a single study cannot reflect the infinite layers of positions and perspectives within a given power hierarchy,44 that “we can never have a ‘balanced picture’ until we have studied all of society simultaneously”.45 For

42 Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, Ethnography, pp. 84, 78.
45 Cited in Martyn Hammersley, Taking Sides in Social Research, p. 68.
Becker, each “one-sided” study provokes further studies that gradually enlarge the sociologist’s grasp of all relevant facets of the issue.

Once I was seen to “take sides” in Xinjiang, a pattern emerged. Urban males got two things off their chest at the first meeting: disgust regarding Han Chinese habits, and a sense of injustice regarding the perceived Han monopoly on resources. Here, my Western identity was an advantage, since most Uyghurs at that time believed Westerners to be sympathetic to their situation. Some respondents retreated temporarily into silence at the second meeting, having reflected on the consequences of others learning their views. Occasionally, the withdrawal of trust was permanent. Other respondents tried to manipulate or exploit the research situation. Young male intellectuals in the mid-nineties hoped to convince me both that Uyghurs should be independent from China and that all Uyghurs desired independence, and tailored information they provided to that end. They played down instances of political/cultural accommodation and intra-ethnic disunity, keen to present a picture of a nation of “resisters”\(^{46}\) Their partial accounts, while defective in one sense, nonetheless provided evidence of the aspirations of that particular social group.

**Politics of Gender**

As a woman studying an Islamic society, I encountered field problems not experienced by male peers (though they faced different gender-related problems). Going out alone sometimes invited adverse reactions, given that Uyghur women usually went out with male relatives or other females. At night, this problem became acute; I would encounter disapproving looks from male chefs in local restaurants. If I attempted to be friendly, some misinterpreted my intention, remaining reticent. For others, I became an object of desire. While female researchers may often be subject to male hustling in the field, this is especially true in an Islamic society, where different norms govern male–female interaction.

On the first trip, I pretended to be married so as to repel male advances. Unfortunately, most Uyghurs could not comprehend why a married woman would abandon her husband and go abroad to study. This is a common reaction to Western women operating alone in Islamic societies.\(^{47}\) Some viewed me as a disloyal wife; others thought me an adulterer, having observed me in the company of different men each day. Furthermore, being “married” failed to protect me from flirtation. On learning that my “husband” was in England, Uyghur men simply declared: “In that case, you can get another boyfriend here!” Often, flirtations were little more than humorous interchanges conducted on a level at which Uyghurs were used to interacting; sometimes, it was even possible to turn the pursuer into the pursued. Once, I jokingly accepted an invitation to go

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\(^{46}\) At first, many participants may try to ensure that the researcher understands the situation “correctly”; Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography*, p. 108.

\(^{47}\) Kathleen Jamie was constantly asked “Where is your husband?” by strangers in Pakistan, see *Among Muslims: Meetings at the Frontiers of Pakistan* (London: Sort Of Books, 2002), p. 55.
dancing with Ghäyrät, a young kebab trader. Horror crossed his face and he produced a thousand excuses why he could not go after all. He had not been serious about “scoring” and was discouraged with no hard feelings. Over the year, we became firm friends; thus the flirtation factor can sometimes be used to advantage, for, as Wax notes, “a coquette is in a much better situation to learn about men than a nun”.

The task of developing platonic relationships was challenging. Rural or less educated males did not maintain relationships with women other than female relatives or co-workers. Others could only conceive of a romantic relationship, as described above. Those who did become respondents had to learn to treat me—as a Western female academic—completely differently to a Uyghur woman. However, each became periodically “jealous” of my relationship with the others, while one respondent’s family consistently treated me as a prospective daughter-in-law, with the phrase “just friends” causing hilarity each time it was uttered.

Keen to avoid being channelled into activities considered suitable for women, I re-negotiated my role afresh depending on the gender, educational and religious (nominal or observant) background of companions. With rural men and most women, I was the epitome of female modesty. With educated men, I played up my Western image and academic status. This enabled me to assume a neutral role vis-à-vis men, and to observe from the men’s side of the room at Uyghur weddings, where guests are conventionally segregated. I was thus included in the “male fraternity” closed to the society’s female members. I gained perhaps greater access than a male researcher, who would have had access to male domains but only limited access to female domains. However, my “gender-neutral” relationships with educated, urban men caused ill-feeling among some Uyghur women, who saw me as a romantic rival.

Politics of Culture

Ethnography requires concerted efforts in “impression management”—the adaptation of appearance, speech and social and cultural behavior—if one is to become an “acceptable marginal member”. Following arrival in Xinjiang, pressure to conform to Uyghur social and cultural norms was great. Learning to speak the native language was of prime importance. Although most educated urban Uyghurs speak good Mandarin, many rural Uyghurs know little Chinese. Also, communicating in respondents’ second language brings difficulties of interpretation. There are often no terms in Chinese that exactly correspond to the

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49 Cf. Lois Easterday, Diana Papademas, Laura Schorr and Catherine Valentine, “The Making of a Female Researcher”, p. 64.

50 Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, Ethnography, pp. 78-88.
Uyghur, and vice versa. Crucially, speaking to respondents in the second language imposed on them by a perceived colonizer creates unhelpful distance.

The process of learning a Turkic–Altaic language for the first time was hindered by two conditions: 1) Chinese is the predominant language spoken in Han-dominated Ürümchi; and 2) Uyghur language textbooks are usually aimed at Chinese native speakers, and one must learn the third language through their second language. The situation is little improved these days, though many Uyghur–English and English–Uyghur dictionaries are available. Changes in local dialect between oases bring new problems, though close examination of local vocabulary often produces synonyms learned in Ürümchi; at other times, the researcher may have to rely on translation by an urban companion. Such companions are helpful both in terms of introductions to rural relatives and in terms of rephrasing statements in standard Uyghur.

As a vegetarian, my biggest cultural adjustment concerned diet. Initial polite refusals to eat meat in Uyghur homes were not well received. Hosts became embarrassed, or assumed that I looked down on them. Moreover, no culture of vegetarianism or ideology of animal rights existed even on the margins of that society. When I finally began to eat meat in Xinjiang, Uyghur acquaintances were glad, and there was a marked improvement in relations.

I had also to alter my appearance. My (then fashionable) dreadlocks proved unsatisfactory for many Uyghur women, who reminded me daily that a woman’s hair “should be long and silky”. After three weeks of resistance, I brushed out the dreadlocks and abandoned my nose-ring, which, while recognized as an accessory popular in India, was an unhelpful exoticism. Next, my companions objected to the bandanna (“handkerchief”) I used to tie my hair and insisted that I use a barrette. My trousers were deemed “too masculine”. Initially, I could not stomach the spangly, frilly clothes dear to many Uyghur women in the mid-nineties. I agreed to have winter suits made in woollen materials, but in subtle colors and plain styles. Doctor Marten boots were relinquished for a tall, leather Central Asian boot, while silver hoop earrings were swapped for yellow-gold közlük earrings—with semi-precious gemstones inlaid like “eyes”. At that stage, adopting the Uyghur look in its entirety would have meant loss of personal ease. In south Xinjiang, pressure to conform was far greater. Unlike the urban areas, where one may locate oneself within a greater diversity of image, rural women hold fast to glamor. In the countryside in the summer of 1996, my image metamorphosed. I bought shipong-dokhawa (chiffon embroidered with velvet flowers, worn over petticoats) and visited Uyghur sewing shops. I wore headscarves and thick nylon tights and felt oddly comfortable doing so. The feeling derived partly from the compliments I received once I did dress so.

51 See also Tarjei Engesæth, A Textbook of Uyghur Grammar: Volume 1 (private publication, 2002).

52 Cf. Kathleen Jamie’s description of a meeting with a Pakistani Shia woman: “Her eyes left my face, which they had given close examination, and began to travel down my frame. ‘You do not wear dupatta?’ she said, around my shoulders, and at my feet she heaved a sorrowful sigh: ‘This is not beautiful shoes’ ”, Among Muslims, p. 36.
However, I was to become a laughing stock upon my return to Ürümchi. Young women turned their noses up at the “provincial” styles of the south and, far from admiring my absorption of Uyghur tradition, made me the subject of mockery.

My “Uyghurized” appearance left different impressions. Most Han Chinese thought me a Uyghur, and this proved useful for going unnoticed in out-of-bounds rural areas. I could pass easily as a minkaohan (Chinese-educated Uyghur), since they too speak Chinese fluently but their mother tongue imperfectly. Uyghurs were divided in their conclusions. Some were convinced that I was Uyghur. Others concluded that I must come from a Central Asian republic, Russia or Pakistan. Still others knew immediately that I was a Westerner. Above all, it was impossible to keep up the pretence when visiting Uyghur homes, since at some point I was bound to fail to understand something my hosts said, especially if speaking in a local dialect. After one or two vain attempts to “pass”, I acknowledged the limits to my linguistic and theatrical abilities.

While pressure to conform to the Uyghur dress code persists in rural areas in 2004 and has heightened among re-Islamizing Uyghurs, it has become easier for the Western researcher to merge into the urban environment, where many Uyghurs have embraced (modest) Western fashions. During a recent trip, I found it advantageous to dress in modern Western clothes and hip-hop styles because the focus of my enquiry was now the hybrid identity of the minkaohan youth, many of whom like US rapper Eminem.

Politics of Religion

The researcher’s religious orientation also affects research relations in Xinjiang. I quickly discovered that it was imprudent to lack a religious identity. Early on, when asked what religion I followed, I said I was not a Christian (naively presuming that all Uyghurs would consider Christianity the enemy of Islam), but admitted that I “had not been brought up a Muslim”. From this, my companions concluded that I had no religion and were subsequently less well-disposed toward me. Some weeks later, when a professor from deeply religious Qäshqär inquired after my religion, a female Uyghur companion quickly answered: “Since coming to Xinjiang, she has believed in Islam”. She later explained that this avoided creating distance. Thus I encountered another dilemma of personal identity: I could not declare myself a Muslim since, while I compromised to a degree (for example, diet), strict adherence to the Islamic code would have reduced the number of research roles available. Yet I could not say I was a Christian (being an agnostic). Eventually, I adopted the standard reply “English people believe in Christianity”, thus avoiding disclosure of my personal beliefs and the stigma attached to being an “unbeliever” while telling an economical truth. Later, I would explain that I was extremely interested in Islam and point out the connections between the two religions. I did this after observing Uyghur men make such comparisons.

At the other extreme, a strong religious identity may affect a researcher’s perceptions in the field and subsequent data analysis. For instance, a strong Christian identity may render them unresponsive to socio-cultural norms derived
from Islamic or popular religious practice, and they may suppress—consciously or otherwise—elements that do not accord with their own beliefs. Findings then tell a partial or distorted story. This is particularly true where research is combined with missionary aims, a not uncommon scenario in Xinjiang.

In the wake of 11 September 2001 and the “war against terror”, I fully expected local assumptions of my Christian status to influence field relations negatively. Yet while I have had to outline my personal position regarding the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to new respondents and have been aware of anti-American and anti-British feeling, this has not translated into a backlash against Christianity per se, and it remains an option preferable to atheism.

There is a great need to respect Islamic social norms. In the interest of maintaining trust, I ate only foods available in qingzhen (halal) restaurants during all field trips. Smoking and drinking were also off limits. Uyghur women are generally not permitted to drink alcohol or smoke. This is a social law, upheld by community pressure. I therefore rarely smoked or drank alcohol in public, since the deliberate expression of my non-Muslim background would have alienated respondents, existing and potential. Yet I sometimes accepted a few cigarettes or a beer when attending private all-male gatherings of Uyghur intellectuals. These educated men were mostly of secular orientation and recognized that I had grown up in different cultural surroundings. The concession was enabled in this setting by an emphasis on my Western origin. Uyghur women were generally more disapproving. Undoubtedly, my decision to quit smoking prior to my 2004 trip made life easier, especially given the new climate of Islamic renewal, with many Uyghurs embracing orthodox practice.

**Politics of Personal Values**

It would be dishonest to pretend that, after hearing countless Uyghur accounts of injustices suffered at the hands of Han Chinese, I did not develop political sympathies. I was at constant risk of over-identifying with respondents and of ceasing to problematize their perspectives. As Becker explains: “... we fall into deep sympathy with the people we are studying ... because of this, we do not give a balanced picture”.\(^53\) In Xinjiang, my personal beliefs concerning stateless nations made the prospect of “siding” with the Uyghurs a real threat. During the initial months, I was sometimes guilty of asking “loaded questions” designed to encourage particular responses.\(^54\) It took a few unanticipated responses to remind me that Uyghur views and values would not necessarily mirror my own, nor those of other Uyghurs.

I attempted to reduce the problem of bias by making those personal values explicit during data collection and analysis. As Becker notes: “Whatever side we are on, we must use our techniques impartially enough that a belief to which we are especially sympathetic could be proved untrue”.\(^55\) When collecting data, I had

\(^53\) Howard S. Becker, “Whose Side Are We On?”, p. 16.

\(^54\) Howard S. Becker, “Whose Side Are We On?”, p. 23.

to beware of recording it selectively, and of talking only with people I found politically sympathetic. To initially spent too much time with one young male intellectual, partly because he said all the right things (remarks which supported my hypothesis on the existence of a widespread ethno–political identity). To counter this tendency, I resolved to spend time with a range of individuals from different social groups (older Uyghurs; women; minkaohan), some of whom might deliver “hostile information” incongruent with my personal hopes. At data analysis stage, it was important not to present data selectively. Second, each account had to be explained within the context in which it was produced, since another respondent (or group of respondents) might provide a different account of the same circumstance or event. Third, it was important to adopt an outside standpoint on respondents’ standpoints, for as Gouldner notes: “Isn’t it the sociologists’ job to look at human situations in ways enabling them to see things that are not ordinarily seen by the participants in them?” This constant battle to maintain the dual role of insider and outsider maximized the opportunities to participate and reflect.

Conclusion

Conventional research methods are difficult to apply in Xinjiang, especially where investigating politically sensitive issues. An intuitive approach must be taken towards data collection, whereby methods and roles are adopted, rejected, modified and re-negotiated in response to each situation and the changing political environment. Most importantly, the researcher must learn from mistakes. My pretence of being married, employed as a strategy to fend off “hustlers”, had proved disastrous in 1995–96. When I met respondents again in 2002, I had to tell them I was divorced—an easily understandable scenario given the unnatural distance I had previously put between my “husband” and myself. In the current political climate, the greatest problem in Xinjiang is respondents’ fear of political repercussions. Whereas a Western identity once proved useful, in the era of the “war on terror” many Uyghurs doubt that any benefit will accrue from talking to a foreigner and fear the consequences of doing so. Perhaps the greatest challenge is gaining respondents’ trust while taking all necessary measures to protect them.

56 Cf. Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, Ethnography, p. 84.
58 Cf. Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, Ethnography, p. 112.