

An Uyghur Meshrep Dichotomy

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In Uyghur tradition, the *meshrep* is a form of cultural entertainment for men. The Uyghur writer Zunun Kadir [Qadir, Qadiri] (1912-1989) from Xinjiang described the meshrep in his writings as a part-educational, part-cultural event that engages participants in poetry, music, dance, and conversation within a structured context. Contemporary Uyghurs have been using meshreps to combat corruption and demoralization of their youth by drugs, alcohol, and unemployment in a social climate of dispossession and disempowerment arising from Han Chinese colonization. Therefore, it is useful to put the meshrep and its political evolution within the perspective of national and international politics.

In this paper I draw upon references in Zunun Kadir's works, and on some more recent events since his death, to identify changes in the practice of the meshrep which parallel the changing contemporary political climate. The subject of the meshrep demonstrates a dichotomy between its perception and use by Chinese authorities on the one hand and by Uyghur people on the other. The dichotomy finds parallels in the way that Chinese authorities have applied cultural policies of loosening, tightening, and punishing,¹ producing responses from Uyghurs in the form of submission, acceptance, and rebellion.

Chinese Politics in Xinjiang

What happens politically in Xinjiang cannot be separated from what happens in China proper. Leaders in Xinjiang are selected first for their loyalty to the Chinese state and the Communist Party, including the military-based "Construction and Production Corps" that is a key instrument of Han colonization of Xinjiang. The line of authority extends from Han Chinese officials in Beijing to Han Chinese officials in Xinjiang, then to Uyghur leaders considered loyal to Han officials of the

¹ The choice of the terms loosening, tightening, and punishing reflects my own interpretation of political trends of the times. For example, loosening at the beginning of Deng era, tightening in the mid-1980s, followed by punishing in crackdowns.

Chinese government. Under Han supervision, Uyghurs are usually frustrated in their jobs, while their promotions are often blocked. Even when an Uyghur has superior qualifications for a position, a Han immigrant is often given the promotion.

The period of liberalization under Communist Party leader Deng Xiaoping, from 1978 and into the early 1980s, originating with the slogan "Seek Truth from Facts,"² created new hope among Uyghurs. Hu Yaobang, as Communist Party Secretary-General, asserted that minority nationalities should be given greater autonomy. For the first time since the Manchu conquest, there was scholarly acknowledgment in China that Uyghurs were of Turkic as opposed to Chinese origin (Tyler 2003: 152).

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, economic and security relations with the West and with the USSR were improved, but the political climate of liberalization changed in the mid-1980s as Deng Xiaoping did not want his faction to lose power. This change also was reflected in Xinjiang. When China began to crack down on dissident Uyghurs, the world powers remained silent. Since the 1980s there has been increased Chinese rhetoric of creating separate cultures, or "othering," of the minorities, especially the Muslim Uyghurs. This served the consolidation of Han nationalism.

Zunun Kadir

Zunun Kadir, born into a poor and conservative family under Chinese rule, became a writer who was committed to nationalism and socialism in the belief that these would serve as the basis for the advancement of the Uyghur people. He witnessed the absorption of the East Turkistan Republic (1944-1949) into the People's Republic of China (PRC), and he continued to work as a writer under the PRC government.

Zunun was eventually subjected to official criticism by PRC officials as a "rightist," his works were condemned, and he was sent to the Tarim

² Deng Xiaoping's speech to 11th Party Congress in 1978 (Deng 1995: 150-163).

Desert in 1961 to undergo labor reform. After 17 years of exile he was rehabilitated in 1979, and he returned to Urumchi to resume his career as a writer.³ Beginning in 1986, his earlier works were republished, with some changes. His later work indicates a degree of disillusionment and caution.

Zunun Kadir's Gulnissa and Remembrance

The dichotomy between the Uyghur view of the meshrep and the Chinese authorities' view can be illustrated through consideration of two pieces of writing by Zunun Kadir, *Gulnissa* and *Remembrance*. These two pieces portray meshreps in ways that illustrate how cultural elements can be used by Uyghurs as a means of cultural and political assertion and by Chinese authorities as a target for "othering" of Uyghur culture and suppression of nationalistic aspirations.

The first example is from the play *Gulnissa* (Kadir 1992a), written in 1942 under the influence of socialist realism. Here, the meshrep is presented from an ideological standpoint that is secular, coeducational, and expressive of Uyghur national conditions. The girl Gulnissa is an orphan who is treated unjustly by her stepmother, Ayhan. The only place that she can find some comfort is in the meshrep, but her stepmother wants to prevent her from participating.

In this piece, the meshrep is an important Uyghur educational, cultural, and political event for Uyghur youth. It is a place and an occasion in which young men and women can meet and entertain themselves. It also includes some satirical criticism of dishonest religious figures. Unfortunately, in this case the stepmother comes and breaks up the meshrep, intimidating the youth into giving up their loyalties to each other.

The meshrep has traditionally been a male bonding activity that includes the playing of music, recitation of poetry, and witty conversation. But in *Gulnissa* we see this male bonding activity evolving to include women, becoming a kind of coeducational youth club in which male and female youth can meet under the supervision of meshrep rules.

In my second example, the short story *Remembrance* (Kadir 1992b), Zunun Kadir takes a slightly different angle on the meshrep. This story was originally written in 1959, but was probably

revised later, as Zunun Kadir said that some of his works were revised, and this piece seems to reflect some of the sociopolitical atmosphere of the 1980s in Xinjiang, and also more broadly in China. In this story one can see evidence of the political pressure under which Zunun Kadir was writing in the period shortly before his condemnation. Newly rehabilitated from 17 years of punishment, Zunun could have been understandably cautious in accepting changes to his work for publication in the 1980s.

In *Remembrance* the meshrep is portrayed in a recollection from the author's own childhood, and it is a very traditional form of meshrep. In contrast to the secular description of meshrep in *Gulnissa*, here there is specific reference to the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. There are no women at the meshrep, and there is a hierarchical structure to the event.⁴

In the story, Zunun Kadir recalls attending a meshrep when he was nine years old. Discipline is enforced by a *passip begi* [disciplinary leader] with a split cane in his hand, and the 30 young men sing a song of loss and sadness in traditional *muqam* form. This *muqam* song expresses a sense of grievance among Uyghurs disappointed after some initial hope of cultural tolerance. As this meshrep is developing toward a feast, the atmosphere is suddenly disturbed by a rival meshrep's participants parading in the streets outside. The two meshrep groups challenge each other, and a fight starts between them.

The political atmosphere of the 1980s encouraged Uyghurs to go back, to some extent, to their roots. During this period many mosques were reopened or new ones built, subject to Chinese government approval and conditions. The veiling of women gained some approval and even promotion, with the publication of a photograph on the cover of the official publication *Xinjiang min zu wen xue* (1981) of Uyghur women wearing veils. During this period some meshreps also may have included Quranic readings.

The meshrep in *Remembrance* ends in violence among rival groups, and fierce competition destroys the intended atmosphere. Zunun Kadir strongly disapproves of this kind of competition:

⁴ Hierarchical structure refers to the system of a man in charge of discipline (*passip begi*), and a leader of 30 boys (*yigit bashi*). It also includes the sitting arrangement according to rank, where the most senior people sit in a special place [*tor*] opposite the door (Kadir 1992b: 167).

³ Author's interview with Zunun Kadir's wife, Zileyhan, and other family members, Urumchi, June 12, 1998.

"The events involved not only youth, but affected the adults as well. Hatred and blood feuds were started, and many people were destroyed by these causes" (Kadir 1992b: 171).

This piece is about meeting a childhood friend, and in this context a meshrep from their childhood is described, published from the perspective of the 1980s. This story reminds us that in the late 1980s there were several uprisings in Xinjiang against the Chinese authorities, as well as the Tiananmen incident in Beijing. In the current atmosphere of global concerns about terrorism, it has been convenient for the Chinese state to equate any Uyghur national aspirations with terrorism. This label is applied not only to real separatist activity, but also to the public raising of grievances, and the assertion of Uyghur economic or political interests.

The Symbolism of the Meshrep in the late 1980s and 1990s

In the 1980s and 1990s, the meshrep became an important cultural symbol for Uyghurs, as well as a means of countering the dire conditions of Uyghur youth faced with the hopelessness of ever-strengthening Chinese colonization of their homeland. Unemployment, alcohol, drugs, and gambling were tragically common problems, destroying not only the demoralized youth but also their whole families and the community. Meshreps could function as a kind of rehabilitation center where those youth willing to participate could find mutual support under the supervision of meshrep rules. The deteriorating environment in the late 1980s led some successful Uyghur community members to promote meshrep activity as a remedy to the ills in Uyghur society.

Unfortunately, two trends negatively influenced this effective cultural process: the Islamization of meshreps and the politicization of Islam. These made the meshrep a target for later Chinese suppression. The Chinese state seems to have become increasingly suspicious of any kind of Uyghur gathering. The growth of religious content in meshreps seems to have provided the Chinese administration with an excuse to repress the gatherings.

For example, according to Uyghur sources, in April 1995 a young Uyghur from Gulja named Abdul Helil set up and led a meshrep association with membership rules forbidding the use of drugs, alcohol, or participation in criminal activity. Nonetheless, when the Chinese authorities launched

the "Strike Hard" campaign in April 1996, Abdul Helil, who had committed no illegal acts, was one of many young people arbitrarily arrested. He was beaten and tortured while held in jail without charge, then eventually killed in prison, and his family was not allowed to see his body (Sing tao jih pao 1997).

In *Remembrance*, the meshrep that ended violently is perhaps a political reflection of violence between Han and Uyghur, as well as between Uyghur and Uyghur. Historically, China has used divide and rule tactics to subjugate nationalities such as Uyghurs. In Zunun Kadir's story, the fighting takes place within Uyghur society and is initiated by leaders. Zunun Kadir works in dichotomy: while he disapproves of internal bigotry and violence in general, in the context of the 1980s, Uyghur readers would be strongly reminded to be vigilant about the divide and rule tactics of Chinese policy.

Edward Said has maintained that "Stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized peoples use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history" (cited in Walia 2001). So Zunun Kadir's representations of meshrep in two different works can be seen to reflect aspects of the condition of Uyghurs in a contemporary world. China continues to assert by force its claim to sovereignty over the Uyghurs, at the same time using every means to exclude Uyghurs from all significant power structures, including those related to scholarship and the economy. For purposes of distraction, divisions are fostered between Uyghurs themselves.

In this, China benefits from an international climate in which the national aspirations of any group with Muslim culture are regarded as "terrorism," persuading the US government and its allies to accept China's suppression of Uyghur national aspirations, however mild and non-violent, in the name of the "war on terror."

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Report on Research Findings

The Kyrgyz in Western Travel Books of the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries

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In the late 19th-early 20th centuries, as part of the Great Game, Western travelers competed in the exploration of Central Asia. They had different occupational, educational, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Books, maps, records, accounts, photos, and drawings resulting from the trips became popular among Western readers interested in the region. Most of the books contained elements of both enchanting novels and formal scholarly accounts.

In the fall of 2004, with funding from the Fulbright program, I started a project to explore the history of the Kyrgyz people and Kyrgyzstan based on the English-language accounts of Western visitors to the region in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.¹ The primary sources of my research are:

¹ In 2000, after having conducted research in Central Asian libraries, I curated an IREX-funded exhibition on Russian and Western travelers to Central Asia at the National Historical Museum of the Kyrgyz Republic in Bishkek. In 2002 a Central Asian Research Initiative grant from the Open Society Institute supported my research on European travelers. The project allowed me to develop a course called "Kyrgyz History and Culture in the Works of European Travelers of the 19th Century," and to organize an international conference in 2003 in Bishkek on the subject of "Historical Sources: The History and Perspectives of Development."

travel accounts found in the libraries of the University of Washington; documents from the Central State Archive of the Kyrgyz Republic, the Central State Archive of Uzbekistan, and the State Archive of Omsk Province in Russia; and historical and ethnographic collections of the National Historical Museum of the Kyrgyz Republic. I was able to find only a small number of these travel accounts in Central Asia itself. Soviet-era historiography on Central Asia considered Western travel writing unreliable and not valuable academically. Today, these travel books are found primarily in libraries in Europe and the United States. For example, the library of the Academy of Sciences in Bishkek has Sven Hedin's *Through Asia* (1899) translated into Russian, and the Alykul Osmonov National Library has Ármin Vámbéry's *Puteshestvie po Srednei Azii* [Travels in Central Asia] (1867). The Alisher Navoi State Library in Tashkent holds one of the two original copies of *Turkestanskii sbornik* [Turkestan Collection], compiled by the Russian bibliographer V. I. Mezhov,² which contains articles and book extracts by various Western travelers.

² V. I. Mezhov compiled this collection in the 1860s-1880s. It includes more than 500 volumes. For information on travelers mentioned in this report, see volumes 67, 100, 178, 200, 206, 238, and 301-302.