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Contesting harmony through TV drama:
Ethnic intermarriage in Xinjiang Girls

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Keywords
intermarriage; assimilation; TV drama; identity negotiation; boundary maintenance; endogamy; social harmony; nationality unity; mass media interventions; ideology

Introduction
Intermarriage has been viewed by ethnicity theorists as a strong indicator of ethnic assimilation and integration (Spickard 1989: 10–13). The original assumption was that the minority group sought to assimilate into the dominant society. Yet the context for intermarriage is not always or necessarily dictated by the dominant group; it can equally be controlled by the dominated. Ethnic groups differ in the fluidity they are prepared to tolerate at the margin, and, when closing their boundaries, may try to sever formerly acceptable ties with other groups, such as intermarriage (Horowitz 2000: 56, 62). Spickard notes that by the turn of the twentieth century, some American minorities (Japanese-Americans, Jews) ‘had agendas of their own … shaping the settings of interethnic relationships in which intermarriages took place’ (1989: 5). In most interethnic contexts, opinions on intermarriage are influenced largely by the images that people construct, in other words, by stereotypes rather than experience (Shibata 1998: 83; Spickard 1989: 19). Xinjiang is no exception. In this chapter, I employ the controversial TV drama series Xinjiang guniang¹ (Xinjiang Girls, 2004) as a vehicle to explore: (1) the use of television in Chinese state projects of social engineering; (2) the role of audience reflexivity in the negotiation of self, community, and nation; (3) the personal dilemmas of young Uyghurs aspiring to mixed romantic unions; and (4) the power of community supervision in the maintenance of (selective) endogamy. I show that while the Chinese state has sought to use television as a tool to encourage its ideal of ‘social harmony’, Xinjiang Girls had the reverse effect of deepening social controversy and shoring up the boundaries it ostensibly sought to remove.²

¹ For Chinese language terms, I use the pinyin transliteration system.
² The core of the empirical data, gathered during the summers of 2002 and 2004, comprises informal conversations with, and direct observations of, some 50 Uyghur respondents of both sexes, of various ages (ranging from 17 to 75), and from various localities (Kashgar, Khotän, Ürümchi, Qumul, Ghulja, and Aqsu). At the time of interview, all respondents were based in Ürümchi. They represent a diverse range of social
Ethnic intermarriage as minzu tuanjie (nationality unity)

While policies towards ethnic intermarriage in China have oscillated over the centuries (Smith Finley 2013), mixed unions have often symbolized Chinese (Han) sovereignty, serving as a vehicle for the subjugation of the peripheries and the cultural assimilation of non-Han groups (Bulag 2002: 98–99; Harrell 1994: 19). Uradyn Bulag shows how the Mongolian people were ‘domesticated’ through a poetics of minzu tuanjie (nationality unity), embodied partly in the marital union (2002: 15, 23). Following the establishment of the PRC in 1949, assimilation through intermarriage was openly pursued during politically ‘red’ campaigns. During more conciliatory periods, while not enforced, intermarriage was actively supported. According to Tashmämät, a historian in his forties from Kashgar, many Uyghurs were sent to China proper in the 1950s and 1960s to study and were encouraged to remain there following graduation. As a result, many Uyghur men took Han wives and produced mixed-race offspring (cf. Qarluq and McMillen 2011: 23). Tashmämät characterized this as a deliberate government attempt to assimilate the Uyghur ethnic group. The recent ‘Xinjiang Class’ programme, which provides state funding for teenaged Uyghurs to study in eastern China and aims to ‘enhance ethnic integration’ (Chen 2010: 2), has similarly come in for criticism as a government plot to increase rates of intermarriage. The socio-political function of intermarriage is lauded by some (though not all) contemporary Han scholars. Xie Lei argues that, historically, Tibetan–Han intermarriage was ‘a necessity’ to ensure the harmonious co-existence of ethnic groups, while in contemporary times the practice has ‘suppressed splittist behaviour, prompted ethnic unity, and upheld the peaceful unification of the motherland’ (2006: 148–9, my translation). His view reflects that of Chinese historians backgrounds, including intellectuals, retired persons, employees of state work units, students and graduates of high schools and universities, independent traders, police officers, and service industry employees. While their names and the specific details of their professions are altered to protect their identities, information concerning age, occupation, and hometown is retained. Rising tensions between Uyghurs and Han Chinese since the early 1990s meant that if one group saw you in the company of the other, it regarded you with suspicion. Thus, since I was interested mainly in Uyghur attitudes towards intermarriage, I decided not to compromise Uyghur’s trust by associating openly with Han residents (cf. Smith 2006). While some of those interviewed were long-term respondents whom I had known since 1995, others were people with whom I built a mutually trusting relationship during the 2002 and 2004 field trips. Conversations took place in a variety of locations, including respondents' homes, my hotel, Uyghur restaurants, cafes, teahouses, and public parks.

3 For Uyghur language transliterations, I use the Romanization system adopted in Komatsu 2005. For place names in Xinjiang, I use the Uyghur language version preferred by local inhabitants, with one exception: the southern oasis of Qäshqär is rendered ‘Kashgar’ in recognition of the conventional use of that name in English-language publications.

4 The ‘Xinjiang Class’ project (since 2000) is a national policy which established four-year boarding high school classes (Xinjiangban) for elite Uyghur students, to be attended in Han-majority schools in eastern cities of the PRC. Since 2005, the estimated total enrolment has exceeded 20,000 individuals in 500 classes across 24 inland cities (Chen 2010: 2).
who portray Wencheng, the Chinese wife of Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo (ca. 618–50), as a pioneer of unity and friendship between Hans and Tibetans, and of the sinicization of Tibetan culture. Yet in Tibetan accounts, she plays only a peripheral role (Powers 2004: 31, 37).

In contemporary Xinjiang, official tourist guides and heritage signs emphasize the contribution made to ‘nationality harmony’ by the marriage between the (Uyghur) Fragrant Concubine and the Qianlong emperor (Fuller and Lipman 2004; Millward 1994; Zarcone 1999). Yet this state representation contrasts sharply with local Uyghur oral histories, which claim that the Fragrant Concubine refused to allow the consummation of the marriage, and planned to kill the Qianlong emperor in revenge for his occupation of her homeland. As Fuller and Lipman remark, ‘these anachronistic arguments project contemporary social conflicts backward 200 or 300 years’ (2004: 321–2). The Chinese state, aware of the potential for intermarried people to form bridges and mediate ethnic conflicts (cf. Shibata 1998: 97), has enshrined in law the principle that neither a couple’s parents/family nor any third party shall influence an individual’s marriage choice. According to Uyghur respondents, the state is particularly eager to encourage marriages between Uyghur females and Han males, a practice referred to as a ‘one-way street’. Here we find echoes of the resentment expressed by African-American and Nisei (second-generation) Japanese-American communities in the United States concerning the ‘one-sided privilege’ of the dominant group (white males) in instigating sexual relations with black women (Evers 1975: 155) and in dating Japanese women (Spickard 1989: 65). Ibrahim, an observant male in his seventies from Khotan, attributed the state’s eagerness to a latent aim to Sinicize minorities by means of patrilineal descent:

If an Uyghur man wants to marry a Han woman, it’s extremely difficult. The Han relatives won’t agree – the child’s name follows the father’s line – but the authorities won’t intervene. Yet if a Han man wants to marry an Uyghur woman, that’s different. He can do so easily because the authorities interfere, supposedly for the sake of ethnic unity, but really because the child will take a Han name! … They call the two families in to ‘educate’ them, remind them that the law protects freedom of marital choice, and accuse them of ‘local nationalism’ [Uy.: millâčiliq] if they persist in opposing the match.

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5 Cf. Gladney 2004: 62–63 on the film Amazing Marriage Customs (1992), which documents marriage practices among China’s 56 nationalities and employs a voiceover to reiterate the law of non-interference.
In this way, local Uyghur families have come under increased pressure from the authorities to cease their interventions.

**Interruption statistics in contemporary China**

Rates of exogamy for ‘severely divided societies’ typically run below 10 per cent of all marriages, or lower where only unions between the most conflicted groups are counted (Horowitz 2000: 62). Correspondingly, Chinese social scientists consider an intermarriage rate of 10 per cent or higher between groups as an indicator of ‘relatively good ethnic relations’ (Li Xiaoxia 2004: 20; cf. Zhang 2005: 24). However, the rate of intermarriage between minority and Han in China varies by region and group. A study conducted in Kunming, south-west China, found that ethnic intermarriage was prevalent, and that most spouses valued equal social status more than common ethnicity (Xing 2007: 170, 175, 178). In Xinjiang, the situation is quite different: intermarriage between Han migrants and minority females is on the increase with *all groups but the Uyghurs* (Ren and Yuan 2003: 99). Ma Rong, conducting a survey in 1997 on ethnic relations in Qaghiliq (Chi.: Yecheng) County, Kashgar Prefecture, failed to find a single instance of Uyghur–Han intermarriage. While his team found three examples in a neighbouring horticultural garden, all occurred within the same family (Ma 2003: 120), suggesting that ethnically mixed marriages commonly repeat down generations (cf. Li Xiaoxia 2005: 63–64). In Herbert Yee’s study of Uyghur–Han relations in urban Xinjiang, conducted in 2000, 78 per cent of Han respondents gave the green light to intermarriage, but less than one-third of Uyghur respondents approved. Indeed, the actual level of Uyghur approval was probably lower if we account for respondents giving politically correct answers. Only seven out of Yee’s 378 respondents (1.8 per cent) were in a mixed Uyghur–Han marriage (2003: 436–7). Zhang Suqi’s study, conducted in Turpan in the early 2000s, revealed just four instances of Uyghur–Han intermarriage in 2001, rising to nine instances in 2003 (2005: 25). While finding that Uyghurs are more likely to intermarry with Han than with any other group (Kazakhs and Hui sit in second and third place), Li Xiaoxia calculated the intermarriage rate among Uyghurs at just 0.62 per cent (2004: 21). In their comparative study of ethnic intermarriage in Beijing and Xinjiang, Mamet, Jacobson, and Heaton found that, of all minority groups in Xinjiang, the odds of exogamy were lowest among Uyghur males (just 0.2 per cent) and Uyghur females (0.46 per cent) (2005: 198, 200). According to another study conducted in rural areas of Kashgar prefecture, strict endogamy

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6 At the same time, Xing’s findings suggested that, as the size of urban minority elites increased after 1990, minority individuals increasingly sought to match both status and ethnicity when choosing a mate (2007).
remains the rule, with 99.39 per cent of couples registered in all-Uyghur marriages (Hu 2006: 15–16). Here, as in Turpan, the number of intermarried couples had doubled between 2000 and 2004, but the proportion of such unions within the total population remained negligible (Hu 2006: 16).

In interviews I conducted in 2002 and 2004, respondents in Xinjiang conceded that intermarriage had ‘very slightly increased’, estimating the percentage of individuals taking this course at around 1 per cent. Most believed that the majority of intermarriages occur in the regional capital, Ürümchi, a perception supported by one study, which found that the odds of exogamy in Xinjiang increase among the young, the highly educated urban residents, and northern residents (Mamet, Jacobson, and Heaton 2005: 199). All respondents noted that Uyghur women were more likely to take Han husbands than the reverse, a gendered pattern also confirmed in domestic and international scholarship (Mamet, Jacobson, and Heaton 2005: 196, 201; Zhang 2005: 24). Yet, if anything, this small increase in intermarriage seems to have heightened the degree of ethnic resistance as families and communities respond to boundary transgression.

**Television and audience reflexivity**

Media researchers agree that the mass media have been used predominantly as vehicles for the official viewpoint, a means to structure public opinion and promote particular ideologies and narratives (Lee and Cho 1990: 33–34; Skuse 2005: 164). In this sense, mass media become tools of social engineering with the capacity to alter public perception. However, it is equally recognized that the audience’s social experience affects the way in which it reads the television text, so that viewing a TV programme becomes a process of negotiation between the text and the context of the audience (Lee and Cho 1990: 37, 42), or ‘a dialogue between fiction and reality, television and country’ (Acosta-Alzuru 2010: 186). It has been argued, for example, that television invites a continual reconfiguration of boundaries presumed to delimit the cultural world (Saenz 1994: 575), and that analysis of popular television narratives must be undertaken in the context of struggles over the construction of identity (Jontes 2010: 716–7). Television thus invites reflection on social life and generates the space for a politics of audience reception. The dynamic between visual representation and society was observed in America in the 1960s, a period during which social attitudes towards black–white intermarriage began to change. Two films dealt with this sensitive issue. The first, *One Potato, Two Potato* (1964), stressed the inevitability of societal censure, i.e. white harassment of mixed couples. A few years later, *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1968) presented a more
hopeful outlook, progressing through serious moments to finally reach a positive outcome (Spickard 1989: 294).

China’s main television network, Chinese Central Television (CCTV), founded in 1958, was originally envisaged as the ‘throat and tongue’ of the Chinese Communist Party, a ‘totalising state voice’ for the project of socialist modernity (Sun 2007: 188–9). Yet following China’s embrace of global market economics since 1980, a tension has evolved between the state’s desire for a Gramscian form of hegemonic control on the one hand, and the creative impulse of television combined with naked economic ambition on the other. As a result, in China too, televisual forms of representation now enjoy a reciprocal relationship with the society that creates them; they are ‘indexical to, and constitutive of, the profound changes taking place in the imagination of self, home, place, time, community and nation’ (Sun 2007: 189–90). The use of television by Chinese cultural elites as a vehicle to stimulate intellectual debate was first witnessed in 1988, in the shape of the documentary series Heshang (‘River Elegy’). This series, which rejected the ‘backward’ Chinese worldview in favour of a (then) coveted Western civilization, is widely considered to have altered the means of imagining the Chinese nation and to have challenged the tradition of didactic representation (Sun 2007: 192–3).

In Xinjiang, social and political realities are often strikingly different from those in China proper, and this is no less true for state control of mass media. On 1 January 2002, Uyghur poet Tursunjan Amat recited a poem titled ‘Wild Pigeon’ following the close of a public concert in Ürümchi. In the days that followed, officials condemned the poem as ‘inflammatory’, charging that it exerted a bad influence on society by advocating ethnic separatism. The chairman of the regional government subsequently called for a strengthening of the anti-separatism struggle in the ideological field, and announced a series of ‘study classes’ to be undertaken by media personnel involved in literature and the arts, the press and publishing, radio, television, film production, cultural management, social science research, and other fields. These classes were intended to educate media personnel in how to wage ‘a just and forceful struggle against all kinds of acts opposing the unity of the motherland’ (Amnesty International 2002). In this context, the production of Xinjiang Girls can be seen as a media attempt to engineer social harmony in a context of regional political unrest. Indeed, at the global level, ‘mass media interventions’ are increasingly employed by governments

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7 The poem tells the allegorical story of the son of a pigeon king who is trapped and caged by humans while on a mission to find a new home for his flock. He commits suicide by eating a poisoned strawberry rather than sacrifice his freedom.
and NGOs as a tool of change or conflict reduction. A key example is the Latin American *telenovela* genre, described as a ‘guide to nationalism, modernity and social change’ (Skuse 2005: 160–1; cf. Acosta-Alzuru 2010). Yet studies show that television dramas also have enormous potential to invite social criticism. To cite one example, Korean viewers demonstrate audience reflexivity when they criticize domestic Korean dramas (which typically represent women as limited to the home) and imported Western dramas (whose depictions of sexual freedom invite moral condemnation and withdrawal to a ‘superior distance’) (Kim 2005: 451, 460). In this way, television viewers selectively incorporate some values into the reflexive formation of their lives while contesting others (Kim 2005: 458).

**The TV drama Xinjiang Girls (2004)**

The controversies surrounding ‘one-way intermarriage’ in Xinjiang were neatly reflected in public reactions to the state-commissioned TV drama series *Xinjiang guniang* (‘Xinjiang Girls’), which I found myself watching in a Beijing street restaurant in July 2004. This TV play was rare in the PRC in that it was directed by an Uyghur woman (Chi.: Wuliyasi Mayinuowa; Uy.: Maynur Ilyas) and acted almost exclusively by Uyghurs; the exception was a Han male who takes the sole Han part (Frangville 2007; Yuan 2008). The 20-episode series, whose plot unfolds chronologically, was broadcast on CCTV Channel 8 – the national channel reserved for serialized dramas – and follows the lives of four daughters of an Uyghur professor based at the Central University for Nationalities in Beijing. While all four were raised and educated in the Chinese capital, the two eldest live in Ürümchi while the two youngest remain in Beijing. As the director shares her complex vision of the diverse personal experiences of the four women, we find that only the eldest daughter – a doctor – is stable in both her professional and personal life. The second youngest daughter, a translator, is troubled by the dilemma of ‘situating herself as a modern woman in a culturally determined community’ (Frangville 2007: 329), and the youngest chooses an international lifestyle as part of a dance troupe rather than return to a Xinjiang homeland she has never known (see Schluessel [ch. 12 in this volume] on the sense of cultural crisis now being debated among Uyghur intellectuals). But it is the second eldest daughter, a civil servant torn between her memories of an absent Uyghur husband and a new Han beau, who provides the central focus for the story. In the face of fierce opposition from her grandfather, portrayed as tradition-bound and inflexible, the drama concludes by suggesting that the Han beau should remain hopeful and wait patiently until the Uyghurs are ‘modern enough’ to accept intermarriage (cf. Frangville 2007: 330).
In her analysis of cinematic roles played by China’s minority nationalities since 1950, Vanessa Frangville argues that, despite the evident aim of the female Uyghur director to underline the complexity of contemporary Uyghur identities through the vehicle of the four daughters, *Xinjiang Girls* nonetheless reflects minority stereotypes circulated among the majority Han. These include: (1) the representation of the Uyghur family as symbolic of a united Uyghur community; (2) the assumption that the Uyghur patriarch is obstructive to the match only because of cultural differences deriving from the two groups’ different stages of development; and (3) the representation of the Uyghur father as an apologist for the Uyghurs’ ‘backwardness’ in the context of the obvious devotion of his would-be Han son-in-law (Frangville 2007: 329–330). For Frangville, these examples prove that Han discourses of minority peoples are inevitably reproduced within the minority consciousness (2007: 330).

Her compatriot, Marie Bellot, goes a step further, proposing that the reproduction of such stereotypes shows that Uyghurs have ‘willingly placed themselves in a position of inferiority vis-à-vis the Han’ (2010: 84). Without having interviewed Ilyas, it is hard to know this female Uyghur director's intentions. However, I would suggest that the scenarios could be interpreted quite differently, if we afford the director the same capacity to resist hegemony as is routinely afforded the audience (cf. Skuse 2005: 161; see also Nyima [ch. 5] and Cencetti [ch. 6] in this volume on the active engagement of Tibetan herders in shaping the effects of state intervention). Perhaps Ilyas intended to champion – and strengthen – the solidarities that have arisen within the Uyghur family and wider community in the face of seemingly irresistible social forces of ethnic assimilation (see Hann [ch. 7] and Robin [ch. 8] in this volume on Uyghur and Tibetan resistance to the state policy of ‘bilingual education’); or to send a message to the state that its goal of social harmony is not so easily achieved. One might even speculate that she predicted in advance the uproar that this socially unacceptable thread would create, and purposely included it to ensure high viewing rates in the Uyghur community and further build popular resistance to Uyghur–Han intermarriage. In other words, Ilyas may have purposely employed popular culture as a means to create collective freedom in a situation of individual oppression (Fabian 1998: 19). And, of course, one should not underestimate the commercial gain involved in such a strategy.

Most interviewees in Ürümchi (2004) resented the suggestion that Uyghurs need to ‘adapt to the modern world’, and that they can achieve this by intermarrying with Han people. Many insisted that the drama was politically motivated – an example of what Sun calls ‘indoctrination’: the delivery of indoctrination packaged as television entertainment (2007: 191). Räwiä, a first-generation *minkaohan* (Chinese-educated Uyghur) in her forties, was
deeply cynical: ‘All those around me saw it as a propaganda exercise. Hoping to make us Uyghurs marry with Hans more and more. But they can’t assimilate us all, can they?’

Dilbär, a female minkaomin (Uyghur-educated Uyghur) high school student, remarked that ‘the Hans’ – conceived as a monolithic entity – would like to see the drama end in successful intermarriage, just as they would like to see ethnic unity and rapprochement in society. Others, such as Ömär, a male minkaomin high school student, acknowledged that Xinjiang Girls dealt with an existing social phenomenon which, while infrequent, was ‘a grave problem’. All insisted that the implications of the drama’s conclusion were ‘unrepresentative’ of the actual situation. Aynur, a minkaomin graduate in her twenties, argued that in reality very few Uyghurs could accept Uyghur–Han intermarriage, a view echoed by Dilbär, who noted that while people will happily watch a fictional drama, they could not bear such a storyline in real life. According to Jelil, an observant graduate in his twenties, most of his male peers felt that the plot was ‘incorrect’ and ‘dishonest’, while Aynur described how the denouement had provoked her to telephone a male cousin in rage. In the most extreme reaction, Tashmämät, a historian in his forties from Kashgar, pronounced that the series should have been called Xinjiang Prostitutes. These reactions demonstrate that viewers ‘perceive of the lives of characters as something they can actively engage in or alter’ (Skuse 2005: 171). Television is transformed into oral culture, and resisted through that culture, as its meanings are re-circulated and altered in the course of everyday life (Lee and Cho 1990: 33). The more ‘unrealistic’ the plot, particularly where it touches on a socio-economic or political issue, the lower the level of public tolerance, and the more likely it is that viewers will demand to see the problem’s solution in the programme itself (cf. Acosta-Alzuru’s analysis of the telenovela Los ninos de la calle [‘Children of the Streets’], 2010: 197).

Reflecting on media, identity, and struggle in twentieth-century China, Vanessa Fong asked how accurately Chinese media representations reflect the lived experiences of China’s citizens, and whether citizens accept the messages to which they are exposed (2007: 58). In the case of Xinjiang Girls, the portrayal of interethnic courtship was deemed to have little to do with social reality, while the message embodied in its plot was firmly rejected. Thus, rather than persuading viewers to ‘voluntarily participate in the state’s ideological projects’ (Fong 2007: 58), the series stoked pre-existing hostilities and sensitivities surrounding Uyghur–Han relations.

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8 For a case study of the growth of political awareness within one minkaohan individual over her life course, see Smith Finley 2007.
The romantic, gentle, and upwardly mobile (male) Other

Allowing that ethnic intermarriage in Xinjiang has slightly increased, what can we make of this phenomenon? For first-generation minkaohan who took Han spouses, it is likely their choice was driven partly by ‘internalized oppression’ (Herschel 1995: 179) – the shame of being Uyghur, engendered by Han intolerance of minority cultures during the ‘politically red’ campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s. This was previously observed among Nisei (second-generation) Japanese-Americans, who, rejected as possible marriage partners by the white community following the Second World War, began to display ambivalence towards their own Japanese-ness. In such contexts, some individuals seek to elevate their sense of self-worth by impressing or conquering a member of the culturally leading race (Beigel 1975: 82).

For second-generation minkaohan, one might hypothesize that study and work in Han-dominated environments leads to a greater instance of Uyghur–Han intermarriage. Globally, intermarriage tends to be more common between college-educated individuals, owing to their shared experiences of higher education and/or their shared urban, professional background (Breger and Hill 1998: 8). In America, intermarriage rates increased across successive generations, with the change in the third generation resulting from the lessening of ethnic tensions (following the civil rights movement) and the coming of age of a ‘highly assimilated and upwardly mobile’ youth (Spickard 1989: 362–3). In contemporary East Asia, young, middle-class, educated Koreans display a cosmopolitan willingness to embrace other cultures (Kim 2005: 456). Individuals of different ethnicities are especially likely to develop close relationships where they grow up together in one community, even in cases where groups were historically at conflict (Evers 1975: 153).

In central and northern Ürümchi, increasing numbers of young, urban Uyghurs are being raised in Han-dominated communities and educated in Chinese-medium classes or schools. Seeing an Uyghur–Han couple out in public together in 2004 (unheard of in the mid-1990s), I expressed surprise to Nurmämät, a minkaomin market trader in his forties. He retorted, ‘Oh, there’s plenty of that these days! You see, a lot of Uyghurs go to Han schools from a young age. So they hardly speak much Uyghur, and end up becoming quasi-Hans [Uy.: khânzu bop qalidu].’ Gülhärä, a 20-year-old female minkaomin student, concurred that minkaohan Uyghur youth who spend a lot of time with Han peers have developed a ‘Han temperament’ (Uy.: Khânzu mijäz), and claimed that some begin to resemble Hans physically. This is viewed as a natural consequence of growing up with Han children, as explained by Rabiýä, 20, a female minkaomin student: ‘They end up speaking and acting like Hans. They don’t speak Uyghur very well, some of them. And so their way of thinking comes to resemble
that of Hans. When they think, they think in Chinese. They’re not comfortable with the Uyghur script.

Yet despite popular perception, it became evident that *minkaohan* and *minkaomin* occupied a diversity of positions along what may be termed an ‘accommodation spectrum’ (Smith Finley 2013). Some young Uyghurs at the extreme pole of acculturation, particularly females, may be more likely to consider interethnic courtship. I interviewed Gülşhäm over a four-week period in 2004. A 20-year-old *minkaohan* who had grown up in Ürümchi, she expressed a strong (potential) preference for a Han boyfriend, explaining, ‘I just feel more at home with them. I suppose it’s because everyone in my street is Han and I’ve always gone to Han schools ever since I was small … so all my friends are Han.’ It is crucial to note that Gülşhäm came from a single-parent family, composed of an absent *minkaohan* mother and a *minkaohan* father who spoke only Chinese in the home. Conversely, Burkhan, 15, a heavily acculturated *minkaohan* male, ruled out the possibility of courtship with a Han, despite certain structural difficulties:

> Our school has separate Chinese-medium and Uyghur-medium classes, and each keeps to itself. In our [Chinese-medium] class of 40, there are only three or four Uyghurs plus some other minority students. So there is little chance to meet other Uyghurs. But I’m still young; when I leave school and go to work, there will be more opportunities to meet a [Uyghur] girlfriend.

This suggests that young males adhere to endogamous principles more strictly than young females, regardless of language of tuition. Similarly, while some young, urban *minkaomin* expressed a degree of sympathy towards mixed Uyghur–Han unions, others signalled the opposite trend: an acute sense of cultural distinctiveness, heightened political consciousness, and desire to maintain (selective) endogamy. As an example of the latter type, Yee’s study found that at Kashgar Education College, where teaching staff are predominantly *minkaomin*, no intermarriage has ever taken place between Uyghur and Han staff (2003: 450). In any case, it is hard to argue that *minkaohan* are more prone to intermarriage while *minkaomin* are less so.

Another factor frequently found to underlie mixed unions is the marginalization of one or both partners. In former Soviet Central Asia, Turkic members of the Communist elite were often orphans or otherwise marginal people who lacked a large kinship network. It was thus quite common for Central Asian male communists to marry Russian women, since for
this type of ‘perfectly deracinated citizen’, the Soviet identity would always trump family or minority group membership (Edgar 2007: 593). For some young urban Uyghurs in Xinjiang, attendance at a Chinese-medium school limits their social circles; others grow up in Han-dominated urban districts where the demographic pool of potential Uyghur partners is reduced. The brother-in-law of one respondent married a Han woman he met while working in Qaramay, where the population was 73 per cent Han in 1992 (Wang 2004). Socially stigmatized persons, such as Uyghur sanpei xiaojie (hostesses working in karaoke rooms), may be equally prone to out-group marriage. Mälikä, 20, a minkaomin student and part-time hostess, confided, ‘I really got to like my [Han] manager. … He saw me in tears the first time I did hostess work, and was impatient. But later he looked after me, and wouldn’t introduce me to potentially stroppy customers.’ This girl had lost her father and been forced to hostess in order to pay for her university education. She came very close to accepting her Han manager’s marriage proposal, finally rejecting him on the grounds that he was not a Muslim. Some minkaohan respondents desired to find marriage partners from within their sub-group, feeling that they shared a sense of liminality vis-à-vis the ‘authentic’ Uyghur cultural community.

A third factor underlying mixed unions is not structural but functional: the desire to improve socio-economic status (cf. Xing 2007). Many Ürümchi respondents attributed the recent growth in intermarriage to the ethnic ‘income gap’. Märyäm, a trader of music CDs in her thirties from Ghulja, suggested that the primary motive for marrying a Han was financial gain. This charge of ‘gold-digging’ was partly substantiated in subsequent interviews. Räbigül, 24, a minkaomin policewoman, described her affair with a married Han male as follows:

I have a Han colleague I could really have fallen for. … He likes me to show him places in Xinjiang. The other week, he paid for me to go to Shanghai with him; we stayed in a hotel and everything. Hard to believe at my age. … I bet you think I’m only interested in money now!

More recent research on mixed marriage goes beyond the traditional foci of structure and function, protesting that these leave no room for ‘the aesthetic spark, the romantic and wholly reckless anti-strategy of love’ (Kohn 1998: 69). From this holistic perspective, ‘the spontaneity and mystery of attractions to Others mingles with the practicalities and functions attendant on these attractions’ (Kohn 1998: 77). This can include physical attraction to a
different aesthetic, as when an American woman in one study described the appeal of the
darker colouring, slimmer builds, and aquiline noses of Middle Eastern men (Brown and
Farahyar 1994: 177). In interviews, young Uyghur females identified the romantic and gentle
manner of Han men as key factors underpinning their yearning for a mixed union. Gülshām
explained:

I can’t stand Uyghur boys. There’s a world of difference between an Uyghur and a
Han guy. Take going out on a date: an Uyghur guy won’t make any effort. You’ll
walk past any old street restaurant and he’ll say, ‘We’ll eat here’. He’ll take you to
one of the city parks, and sit there. That’s it. Now, a Han guy knows how to treat a
girl. He’ll look for a place with nice surroundings, a romantic atmosphere.

She rejected the suggestion that there might be a correlation between atmospheric restaurants
and a man’s financial means, claiming that such places were ‘not necessarily expensive’, then
continued: ‘It’s about deeds, actions [indicates an Uyghur couple sitting behind us]. See?
That Uyghur guy just sent that Han flower seller away! … He told the child she should be at
home. … A Han would have bought the flower and presented it to his girlfriend!’ Gülshām
interpreted the man’s behaviour not as a politically symbolic act (as I had), but as ‘an
inability to understand romance’. Her friend Rābigül, a minkəomin policewoman, agreed:
‘Han men understand romance [Uy.: romantik]; they know how to treat a girl. They’re very
gentle. … They know how to talk to you on the phone. Uyghur men just grunt a few words
and then hang up! I want a guy who will hold my hand as we walk along the street … and
never let go!’ As we dined outside in central Ürümchi, Gülshām continuously eyed passing
Han men, and occasionally Western men. She was particularly impressed by a group of Han
businessmen, who clearly hailed from the more developed and wealthy east. At one point, she
squeaked excitedly and indicated a ‘mixed’ couple (Han boy, Uyghur girl) of around 16 years
of age, walking hand in hand. She was deeply impressed by the couple’s courage. Both
women identified the casual dress sense of Han men as a ‘pull’ factor, as confirmed by their
schoolmate, Dilbār: ‘The minkəohan like those [Han] guys who dress down, wear leisure
gear [Chi.: xiuxian fužhuān]. Uyghurs usually dress up, … wear Western-style suits, shirts,
and dress shoes. … The other night, Gülshām said she didn’t like guys who “dressed like her
grandfather”!’
A fourth factor which may influence attitudes towards intermarriage is a change in religious belief, brought about by a secular education, rapid modernization, and/or globalization (cf. Shibata’s study on Guyana, 1998: 91). Zemmel found that contemporary Anglo-Jews brought up in an environment in which they do not identify positively as Jews are more likely to marry out of the faith (1999: 67). The traditional institutions of authority (the family; rabbis) exercise less influence than previously because young people see marriage as an individual choice. They also tend to go to university and marry later, when they are financially independent and no longer reliant on the family, in particular the ‘protective’ Jewish mother (Zemmel 1999: 75, 195). In contemporary Xinjiang, there may be greater potential for intimate relationships with Han peers among Uyghurs who were not raised to adhere strictly to orthodox Islamic practice, that is, among those who observe only dietary restrictions. Gülshäm admitted that while she considered herself ‘too young’ to have a boyfriend (at 20), some of her friends were dating Hans. She shrugged off the suggestion that the Islamic faith might create problems for such unions, observing nonchalantly, ‘They [Han boyfriends] go home at the end of the day, and don’t eat pork in front of us’. Nevertheless, her acknowledgment that Han boyfriends would need to go home to eat pork highlights an important distinction between possibilities for courtship and marriage.

Finally, a mixed union can release some individuals from the strictures of their own society, particularly gender roles and expectations. Studies show that some men are attracted to out-group women because they are perceived to be more submissive than in-group women, as when white American males are drawn to Japanese women (Beigel 1975: 69) or black American males to ‘ultra-feminine’ white girls (Downs 1975: 164). Conversely, some women may be repulsed by certain male characteristics within their ethnic group, such as traditional dominance over women (Shibata 1998: 90) or a tendency towards violence (Beigel 1975: 82). For example, Indian women in Guyana ‘do not easily forget witnessing their mothers’ miseries at the hands of their Indian husbands’, and some therefore opt to marry African men (Shibata 1998: 89). A female Greek respondent described the soft, calm, patient character of her Turkish husband, contrasting this against Greek husbands, who ‘shout, swear, and cheat on their wives’ (Petronoti and Papagaroufali 2006: 571). A black American woman described how her first marriage to an in-group member failed owing to her husband’s male chauvinist values, while her second marriage to a Jewish American succeeded because it was based on equality (Tartakov and Tartakov 1994: 150).

In Islam, while the concept of ‘mutual respect in marriage’ – meaning that married couples should maintain conjugal intimacy and marital decorum in an expression of the love...
and compassion between them – is recognized, a woman is nonetheless required to obey her husband. This is known as tamkīn (obedience), as opposed to nushūz (disobedience) (Yamani 1998: 162). Many Muslim females therefore choose to marry out based on the desire to rebel against traditional female roles (see Khatibi-Chahidi et al. 1998: 61). In a study of intermarriage in Turpan, several female Uyghur and Hui respondents cited the desire to avoid male chauvinism as their main motivation in seeking a Han husband (Zhang 2005: 27). My interviews in Ürümchi suggested a similar pattern. Patigül, a trader of music CDs in her twenties, attributed her friend’s 12-year marriage to a Han to the husband’s relative tolerance of her friend’s personal freedom: ‘Her husband is very gentle [Uy.: yawash]; he lets her get away with an awful lot! Not like an Uyghur husband, who would rule with an iron fist [Uy.: qoli qattiq].’ Räbigül, a minkaomin policewoman, cited male violence as a key factor putting her off relationships with in-group men: ‘Uyghur men are so abrasive towards their wives. … I’ve seen too many women getting beaten by their husbands to want that for myself!’ To be sure, in a rare example of a mixed union involving an Uyghur husband and Han wife, domestic violence had initially proved an issue. The husband, a market trader in his thirties from Aqsu named Osman, confided, ‘In the first three years of marriage, I occasionally beat her … because we were arguing and she wouldn’t obey me. But I don’t hit her now. Now I respect her and she respects me.’ The situation was neatly summarized by Zunun, a minkaomin in his thirties working in the service industry: ‘Many Uyghur women … have been ill-treated at the hands of Uyghur boyfriends; there is a culture of Uyghur men hitting their women. So, if Uyghur women increasingly fall into the arms of Han men, the blame lies at least partly with us.’

**Parental prohibition and community supervision**

At the time of the broadcast of Xinjiang Girls, the threat of boundary crossing had already produced keen resistance within the Uyghur community. This came primarily from the protagonists’ parents. Studies show that parental obstruction to intermarriage is most likely to occur where one group has a strong sense of ethnic or religious identity, or a history of political and/or socio-economic conflict with another group: ‘Where ethnic loyalties are strong, intermarriage is even more urgently than usual a family matter’ (Horowitz 2000: 62). Respondents in Ürümchi confirmed that few Uyghur parents would allow an Uyghur–Han match, estimating the proportion of tolerant parents conservatively at 1 per cent and

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9 The Uyghur word yawash can mean, variously, ‘gentle’, ‘kind’, or ‘obedient’. Many Uyghur men (and some women) ridicule Han males for being ‘afraid of their wives’.
generously at 10 per cent. Even those parents who might potentially have taken a more progressive attitude rarely did so. It is documented that the situation of an absent parent can sometimes lessen parental opposition (Khatib-Chahidi et al. 1998: 55). Yet although Gülshäm’s father was both Chinese-educated (minkaohan) and a single parent, he forbade her to date anyone before completing her higher education, enforcing this via an evening curfew. He thus outlawed romance during precisely that time when she was most likely to interact with Han boys. While he occasionally threatened to re-marry with a Han, there was a clear dividing line between humorous banter and real life. Gülhärä, the 20-year-old minkaomin university student mentioned earlier, exclaimed that her father would ‘go mad’ if she became intimate with a Han male, while Aynur declared that her parents would ‘kick her out of the house’. This was later confirmed by her male cousin, who added with a grin, ‘They would say, “She’s no daughter of mine!”’ As a result, most mixed couples in Xinjiang choose to separate. In the United States, filial piety prevented many Nisei Japanese-Americans from marrying non-Japanese partners (Spickard 1989: 67). In Xinjiang, enduring respect for elders combined with adverse parental reaction serves to ensure, even guarantee, endogamy in Uyghur society.

In a minority of cases, a couple may defy familial sanctions by eloping, a practice common throughout history and across national borders (Ellman, cited in Spickard 1989: 194). Thus, community attempts to prevent intermarriage can provoke rebellion in a mixed couple and encourage them to take risks. Stoltzfus describes how a German woman engaged to a Jewish man shunned the German store where she normally shopped on 1 April 1933 – the national boycott day – walking straight past Sturmbteilung (Stormtrooper) guards to enter a store marked as Jewish (1996: 39). Summoned in 1934 to the local Nazi party headquarters, where an officer attempted to ‘enlighten’ her about the ‘evil Jews’, the woman responded, ‘Well, I’m not marrying a Jew, but a person’ (Stoltzfus 1996: 55). In October 1933, some German–Jewish couples had rushed to the altar upon hearing that the Nazi regime planned to make intermarriages illegal (Stoltzfus 1996: 45). Contemporary Uyghurs similarly emphasize the power of love when eloping, as described by Tahirjan and Ghäyrät, minkaomin migrant workers in their thirties from Aqsu: ‘The son or daughter says, “This is the person I have fallen in love with”. If the parents don’t agree, they go someplace far away, coming back only when they have children. Even then, they may ignore the parents and look the other way in the street.’

10 The Sturmbteilung (SA) was the Nazi militia created by Hitler in 1921, which helped him to power.
Obstructive parents may thus be rejected by defiant children in a process of ‘counter-ostracization’ (cf. Evers 1975: 157). It is worth noting here that elopement has long been a recognized social institution among Uyghurs, regardless of whether a proposed match crossed ethnic boundaries. Once a couple has eloped, the action is irreversible. A humorous Uyghur saying warns: ‘If the parents won’t at first agree to the match, they will after the couple has eloped for fifteen days!’ The implication is that, after two weeks alone with a male, the female is no longer pak (pure) and no other man will have her. Where a marriage takes place against parental wishes, familial sanctions may remain in place long afterwards in the form of parental excommunication (cf. Beigel 1975: 72). Patigül, the trader of music CDs mentioned earlier, described how her friend was disowned after she took a Han husband who failed to convert to Islam: ‘She and her parents don’t talk. They won’t have her in the house. So, every Rozi or Qurban festival, she’s in tears because that’s when families should get together.’

Alongside parental prohibition, community supervision plays a key role in preventing Uyghur–Han intermarriage. As Grearson and Smith note, ‘People in intercultural relationships must be prepared for extra attention, some of it subtle and some of it not so subtle’ (1995: xi). Mixed marriages are often treated with suspicion because they call into question boundaries between ‘self’ and ‘other’. This in turn causes extended kin and the local community to reinforce negative discourses and stereotypes of the out-group (Breger and Hill 1998: 4, 9, 12), with intermarriage and mixed-lineage offspring deemed threatening to the ‘purity’ of one or both groups (Hartley 2010: 237). Community supervision can be particularly effective in Islamic societies, which seek to organize the minutiae of family life through the collective enforcement of public morals (Ayubi 1991: 35). Since the Arab-Islamic culture emphasizes ‘external’ over ‘internal’ moral enforcement (i.e. shame over guilt), it is the public who are expected to collectively oversee sex, women, and the family (Ayubi 1991: 37, 42–44). In contemporary Xinjiang, few dare to pursue marriage with a Han person openly. Uyghur–Han couples who appear in public risk the verbal and sometimes physical censure of the Uyghur public. Adil, a male restaurateur in his forties, explained: ‘If we see an Uyghur and a Han together in the street, we feel anger in our hearts; they appear ugly [Uy.: sät körünidu].’ According to Patigül, mixed couples were never seen in the Uyghur district (Döngköwrük) of Ürümchi, for people would curse them and hurl jibes at the Uyghur girl, such as, ‘What’s wrong? Couldn’t you get an Uyghur partner [Uy.: sanga
Nurmämät, the *minkaomin* market trader in his forties, and Gülshäm added that some individuals would even strike the couple, as confirmed by a 19-year-old respondent dating a Han man: ‘It’s hard for us to even go out in Ürümchi. If other Uyghurs see us together, they make trouble. Men swear at us and hit us. … Uyghur women aren’t so bad, but they still make [critical] comments.’ This girl’s mother would not allow the couple to marry in Xinjiang, though the Han male had given up pork and was learning the Uyghur language. However, she agreed to her elder daughter’s marriage to a Han in Beijing because their married life would be spent away from Xinjiang and the concomitant social pressure. Ben-Adam (1999: 204) documents similar cases where Uyghur students married to Han people in China proper were instructed by parents not to return to Xinjiang.

Most effective in enforcing the intermarriage taboo are friends and co-workers. When Gülshäm mused upon the possibility of a Han boyfriend, her *minkaomin* classmate was furious, threatening to ‘kick [Gülshäm] in the face’, and break off their friendship. According to Gülshäm, this reaction resulted from the Uyghurs’ strong ‘ethnic thinking’ (Chi.: *minzu guannian*): ‘They think Hans are unclean, and set themselves apart. They’re stand-offish; they exclude Hans from their lives.’ One might surmise that community supervision would therefore have a greater impact on *minkaomin*, who interact mainly with Uyghur peers.

Zunun, the service industry employee, described how an interethnic courtship in his workplace (Uyghur female, Han male) had collapsed after Uyghur co-workers urged their compatriot to abandon the match. However, the taboo can operate just as effectively among *minkaohan*. Despite speaking Chinese more fluently than Uyghur, and being acculturated in dress, manner, and musical taste, 15-year-old Burkhan stated that he would never marry a Han: ‘If I did, no Uyghur would visit me or befriend me.’ This view was reflected in the comment of an Uyghur researcher working for Herbert Yee, who insisted that his daughter must never marry a Han lest their family be ‘looked down upon by his fellow people’ (2003: 450).

Like familial sanctions, community opposition may continue to affect an Uyghur–Han union following the marriage, as in the case of Osman, the Uyghur market trader who is married to a Han woman. Several years after the wedding, a fellow trader from Khotan continued to voice strong disapproval of Osman’s choice: ‘He has a good heart. But we don’t approve of him marrying that Han, because she’s not a Muslim and won’t take the religion. … They just play with this [points to mouth] and this [points to genitals]. … That’s

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11 This respondent used *ma* at the end of her question instead of the Uyghur *mu*, a common habit in Ürümchi, where the distinction between the Uyghur and Chinese question particles is increasingly blurred.
all it’s about.’ He thus defiled Osman’s relationship by describing it in purely sexual terms. The wife’s failure to convert meant she had to keep away from her husband’s kebab stand for fear that Uyghur customers would deem her presence haram (unclean). Instead, she performed less visible tasks in the restaurant’s kitchen. Patigül expressed a similar lingering suspicion of her friend’s Han husband, who had not converted, confessing that her appetite failed when visiting their home.

**Male honour, female shame**

Marrying out is often considered a violation of group identity and of the ‘sexual taboo’ (Barbara 1989: 15). At the heart of this lies the notion of the ‘gendered ethnic centre’, an ideology which defines in-group women in symbolic terms as ‘mothers of our people’ (Breger and Hill 1998: 15). It was long ago shown that in ‘intimate’ Mediterranean societies, the basis for honour and shame was essentially sexual, with women expected to remain chaste until married and faithful thereafter. A single mistake destroys female honour and, with it, that of their close male relatives (Peristiany 1966; cf. Antoun 1968: 674–8 on modesty in Arab villages). Thus it is intermarrying women who often become targets of harassment when crossing normative boundaries (Shibata 1998: 84, 96). Particularly in plural societies, minority women may become ‘forbidden persons’, prevented by their menfolk from forming relationships with majority men, so that marriage becomes the last arena in which minorities retain control (Barbara 1989: 14–15). Restrictions on in-group women may be precipitated by a sense of political, social, cultural, or economic impotence (Buijs 1993: 5, 18). In West Berlin, for instance, high unemployment created feelings of disempowerment among Palestinian refugees, and males reacted by reconstructing the ideals of female seclusion and gendered segregation of space (Abdulrahim 1993: 67). In this way, they reconstructed group identity around male honour and female shame (Breger and Hill 1998: 14–15).

In Xinjiang, I did interview some female respondents who demonstrated a capacity for tolerance of, and empathy with, Uyghur–Han romantic unions. These ‘universalists’ hailed exclusively from the young generation, and invariably focused on love as the central consideration in courtship. However, the vast majority opposed intermarriage with Han people, and all the more fiercely in the context of the phenomenon’s increase. Uyghur men were especially visceral in their opposition to interethnic courtship, expressing this in violent criticism of the females concerned and an earnest defence of Uyghur males. Shökhrät, a male intellectual in his thirties from Kashgar, cynically rejected the idea that Han men were ‘more
romantic’, countering, ‘The Chinese are loaded, the Uyghurs have no money’. He added that such girls ‘don’t have a brain’ [Uy.: kalisi yoq] and are ‘little better than prostitutes’, a view later echoed by Tashmämät, a historian in his forties. Jelil, the pious university graduate in his twenties, argued that Uyghur women were attracted both to the superior financial means of Han partners and to their often higher level of education (this explaining why rich Uyghur businessmen may be deemed less attractive). Tashmämät listed four reasons why Uyghur women date Han men:

First, some girls will go with anyone who has money, with Hans, old men. … Second, these girls have grown up among Hans [are minkaohan or Ürümchi-born] and are closer to Hans. Third, these girls have often slept around, they are broken [Uy.: buzq, no longer chaste], and cannot find an Uyghur husband. Fourth, they are living in their own world [Uy.: özining dunya], a dream world [Uy.: khiyali dunya].

The phenomenon was thus attributed to ‘gold-digging’ (marriage for financial gain), acculturation, lost virginity, and a lack of common sense. Abdurerim, an observant minkaomin graduate from Aqsu in his twenties, identified the relative upward mobility of urban Hans and, while allowing for the sanctity of love, characterized Uyghur–Han marriage as an ‘empty-headed’ act. All four implied that such women lack a political conscience. Interestingly, Dilbär, the minkaomin high school student, agreed with many of these comments, which suggests that some Uyghur women may be equally critical. According to Han scholar Li Xiaoxia, it is ‘inevitable that minority women attracted by the higher political and social position of Han males will abandon in-group customs and adopt those of their Han spouse’ (2006: 84, my translation). His view is endorsed by Xing Wei, who found in the early 1990s that minority women in the south-west were more likely to marry out than male counterparts (2007: 169).

Just one respondent openly invoked the political situation in connection with the intermarriage taboo. This was Ömär, the minkaomin high school student, who explained:

We cannot accept Uyghurs marrying Hans – unless the latter convert to Islam. It’s too much to bear. We think, ‘They took away our country [Uy.: dölitimizni eliwaldı], our language, and our culture, they made us like them. And now they want our women too.’ … These things are connected and cannot be separated. And so we oppose intermarriage. It’s the final straw, the last thing we can resist. I can’t bear the thought
of reading in history books that … we were assimilated through intermarriage with the Han. That’s too humiliating. I don’t want us to end up like the Native Americans.

Uyghur–Han intermarriage is thus interpreted as a ‘loss’ in a context where Uyghur language, culture, and social status are under threat. Here, women become the ‘culture bearers’, to be protected from encroachment by Han men as a means to preserve the Uyghur cultural heritage and maintain face. In this way, where other cultural markers such as language are gradually eroded, the intermarriage taboo comes to embody the final arena of ethnic resistance (cf. Borchigud 1994 on Inner Mongolia).

Notions of loss and restoration of male honour carry a particular weight in Islamic societies, and are especially marked in Arab countries where males experienced a double humiliation during the twentieth century: national humiliation following the 1967 defeat by Israel; and social humiliation caused by class demotion resulting from certain socio-economic policies. Here, women have often become the vehicle for the ‘restoration’ of male honour (Ayubi 1991: 40). For many Uyghur males, the vision of in-group women courting Han men can be characterized as the painful culmination of a series of humiliating blows, including the invasion and political domination of the Uyghur homeland, the erosion of Uyghurs’ social position through discriminatory socio-economic policies, and the attack on Uyghurs’ cultural heritage through assimilatory policies towards language, culture, and religion. As Nurmämät remarked, ‘If a mixed couple appears in Erdaoqiao [the Chinese name for Döngköwrük, the Uyghur district], people swear at them, even hit them! If it’s an Uyghur girl. If it’s a boy, they say nothing.’ The responsibility for avoiding further national shame and rebuilding national honour thus lies squarely with Uyghur women. The gender discrepancy is partly explained by the Islamic norm of patrilineal descent. Uyghur women are required to marry in-group men, or men from other Muslim groups, to ensure continuity of religious identity. A Muslim husband provides the child with his name and religion, and ensures that the mother – as the source of the child’s religious and moral education – continues to practise Islam (cf. Yamani 1998: 154).

Most male respondents firmly rejected the suggestion that Uyghur women are fleeing to Han men to escape Uyghur male violence. Tashmämät observed:

The Hans interact according to a system of Confucian relationships, one of which requires that women obey their husbands. Han households in Xinjiang operate on this basis. In an Uyghur household, we say that men should
dominate, but don’t put this into practice for fear of what may happen to us in the afterlife [Uy.: \textit{Yaman bolidu däp} – things will go badly on the Day of Judgment].

While admitting that some men behave badly by sleeping with and then abandoning girls, Jelil protested that Uyghur males no longer beat women. He also defended them against the charge that they do not understand romance: ‘It’s true that Uyghur men don’t do romantic talk, \textit{can’t} do it. … But they still feel those things in their hearts.’

\textbf{Conclusion}

Li Li has suggested that, as the most influential genre in China’s new media landscape, the television drama ‘embodies the many complex aspects of social forces and relationships contested in China’s reform’ (2011: 327). Its function as a ‘dynamic cultural agent’ in a public space governed by political interventions can be traced back to the CCP’s response in 1991 to \textit{Kewang} (‘Yearnings’), a groundbreaking TV play set against the Cultural Revolution. Li Ruihuan, the Politburo member charged with overseeing ideological matters following the 1989 Tian’anmen incident, invited the film crew to Zhongnanhai in Beijing, and commended the drama as a ‘worthy model’ for the nation’s literary and artistic writers. He observed that in order to make socialist principles – defined as ‘honest, sympathetic, sacrificial, and harmonious’ human relations – acceptable to the masses, media workers must be taught to \textit{learn to use the forms favoured by the populace}. Since then, the Jiang and Hu administrations have advocated the ‘harmonious society’ as the primary theme in Chinese media production, with sympathetic feelings generated by TV dramas forming the core of the ‘social, moral, and ethical values that … could hold together a united and harmonious society’ (Li Li 2011: 338–9). Yet the extent to which \textit{Xinjiang Girls} reinforced this ideal is questionable. The presentation of true love, modelled on the narratives of ‘genuine human sentiment’ that have characterized Chinese melodrama since the 1980s, proved unconvincing for most Uyghur viewers. Shibata notes that a brief increase in intermarriage can add extra force to local antagonism, ‘highlighting new weaknesses in the racial barricade … that need to be shored up’ (1998: 87). The response from the Uyghur community in 2004 suggests just such a social backlash. Andrew Skuse has described the deliberate sidelining of the Taliban in the Afghan radio play \textit{New Home, New Life} (1996–1998) as ‘reflective of production struggles over political and moral interpretations of Afghan society’ (2005: 162, 166). In the same way, one can imagine the scene as media workers debated possible endings for \textit{Xinjiang Girls}: Could
the Uyghur audience accept the eventual marriage of the second eldest daughter to her Han beau? Or would this lead to street demonstrations in the regional capital, as had the publication of the book *Sexual Customs* (considered offensive to Islam) in 1989? The compromise position eventually adopted – to leave the ending open as the Han beau awaits the modernization of Uyghur thought – did not provoke street protest. However, I would argue that it did bring the Uyghurs’ subjection directly into their consciousness, causing them to challenge the ideology marketed by the dominant group, and to ‘demand a form of correction’ in everyday life (cf. Lee and Cho 1990: 40–41).

**References**


