



## Extracting Cultural Resources: The Exploitation and Criminalization of Uyghur Cultural Heritage



## Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	2
Intangible Cultural Heritage and the International Cultural Rights Regime.....	4
China and Intangible Cultural Heritage.....	7
The Muqam: Officially Enshrining Classical Uyghur Music.....	11
The Meshrep- Threatened by Whom?.....	14
Music and Dance.....	18
Shrines and Shrine Festivals- Forbidden Uyghur Intangible Cultural Heritage.....	26
Ethnic Crafts and the Tourism Industry.....	31
Traditional Uyghur Building Techniques.....	37
The Uses of Folklore.....	41
Conclusion.....	44
Recommendations .....	47
Acknowledgments.....	49
Citations.....	50

*Cover image: Performers entertain tourists at the gates of the reconstructed Kashgar old town © Xinhua*

## Executive Summary

The government of the People's Republic of China has always reserved the right to control the cultural expression of its citizens and has perceived cultural production as an important tool for maintaining power. In recent years the increase of control over the cultural realm has followed the same path as the retrenchment of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in other parts of Chinese society. Uyghur cultural expression, like other aspects of Uyghur society, has come under even greater pressure than in past decades as the government increases its attempts to deepen control over East Turkestan through a center-led economic development campaign and assimilationist agenda.

This report will examine the history of government control of Uyghur cultural expression and the narrowing of room for Uyghurs to take the lead in developing their own traditions in recent years using the concept of intangible cultural heritage (ICH). Intangible cultural heritage encompasses those aspects of cultural expression which do not include the artworks and monuments traditionally thought of as cultural heritage, such as music, dance, craftsmanship and oral history. The concept was given an international platform when the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) instituted two lists to promote and protect ICH internationally- the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. The Chinese government enthusiastically embraced the concept, and submitted an element of Uyghur ICH to each list, namely the Muqam, suites of Uyghur classical music, and the Meshrep, a traditional event which served as a platform for a wide variety of Uyghur cultural expressions including music, dance, and oral history.

UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage program is intended to contribute to its mission to facilitate cross-cultural understanding while maintaining cultural diversity. However, China's treatment of minority cultures casts its commitment to these principles into doubt. China's official policy does not approach these cultures in the spirit of mutual respect. Instead, China utilizes the UNESCO lists to gain international recognition of minority cultures, such as the Uyghurs', as small parts of *Chinese* national heritage, allowing them to take only narrow officially defined forms.

On the national level, the Chinese government has used the concept of ICH to shape its policies towards traditional cultural expression, with a strong center-led focus and significant input from experts rather than the bearers or performers of cultural heritage. This contravenes the spirit of the UNESCO program which advocates centering communities and heritage bearers. Official Chinese policy states that ICH must help strengthen national unity and socialist values and serve as a tool for increasing national prestige and strength as defined by the Communist Party. The numerous laws and regulations on the preservation of ICH and the system of supporting and educating heritage bearers allow micromanagement of Uyghur cultural expression down to the grassroots level.

The official narrative regarding Uyghur culture is that the government is supporting cultural production through its ICH program and raising the cultural level of rural areas by sending official troupes to perform there, and that official policies are preserving Uyghur culture in the face of threats, namely the infiltration of religious extremism and hostile foreign forces. This justifies government management of Uyghur cultural expression. Official policy is highly focused on the use of Uyghur traditions as “cultural resources” which can be utilized to grow the tourism industry, which has become an important part of the center-led economic development plans. Its growth facilitates the movement of Han Chinese into the region as both short-term visitors and labor for the growing industry and provides additional justification for the repressive securitization policies, aimed at creating an impression of “stability.”

The government’s repressive policies on freedom of speech, religion and assembly mean that Uyghur artists are not free to perform and develop their cultural industries on their own terms, and the Uyghur public is not free to participate in traditional cultural events or maintain the significance of traditional practices. This can be seen in the banning of shrine festivals and prevention of shrine pilgrimages, an important manifestation of Uyghur religious practice, as well as the transformation of the meshrep from a community-based activity into a vehicle for CCP propaganda. This means that Uyghur culture is being transformed into nothing more than the symbolic diversity of clothing and dance enforced by authorities from above even as the government’s assimilative policies intensify.

This campaign is taking the form of pressuring Uyghurs to publicly perform modern dances, sing Communist “Red Songs,” wear pseudo-traditional Chinese hanfu robes, and celebrate Chinese New Year. This is taking place against the backdrop of a massive crackdown, including the imprisonment of tens of thousands of Uyghurs in re-education camps. The government defines cultural expression of Uyghurs in everything from music and dance to clothing and architecture and is marginalizing Uyghur culture in a way that parallels their economic and political marginalization. Controlling or forbidding traditional or Uyghur-led cultural expressions are not only a violation of individual rights to free speech, assembly, and religion, but are also violations of their cultural rights, threatening the ability of Uyghurs to define and maintain their own identity.

## **Intangible Cultural Heritage and the International Cultural Rights Regime**

As its name suggests, the concept of intangible cultural heritage refers to those traditional arts and cultural practices distinct from physical places and objects. It encompasses everything from the performing arts, oral history, festivals, food, and traditional crafts. The concept was developed out of a desire to not privilege monumental works architecture and works of art as a culture's heritage, as well as fears that modernity and globalization would have a homogenizing effect on local cultures, making it difficult for them to maintain their traditional performing arts and craftsmanship. The earliest forms of state-sponsored protection for these forms of cultural heritage come from East Asia; in 1950 Japan passed a law to extend "government recognition and support to those traditions that embodied its national cultural patrimony."<sup>1</sup>

The concept spread to other nations and eventually to the United Nations, where awareness of the need to protect not only natural and manmade monuments but also intangible cultural production took hold in the 1990s. In the 1970s work was done on the possibility of extending copyright protection to "folklore," but the earliest recognition UNESCO officially extended to the concept of protecting traditional cultures was the 1989 Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore.<sup>2</sup> However, at an international conference in 1999, the Recommendation was found to be "a somewhat ill-construed, 'top-down,' state-oriented, 'soft' international instrument that defined traditional culture in essentialist, tangible, archival terms" with little impact on cultural practitioners, according to Richard Kurin.<sup>3</sup> The conference recommended that the concept be moved toward a view of cultural traditions as "'living' and enacted by communities."<sup>4</sup> To that end the emphasis shifted to paying "attention not just to artefacts, but above all to persons," who enact processes which "provide living communities with a sense of continuity with previous generations and are important to cultural identity, as well as to the safeguarding of cultural diversity and creativity of humanity."<sup>5</sup>

The concept of intangible cultural heritage is not exclusively designed to protect the culture of ethnic minorities, but it is closely connected to the goal of doing so. Acknowledgement of the need for protection of the cultural rights of minority communities had been present from the beginning of the development of international human rights law. The right of everyone "to freely participate in the cultural life of the community," including by enjoying the arts, as well as the right to the "protection of moral and material interests" of artistic production was first stated in Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and restated in Article 15 of the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and in Article 27 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights; in both of these covenants cultural rights are framed as belonging to individuals, to be protected at the state level. The 1991 revised reporting guidelines of ICESCR requires state parties to provide information on the "cultural heritage of national ethnic groups and minorities and of indigenous peoples' and mankind's cultural heritage," demonstrates a shift toward a more subnational focus.<sup>6</sup> The 1992 UN Declaration of the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic

Minorities requires parties to create “favorable conditions” to enable minorities to develop and express their “culture, language, religion, traditions and customs.”<sup>7</sup>

The 2001 UNESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity re-emphasized the principles of Article 27 of the UDHR and Article 15 of the ICESCR, stating that “[c]ultural rights are an integral part of human rights, which are universal, indivisible and interdependent... All persons have therefore the right to express themselves and to create and disseminate their work in the language of their choice, and particularly in their mother tongue; all persons are entitled to quality education and training that fully respect their cultural identity; and all persons have the right to participate in the cultural life of their choice and conduct their own cultural practices, subject to respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.”<sup>8</sup> The UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, adopted in 2005, takes into account “the importance of the vitality of cultures, including for persons belonging to minorities and indigenous peoples, as manifested in their freedom to create, disseminate and distribute their traditional cultural expressions and to have access thereto, so as to benefit them for their own development,” however it reaffirms the principle of sovereignty, maintaining the state as the actor that implements policies to protect cultural rights.<sup>9</sup>

The 2003 UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention established the current international framework of international ICH protection.<sup>10</sup> It divides ICH into five “domains:” Oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of intangible cultural heritage, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, and traditional craftsmanship.<sup>11</sup> However, states are free to use different domains. The two UNESCO lists of intangible cultural heritage, the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Urgent Need of Safeguarding, emerged out of the desire to maintain cultural diversity and increase awareness of the less concrete expressions of culture.

Much of the criticism around the current international regime of intangible heritage protection was developed by anthropologists like Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, who said that the ICH system allows state parties to “define and identify the cultural assets on their territory by creating inventories,” lists which exist to glorify their national cultures instead of creating a system to allow bearers of culture to maintain tradition.<sup>12</sup> These lists inevitably change the how heritage is performed; by designating certain cultural practices as ‘heritage’ and integrating them into economic development via cultural tourism, “they can be brought into line with national ideologies of cultural uniqueness and modernity.”<sup>13</sup> The cultural expression of groups such as the Uyghurs can be transformed into marketable items. There is a threat that cultural heritage practices become divorced from the context that produced them when placed on the list.

The issue Uyghurs face in regards to their intangible cultural heritage is threefold: the government’s listing of Uyghur ICH as Chinese national heritage and its use as a tool to further

Chinese national interests is appropriative; the fact that the government only permits cultural expression within narrow parameters defined by the Party, meaning Uyghurs are not free to define and develop their own culture for themselves; and lastly the official assertion that distinctly Chinese traditions belong equally to the Uyghurs and encouraging them to participate in them under coercive circumstances is an imposition aimed at assimilating them into the “Chinese nation” (zhonghua minzu). As one critic, Lucas Lixinski, pointed out, because the UNESCO Convention operates on the level of states, it “is incapable of offering remedies for misappropriation by third parties, particularly when the third party is the state.”<sup>14</sup> By placing the responsibility of identifying and protecting ICH on the state parties, the Convention might facilitate their erasure through appropriation and government control instead of preserving cultural diversity as it intends.

## China and Intangible Cultural Heritage

*In the world today, all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines. There is no such thing as art for art's sake, art that stands above classes or art that is detached from or independent of politics.*

Mao Zedong made the above assertion in his famous Yan'an Talks on Art and Literature in 1942,<sup>15</sup> laying out the principles for what would become the government-dominated art policy that would persist in Chinese society for decades to come. After reform and opening, it at first appeared that the profit motive would become the primary driving force of the Chinese art world. This would affect performing arts troupes and other institutions where minority arts were to an extent allowed to be preserved- the troupes had to show that they were capable of supporting themselves, and performing artists outside the official groups were given the opportunity to find an audience.<sup>16</sup>

However, Xi Jinping is reasserting the Communist Party's leadership over the realm of culture. In his October 2014 speech to the Beijing Forum on Literature and Art, he also dismissed "art for art's sake," and asserted that artists should not blindly follow the profit motive but consider ideology in their work.<sup>17</sup> They must simultaneously utilize elements of traditional Chinese culture and create works that will appeal to a worldwide audience. The speech laid out the importance that culture will play in the "rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," taking "patriotism as a theme, leading the people to establish and maintain correct views of history, nationality, statehood, and culture while firmly building up the integrity and confidence of the Chinese people."<sup>18</sup>

Uyghur artists working in fields that fall under the umbrella of "intangible cultural heritage" have in the past managed to preserve some degree of an authentic Uyghur voice and control over their own heritage under the rule of the Communist Party. This can be seen in the canonization of the Twelve Muqam, and to some degree in the study of the Meshrep, the two internationally recognized items of Uyghur intangible cultural heritage. However, as this report will argue, it is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain any degree of independence from the government's use of ICH for its own ends.

China has long used the UNESCO cultural and natural heritage lists to enhance its international prestige.<sup>19</sup> China enthusiastically embraced the concept of intangible cultural heritage from its inception and is perhaps the most enthusiastic supporter of the concept on the international stage. It has sought the recognition of the international community through the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage and the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, and now has more entries on the lists than any other nation at thirty-nine.<sup>20</sup> Among these are several significant elements of Uyghur intangible cultural heritage, the muqam and the meshrep.

Tracey L.D. Lu argues that in much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Chinese government saw traditional festivals and local beliefs as backward. A desire for modernization led them to be forbidden by local governments, a mindset that still lingers in government policies towards ICH.<sup>21</sup> During the CCP's process of classifying ethnic groups, elements of what now would be termed intangible cultural heritage were used as tools for identification, including festivals, performing arts, and folklore. These were denounced as "Old Customs, Old Beliefs, Old Habits, and Old Ideas" during the Cultural Revolution, a time when Uyghur cultural expression was entirely forbidden. After reform and opening, the new concept of 'cultural heritage' began to replace 'folk culture.'<sup>22</sup>

The National People's Congress endorsed the UNESCO Convention in 2004, ushering in an official regime of "intangible cultural heritage with Chinese characteristics."<sup>23</sup> National level ICH legislation emphasizes strengthening socialist values, national identity and unity as a core purpose of ICH management.<sup>24</sup> "The protection of intangible cultural heritage and maintaining continuity of the national culture constitute an essential cultural base for enhancing cohesion of the nation, boosting national unity, invigorating national spirit and safeguarding national unification," as one Politburo member said in 2006.<sup>25</sup>

A national level law on ICH was adopted in 2011, creating a national-level strategy for the management of ICH.<sup>26</sup> The 2011 law defines ICH and lays out the responsibilities of different levels of government for its support, including the need to fund the surveying, research, construction of museums and cultural centers, promotion and education, and the support of masters or 'inheritors' (chuanchengren). The Ministry of Culture has a special department for the management of ICH and bears this responsibility together with the National Academy of the Arts, academic departments, and regional ethnic committees. ICH items are listed at national, provincial, city and county levels and funded by the corresponding government level. At all levels the process is controlled by the state. Contrary to the principles of UNESCO, 'excellence' is one of the determinants of ICH in China; the ICH department determines which items of intangible cultural heritage will be promoted and preserved.<sup>27</sup> This is a continuation of the principle of distinguishing between "the essence and the scrap" first laid out by Chairman Mao in the Yan'an speeches on culture in 1940.<sup>28</sup>

This attitude has led to a center-led and elite dominated system of identifying and protecting ICH, contrary to the emphasis on local actors and the communities themselves laid out in the UNESCO Convention. Although new actors are emerging locally in the Chinese ICH realm, "a dense web of symbiotic networks between local cadres and scholars" remains, suggesting that China's cultural policy development remains "highly elite driven."<sup>29</sup> Its potential as a tool for economic development through tourism is at the forefront of the thinking of local cadres, who utilize national concepts to further their local interests. The use of ICH for tourism development was endorsed by the Ministry of Culture in 2009, who issued guidance on the promotion of culture for tourism.<sup>30</sup> A 2011 Decision from the CCP Central Committee on culture restates its intention to strengthen the Party's leadership over "cultural work," ensuring that they "have a

comprehensive understanding of our traditional culture so that we can winnow the grain from the chaff, make the past serve the present and bring forth the new from the old.”<sup>31</sup> Among the goals of these reform efforts are integrating ICH protection with tourism, “strengthen[ing] education in ethnic solidarity and progress, increas[ing] people’s sense of identity with the great motherland and the Chinese nation” and increasing China’s soft power.<sup>32</sup> The recent plan to merge the Ministry of Culture and the National Tourism Administration underscores the government’s intention to use culture as a resource to serve the needs of the state.<sup>33</sup> All of these goals have politicized and commodified traditional (and modern) cultural expression, including that of the Uyghurs.

In 2014, Xi Jinping became the first Chinese leader to visit UNESCO headquarters, where he emphasized the value of cultural diversity and importance of cultural equality, stating that China had been spreading its culture via the Silk Road since it entered the “Western Regions” during the Han Dynasty.<sup>34</sup> There has been an increase in the use of ICH as a tool to promote Xi’s signature policy push, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Uyghur culture plays a significant role due to their homeland’s position along the historical Central Asian trade routes and at the heart of the BRI plan. According to media reports the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) has 83 items on the national level list of ICH and 4,359 items at all levels on the regional list of ICH.<sup>35</sup>

Reasserting the CCP’s leadership over culture is explicitly linked to maintaining stability in East Turkestan. During CPPCC Vice Minister Lu Zhangong’s inspection tour focused on culture, leaders of the XUAR stated that the government was enhancing its ideological leadership and “cultural self-confidence,” creating a positive atmosphere to ensure stability, although they admitted the region faced “special challenges and difficulties in ‘Telling a Good China Story With Firm Cultural Self Confidence.’”<sup>36</sup> The Vice Minister asserted that the essence of XUAR’s culture was “unity in diversity” and that it was an important part of “the Chinese nation’s excellent culture.”<sup>37</sup>

Comments by Gao Zhimin, Deputy Secretary of the General Office of the Communist Party, illustrate the utilitarian and ideological attitude of the government towards cultural production. In May of 2017 he stated that under the leadership of the CCP, the XUAR regional government “actively protects and passes on excellent traditional culture, promotes the development of modern culture, safeguards the basic cultural rights and interests of all ethnic groups and continuously improves the cultural identity and cohesion of the Chinese nation,” however all this is threatened by the infiltration of “hostile foreign forces and religious extremists.”<sup>38</sup> This serves to justify strict government control over cultural production, including at the grassroots level, and increased ideological campaigns. He went on to assert that the local media and cultural system should be utilized for external propaganda to promote the Belt and Road Initiative, that efforts to “fully excavate Xinjiang’s cultural resources and potential” must be made, and that cultural industries should contribute to economic growth.

The regional departments in charge of culture see artists and performers as an important part of ideological work. In April of 2017 the deputy secretary of the XUAR Ministry of Culture Muhter Mehsut said that all cultural workers have a duty to help maintain stability.<sup>39</sup> He said that minority cadres have a particular duty to be “guardians of national unity,” and that the Ministry of Culture will help artists of all ethnic groups create programs which promote “de-extremification” and national unity, to guide the masses utilizing proper education against religious extremist thought.<sup>40</sup> This serves to illustrate the CCP’s attitude towards culture in general and Uyghur culture in particular. The government frames its interventions in Uyghur culture as “saving” it and uses this to justify thorough control of Uyghur cultural production.

## **The Muqam: Officially Enshrining Classical Uyghur Music**

Submitted to UNESCO as the “Xinjiang Uyghur Muqam,” the suite of classical music known as the Twelve Muqam was the first piece of Uyghur intangible cultural heritage to be inscribed on UNESCO’s list of representative works. The term muqam derives from the Arabic term maqam, meaning mode, but in Uyghur use refers to large, fixed suites of songs.<sup>41</sup> As James Millward points out, Chinese scholars often emphasize similarities with Tang dynasty music, or even assert that its origin lies in the Han dynasty, thus portraying the muqam as “a unique cultural achievement of the Uyghur people, realized through a process of mutual interchange with the fraternal Han people.”<sup>42</sup> The original introduction to the muqam on the UNESCO website asserted that it is “characterized by variations and continuity of musical patterns, indicating close affinity with the musical culture of China’s central plains.”<sup>43</sup> Although the UNESCO site no longer has that characterization, it can still be seen on this Ministry of Culture website.<sup>44</sup>

Framing the CCP’s oversight of Uyghur cultural expressions such as the muqam as “saving” it from foreign influence and religious radicals as well as the appeal of modern culture is a constant theme in official media. The first work to preserve and canonize the muqam was led by teams of Chinese musicologists working with expert Uyghur performers in the 1950s. However, as musicologist Cheun-Fung Wong points out, “[i]n many important ways, attempts to “collect and rescue” minority music, as innocent and benevolent as they may sound, have often been implicated in China’s quasi-colonial encounter with its minority citizens in the modern era, both before and after the Communist takeover in 1949.”<sup>45</sup> By creating standardized songs, styles and performances, the muqam project “saved the tradition from its alleged primitiveness.”<sup>46</sup> Helen Rees states that these kinds of projects had the objective of “find[ing] raw material that could be drawn on for professional compositions and staged versions of peasant culture, or for propaganda.”<sup>47</sup>

The Twelve Muqam (On Ikki Muqam in Uyghur) can be described as the classical canon of Uyghur music, and have great significance as a symbol of Uyghur identity. The Twelve Muqams consist of 30 to 40 songs each, and each takes about an hour to play. In addition to the Twelve Muqam there are regional varieties such as the Dolan, Turpan, Qumul and Kashgar-Yarkand muqam, some of which are listed separately on the Chinese national level ICH list; indeed, traditionally musicians would develop their own repertoire which would be passed down to their students. The canonized Twelve Muqam represent an institutionalization of the tradition under the control of the Ministry of Culture. According to anthropologist Nathan Light, the project of editing what became the canonical Twelve Muqam, while having significant Uyghur input, was undertaken “within institutions which removed expressive culture from the control of the performers and excluded many people from the process.”<sup>48</sup> During the process some muqam songs had their religious elements removed, a move justified by the editors as politically expedient, for example allowing them to be played on the radio without violating rules against the performance of religious material.<sup>49</sup> These versions are the ones which are performed by official groups like the Xinjiang Muqam Ensemble. In 2003 during a tour of the UK, members

of the ensemble told ethnomusicologist Rachel Harris that their program had been reviewed by the Xinjiang Cultural Bureau and all the religious content removed.<sup>50</sup>

The government has long promoted the official narrative of religious forces such as the Sufi shaykhs suppressing the “song and dance traditions that were the supposed heart of Uyghur cultural tradition,” but also allows no performances with religious elements.<sup>51</sup> Amannisa Khan, the Uyghur queen credited with the first canonization of the muqam, is portrayed in a film based on a 1983 play by Chairman Saypidin Azizi as defending the right of Uyghurs to sing and dance against conservative Sufis, despite the fact that Sufism had a tremendous influence on the music of the muqam. The official line is that spirituality is not an important or inherit element of Uyghur music. During the process of canonization, lyrics about romantic love were selected over ones pertaining to religion. Some participating performers were frustrated because the muqam was politicized and transformed into “a fixed repertoire transmitted within institutions,” rather than centered on the performer as it was in tradition.<sup>52</sup>



*Performance by the official Muqam Performing Arts Troupe © Xinhua*

The early efforts to canonize the Twelve Muqam came to a halt during the Cultural Revolution- the muqam was declared a ‘poisonous weed’ and copies of the edited text were burned. Traditional music in general was condemned- one Uyghur musician recalled Red Guards attending weddings and other events, ensuring only revolutionary songs could be played.<sup>53</sup> Only the eight model operas could be performed- the only one to be translated into Uyghur, Legend of the Red Lantern, used musical elements from the muqam suites and Uyghur instruments.<sup>54</sup> Rachel Harris states that “[p]laying muqam is sometimes regarded as a spiritual, even a physical need,” and recounts meeting an elderly folk singer who told her: “During the Cultural Revolution, I was forbidden to sing the muqam, and I could feel it building up inside of me with great heat. Finally, I got on my donkey and rode into the desert. I rode until I was far away

from all people, then I started to sing. I sang all the muqam I knew, and then I went back. If I had not done this, I would have become ill."<sup>55</sup>

After the end of the Cultural Revolution, the freedom to play traditional music returned. The institutionalized preservation of the muqam continues to be the dominant form today, still very much under the control of government bodies like the Ministry of Culture, among the traditional musical forms transformed into “raw musical materials for new compositions and appropriated “minority folksongs” which have worked effectively with political propaganda to fabricate an idealized image of ethnic minorities as musically talented yet politically subservient citizens of the People’s Republic.”<sup>56</sup> A ten year plan to preserve the muqam was published in 2005,<sup>57</sup> and touted as among the human rights successes by the government.<sup>58</sup> It lays out plans to create muqam centers focused on local versions, training and support for elder performers, teaching muqam in schools and international exchange. This demonstrates the state’s firm control over how the muqam is transmitted and performed down to the grass roots level.

## **The Meshrep- Threatened by Whom?**

The second item of Uyghur ICH listed by UNESCO is the meshrep, inscribed on the List of ICH Need of Urgent Safeguarding in 2010.<sup>59</sup> The meshrep can take a variety of forms, but generally refers to gatherings that take place outdoors and serve as a forum for a variety of cultural performances. These include various types of music and dancing, as well as historical recitals, games and joking. There is often a distinct religious element to the events, including telling the histories of Islamic personages and local saints, sermonizing, and moral guidance. The gatherings could be quite large, sometimes involving hundreds of people. Anthropologist Ildiko Beller-Hann describes meshrep as “the institutionalized enactment of community itself; through the transmission of rules between generations young people were taught how to be social, how to submit to the rules of the community.”<sup>60</sup>

Traditions in different cities in East Turkestan vary; for example, the Ghulja style was made up of fixed all-male memberships, which differs from the tradition of the southern part of East Turkestan, which tend to be ad hoc gatherings of neighbors. Harris described observing “vibrant living traditions” in the early 2000s, where musicians could earn a good supplementary income performing at meshrep and were not obligated to do hashar (free labor compelled by the state). Instead, the authorities would call upon them to play for visiting officials.<sup>61</sup> The Chinese government put forward the meshrep for the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, saying that the tradition was threatened by declining interest in it from the youth due to competition with other forms of entertainment. However, the Chinese state has itself long been the main threat to the continuation of the tradition, beginning with disrupting the communities which held them through farm collectivization and then by completely banning it during the years of the Cultural Revolution. Its revival in the 1980s was led by grassroots groups, but their community-led organizations were eventually put down violently. Today the practice has been transformed into television performances, tourist attractions and government led propaganda events.

Two examiners were appointed to assess China’s submission of the meshrep to the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, Rachel Harris and Chon In Pyong. Chun In Pyong noted that inscribing the meshrep on the list could undermine the essence of the form by transforming “spontaneous and improvisatory characteristics” into “a set and artificial form of arts.”<sup>62</sup> However he attributed the main threat to the continuity of the practice as the appeal of modern cultural products to Uyghur youth.

In Rachel Harris’ assessment the small-scale less formalized forms of meshrep were in no danger of dying out and noted that it was curious that China’s submission claimed that the practice of meshrep was in decline compared to thirty years previously, immediately after the end of the Cultural Revolution which had banned traditional practices for decades. The 1980s and 1990s saw a revival of interest among Uyghurs in their traditional music and cultural practices,

including meshrep. China's submission to UNESCO did not mention government restrictions as a threat to the viability of a revival of meshrep.

Harris also cited the shift to Chinese language education in schools, movement of Uyghur communities to make room for development, and restrictions on religious practice and large gatherings as threats to preservation of meshrep. The meshrep has a strong religious element; Harris expressed concerns that the only time the word "Muslim" appeared in the submission was regarding ritual bathing practices, raising concerns that other religious elements like prayers and sermons might not be protected. She also expressed concerns about the transformation of meshrep into "folkloric displays" for the tourism industry, as well as the distribution of funds between official institutions vs. representative inheritors.<sup>63</sup>

In its response to Rachel Harris, the XUAR regional Cultural Department denied that the bilingual education system and restrictions on large gatherings would influence the preservation of meshrep and stated that "Muslim practices and customs are well respected throughout the practices of Meshrep. However, Meshrep is a space for traditional cultural practices instead of religious practices. The communal prayers and sermons do not take place at meshrep."<sup>64</sup>

The "preservation" efforts which the cultural ministry touts consist mainly of filming, categorizing and documenting the events before knowledge of them disappears and supporting professional performances. Those who point out that tourist shows and staged performances by official troupes are not authentic meshrep are not doing so out of a belief that cultural practices should not evolve and change with the times but rather out of concern about the repressive policies which do not allow the practitioners to determine the significance and meaning of their own traditional practices.

UNESCO's state-focused approach is particularly detrimental when it comes to authoritarian states. The development of a culture and evolution of the significance of a cultural expression can only be meaningful in a society which tolerates diversity and freedom of association, ideals which UNESCO supports but cannot enforce on member states. With the rapid development of a tourism industry catering mostly to Han Chinese, and an official fear of unsupervised Uyghur gatherings, much of what Rachel Harris feared has come to pass. News of the meshrep in Chinese official media refers mostly to official state performances, tourist offerings and ideological campaigns led by CCP members. In order to prevent the "infiltration of religion onto campus," universities forbid students from attending "illegal religious gatherings" including meshrep, as a notice posted on the Xinjiang Arts University website states.<sup>65</sup> This is also the case in universities outside of East Turkestan, for example Shaanxi Normal University which lists attending meshrep as a sign of extremism.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, refusing to attend "normal meshrep" is also one of 75 signs of extremism on a government list.<sup>67</sup>

In 2012, Rachel Harris visited a village in southern Xinjiang where she had previously attended meshrep, but the organizers said they “had not dared to organize a meshrep” since her previous visit three years before. One organizer told her “It is a shame. Our young people are not learning how to play meshrep anymore. They don’t understand our values, they don’t know how to behave.”<sup>68</sup> They decided to try to hold one since there were foreign guests, and several hundred people arrived. An hour later the police arrived and told them to stop, and the guests from the county town received calls from their work units telling them the event was not officially approved and they should leave. The interference of the authorities preventing Uyghurs from gathering for meshrep or other reasons has increased since 2009. The Chinese ICH law requiring provincial level approval and a Chinese partner for an overseas researcher to do studies make it difficult to know the current status of the meshrep- it appears it now only exists as state organized campaigns to serve state ends.

Jay Dautcher points out that the official promotion of meshrep for tourism purposes had already begun in the 1990s, as staged events which “blended elements of folk practice with scripted performances by professional entertainers” portraying the meshrep as “sites of leisure and frivolity replete with boisterous games, singing maidens and laughing children.”<sup>69</sup> The grassroots meshrep that Jay Dautcher describes in Ghulja in the 1990s had fixed membership groups who would meet regularly “to discuss matters of mutual interest relevant to their communities, to discuss and promote Islamic practice, and to collectively regulate group members’ conduct,” as well as to engage in philanthropy.<sup>70</sup> Rule breakers would be sanctioned for their conduct inside and outside the meshrep with humorous punishments.

Meshrep became an important social movement in ‘90s Ghulja, encouraging young men not to drink or do drugs. The practice was banned in April 1995 due to participants organizing and participating in collective actions including discouraging alcohol consumption; fines were levied on those who continued to participate and leaders of the movement were repeatedly detained. The meshrep groups organized a league of soccer teams for local boys. In August 1995, the municipal government announced the field that the tournament was to be held on was needed for military exercises, and tanks were deployed on it. This action led to a protest march; the government responded by mobilizing hundreds of soldiers and detained the meshrep leaders. The day after the demonstration the local television station broadcast a program billed as a meshrep featuring a professional troupe of singing and dancing performers, “a confusing hybrid of musical meshrep, modernization propaganda, and television variety show,” according to Jay Dautcher.<sup>71</sup>

In February of 1997 another large protest led to a violent clash with the People’s Armed Police, leading to the deaths of between 30 to 100 Uyghurs and the arrests of the organizers and thousands of others, followed by dozens of executions.<sup>72</sup> The government fired hundreds of local officials who they blamed for the unrest. The Uyghur chairman of the Regional People’s Congress, Amudun Niyaz, participated in a meshrep six months later and condemned “a handful of separatists” for manipulating “this recreation to establish illicit ties... disseminating speeches,

undermining national unity and motherland unification, and for carrying out illegal religious activities.”<sup>73</sup> He vowed that the government would crack down on illegal meshreps and “actively promote and organize healthy, traditional meshrep” which would celebrate “our new life” and advance Uyghur culture.”<sup>74</sup> As Dautcher notes, the government had not banned grassroots meshrep for promoting illegal religious activities but for inherently being an illegal religious activity.



*Ministry of Public Security SWAT Team holding a meshrep in Yarkand, 2017 © Lijian Qianyan*

The supervision of people’s meshrep attendance and music consumption is an important part of the government’s control of Uyghur society at the grassroots. One cadre, who was among the first 200,000 officials to be sent into rural areas in 2014, wrote a memoir in which he recounts “some of the social woes plaguing Uyghur society.”<sup>75</sup> He states that attending weddings was part of his job, and that although he attended one with an officially encouraged meshrep, “it is now rare to see meshrep performed in rural Xinjiang due to the influence of religious extremism.”<sup>76</sup> Uyghurs are not permitted to organize their own meshrep, but are required to perform them under the gaze of CCP officials. This micromanagement of Uyghur cultural expression is framed as “saving’ it. UHRP argues that Uyghurs are only permitted to engage in meshrep in the presence of CCP officials.

## Music and Dance

The national level list of intangible cultural heritage includes numerous items of Uyghur ICH beyond the internationally recognized muqam and meshrep. Music and dance are closely associated with minority nationalities in official cultural performances, which often serve to bolster a narrative about a harmonious multiethnic Chinese state and its rule by the CCP.

The widespread Chinese narrative of the history of Uyghur music is China-centric and intended to bolster narratives about Chinese possession of the region since ancient times. For instance, official histories trace Uyghur music's origin back to Western Han officials mentioning "hu music" in their records, followed by the influence of musicians from the West in the Tang court.<sup>77</sup> Uyghur histories, such as one commissioned by the Shah of Khotan in 1854, trace the history of music back to its mythical creator, one of Noah's sons, through ancient Greece, the Arabic maqam (musical modes), Iran and Iraq, and Central Asia, including the mystic poets who wrote much of the poetry that serve as lyrics for the muqam.<sup>78</sup>

Official Chinese narratives emphasize non-Islamic origins for Uyghur dance culture as well. David Brophy notes that the Xinjiang Nationalities Dictionary entry on the sama dance, an item inscribed on China's national ICH list, states that the origin of the word is saman (in English, shaman). The entry goes on to say that it evolved from ancient shamanic dance and has no inherently religious, particularly Islamic, significance, demonstrating that Uyghurs "practice a distinctly local form of Islam that resists assimilation to pernicious foreign standards of Islamic orthodoxy."<sup>79</sup> However sama is an Arabic term specifically referring to a Sufi ritual of music and dance, traditionally performed in East Turkestan by ashik mystics at shrine festivals accompanied by meshrep portions of the muqam.<sup>80</sup> Authorities seek to downplay this spiritual dimension, for example excising the Sufi aspects of the Chahargah muqam from recordings by the official Muqam Art Troupe, such as in a 2001 recording where the word "Allah" was replaced with "dostlar" (friends).<sup>81</sup> Brophy says that there were unconfirmed reports that the mayor of Kashgar attended a sama dance where "Allah" was chanted in the traditional Sufi manner; this led to a turn against encouraging the sama dance, and it was banned from locations such as the Id Kah Mosque in Kashgar.<sup>82</sup> Traditional large-scale sama dances performed outside the Id Kah during the festivals of Kurban and Rozi had been forbidden in the late 1990s, "replaced by carefully orchestrated events for middle school children."<sup>83</sup>

Sufis are framed in official historiography as oppressive religious authorities who discouraged music and dance. However Sufi rituals revolve around music and dance, which have become impossible to perform or even difficult to study due to government repression. In the early 2000s one Uyghur scholar of Sufism told a Chinese-American researcher that his equipment and the recordings made during research trips had been confiscated by police. The police interrogated him and instructed him not to speak to Americans about Sufi music.<sup>84</sup> Those Uyghurs still practicing Sufi ritual had to do so surreptitiously; those caught performing, would

be punished with wage cuts and police surveillance, as happened to a group who performed for a Japanese filmmaker in the early 2000s.<sup>85</sup>

In March of 2014, Dilnur Abdaulla, deputy chair of the China Dancer's Association, said that religious extremists were compelling people not to sing and dance. That year marked the beginning of a ramped up anti-extremism propaganda campaign in which music and dancing has played a prominent role. State song-and-dance troupes are sent down to the countryside to "promote modern lifestyles and tackle religious extremism."<sup>86</sup> These include instituting "a weekly meshrep to counter extremism," transforming the traditional community event into one where Uyghurs must demonstrate loyalty to the state and to the Chinese Communist Party.<sup>87</sup> The safeguarding program which is part of the meshrep's inscription on the UNESCO list has become a tool in a propaganda campaign. This type of "meshrep" is a distortion of the tradition and calls into question China's commitment to the principles laid out in UNESCO's requirements for preserving intangible cultural heritage items in urgent need of safeguarding, which include ensuring that practitioners of a tradition have leadership in its preservation.



*Elderly meshrep inheritors dance to "Little Apple" © Tianshanwang/Zuihouyigongli*

The weekly or daily song and dance sessions are not limited to traditional elements or Red Songs. In recent years the Chinese pop song "Little Apple" has often featured in these events, and as a modern pop song it has become part of a repertoire to help promote "development and modernity."<sup>88</sup> Particularly controversial are the images of imams dancing to the tune which have appeared in the Chinese media.<sup>89</sup> The image of Uyghurs performing a combination of new and

traditional dances to a modern Chinese pop song is intended to display their loyalty to the state, rejection of “extremism,” and celebration of the benefits of modernity which the state provides. One video, which went viral according to the Chinese media, shows elderly Uyghurs from a Poksam County meshrep cultural group dancing to the song to show that they “won’t allow ruffians to disturb our carefree and happy life,”<sup>90</sup> and “their desire to enjoy modern culture.”<sup>91</sup> The performance also served to promote local tourist attractions such as the local folk culture village and the Yarkand River Wetlands National Scenic Area.<sup>92</sup> One report written by an anonymous Uyghur which appeared in a Hong Kong media outlet acknowledged that the dancing was mandatory, but claimed that locals supported the de-radicalization campaign, including imams who had initially disapproved of the dancing later encouraging their family members to participate and participating themselves.<sup>93</sup>

The authorities have even tried to promote the concept of a “Dolan Little Apple” style of dance, to match the traditional Dolan Meshrep. Massive public displays of the modern dance have been staged in places like Mekit County’s culture square.<sup>94</sup> The square, prominently featuring hanbiao columns and Shang dynasty style bronze ding braziers, does not place a particular emphasis on Uyghur culture. The square also serves a use for displays of force by the militarized police, in addition to dancing.<sup>95</sup>



*A large crowd dances the “Dolan Little Apple” in Mekit County, 2015 © Tianshan*

Authorities from a variety of CCP organs organize this type of local cultural performance. For example, the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corp’s (bingtuan) Party Committee Propaganda Department work committee arranges dates for activities and for the masses to “spontaneously” dance the meshrep and “Little Apple,”<sup>96</sup> or put on Chinese cultural

performances of Peking opera to build bingtuan/masses solidarity.<sup>97</sup> The People’s Liberation Army encourages soldiers to learn folk dances to “make friends with the minority masses.”<sup>98</sup> Mass demonstrations of Chinese cultural practices are also encouraged by the authorities and organized by officials, for example thousands of “cadres and people of all ethnic groups” gathering to “Sing the National Anthem and Practice Tai Chi” in Yarkand in 2016,<sup>99</sup> or organizing tai chi demonstrations by Uyghur high school students.<sup>100</sup>



*Bingtuan “Sending Culture to the Grassroots” Peking Opera Performance © Bingtuan Third Division*

Music is a popular form of entertainment in Uyghur communities and is one of the most important tools to maintain knowledge of the Uyghur language in the face of its marginalization in the education system and other public institutions. Uyghurs are creating music in modern styles such as rock, pop and rap, but links to classical and folk traditions- both inscribed as national level ICH items- can still be seen, helping ensure that traditional styles remain relevant to modern audiences.<sup>101</sup> In the 1990s mass-produced music cassettes became widely popular, allowing a Uyghur alternative to Chinese-language media to grow. Singers whose songs contained political subtexts drew attention from the authorities, who banned their work and performances. These lyrics were metaphorical- for example Omarjan Alim’s song entitled *Mehman Bashlidim* (I Brought Home a Guest), banned after release, describing a guest who entered the narrator’s home and pushed him out into the desert suggests the narrator’s view of Uyghur-Han relations: “I brought a guest back to my home/And at the back laid down a cushion/now I cannot enter/the house I built with my own hands.”<sup>102</sup>

One musician, Abdurahim Heyit, was swept up in the recent crackdown and detained without charge in April 2017.<sup>103</sup> He had been under scrutiny from the 1990s, when authorities forbid him from touring, finally completely banning him from recording his songs or performing anywhere but with an official troupe. He declined to appear in televised performances, telling Joanne Smith-Finley “I don’t want to play the songs the producers ask me to play...and they won’t let me play the songs I want to play!”<sup>104</sup> His recent arrest was also likely due to the lyrics of one of his songs, according to the poet Tahir Hamut, who reported his arrest. His song lyrics were written by others, consisting of poetry published by government approved presses.

Even artists who avoid political subjects have been affected by the ongoing crackdown. Pop star Abalajan Ayup was detained in February 2018 upon his return from a music tour in Shanghai. Abalajan had been making efforts to appeal to a Chinese audience by releasing Mandarin language songs and avoided political topics. One of his songs did however seem to subtly suggest the importance of Uyghur language education, although it also said that Uyghur children should also learn Mandarin.<sup>105</sup> The authorities have not announced his detainment or the reasons for it, though Radio Free Asia recently confirmed it by speaking to police in his hometown.<sup>106</sup>

The lyrics of Uyghur music must be translated into Chinese and submitted along with the scores to the regional offices of the General Administration of Press and Publications and reviewed to ensure they are not “proselytizing” or “pornographic.”<sup>107</sup> “New” songs which utilize government-approved traditional folk song lyrics do not need prior approval; these folk songs are published in official anthologies subject to the directives of official censors. Musicians are told to only include positive messages in their music and to avoid “gloomy images.”<sup>108</sup> The scrutiny includes not only recording artists but also everyday performers, who by the late ‘90s were given lists of songs forbidden to play at weddings and other events.

The authorities increased their attention on the lyrics of Uyghur popular songs since the mid-nineties, and after September 11<sup>th</sup> equated political song lyrics to separatism and terrorism, leading to an increase of control over cultural products.<sup>109</sup> In 2002 the vice-chairman of the Xinjiang People’s Congress declared that the arts were being used to attack China on the ideological front, and were the same group as those conducting “violent terrorist operations.”<sup>110</sup> At the end of a concert in the Xinjiang People’s hall in 2002, the poet Tursunjan Emet recited a poem that was deemed have separatist undertones, leading the provincial government to undertake a campaign against those who “openly advocated separatism in the name of art.”<sup>111</sup> This meant, as the scholar Joanne Smith-Finley pointed out, that cadres once again were “instructed to use politics as the only standard when judging and artistic or literary work.”<sup>112</sup>

The Deputy Party Secretary of the XUAR Propaganda Bureau and Secretary of the XUAR Ministry of Culture Party Leadership Group Ren Hua emphasized the cultural ministry’s role in combating the “Three Evil Forces” and “Two Faced People,” and ensuring that “absolute ideological security” is maintained in the cultural realm.<sup>113</sup> He went on to say that the culture of Xinjiang is characterized by “unity and diversity,” and is an “important part of the outstanding

Chinese culture.”<sup>114</sup> The monitoring of cultural production is undertaken down to the lowest level via Mass Art Centers. While the government presents this as promoting and protecting culture, it also means that cultural works and those that create them are closely monitored, ensuring their works adhere to the Party’s policies and ideology.

Given the government’s view of culture as a tool to promote ideology, and its need for total “ideological security,” it should come as no surprise that the on-going crackdown has affected the Uyghur cultural industry as well. Sociologist Dilnur Reyhan describes how Uyghur produced television and radio shows which were allowed to be broadcast under supervision of the Ministry of Culture have gone off the air.<sup>115</sup> The Ministry ensures that some Chinese contestants are included on talent shows, that they have Chinese subtitles, no trace of Uyghur nationalism, and do not mention Turkey, use Turkish phrases, or advertise Turkish products. Uyghur singing and dancing competition shows had become popular internationally, with contestants coming from neighboring Central Asian countries to participate. The acceleration of securitization under Chen Quanguo has devastated the Uyghur businesses which supported these shows, and the Ministry of Culture did not renew their annual contracts citing the political situation.<sup>116</sup> Those Uyghur programs still being broadcast have taken a more propagandistic tone. Uyghur cultural products’ potential appeal to neighboring countries is not being promoted despite the Ministry’s plans to try to increase cultural exports.

Even as authorities make it difficult for Uyghurs to organize their own gatherings and performances, they have been increasing official propaganda performances. This often takes the form of official troupes staging shows organized by the Publicity Department (formerly officially translated as the Propaganda Department). One of the stranger uses of performance for propaganda has been “flash mobs,” including many in honor of the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress.<sup>117</sup> Performers organized by the regional Publicity Bureau gather at a prominent location such as Tianchi Lake and lead bystanders in singing and dancing, including new interpretations of folk songs as well as newer, more propagandistic songs such as “Our Xinjiang is a Good Place,” a song with overtones of welcoming Han settlers to a virgin land.<sup>118</sup> These types of performances serve to create an image of a contented Uyghur population and are aimed in no small part towards tourists. The merchants at the bazaar in Urumchi organize “flash mobs” of Uyghur dancers in ethnic costume, so tourists can enjoy “Xinjiang ethnic folk music while shopping.”<sup>119</sup>



*Red Song contest in Kashgar, 2016 © ZhongguoKashiwang*

As Joanne Smith-Finley notes, the Chinese government “has frequently used vocal music as a vehicle for the dissemination of national standard speech (Mandarin) in the hopes that local, regional and ethnic loyalties will transform into national (Chinese) ones. Where minority languages are retained in folk songs, the aim has been to represent ethnic diversity while lyrics stress inter-ethnic harmony.”<sup>120</sup> Events promoting official ideology and Mandarin speaking have become ever more frequent in East Turkestan. Singing “Red Songs” has become an increasingly prominent feature of officially staged cultural activities, as in the above photo of a singing competition held in Kashgar in 2016.<sup>121</sup> For a contest in 2017, Han teachers from inland China went to Poskam and “became teachers, helping the music teachers correct the pronunciation of the Uyghur villagers until they could all sing Red Songs in pure Mandarin.”<sup>122</sup>

The authorities are also increasingly promoting Chinese cultural performances among Uyghur children. In December of 2017 one village outside of Kashgar had its fourth graders perform Peking Opera for a visiting association of Henan businessmen to express gratitude for the 17,000 renminbi worth of winter clothing they had donated.<sup>123</sup> The Chinese classics has become a part of the education of Uyghur children,<sup>124</sup> and campaigns such as “mobile museums” which “resemble mobile propaganda teams” traveling to rural areas to ensure that the official historical narrative reaches even remote areas.<sup>125</sup> History lectures are held in villages across the region on “local, ethnic and religious history” to help people be “more confident in their culture and socialism in the new era.”<sup>126</sup>



*Children perform Peking Opera @  
ZhongguoKashiwang*

The many performance troupes in the PRC have frequently toured overseas since reform and opening, a trend that is accelerating under campaigns to increase China’s cultural soft power. Uyghur music and dance performances overseas have become an advertisement for China’s Belt and Road Initiative. The government has positioned East Turkestan as the central hub for the overland route through Central Asia; despite trying to prevent the free movement of Uyghurs across the border, Uyghur musical culture suggests ties to neighboring regions, making it a useful tool for the promotion of Xi Jinping’s signature foreign policy initiative. Events like

the “China Xinjiang International Dance Festival” and numerous Silk Road themed stage shows are a “strategic move... combin[ing] cultural and economic exchanges under the ambit of Belt and Road Construction.”<sup>127</sup> Shows with names like “China Dream on the Silk Road- the Eternal Meshrep”<sup>128</sup> and “Meshrep Arrives in My Home” are developed as part of a strategy to promote the Silk Road Economic Belt, the overland route of the BRI, attracting tourism and investment.<sup>129</sup> Wealthy Chinese cities like Shanghai are pairing with XUAR TV stations and performing arts troupes to develop cultural industries, including Twelve Muqam themed stage shows, in order to “help ethnic minorities develop their culture and present it in a more refined form on the world stage.”<sup>130</sup>

The central Ministry of Culture released a “One Belt One Road Culture Development Plan” in 2017, laying out its strategy to build Belt and Road themed cultural exchanges and “brands” under government leadership.<sup>131</sup> The XUAR Tourism Bureau is also particularly keen to establish a “Silk Road Ethnic and Cultural Brand” with strong government oversight, with a particular focus on the southern part of East Turkestan.<sup>132</sup> The regional cultural development five-year plan calls for the construction of venues for music and dance for “Xinjiang-style, healthy, civilized, and fashionable” entertainment events.<sup>133</sup> The government does not appear to believe that its desire to present a unique “brand” is working at cross-purposes to the assimilation campaigns which threaten to homogenize the region.<sup>134</sup>

## **Shrines and Shrine Festivals- Forbidden Uyghur Intangible Cultural Heritage**

Shrine festivals have traditionally been an important facet of Uyghur religious practice, providing a place to transmit oral history and music. Scholar Rian Thum argues that worship at the shrines, including during festivals, brought people from various cities and oases together, making them a significant part of the formation of Uyghur identity.<sup>135</sup> However, shrine festivals are not recognized by the government as intangible cultural heritage worthy of protection, even though they provide a platform and context for many traditions inscribed on the national ICH list. Indeed, most if not all significant festivals have been banned, while the transformation of some shrines into tourist attractions discourages their traditional role in Uyghur society. The authorities banned the festivals due to their fear of large gatherings of Uyghurs and any religious influence among them, but Rachel Harris suggests the possibility that the authorities also reject on an aesthetic level the “disorderly sights and sounds,” and that the music and that rituals performed at them represent “alternative forms of power [which] are antithetical to the modernizing, totalizing mission of the nation state.”<sup>136</sup>

Situated between Kashgar and Yarkand on the site of a 998 AD battle between the forces of the Qarakhanid king Ali Arslan Khan the Buddhist Kingdom of Khotan, the Ordam shrine sits on a significant site in the story of the Islamization of the region.<sup>137</sup> Located dozens of kilometers into the desert, it consists of a tall mast on a sand dune- the mazar (shrine) itself- and a mosque, prayer hall and residence a kilometer away. On the first ten days of the Muslim month of Muharram, the Ordam shrine was the site of a major festival in which tens of thousands of Uyghurs participated, until it was banned in 1997.<sup>138</sup> The festival featured the singing of the muqam and meshrep, singing of hikmat (melodic chants) by ashiqs (Sufi mendicants), recitation of oral history, and the sama dance. Ritual healers called bakhsi would play a mix of secular and sacred music, including drumming which was rare at other festivals.<sup>139</sup> Pilgrims would bury themselves in sand, believed to have healing powers. The sand burial, no longer permitted as part of the rituals at Ordam, has been listed on the Chinese national ICH list as the “Uyghur sand treatment.” Instead of being performed at festivals in the context of a sacred site, it is marketed as an experience for tourists.<sup>140</sup>

The Xinjiang Arts Research Unit recorded music at the Ordam festival in 1995, the last time it was held. The festival had only been revived in 1980, after its previous ban in 1958 after the Anti-Rightist Campaign, when it was banned as feudal and superstitious. The shrine was closed to the public and the families of the shaykhs were forced to move away, leaving only one who was required to report unregistered visitors to the authorities; Rian Thum reports that he when he attempted to visit the shrine in 2007 the police detained him and sent him to the county police headquarters, telling him that “there was ‘something secret’ out in the desert.”<sup>141</sup> However, Rahile Dawut reports that as of 2015 some pilgrims still came to secretly pray at the shrine at night. Shrines closed after Ordam include the shrine of Imam Shakir outside of Khotan, which was shut down in 2009 and all religious activity there forbidden. Pilgrims who defied the ban

were fined by the authorities for the crime of “cross village worship,” and were required to do self-criticism in front on their fellow villagers so others could learn from their example.<sup>142</sup>

In 1997 another festival, held at the Imam Hasim mazar, become more heavily regulated by the authorities, with tickets sold and police overseeing the event, but was not at that time banned.<sup>143</sup> It provided an important platform for the performance of dastan, another item on the national ICH list. Dastan are recitations of epic poems with musical accompaniment, traditional among Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples. However, Rahile Dawut and Elise Anderson report that the festival has not taken place since 2013,<sup>144</sup> and Rian Thum states when he attempted to visit in 2013 police were preventing anyone from approaching it; he joined a small group of pilgrims that was taking the risk of secretly visiting it via a long detour through the desert.<sup>145</sup> Even as the authorities actively shut down traditional venues for dastan performance, multi-national conferences for scholars are held, suggesting that it is among the many ICH items whose preservation is expert-led rather than community led.<sup>146</sup> Space for dastanchi to perform is shrinking; not only can they no longer perform at the large festivals but traditional performance venues like bazaars no longer offer space. The requirements of appealing to tourists are changing the nature of the art form.<sup>147</sup>



*Festival at the Imam Asim shrine photographed in 2010 © Rian Thum in WSJ*

Shrines are not only a place for religious observation during festival days, but are also traditionally visited by pilgrims throughout the year. Rian Thum notes that the reciting of the histories and lives of the saints at shrines has been suppressed by the government, with the texts which record that history confiscated as illegal religious texts now being held as cultural property by official institutions which limit academics’ and the public’s access to them.<sup>148</sup>

Anthropologist Rahile Dawut states that local authorities and commercial interests were debating whether pilgrimage to religious sites should be discouraged as superstition or exploited as a tourism resource following the model of the commercialization of Tibetan religious culture. According to Jay Dautcher, they were being reshaped by the government into tourist sites beginning in the 1990s, with the tourism administration bureau fencing and ticketing the entrance of one mazar he observed in Ghulja.<sup>149</sup> Three shrines, the Afaq Khoja, Mahmud al-Kashghari and Yusuf Khass, together with the Id Kah mosque, have become major tourist attractions in Kashgar, leading mostly Han owned private tourism companies to buy the management rights to other shrines and charge both Han tourists and Uyghur pilgrims to enter. The authorities were conflicted about whether to define all shrine pilgrimage as illegal religious activity and feudal superstition, and as noted above have banned large-scale festivals. Rian Thum observed that some smaller shrines appeared closed during a trip to East Turkestan in 2017.<sup>150</sup> As Rahile Dawut notes, shrine festivals represent a moderate, indigenous form of Islam and thus cannot be reasonably linked to foreign Islamic extremism.

She also notes that the decisions about transforming shrines into tourist attractions are mostly made above the heads of the local people and even the local governments, and “[m]ost benefits of tourism are siphoned away from the local area, so that local people most often feel themselves as outsiders. The history of the shrines is often explained to tourists by Han Chinese tour guides who know very little about the local culture. Misinterpretation of Uyghur culture thus often annoys the local community.”<sup>151</sup> The festival at the Jafiri Sadiq Mazar may have been the last major festival to survive, with required registration with the police and tickets which could be prohibitively expensive, meaning that as numbers of Han tourists increased, the numbers of Uyghur pilgrims declined.<sup>152</sup> However, Rian Thum found police blocking entrance to the shrine in 2015, saying that it now appears that all Uyghur shrine festivals are now forbidden.<sup>153</sup>

The entire village in which the Tuyuq Khojam Mazar is situated was turned into a tourist attraction in 2004, and is framed as a place where visitors can see Uyghurs living a simple life according to ancient customs.<sup>154</sup> The owner of the private company which earns the ticket revenue want to encourage pilgrims, believing the impression of authentic religious practice will attract more tourists, but in the management of the site it engages with higher government offices instead of the local government, shrine custodians and villagers.<sup>155</sup> While Uyghur pilgrims could enter for free, they could only visit the mazar and were not permitted to enter the village. Rahile Dawut proposes instead that tourism income should be used to support the local community and its cultural heritage: “Locals should be provided with opportunities to market their own religious heritage, not simply for commercial purposes, but also as an important means to preserve, revive and above all represent their traditional culture.”<sup>156</sup>



*“A multi-ethnic crowd dances a cheerful meshrep together” for Chinese New Year © Xinhua*

While the most uniquely Uyghur festivals are banned, the CCP authorities appear to be trying to promote the celebration of Chinese New Year among Uyghurs. Chinese New Year, or Spring Festival, is not a traditional Uyghur holiday and its associated customs not performed by the Uyghur population. Media reports from the past several years have highlighted Uyghurs celebrating the festival alongside CCP members sent to villages on “visiting” trips where they conduct Chinese New Year traditions with an assigned family to increase “ethnic unity.”<sup>157</sup> For example a 2016 report from the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection describes Uyghurs in Awat country, Aksu, “celebrating the traditional Chinese festival in their own unique way,” hanging up spring couplets, red lanterns and “fu” happiness characters, along with dancing in a meshrep, “an indispensable part of the Dolan people’s celebration of Chinese New Year.”<sup>158</sup> In 2017, a Xinhua article reported that a “visiting the people” work team would spend Chinese New Year in a village in Kargilik county- normally the mostly Han officials were allowed to return home to their families as is traditional. One official said that while he felt some regret about not being able to return home, he “was happy to spread the flavor of Chinese New Year to the Uyghurs there.”<sup>159</sup> Another village outside of Kashgar held a three day “ethnic unity spring festival celebration,” the first time that there was a Chinese New Year atmosphere in the village, according to one resident.<sup>160</sup>

The government efforts to promote the celebration of Chinese New Year among Uyghurs accelerated in 2018; this includes unconfirmed reports that this included fines for those who did not post New Year couplets, eat dumplings and perform other traditions.<sup>161</sup> Though building a “Happy Chinese New Year cultural brand” is part of the Ministry of Culture’s Belt and Road Strategy,<sup>162</sup> UHRP believes that the campaign aimed at Uyghurs seems intended to assimilate them into Chinese culture.

Many media outlets reported on the festivities organized by CCP officials. In one village in Makit County, a celebration was organized at the social welfare office where elderly Uyghurs made dumplings with officials and watched a performance by children from the Makit County Number Two Kindergarten wearing Chinese costumes and Chinese opera masks.<sup>163</sup> A video produced by Xinjiang Television shows young children performing in Chinese hanfu robes,<sup>164</sup> the television station also set up a number of sub-venues for live New Year celebration performances.<sup>165</sup> The mix of Chinese performances such as lion dances with performances of Uyghur items such as the muqam seem calculated to reduce Uyghur performance to one act in a variety show, as in the national CCTV New Year's Gala broadcast from Beijing.<sup>166</sup> As anthropologist Darren Byler points out, the staged photo ops of Uyghurs celebrating alongside Han officials which appeared in large number in the Chinese media during the 2018 Chinese New Year Celebrations are taking place against the backdrop of tens of thousands of Uyghurs being detained in reeducation camps, making it likely that those remaining to celebrate were doing so under duress.<sup>167</sup>



*Kindergarteners in Makit County perform for Chinese New Year © Makit Zero Distance*

This is in marked contrast to the obstacles which the government places in front of Uyghurs who wish to participate in traditional holidays or religious observances like Ramadan, for example forbidding fasting by students and officials and requiring restaurants to remain open.

Secular holidays such as Norwuz receive a degree of government promotion, albeit not always in a traditional manner, instead serving as another opportunity for the government to organize propaganda events, for example large scale ‘sama’ dance contest<sup>168</sup> or using it as another opportunity for Party work teams to “educate the masses” and lead de-radicalization activities.<sup>169</sup> The festival of Nowruz is traditionally celebrated by Uyghurs as their New Year festival is also celebrated across Central Asia, Iran and Turkey. This makes it another curious addition to the Chinese national list of ICH.

## **Ethnic Crafts and the Tourism Industry**

The development of the ethnic craft industry can be a route to both increasing household income and preserving skills that would otherwise be lost. This is one of the motivations behind listing so many traditional crafts as items of intangible cultural heritage in China, including Uyghur crafts. While the commoditization of traditional crafts may not be as obviously sensitive as that of tuning sacred sites into tourist attractions- the products craftsmen create are literally commodities- even they are influenced by the repression in East Turkestan and state control over definitions of Uyghur identity. Because the product is not merely a souvenir “but a representation of the ethnic folk themselves,” mass produced, or profit-focused state led production, can undermine what makes the crafts culturally significant.<sup>170</sup> Some of these crafts can even become discouraged because of political sensitivities; the preservation of traditional crafts has become symbolic cultural diversity as the government’s assimilative policies accelerate.

Uyghurs are among the groups which figure in the minority “folk village” theme parks in wealthy Chinese cities, which sell an ideal of rural life with a veneer of the exotic, “based solely on replication and display of some selected symbols and markers of ethnic exoticism and bear little distinction from folk cultures being promoted and standardized throughout China,” as scholars of the Chinese tourism industry Geoffrey Wall and Li Yang put it.<sup>171</sup> Uyghurs are presented alongside dozens of other groups with whom they have nothing in common other than their numerical relationship and comparative “exoticness” to the Han. “Living fossils” is the term often used to describe certain traditional crafts or entire villages.<sup>172</sup>

Authentic cultural elements of ethnic minorities are distorted in the need to appeal to tourists. Within East Turkestan, Uyghur culture is also set aside in park settings aimed at tourists, as well as in markets for artisans to sell their wares to tourist buyers. The Mekit county Dolan Folk Customs Tourism Street, for example, promises to create a “super large-scale platform for cultural tourism, entrepreneurship and industrial poverty elimination, ” by promoting businesses engaged in making handicrafts, dried fruit, ethnic clothing and food.<sup>173</sup>

The provincial tourism bureau is deeply involved in developing projects with the goal of using “folk culture” for poverty alleviation. These projects are aimed at bringing in Han tourists to rural parts of East Turkestan, and often take the form of parks with various attractions, not necessarily utilizing Uyghur culture. For example, the Hannuoyi Cultural Industry Park (汉诺依文化产业园) in Beshgeran County outside of Kashgar, features a “Red Culture” education area where one can experience the time of collectivization including dance, music, and food, juxtaposed with a “National Culture Academy” where visitors can learn about Chinese medicine, calligraphy, painting, music and dance.<sup>174</sup>



*Above: “Red Culture” education center Below: “National Studies Academy” at the Hannouyi Park in Beshgaren © Kashgar City Net*

This is part of the plan to develop “a cultural tourism industry with national characteristics” in Beshgeran County focusing on “experiences” for tourists. Agricultural tourism seems to be where the local Uyghurs figure into the plan, with new housing being built for “farmhouse” tourism and pomegranate cultivation, vineyards and wineries being promoted to appeal to tourists.<sup>175</sup> The plan appears to be highly center-led; as the Hannouyi Cultural Industry Park was under construction the Kashgar Tourism Bureau held an ethnic unity rally in the village where the cadres gave speeches, sang songs with the locals such as “Without the Communist Party There Would Be No New China” and “Unity is Strength,” and held an official meshrep.<sup>176</sup>

This problem of culture being reinvented for outsiders, which is a feature of ethnic tourism worldwide, is compounded by the political and economic marginalization that the Uyghurs face;

creating dependence on Han tourism reinforces the political project of Han control of East Turkestan. Even cultural preservation is motivated mostly by tourist demand for “authenticity.” What’s more, the government argues that the securitization of the region is necessary to create the conditions where tourism can develop, and enlists tourism bureaus in the work of “stability maintenance.”<sup>177</sup> Local tour guides were ordered to monitor foreign tourists ahead of a Belt and Road conference, according to a manager from the only tour company permitted to guide foreign tour groups in East Turkestan, the state-owned China International Travel Service.<sup>178</sup> The manager stated that foreigners “asking questions on banned topics,” would “cause a lot of problems” for them when reported to the police. Uyghur tour guides face particularly strict monitoring of their political attitudes to ensure that they do not give a negative impression of the political situation to foreigners.

However, instead of creating a feeling of security among visitors, the omnipresence of the security forces leaves an impression that the region is dangerous, hurting those Uyghurs who have come to depend on tourism for their livelihoods.<sup>179</sup> The number of visitors dropped sharply in 2014 to 20 million, but the regional government claims that 2017 saw a 30% increase from 2016 to 107 million, and they hope to again increase that number by 30% in 2018,<sup>180</sup> demonstrating that the region is harmonious and stable, in the words of the latest government work report.<sup>181</sup> The previous year’s government work report described the plan for the expansion of tourism, particularly cultural tourism in the southern part of East Turkestan, on the basis of its “ethnic customs and abundant Silk Road cultural resources” and according to a “scientific tourism industry development plan.”<sup>182</sup>

Pal Nyiriri, a scholar of the Chinese tourism industry, notes that Chinese experts who formulated the plans for the development of the domestic tourism industry saw it not only as a means of increasing employment opportunities, but also a means to raise the “civilization” level of rural areas, exposing their residents to city dwellers with modern lifestyles. An important element in the Chinese state’s tourism industry plan is “correctly framed consumption of places as an instrument of the strengthening national consciousness.”<sup>183</sup> As Nyiriri notes, the government at the “county, prefecture or provincial level...are present as both stakeholders (co-owners) *and* regulators in every tourism development project,” describing the Chinese tourism industry as a system of “indoctrainment.”<sup>184</sup>

There has traditionally been a connection between the guilds of Uyghur craftsmen and Sufi brotherhoods, meaning that there has been a spiritual element even in everyday business for the Uyghur people. Each craft had a patron saint, and craftsmen would traditionally gather once a week to commemorate him, similar to veneration at shrines, according to the fieldwork of Ildiko Beller-Hann.<sup>185</sup> Religious tradition was embedded even in everyday business, and each craft had a handbook laying out appropriate rituals as well as the history of the trade.<sup>186</sup>

The government promotes craftsmanship on its own terms, just like every other element of ICH. A book entitled “Ancient Uyghur Craftsmanship,” first published in 1988, which discussed

papermaking, carpentry, carpet making and silk weaving was banned and thousands of copies burned, along with numerous other books on Uyghur history in 2002 during a crackdown on Uyghur culture for its supposedly separatist content, perhaps due to the Quranic verses it contained.<sup>187</sup> At least one Uyghur craft on the national ICH list appear to have lost government support, namely Uyghur knifemaking. Many knives for sale as souvenirs are cheap mass-produced ones; artisan-made knives are more expensive. According to one report, knifemakers in Yengisar, the most famous town of the knifemaking craft, were forced to close their shops for a week when a trade fair in Urumchi was going on.<sup>188</sup> One travel writer notes that tourists are only permitted to buy one knife at a time and must ship it home instead of taking it on planes or trains, damaging the business of the Uyghur artisans.<sup>189</sup>

Another craft is atlas silk, traditionally an element in Uyghur women's wardrobe and one of the most visible symbols of Uyghur ethnicity. It continues to be made in the traditional manner by professional silk weavers, particularly in and around the city of Hotan. The silk weaving process is on the national list of ICH, as is traditional Uyghur clothing. Government authorities are promoting it as part of its textile industry development strategy, sponsoring fashion shows and other events.<sup>190</sup>

Ethnic clothing is closely associated with minority identity in China and is one of the characteristics that was used by the state to distinguish an ethnicity.<sup>191</sup> Academic Anna Hayes states that official presentations of ethnic minorities in the Xinjiang Regional Museum focus on the "otherness" and "beauty" of minority nationalities. The museum's display of Uyghur dress, for example, describes the traditional costumes of Uyghur "Graceful Women and Handsome Men" as "reflect[ing] 'the Uyghur people's free, natural and unrestrained characters.'"<sup>192</sup> The essentializing nature of official depictions of ethnic clothing may be problematic from an academic perspective, but they are particularly troubling when one considers that the government reserves the right to define this and other aspects of Uyghur cultural identity, and once again frames its interventions in terms of "saving" authentic Uyghur culture.

In 2014 "a small leadership group at the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Bureau of Quality and Technology Supervision" in partnership with other offices carried out "standardization work" of ethnic minority dress due to concern over the alleged "disappearance" of traditional Uyghur clothing due to the influence of the Three Evil Forces of "extremism, separatism and terrorism."<sup>193</sup> The government has long politicized Uyghur dress, with efforts to prevent the wearing of Islamic dress going back to 2008, including rewards for turning in individuals with "bizarre dress" or long beards and campaigns like "Project Beauty."<sup>194</sup> The media promotes projects that portray Uyghur clothing as having no religious influence, such as the "100 Years of Uyghur Fashion" video, based on similar projects that became popular on the Internet in western countries. The video shows a model's outfits changing from atlas silk to revealing modern clothing, including a Red Guard uniform to represent the decade of the 1960s.<sup>195</sup>



*Xi Jinping presented with a doppa during his 2014 trip to Kashgar © CCTV*

The doppa hat and atlas silk are framed by the authorities as genuine traditional Uyghur clothing in contrast to headscarves and other “foreign” items. Officials even occasionally wear one themselves for ethnic unity photo-ops, including Xi Jinping himself. However, even this officially sanctioned apparel is discouraged in some contexts, including banning the wearing of doppa at universities according to some reports.<sup>196</sup>

In 2009, a Uyghur student founded a festival on May fifth to celebrate the doppa; despite being initially promoted in the official media, students reported that just a few years later they were being warned by their teachers not to recognize the day by wearing a doppa.<sup>197</sup> In 2013 a photo circulated on the internet of middle school students being warned not to wear the doppa.<sup>198</sup> Authorities blamed the controversy on outside forces, meaning that individuals who continued to discuss the issue risked being labeled separatists, as a commentator on Uighurbiz.com pointed out at the time.<sup>199</sup> Disputes over the clothing bans have even ended in violence. In May of 2014 the arrest of several girls for wearing headscarves and Islamic dress sparked a protest in Aksu. Police fired on the crowd, killing up to four people.<sup>200</sup> House-to-house searches for women wearing headscarves reportedly resulted in the police shooting a family of five in Beshkent village in 2014, leading to further violent clashes with protestors in Yarkand.<sup>201</sup>



*Children in Aksu wearing hanfu given by the local working group of the Geology and Mineral Resources Bureau in 2015 © Tianshan/Zuihougongli*

While Uyghur clothing is being discouraged in schools, or only allowed under strict parameters set by the authorities, Chinese clothing is being increasingly pushed on Uyghur students. Hanfu is the pre-Qing style of clothing that died out in Chinese society four hundred years ago, and today is often associated with Chinese ethno-nationalists who believe that the cheongsam (qipao) is of Mongol/Manchu origin and therefore inappropriate as a symbol of Han Chinese identity.<sup>202</sup> This makes it somewhat controversial even within China.<sup>203</sup> However, there have been numerous media reports from various schools showing Uyghur children from kindergarten to middle school wearing “Confucian robes” and hanfu. Events where children recite Chinese classics feature the costumes and are explicitly connected to learning Mandarin, making locals in Aksu “Sing red songs out of gratitude to the Party, and demonstrating numerous ethnic groups’ recognition of the mainstream culture of the motherland,” in the words of the local United Front Work Department.<sup>204</sup> Hanfu also appears in village anti-extremism rallies, alongside military uniforms, in addition to more traditional Uyghur apparel, during which “everyone dances a happy meshrep.”<sup>205</sup>

Schools in the region use calligraphy and classical literature to “boost traditional Chinese culture and core socialist values,” thereby promoting “China’s core competitiveness.”<sup>206</sup> “Because Uyghurs are innately gifted in singing and dancing, they can learn Peking opera quickly,” said one Han teacher in a kindergarten outside Kashgar, which also has its students wear opera costumes, military uniforms and sing red songs.<sup>207</sup> This promotion of wearing “traditional” Chinese clothes serves an assimilative purpose and are provided by government agencies in at least some cases.<sup>208</sup> When images of Uyghur children wearing hanfu circulated on social media in 2017, some Han Chinese readers found the image of young Uyghurs encouraged to wear hanfu objectionable.<sup>209</sup> It should be noted that wearing hanfu is anything but traditional, it having died out centuries ago.

## Traditional Uyghur Building Techniques

Traditional Uyghur building techniques are on the national list of intangible cultural heritage, but the built environment of Uyghur cities is rapidly losing much of its distinctiveness. The demolition of Kashgar's Old Town in 2009 drew worldwide attention; historic monuments such as the Xanliq madrassa were demolished. What stands in its place today is designed to appeal to tourists. Attractions are designed to bolster a narrative of Chinese domination since ancient times, such as a new "Han dynasty" style construction in the Old Town of Kashgar.



*New Chinese style construction in Kashgar's old town*  
© Baidu streetview

Architecture is perhaps the most obvious example of the classic understanding of cultural heritage, and some might not seem to fit in the category of intangible heritage. Nevertheless, the knowledge of traditional building techniques can be thought of as intangible, and indeed traditional Uyghur construction techniques are on the national list of Chinese ICH. The physical buildings and built environment have social significance and demonstrate the artificiality of the separation between

intangible and material cultural heritage. As architectural anthropologist Madeln Kobi writes, "Uyghur-style buildings and interior decoration are of continued relevance for Uyghur inhabitants for performing indigeneity and for manifesting cultural difference from the Han Chinese."<sup>210</sup>

Uyghur building styles are clearly related to Central Asian and broader Islamic architecture in materials and design. The traditional materials of rammed earth and adobe which are well suited to the local climate are rapidly being replaced by the modern Chinese styles designed and built by firms from cities in the east. These buildings serve as a symbol of Han in-migration to many Uyghurs, even if they themselves live in them. Madeln Kobi states, "the political situation in XUAR with a strong state-promoted construction of a housing aesthetic borrowed from eastern China challenges Uyghur architecture to aesthetically and formally remain part of the cityscapes." Traditional Uyghur one or two-story courtyard houses are being demolished "as part of politically motivated campaigns to cleanse inner-city areas of rural migrants," simultaneously depriving them of affordable housing and homogenizing the urban design to appear more like Chinese cities.<sup>211</sup>

According to one observer, the objective of these redevelopment projects is ideological- the "State attacks these inhabited spaces in order to undermine the entire identity associated with

them.”<sup>212</sup> The new “old” neighborhoods with Uyghur facades will accommodate Uyghurs and serve as a tourist attraction, standing alongside Shenzhen-style skyscrapers designed to appeal to the new Chinese residents.

The city of Qumul re-developed a local shrine into a tourist attraction, and despite local objections demolished a large section of the surrounding cemetery to make way for a road. Though the shrine is still considered a holy place to local Uyghurs, the entrance fee is high, discouraging them from performing traditional prayers there according to fieldwork by Ildiko Beller-Hann. The local government also re-constructed the palace of the *wang*, the ruler who served as the local intermediary to the Qing Empire.<sup>213</sup> Locals told Beller-Hann that the original palace, destroyed in the 1930s, stood a kilometer from the reconstruction, whose Chinese-style architecture they saw as inauthentic. Architects were invited to submit designs, but “those proposing exclusively Central Asian Islamic architectural features were rejected.”<sup>214</sup> Instead the reconstruction has the features of Chinese imperial architecture whose most famous examples can be seen in Beijing. A Uyghur official from the local Cultural Department told her that the style was meant to blend Han, Mongol, and Islamic styles and represent interethnic harmony.



*Reconstructed palace of the Hami King in Qumul © Tianshan*

Uyghurs look westward to Central Asia, Iran, and Turkey for the origins of their traditional architectural style. Modern apartment buildings may have nods to traditional elements, but their construction techniques and layout are modern Chinese style. Advertisements for real estate promise the kind of luxury that can be found in Shanghai or Shenzhen in “Spanish” or “European” styles marketed towards Chinese on the basis that Uyghurs cannot afford the prices demanded.<sup>215</sup> Only one development that Kobi observed touted “ethnic elements” such as a

mosque, a performance area for singing and dancing and a street for selling handicrafts and ethnic apparel.<sup>216</sup>

After the first Xinjiang Work Forum cities were paired with wealthy counterparts in the east-Kashgar's major partner is the city of Shenzhen, a manufacturing city that arose in the eighties to take advantage of proximity to Hong Kong. Shenzhen, a city with a history only a few decades long, represents Chinese modernity and export-led development, which the government hopes to replicate in East Turkestan. Wealthy coastal cities are pairing with Kashgar to develop new commercial sections of the city such as the Guangzhou New City or the Kashgar Economic Development Zone, which aims to replicate Shenzhen. Shenzhen was also deeply involved in developing Kashgar's tourist industry, despite not being a major heritage tourism destination.<sup>217</sup> These developments significantly alter the cityscape, but Kashgar's remoteness from oceanic transportation creates doubts about whether it can replicate Shenzhen's success.<sup>218</sup>



*Computer image design of Kashgar Economic Development Zone, 2015, © China Daily*

While there are Uyghur architects creating developments aimed at Uyghur customers, they perceive themselves as discriminated against due to the fact Han control administrative posts and they do not have the “guanxi” connections necessary to obtain construction licenses and building permits. One middle class Uyghur told Madlen Kobi that the Hotan museum was originally going to be designed by a Uyghur architect, but the government did not approve the Uyghur design elements. He went on to say that “there are many rich [Uyghur] people in Hotan who would like to build special buildings with Uyghur characteristics, but the government does not allow them to do so.”<sup>219</sup>

Han architect Wang Xiaodong designed both the Urumqi bazaar and led the redevelopment of Kashgar “Old Town.” These constructions are designed by Chinese architects aimed at Chinese tourists who wish to see something exotic, not “Mandarin speaking middle-class Uyghurs living in apartments.”<sup>220</sup> They are also often built by companies from elsewhere. The Shandong Construction Company provided the bricks used in the bazaar, a deal believed by Uyghurs in

Urumchi to have been facilitated by corruption by then Party-Secretary Wang Lequan, who offered tenders to companies from his native province.<sup>221</sup> Within their modern apartments, many Uyghurs maintain traditional elements in decorative woodwork and layout of rooms, but the traditional techniques listed as ICH are no longer in widespread use. The reconstructed houses of the Kashgar Old Town are made of concrete and steel rebar, not the traditional adobe and tamped earth. The only traditional elements that remain are the façades designed to look like adobe and brickwork. The urban renewal brought with it not only the destruction of the physical houses but the social networks that they shaped and sustained, itself an important intangible facet of ethnic identity.



*The Reconstruction of Kashgar's Old Town, using modern techniques and an "adobe" façade*  
©Zhongguo Jingjiwang

## The Use of Folklore

Specific items of folklore relating to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region have also been placed on China's national level list of intangible cultural heritage. In certain cases, the items chosen can be interpreted as an attempt to bolster claims that the region has been part of China since ancient times. This can particularly be seen in the case of the legends of the Queen Mother of the West, a Taoist deity who is presented in official histories as historical or quasi-historical. She is described meeting the ruler of the Zhou dynasty, King Mu, as an equal, and is associated with the Kunlun Mountain, in myth described as a paradise where she grows immortality-granting peaches. In officially approved histories the Queen Mother of the West is "often described as an historical ruler rather than as a mythological deity, and her realm is depicted as one of the tributary states of the Zhou Empire," with her home placed in modern-day XUAR.<sup>222</sup>

The official narrative presented in local museums conflates XUAR with the Western Regions over which she ruled, and her dwelling place as beside the Tianchi Lake outside of Urumchi, where a Taoist temple to her was built in 1999 on the site of a Buddhist nunnery built in 1923 according to official media reports.<sup>223</sup> Her meeting with the legendary King Mu of Zhou represents an "effort to push back the first contact between peoples of the Central Plains and Xinjiang back through the centuries," and to frame it as peaceful exchange rather than conquest, according to historian Alessandro Rippa.<sup>224</sup> Even Chinese historians who doubt the historicity of the Queen Mother of the West assert that "the travel geography recalled in the text must be historically correct."<sup>225</sup> The Urumqi museum does not explore the westward origins of the most ancient cultures of the region, cultures which the official narrative links to the myth of the Queen Mother of the West. The museum's true examination of history only begins with the Han dynasty, with the date of 59 BCE, the "beginning of the Western Han Dynasty Governing the Western Region." This presentation is in service of a political agenda, as Rippa points out. Modern use of the Queen Mother of the West legend is intended to create narrative of the region belonging to China before even the Han dynasty presence.

The Legend of the Queen Mother of the West is listed as an item of ICH from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, despite other locations laying claim to it, such as the temple on her purported birthplace in Gansu,<sup>226</sup> or Qinghai.<sup>227</sup> The reconstructed temple serves as a tourist attraction; the local government instituted a cultural festival at the lake after the myth was inscribed as national level ICH in 2014 featuring Chinese customs and local singing and dancing performances. Reports from the time went out of the way to note that the audience included Uyghurs and that the event represented ethnic intermingling.<sup>228</sup> The annual event also includes Taoist ceremonies featuring hundreds of worshippers in hanfu.<sup>229</sup> Participants were gathered by festival organizers from across the northwest, and could win free transportation and lodging.<sup>230</sup> The contrast of an artificial "Chinese" festival with compensated participants stands in sharp contrast to the banned shrine festivals of the Uyghurs.



*“Taoist worshippers” at the Queen Mother of the West Festival, 2016 © Tianshan*

The Tianchi Lake tourist bureau even planted peach trees in the vicinity to match the story, despite climactic challenges, and have developed a biannual peach festival.<sup>231</sup> Together these serve to create the Xiwangmu “cultural brand.”<sup>232</sup> The 2012 peach festival’s major show, “Meeting at Lake Yao,” was a performance of the story of Xiwangmu’s meeting and romance with King Mu, reminiscent of the opera about Princess Wen Cheng’s marriage to the king of Tibet, but with even less basis in historical fact.<sup>233</sup>



*Performance of “Meeting at Lake Yao” at the 2012 Lake Peach Festival © Tianshan*



Above: Film Poster for Shanghai Animation Studio's new Äpändi film, ©Wangyi News  
 Below: Plans for Apandiland ©Tencent

There are also items of Uyghur folklore on the national list of ICH, namely the stories of Näsirdin Äpändi, a figure who appears in folklore across Central Asia and the Middle East as well as East Turkestan. A trickster figure, his “stories reinforce a Uyghur self-image of irreverence for those in positions of power, and valorize the use of witty retorts and disdain for protocol in public settings,” according to Nathan Light.<sup>234</sup> In addition to being another example of the Chinese authorities listing traditions that have transnational and non-Han significance as Chinese intangible cultural heritage, they also are serving as fodder for the cultural industry and tourism strategy. Apandiland, a theme park outside of Kashgar, features a performance space for darwaz (tightrope walking, another Uyghur item on the national ICH list), rides, a bazaar and garden; in sum, a Uyghur-themed Disneyland.<sup>235</sup> The first phase was scheduled to open in 2015, and was constructed with aid from the Guangdong government.<sup>236</sup> In 2016 a cartoon based on the stories was financed by aid money from Shanghai, as part of the Belt and Road “Culture First” strategy, in hopes of appealing to cultures where the tales are popular.<sup>237</sup>

The purpose of this report is not to argue for the accuracy of one historical narrative over another but to demonstrate that the official narrative serves the government’s interests in the region. The history and mythology of East Turkestan can only be approached from the official

position, preventing Uyghurs from examining their own history and making their own art. Forbidding historical research is a violation of their cultural rights in addition to their rights to free speech. China’s national Intangible Cultural Heritage Law passed in 2011 also placed restrictions on foreigners conducting research on ICH, who must get approval at the provincial level, partner with a Chinese ICH institution and turn over all their findings.<sup>238</sup> These rules make conducting academic research challenging, even on topics not at first glance sensitive, and contribute to the information blackout in the region.

## Conclusion

The preservation of Uyghur intangible cultural heritage and ensuring that its future development and evolution lies in Uyghur hands, faces a serious challenge in the form of the dominance of the cultural sphere by Chinese authorities. The CCP reserves the right to define Uyghur cultural identity in everything from music and dance to clothing and architecture. The state has the goal of assimilating Uyghurs into the Chinese “cultural mainstream,” leaving Uyghur cultural expression to serve either as a medium for state propaganda or as a tourist attraction, which serves both to make profit from it and to draw the region further into the control of the center. Political considerations are once again key to the creation of art in China; as Xi Jinping stated at the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, “Ideology determines the direction a culture should take and the path it should follow as it develops.”<sup>239</sup>

The Chinese government has reasserted control over the realm of culture and intends to use it as a tool to advance its own interests. This is not a new phenomenon. The scholar June Teufel Dreyer argued in 1993 that “cultural development carried on by the party and government on behalf of minorities seems to be acceptable, whereas cultural development carried out by minorities on their own behalf seems unacceptable.”<sup>240</sup> Only “minority culture under the direct control of party and government is celebrated; all other manifestations thereof are regarded with utmost suspicion.” Her description of China’s minority cultural policy as “pluralist in form but assimilationist in function” fits the Uyghur case very well. Even as the government promotes the “form” of Uyghur culture as a tourism resource, the assimilationist function has only accelerated in recent decades, and in the last few years has gotten to the point of promoting wearing hanfu and celebrating Chinese New Year, in addition to transforming the meshrep into a platform for propaganda campaigns.

The listing of two items of Uyghur intangible cultural heritage on the UNESCO List of Representative Works and on the List of Items in Need of Urgent Safeguarding has done little to preserve them. As critics like Laurajane Smith point out, the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage has an “inability to deal meaningfully with concepts of community,” and leads to a professionalized bureaucracy taking control of culture instead of community members.<sup>241</sup> This is certainly what has happened in the Chinese case. The requirement the UNESCO operate through state parties rather than sub-national groups means that the state is given the authority to put forward and oversee items of heritage, often of marginalized minority groups. Communities are an important part of the Convention, but UNESCO leaves it up to states to define what a community is. The Convention requires “consultation” but does not define what consultation is. If the community cannot meaningfully dissent from the official line, as is the case in repressive contexts like that in East Turkestan, then consultation cannot in any sense be a meaningful negotiation, making it “simply an exercise in canvassing opinion.”<sup>242</sup>

The apolitical stance that UNESCO takes is problematic because its project is inherently political, as it “is daily engaged in political acts of recognizing and/or misrecognising claims to

identity and cultural diversity.”<sup>243</sup> In the Uyghur case, by listing Muqam and Meshrep as pieces of Chinese intangible cultural heritage, it is giving legitimacy to the Chinese government’s claim to the right to control Uyghur cultural production without any concern for the current repressive political situation. China presents its micromanagement of Uyghur cultural expression as evidence for its support and preservation of it, even touting it as a human rights achievement. Cultural expression is not a “living fossil” but instead an important part of people’s identities, which inevitably change with the times. As Rachel Harris stated in her assessment of the meshrep for UNESCO, “[l]ocal manifestations of meshrep are living traditions, transmitted from generation to generation, and they have the potential to be updated and recreated in response to the changing environment and social realities.”<sup>244</sup> As of now, these changes solely take the form of the government dictating to Uyghurs how they will be performed, and solely to serve the government’s interests.

UNESCO must take seriously these issues if it wishes to ensure that the ICH of marginalized minority peoples are truly preserved. This is doubly important in the cases of states like China, which explicitly plans to use these cultures as a resource to pursue political goals. Because China is powerful and closely engaged in working with UNESCO, it has the potential to affect the future of international cultural policies. UNESCO should do more to ensure that sub-national communities and the bearers of heritage have a true voice in the proceedings.

The transformation of Uyghur cultural sites and the ICH associated with them into tourist attractions are another concern given Uyghurs’ limited control over their development and profits. Uyghurs’ lack of freedom of speech, assembly and religion and their lack of political representation mean that they have no way to have a voice in the development and use of these “cultural resources.” An influx of large numbers of tourists can create fundamental transformations in the meaning and performance of culture as it is transformed into a product for consumption by outsiders. As scholar of Chinese tourism Tim Oakes notes, “the national project of manufacturing traditional, yet commercialized, minzu culture tends to construct folk culture primarily as a performance” in the manner of the official song-and-dance troupes, while stripping it of its original significance.<sup>245</sup> This can be seen in the case of the banning of shrine festivals which served as an important context for many of the items of officially listed Uyghur ICH and now marketed to tourists, or in the meshrep whose importance derived from its community-led nature, now transformed into televised performances by professionals or vehicles for CCP propaganda.

Uyghurs should not be left out of decisions involving their own cultural products, let alone prevented from performing them entirely as in the case of shrine festivals or music which does not meet official approval. The UNESCO program for protecting Intangible Cultural Heritage is intended to preserve the conditions which allow the ICH to be performed or made and to protect cultural diversity. But the Chinese government’s explicitly assimilationist policy and center led program of producing art, developing heritage sites for tourism and inventing new heritage

events while banning traditional ones present the greatest challenge to this goal. The Chinese government has long been open with its belief that it has the right to manage cultural expression down to the lowest level; the brief period of freedom which opened up for the Uyghurs in the 1980s soon ended, and it appears that a new period of even stricter management has been developed.

UNESCO makes explicit reference to human rights in the preamble to the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, listing those international human rights declarations and conventions which include cultural rights.<sup>246</sup> It also states that its purpose is to promote the importance ICH in efforts to maintain cultural diversity and sustainable development. By controlling and banning Uyghur cultural expression, China fails to abide by the requirements of the human rights principles listed in international conventions including individual freedoms of speech, assembly and religion that are vital to any meaningful protection of ICH. China also fails to contribute to the goal of maintaining cultural diversity by actively undermining the roots of Uyghur culture and attempting to assimilate Uyghurs into a state-defined Chinese identity. The Chinese government's cultural projects do not facilitate cultural exchange and understanding on the basis mutual respect and equality, nor do they help preserve cultural diversity, UNESCO's overarching goals.

## **Recommendations:**

### **For UNESCO and other international cultural bodies:**

Consider possible consequences for state parties to the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage who fail to abide by international human rights instruments as referred to in its preamble, particularly when those rights violations touch on the very ICH items which UNESCO has listed as in need of protection. These may include not engaging in projects and activities with nations whose official policies fail to meet international human rights norms.

To this end, UNESCO should develop a review mechanism with a focus on the human rights aspects of safeguarding ICH, to be carried out by the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Strengthen the intangible heritage instrument's engagement with grassroots and sub-national groups, particularly focusing on member states with poor track records on abiding by the human rights principles necessary to ensure that ICH items are genuinely protected.

Put greater emphasis on the conditions necessary to truly preserve ICH items, namely freedom of speech, religion, and assembly. Bring heritage bearers and NGOs more directly into the process of the inscription and protection of ICH items at the international level and ensure that practitioners can use their own language during the process.

Send the UN Special Rapporteur for cultural rights to East Turkestan to investigate the situation and prepare a report for the General Assembly on the current situation of Uyghur cultural rights and their intersection with human rights broadly defined.

### **For the Chinese Government:**

Create the conditions to allow Uyghurs to enjoy their cultural rights as listed in Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and elaborated on in Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, including the right to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits, and the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production.

Sign and implement the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and implement Article 27, ensuring that Uyghurs are not denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language.

Abide by the principles of Article 1 of the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, namely protecting the existence and the national or ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic identity of minorities within their respective territories and encourage conditions for the promotion of that identity. ICH is an important facet

of protecting these principles, which can be done by ending restrictions on groups of Uyghurs assembling for events such as traditional festivals or community-organized meshrep; allowing Uyghur performing artists to make their art without oversight from censors; and fostering conditions where Uyghurs can utilize their own language in school, business, government, and art.

Ensure that Article 3 of the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities Persons is implemented. This means ensuring Uyghurs have the right to participate effectively in decisions on the national and regional level and ensuring the cultural policies involving Uyghur heritage are guided by Uyghurs at the grassroots level. This can be achieved by ensuring that Uyghurs have sufficient representation at all government levels necessary to ensure that any policy decisions have meaningful Uyghur input; and by ensuring Uyghurs' right to establish and maintain their own associations is protected.

Implement Article 4's requirements regarding non-discrimination and equality before the law by ending the system of arbitrary detention, particularly the re-education camps; by creating favorable conditions for Uyghur culture to flourish and facilitating education on Uyghur culture in the Uyghur language.

While formulating intangible cultural heritage policies follow the requirements laid out in the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage namely Article 15, which requires the State Party "endeavour to ensure the widest possible participation of communities, groups and, where appropriate, individuals that create, maintain and transmit such heritage, and to involve them actively in its management."

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The Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) was founded by the Uyghur American Association (UAA) in 2004 with a supporting grant from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). UHRP's mission is to promote human rights and democracy for the Uyghur people. In 2016, UHRP became an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit, tax-exempt organization.

UHRP works to raise the profile of the Uyghur people by:

Researching, writing and publishing commentary and reports in English and Chinese covering a broad range human rights issues involving civil and political rights, through to social cultural and economic rights;  
Preparing briefings – either written or in person – for journalists, academics, diplomats and legislators on the human rights situation faced by the Uyghur people.

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