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SAJIDE TURSUN

Gender and urban aspirations:  
the case of highly educated Uyghur  
women in Shanghai



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## Abstract

In spite of the growing attention given to minority Uyghurs in China, there has been little focus on gender issues in relation to the Uyghur migration to inland cities since the 1980s. Based on fifteen months of ethnographic research from 2012 to 2013, this article focuses on the lifeworlds of highly educated Uyghur women and their aspirations in the megacity of Shanghai. A combination of local gender norms, patriarchal Islamic ideologies, and state policies that aim to promote the emancipation of women have influenced the current status, conditions, and gendered identities of Uyghur women. Added to these are the shifting demands of an environment marked by rapid socioeconomic change in urban China that sees Uyghur women on the move. Tracing the migration story of Uyghur women through a case study of Xumar, a woman who pursued university education and then worked in Shanghai, I demonstrate the dilemma of staying or returning with which they constantly wrestle as they attempt to balance the normative Uyghur cultural values and their experiences of urbanism and cosmopolitanism in Shanghai. These factors all inform their understandings of what it means to be a Uyghur woman. Looking at the shifting ideas of gender among highly educated Uyghur women, this research contributes to understanding changes of Uyghur identity in relation to migration on the one hand, and reflects the ambivalence and complexity of Uyghur migration experiences on the other. Personal narratives of migrant Uyghur women shed light on the subtleties of the gender roles, arguments for and against returning home, and their later resignation to (arranged) marriages. The migration experiences gained by the women offer them a better understanding of themselves and of the demands and expectations of their cultural heritage. The urban aspirations of highly educated Uyghur women, this article argues, are produced by structural, cultural, and social factors that rely on dominant discourses of migration, minority, gender, age, class, and place.

**Keywords:** Uyghur, migration, China, Shanghai, gender, urban aspirations.

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## Introduction

The state implementation of the Reform and Opening-Up Policy (Chin. *gaige kaifang*<sup>1</sup>) in the 1980s ushered in rapidly booming economic development and urbanization in China. Facilitated by the relaxation of state migration policies, increasing numbers of internal migrants have made their way to big cities such as Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Shanghai, and Beijing. Uyghurs are part of this trend of migrants seeking social mobility. In spite of the distance from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (hereafter Xinjiang) in the far west,<sup>2</sup> Uyghurs have migrated to inland cities (Chin. *neidi*; Uygh. *ichkir*) in pursuit of education, business, and work opportunities. According to Yun Huang (2008, 1), there are approximately 1.6 million Uyghur migrants in China, of which about 600,000 are living in big cities like Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Beijing. In 2013, according to Shanghai Statistical Yearbook, the city's external/floating population (Chin. *wailai renkou*) accounted for about ten million among a total of twenty-four million residents.<sup>3</sup> According to the latest statistics available, there was an ethnic minority population of 276,163 in Shanghai in 2010, of which 5,254 were Uyghurs. The Uyghur population in Shanghai was 492 in 1990, 1,701 in 2000, and 5,254 in 2010 and has showed a rapid increase since the first decade of the 2000s.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Uyghur is primarily written in an Arabic alphabet. The transliterations of Uyghur names and other words in this article follow the Uyghur Latin Alphabet (ULY), based on Latin script. There are exceptions: one is the name of the Uyghur Autonomous Region, which is here spelled Xinjiang, the commonly accepted form in modern scholarly literature; others are also place-names, such as Kashgar instead of Qeshqer (ULY) or Kashi (Pinyin), which is widely recognized in English. Chinese words are transliterated according to the Pinyin system.

2 For example, the trip from Beijing to Ürümchi (Chin. Wulumuqi), the capital of Xinjiang, takes two days by train or five hours by plane. The trip from Shanghai to Kashgar (Chin. Kashi) takes two and half days by train or eight hours by plane.

3 See <http://www.stats-sh.gov.cn/tjnj/nj14.htm?d1=2014tjnj/C0202.htm> (official website of Shanghai Statistics Bureau)

4 Shanghai Municipal Commission of Ethnic and Religious Affairs, [www.shmzw.gov.cn/gb/mzw/shmz/tjb/index.html](http://www.shmzw.gov.cn/gb/mzw/shmz/tjb/index.html). My fieldwork suggests a larger quantity of Uyghurs, because the number of the floating population with non-*hukou* (the household registration system) status is always fluctuating. The *hukou* system is a state institution designed to provide population statistics and identify personal status; its regulation and restriction of population mobility has gradually loosened since the 1980s under the transformation from the planned to the market economy.

Peter van der Veer states that “the urban signifies the future, nowhere as clearly as in the aspiration of the Chinese government to make the urban the imminent future of many more millions who now live in the countryside” (2016, 251). Shanghai is a particularly aspirational city that has attracted migrants who now make up about half of the population. As the financial center of China and a globalizing city, it provides a platform for diverse cultural products, life opportunities, modes of consumption, and new identities. Uyghurs, like the rest of China’s internal migrants, consider Shanghai an ideal city to migrate to. Highly educated Uyghurs believe that Shanghai provides an impartial platform for social mobility, where people are evaluated based on job performance and individual capability rather than other factors. Generally, Shanghai can be seen as a microcosm of Uyghur migration patterns in inland cities across China.<sup>5</sup>

Studying Uyghurs outside Xinjiang provides us with a different perspective for looking closely at the encounters between borderland and inland, minorities and majorities, and the meetings of cultures, ideas, and lifestyles. Existing impressions and perceived images of Uyghurs and the majority Han Chinese (Chin. *zhuti minzu*) are reshaped and renegotiated in these encounters. Studying Uyghur migrants also allows us to reconsider understandings of the social relationships between ethnicity, minority, religion, urbanization, and globalization in China. Looking beyond the concept of identity, I also explore Uyghur aspirations in Shanghai, namely, an orientation to the future and the hope for a good or better life in the city; as a transformative process in which migrants negotiate authoritative state discourse, religious and cultural expectations; and, at the possibilities for socioeconomic mobility.

Notably, the migration from minority groups to metropolitan China offers rich data with which to explore gender-related questions, as minority movement involves a very high proportion of females (Iredale, Bilik, and Guo 2003, 14). While scholarship has paid increasing attention to female migrants in China and minority Uyghurs from various perspectives, there has been little focus on gender issues in relation to Uyghur migration to inland cities.<sup>6</sup> My own identity as a Uyghur woman opened up the possibility of looking closely at the lives of other Uyghur women. This article

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5 According to my fieldwork from 2012 to 2013, the majority of Uyghurs in Shanghai are students, including university students, high school students in boarding schools, and advanced students in training or cooperation/exchange programs. They are also civil servants and other professionals, as well as self-employed businesspeople, street peddlers, and workers.

6 The research on female migrants in China has focused mainly on domestic or factory workers. See, for example, Chow 1991; Jacka 2014; Lee 1998; Ngai 2005; Zheng 2009.



addresses the daily lives of highly educated Uyghur women in Shanghai in particular. Through the life story of Xumar whose migration experience and narratives, to a great extent, reflect that of highly educated Uyghur women, I demonstrate how varied yet shared experiences of them are embedded in urban, modern, and cosmopolitan values. I ask: How does their life experience in Shanghai (re)shape or constitute their perceptions of being Uyghur women? How do they practice their gender in a Han-majority city in comparison to in Xinjiang, and where it is practiced within a community based on shared Uyghur cultures and values? What are their challenges in and aspirations when living in Shanghai?

The migration experience of highly educated Uyghur women in Shanghai resembles that of professional women (Chin. *bailing nüxing*) in China, which is called “the leftover women [Chin. *sheng nü*] phenomenon “. This is the increasing number of highly educated, single, unmarried Chinese professional women of marriageable age (around thirty), who are being “left over” in the marriage market. The personal narratives of migrant Uyghur women shed light on the subtleties of the gender roles, arguments for and against returning home, and their later resignation to (arranged) marriages. The experiences gained by the women offer them a better understanding of themselves and of the demands and expectations of their cultural heritage. I show that structural, cultural, and social factors relying on dominant discourses of minority, gender, age, class, and place produce and locate the urban aspirations of highly educated Uyghur women. Aiming at providing an ethnographic account of Uyghur migration, that of highly educated Uyghur women in this case, this paper contributes to gender and feminism studies through personal narratives of Uyghur women.

## Uyghur Migration and Gender

Studies of Uyghur migrants in inland cities include investigations of the formation and transformation of the ethnic enclaves ‘Xinjiang Village’ (Chin. Xinjiangcun) in Beijing’s Ganjiakou and Weigongcun areas (Ren et al. 1996; Zhuang 2000; Wang and Yang 2008); Uyghurs’ integration and adaptation to the city and their migration’s impact on ethnic urban relationships (Ma 2007; Tang 2006); Uyghur identity building in cities dominated by mainstream Han Chinese culture; their relations with the majority society, and the ways they cope with their minority status (Y. Huang 2008; Kaltman 2007; Qarluq and McMillen 2011). Generally, this body of literature dem-

onstrates the ethnic segregation that leads to closed networks of Uyghur migrants. Because of prevailing stereotypes of migrants as outsiders and Uyghurs in particular as pickpockets and drug dealers, bias or intolerant attitudes have also been observed among local city residents.

A limited number of studies on Uyghurs address the question of gender explicitly or implicitly. Abramson (2012) observes that despite increasing attention in scholarship to Uyghurs from various perspectives, little of its focus has been on gender issues. By following the story from the nineteenth century of a Kashgar woman called Nuzugum, acknowledging her prominence in the canon of Uyghur literature and her place among Uyghur national heroes, Abramson highlights the integral but overlooked role of gender in the construction of modern Uyghur identity. Nuzugum's story is that she kills an enemy outsider that she is forced to marry rather than yield her chastity and bear his children.

Ildikó Bellér-Hann (2008, 188-202) discusses gender relations, family law, and locally endorsed ideas about morality in nineteenth - and early twentieth-century Xinjiang. She specifically investigates conjugal rights and obligations, property relations, budgeting arrangements, and assumptions about male and female participation in economic production. Women at that time were regarded as the backbone of the house and family, and they held the key to its prosperity, as well as its disintegration. In her discussion of the life cycle, Bellér-Hann (*ibid.*, 235-284) introduces marriage and divorce, with details about choice of partner and negotiation. She also discusses the Islamic marriage ceremony (Uygh. *nikah*) and wedding (Uygh. *toy*), the marriage payment (Uygh. *toyluq*), divorce conditions and causes, and the moral evaluations in relation to marriage and divorce.

Brophy (2005) looks specifically at forced marriage in Uyghur literature, including the Nuzugum tale, observing the importance of images of women in nationalist projects and highlighting the role of heroines in Uyghur literature. In her dissertation, Eli (2006) addresses gender and ethnicity among women in Kashgar and emphasizes the importance of cultural and symbolic values in ethnic identity construction. Other studies look at the exoticized images of Uyghur women in paintings and for tourism produced for majority Han audiences (Clark 1987, 23-24; Gladney 1994, 102, 114-15; Gladney 2004, 79-81). Dautcher (2009) explores the masculine identity within one community in Ghulja in northern Xinjiang based on his ethnographic research conducted in the 1990s. Looking at the place of religious and secular education in the lives of Chinese Muslim women, Jaschok and Chan (2009) examine the case of Uyghur women within a discussion of restricted religious education in Xinjiang,

which is popular elsewhere among Hui communities. They demonstrate the relationship and tension between Islamic and secular education in a diversity of Muslim contexts in China.

Focusing on intermarriage, Finley (2013, 294-348) illustrates how, following the demise of earlier boundaries, Uyghurs employ a mixture of parental prohibition, community supervision, and self-censorship to guard against interethnic courtship and marriage with Han Chinese. She also discusses the racial, religious, cultural, historical, and political barriers to Uyghur-Han intermarriage. Finley presents a hierarchy of preferences for intermarriage – with other Turkic and Muslim groups – constructed by Uyghurs in contemporary Xinjiang and proposes that this system of selective endogamy is deployed to maintain ethnic honor and shame in a context of Uyghur national politics. Women are generally considered more important than men in preserving these ethnic boundaries. In her dissertation, titled “Muslim Women at a Crossroads: Gender and Development in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China,” Cindy Huang (2009) provides us with a nuanced ethnographic study of Uyghur women. She explores how the narratives of Uyghur women in Xinjiang reflect historical conditions and shape their political, ethnic, and cultural engagement in the present. Huang demonstrates that being *japakesh* (Uygh.) – meaning to persevere through difficulty and suffer with a moral purpose – has become a persistent theme among the narratives of Uyghur women.

The literature presents a historical account of gender roles and gender relations in Uyghur society, all of which are shaped and constituted by local values, Islamic ideology, and the state project of emancipating women.<sup>7</sup> This background highlights the role of gender and gender relations in Uyghur identity construction (Bellér-Hann 1998; Bellér-Hann 2008, 188-201; Caprioni 2008) and thus motivates the shifting of meanings of gender practice in everyday life. Such intertwined forces, which impact the gender perception of Uyghurs, continue in contemporary China. In the midst of all of this, Uyghur women have to adjust to their changing roles in the household. If their role was previously more inside the home, the drastic increase in living expenses now requires them to work outside the home as well. A rising number of women are also devoted to getting an education and are pursuing careers and financial and social independence. These social transformations are forcing both Uyghur men and

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7 Since the 1980s, the People’s Republic of China has introduced extensive legislation to promote equality between the sexes. According to Bellér-Hann’s (1998) research among Uyghur villagers in southern Xinjiang in 1996, however, Uyghur women’s work remains undervalued, like that of rural Han Chinese women.

women to catch up with new sorts of requirements in the “performance” of their embedded gender roles.

Also important is that the state has represented Uyghur women, like other minorities in China, as an exotic fascination in colorful traditional clothes.<sup>8</sup> This is a widespread phenomenon that started in the 1980s and involved the voracious domestic consumption of minority cultures (Schein 1997, 70). That trend still prevails. Fieldwork shows that the exotic image of Uyghur women is reproduced and commodified in the Xinjiang restaurants where (veiled) Uyghur women perform dances for primarily Han Chinese customers.

In migrating out of a community that shares somewhat common cultural values to the city, women seem to have greater opportunities for personal agency and autonomy than previous generations of women. However, they are simultaneously positioned within numerous cultural and structural constraints, such as the rigid *hukou* (household registration system), minority status, and gender-stratified labor realms. Under these contexts, being Uyghur women entails different meanings and challenges in Shanghai than in Xinjiang. In migrating to Shanghai, Uyghur women confront common challenges as a stigmatized minority group and as romanticized “exotic” Uyghur women. Nevertheless, they have endeavored to balance the urban lifestyle and values in Shanghai with those back in Xinjiang. According to their heterogeneous but related interpretations and understandings, an urban lifestyle represents an aspiration for the consumption of fashion and technology. It also means encountering different value systems. The value system back in Xinjiang has more to do with the ethnoreligious identities they carry as “Muslim” or “Uyghur,” whichever dominates their own understanding of identity. This article attempts to take further steps in understanding the connection between Shanghai and Xinjiang, particularly with regard to the dilemma over staying or returning. In order to do so, I trace the stories of Uyghur women who returned to Xinjiang during my fieldwork there.

The stories Uyghur women shared with me, Xumar’s migration experience in particular which I contextualize and retell in this paper, conveys a sense of how highly educated Uyghur women conceive and live their lives in Shanghai and Xinjiang. On the one hand, family-centered Uyghur “tradition/custom” (Uygh. *en’enelörpadet*) is always woven into those women’s narratives. On the other hand, *idiye* (Uygh.), the new ideas and values they encounter, and *tejrîbe* (Uygh.), their living and work-

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8 In a provocative analysis, Schein (1997) describes this project as “internal orientalism.” In China, this fascination with the exotic extends not only to minorities but also to representations of foreigners (Nyíri and Breidenbach 2005, 76).

ing experiences in Shanghai, play an important role in their present and future lives. In the following sections, I show how highly educated Uyghur women encounter, understand, and live through such tensions in Shanghai. In particular, I demonstrate how they are recognized as Uyghur women there, and how they understand and practice their gender in relation to the intertwined impacts of class, education, and their individual experiences. The case study I present in the following story of Xumar (this, like the names of all my subjects, is a pseudonym) reflects the urban and globalized experiences of migrant Uyghur women and illustrates the tensions of migrating from their community to an urban setting.

## To Stay or to Leave: The Dilemma

Although I have a good job with a decent salary in Shanghai compared to other Uyghurs, it is really difficult to have a satisfying life here.  
—Xumar

During my fieldwork in Shanghai from 2012 to 2013, I encountered Xumar, then aged twenty-eight, who was a human resource manager in a foreign trade company. It was her story about quitting her job in Shanghai and returning to Xinjiang that raised my interest in better understanding gender among young Uyghur women. Xumar was born into an upper-middle-class family and went to a prestigious Uyghur-language school in a city in northern Xinjiang. She was placed in an experimental bilingual class (Chin. *shiyaban*) – an advanced-placement class for prospective students of Uyghur middle schools – and came to Shanghai to study business administration on passing the university entrance exam (Chin. *gaokao*) with excellent marks. As most Uyghur parents expect, she was to return to Xinjiang immediately after graduating for a relatively stable public service job. Instead, after negotiating with her parents, she began her first job in a city in southern China. However, she disliked this job and decided to return to Shanghai, where she had had some positive experiences during her five years as a university student. With her command of English and Mandarin, along with other skills, she got a decent job in a European company and worked in Shanghai for a few years. Nevertheless, she was planning to go back to Xinjiang when I met her in Shanghai in March 2012. She gave the following reasons for her decision during our first interview at a train station:

My salary is good, but living expenses are comparatively high here. I may never be able to purchase an apartment or a car. University students here admire me for my ability to work in a foreign company and travel around the world. While I was back in Xinjiang, some people talked behind my back by imagining that I would marry a Han Chinese in Shanghai. Some even said to my face, “What are you doing all alone there as a young woman? It’s not good! What is so attractive to you in that city?”

There are tensions between income and living expenses, staying and returning, aspirations and expectations reflected in Xumar’s narrative. Notwithstanding her economic independence as a middle-class professional, her understanding of her gender role is deeply connected to the fabric of Uyghur culture and society. Zang’s recent study on gender and ethnic variation in arranged marriages of Uyghurs and Han Chinese in Ürümqi explores this connection to some extent, finding that “both religious and ethnic components are present and interwoven with each other in the Uyghur patterns of marriage” (2012, 616). My own fieldwork with Uyghur men and women suggests that Uyghur society still widely maintains endogamy as an important part of the collective consciousness and a way to preserve ethnic boundaries. However, Xumar told me that she could have a relationship with a foreigner (Uygh. *chetellik*, meaning non-Chinese) if she wanted to. This seemed more acceptable than marrying a Han Chinese in the hierarchy of intermarriage preferences among Uyghur in general, but she found it unacceptable, given the cultural differences and the complications for family life that might result from such an arrangement.

My fieldwork shows that, as in Xumar’s narrative, a discussion surrounding honor, shame, and reputation becomes part of migrant Uyghur women’s life experience. On different occasions, Uyghur women in Shanghai are also victims of the recent discourse about *xinjiangren* (Chin. “people from Xinjiang,” indicating Uyghurs) – namely, their discredited reputation among inland residents. Xumar was the only Uyghur/*xinjiangren* in her company, and a Han Chinese colleague directed her anger at losing her smartphone at Xumar, believing a Uyghur thief (Chin. *xinjiang xiaotou*) to have stolen it. The colleague made what Xumar saw as inappropriate comments about “*xinjiangren*” on the company’s information platform. Even though their manager denounced this behavior as racism and offered an apology from the colleague, Xumar refused it, saying that she would prefer to work together without hatred. Similarly, other Uyghur professionals, both men and women, told me that it takes more effort for them than for Han Chinese to prove themselves in a majority Han Chinese work environment. Conversations with Xumar and other professionals



(including men) showed that they were well aware of such discrimination, as well as the conflicts between different value systems. As she told me:

My boss doesn't want me to resign. As a European, she just cannot understand that I would quit my job for marriage. She put an article titled "Marriage Is Not the Only Solution" on my desk the other day and even came up with the idea that if she could find me a Uyghur man by posting an announcement on the internet, I could probably stay. I never regretted my decision to work in Shanghai; I got a lot of experience from my job. However, one should think about the future and think about whether it is worth doing something against the will of the family and, more broadly, the common morality of the tradition one grows up with. I may keep working here and have a higher position in the company, which means a very successful career, but whenever I go back to the apartment I rent, the feeling of loneliness, uncertainty, and sadness swallows me. I always think, "What is the value of a successful career?"

I want to talk to my husband, play with my children, and complain to my parents after work. To work in a foreign company also means a lot of pressure; sometimes I come back from work very late and sleep with my clothes on, then I wake up at midnight, all alone with tears in my eyes. When I finally decided to go back [to Xinjiang] after struggling for years, my parents were so happy, and I realized that my decision was really worth it. At least I saw my parents smiling after they worried about me for years.

Xumar's dilemma is not unique. Her struggle with career and family resembles that of professional women (Chin. *bailing nüxing*) in China in general, those called "the leftover women [Chin. *sheng nü*] phenomenon" (To 2013). This is the increasing number of highly educated, single, unmarried Chinese professional women of marriageable age (around thirty). To believes that the "discriminatory" and "controlling" gendered constraints imposed by the women's male suitors and partners reflects the persistence of the Chinese patriarchal structure and argues that this is the leading cause of the women being "left over" in the marriage market. The desire for women to have lower professional status than men persists in contemporary China. All this holds in the situation of highly educated Uyghur women, and it is even more difficult for them to find a Uyghur partner in Shanghai to keep the ethnic boundary with their additional ethnoreligious restrictions. At the time, according to Xumar, a woman who used to work in Shanghai was preparing her wedding after going back to Xinjiang. The marriage had been arranged hastily because of the poor health of the woman's father. For Xumar, who also feels the overall social pressure to marry, the balancing act of being a good Uyghur woman centers on kinship, the honor of the family, and her own respectability.

### *Life and Network in Shanghai*

For young people, nightlife and shopping are the two most attractive features of Shanghai, colloquially known as Modu, “the monster city.” Apart from work, the lives of Uyghur professionals consists of various types of gatherings with co-workers, friends, and other Uyghurs at restaurants, pubs, clubs, massage parlors, karaoke halls, and shopping malls. Fieldwork suggests that interactions among Uyghurs are more frequent in big cities like Shanghai than in smaller places like Xi’an, where I conducted fieldwork from 2007 to 2008. Besides activities that the universities sponsor or organize, for instance Eid al-Fitr or Nawruz celebrations, there are also more-spontaneous activities. *Chay* (Uygh. literally “tea,” meaning “tea party”) is a regular gathering for Uyghur women. These are hosted by group members in turns and have become occasions to share information, feelings, and impressions about their lives in Shanghai. They are an extension of *chay* parties in Xinjiang, which are organized monthly with “rotating credit” among eight to twelve members, each of whom in turn collects money from the rest of the group (while not themselves contributing) to pay for the party, which is normally held at a restaurant. This has become a way to socialize, and a channel for providing financial support to group members and their families. In addition, there are gatherings organized to welcome or bid good-bye to fellow Uyghurs. These gatherings, as a means of socialization for Uyghurs, could be seen as a microcosm of the lives of Uyghur professionals in Shanghai.

In April 2012, Xumar invited me to a gathering with her colleagues and friends at a Turkish restaurant. Only then did I witness her capacity to shift from one language to another. Most of the conversation at this dinner was in English, because one of her colleagues, a man from India, was unable to understand Chinese well. I also understood how painful it would be for Xumar to leave Shanghai. Her *tejrıbe* (Uygh. “experience”) of working in an international environment added value to her ability to mediate between different groups of people, which also made her a “perfect human resources manager,” as one of her colleagues put it. At other dinner gatherings, other Uyghur professionals who also work in an international environment explained to me that their experience of being Uyghur in a Han Chinese-dominated society enhanced their ability to negotiate different cultural and value systems, unlike their Han Chinese counterparts.

Xumar is quite familiar with the special activities and events on Hengshanlu, the famous bar street in Shanghai. She invited Gabi, one of her European friends and me to a salsa night in a bar on a Monday evening. There were few other people



there when we arrived around nine in the evening. Xumar and I ordered alcohol-free piña colada, strongly recommended by the Philippine bartender, while Gabi had beer. We sat at the bar and talked about Xumar's future plans in Xinjiang. Gabi also spoke Chinese, and the mixture of English and Chinese in our conversation confused the bartender. We let him guess our nationalities, which proved to be harder for him than he must have expected. Clearly, both Xumar and I were not surprised about such confusion for ethnic minorities, for it always follows when Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities with distinguishable physical appearances say, "I am from China."

As with most Uyghur women, Xumar's physical appearance (non-Chinese-looking) and her often Western style of dress tended to make her invisible in the diverse city of Shanghai, unless she was directly asked about her ethnicity (*xinjiangren*). Her response would sometimes elicit a discriminatory reaction from local residents. Talking to other highly educated Uyghur women, I observed a subtle sense of pride among them in being considered foreigners. However, there also appeared to be a strong desire to express and introduce their ethnicity. On the one hand, the sense of pride, facilitated by the internal environment of Shanghai, makes Uyghur women invisible in the city. On the other hand, they are also quite visible because of their urge to represent Uyghurs as highly educated professionals to the public, in contrast with the prevailing negative image of Uyghurs in the city. At gatherings of Uyghur women in Shanghai, they always talk about encounters of telling people their ethnic origin, be they pleasant or outrageous, and receive emotional support from one another.

### *Returning to Xinjiang*

I remember receiving a phone call from Xumar in April 2013, one year after she went back to Xinjiang. She informed me that she was marrying a Uyghur man in Ürümchi, having fallen in love after they had courted for several months. We talked about her life after she had returned to Xinjiang. Her temporary teaching job at a secondary technical school was stressful, and there was no way she could take advantage of her English or business management skills there. The college could not give her a formal teaching position before she attained a master's degree. She expressed her condition aptly with the Chinese word *benkui* (collapse), which connotes a feeling of loneliness, helplessness, and regret all at once. Switching to Uyghur, she said, "Xudagha shukri" (Thank god) for having met her fiancé, Ezmet, an established doctor with a good family background.

I saw Xumar briefly in Ürümchi in August 2013, about a month before her wedding. She was busy decorating the apartment that her parents had purchased so they can visit her there. Xumar complained that she had a difficult time figuring out where to get simple, inexpensive furniture locally that one could easily get in Shanghai (at IKEA, for example). She told me that the groom's family had already prepared an apartment for them as a wedding home, and at that time, both families were busy with the wedding arrangements. They planned to hold weddings in both her hometown and Ürümchi, where the groom was from.

Because she was going to settle down with a family, Xumar seemed much more relaxed than the time when she was still uncertain about whether it was appropriate to go back to Xinjiang. On the way to meet a mutual friend, we passed through Ürümqi's Nanmen Square, one of the landmarks of the city. I asked her about the differences between Shanghai and Ürümqi. She replied that Shanghai was relatively safe. Since she had lived in Shanghai for more than seven years, I understood that it was a fair comment. However, as many of my other informants agree, she also believed that she could have a sense of belonging in Ürümchi only in Erdaoqiao, the Grand International Bazaar full of Uyghur shops. "Otherwise, life for me here is similar to Shanghai, just a bit expensive regarding the quality of life and less convenient," she said. The last time I met Xumar was in Shanghai during her honeymoon around the coastal areas with her husband. She told me she was looking for a job in Ürümchi.

### *Balancing "Modern" and "Traditional" Lifestyles*

Most Uyghur female professionals I met in Shanghai were between twenty-four and forty-five years old. They worked as translators, personal assistants, or human resource assistants or managers. This group of Uyghur women spoke Mandarin well and were fluent in English or other foreign languages. My fieldwork suggests that marriage has always posed a major obstacle for them to stay in Shanghai for extended periods because they constantly struggled with the dilemma of staying or going back for family and marriage. The main options available to them are either going back home to accept an arranged marriage,<sup>9</sup> marrying a Han Chinese or a

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9 It is common to arrange the marriage of young, single Uyghurs in the city. After both families agree on the appropriateness of the match (in terms of social status), the young couple are given some time to get to know each other and then get married if they are

foreigner in Shanghai, or, in rare cases, marrying a Uyghur man in Shanghai. Some hoped to encounter a Uyghur man at gatherings of Uyghur professionals.

Throughout my fieldwork, I witnessed Xumar's struggle to meet the different demands imposed on her as a Uyghur Muslim woman. Often the dilemma was one of reconciling her identity as a free, independent, and career-centered woman with ideas of femininity more acceptable to the Uyghur community. After she returned to Xinjiang, I was able to follow her on microblogs and messaging apps, where she shared her joys, sorrows, and life after marriage. She got a teaching job at a privileged international school through information that her friend Ayshe, who had studied with her in Shanghai, had supplied. The new job seemed to excite Xumar more than her previous Chinese teaching job had. She told me that the job environment was relatively similar to that of her job in Shanghai, with the management tending to be tough and in keeping with international standards. At the beginning of June 2014, Xumar announced that she was expecting a baby.

Xumar's story is not unique. Other single Uyghur women in Shanghai also feel that the choice of returning to their hometown in Xinjiang, with the added stability of life around their parents, is the right and rational one. Living in Shanghai, Xumar experienced a somewhat different life than most Uyghur women back in Xinjiang. For instance, she was able to travel to Europe and closely encounter Western lifestyles through English and Chinese media and an international working environment. She believed that she eventually chose her own destiny – namely, going back to Xinjiang, where her family lived – based on her family-centric aspirations. Her *tejrîbe* of studying in a bilingual school, becoming trilingual later on, and living and working in a challenging job environment in Shanghai had enhanced her credentials on the job market even after she went back to Xinjiang and her social circle there.

However, she said that some of her friends in Shanghai pitied her choice, thinking that she would have had a better future if she had stayed in Shanghai or gone abroad. Nevertheless, she made her own way by balancing a “traditional” lifestyle with new *idiye* (ideas and values) and *tejrîbe* (experience), by privileging family and kinship as her center. Most of the highly educated Uyghur women in Shanghai hold more or less similar ideas of what it means to be simultaneously a modern woman and a Uyghur Muslim – for example, rejecting interethnic marriage and romantic relationships with non-Uyghur ethnicities. These Uyghur women were not happy

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willing to. It is inevitable that family and social pressure sometimes forces young Uyghurs to accept marriages arranged by their parents against their wills.

about being monitored or controlled by Uyghur men, as they told me, because sometimes those men themselves had non-Uyghur girlfriends. In practice, the women still held traditional ideas about marriage and accepted patriarchal ideals as being part of Uyghur socialization. There appears to be a tension between their experience of growing up in gendered Uyghur Muslim society and living in Shanghai, where they are able to accept different types of gender roles.

When I first met Marhaba, a young, single university student in Shanghai at the beginning of 2013, she was preparing for English exams (GRE and TOEFL) needed to apply for masters programs overseas. During a casual conversation with a group of Uyghur university students at a dinner, she talked about the male chauvinism among Uyghur men and complained about how “controlling” they are. She pointed specifically to *minkaomin*, those who attend Uyghur – as opposed to Han Chinese – schools. In differentiating these education systems, Uyghurs apply different stereotypes to these categorized groups. In the case of romantic relationships, for example, those who attend Uyghur schools are considered more controlling than those who attend Chinese schools. When I met Marhaba again, in the summer of 2013, she happily talked about her Uyghur boyfriend being a *minkaomin*, although the male chauvinist attitude of such men had been unacceptable to her in the earlier conversation we had had. She told me she actually liked his show of masculinity and control over difficult situations.

I was struck by this shift in her opinion, as she had been very critical about male chauvinism among *minkaomin* men in the past. Although she rejected male chauvinism, she still rated a display of masculinity among the desirable qualities for a Uyghur man. In later conversations, she explained to me that her boyfriend had helped her through the hardships of applying for universities abroad. Masculinity for her meant protection and a way for a man to express care and love, whereas male chauvinism is a way of controlling women’s freedom – by monitoring their whereabouts, for example. Her boyfriend’s masculinity made sense to Marhaba when she got support from him while she was feeling helpless and alone in Shanghai.

My argument is not that Uyghur women are happily dominated by men and are all fond of male chauvinistic attitudes. Instead, I argue that Uyghur patriarchy expresses chauvinistic behavior in its own way and hence these women perceive it at the complex intersection of class, education, and personal experience. In order to do so, I have illustrated the complex negotiation of overlapping values by educated middle and upper-class Uyghur women in Shanghai, aimed at finding a balance

between being women and being Uyghur Muslims that reflects an understanding of new *idiye* (ideas and values) and *tejrife* (experience) in the city.

## Conclusion

Aspiration, by definition, involves an orientation to the future. Appadurai (2004, 64) notes that the “capacity to aspire” depends on how much a given culture offers its individuals and communities the capability to achieve economic development and progress. This concept is also generally applicable to city planning and migration, as well as to the roles that religion and the media play in global cities (van der Veer 2015). Aspiration can be partly understood as hope, and “by paying attention to the aspirations of people, communities, classes, experts, and institutions, one can get away from the static connotations of the concept of ‘identity’ that tends to fix people to what and where they are rather than to what and where they aspire to be” (ibid., 3-5). Looking at Uyghurs outside Xinjiang and inquiring about their urban aspirations has provided different perspectives on Uyghur social lives in the city.

Structural, cultural, and social factors that rely on dominant discourses of gender, age, class, and place produce and locate the urban aspirations of Uyghur women. Migrating to a city like Shanghai allows Uyghur women to have different life experiences (*tejrife*), be they modern or cosmopolitan lifestyles or new gender values. Apart from their ethnoreligious identities, the ways that they make themselves recognizable have much to do with their understandings of gender, as well as their class status and education level. A mix of Muslim modesty, Uyghur tradition, and their experiences of urbanism and cosmopolitanism in Shanghai have influenced their overall understandings of gender. These understandings are reflected in the struggles and dilemmas of Xumar’s narrative and demonstrated in the tensions that these highly educated women have encountered in balancing different values.

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