Introduction

Every story is a travel story.

—Michel de Certeau

If a man with no legs tells you he’s going to swim across the river, don’t believe him.

—Uyghur aphorism recorded circa 1875

I arrived in the city of Yining in northwest Xinjiang in the summer of 1995 with plans to conduct a year of ethnographic research into the marketing practices of Uyghur merchants. I had arranged to live in a suburban neighborhood on the outskirts of town with the family of a Uyghur friend I had made almost a decade earlier, when I lived in Beijing. As a field researcher, I dutifully spent my first days in Yining wandering through its bustling markets, chatting with merchants, and observing the flow of commercial and social activity. I had previously spent a year in Urumqi, Xinjiang’s largest city, using that time to study Uyghur for six to eight hours each day and to socialize with Uyghur friends at night. By the time I arrived in Yining, my language skills were sufficient to allow me to interact, as did the men, women, and children around me, speaking entirely in Uyghur.

As the days passed, the conversations and personal dramas of my host family members and new friends from the marketplace quickly drew me into the rich life-world of an extended Uyghur family, a Uyghur suburban neighborhood, and the larger Uyghur community of Yining. Immersed in the language and lore of their daily lives, I realized how poorly existing scholarly works on Uyghurs, works that focused
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almost exclusively on Uyghur ethnonationalism and Uyghur-Han relations, had prepared me to understand my subjects’ daily lives. I expanded my research focus beyond the topic of Uyghurs’ economic strategies in the post-Mao era of economic reform and allowed myself to be drawn into everything and anything of interest to my new Uyghur family and friends.

This book presents the results of my attempt to make sense of everyday life in the predominately Uyghur suburbs of Yining and to situate that understanding into a broader account of Uyghur culture and social life. My goal is to provide an ethnographic thick description of Uyghur culture of the kind I wish had been available to me prior to my fieldwork.

In the four parts of this book, I explore topics ranging from child rearing to wedding practices, from informal socializing to market activities to forms of religious devotion. Uniting these topics and my analysis of them is, first, an emphasis on the role of folklore and personal narrative play in helping individuals situate themselves in, as well as create, the communities and social groups in which they participate. A second connecting thread is the critical impact of the male individual’s concern to advance his position in an agonistic world of interpersonal status competition on the myriad external forms of social life in Uyghur communities.

In one sense, the book does not deal with what is usually characterized in ethnographic literature as ethnicity per se. Instead, my narrative is framed around the terms identity, community, and masculinity. Identity, because I seek to portray how Yining’s Uyghurs experience and express a set of individual and collective identities organized around concepts of place, gender, family relations, friendships, occupation, and religious practice. Unlike Uyghur intellectuals in Beijing and Urumqi, whose discussions of Uyghur identity drew on the same normative party-state ethnicity discourse they sought to oppose, Yining Uyghurs showed few traces of organizing their self-identities around explicit notions of “ethnic” or “minority” status. Community, because in virtually every aspect of their daily lives the individuals and families I knew were drawn into dense and overlapping networks of face-to-face social relationships that bound them into a single social body, a community united by a shared engagement with local differences as much as local commonalities of daily life. Masculinity, because my account is weighted toward describing
Fig. 1 Ornate doorways allow passage through the high earthen walls that surround the court-yards of Uyghur homes. Here young children play in the small lane leading to Abidem’s house in Zawut mehellé (photograph by the author, 1996).

the lives of men and the place of men’s status competition within daily life in the community. This does not mean women’s voices are absent; as a member of my host household, I interacted each day with the women of a large Uyghur family, listening to and participating in their private conversations about spouses and children, about their work inside and outside the home, and other aspects of their lives. During my year-long residence, I believe I collected as much information from women as I did from men; however, the lives of men and women’s views about men and their relationships with them were typically at the center of these women’s conversations. Although my account draws on women’s voices, it does so to examine the lives of men.

In Part I, I introduce Uyghur community life by examining the importance of place and space as bases for individual and collective identities. In Part II, on gender and the life cycle, I examine the concerns expressed by Uyghur men and boys regarding the cultivation and performance of a masculine habitus. In the first three chapters in
Part II, I focus in turn on gender and child rearing, childhood play, and adult relationships, emphasizing in each the position of boys and men in these activities. In the next two chapters, my focus shifts exclusively to the lives of adult men, and in particular to two masculine institutions, nicknaming and a form of gathering known as olturush, in which men’s abiding concern to build and maintain personal status by symbolically dominating other men figure centrally. In Part III, I consider the role of marketing and merchant culture as a domain in which men compete for status through their efforts to achieve wealth and position in the local community. Finally, in Part IV, I offer an account of vernacular Uyghur Islam and consider how men’s competition for status shapes local religious sentiments and practices.

Most of the ethnographic materials I present here come from informal conversations conducted in Uyghur and are rendered here in English based on interview and field notes recorded within one or two days of the actual conversations. Longer passages quoting from those conversations were transcribed from video and audio recordings of interviews or events. To evoke for the reader some sense of my experiences in the field, I have incorporated excerpts from my field notes into the narrative, sometimes editing them slightly for the sake of clarity but without altering the meaning. Throughout the book personal names have been changed to protect individuals’ privacy, with the exception of people whose accomplishments as scholars, authors, or entertainers have made them public figures in Xinjiang. A glossary listing Uyghur terms that appear in the text is provided in the back matter.

All translations from printed materials (these are mainly from Uyghur and Chinese) are my own unless otherwise noted. Given the lack of standardization of Uyghur orthography—each dictionary I purchased in Xinjiang seemed to offer new spellings for familiar words—I can only say that, in transcribing mehelle residents’ speech, I attempted to match standard spellings as much as possible, but my interest in capturing local pronunciation patterns has in some cases produced variant spellings. Monetary amounts are given in Chinese renminbi in units of yuan (known colloquially as kuai) or in U.S. dollar equivalents at the exchange rate of eight yuan to the dollar.

This book is intended for readers interested in a general ethnographic account of life in a contemporary Uyghur community. Readers
more deeply interested in Uyghur studies may find information of value in the doctoral dissertation on which this book is based; it includes annotations on historical, etymological, linguistic, and folkloristic details not included here and documents extensive connections between the folklore I encountered in Yining and folklore collected between the 1870s and the 1950s throughout Xinjiang and recorded in works by authors such as Gunnar Jarring, N. F. Katanov, Albert von Le Coq, Sergei Malov, Karl Menges, N. N. Pantusov, and W. Radloff. Taken together, those references illuminate the fact that many of the beliefs, practices, and oral folklore I found in Yining are not unique to that locality but are the vibrant contemporary expression of a shared cultural heritage that unites Uyghurs throughout Xinjiang. The extent to which geographical isolation, inter-oasis migration, and other factors have shaped patterns of difference within the shared culture of this region can only be considered when ethnographies from other oases become available for comparison.

Although this book tells a story about the lives of Uyghurs, that story is shaped through the lens of my experience as a first-time ethnographer engaged in field research. Because the book interweaves two stories, one about a Uyghur community, the other about my life in that community, perhaps a few words on this approach are in order. A good story, conventional wisdom suggests, is one in which the reader is taken on a journey of discovery. And a compelling ethnographic narrative might be compared to a journey from one side of a river to the other; a departure from the firm ground of the familiar, a traversing of the unfamiliar, and ultimately a return to the firm footing of a new understanding. Such a story would conjure up an idealized field research experience, in which the ethnographer plunges into a radically new environment, starts with no ground under his or her feet, and slowly gains confidence that he or she has arrived on a new shore and attained a secure epistemological footing in the host community’s life-world. As a researcher in the field, however, I more often felt like the proverbial man with no legs attempting to swim across a river. In the beginning of my research, I was challenged to participate in a complex social world in a language in which I was far from perfectly conversant. As a writer, I struggled equally with a narrative form that presents as a linear, coherent whole fragments of understanding and insight accumulated
through a nonlinear, disjointed, often quite disheartening process. The greater point, as I see it, is not whether I as an individual have proved myself capable of swimming across the river, but whether there ever is the possibility of finding firm ground on the other, the Others’, shore. For me, a commitment to social science inquiry has grown to include a willingness to accept that one swims as best one can, and hopes for landfall, as a sign of one’s willingness to learn, to make mistakes, and to grow.