

Strategies of Social Support and Community Cohesion in Rural Xinjiang

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Summary

Situated in China's northwest, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region has often been characterized as one of China's most notorious "restive" areas. Scholarly enquiries to date have, therefore, often focused on issues of ethnicity, identity, and conflict, demonstrating how the center attempts to control its troubled periphery. In contrast, this paper focuses on the everyday strategies that Uyghur villagers in the eastern oasis of Qumul have at their disposal to make ends meet and to "muddle through" as best they can under the current conditions of the "socialist market economy." Using social support as an analytical concept around which to organize the ethnographic data, the paper is a preliminary attempt to explore how in response to increased exposure to market forces — ones that have created new uncertainties and insecurities for many rural households — Uyghur villagers creatively combine old and new forms of social support, drawing on the state as well as on kinship and religion to ensure social reproduction on both the household and the communal level.

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Introduction

Since 2000 the western provinces of China have been the focus of a massive governmental development campaign to counter the growing regional disparity with eastern China (Lai 2002; Holbig 2004). The "Open up the West Campaign" aims at securing the stability of minority regions through the encouraging of economic growth and prosperity, although minority populations in many areas interpret this as a thinly disguised effort to sinicize and integrate them more closely into the Chinese polity (Moneyhon 2003; Bequelin 2004; Wiemer 2004; Millward 2007). This provides the broader context framing the following, preliminary enquiry into the coping strategies of rural Uyghurs in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

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Situated in China's northwest, this area has typically been characterized as one of China's most notorious "restive" areas. Scholarly enquiries to date have often focused on interethnic conflict as well as on religious and cultural repression, demonstrating how the center attempts to control its troubled periphery (Bovingdon 2004, 2010; Starr 2004; Dwyer 2005). Another trend in research on Xinjiang is related to poverty alleviation. While the focus herein is on rural areas and is embedded in the broader context of poverty research in China in general,¹ such research is characterized by a quantitative approach and addresses the existing income gap between Xinjiang and the national average from the perspective of policy-making.² In contrast, this paper focuses on the everyday strategies that Uyghur villagers have at their disposal to "muddle through" as best they can under the current conditions of the "socialist market economy," using social support as an analytical concept around which to organize the data. It is a preliminary attempt to explore how in response to increased exposure to market forces that have created new uncertainties and insecurities for many rural households, villagers creatively combine old and new forms of social support, drawing on the state as well as on kinship and religion to ensure social reproduction on both the household and the communal level.³

It is accepted wisdom that in all societies every person in their life goes through phases when they need and when they provide support, and many do both simultaneously much of the time. In answer to this need, societies have developed institutions and mechanisms that cater for both present difficulties and future contingencies (F. and K. von Benda-Beckmann 1994, 2007; Midgley 1997). While it is tempting to use the term "social security" in this context, it may also be highly misleading — since it is generally used to describe modern, top-down, bureaucratized state involvement in the redistribution of resources. Inspired by the title of the research program of which my project has also been a part,⁴ I suggest that for the purposes of the present paper the term "social support" can be used more gainfully since my understanding of support is a more inclusive one: it also includes nonstate forms of support, since help for those who are unable to take care of themselves is rarely exclusively the concern of the state.⁵ This broad and loose definition of the term is further justified by the equally loose emic Uyghur concept of "*ajiz*," which

- 1 For representative examples, see Rigg (2006) and Zhang and Wan (2006). For a more comprehensive overview of aspects of political and social organization and reconstruction in rural China, see Bislev and Thøgersen (2012).
- 2 For recent examples, see Chen et al. (2012), Cheng (2011). Zukosky (2012) provides the results of qualitative fieldwork conducted in a village of northern Xinjiang, where the main livelihood of the predominantly Kazakh population is animal husbandry.
- 3 A more detailed elaboration of the intersecting social support strategies outlined here will follow in future publications.
- 4 "Social Support and Kinship in China and Vietnam," Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle, Germany. For further information see: <http://www.eth.mpg.de/cms/en/research/d2/socsec.html> (accessed: 2013-05-25).
- 5 My understanding of the concept of social support is based on the approach of the von Benda-Beckmanns (F. and K. von Benda-Beckmann 1994, 2007; K. von Benda-Beckmann 2005).

refers to all persons who for whatever reason are in need of either material or emotional support (or both).

In many societies, organized state support is hardly ever the only available form of social support; neither is it always the dominant or most significant one. More often than not the other major providers of security are kinship structures and neighborhood/residential networks, the significance of which often overrides that of the state. This broad term includes various other potential providers such as religious institutions or local/international nongovernmental organizations. Understood in this more encompassing manner, social support is conceptualized here as being embedded in multiple and complex social relationships of all kinds, which include — but simultaneously also go beyond — tangible material forms of support and thus also take emotional needs and sustenance into account (F. and K. von Benda-Beckmann 1994, 2007).

Although in times of a major catastrophe such as a famine, an earthquake, a flood, or war, urgent, large-scale help is needed, most small-scale, localized support arrangements are designed for so-called “ordinary adversity,” — in other words to counter contingencies that are to be expected or reckoned with in the course of a typical lifetime: old age, illness, unemployment, the care for or education of children, as well as culturally or legally prescribed situations such as rituals surrounding the major events of the lifecycle (birth, marriage, and death). Since the research to be presented here took place under conditions of stability, this paper deals exclusively with patterns of social provisions in ordinary times unmarked by a sudden, large-scale, unexpected crisis. From this, it follows that my approach is not to be confused with poverty or crisis research: situations of “need” are conceived of as relative and context-dependent, and I am interested in both the remedial as well as preventive measures mobilized by local actors so as to counter them. Throughout the research period, the emphasis was on the collection of qualitative rather than quantitative data — and on the locally available mechanisms that ordinary people can choose from, rather than on the legislations and centrally initiated schemes that reveal only policy perspectives.

The research took place with official permission in two rural townships situated in the oasis of Qumul, on the eastern fringes of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, mostly between September 2006 and February 2007 but also during a shorter visit in 2009; one is Shähärichi located in the vicinity of the city of Qumul/Hami, where irrigation farming constitutes the main form of livelihood.⁶

6 Fieldwork was carried out together with Chris Hann. The present article is part of the project “Feudalism, Socialism, and the Present Mixed Economy in Rural Eastern Xinjiang,” for more information see <http://www.eth.mpg.de/cms/de/people/d/hann/project1.html> (accessed: 2013-05-25). In both cases, the data collection typically focused on a smaller segment of the township, but a more systematic household survey could be carried out in one of the rural settlements located in Tian Shan township. Both here and in several neighboring villages numerous open-ended and semistructured interviews have been carried out. This was also the main data collection method employed in

The proximity of the city provides easy access to markets and employment opportunities outside the agricultural sector. In contrast, Tian Shan township is situated about 50km east of the city in an area where villagers live in scattered communities and rely on a mixed economy for their livelihoods; animal husbandry forms the basis of the economy, being complemented by agricultural production and horticulture as well. Because of the geographical distance of this settlement from the urban center of Qumul, nonagricultural earning opportunities are limited and much harder to access. Both settlements are ethnically Uyghur: Shähärichi has a small proportion of Han though the Uyghur population dominates, while Tian Shan township can be characterized as ethnically homogenous.

In what follows I shall focus on some select aspects of discourse and practice related to the aforementioned broadly defined concept of social support. I start with a brief outline of pre-socialist social support. This will be followed by considering the role of the state, religion, and kinship in shaping strategies of both providing and receiving social support under reform socialism. To some extent I go against the grain when, instead of working from the specific — that is, thick description — to the general, I present my data in more generalized terms — since I consider an article of this length most suited to presenting preliminary findings and identifying general trends.⁷

Social support before 1949

Diverse historical sources inform us about the position of the poor and the destitute (*faqir-miskin, ajiz*) in premodern, presocialist Uyghur society, while accounts of poverty and social marginality as well as of mechanisms to counter them reveal diversity comparable to the modern situation.⁸

Local government support for the poor in Xinjiang most likely began in different localities at different times. For example, the distribution of regular grain aid to the needy started in Kashgar just before the end of the nineteenth century, after the oasis had been hit by an earthquake (Bellér-Hann 2008: 159). By the early twentieth century, almshouses had been established by the Chinese authorities where the destitute could become either permanent or temporary boarders. Such top-down reactions to poverty were most likely motivated by the fear of riots breaking out and by a desire to control large numbers of the poor. Although we have no specific reports about the setting up of almshouses in the oasis of Qumul, historical references attribute to one

Shähärichi, where most interviews were carried out in the vicinity of our own rural base. Even when official permission is granted, fieldwork in rural Xinjiang remains difficult and restricted due to the political sensitivities characterizing the the region.

7 A more substantial publication based on a “thick description” is currently under preparation.

8 Emic descriptions and eyewitness accounts penned by western observers, though abundant, usually make references to southern Xinjiang; fully applying this information to the whole of Xinjiang may be unwarranted.

of the Muslim rulers of the region, the female regent Mihribanu, the establishment of granaries in the second half of the nineteenth century precisely for this purpose (Tömür 1988: 173). Besides, orally transmitted local knowledge as well as local historical sources frequently make reference to the charity exercised by the last Muslim ruler, Shah Mähsut, to individuals in need (Bellér-Hann 2012a: 318).

Beside such vertical, top-down forms of social support, there were also other mechanisms at work that were embedded in local social institutions and that had very clear religious underpinnings. As one of the five pillars of Islam, the payment of alms (*zakat*) is considered the obligation of every adult Muslim who does not suffer from mental infirmity, who possesses a minimum amount of property, and who has accumulated a sufficient amount of wealth within a lunar year. The ability to pay *zakat* may have been an important indication of economic and social status, although at present we do not know how exactly it was levied. Other forms of ritualized almsgiving typically took place at the time of religious festivals and on other days of religious significance.

If conditions were comparable to southern Xinjiang, major events of the lifecycle and other communal rituals in Qumul must have functioned as occasions for charitable redistribution: at weddings, death-related ceremonies, and also in healing rituals, provisions were made for the poor — in the form of a free meal, small gifts, fruit, bread, and/or barbers' services. These occasions simultaneously included horizontal reciprocal exchange, reinforcing communal ties; they gave participants the feeling of belonging and security in the present and the promise of support in the future. Nowadays, the conspicuous appearance of numerous beggars in the streets of Qumul during the Islamic holidays is explained in terms of regional pride: the beggars are said to have arrived from southern Xinjiang in response to the generous, charitable reputation of the people of Qumul. The fact that, in contrast to southern Xinjiang, the town lacks large numbers of beggars is also taken as proof of local people having a piety that prevents them from allowing their own relatives to fall into this fate (Bellér-Hann 2012b: 214). Oral tradition also preserves the memory of the generosity of certain local persons who would never deny help to others, be it feeding the needy grain, giving them clothes, or allowing others to use their draught animals.⁹

Social support today

The role of the state

The patterns described above changed with the incorporation of the region into socialist China. Throughout collectivization most if not all decisions concerning production and redistribution were taken over by the collective. While some authors state that collective provisions were the most significant development in social

9 Interviews in Qumul, 2007.

security terms in China during the Maoist period, others suggest that — in spite of the improved conditions that the new system brought for the masses — socialist policies also entailed many political and economic instabilities and even periods of chaos. This, ultimately, resulted in the reinforcement of traditional family values (Davin 1995: 29). Although Delia Davin formulates this observation about Han Chinese, I argue that Uyghur kinship and family values are comparable and therefore Davin's statement concerning Chinese socialism is also applicable to the conditions of the Uyghur in Xinjiang. There was probably more continuity there in social support practices than is generally assumed, based on the perpetuation of kinship relations, solidarity, cooperation, and support.

The rural collective welfare system of the Maoist period provided farmers with enough food to meet their basic needs, and as early as the 1950s the state introduced the Five Guarantees system (*bāsh kapalät*) for those with no family support and no capacity to work (food, clothing, fuel, housing, funeral expenses). The Five Guarantees system has been maintained ever since as a measure used to counter poverty. People deemed as needy are provided with help in kind, which includes grain/flour, meat, cooking oil, and fuel, delivered at the time of the Islamic holidays. Typically, local cadres identify families who qualify for state support although needy households are also encouraged to take the initiative and apply. In one neighborhood of Shähärichi in 2006, a noticeboard was displayed in a central location inviting people in need to sign up for aid; limited functional literacy skills and shame may, though, have inhibited some from applying. Others, meanwhile, did not apply because they were sure to be turned down on the grounds that they came from the wrong social background.

This may come as a surprise almost thirty years after the end of collectivization, which also marked the end of the class struggle and its persecution of class enemies. Yet, the force of related memories from the past clearly continues to serve as a mechanism of self-censorship. One elderly woman was prevented from applying for state support by her son, who at the time was employed as a township cadre. He persuaded his mother that her application would put undue strain on the meagre communal resources, since there were many other people in the village much poorer than herself. In turn, the old lady suspected that allowing his own mother to be classified as poor would embarrass/shame her cadre son. Most families who qualify for receiving such provisions have no earning power and no cash income whatsoever: in several cases such households consisted of an elderly parent taking care of his/her grownup, mentally or physically handicapped offspring. In such cases there was a general consensus that the recipients of such food aid belonged to the deserving poor, and only in rare cases were the grownup children of such individuals criticized for not taking good care of the elderly — an obligation dictated by local custom.

Since the reform period starting in the early 1980s, top-down, institutionalized state support in rural areas has remained limited. The collective medical care system

introduced in the 1960s was abolished in the early 1980s and a new, so-called cooperative medical insurance scheme was introduced in some rural areas of southern Xinjiang in the mid-1990s, when it was greeted with great suspicion. By 2006–7 in the Qumul countryside the new medical insurance system had already been widely embraced and most peasants joining it were satisfied. Farmers pay a nominal amount of 25 yuan per year and for that 70 percent of their treatment will be reimbursed. This only applies if they use the nearest district hospital. It is well known that municipal and provincial hospitals offer better treatment and if farmers choose to go there the amount they are reimbursed for decreases dramatically, so the better the facilities they use the less their insurance is worth. One hears stories about middle-income families who have lost all their savings and have sunk below the poverty line because of the medical bills incurred by a family member's severe illness, a situation that the government's collective medical insurance scheme is supposed to counter. Some doctors claim that on occasion they still treat patients who are unable to pay their share of the bill and in such (admittedly rare) cases the medical personnel all make contributions from their own pockets.

Another recent change locally is the building of an old people's home in the oasis center, which is supposed to cater for all those who have no relatives to support them and who are thus unable to care for themselves. Uyghurs in general regard it shameful to even consider sending a parent there, but local officials insist that there is a need for it. During fieldwork, meanwhile, there was no talk of introducing a pension program for rural residents in Xinjiang. While in Tian Shan township farmers were sure of receiving aid relief from the government should a natural disaster occur (such as an epidemic spreading among their herds), with the exception of those officially classified as poor no one receives regular state support. Apart from the cooperative medical insurance scheme, much state support is remedial in nature and aims at fighting existing poverty rather than fostering sustainable development — one of the stated aims of the Open Up the West Campaign.

One major state initiative that would make a considerable difference was the founding of four new settlements in the oasis through the reclamation of land, which took place before the introduction of the Open Up the West Campaign. Taking advantage of offers of land, agricultural tools, and modern housing in these new settlements, many young families relocated and now make a living growing cash crops like cotton and fruit. However, because of limited water resources, the possibilities for such projects have been locally exhausted. Rural households in the old villages definitely benefit from ties with relocated relatives and are now embedded in new, complex webs of cooperation and support, but young people remaining here cannot hope for such new opportunities in the future.

The role of religion

Islamic ideals of generosity and local conceptions of reciprocal rights and obligations among kin provide the major ideological underpinnings for all acts of charity coming from nonstate sources. Religion is often called upon as the most important ideological backdrop to nonstate support, but religious institutions themselves do not appear to be the direct source of such aid. The traditional religious tax (*öshrä-zakat*) was abolished back in the early 1950s.¹⁰ However, people in Tian Shan township claim that, following the harvest, those who can will give approximately one-tenth of their grain to the needy directly, a practice that seems to have been partially revived after collectivization but one that is not necessarily followed by everyone in the market economy. All households belonging to the mosque community pay alms (*sādāqā*) at the end of Ramadan, and at the time of the Festival of Sacrifice the hide and head and feet of the sacrificial animal are donated to the local mosque. Charitable donations only in name, the money generated in this way is used to pay the imam and muezzin for their services (who in these locations do not have a regular income), to restore the mosque, to pay for fuel during the very cold winter months, and to take care of occasional refurbishing — such as buying new carpets for the building's interior. Some people have commented that they were subsidizing a mosque that in effect was “taxing” poor people, but such views were not common and such donations appeared to have overwhelmingly been made as a matter of course.

In Shähärichi, the Friday mosque, which once a week serves as the rallying point for the male population of several natural villages, is occasionally used to announce a case of unusual hardship and the need for charitable donations, such as when someone needs a particularly expensive operation to cure a life-threatening condition. The announcement is then followed by a collection in the mosque. But such occurrences are the exception rather than the rule and they clearly represent only an emergency measure. In general, however, while small neighborhood and village mosques fulfil the function of both religious as well as social centers, mosque-related rituals do not have any direct charitable function. Instead, they serve as scenes for the performance of the ritual actions that reinforce and perpetuate communal ties through the ceremonial and reciprocal sharing of bread and fruit brought from home. These are exchanged after communal prayers and are then taken home for household commensality. Through reinforcing horizontal social relations and a sense of belonging, these ceremonies constitute important sources of social support in the broadest, most inclusive sense of the word.

In Shähärichi township, a few individuals were mentioned as practicing large-scale charity. In one village, cadres' official reports mentioned one such person as being one of the main sources of registered poverty relief efforts. A successful rural

10 Popular Uyghur usage merges the Islamic tithe and the *zakat*.

businessman, this person was motivated to give both by his own poor origins and by religious sentiments. He used various ways to identify the needy and distribute support: he helped individuals he knew directly in villages where he did business; occasionally he organized the free distribution of a ceremonial meal at a saintly shrine situated away from the city and from his own village; in his own village he asked the local leadership in charge of distributing state relief for the poor to help him identify deserving households in need. However, two years later he was receiving state support himself after he had become incapacitated by brucellosis and lost much of his wealth.

While religious institutions play no practical role in current support patterns, they have persevered on the discursive level at least. Local discourse clearly delineates who should receive the *öshrä-zakat* — that is, what has remained of the religious tax. According to this recipients of these alms cannot be close relatives, and a man is not allowed to give to his parents, siblings, or children since it is his obligation to provide for them. Not fulfilling one's religious duties is considered a sin, while only voluntary almsgiving generates religious merit. One possible interpretation of this stated rule may be sought in the rules defining intimacy and proximity: donating and receiving alms is only acceptable between strangers because almsgiving by definition excludes horizontal reciprocity (even though one usually "reciprocates" with a prayer). Giving alms for the donor is a religious duty or merit, but for the recipient it may be shameful.¹¹

The role of kinship and custom

In spite of increasing efforts by the Chinese government to assume more responsibility for the social security of its rural peoples, much of the support today continues to be expected to come from nonstate (traditional, informal) sources embedded in kinship, neighborhood, and community relations. The most important sources of financial and emotional help are typically close acquaintances, and especially close relatives.¹² Neighborly and kin obligations are part and parcel of the conceptualization of such relationships: visiting the sick and taking food to your neighbor have been enshrined in local normative expectations, but when asked about mutual help and support in the Maoist period people clearly had other forms of support in mind that they often contrasted to present conditions. These can be summed up as follows:

1. Under Maoism there was little scope for help and support because people possessed very little. In contrast, today in the reform period there is a great deal more cooperation, a statement that resonates with scholarly perceptions of the resurgence of kinship relations.

11 This may explain the strategy of the charitable businessman described above, when he asked local cadres to act as intermediaries for charitable distributions in his own community.

12 For a general introduction to kinship and cooperation, see Schweitzer (2000).

2. There is nowadays little cooperation, since social relations in the market economy are all about money.

These apparently contradictory views may be explained by the complex meanings conveyed by concepts such as help, support, and cooperation, since they can be both negatively and positively connoted depending on whether speakers intended to stress the negative aspects of collectivization and the advantages of reform socialism or whether they wished instead to criticize the conditions brought about by the market economy. The terms often conjured up a limited number of images in the collectivized past, when production and most other areas of life were regulated by organized, enforced forms of cooperation. Nevertheless, people were quick to point to genuine manifestations of interhousehold cooperation, which included mutual help among men in house-building, women helping each other during childbirth, and activities that required voluntary action being taken since there were no such skills provided by the collective. Rituals at the time were severely curtailed and therefore could not serve as occasions for large-scale hospitality, which would require labor cooperation as well as gift-giving — while households had either very limited or no access at all to cash. Pooling labor on ritual occasions, giving expensive presents in kind or in cash, and helping each other out with more substantial cash loans have become dominant features of the reform period.

Although altruistic help (*khaliṣ yardām*) may be provided among kin and neighbors, this strategy is only employed when the help needed does not require too much time and energy being invested. In such cases a paid labor force is mobilized, and the traditional, rotating pooling of labor (*lapqutlishish*) moving between households — sometimes defined in terms of a permanent, self-reproducing debt — is said to be a thing of the presocialist past.¹³

While the increasing significance of the flow of money is often associated both by scholars and local actors with impersonal relationships, social practice reveals more complex patterns. With the exception of the wealthier ones, many farmers prefer to avoid taking a loan from banks because of the high interest demanded on them. Others are convinced that even if they did wish to take out a loan from the banks they would be rejected because they do not fulfil the basic requirements for it. In such circumstances people resort to other strategies instead. Those who possess livestock may sell a sheep or cattle to raise the sum needed. More typically, people turn to close relatives such as a brother or sister of either their wife or husband. The sum is then borrowed for a few years and is returned without any interest being paid on it. The purpose of such borrowing may include paying for expensive medical treatment, investing in a business, or paying off the education fees for a child. Such loans require intimate relationships and can, at least ideally, be expected only from

13 Interviews revealed that this local institution was mobilized by state officials in the early 1950s prior to the first land reform, when the mutual aid groups were organized around existing household clusters that had been engaged in informal labor cooperation with one another.

close blood relations, while affinal relationships are deemed as unsuitable, at least on the normative level. While this ideal may or may not be acted out in reality, informal borrowing clearly assumes close ties that are based on mutual trust and multiple reciprocal obligations.

On the discursive level market relations are distinct from voluntary cooperation between kin, but cooperation and support in practice rarely bear out romanticized ideals of mutuality. They often assume asymmetrical forms; we came across cases where urgent agricultural work was performed not by brothers pooling labor and taking it in turns to work each other's plots but by wage laborers employed only for a few days. In several cases, the laborers turned out to be close relatives (siblings) who would be paid in cash. This payment was below the amount offered to a stranger and the relatives working for cash could also count on getting support in return, perhaps in a different form. Dyadic relationships between two brothers and their households are sometimes nurtured and cash payments between them used to reciprocate the loan of a tractor, but they may also resort to returning the loan in kind — in other words through labor, depending on the availability of surplus money.

Social relations are acted out and perpetuated through lifecycle rituals that have become more elaborate and expensive over the course of the reform period but that continue also to preserve a certain gendered division of labor; it is the women participating in them who are expected to arrive bearing presents. Traditional gifts — pieces of textile — are expected to come from more distant kin and neighbors, while more substantial cash contributions are to be additionally made by close relatives. People with grownup children may also state that in the case of an emergency they will rely on their offspring, a strategy informed by notions of intergenerational obligations that is often resorted to, but not always, with success.

As mentioned above, kinship proximity determines whether being on the receiving end of charity is perceived as acceptable or shameful. Dependence on close kin is acceptable because it is embedded in customary expectations of rights and obligations (such as between parents and children) and it may comprise the promise of reciprocity (between brothers, cousins, etc.). In line with traditional practice, divorcees tend to leave their small children with their first husband or his relatives, because in the new relationship their child would become dependent on a stranger: this norm also suggests that dependence on another man is acceptable between agnatic relatives only. Normative discourse distinguishes between close kin and strangers, but local categories in practice display a certain flexibility in this regard; the “power of blood” is only rarely accentuated.

In case of an emergency, large sums may be collected from a wide circle of relatives, both close and distant, as is illustrated by the following example: Some years before our fieldwork, a certain man had caused a fatal car accident and was consequently sent to prison. To release him on bail, a substantial amount of money

was needed (30,000 yuan), an unrealistically large sum to borrow from one person alone. Ostensibly to save family honor, the money was put together by a wide circle of relatives, although donations must have also come because of the wish to perpetuate and invest in long-term family ties as well as due to religious sentiments; the family head relating this incident invoked both religious and kin obligations to this effect. Such examples are exceptional, and illustrate possible remedies to be used in the face of an emergency.

More typical are the multiple, entangled forms of giving and taking, which include the circulation and exchange of cash, labor, and other services as well as presents. Middle-income families may oblige themselves to regularly pay a small sum toward the education of a nephew or a niece, in the hope that when the latter has employment he or she will in turn support their own child when the time comes. Such support may take the form of “earmarked cash,” when money is paid toward a specified part of the total expenses — such as covering the student’s food while at university. The value of money and other contributions provided during lifecycle rituals are carefully noted to make sure that they will be duly reciprocated when the occasion comes.

There are many other forms of both seeking and providing social support that cannot be further elaborated on here. To give just one example, adoption has had a long history in this oasis and is an institution closely connected to social support. In a region where ethnic parameters are consistently perpetuated, adoption practices can be placed along a spectrum — with interethnic adoption comprising one extreme and adoption between close kin the other. While in the presocialist past the adoption of poor children by rich families could take place across ethnic boundaries (Uyghur families adopting Han children) and might involve the payment of cash, adoption today is more likely to follow the pattern whereby a childless sibling adopts a child.

Such instances tend to occur in situations where the close kinship relations of donor and recipient are paralleled with the existence of a certain economic asymmetry between them. The relationship is characterized by a series of open-ended reciprocal exchanges in which the informal adoption of the child by the wealthier party is only one important step. This, however, does not mean that the child is regarded as a commodity; rather, the adoption ensures the long-term wellbeing of a child who remains close to the donor’s social circle. In the series of favors and services exchanged, the adoption is not seen as being part of a commodity exchange but as an important expression of an intimate family relationship embedded in a web of rights, obligations, and above all trust. Another commonly occurring pattern is when grandparents adopt their own grandchild, to help their divorced daughter to remarry or to have a young person around to help them in old age, or perhaps both. In such cases the categories of “provider” and “recipient” of support become blurred and entangled, and such relationships are also intertwined with further dimensions of support. Sending a child to higher education has become an important aspiration of

some peasant families investing in their own future. This has changed over the last ten years, since the Chinese government stopped guaranteeing state employment to all graduates who finished their studies after 1998.

Clearly, multiple definitions of poverty and need exist side by side and the numerous strategies mobilized to counter them often become mixed together and inextricably entangled. More often than not the same person can be both recipient and provider of support, in varying measures, depending on the context: Khalidām comes from a poor peasant family and has always lived in Tian Shan township. She is over 60, and for the last 25 years has been the main worker in the family because her husband suffers from a form of disability. She has grownup children, her daughters have been married out, her two sons — one married — are living with her. The sons take care of agricultural production, while she uses her many skills to make ends meet. Together with her sister-in-law who lives nearby, she makes earthenware ovens for sale on order; the two women share the income generated. She also sells embroidery to the tourist office in Qumul, and in the past she once set up a chicken farm. Since this enterprise ended in financial loss, by the time of our visit it no longer existed; instead, she was using her musical talents to sing and drum at village weddings. Whenever the need arose, she volunteered to take care of her paralyzed elder sister for months at a time. When her married daughter had a baby in town, her sister-in-law took over the care of the elder sister. She would also give emotional support and food to her severely handicapped neighbor, a lonely widow who existed on state support. Yet Khalidām herself has applied to the local authorities to receive state support on the grounds that she had been a member of the Communist Party for seventeen years and that she has to support her disabled husband. Her application has been accepted and she receives occasional help during the major religious festivals in the form of coal, flour, meat, and oil.

Märyämghan, an elderly widow living in Shähärichi who has given her sons her share of land for cultivation, may spend part of the year living with one then with her other married child, where she is fed and her medical expenses are paid for. She enjoys the care and emotional support of her family, and, health permitting, she may also reciprocate by providing childcare, cooking, and other household services. On the two annual Islamic holidays she receives a set of clothes from each of her sons. Limited or no access to cash is not necessarily a sure sign of poverty in her case. Parhad, an old man living on his own in Shähärichi with occasional support from relatives and the state, is equally short of cash but lacks the emotional support and care of the immediate family that Märyämghan clearly enjoys. Their level of individual autonomy (agency) may be difficult to gauge and compare. Clearly, pure economic calculations of their finances do not reveal the complexities surrounding their quality of life.

Conclusion

Fieldwork data collected in villages in the oasis of Qumul in eastern Xinjiang during the era of reform socialism reveal that concepts of remedial solutions to need (such as charity and generosity) permeate everyday discourse, and furthermore contribute to the shaping of regional (*Qumulluq*) as well as Uyghur ethnic identity. Discourse and practice merge ideas about the role of the state, religion, morality, and kinship and they highlight the often complex interconnectedness of various forms of support, also calling into question the notion of individual “agency.”

At present state support in rural areas in eastern Xinjiang seems to be by and large remedial, although the recent introduction of the cooperative medical insurance scheme points in a different direction. Nonstate, primarily but not exclusively kin-based support is more encompassing, since in addition to addressing real emergencies and including other remedial forms it also offers numerous mechanisms rooted in tradition to counter “ordinary adversity.” Such “bottom-up” strategies of social support are numerous, some represent a perpetuation of presocialist practices, while others have been undergoing rapid change. Most people muddle through by mixing different strategies as best as they can. Religion continues to provide import ideological underpinnings for exercising charity, and Islamic holidays especially are seen as occasions when donations should be made; however, religious institutions play no direct part in poverty relief. At the same time, some religious rituals (both in the mosque and in the cemetery) continue to strengthen horizontal social relations. The main providers of social support remain the family and informal networks. Marriage, remarriage, and adoption, conforming with cultural and religious expectations regarding participation in and the organization of rituals, all have social support aspects. State support may take on exceptional relevance, as the large-scale land reclamation projects accompanied by the voluntary resettlement of young families illustrate. This example is also demonstrative of state support typically addressing poverty alleviation and crisis management and only rarely engaging in sustainable development projects, as envisaged by the “Open Up the West Campaign.”

Faced by the new challenges that have been brought about by accelerated development taking place against a backdrop of rapid market liberalization and political restrictions, local people continue to make ample use of discursive and actual strategies informed by past experiences — but also make pragmatic decisions in response to changing policies.

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