The Artist and the Artisan in Xinjiang (China)
Central Asia: The Changing Uyghur Muslim Culture

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Abstract — The investigation is based on interviews with Uyghurs, a Turkic Central Asian people. The interviews took place in Kashgar, a leading city in the Western Xinjiang autonomous region of China, and Beijing. Modern culture begins with industrialization and the growth of ‘modernity’ (Shiner, Bourdieu). At this point historically the artist separates from the artisan, and a distinctive cultural aesthetic is born. This aesthetic reflects and gives direction to the transformation of the society. There is a wealth of social theory on the dramatic impact of the cultural break as it occurred in the West and its significance for modern Western society. As Uyghur society enters a new era, a differentiation in the social function of the artist and artisan appears; the artist is a “new person” when compared to the artisan. There will be a look at the background of the artist and on Uyghur art. Of particular interest, especially for Muslim society, is the acknowledgement of the role of women, and on the role of the artist in Uyghur culture.

Index Terms — Uyghur, Anthropology of Art, Artisan, Artist.

I. THE “MODERN” SYSTEM OF THE ARTS

The theory of “modernity” to be investigated concerns the different cultural contributions of the artist and the artisan. In the analysis of Western European history it is held that the separation of the artist and the artisan is the significant element in cultural change (Shiner, 1975, esp. 249; Mudimbe, 1993). This approach will now be extended to the world of the Turkic Central Asian people, especially those in Western China. This investigation is based on interviews with Uyghurs in Kashgar, a leading city in western Xinjiang Autonomous region of China and on research in Eastern Xinjiang and Beijing.

There was a traditional ‘system of the arts’ in the West before the eighteenth century; similarly this system prevailed in Xinjiang, Central Asia in the recent past. In that system, an artist/artisan was a skilled practitioner and his/her work of art was a useful product of skilled work. An appreciation of the art was integrally connected with the artist/artisan’s role in the life of the community. ‘Art,’ in this usage, meant approximately the same thing as the English term ‘skill’, a sense that has survived in phrases like ‘the art of war,’ ‘the art of love,’ and ‘the art of medicine.’

In this system artisans were certainly able to express themselves individually and make profound statements through their work. Nevertheless they practiced a craft and self-expression that was limited to the bounds set by their accountability to their audience. Thus, in this system, what we call the crafts, such as textile work, were more highly honored than now, and what we call the arts, such as painting and theater were treated more like crafts than they are now.

In Western tradition, the modern system of the arts developed in connection with a market for art among the growing middle class. For the Western industrial middle class system, Fine Art was divided from the crafts to become an appropriate object of refined taste, and usefulness became a negative than a positive feature for a work of art. New institutions devoted to the arts, such as galleries, museums, concert halls and libraries, are now a central part of the new system. The aesthetic of cultural development and the character of the artist as a critic of modern society are derived from this tradition.

The world of Chinese Central Asia (Xinjiang) and the rest of Central Asia had a far different historical experience than that of Western Europe, and for that reason a framework such as that of Eisenstadt’s “multiple modernities” (Eisenstadt, 2000) is more appropriate rather than those of the more conventional Western theorists (Lerner, 1958; Inkeles, 1974). As European technical innovations were introduced into the military in Imperial Russia and into the Qing Dynasty in China in the Nineteenth century, the largely nomadic and agrarian peoples of Central Asia were incorporated into these respective empires. Although the people themselves were Muslim and spoke a Turkish language rather than Russian or Chinese, the process of incorporation continued. During the Twentieth century the secular leaders of the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China subdivided these peoples into republics and autonomous administrative units. The secular leadership had little use for either Islam or Turkish cultural identity. In this sense the experience is very similar to the case made by Shari Cohen (Cohen, 1999), that for many of the new nations of Eastern Europe, there is an absence of history in the very areas that made the people feel different and unique, i.e., their history and cultural identity.
II. THE LEGACY OF THE PRE-INDUSTRIAL PAST

To understand the distinctive cultural aesthetic of the artist and artisan in Uyghur society is to specify the features that make this distinctively Uyghur. Among the people of Xinjiang, there was a specific traditional legacy. Rachel Harris (2002, 2007) among others illustrates some of this, with her works on the Uyghur muqam, the performance music and art of this part of Central Asia. Muqam is the general term for a variety of musical practices widespread among the Uyghur communities. Because the Xinjiang region has always been marked by a high degree of cultural exchange between East and West due to its location on the hub of the Silk Road, Xinjiang Uyghur Muqam is a composite of songs, dances, folk and classical music characterized by diversity of content, dance styles, musical morphology and instruments used. Songs vary in rhyme and meter and are performed solo as well as in groups. The lyrics contain not only folk ballads but also poems written by classical Uyghur masters. They reflect the life of the Uyghur society. In Muqam ensembles the lead instruments, called Satar or Aijak may be bowed-stringed, plucked or wind instruments.

Today, community festivities in which everybody participates in the Muqam are held infrequently. The responsibility for passing on the tradition to new generations of practitioners has fallen almost exclusively on the shoulders of folk artists, and the interest of young people in Muqam is gradually declining. Today, several Muqam pieces are no longer performed, such as the “Twelve Muqam”, which is over 20 hours long.

Figure 1 contains a painting by of a performance of the Muqam the Uyghur artist Abdukirim Nesirdin. The participants are dressed in clothing worn in the early Twentieth century. The painting is figurative, which is in the tradition of Central Asian Islam. The participants are largely male. Although the central figure is a woman, she is “covered”.

As Uyghurs begin to migrate out of the province, they carry their culture with them. In a discussion of popular music in China in the first decade of this century, Baranovich (2003, esp. p.737) focuses on the contribution of Uyghurs as writers and singers to an audience that knows nothing about Xinjiang. There is special importance to Xinjiang in their songs. Although the singer is located in Beijing, he longs for his real home, thousands of kilometers away.

III. XINJIANG ENTERS THE MODERN ERA

The Qing dynasty in China had control of the region in the 1880’s. At that time Xinjiang was largely agricultural. The agricultural economy supported handicraft production and a handicraft industry; factories developed. Extraction industries such as mining in coal and jade was also present (Weimar, 2004, p. 165). This process of irrigation for farmlands, support for farming, protection of pasturelands, development of extraction industries, and support for handicrafts especially silk spinning and weaving formed the basis of the Xinjiang economy until the war period of the 1940’s (Weimer, 2004, p.168). Xinjiang’s distance from the coast limited opportunities for foreign investment, but its central location in Central Asia supported its place as a trading center. After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 and the formal incorporation of Xinjiang into the PRC in the 1950’s, the PRC made a substantial investment in the region. Xinjiang’s economy by today’s standards in China is relatively well off. Of the 31 regions and provinces in China, Xinjiang ranks twelfth in gross domestic product with the first eleven ranking positions held by the coastal provinces.

The PRC also invested in arts and in arts education. In 1952 Xinjiang College set up an art department and in 1958, on the foundations of this department, the Xinjiang School of Art was established. Later, this became the Xinjiang College of Art. In the 1980s Xinjiang Normal University established a Department of Art, and these art schools continue to nurture many artists. At the same time, Chinese schools of Art supported large numbers of ethnic minority artists in Xinjiang. Several dozen of these artists gradually became established, forming the backbone of Xinjiang’s Fine Art scene. Specialist schools of drawing and painting were also founded, such as the Xinjiang School of Painting, which had a major influence on the development of Fine Art within the region. Amateur Fine Art associations continually expanded. New life was also breathed into popular art.
IV. THE ARTISAN EFFORTS TODAY

The artisan efforts are represented by the tradition of skill craft shops. In today’s stage of economic development, the Uyghur skill craftsman is engaged in an economic model of the firm in which the center of Uyghur life and craft industry is the Uyghur family (Makofsky, 2012). Large, patriarchal, Muslim, the family rather than the individual still acts as the economic unit of analysis when it comes to traditional Uyghur skill crafts. This is true despite the fact that at times social class levels are remarkably different.

Three of the Uyghur craftsmen interviews will be presented. Two of the artisans had shops on what is called “Crafts Street” in Kashgar, and one sold his wares in the Sunday Animal Bazaar.

The first of these craft shops is that of a fairly well known musical instrument maker, whose great grandfather, grandfather, father, and all the males of the family have gone into the business. This business began in this shop in Kashgar in 1949.

The shop and workshop are combined. The customers for his fine instruments are basically all Uyghur. They come to him because of the reputation of the family shop. There are no advertisements for his instruments. People who are interested in good instruments come from all over Xinjiang, especially Western Xinjiang. The musical instrument maker is comparatively well educated, having had 13 years of formal education.

Down the street is a wood products shop. Again, the workshop and the retail shop are in the same place. The owner’s father, who is now 70 years old, learned the business from a wood master in Uzbekistan. The owner has a primary school education. His two young sons (roughly eight and ten years old) are working by his side. The craftsman began working in the shop 23 years ago; and his brother also works there. The family makes all different sorts of Uyghur wood products – toy tops, rolling pins, objects that are used for the processing and decoration of “nan” (Uyghur bread). His wife paints the instruments at home, and also has a part time job. The dust and dirt, and the relatively low income earned by the shop represent a major problem.

The third craftsman is a knife maker, 33 years old. He, his father and his grandfather have all been in the knife business. He has a middle school education. The knives are made at a workshop at home, and then sold at the Sunday animal market bazaar, with his brother. Actually, in addition to the home workshop, the owner has orchards, and a blacksmith shop. The fields are divided, and his orchard is large. There is also an area adjacent to his home where goats and cows are raised. His wife makes “doppas”, the Uyghur male head covering, which are also sold in the bazaar.

The artisan in the “new industrial” setting plays a more conservative role vis-à-vis Uyghur art and culture. The businessman only interacts with the outside public when members of that public seek him out. The sphere of business does not appear to change, and relies essentially on the Uyghur market to survive. There is the possibility that factory products may ultimately destroy the market; severe competition has not yet appeared.

V. THE DISTINCTIVE ASPECTS OF THE UYGHUR ARTIST AND THE UYGHUR CULTURAL AESTHETIC

The artist is in a far different position than the Uyghur artisan. A “new man/woman” on the cultural stage, the artist has one critical obstacle to face: There are far more artists and art practitioners than there are customers, and the Uyghur demand for art is small.

As one travels through Xinjiang and Beijing it is immediately apparent that there are many Uyghurs involved in the visual and performing arts. A retired schoolteacher with a pension rents a space on a public street, and paints and exhibits his paintings. A young student from the university has a friend who is pursuing a degree in music and dance, and this friend is able to get employment in Uyghur clubs and even in Chinese clubs that dot Beijing.

A travel agent in Kashgar has some paintings for sale on his walls, those of a local artist with a degree from the school in Urumqi. The artist has set up a little shop that can be used to exhibit his works while he pursues other jobs nearby. The artist, Obulqassim’s father is in auto and machine repair. He has had many places since graduation, but this is his new shop. Obulqassim’s goal is to not have to work at other jobs. He paintings, either through the travel agent or from his shop, are sold primarily to Western tourists – not at all to Uyghurs. Obulqassim does machine repair work with his father and teaches art in Kashgar. He has both Han and Uyghur students, so his reputation is beyond the Uyghur community.

A. Women Play an Important Role as the Object/Subject in Uyghur Art

Female modesty and the role of women in art serves as a major element in the Uyghur cultural aesthetic. The issue of female modesty is often the first thing that strikes a visitor to any Muslim society. How and why the tradition of ‘protected female’ has come to play an important role in Muslim life has inspired some anthropological debate (Antoun, 1968; Abu-Zahra, 1970), but the issue has been critical to the eye of nearly every observer of Muslim life.

This feature of Muslim culture can be seen in artwork itself, which carries forth one tradition present in the muqam. Unlike the Western or the Chinese woman, the Muslim woman is covered, usually with head coverings and with little
uncovered arms or legs. In the paintings of Zoram Yasem, as we can see in Figure 3, the females in Uyghur paintings are clothed and in a family setting.

It is difficult to escape the fact that the portrayal of women in painting has been a critical point of issue as Uyghurs interact with non-Uyghurs. This was attested to in a well-reported incident dealing with the art world that occurred nearly thirty years ago, but is just as relevant today as it was in the past.

From James Millward’s report of the event (painting referred to is Figure 2):

“In 1987, anthropologist Dru Gladney witnessed Uyghur artists protesting in Urumqi over an exhibition at the Overseas Chinese Hotel. The gallery had displayed Han paintings of Uyghurs singing, dancing, riding donkeys and balancing watermelons on their heads. Particularly offensive to many conservative Muslims was Ting Shaokuang’s *Silk Road*, which depicted a woman bare-breasted with a desert caravan. As he analyzes in "Representing Nationality in China: Refiguring Majority/Minority Identities," from *The Journal of Asian Studies* (February 1994): The eroticization of minorities essentializes the imagined identity of the Han and reaffirms Han feelings of superiority. Public, state-sponsored minority representation as both more sensual and more primitive than the Han supports the state's agenda. With the proper educational and economic progress they will eventually attain the modernity that the Han have attained and enter into the same civilized restriction.”

A female Uyghur painter Zoram Yasem is of particular importance in contemporary Uyghur art. She is an Assistant Professor, Vice Director in Xinjiang Art Institute. Her painting of Kariye women in the southern part of Xinjiang has gained particular attention. Another fairly well known female artist, Isimjan, paints female subjects in home-like settings.

The fact that women artists are represented in the world of Uyghur art marks a sharp contrast to what Westerners often imagine about life in Muslim Society, that females are hidden from view. Female artists and the females concerned with the arts are very much represented in Uyghur society. In the emergent culture, the protection of women does not mean the exclusion of women. Arts, museum work, education, language and literature studies all involve women. This is not restricted to Uyghur life. Winegar (2008, 2012) documents the same involvement has been shown Egyptian and Palestinian women in the arts field.

**B. The Artist as the Champion of Uyghur Culture**

The painting shown in Figure 4, farmers resting, presents another characteristic of the Uyghur cultural aesthetic. The
painter Turdi Amin was born in Kashgar in 1951 and his specialty is the painting of Uyghur daily life. The isolation of Central Asia and the difficult terrain meant that modern farm equipment was not available. There was no rail transportation to Xinjiang until the 1970’s and farm equipment was not available until decades later. Uyghur farming was not mechanized until after 1990’s. Simple tasks that would be handled by mechanization were carried out through collective work. One Uyghur interviewed described how, in his youth, neighbors gathered to help separate wheat kernel from chaff. The people involved in farm work would place the stalks on large blankets, wait for a strong wind, and then toss the wheat in the air. Following this, everyone would gather each piece by piece on the ground, making different piles. The person being interviewed was less than forty years old, and he was describing a farming practice that took place in the late 1990’s.

Typically, farming was a labor intensive and collective, both in Xinjiang and in the neighboring areas. Rural paintings in Kirghizstan typically show workers at a gathering at their collective farm, the kolkhoz. Turdi Amin’s painting, then, is not some isolated or idealized sample. It is social realism, Central Asian style.

The earliest of the Uyghur painters committed to this school of painting were Ghazi Emit and Abdukirim Nesirdin. They shook off the subject matter of traditional painting and forged a new path of artistic creativity using differing styles and subject matter. Nasirin’s muqam (Figure 1) is a painting in traditional subject matter with a new style.

The Uyghur artist here is preserving and discovering Uyghur history with paintings of common people. There is little tradition of this type of painting, and it is the activities of the subjects that are most important. The representation of lives of common people, which captured the imagination of European painters from Breugal to Van Gogh, is now being developed in Central Asia.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Uyghur artist and artisan struggle to keep the Uyghur tradition alive. The artisan continues the tradition of Uyghur crafts, but does so in the framework of a production model that may not be viable in the modern Uyghur life. The aesthetic contribution of Uyghur art certainly has a place within the emerging Xinjiang, but as yet there is no Uyghur public that demands this art.

The effort of the artisan and the artist reflects the difficulties that Uyghurs face in modern China, the choice between assimilation and cultural difference. As nearly every writer who has discussed the region has discovered, this struggle is never far from any aspect of Uyghur life.

REFERENCES


