

**A Meshrep in Our Home... Where There Is No Meshrep:
Contrasting Narratives in the Reinvention of a Uyghur Gathering**

By:

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Abstract

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The addition of Uyghur *meshrep* gatherings to the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2010 has influenced the way the gathering is promoted and understood by different segments of Uyghur society. Interviews and conversations with Uyghurs in western China together with Uyghur academic articles show how the attention brought by UNESCO status affected Uyghur perception of *meshrep*, creating new narratives of the gathering as foundational to Uyghur culture. I focus on how the proliferation of the term *meshrep* and staged portrayals of its practice after attaining UNESCO status reveals how different actors within Xinjiang use *meshrep* as a tool for commerce, as a representation of cultural heritage, as a way to promote state ideologies of how minorities “should” be, or as a memory of what Uyghur life was imagined to be. I examine how *meshrep* is promoted and understood by Uyghurs, and also by the Chinese state and entrepreneurs in China. I situate these gatherings in the context of other Central Asian performance traditions. Different segments of Uyghur society hold a range of attitudes toward *meshrep*, depending on the person's affinities. Promoting *meshrep* through UNESCO status has not had the cultural-renewal effect intended by some academics, but many Uyghurs still perceive *meshrep* gatherings as central to modern Uyghur life. The discursive practices surrounding the word *meshrep* itself also reflect social and linguistic issues affecting Uyghurs today.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	
<i>Meshrep Yoq Yerde: Where There Is No Meshrep</i>	1
Historical Context and Etymology of <i>Meshrep</i>	5
Chapter 2: Literature Review	
2.1 Overview.....	13
2.2 Central Asian Art Traditions.....	13
2.3 Impact of Cultural Heritage Status.....	15
2.4 <i>Meshrep</i> and the Xinjiang Context.....	19
2.5 Theoretical and Power Issues Relating to <i>Meshrep</i>	27
2.6 Summary.....	30
Chapter 3: Methodology	
3.1 Overview.....	31
3.2 Field Research Methodology.....	31
3.2.1 Participant Observation.....	31
3.2.2 Interviews.....	33
3.2.3 Informal Conversations.....	35
3.2.4 Texts Published in Xinjiang.....	35
3.2.5 Media.....	36
3.3 Analytic Techniques.....	37
3.4 Summary.....	38
Chapter 4: <i>Meshrep</i> Reinvented	
4.1 Overview.....	39
4.2 Historical Memory.....	40
4.3 UNESCO Research and Promotion Efforts.....	49
4.4 The Role of Media.....	53
4.5 Experiencing <i>Meshrep</i> Through Tourism.....	55
4.6 Commodification of <i>Meshrep</i>	58
4.7 Reflections on Discursive Practices and <i>Meshrep</i>	61
4.8 Summary.....	66
Chapter 5: <i>Meshrep</i> , You Live With Us	
The Spectacle of Song: Capitalizing on <i>Meshrep</i> Fever.....	68
Concluding Thoughts.....	74
References.....	77

List of Figures

Fig. 1: Opening Frame.....	42
Fig. 2: Blowing the Horn.....	43
Fig. 3: Running to <i>Meshrep</i>	44
Fig. 4: Han at “ <i>Meshrep</i> ”.....	56
Fig. 5: “ <i>Meshrep</i> ” Belly Dance.....	57
Fig. 6: <i>Meshrep</i> Storefront.....	60
Fig. 7: <i>Meshrep</i> Kettle.....	61
Fig. 8: Dolan <i>Meshrep</i>	69

Chapter 1

Introduction

Meshrep Yoq Yerde: Where There Is No Meshrep

Folk Song Translated by Aziz Isa Elkun

*Gülliük bagħda yayramsiz,
bulbul bolup sayramsiz.
Burun méni yaxshi körüp,
emdilikte tashlamsiz?*

Are you playing in the garden
Are you singing like a nightingale
You have loved me before
And now are you going to abandon me?!

*Ah, bargħum yoq méning,
ah, chalghum yoq méning.
Ah, meshrep yoq yerde,
chalghum yoq méning.*

I don't want to go there
I don't want to play music
Where there is no *meshrep*!
I don't want to play music.¹

*Alma atarmiz dep kelduq,
gül tutarmiz dep kelduq.
Bügündidek meshrepte,
shox oynarmiz dep kelduq.*

We came here to throw you an apple
We came here to give a bunch of flowers
Like today's *meshrep* -
We came here to play happily.

*Ah, bargħum yoq méning,
ah, chalghum yoq méning.
Ah, meshrep yoq yerde,
chalghum yoq méning.*

I don't want to go there
I don't want to play music
Where there is no *meshrep*!
I don't want to play music.

"I don't want to go there, I don't want to play music, where there is no *meshrep*" intones the above folk song. Today, these words contain not simply a preference for a certain kind of party, but remind Uyghurs, a Central Asian Turkic people residing in western China's Xinjiang region, that most of them already live in a place where there is no *meshrep*. The simplest English translation of the modern Uyghur term *meshrep* is simply "gathering." This type of gathering, which used to contain many forms of music, stories, as well as jokes and games, was inscribed to

¹ The orthographic conventions in this thesis follow standard Uyghur Latin Script (*Uyghur Latin yéziqı*), which is similar to other Latin-script orthographies, except: e represents ε, é is e, j is ð, gh is κ/γ. Personal names and less-known toponyms are in Uyghur Latin. However, for well-known toponyms, I use common spellings. In the translation given here, I supplied the translation for the last line of the second and fourth stanzas, since it is not in the original translation.

the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding in 2010. Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) includes oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, and the skills to produce traditional crafts². Uyghur academics in partnership with the Chinese state petitioned to have the Uyghur *meshrep* added to this list in part because people no longer have these neighborhood gatherings, but also because of the benefits the prestige of UNESCO status affords academics, the Chinese state, business, and the tourism industry.

The above folk song *Meshrep Yoq Yerde* [Where There Is No Meshrep] was sung by a Uyghur woman for an episode of the Xinjiang's Got Talent competition in 2015.³ Performers share their talents, hoping to be discovered and launch a career as an artist. They choose a song or dance that they believe will stir the emotions of judges and audience members, setting the performer apart from the competition. This song from her hometown Keriya, an oasis in the southernmost region of the Tarim Basin in Xinjiang. This region east of the ancient Saka kingdom of Hotan constituted a vital part of the southern branch of the so-called Silk Road, and is known for the jade found along the desert banks of the Keriya river. It is also known for its pious inhabitants and for having what is viewed by some Uyghurs as a more authentic version of their culture than the urban lifestyle many share today.

The lyrics call to mind a time when Uyghurs lived primarily as oasis farmers, tending gardens and orchards. The theme of lost love, in the imagery of the former love beloved playing in the garden and joyfully singing like a nightingale in lines 1-2, sets the tone for this song. The pair came to enjoy the playful fun of the day's *meshrep* gathering. The word *shox* 'playful,

² <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003> (accessed 16 April 2017).

³ I am indebted to Elise Anderson for sharing the story of how this song became a modern Uyghur anthem.

'mischievous' in line 12 is used often in Uyghur life. Phrases like "*U bala bek shox* [That child is very naughty]" or "*Ussulchi shox oynaydu* [The dancer dances playfully]" both express aspects of the word *shox*. The word has a positive connotation, emphasizing the lively spirit the person being so labeled possesses. Uyghurs describe themselves as *shox*, even ascribing the quality as something important to being Uyghur. This one small word is related to enjoying life, being creative, and not being repressed by forces that might try to stifle a person's spirit. In the context of this song, it recalls the importance of having fun and placing a high value on social bonds. This emphasis on play is often at odds with the busy, work-driven lives people lead, but Uyghurs themselves frequently contrast their love of fun and socializing with the work ethic they see in the Han Chinese. Emphasizing the free-spirited fun they had at the *meshrep* gathering and the refusal to go to a place without this quality underlines these values. In singing this song, the artist asserts that just as she does not want to be abandoned by her love, she does not want to be in a place without the conviviality of *meshrep*. In the wake of the song's rise to popularity after the 2015 performance, these themes struck a chord with Uyghurs around the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. This song, formerly specific to a particular oasis, has since spread not only throughout the region, but also nationally and internationally, and has become a ubiquitous feature at Uyghur weddings and celebrations.

Many Uyghurs have not actually experienced a *meshrep* gathering, yet the term and its connotations have taken on a life of their own. It shows up in a wide array of realms, in sometimes surprising ways, and just as in the case of the song sung by the Keriya woman looking for stardom, the word *meshrep* has a way of grabbing people's attention. I first became aware of *meshrep* during a Uyghur culture class at Xinjiang University in 2008. It was not something that had come up in conversations with my friends in their teens and early twenties, but my professor showed pictures of Uyghurs gathered in mud-brick village homes at *meshreps*, singing songs and

playing games such as *resim tartish* 'lit., taking a picture' where a man who had done something inappropriate by the standards of his community was punished by having a bucket of cold water thrown over his body, leaving the wall behind him wet while the outline of his body remained dry. She explained that the practices of *meshrep* had been important in establishing community norms, by teaching Uyghur stories and language practices to the next generation, and in simply having fun together. She also remarked on how rare these gatherings had become, and said it was a sensitive topic to discuss because of government policies toward minorities.

In the years to follow, I learned that *meshrep* had been inscribed to the UNESCO list and was curious about what that status meant for the practice of *meshrep* in Xinjiang. In this thesis, I examine the diverse array of voices present in the conversation about *meshrep* as a practice and as an item of intangible cultural heritage. After studying the discussion surrounding *meshrep* and the meanings now attributed to it, I relate these voices to issues of power that are present in modern day Xinjiang as part of the People's Republic of China. Uyghurs are one of the 56 officially recognized ethnic groups in the PRC. Chinese state policies and state-sanctioned representations of Uyghurs reveal ideologies of how the state wants to define the group. The participation, reactions, and resistance of Uyghurs from different segments of society are instructive in displaying the diversity of Uyghur culture. My work on *meshrep* also examines how in the midst of diverse interpretations of the practice, there are underlying ideas that provide a sense of unity among Uyghurs in the complex political environment of Xinjiang. *Meshrep*, as a cultural practice being reinterpreted through UNESCO status and less formal appropriations of the term, provides a window into the many factors that affect Uyghur culture and identity.

Historical Context and Etymology of *Meshrep*

The term *meshrep* can be traced back to the Arabic *mashrab* مشرب , which is composed of the prefix *ma-* 'with, in' and the root *sh-r-b*, 'drinking, flowing, or absorbing' (Wehr 1994:540). The Islamic conquest of Central Asia in the 8th century established Arabic as the area's religious language. In Iran and Central Asia, the primacy of Islam motivated the diminishment of Middle Persian since it was associated with Zoroastrianism. During the 10th-15th centuries, Classical Persian took its place and gained status as a literary language in Iran and Central Asia. Literary Persian gained prestige in Central Asia, with its substantial number of Arabic lexical elements, and in turn was incorporated into Turkic literary languages (Soper 1996:54,55).

Many Arabic words came into Turkic languages through Persian, and were even seen as 'Persian' loanwords (Golden 2006:26,27). The Turkic peoples, including the Uyghurs, originated in what is now Mongolia. The modern Uyghurs of Xinjiang trace their ancestry primarily to Persianized Turks in Transoxiana (Central Asia), and partly to the Old Turks of what is now Mongolia. Even as the Central Asian Turks came to dominate Transoxiana, Persians were valued for their skills in culture and commerce: areas that were important to nomadic Turks interacting with sedentary society (Golden 2006:24). The Persian language, together with a Middle Turkic-Persian literary language called Chaghatai, came to share prestige as linguae francae of the area. Islam came to the Turkic world through Persian influence. Nonetheless, because these Turks converted to Islam, these languages contained a sizeable number of Arabic loanwords. It is likely that the term *meshrep* was adopted by Turkic speakers during this long period of contact (ca. 9-14th c.), but the historical record is opaque, as discussed below.

Examining Persian-Turkic contact illuminates how the Arabic term *mashrab* took Persian and Turkic cultural and religious features, by virtue of their shared geographic area, religion, and

many cultural norms. This proximity had a strong effect on the nature of language contact. The prestige afforded Persian as the language of government, religious contexts, and education resulted in many Persian loanwords in these categories in modern Southeastern Turkic languages, like Uyghur and Uzbek.

In Persian and Ottoman, both *mashrab* and the related *mashraba* were often used to mean a place where people drank (either a reservoir or a place for communal gatherings) (Alexandre Papas 2017, personal correspondence). Further, the name *Mashrab* given to the famous 17th century antinomian dervish from Namangan, is today interpreted as "the drinker" because of his association with the more libertine spectrum of Sufi practices (*ibid.*). The term *mashrab* has been quoted by wandering Sufis in both literal and symbolic senses: a real or non-real drinking place (perhaps equivalent to *kharabat* 'ruins, taverns, brothels') where Sufis drinks either real wine, or the divine wine, or both (*ibid.*). More rarely, *mashrab* has been understood as "spiritual source," equivalent of a Sufi spiritual path (*tariqa*) (*ibid.*).

The earliest mention of *mashrab* I could find in print was a book of meditations by Ruzbihan Baqli, a Sufi poet and mystic who lived in what is now Iran, who wrote the *Kitab Mashrab al-arwah* [The Tavern of the Spirits]⁴ before his death in 1209. In it, he tells of 1,001 stations (*maqāmat*) that one visits on the way to oneness with the divine, where the *mashrab* connotes a tavern, which is here symbolic of a place where one drinks deeply of the Divine. Later, the Mughal emperor Amir Akbar (r. 1556-1605) wrote a letter requesting a subject for his court, in which he mentioned 'the divine *mashrab*': "It will be desirable if Rashīdud-din Ishāq who is a man of great talent and ability and has partaken of the divine *mashrab* in a large measure, should come in person to the imperial court" (Alam 1998:322). From drinking and divinity,

⁴ The Arabic title can also be translated as "The Spirits' Font," "The Tavern of Souls," or "The Drinking Places of the Spirits" (Chittick 2012:30, Ernst 1985:35).

mashrab also came to connote socializing: another Mughal source claims that the Mughal empire itself was strongly dedicated to *mashrab-i i'tidal*, 'social harmony', and allowed followers of all religions to live in peace and practice their rituals (Alam 2000:239). Muhammad Hakim Khan, in the 19th century in what is now Uzbekistan, used the term *mashrab qalandar* 'drunken dervish' to call someone socially inept and unstable (Schiewek 1998:197). In the earliest example of *mashrab* in Arabic usage, the word connotes 'drinking place', but in a spiritually-charged, symbolic sense. The usages from the Mughal empire, of which Persian was the official court language, relate more to behavior and ideas about how society should be. While these meanings were positive, the word also has negative connotations in some contexts, as in the 19th century example of the drunken dervish.

As evidenced by the above examples, the concept of *mashrab* in Arabic and Persian encompasses a number of ideas and its usage depends highly on the context. Although the root of the word is related to drinking, and this is reflected in the earliest usage, the meaning appears to have broadened to include ideas relating to behavior, personality, and philosophy. In Modern Arabic, *mashrab* can be a drink, drinking place, water hole, drinking trough, drinking fountain; a restaurant or a bar; an inclination, a taste; a movement or a school (of thought) (Wehr 1994:540). In Modern Persian, the term refers to drinking, imbibing, a water reservoir, or any place out of which people drink; water, a beverage; nature, temper, humor; behavior, sect, or religion (Steingass 1973:1245). In both of these sets of definitions, the first sense relates to drinking, but the definition also includes senses related to personality and behavior. In Modern Arabic and Modern Persian, *mashrab* is an archaic noun that does not currently have wide usage. In Modern Persian, the term is used in the expression *khosh mashrab*, 'a person with a pleasant personality, a good conversationalist', which reflects more the later Arabic senses of 'temper, character,

humor.' In Chaghatai Turkic (ca. 14-19th c. CE), which was heavily influenced by Persian and is the language that was one of modern Uyghur's main antecedent languages, *meshrep* came to denote character, disposition, habit, or a place for drinking beverages (Bahawudun et al. 2002:603). The word was more related to personality and a way of being than to drinking. The term *mashrab* exists in other Turkic languages, but is not commonly used. In Turkish and Azeri, *meshreb* is an infrequently used word that connotes 'manner, disposition.' I found no other examples of *meshrep* being a gathering in Turkic or other languages. In modern Uyghur, some dictionaries define *meshrep* as simply as a celebration with song and dance (e.g. St. John 1997:585). However, a Uyghur journal article about *meshrep* attaining UNESCO status provides a more encyclopedic definition:

"The *meshrep* is a widespread gathering of Xinjiang Uyghurs. There are many different roles for the *meshrep* and many different forms, according to the region and social function. It is the cultural space that contains Uyghurs' traditional customs and muqam, national songs, dance, collection of folk songs, theater, circus, national games, national literature and other forms of cultural expression. Thus, *meshrep* is an important activity that continues and develops the morals, customs, etiquette and manners, culture and art. It is also an important part of Uyghur traditional holidays and ethnic activities." (my translation; Baqi 2011:2).

The importance of *meshrep* in Uyghur culture is enshrined in idioms and sayings. Labeling a person as *meshrep körgen* [one who has seen *meshrep*] is a way to say the person is a mature member of society who knows Uyghur social norms. Saying that something should not be said at a *meshrep* or a person has not participated in a *meshrep* (*meshrep körmigen*) means that person or thing is uncouth. The Uyghur usage of the term *meshrep* to denote a gathering is semantically related to the Arabic and Persian meanings of *meshrep* as a social drinking space, but the modern Uyghur term connotes a particular style of gathering, which instills cultural norms.

The Arabic and Persian senses relating to behavior, philosophy, and attitude seem to have been retained in the Uyghur context as *meshrep* was a forum for teaching cultural norms to

the community. There are similarities with how *mashrab/meshrep* meanings in historical examples from Persian and Arabic relate to Sufi practices, finding the way to the Divine, and living in harmony. While these meanings seem only loosely related to the modern Uyghur definitions of *meshrep*, the idea of social harmony and living in the right way persists. Some Uyghur scholars in both academic articles and my interviews have argued that prior to adopting Islam, Uyghurs had gatherings that were known as *sughdich* 'feast' or *sürchük* 'evening gathering', and these later became known as *meshrep* (Turdi 2009). According to 11th century Turkic dictionary of Mahmud al-Kashgari, *sughdich* refers a feast that circulates among people in winter in succession (Al-Kashgari cited in Turdi 2009:593); *sürchük* is simply an evening gathering or party (*ibid.*:624). Turdi argues that it was during al-Kashgari's time (11th century CE) that the structure of the gatherings from earlier periods grew into neighborhood gatherings that more closely resemble what Uyghurs today imagine as *meshrep* (*ibid.*:711).

The influence of Islam on Uyghur performance practices such as music and gatherings lent a more religious and ritualistic cast to ceremonies and practices that had apparently previously been more social in nature (Gillam 2006:107). As oasis farmers, Uyghurs had evening gatherings for entertainment, especially in the winter months after harvest. Between the 10th and 17th centuries, the majority of Uyghurs converted to Islam (*ibid.*). Applying the word *meshrep* to the new style of gathering during that period of Islamicization may have been a way of legitimizing the gatherings as proper, in spite of the contested nature of music in some schools of Islam. The *meshrep*'s reputation of being associated with Sufi practices and social values added religious legitimacy to the gatherings.

Other types of Uyghur gatherings existed alongside *meshrep*, and the distinction between these various gatherings is not always clear. One communal gathering, known as *mejis*, is described in 19th century accounts as an occasion where residents of what is now Xinjiang would

gather in mixed-sex groups, play games, drink tea together, potentially flirt, recite poetry, sing, and dance (Beller-Hann 2008:212). This gathering is similar to how “traditional” *meshrep* is portrayed today. Some *meshrep* of the past, however, were much more formal affairs than how *mejlis* is portrayed. In some regions, only males, and predominately wealthy males, were allowed to participate in *meshrep*. They were entertained by musicians performing epics accompanied by music, and in some regions these male gatherings involved the recitation of popular Islamic texts, followed by dancing, which contributed to the Sufi character of the meetings (*ibid.*:213). In addition to this formal male religious *meshrep*, there were other less formal gatherings that were also termed *meshrep*. The French traveler Grenard, provided a brief description of *meshrep* as it existed in the 1890s in southern Xinjiang, explaining them as large private gatherings where music was played, and which took place mainly at night, in the host’s courtyard (Grenard 1898:145). Data collected by the Tatar linguist E.R. Tenishev⁵ in the northern Tarim oasis town of Aqsu in 1956 point to *meshrep* as a place for flirting and having parties in the evening (Tenishev 1984a), while another mid-20th century interviewee in the southwestern Tarim town of Dolan describes earlier Dolan *meshrep* in which only "landowners, village leaders, and elders took part in evening *meshrep* parties" (Tenishev 1984b). Thus, among the Uyghurs from the late 19th to mid-20th century, the term *meshrep* had broad application to communal gatherings of many kinds, sometimes overlapping with other types of gatherings.

Since the 1950s, the modern usage of *meshrep* in Uyghur retains some elements of the meanings originally ascribed to the term, but emphasizes *meshrep* as a gathering to instill Uyghur culture and customs. The current prestige of *meshrep* above other Uyghur gatherings is due to its connection to another prestigious performance genre, the Uyghur *muqam* (a modal musical style).

⁵The Tenishev texts were linguistically and culturally annotated, translated to English, and were made available to me through the Uyghur Light Verbs project (Dwyer 2010-2015).

Muqam comprises some of the music used in *meshrep* gatherings, and conversely there is a section of the *muqam* performance that involves dancing, also called *meshrep*. *Muqam* was approved as UNESCO-endorsed Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2008, and the next project was acquiring the same status for *meshrep*. In my work on *meshrep*, talking about *meshrep* without hearing about *muqam* was often challenging. In the realm of Uyghur cultural heritage, Uyghur scholars have put these forward as the most important pair of practices in Uyghur society. For some Uyghurs, the history of *muqam* and *meshrep* root Uyghur musical performance and cultural gatherings in Central Asian and Islamic art forms and create a sense of connection to the Islamic world. Both words are Arabic in origin, which associates them with the broader Islamic world. Being culturally aligned with Islamic and Central Asian identity is more important to many Uyghurs than being identified with China, so the Central Asian and Islamic cultural heritage of *meshrep* and *muqam* provides a source of pride. However, most Uyghurs today live in China, an East Asian and secularist nation, and so must accommodate this Central Asian Islamic identity within that of China. Obtaining official UNESCO recognition of these Uyghur performance genres has resulted in new kinds of *meshrep* and *muqam* performances for new audiences. Who decides what is authentic? Who profits economically from state and UNESCO recognition? How do these forms of *meshrep* affect how Uyghurs view modern and premodern *meshrep*? These questions, and the tension between a pride in heritage and an appropriation of that heritage, are what I will explore in this thesis.

We have seen that *mashrab/meshrep* has a long history in Arabic, Persian, and several Turkic languages. Its semantic malleability in modern Uyghur may have contributed to its frequent use: any of the various practices encompassed in *meshrep* can be emphasized and deemphasized to fit a person or group's ends. How *meshrep* became the name of a Uyghur neighborhood practice for instilling cultural values while enjoying games and music in the

evening is unclear. The agrarian daily rhythm of most oasis Uyghurs provided ample time for evening leisure in the winter months; the Sufism that many of them espoused, together with their contact with Persian oral and literary traditions likely all played a role in the typical practice of *meshrep*. In the next section, I discuss *meshrep* in the context of Central Asian musical performance traditions and the effect of intangible cultural heritage status on *meshrep*.

Chapter 2

Literature review

2.1 Overview

The study of *meshrep* is relatively new and there is not a large body of academic writing on the topic. My examination of *meshrep* is informed by my interviews and *in situ* research, as well as by secondary sources on Central Asian artistic performance tradition, UNESCO Cultural Heritage Status, ethnographies of and by Uyghurs that depict *meshrep*, as well as theoretical perspectives involving critical discourse analysis and language and power.

2.2 Central Asian Art Traditions

The history and present-day practice of *meshrep* are situated within the larger body of Islamic and Central Asian artistic forms and celebrations. *Meshrep* occupies both artistic and everyday spaces as it incorporates musical styles related to those performed in the larger Islamic world while also celebrating a diverse array of occasions. The Uyghur practice of *meshrep* shares some of its history with other oral art forms of the region, such as the *muqam* (*maqām*) mentioned above, both before and during current UNESCO efforts, but they differ due to *meshrep*'s status as a more informal gathering, its didactic nature, and the wide range of oral art forms encompassed in *meshrep*. In this section, I describe the history of *muqam* because this history is helpful in understanding how both *muqam* and *meshrep* existed pre and post-UNESCO status.

Many of the well-known musical traditions across the Middle East and Central Asia share a common melodic scale system of twelve movements. Early Arab music was heavily influenced by the Persian modal system known as *dastgāh*, developed during the Sassanid period (226-642 CE). When the Arabs conquered Persia in 642 CE, Persian music was more advanced, and the systematic nature of the 12 *dastgāh* was melded with Arab music, becoming known as *maqām* (Farhat 1990:3,4).

Muqam, as this melodic scale system of twelve movements is called in Uyghur, is considered a central musical tradition in Uyghur culture, and because *muqam* was granted UNESCO status prior to *meshrep*, it is worth examining here to understand the influence of UNESCO status on Uyghur art. The Arabic word *maqām* is related to the idea of locality, but also includes the meaning of key, tonality, and mode in music (Wehr 1994:936). The melodic modes of *maqām* were meant to mirror the universe: the dimensions of instruments and number of modes were related to ideas about the cosmos (Farmer 1997:157,163). Music in Islam is somewhat controversial. While the Qu'ran itself does not forbid music, some purists believe that it is a forbidden pleasure. Nevertheless, music was part of an overarching system of life and was accepted by Islamic philosophers, astronomers, mathematicians and physicians (ibid.).

This musical format was adopted and adapted across the region. *Maqām* became a high prestige art form in Ottoman Turkish music, supported by the ruling powers and religious leaders. During the 13th and 14th centuries, *makam* grew in popularity in Anatolia, and by the 17th century the musical style was a well-established part of Ottoman Court music (Feldman 1996:40,195). The related Turkish *makam* system is based on tetrachordal and pentachordal roots that can be combined in varying ways. Music is both pre-composed and improvised (Feldman 1984:22). *Maqām* in Uzbekistan is most commonly known as *shashmaqam* and contains six distinct cycles. The song texts are taken from classical Arabic poetry and set to rhythms adapted from Arabic music. Performance requires years of training and does not allow improvisation, although prior to preservation efforts it was an oral tradition (Levin 1984:25). Unlike the Arabic tradition of *maqām* as a modal basis for improvisation, modern Uyghur *muqam* is a set suite with twelve sections during which certain songs, poems, dances, and instrumental interludes are performed (Harris 2008:1). Each *muqam* is made up of a main melody, epic stories, and a form of *meshrep* (Ili 1999:1060). The proliferation of *maqām* practices and forms across Central Asia resembles the

way the term *meshrep* moved throughout the region, acquiring different definitions and practices along the way.

2.3 The Impact of Cultural Heritage Status

When an element of a culture is given ICH status, the practice becomes itemized and takes on a meaning it may not have had before. In this section, I explore how ICH status influenced the Uyghur *muqam*, Uzbek *shashmaqam*, and the Central Asian spring celebration *Navro'z* because these examples help illuminate the influence of UNESCO status on *meshrep*. While *maqām* traditions across Central Asian have different formats, the efforts to preserve the *maqām* in various locations look strikingly similar. The process of "muqam-isation" involves finding a way to enshrine the art form as a national or local symbol and codifying the performance (Harris 2008:107). The myriad styles and interpretations of the tradition in a given location are distilled down to a set suite of musical interludes and fossilized as a concrete piece of cultural heritage. What may be lost in the creativity and fluidity of the art form is replaced with higher cultural prestige. Uyghur *muqam* in China and the Uzbek *shashmaqam* in Uzbekistan both gained cultural prestige through preservation efforts related to nation building.

During the Stalin era (1922-1952), Uzbek *shashmaqam* was controversial and associated with backwardness and Sufism, but after the death of Stalin it gained prestige as a cultural symbol (Levin 1984:27). Yunus Rajabiy was a key contributor in creating the modern Uzbek *shashmaqam* system. His work in the mid-twentieth century involved transcribing folk music onto musical staffs, enabling him to learn how to compose *maqam* (ibid.:26). He viewed the art of *maqam* as something that needed to be protected, referring to "the firm safe-keeping on its laws and traditions, in spite of the fact that it developed on the basis of oral tradition" (ibid.). Because of his work, *shashmaqam* has a high status in Uzbekistan's art culture and a firmly set format, but is essentially frozen, which could be viewed as a sign of cultural morbidity (ibid.:27).

In the case of Uyghur *muqam*, its canonization process began in the 1950s, as Chinese Communist Party arts officials created anthologies of the folklore of minority populations. During this effort to standardize and record the *On Ikki Muqam* [Twelve Muqam] as a representation of Uyghur art, researchers discovered an 1854 text of *Tavārikh-i mūsīqiyyūn* [History of Musicians] that recounts a wide variety of miraculous tales and scholarly works. That text also included the story of a 16th century woman, Āmānnisā Khan, who was credited with collecting and ordering the musical interludes that became the Uyghur *muqam* (Anderson 2012:69). Subsequent modern Uyghur translations of the 1854 text published in the 1980s emphasized her biography above the other biographies included in the original Chaghatay document (*ibid.*:69). Āmānnisā Khan's person became inextricably linked to *muqam*, giving the musical format a sense of historical legitimacy, as she was the wife of 'Abd ar-Rashid, the ruler of the Yarkand Khanate (*ibid.*:70). Yarkand is another oasis located in the southern Tarim basin what is now southern Xinjiang; the town is strongly associated with Uyghur musical arts. Later work to canonize Uyghur *muqam* as UNESCO Intangible World Cultural Heritage referred to the prestigious association of *muqam* with Āmānnisā Khan, a "Uyghur princess."

Muqam was officially inscribed to UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008, but much of the work of codifying the practice was done prior to the official inscription. *Meshrep* was subsequently inscribed in 2010. The path *muqam* and *meshrep* took toward gaining UNESCO status and the influence this status has on artistic and economic practices, as well as Uyghur and Chinese national identity, share some important similarities. These similarities help better understand the current discourse about *meshrep* as both *muqam* and *meshrep* are presented as the most important Uyghur musical arts. The pre-UNESCO format of *muqam* was loosely systemized but not standardized; instead, the performers learned, modified, and forgot songs (Light 2008:46). Historical narratives, such as the story of Āmānnisā

Khan, the editing process inherent in codifying a practice, and debates over the content and techniques of *muqam* all played a role in transforming regional *muqam* traditions into the canonized *Uyghur On Ikki Muqam* of cultural heritage (ibid.:39). The enthusiasm given to forms of intangible cultural heritage that have gained UNESCO status has been dubbed "intangible fever" (非物质文化遗产热 pīnyīn: fēi wùzhí wénhuà yíchǎn rè) (Harris 2008:112). The Chinese government's enthusiasm for intangible cultural heritage, particularly in the Uyghur case, is heightened by the ease with which interpretations of intangible cultural heritage can be manipulated to suit the government's narrative of minority identity (ibid.). Putting the histories and practices of the intangible heritage through a state-sanctioned canonization process roots the art firmly within the umbrella of China's "family": the idea that all of the 56 ethnic groups within China are joined together through a sense of national brotherhood, even though they are diverse. While the history of both *muqam* and *meshrep* are situated historically in Islamic and Central Asian culture, rewriting the story with the state-sanctioned canonized version as the high status art form creates a completely different narrative that lines up well with China's goals for minority integration into the state. The cases of the Uzbek *shashmaqam* and the Uyghur *muqam* both provide a useful comparison and contrast to the way UNESCO intangible heritage status has influenced *meshrep*.

The presentation of *meshrep* as intangible heritage differs from *muqam* due to its status as a neighborhood gathering rather than a formal art performance. *Meshrep* resembles a celebration rather than a presentation of a set series of musical movements. *Meshrep* has a malleability of practice that is a useful tool for creating a sense of national pride, and this aspect is displayed in

the way a variety of actors benefit from the modern work on *meshrep*. *Navro'z*⁶, the Persian celebration of the new year at spring equinox, functions much the same way in post-Soviet Uzbekistan: it shows how cultural heritage can be used to promote particular cultural values. The *Navro'z* holiday was also given UNESCO intangible heritage status in 2009, and the *Navro'z* celebrations of Azerbaijan, India, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan were included⁷. China was not part of this list. Since at least 2008, there has been a resurgence of celebrating *Navro'z* among Xinjiang Uyghurs. Earlier, Uyghur elders remember celebrating *Navro'z* up to the 1960s (personal communications, Xinjiang, 2008).

Today in post-Soviet Uzbekistan, *Navro'z* is the most politically and culturally important celebration and state holiday. Its revival in the 1980s and 90s displays the politics of the culture at that time. It is a state and cultural holiday which "celebrates the triumph of light over dark and coldness, the renewal of nature, and the beginning of the agricultural labor cycle" was banned during the Soviet period (1922-1991) due to antireligious campaigns and fear of fundamentalism (Adams 2010:50,51). The interplay between state control and the interpretation of ethnic traditions by the state at different points in time influences if and how populations are allowed to freely express their culture. While *Navro'z* is associated with folkloric, Zoroastrian, and animistic elements, the young post-Soviet government of Uzbekistan was cautious in promoting the holiday, aiming to limit its relationship to Islam to control fundamentalism while harnessing the spirit of the holiday to promote Uzbek nationalism in a secular way (ibid.:61,62). The Uyghur *meshrep* has similarly been banned during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and following a

⁶ *Navro'z*, from the Persian *now* 'new' and *ruz* 'day', is widely celebrated across Central Asia. It is also spelled Novruz, Nowruz, Nooruz, Navruz, Nauroz, Nevruz, etc. depending on the country. In transcriptions of Uzbek, it can be spelled Navruz or Navro'z, with the apostrophe representing the elongation of the prior vowel.

⁷ http://www.unesco.org/archives/multimedia/?pg=33&s=films_details&id=302 (accessed 15 April 2017)

1997 incident in the northern Xinjiang area of Ghulja, and then later revived with an emphasis on elements that fit within the Chinese Communist Party's plan for the representation of ethnic identity. As in the case of *Navro'z*, downplaying religious aspects while emphasizing national pride is key in this process. In post-Soviet Uzbekistan, celebrations and spectacles are used as a way to promote national pride by "recovering" the Uzbek traditions lost during what was termed Russian "slavery", which is how the cultural elites involved in the creation of the *Navro'z* spectacle view the Soviet era (Adams:81). In Uzbekistan, this recovering of pride concerned the Uzbeks, while in Xinjiang, pride in such ethnic artistic practices must be somehow rooted in the ethnic group's identity within China. The *meshrep* can promote a sense of pride for Uyghurs, but in this, especially after UNESCO status, the practice is situated within the dynamic of Uyghurs being part of the PRC family.

To be meaningful outside of intellectuals, these efforts promoting national pride through performance need an ideology that draws other segments of society into the production. In both China and Uzbekistan, performances can take on the role of "soft power" techniques to achieve political goals. Adams argues the Uzbek case did not have sufficient ideology for the spectacle to create political impact. While a majority of Uzbek intellectuals participated in reproduction of rhetoric surrounding the spectacle, others in the general population were not overly interested and citizens had no incentive for being part of the spectacle (ibid.:197). The result of efforts to revitalize *Navro'z* and promote it as a symbol of Uzbek heritage was not as impressive as hoped: for some Uzbeks in rural areas, the spectacle prompted a renewed interest in their folktales, but for others in urban areas these spectacles were mostly appreciated as a way to see their favorite popstars in concert (ibid.:198). Similarly, my research on *meshrep* revealed a strong difference between the way academics and non-academics perceived *meshrep*. In Uzbekistan, the spectacle was successful in filling the public sphere with state-sanctioned discourses, which created a sense

of control over what people were consuming, but left no room to know what people really think about the discourse. It was a one-way conversation that only elites and those with power could contribute to. The intention of promoting *meshrep* in western China or *Navro'z* in Uzbekistan was not to only involve elites, but also to make the practice meaningful and accessible to society at large. The lack of connection between the performances and people's lives resulted in a lackluster response by the general population.

2.4 Meshrep and the Xinjiang Context

A Brief History of Xinjiang

The region that is today known as Xinjiang (新疆; pinyin: *Xīnjiāng*; lit.: 'new territory/frontier') was first incorporated into China during the Manchu Qing Dynasty in 1759. From this time forward, Xinjiang's status became tied to nation building. Prior to the conquest of this region, many of the inhabitants identified themselves in terms of which of the six oases cities (Altishahr) they lived in and were generally sedentary farmers (Bellér-Hann 2008:40). Many Turks⁸ from the region practiced a form of Sunni Islam influenced by Sufi practices, after Islam became established in the region in the 11th-14th centuries, and shared a Turkic language, which provided a sense of group membership (*ibid.*). The ethnonym Uyghur⁹ was not applied to the Turkic ethnic group known today as Uyghurs until the early 20th century. In the 1930s, "Uyghur" was assigned to the largest ethnic group living in the region that is today Xinjiang (Bovingdon 2001:103). When the Communist government gained power in 1950, building a cohesive nation was a major goal and using policy to constrain various minority groups was one way this was attempted. The ethnic groups of Xinjiang with Turkic and Islamic identities were

⁸ There were also Mongols and Indo-European peoples living in the region.

⁹ The modern Uyghurs are partly related to but not the same ethnic or genetic group as the Uyghur Empire (744-840 CE) founded by a group of tribes known as the Tokuz Oghuz in what is now Mongolia (Christian 1998:264-276).

perceived to be a threat to establishing a unified China. Decreasing the connection to their Turkic identity and reformulating this identity into one that was always part of China was a central goal of CCP policy. One way a state gains control over a challenger is to rewrite the region's history, which is exactly what China did: histories of Xinjiang were written from a Chinese point of view, as if Xinjiang had been part of China since ancient times (Jarring 1986:29). The ethnic groups of the region were reconceptualized as "minorities" within the Chinese state. Incorporating the diverse groups, including Uyghurs, into the idea of China's "family" was and remains a driving force in how policy regarding Xinjiang is enacted. This paradigm for policy in Xinjiang and attitude toward Uyghur culture continue to play a powerful role, even in the influence of government policy on whether people can have *meshrep*, and what those *meshrep* are supposed to contain. I will explore the *meshrep*, particularly in the 20th century, next to discuss how policy can influence and hinder its practice.

Situating Meshrep

Meshrep includes many practices and a wide variety of styles. It is a gathering rooted in a particular place and time, taking on qualities and practices that are meaningful for the people participating in the *meshrep*. Some, such as the *ottuz oghul* [thirty sons] *meshrep* of the Ili region, are only for men. Some are weeknight neighborhood gatherings where everyone is invited, some are specific to celebratory events, such as cultural holidays. The current scholarship on *meshrep* conducted in Xinjiang often focuses on labeling and describing what have been deemed the canonical *meshrep* forms of various regions. The choice of canonical and non-canonical reflects more the style of codification that can accompany UNESCO status than the reality of *meshrep*. In the following section, I will describe how *meshrep* practices are passed on, what research has been conducted by ethnomusicologists, and which issues have led to its disappearance and

reemergence, as well as examining the UNESCO process. I will contrast these accounts with how *meshrep* is presented in current Uyghur scholarship.

Meshrep Transmission

Meshrep knowledge is generally passed on generationally, with older community members sharing the practices with the younger generation, including both men and women. *Meshrep* leaders must gain competence in conducting the gathering through time and experience, and the transmission of knowledge is largely oral in nature (Roberts 1998:683). There are regional differences in *meshrep* songs and activities, as well as the prevalence of *meshrep* in various locations around Xinjiang. While oral transmission of knowledge has historically been a primary mode of intergenerational education about rituals and customs among Uyghurs, oral culture is rapidly diminishing due to the primacy of other media (Bellér-Hann 2000:73). *Meshrep* leaders are generally older members of society who have had the life experience to learn how to conduct *meshrep*, but due to shifts in how knowledge is transmitted, policies within China that have encroached on Uyghurs' ability to gather, and the impact of modern technology on entertainment options, this knowledge is not often passed on to the younger generations.

Meshrep in the Late 20th Century

Publications on *meshrep* focus on themes of musical styles, its relationship to social organization, and revitalization efforts. The activities of a *meshrep* vary, but music is a constant feature. Some common themes for songs sung at *meshrep* are religion, courtship, and locality (Light 2008). The portrayal of Uyghur identity as communicated through song looks quite different when the songs are performed by Uyghurs for a Uyghur audience than when performed in a national forum. In an attempt to promote a picture of unified nationalities, efforts to package

Uyghur expressions in a certain way have rather served to emphasize the gap between Uyghur identity and state representations of that identity (Harris 2012:451). While my investigation of *meshrep* does not focus as exclusively on music as these ethnomusicologists' work does, the examples of themes prevalent in *meshrep* and the difference in the portrayal of Uyghur identity on local and national levels helped guide my initial inquiries. Harris's work on Uyghur music helps provide background in the realm of critically examining the formation of Uyghur identity in music and performing arts. My analysis of how *meshrep* can be viewed quite differently by people from varied walks of life in Uyghur society was aided by her research on music.

Meshrep practice (as presented earlier by sources describing 19th and early 20th century gatherings) grew rare during the collectivization of agriculture and the 'anti-rightist campaign' of the late 1950s and early 1960s when "traditional" culture was discouraged, then virtually disappeared during the Cultural Revolution in the later 1960s and most of the 1970s when such activities were violently suppressed (Roberts 1998:681). Uyghur refugees who came from the Ili Valley (a region in northern Xinjiang) to Kazakhstan in the 1950s and early 1960s brought a collective memory of the *meshrep* with them, but were only successful in reviving the ritual in Kazakhstan as a means for young men to gather and form local peer groups (*ibid.*). This description of *meshrep* in a Uyghur diaspora displays elements of how the practice changed over time. The educational aspect of the ritual, as a vehicle for the indoctrination of religion and cultural practices, virtually disappeared: by the early 1960s, the form and function of the *meshrep* described in Uyghur language literature, fell out of common practice (*ibid.*). The *meshrep* discussed in this case is one particular to the Ili Valley and is a gathering where older men teach younger men how to behave as proper members of Uyghur society through such teaching methods as jokes, music, and games (*ibid.*:682). The *meshrep* in the 1960s Kazakhstan example

described by Roberts lost key elements of its role as an activity that taught Uyghur men how to behave and became a less purposeful gathering of peers.

After the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, Xinjiang, like other regions of China, adjusted under the reforms of Deng Xiaoping, which opened up society, renewed religious freedom, and promoted economic growth (ibid.:684). Part of these cultural changes involved the resurrection of *meshrep* in some areas of Xinjiang. Prior to the last few decades, there is not a lot written about Uyghur *meshrep*. In the early 1990s, *meshrep* in the Ili Valley was used as a means of solidifying group identity and membership in the local community (Dautcher 2009). These gatherings again focused on older men teaching younger men how to behave as members of Uyghur society. Failure to participate in prayers, having an extramarital affair, or consuming illegal drugs may result in the *meshrep* participant being chastised (ibid.:275). Although chastising is accomplished through games that are sometimes humorous, the effect is that group members know what appropriate behavior is and is not. Group norms on topics of religion, family relationships, and drug use are preserved in a way that is defined and supported by the Uyghur community.

The *meshrep* presented in the work of Roberts and Dautcher are specifically for men. This type of *meshrep* is not the only style practiced in Xinjiang. Much of the scholarship on *meshrep* at this point is either by ethnomusicologists, who write with an emphasis on the musical tradition, and male researchers, who tend to bond with other men, as it is usually the case in Uyghur culture that close friendships form predominately with people of the same sex. While there are aspects of life where there are distinct male and female roles and spaces in Uyghur life, the *meshrep* is not necessarily gender exclusive. The scholarship that talks about *meshrep* more generally, as in the 19th and early 20th century examples I provided in the introduction, give an overview of how *meshrep* could involve parties at night for a person of either gender, but because

modern ethnographic work in English depicting *meshrep* has been done by men in a region where there is a *meshrep* specifically for men, it can create the false picture that *meshrep* is always a male gathering. In spite of the incomplete nature of this presentation of *meshrep*, the description of the functions the gathering played in society provides some insight into *meshrep* tradition in the late 20th century prior to attaining UNESCO status. This provides a valuable contrast to the way *meshrep* is presented post-UNESCO status.

Forced Disappearance and Re-emergence of Meshrep: From Being Banned to Getting UNESCO Status

By the late 1990s, regulations on the gathering and an outright ban on *meshrep* led to the practice virtually disappearing. The Ghulja riots of 1997, which began as a protest about government regulations on Uyghur cultural expression, resulted in a ban on *meshrep* across Xinjiang (Gilliam 2016:108). Although it has been argued that *meshrep* was a way for Uyghurs to express their identity and combat social problems, the religious nature of some *meshrep* practices led to China's suspicion and suppression of these gatherings (Thwaites 2005:24). This crackdown on gathering ended the fledging movement toward *meshrep* revitalization at the grassroots level.

In the years following the ban on *meshrep* in 1997, it returned to public life in the form of community-based performances that attempted to draw on "traditional" formats and as performances where professionals acted out *meshrep* (Gilliam 2016:109). Televised *meshrep* began to be aired on Xinjiang stations in 2003 and contributed to the commercialization of the practice as funding for these filmed performances came from businesses and for-profit entities (*ibid.*). During this time, the movement to gain UNESCO protective status for *meshrep* was implemented by Uyghurs, but was conducted in a very top-down manner. Tömür Dawamet, who was the chairman of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region from 1985 to 1993, had nurtured this project since participating in the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) Congress in Beijing in 2003

(Harris 2015:10, used with permission). Under his leadership, a series of archiving and publication initiatives were set in motion and a *Meshrep* Rescue Team (*Meshrepni Qutquzush Xizmet Guruppsi*) was established with the purpose of carrying out rescue and safeguarding measures, including the nomination of three local *meshrep* traditions for inscription on the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ibid.:10). Xinjiang TV and other media increased their coverage of *meshrep*, this performance form was selected as one of China's national research projects, and Xinjiang's universities listed *meshrep* among their designated research subjects (ibid.:10). Data collected by the Xinjiang ICH Protection Center presents *meshrep* through a DVD set, which presents *meshrep* in a highly stylized manner, and creates a typology into which each region's practices are placed (ibid.:11). Harris critiques the top-down manner in which *meshrep* research has taken place and delves into issues with how UNESCO status is applied to intangible cultural heritage within China.

Xinjiang-Published Scholarship on Meshrep

Articles on *meshrep* published in Xinjiang by Uyghur academics provide insight into how the practice was presented prior to and after UNESCO status. A key collection that was written with the purpose of showing *meshrep*'s legitimacy as ICH was edited by Tömür Dawamet (2009). In this large book, *Junggu Uyghur Meshrepliri* [Chinese Uyghur *Meshreps*], there are 159 pages of staged pictures depicting *meshrep* practices, six articles (by Turdi, Rehman, Qadir, Muxpul, Ishaq, Abliz), and descriptions of the 31 types of *meshrep* researchers had classified. Two of the articles (Turdi's and Rehman's) concern the history of *meshrep*, and I describe these arguments more deeply in Chapter 4. Another, entitled "*Uyghur Naxsha-Ussul Sen'itining Böshüki - Meshrep*" [The Cradle of Uyghur Song and Dance - *Meshrep*] makes a case for why *meshrep* should be considered one of most important Uyghur art forms (Muxpul 2009). The remaining three provide detailed accounts of *Ottuz Oghul Meshripi* 'Thirty Sons *Meshrep*' (Qadir 2009) *Kök Meshripi* 'Spring *Meshrep*'

(Ishaq 2009), and *meshrep* games (Abliz 2009). This book was compiled prior to *meshrep* being added to the UNESCO list and was used in the application process to show the value of *meshrep*.

The articles published in Uyghur academic journals after *meshrep* was inscribed to the UNESCO list focus on documenting *meshrep* and UNESCO related efforts. The articles I found documented the activities of the *Meshrepni Qoghdash Xizmiti ‘Meshrep* Preservation Group’ (Mexsut 2013), provided scripts of the games used in a Hotan village *meshrep* (Elqut 2012), and discussed particular *meshrep* types (Toghrul 2013). One article focused on the educational role of the Dolan *meshrep* (Qorighar 2013) and another listed and explained *jaza oyunliri* ‘punishment games’ one might encounter at *meshrep* in different regions of Xinjiang (Sayrami 2012). A recently published article explains *meshrep* practices in terms of how they are important for psychological health, education, and group solidarity (Pawan, Dawut, & Kurban 2017). In contrast to the nature of most articles, centered on explaining *meshrep* and promoting it as prestigious cultural heritage, one article offered a critique of UNESCO efforts and the fervor with which Uyghurs got involved with the project (Abijan 2013). He argued that Uyghurs were applying the term *meshrep* to as many practices as possible to get funding, and that some regions were receiving more attention than others (ibid:68). These articles, published after UNESCO status, focus on educating people about *meshrep* and making the case for its importance. This Uyghur academic discourse about *meshrep* is explored more deeply in Chapter 4.

My Approach to Meshrep Study

The above sources provide helpful critiques of the current work on *meshrep* as well as insight into the way the practice is being interpreted. My work draws on this background, but focuses instead on popular reception of *meshrep* the people’s perceived relationship to it. Additionally, I focus on the meanings being ascribed to the word and practices of *meshrep* by and beyond the influence of UNESCO status. Much of what has been written about *meshrep* focuses

on those who are involved in researching and performing *meshrep*, but does not reach out to other segments of Uyghur society to inquire about their relationship to *meshrep*. I examine the practice and the term's usage from both academic and layperson perspectives to more fully understand the impact UNESCO status has had on Uyghur culture for various segments of society.

2.5 Theoretical and Power Issues Relating to *Meshrep*

Language and Power

Meshrep is a varied practice, and the large body of songs, poems, and narratives various *meshrep* contain is integral to its performance. These artistic expressions of identity in the Uyghur language are especially important in a situation where education and professional life are dominated by Mandarin Chinese. Forums where Uyghurs can create an environment that is solely in the Uyghur language are becoming increasingly rare. Language is always exercised as a form of power. Mandarin Chinese is given prestige over Uyghur in many realms of life: many occupations and the education system require that Uyghurs use Mandarin. Language is symbolic and linguistic exchanges are “relations of symbolic power in which the power relations between speakers or their respective groups are actualized” (Bourdieu 1991:37). In these exchanges, the overarching power relations which characterize the society as a whole are enacted on a micro-level in all aspects of life. Policies and attitudes relating to language and culture reflect the dominance of Mandarin Chinese and Han culture. Discourses about *meshrep*, from state-sponsored codification efforts, Uyghur academics, laypeople, those involved in *meshrep* performance, and those affiliated with commerce, provide a window into how overt and covert policies and attitudes are reflected in modern portrayals Uyghur language and culture (cf. Dwyer 2005). I draw on the relationship between language and symbolic power as I analyze the discussion of *meshrep* among different groups in Uyghur society. In the case of *meshrep*, the

discursive practices show relationships between forms of power, as in the state or the power of pride in one's ethnic heritage. My analysis in Chapter 4 shows who has the ability to wield that power, how they do so, and what effect this has on the discussion of *meshrep*.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a paradigm that is useful in the study of *meshrep* as it approaches language as a social practice. The context of the language in use is crucial to understanding how the discourse is both shaping and being shaped by the culture (Wodak & Meyer 2009:6). CDA's use of multidisciplinary methods to study not only linguistic but especially social phenomena fit my work on *meshrep* well: *meshrep* encompasses not only speech and text, but also performance, commerce, and art. "CDA can be defined as being fundamentally interested in analysing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language. In other words, CDA aims to investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, constituted, legitimized, and so on, by language use (or in discourse) (ibid.:10)." In this thesis, I did not explicitly use CDA. The discourse of modern *meshrep* research and performance reveals many ideologies which would benefit from this type of analysis, but in the scope of my thesis I focused on discourse ethnography rather than CDA to present and discuss my findings.

Narrative and Memory

Studying collective memory is also useful in my study of *meshrep*. Collective memory is a representation of the past shared by members of a group such as a generation or nation-state and its study examines the role of narrative in shaping recollections of the past (Wertsch 2008:120,122). The study given as an example examines how narratives of Russians from

different age groups reflect events in WWII to determine how the state influences collective memory and how the specific narratives fit into certain "schematic narrative templates", which operate as a "cookie cutter" that shapes people's recollections (ibid.:130,132). This examination of the durability of narrative over time as it relates to collective memory is useful in the examination of *meshrep* because much of the work on the topic is "salvage anthropology", recreating descriptions of very well defined ideal forms of an institution that are depicted as remaining unchanged over time (Roberts 1998:680).

2.6 Summary

In this section, I presented information on Central Asian oral art forms and the impact of cultural heritage work in the Central Asian region. This provides a foundation to understand where *meshrep* is situated historically and culturally, and also gives insight into how heritage work on *meshrep* compares and contrasts with heritage work on other Central Asian art forms and celebrations. I then provided a brief history of Xinjiang and a chronological summary of *meshrep* scholarship depicting the practice since the mid-twentieth century. Finally, I presented theoretical paradigms that were useful in my study of *meshrep*. My analysis of *meshrep* is a discourse ethnography from multiple perspectives, informed by Bourdieusian notions of language and power, and Wertschian notions of memory schemas.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Overview

Below, I will describe the techniques I used for *in situ* research (primarily participant observation, interviews, and informal conversations) and analysis (discourse ethnography). I also describe the range of data sources used in this study: besides interviews, conversations, and field notes, I also made use of print and broadcast media (described below in sections 2.4 and 2.5).

Initially, the primary question I had intended to answer during my field work was how modern televised *meshrep* differed from the *meshrep* Uyghurs remembered. As I conducted my fieldwork, however, I was surprised to discover that finding Uyghurs who had personal memories of *meshrep* was difficult, not only in the urban setting of Ürümqi, but also in Kashgar. During my six weeks spent in Xinjiang in summer 2013, I worked to get input from as many age groups and segments of Uyghur society as I could, in an attempt to find who might have memories to share and to understand what factors affected how people from different walks of life experienced *meshrep* in Xinjiang. My local experience caused my focus to change from a comparison of past and present *meshrep* to an analysis of how Uyghurs from different segments of society understood *meshrep* and what impact its formal recognition through UNESCO status had.

3.2 Field research methodology

3.2.1 Participant observation

Prior to my fieldwork in summer 2013, I made several visits to Xinjiang, including two summers of language study at Xinjiang University, a year post-undergraduate studying Uyghur at Xinjiang University, and visiting friends in summer 2011. By the time I returned for my fieldwork in 2013, I had a network of former professors and friends, as well as contacts

recommended by my advisor. My research is qualitative with an emphasis on my own participant observation. I am a young, white, rural-raised, college-educated, U.S. born-American woman. I have also lived in other parts of the Turkic and Islamic world. I know the Uyghur, Turkish, and Azeri languages, and have an advanced beginner proficiency in Mandarin. Through living in Xinjiang, Turkey, and Azerbaijan, I have some cross-cultural familiarity with the art forms and cultures of those Turkic groups. Therefore, my understanding of Uyghur culture is situated within my understanding of Turkic culture across Eurasia. The styles of music, hospitality, eating customs, languages, and religion share much in common across these cultures. Comparing and contrasting Uyghur art with cultural performances in Azerbaijan and Turkey was helpful in understanding the how roles of the state, religion, and Turkic identity are emphasized in different contexts.

In Xinjiang, I conducted participant observation by spending time with Uyghur families in Ürümqi and a small village in Turpan. Much of my time was spent simply observing people's lives and having conversations as we cooked, ate, and drank many cups of tea together. We often watched television and I made note of what programs people chose to watch. I observed the topics people chose, and those that were avoided. These everyday situations helped inform my understanding of Uyghur life, and also how *meshrep* fit, or did not fit in, to that rhythm. Walking through streets of Ürümqi and Kashgar, I noticed the types of shops, advertisements, and products marketed to Uyghurs in Uyghur parts of town, as opposed to those in Han Chinese parts of town. By doing so, I gained insight into the discourses of Uyghur life, since such discourses also frame *meshrep* practice. Walking around with Uyghur friends as they reacted to and explained our surrounding environment helped me understand their perspectives on Uyghur culture. These experiences revealed that Uyghurs from different walks of life have a range of attitudes and ways of talking about *meshrep*.

3.2.2 Interviews

The aim of the interviews was to elicit from Xinjiang Uyghurs specific *meshrep* experiences and attitudes. I planned to compare these individual accounts with published academic publications about *meshrep* published after official UNESCO recognition. I used opportunistic snowball sampling among contacts I had made in past visits to Xinjiang and conducted semi-structured recorded interviews with six Uyghurs who had lived the majority of their lives in Xinjiang: four men and two women, ranging in age from 28 to 56. Four of the six people interviewed held doctoral degrees in the humanities and worked in higher education. Of the remaining two, one was an educator and language activist, and one was a housewife. I obtained Human Subjects permissions from the University of Kansas (HCSL#20809) and each interviewee read and agreed to a consent statement. After explaining the research, the interviewee's rights, and obtaining permission to conduct the interview, each interview lasted between forty and ninety minutes. I conducted the interviews in Uyghur and used the following questions, and allowed the interviewee to speak freely in whatever direction the conversation traveled. My goal in asking these questions was to contrast the interviewee's past experience or memory of *meshrep* with the current presentation of the practice on television and in UNESCO promotion efforts. I found that most of the interviewees had little past personal experience of *meshrep*; nevertheless, these questions provided a good starting point from which to talk about their opinions of current presentations of *meshrep*. The following is a list of questions I asked of each interviewee (translated into English):

Demographic Information

- 1) Where is your hometown?
- 2) How old are you?
- 3) How long have you been living in your current neighborhood?

Past *Meshrep* Practices

- 1) In your childhood, how often did you participate in or hear about area *meshrep*? (number of times per month or year)
- 2) What types of *meshrep* do you remember participating in?
- 3) Which types of *meshrep* were the most common?
- 4) Please describe *meshrep* songs or practices that you remember.

Present *Meshrep* Practices

- 1) How often do you participate in *meshrep* today?
- 2) What types of *meshrep* have you participated in in the past 5 years?
- 3) What aspects/types of *meshrep* practices do you think are becoming less prevalent?
- 4) Please describe songs or practices from your recent *meshrep* experiences.

Meshrep in the Media

- 1) How often are *meshrep* shown on television?
- 2) How often do you watch them?
- 3) What types of *meshrep* are shown on television?
- 4) What are similarities and differences between *meshrep* on television and those you practiced as a child?
- 5) What are similarities and differences between televised *meshrep* and those you practice now?

I took notes and anonymized the results, to protect the identities of the interviewees. Nonetheless, the formality of interviews, especially recorded interviews, created a barrier with most people who were not from an academic background and therefore familiar with the protocol.

3.2.3 Informal conversations

The formality of interviews, especially recorded interviews, created a barrier with most people who were not from an academic background and therefore familiar with the protocol. In both Ürümqi and Kashgar, I sampled people's attitudes toward *meshrep* more broadly by striking up conversations with people I met as I browsed in Uyghur instrument shops or herbal medicine stores. Younger Uyghurs often did not have any memories of *meshrep*, so I sought out elders by going to stores in Ürümqi's winding back streets, chatting with ladies at an Ürümqi nursing home, and greeting people waiting outside the hospital near my apartment. I was able to meet people representing urban and rural backgrounds, and converse with people of a wide variety of ages, in approximately 25 interactions. These conversations, though often brief, were informative in helping me understand the "schematic narrative templates" (Wertsch 2008) that Uyghurs from different backgrounds draw upon when speaking of *meshrep*. Conversations I had with friends about their experiences (or lack thereof) were also taken into account, as I compiled a list of narrative themes toward *meshrep* found in Uyghurs from different demographics.

3.2.4 Academic Articles Published in Xinjiang

Articles and books about the history of *meshrep* and its official recognition reveal how Uyghur academics discuss *meshrep*. These sources published in Uyghur in Xinjiang provided a contrast to articles published outside of Xinjiang, displaying what aspects of *meshrep* are emphasized in research within China, and how that research has been influenced by *meshrep*'s UNESCO recognition. I sought out the key book that was published to promote *meshrep* for UNESCO status (Dawamet 2009), which contains six articles about *meshrep*. I also gathered six articles published between 2011 and 2013 about *meshrep* (Abijan 2013, Elqut 2012, Mexsut 2013,

Qorighar 2013, Sayrami 2012, Toghrul 2013).

These scholarly articles provide further insight into academic and state-driven narratives of *meshrep*, as they emphasize the history and prestige of the practice in an effort to bolster *meshrep*'s status. I compared these written sources with my interviews, which were more spontaneous and less guarded. This comparison revealed the intentional gap between academics' personal attitudes and their public assertions. I also looked at keywords used in the articles to describe *meshrep*, categorized the articles based on their focus (*meshrep* history, types of *meshrep*, UNESCO efforts), and used this corpus to compare the formal, academic discourse of *meshrep* with how *meshrep* was presented in my interviews, conversations, media, and advertising.

3.2.5 Media

Television is one of the key venues where *meshrep* is most visible to Uyghurs. Starting in 2003, televised *meshrep* were broadcast every Saturday night. I was able to view portions of televised *meshrep* and get feedback from Uyghurs about their reactions to them. Conversations with a contact who is an employee of Xinjiang Television (XJTV) were also informative in understanding how *meshrep* are defined and who gets to participate in the creation of its modern practice. Televised *meshrep* is used by some businesses as an advertising tool. I describe the attitudes my interviews and conversations revealed toward televised *meshrep* and its use in advertising in Chapter 4.

Meshrep performances for tourists also play a role in the promotion of the art form. I attended a *meshrep* performance delivered for a predominately Han audience and was able to converse briefly with some of the performers. I discuss this interaction in Chapter 4, and compare the discourse of *meshrep* of the performer with that of the state, academics, laypeople, and commerce. These observations provide an important glimpse into how people within China

outside of the academic world consume and understand *meshrep*.

3.3 Analytic techniques

My analytic approach consisted of multi-perspective discourse ethnography, informed by Bourdieusian notions of language and power, and Wertschian notions of memory schemas. This perspective provided a flexible framework as I worked through my data, reminding me to view the data I gathered with special attention to power relationships and who benefits from these discursive practices.

I analyzed academic articles, interviews, and conversational data. By looking for themes within these data, I aimed to answer the question of what *meshrep* meant to different people and institutions. I compared the practices of different groups, looking for patterns in the narratives, and noting for how *meshrep* was used and expressed in different ways by these groups. I primarily analyzed discursive practices, producing a kind of discourse ethnography rather than a strict analysis of examples of discourse in text and speech. The sensitive nature of doing work in Xinjiang made it difficult to gather many recordings or even take notes while talking to people. I made notes after returning home from conversations, but without recorded data I could not reproduce exact sentences. However, certain phrases were uttered frequently in the unrecorded conversations I had and they, along with the overarching themes of these conversations, were still instructive in developing my analysis of how *meshrep* is discussed. The patterns that I discovered in the data formed the basis of my arguments for how *meshrep* is currently understood by different groups in Uyghur society, as I discuss in Chapter 4.

The concept of "schematic narrative templates" from Wertsch's work on collective memory (2008) was also a useful lens as I read articles and listened to my interviews. Certain themes came up repeatedly within various groups, most notably in the academic discourse of *meshrep*. The way that some want to construct the memory of *meshrep* is instructive in

understanding the role that narrative takes when shaping recollections of the past. The recurring themes from academic and UNESCO sources were a useful comparison to the discussion of the practice of *meshrep* I found among groups not associated with the formal presentation of the practice.

My aim was to take a broad sampling of how *meshrep* is defined and discussed, then critically examine how these themes relate to the ways *meshrep* displays trends in contemporary Chinese policy toward minorities, how Uyghurs themselves define being Uyghur, and how the narratives of *meshrep* get repurposed to serve varied ends for both the Chinese state and Xinjiang Uyghurs of different walks of life.

3.4 Summary

My research methods during six weeks of fieldwork in Xinjiang included semi-structured interviews, informal conversations with a wide variety of Uyghurs, critical readings of academic literature, observation of performances, and participant observation to gain a broad perspective on *meshrep*. My subsequent analysis of discursive practices is informed by Bourdieu's notions of language and power and studies on collective memory.

Chapter 4

Meshrep Reinvented

4.1 Overview

In this section I synthesize formal interviews and Uyghur academic articles, as well as informal conversations and my own observations to outline the discursive practices of different segments of Uyghur society concerning *meshrep*. I will analyze these data to argue that formal Uyghur *meshrep* promotion efforts in some ways mirror those of *muqam*, but will explain how the unique nature of *meshrep* as a solely Uyghur gathering and as one that was centered in neighborhood participation creates a dynamic that allows for the word *meshrep* to be utilized as a symbol of Uyghur identity. The ways the concept of *meshrep* has been redefined and appropriated by different actors provide a glimpse into broader themes that are at work in the negotiation of ethnic identity for Uyghurs both as part of China's nation building project and as Uyghurs understand themselves, their past, and future.

As a cultural practice in transition, *meshrep* provides a window into the many factors impacting Uyghur culture and identity. From the *meshrep* of historical memory, to the *meshrep* as endangered intangible cultural heritage, to *meshrep* as a commodity, this cultural practice provides an example of how elements of cultural heritage are sometimes reinvented in the context of modern China. It also shows the wide range of actors who are part of the research, revitalization, and reinvention of *meshrep*. My aim is to explain the background of *meshrep* attaining UNESCO status, the tensions within this process, and reactions Uyghurs from varied walks of life have to current *meshrep* interpretations.

4.2 Historical Memory

During my fieldwork, I heard frequent references to *meshrep* as a Uyghur cultural school: the practice that contained the knowledge necessary to become a full member of Uyghur society, fluent in the arts, games, language, literature, and social norms of the culture. The modern historical narratives of *meshrep* delve into the annals of early Chinese historians who wrote about the gatherings and celebrations of the non-Chinese peoples of the Western Regions. Although historical texts documenting *meshrep* are sparse, the Uyghur scholar Abdushükür Turdi describes the history of *meshrep* gatherings, relating them first to gatherings in the 4th or 5th century CE that included thousands of people gathering to perform ceremonies, sing, dance, and slaughter animals (Turdi 2009:711). He infers this connection from The Book of Wei (魏書, pīnyīn: Wèi shū, written from 551-554 C.E.) depiction of the Qangli (Kangli, Kankali) Turkic people. This Turkic group is not closely related to modern Uyghurs, nevertheless he argues that these gatherings point to the creation of early *meshrep*. He relates *meshrep* to 5th and 6th century paintings inside the Buddhist caves of Xinjiang, specifically the paintings in caves 11, 25, 30, and 38 of Kucha, which depict men and women gathered to play musical instruments for various ceremonies (ibid.). He contends that the *meshrep* of later years grew out of the regional practices that developed from these earlier gatherings.

Clearly, early Chinese sources and historical conjectures of Turdi do not show that these gatherings have any direct relationship to the *meshrep* of today's UNESCO heritage initiative. Nonetheless, those interviewees involved in *meshrep* promotion stressed that *meshrep* pre-dated Islam and was a purely Turkic, Uyghur phenomenon. This narrative is also useful to the Chinese government as a way to locate Uyghurs outside of Islam, especially as Islamic identity grows more important to many Uyghurs with the loss of other forms of cultural expression. The exact

accuracy of the historical interpretation of *meshrep* is up for debate, but in this discourse accuracy is not the most important attribute. Rather, the molding of a particular image that serves the parties involved and creates a “safe” picture of the Uyghur past firmly situated within China is of foremost importance to the Chinese national identity project. Finding references to practices that can supposedly be connected to modern Uyghur culture is a way to show the tradition has longevity, which adds to the sense of legitimacy, especially in China. In the construction of histories within China, there is an emphasis on the very long history of Han culture. The histories of other groups, such as Uyghurs, are interpreted in light of where they fit into this, which is a way to orient cultures within the state narrative. Defining cultural heritage in China often provides an opportunity to negotiate the line between ethnic identity and the position of the ethnic group as part of China. The ways in which this is done are often problematic, the example of *meshrep* being no exception.

Cultural expressions of Uyghur identity have become increasingly important as schooling and professional life are dominated by the Mandarin Chinese language and PRC cultural policies. Monolingual Uyghur language domains are becoming increasingly rare. *Meshrep* is a uniquely Uyghur cultural and linguistic space, but its current status is influenced by China’s attitude toward minority cultures that often exoticizes and essentializes the complex and varied ways of being that characterize their lives, making it into a facade of what it once was. In Chinese state presentations of Uyghur culture, Uyghurs are presented as an ethnic group strongly associated with music and dancing, as if this is solely who they are. State-sanctioned performances on national and international stages focus the “exotic western minorities” and present them as entertainment while leaving out other markers of Uyghur identity, like language and religion. I discuss this further in this chapter.

An example of how this history is manipulated can be heard in the nomination video used to gain UNESCO protection for *meshrep* (UNESCO 2009). Instead of using the Uyghur term for *meshrep*, or even standard Mandarin (麦西来福; pīnyīn: màixiláifú lit. 'harvest festival') for the UNESCO bid, the gathering is labeled with a Mandarin-Uyghur hybrid transliteration as *maxirap* and pronounced as such in the English language video. *Maxirap* represents a nearly-complete accommodation of the Uyghur pronunciation of *meshrep*, except that the Uyghur Latin orthography is consciously rejected in favor of using Pinyin Latin (Arienne Dwyer 2017, personal communication).

Fig. 1: Opening scene (<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/USL/meshrep-00304>)

Meshrep (China)

Urgent Safeguarding List - 2010

Film 'Maxirap'

© 2009 by ICH Protection and Research Centre, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China



communication). Pinyin is still the only official Latin-based orthography in China, and even though Uyghur Latin is favored by many Uyghurs, the latter is disallowed in Chinese state

communications, as it connotes what the Chinese state considers Uyghur nationalism and foreign meddling in Chinese affairs (*ibid.*).

The short film was populated by a village of young people dressed in matching outfits who came running to the *meshrep* (see Fig. 3) when beckoned by a man blowing on a ram's horn (see Fig. 2). It was filmed in a yellowed Sepia tint as if to emphasize the how detached *meshrep* is from the present day. The imagery of the video hails from an imagined past set centuries ago.

Fig. 2: Blowing the horn (<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/USL/meshrep-00304>)

Meshrep (China)
Urgent Safeguarding List - 2010
Film 'Maxirap'
© 2009 by ICH Protection and Research Centre, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China



The representation of village life and the matching ethnic costumes worn by the actors involved create a picture that is far removed from how the majority of modern day Uyghurs live. The narrator in the UNESCO film, speaking English with a strong Mandarin accent, described the *maxirap* as the “most important spiritual home for Uyghurs.” Yet the film shows *meshrep* in a way

that bears little resemblance to their daily life. Showing a *meshrep* during the day seemed strange to some Uyghurs with whom I discussed the video, as they had only been to *meshrep* at night. A Uyghur colleague described his memory of filming a neighborhood *meshrep* in Dolan in 2004, where a tractor was used to provide lighting for the gathering. Uyghurs are presented atemporally, as if Uyghurs and the *meshrep* are some sort of exotic cultural object.

My conversations with Uyghurs revealed that even Uyghurs who were old enough to

Fig. 3: Running to *Meshrep* (<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/USL/meshrep-00304>)
Meshrep (China)
Urgent Safeguarding List - 2010
Film 'Maxirap'
© 2009 by ICH Protection and Research Centre, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China



remember *meshrep* from rural areas felt this imagery was very detached from their lives, but rather was designed to fit within the Chinese framework of what Uyghurs are “supposed” to be. Many noted the stark contrast between the agrarian life many Uyghurs used to live in and the urban life many have moved toward. Without strong neighborhood identities or the seasonal rhythm of

working on a farm, the space, time, and context for *meshrep* as it was practiced in a village is not found in many contemporary Uyghurs' lives, especially not for urban Uyghurs. At the same time, the agrarian past does occupy a space in the Uyghur historical imagination, just not in the ways that are represented by the government sanctioned portrayals of *meshrep*. A Uyghur historian I interviewed who grew up during the Cultural Revolution and had no knowledge of *meshrep* until late in his adulthood likened the current revitalization efforts to a back-to- nature farming movement he had heard of in Europe. There is a strong feeling of nostalgia for a time when life was simpler, communities were unified, and families were connected to their land. In media produced by Uyghurs, this often gets communicated through scenery. Uyghur music videos across genres ranging from folk to pop to hard rock draw on the trope of village life, using it to signify that the artist understands what it means to be authentically Uyghur. On a long, hot 27 hour bus ride from Ürümqi to Kashgar, I watched numerous music videos set in fields of wheat or in dusty, barren deserts. These videos seemed to be preferred, at least by my fellow sleeper bus companions. The music could cover a wide range of styles, but the scenery that felt most like home was never the urban environment that many Uyghurs now inhabit. The negotiation between past and present is part of both government sanctioned cultural portrayals and of Uyghur-produced art. A key difference is in the way that this negotiation takes place: Uyghur artists can take the past into account in more subtle ways that calmly draw attention toward aspects of identity that are important to them and will resonate with their audiences.

In contrast, the UNESCO video portrays Uyghur culture as something that is not part of the modern world, but that is stuck in an idyllic past where everyone participates in a cartoonized version of agrarian village life. Subjects such as religion or the real-life challenges of living as a Uyghur village farmer in China are conveniently left out, even though religious beliefs and

working through struggles within the community were integral parts of *meshrep*. One interviewee who grew up near Kashgar described how people in need were provided with food at *meshrep*. Other issues within the community, such as alcohol abuse or inappropriate behavior between the sexes, were brought to light and dealt with through games and punishments. Ablat listed off some basic lessons a person would learn at *meshrep*:

“*Uyghurlighini ögenidu.*

Uyghurlar qandaq qilidu? Edeplik oturidu.

Uyghurlar qandaq qilidu? Xeqlerningki ayallirigha qarimaydu.

Uyghurlar qandaq qilidu? Uyghurlar chay ichken chaghda chay edep bilen (snort sounds) *qilmay, chiraylik ichidu.*

[He¹⁰ learns how to be Uyghur.

What do Uyghurs do? They sit politely.

What do Uyghurs do? They do not look at other men's wives.

What do Uyghurs do? When they drink tea, they use their manners and do not snort, they drink prettily.]”

My interviewee asserted that these were the kinds of things people learned at *meshrep*, as well as lessons specific to the village or neighborhood context at hand. As *meshrep* has been taken out of the neighborhood context and put into the realm of cultural heritage, the importance of *meshrep* as a community-building gathering is only shown through actors portraying set scenarios.

Controversial topics, such as those relating to religion, or to struggles with local government, are conveniently left out to focus on aspects of Uyghur life that fit within the Party line.

¹⁰ *Meshrep* are not only for men, but this interviewee is male and speaks from a male perspective. At a *meshrep*, men, women, and young people all learned social norms appropriate to their gender within the context of their community.

The complex factors involved in the shifts from the world of historical memory to modern reality are also absent from much of the conversation revolving around *meshrep* research and presentation. It existed in another time and is used to represent and manipulate the “essence” of what it meant to be Uyghur. The difference between the neighborhood *meshrep* of the past and the current presentation of *meshrep* brings up questions about exactly what contributed to the decline of *meshrep* in modern Uyghur life. An interview with Dr. Rahile Dawut, one of the key Uyghur researchers involved in *meshrep* documentation efforts, revealed some of the factors in this decline (personal communication, 2013). Some of these reasons are related to global patterns of increased urbanization as economies have shifted away from farming toward industry. I met an older gentleman sitting in a traditional medicine shop and when I asked him about his earlier *meshrep* experiences, he fondly remembered gathering until the neighborhood *rawap* player moved away and the neighborhood lost a central part of producing the music of their *meshrep*. Not being tied to land means moving for work or education is more commonplace than it was a century ago. Politics, and especially the so-called Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), also played an extremely large role in creating the current cultural climate in Xinjiang. Land was collectivized and neighborhood structures and the agrarian rhythm of life that *meshrep* existed within were uprooted, leaving the practice without its context. Older Uyghurs, whom I sought out in an attempt to get more direct information on what historical *meshrep* were like, emphasized that the Cultural Revolution imposed a glaring interruption of artistic traditions. The declaration of cultural practices as “feudal” had an impact on every aspect of daily life, including the community structure and the practice of *meshrep*. While there was a resurgence of *meshrep* during the 1970s and 80s in some locations, and in the 1990s in the northwestern Xinjiang area of Ghulja in particular, it seemed that whatever *meshrep* had been in people’s lives prior to the Cultural Revolution was never quite recovered. Current restrictions on Uyghurs gathering served

to further undermine any attempt at recreating the former sense of neighborhood structure and *meshrep* gatherings. The Cultural Revolution left a huge mark on people's lives across China and in the decades following, new government policies have continued to create barriers to Uyghurs gathering. While the *meshrep* was important to people's lives and still has a prominent place in the cultural imagination of many Uyghurs, the weight of other aspects of life was greater than *meshrep* in elderly Uyghurs' recounting of the past.

Cultural shifts impacted by forces outside of China also played a role in the decrease of *meshrep* gatherings. Islamic influences from countries with more conservative interpretations of the faith have impacted the way some Uyghurs practice their faith, dress, and view their own cultural heritage. Dr. Dawut pointed out that shifts toward stricter interpretations of Islam by some Uyghurs have made aspects of *meshrep* inappropriate to their understanding of their faith, citing those in Hotan who no longer dance. Technology has left few places untouched and while Uyghurs of yesteryear may have spent their evenings at a *meshrep*, Uyghurs of today are likely to watch television or chat on their phones, utilizing Chinese chat apps to stay in contact with their community virtually instead of through an in-person gathering. While collective historical memory plays a strong role in creating a picture of who Uyghurs are and what *meshrep* was, the forces from government, global economic shifts, and cultural changes among Uyghurs themselves create a new cultural climate. Without accounting for how each of these reasons plays into *meshrep* decline, and the fact that some of these reasons stem from discriminatory laws toward minorities, the *meshrep* of historical memory, especially as shown in UNESCO media, exists in a pristine space where it is not attached to the fraught reality of life in Xinjiang. This is useful for the government and also as a symbol of national pride for Uyghurs, but as we have seen in the above examples the two manifestations of this historical memory look very different.

4.3 UNESCO Research and Promotion Efforts

The work to promote *meshrep* has focused heavily on finding members of Uyghur society who still remember *meshrep* activities and then organizing filming sessions to capture memories of *meshrep* before this knowledge is lost. In China's effort to acquire UNESCO status for the gathering, a group of Uyghur scholars were tasked with identifying types of *meshrep*, then getting descriptions of different *meshrep* from around Xinjiang, and finally recording sample *meshrep* representing the main types. A large tome published by the Xinjiang People's Publishing House served as a portfolio of *meshrep* to present for UNESCO consideration. The large green book contained a compilation of select *meshrep* scripts from each region of Xinjiang, articles on *meshrep*, staged pictures of *meshrep* gatherings, and an accompanying DVD set. The book was based on memories of *meshrep* from 20-30 years prior. *Meshrep* depicted in the films and scripts were highly stylized and formatted by the film directors more than the practitioners, according to my interview Dr. Dawut. Articles with titles like "The People's Art School: The Uyghur Folk *Meshrep*," "The Golden Key to the Treasury of Uyghur Intangible Culture: *Meshrep*," and "The Cradle of Uyghur Song and Dance: *Meshrep*" were included in the work to provide proof of the merit of *meshrep* for qualification as UNESCO intangible cultural heritage (Dawamet 2009). The breadth and importance of this cultural practice, along with the loss of this rich forum for cultural expression from most Uyghurs' everyday lives made a strong case for the inclusion of *meshrep* on the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage in urgent need of safeguarding. In a *Xinjiang Medeniyiti* [Xinjiang Culture] journal article announcing the inclusion of *meshrep* in the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Urgent Need of Safeguarding, the state of *meshrep* preservation is presented in these terms:

"According to our understanding, in 2006 the autonomous region *meshrep* preservation

group was established. Since that time they began the task of investigating, saving, and preserving the *meshrep*, which is intangible cultural heritage. They have filmed 31 types. Originally, Uyghurs had more than 130 types of *meshrep*, but for various reasons they have decreased to only approximately 30 types” (my translation; (Baqi 2011:2).

The process of applying for UNESCO status started years before *meshrep* was accepted in November 2010. This article and the way preservation was approached emphasize the loss of *meshrep* in numerical terms, drawing attention to a quantity more than to the loss of the contextually based and fluid nature of *meshrep*. The practice is likened to an endangered species. In order to rejuvenate the population, the researchers set about creating typologies for *meshrep*, almost as if each region were a taxonomic family and each *meshrep* was a species in need of saving. In my observations, the books, films, and interest in this formal canonization and promotion of *meshrep* did not penetrate many sectors of society beyond the academic sphere.

There has been critique toward how *meshrep* preservation has been approached from a number of angles. When *meshrep* was being considered for UNESCO status, Rachel Harris was involved in the approval process and was reticent to recommend that it be added. Although she had supported a previous, unsuccessful attempt to inscribe *meshrep* to the UNESCO list in 2008, in her comments on the second attempt to add *meshrep* to the this list she stated:

“It seemed to me that in this atmosphere any meaningful safeguarding of *meshrep* was simply not feasible. I recommended against the inscription, and wrote that in my view: local restrictions on a range of community-based religious activities and on large public gatherings could be expected to have a direct impact on the viability of *meshrep* gatherings ... It seems likely that this initiative will contribute to the promotion and preservation of folklorized representations of *meshrep* traditions, while grassroots practice remains subject to the threats detailed above.

The Chinese submitting party wrote in their response that ‘in China, people of all ethnic groups fully enjoy the freedom in religious belief’, but that *meshrep* were a ‘space for traditional cultural practices instead of religious practices’. UNESCO accepted this representation, and the *meshrep* was duly inscribed” (Harris 2015:18-19). In documents presenting Uyghur cultural heritage for UNESCO status, both *meshrep* and *muqam* were cleansed of all religious references (*ibid.*:15). Seeking protection for *meshrep* as a public performance as opposed to a local, unregulated, neighborhood gathering draws a clear line between what is considered legitimate and illegitimate *meshrep*, as far as the authorities are concerned. Uyghur scholar Xudaberdi Abijan (2013:66) critiqued *miras qizghinliqi* ‘heritage enthusiasm’ a term that has come up in reference to other ICH projects within China, (e.g. Harris 2008). Abijan admonishes Uyghurs actively involved in this process for being too eager to jump at the chance to participate in a government-sanctioned effort to preserve Uyghur culture. The enthusiasm for *meshrep* research resulted in certain regions gaining more access to funds and resources, creating inequality in how *meshrep* of various regions were preserved. He criticizes the categorization of *meshrep* and how now it seems that people are trying to fit many practices which would not have been viewed as *meshrep* under that umbrella to benefit from the prestige (and funding) of the current intangible heritage movement (Abijan 2013:69). His article more accurately reflected the attitudes uncovered in my interviews with academics and helped explain the lack of interest in *meshrep* I found among laypeople.

Casual conversations with Uyghurs I met in music shops in Ürümqi and Kashgar showed a lack of connection to *meshrep* and its promotion as ICH. While the musicians who worked at and frequented the shops could tell me about Uyghur music and art in general, only the elderly had many memories of *meshrep*. The younger Uyghurs would typically discuss *meshrep* as related to *muqam* or as a kind of Uyghur folk song and dance. While having a brief conversation with a female storekeeper in a side street in Ürümqi, a young man from Dolan jumped into our

conversation about *meshrep* to assert that it was just a Uyghur song and dance: “*bir Uyghur naxsha usuli.*” The dismissive tone with which he delivered this information and the fact that he was from Dolan, a region known for its *meshrep*, made me wonder why I so often heard this explanation from people not involved in more formal research and promotion efforts. One reason I discerned from these interactions was that *meshrep* was viewed as an informal, commonplace gathering. It was not viewed as something in need of formal explanation because it was taken to be basic knowledge that anyone should know. It was something taken for granted and it was strange that I would be curious about it. Very few of the people I met who were not in academia had any idea that *meshrep* had UNESCO status. I recall a bookstore owner and a musician or two being aware of this status, and a few older people noticing an announcement about *meshrep* in the newspaper. To most, *meshrep* was not something that needed a lot of fanfare. Another reason for the young man’s reaction was the detachment most contemporary Uyghurs have from *meshrep*. Some regions still have *meshrep*, but the strict policies about Uyghurs gathering create a climate where having an organic neighborhood *meshrep* is difficult. For many Uyghurs, *meshrep* exists as a pastime of memory at most. My questions to try to understand *meshrep* seemed to come across as it would if someone from another country came to my small, rural hometown and began interrogating people about square dances and barn raisings. I know these activities were likely important to solidifying social bonds and creating the environment in which I grew up, but they have little bearing on my present existence. The reactions to my simple question of what a *meshrep* was reminded me of this feeling of knowing something was important in the past but is no longer part of everyday life.

The first goal of *meshrep* preservation, according to my interview with Dr. Dawut was to *chushendurush* ‘explain’ *meshrep* to people by showing regional differences in the practice. However,

the books and films published to this end did not resonate with the intended audience. When Uyghurs saw me carrying the giant green *meshrep* book (Dawamet 2009) around, they were curious about it, but often more because it was green, a color associated with Islamic literature, than because it was a book about Uyghur culture. Another book series was published in smaller formats, as a single paperback book that gave a summary of the *meshrep* of each region and also broken into four smaller books that each focused on a particular region. I easily acquired these books and saw them at numerous hole-in-the-wall book shops as well as in the larger bookstores of Ürümqi and Kashgar. Again, people were curious about them if they saw me with them, but they had not been attracted to them prior to my introduction. The formal efforts to preserve *mehsrep* in print to somehow make up for the loss of *meshrep* and create a sense of Uyghurness through state-sanctioned means made little impact on Uyghurs' understanding of or interest in *meshrep*, from my observations.

4.4 The Role of Media

Modern media formats, such as television and tourism-centered performances, have also been influential in both promoting and redefining Uyghur *meshrep*. The more fluid nature of participation in village *meshrep* contrasts sharply with the performance-based televised *meshrep* that have become the only type of *meshrep* many urban Uyghurs have seen. Televised *meshrep* was intended to help explain *meshrep* to Uyghurs who may not have had a lot of real life exposure to the gathering. Dr. Dawut revealed that explaining *meshrep* in an accessible way was a primary goal of the research, and the team decided television was the best way to reach people. The research team also aimed to show regional differences and preserve local culture. The televised *meshrep* would serve as a reminder of how Uyghurs used to interact and instill cultural pride in ways that were in line with modern ideologies of how Uyghurs are “supposed” to behave in

China. In my formal interviews, most admitted that while they started out being excited about seeing *meshrep* through televised depictions, they quickly lost interest because they found the televised *meshrep* to be *zérikishlik*, ‘boring.’ *Meshrep* of television exists outside of any real life context and loses the community participation that characterized the gatherings of the past. It is detached from real life issues people might face in their contemporary communities and is simply entertainment. The weekly programs depicting regional *meshrep* through artists' performances started in the early 2000s and continue, along with a variety that is also called *Meshrep* and is on XJTV in the evening. Actors and musicians in ethnic costume sing, play games, and dance on stylized stages meant to represent environments where Uyghurs would once have gathered: open courtyards with grapevine trellises, dusty dirt roads, colorful carpets spread across the area where the *meshrep* will take place.

My younger friends rarely watched the televised *meshrep*, although I have noticed the *meshrep* variety show type programs being on in the background of gatherings at their homes. Sometimes they would leave it on for my sake since they knew I was interested in seeing how *meshrep* was depicted. A Uyghur girl in her early twenties who had grown up in Ürümqi said she had never heard of *meshrep* until she saw one televised. While her family had ties to more rural areas of southern Xinjiang, the topic of *meshrep* had never come up in conversation. A young woman in her mid-twenties from a village in Turpan who worked at the Xinjiang Television station and was involved in the production of televised *meshrep* said she had had no exposure to *meshrep* prior to the filming endeavor. Though she grew up in a rural, farming community, her parents had grown up during the 1960s and 70s, when cultural expression was highly suppressed. She remembered her mother telling her about singing songs while working in her work unit, but other than that she had heard very little about Uyghur gatherings that would resemble a *meshrep*.

or the body of songs and literature that are part of *meshrep*. Older populations, represented by Uyghurs I met on the street, did not make it a point to watch the *meshrep* each week, but knew it was on television on the weekends. An Ürümqi nursing home, which included occupants from many regions of Xinjiang, made it a point to include a weekly *meshrep* viewing in their schedule of activities, although the elderly inhabitants of the facility did not express interest in talking about *meshrep* or their memories of it. Again, the interruption of people's lives by the Cultural Revolution and economic shifts in society, as well as family responsibilities and work, were more prominent in their minds. A representation of *meshrep* intended to make it accessible and explain the practice to those who did not have a background while reminding those who had seen past *meshrep* fell short of expectations. Televised *meshrep* are simply not interesting enough to hold most people's attention very long.

4.5 Experiencing *Meshrep* Through Tourism

Tourism is another realm where *meshrep* gets reinvented. Students at the Xinjiang Arts Institute can now major in *meshrep* performance, which provides an opportunity to learn the songs, stories, games, and other elements of historical *meshrep* to display in government-sanctioned performances. They become paid professionals who travel around in troupes, performing *meshrep* of a sort for an audience. The *meshrep* is uniquely Uyghur and in tourism, it is a concise symbolic representation to the outside world of what it means to be Uyghur.

Han tourists visiting Xinjiang for an experience of China's "Wild West" can attend banquet style dinners with dancers and musicians performing a variety of musical styles and dances from Uyghur and other cultures, all under the title of *meshrep*. One evening while I was in Ürümqi, I randomly met a woman who, upon hearing that I found it difficult to find *meshrep*,

informed me she was at a *meshrep* every night. She invited me to come to the Grand Bazaar to see her *meshrep*. I took her up on her offer, arriving at a theater one evening and being escorted to a quiet, private room on an upper level which served as an excellent perch from which to observe rows of long tables full of Han tourists eating their Uyghur feast. There were platters of *polu* (a pilaf of rice, carrots, and mutton), watermelon, and *nan* (Uyghur flat bread), along with a never-ending flow of skewers of *kawap* (mutton kabobs). As the tourists from inner China who came on a tour bus for a highly scheduled tour of Xinjiang ate, the performance began. On the stage, dancers performed popular Uyghur folk songs, interspersed with dances from around the world.

Fig. 4: Han at a *Meshrep* performance, Ürümqi (August 2013, photo by author)



There was flamenco, tango, and belly-dancing complete with a very non-Uyghur midriff-bearing top and a snake slithering around the young woman's shoulders. All of this was presented under the umbrella of *meshrep*. While watching the performance, a 17-year-old Uyghur girl who grew up near Kashgar was sent to be my companion. She was one of the dancers and she explained each act to me, animatedly expressing her excitement for the performance. The contrast between Fig. 5: “*Meshrep*” belly dancing, Ürümqi (August 2013, photo by author photo)



meshrep as it was likely practiced in her home community decades ago and the performance in front of us did not faze her. During her lifetime, she had likely never been to a *meshrep*, and this performance was just her job. She was simply excited to be able to perform and potentially make a career out of doing what she loved. *Meshrep* as tourism is a way to make money off of ethnic identity. Though some of the ways that identity gets expressed and commodified display elements that have no connection to Uyghur culture, the performers, those running the show, and the tourism companies benefit from *meshrep* as a money-making enterprise.

4.6 Commodification of *Meshrep*

Beyond profiting from *meshrep* as a tourist attraction, companies around Xinjiang have begun using the term *meshrep* in advertisements and company names to ascribe a sense of Uyghurness to their business. In my interview with Ablat, an educator who grew up in Kashgar, he said: “Esli, meshrepning menisimu *yighilish* digen gep... [Originally, the meaning of *meshrep* was *gathering*.]” In contrast, he described the current state of *meshrep* as “*ilanqua oxshaydu bu* [it has become like an advertisement].” Akbar, a native of Turpan who came of age during the Cultural Revolution and later became a history professor, used the term *sün’iy* ‘artificial’ to summarize his view on modern *meshrep* interpretations. Companies can create their own *meshrep*, use the term *meshrep* in their advertisements, and sponsor televised *meshrep* to affiliate themselves with the term. Ablat joked about how anything can now be a *meshrep*. He began by describing the role *meshrep* can play in helping a county promote itself and its products: “*Shu nahiye tonushturup, shu nahiye satgili bolidighan nersini sitish... hazir meshrep... pul bersingiz qilip beridu* [Introduce the region, sell the region's products... now, if you give money you can have a *meshrep*].” He went on to describe how he had seen “*téléfon shirkiti meshripi*” [telephone company *meshrep*] and “*banka meshripi*” [bank *meshrep*], further demonstrating his point about how commodified *meshrep* has become by suggesting if I had money, I could sponsor an “*Amérika meshripi*” [America *meshrep*] or even an “*Amanda meshripi*” [Amanda *meshrep*] in my own name! While the formal UNESCO work on *meshrep* has not drawn much attention beyond the academic realm, the proliferation of the term in other directions is hard to miss.

It was not difficult to find evidence of his views on how *meshrep* is used for profit. My friend who works at XJTV remembered filming an Arman *meshrep*, representing the Arman supermarket, which is one of the most popular Uyghur stores in Xinjiang. Affiliating the

company with *meshrep* promoted the business as being for Uyghurs. The inside of an Arman supermarket already has many elements that speak to the company's desire to appeal to Uyghurs, such as the patterns worn by store clerks, the prominent displays of snacks for Uyghur hospitality, and the abundance of products made by Uyghur or Turkish companies. The Arman *meshrep* was another way for the company to align itself with its Uyghur audience. While in Turpan visiting this same friend's small village in summer 2015, I saw an advertisement for the China Mobile phone company painted on a mud brick wall along a dusty dirt road promoting a “*meshrep kartisi*” [*Meshrep* Card] phone plan. China Mobile is one of China's largest providers of mobile phone services and this particular phone card made use of *meshrep* to draw upon the symbolism of the word: with one word, this card associates the phone service with community, fun, and Uyghurness.

A Xinjiang-based appliance company took the use of the term even further by using it as the name of their company. *Mashrap*¹¹ Appliance Company produces refrigerators, washing machines, stoves, and other household labor-saving machines, all emblazoned with their *Mashrap* insignia. The company tagline, “*Öyimizde mashrap bolsun* [May there be a *meshrep* in our home],” speaks volumes. In summer 2016, I walked past a *Mashrap* appliance store every day on my walk through southern Ürümqi en route to my teaching job. One evening, I stopped in to chat with the young, male Uyghur shopkeeper. I asked him why he felt the name *meshrep* had been chosen for the company and what he thought was represented by the company's tagline. He talked about how *meshrep* is very important to Uyghur culture, although he was a young man without personal experience of *meshrep*. He described *meshrep* as a neighborhood party with singing and dancing,

¹¹ Both *meshrep* and *mashrap* are ways to represent the Uyghur word *meshrep* in Latin characters. While I have used *meshrep* throughout this thesis, in the case of this store I leave the spelling in the manner of its brand.

which would draw people together and create a fun, happy environment. The phrase “*köngul echish*” [have fun, lit.: open one's heart] came up numerous times in conversations about the purpose of *meshrep*.

Fig. 6: *Mashrap* Storefront, Ürümqi (July 2016, photo by author)



This young man enthusiastically described how using the word *meshrep* for the company signified happiness in the home. While at one time, the idea of having a *meshrep* in the home referred to the literal gathering, today, the dream of having a *meshrep* in every home could be realized via purchasing appliances marketed to appeal to Uyghurs. Having a *meshrep* in one's home was a symbol of happiness, prosperity, and connection, now fulfilled by labor-saving devices rather than a shared experience.

Fig. 7: *Mashrap* electric kettle, Ürümqi (July 2016, photo by author)



4.7 Reflections on Discursive Practices and *Mashrep*

Talking with Xinjiang Uyghurs during my fieldwork, I learned that the understanding of what *meshrep* entails varies widely, but this is based largely upon what sector of society a person interacts with the most. The word has associations with Sufism, building Uyghur community through teaching new generations the norms of society, sharing stories and songs, punishing community members through playful games, and also gets conflated with other forms of Uyghur gatherings, such as *bezme* 'get-together' or *mejlis* 'meeting'. Historically, the delineation of when something was a *meshrep* and when something was some other type of gathering was not entirely clear. It was a distinction made regionally, and *meshrep* of different locales took on different forms themselves. In the early 2000s, *meshrep*'s cultural heritage had enough prestige and also had the potential to contain so many other representations of Uyghur culture in the diversity of its practice that it drew attention as a potential for UNESCO status. It was chosen by a group of

Uyghur intellectuals and the Chinese state as one of the most important representations of Uyghur culture. Attaining UNESCO status for *meshrep* was approached in much the same way as the process with *muqam*, but *meshrep* was generally a more informal practice than *muqam* and had much less structure. *Meshrep* with *muqam* are an apt pair because there is a section of *muqam* called *meshrep* that involves dancing and because elements of *muqam* music are often used in *meshrep*. Both terms share Arabic roots, which ties the practices to the Islamic world, and are presented as having a long history in Uyghur culture. With my own understanding of *meshrep* coming from academic discussion of the topic, I had not expected to find that so many Uyghurs had so little experience of *meshrep*, that indeed to some *meshrep* was only a variety show on TV.

Through attempting to examine Uyghurs' reactions to how *meshrep* was being influenced by UNESCO status under Chinese policies, I found that the conversation surrounding *meshrep* contains at least five different lines: that of the state, academics, laypeople (with some variation based on age and location), performers, and those involved in commerce. These entities can be thought of in terms of Bourdieu's concept of field. A field is a setting where agents and their social positions are located, and the position of each particular agent in the field is a result of interaction between the specific rules of the field, and the power relations within and between fields (Bourdieu 1993:30). The state constitutes a field that exerts power over the others, especially the academy (where Uyghur academics are situated) and media and tourism (where performers are situated). In the discussion of *meshrep*, laypeople have less power than the state, but assert power by not participating in the state-sanctioned presentation of Uyghur culture, making a quiet but strong statement about what is and is not an authentic representation of their culture. Those involved in using *meshrep* as a marketing tool in commerce use aspects of the state-sanctioned presentation while also harnessing the power of nostalgia to appeal to laypeople

through emphasizing positive elements of Uyghur culture. While the field of the state exerts power over how agents can express themselves, resistance to and negotiations of the products of state power come out in the interactions of the other entities with the state.

To the Chinese state, a state-sanctioned *meshrep* is a way to promote a view of the Uyghur ethnic group as a happy song and dance people. In the spectacle of *meshrep* through performances of in tourism and media, the state exercises its power to define *meshrep* in terms that serve the end of promoting a monolithic picture of Uyghurs that limits their identity to singing and dancing. The state has power to decide which *meshrep* are legal, and which are not. Rachel Harris describes a spontaneous 2012 *meshrep* she participated in that resulted in a tense standoff with local authorities (Harris 2015:24). The *meshrep* the state allows in media and tourism is a caricature of the neighborhood gathering it used to be, used to show a good face to the outside world and an entertaining face within China. It provides a veneer of caring about minority groups, while organic gatherings like the one Harris described are not allowed. *Meshrep* has become a tool for the state to use presentations of ethnic performances bring in money for research and tourism (Harris 2015:17). The presentation of *meshrep* in state-sanctioned performances and research is glaringly different than so much of the rest of the conversation about Xinjiang in China, which focuses on how dangerous the “restive Western Regions” are. Nearly every conversation I have with a Chinese person not from Xinjiang involves them being afraid of how dangerous it is for a person to visit the western part of their country. The depiction of *meshrep* as a happy, civilizing, entertaining element of Uyghur culture is a convenient way to present this region while glossing over some of the ways state control has contributed to issues in the region.

Among Uyghur academics, the conversation about *meshrep* was often loaded with idealized pictures of a sort of paradise lost. They emphasized that *meshrep* played a crucial role in the socialization of Uyghurs and that without it, cultural knowledge was being lost. This was the discourse I was expecting to learn more about from the layperson's perspective during my fieldwork. Since my background in understanding *meshrep* was disproportionately influenced by academic texts and conversations with Uyghur professors, this idealized practice was the only way I had ever understood *meshrep*. In this subculture, the schematic narrative templates I discovered presented *meshrep* as a cultural school, the cradle of Uyghur art, the practice that held communities together. The discourse constructed by academics about *meshrep* was built on a collective memory of *meshrep* as a neighborhood gathering where Uyghurs learned to be Uyghur. Without it, Uyghur young people no longer learn these cultural norms and members of Uyghur society struggle to find their bearings. The view of *meshrep* as a locus of socialization is implicitly critical of the Chinese state portrayal of minority groups, yet academics within China also have to work with the state as they navigate their careers. This balance can be very tenuous for minority scholars, resulting in articles that may not reflect the authors' deepest convictions and clearest findings, but rather a softened version combined with viewpoints that will better fit the party line. Xinjiang-published Uyghur-language articles are often unsatisfying to Uyghur readers because they know how much has to be left out to safely publish articles and maintain one's career. Turkic religious practices and histories that do not fit well within the state discourses of how Uyghurs are downplayed. In the field where Uyghur academics reside, state power over how they can present their work and views influences their discursive practices. Critical Discourse Analysis would be a useful technique for future work on the ideologies of words frequently used in academic writing on *meshrep*, such as *miras* 'heritage' or *en'eniwiyl* 'traditional,' especially as the body of academic writing on *meshrep* grows over time. The notions of what

constitutes Uyghur “traditions” and “heritage” remain highly contested. To some actors, like the state, they are de-Islamicized song, dance, and music performances, and this redefinition of tradition and heritage comes out in academic discourse. CDA could reveal additional insights on the changing definitions of traditional heritage by the various actors.

For performers, *meshrep* is a way to make their livelihood through utilizing Uyghur culture. It is not inherently laden with deep cultural meaning. Tourism is a way to make money, and for the Uyghur dancers and singers who were able to follow this path to a career, *meshrep* provided a way to market their skills. The people I met involved in this sector were Uyghur, but I do not doubt that Han-run tourism companies in other parts of China profit from *meshrep* as a performance as well. Busloads of Han tourists come into Xinjiang daily to get a taste of adventure while maintaining the safety of a group tour. Performers and the Uyghurs who run these industries capitalize off of the exoticization of Uyghur culture. Although this exoticization is part of the state’s power, performers acted as if they were unaware of the influence this power had on their work. In the conversations I had, this practice of Hans gawking at exotic minorities was not viewed as problematic. The performances were an opportunity to have a job doing something they liked. It was a realm where they had some power to use their culture to create their lives. *Meshrep* was a tool, much like an artist of another sort could use paint to make his way in the world.

Meshrep as presented in commerce and discussed by those who use this name in business, such as the case of the shopkeeper at the *Meshrep* appliance store, makes use of nostalgia for a kinder, happier time. Such views mirror those of some U.S. Americans, who are nostalgic for the “good old days” of a white suburban patriarchal (Leave It to Beaver-esque) lifestyle, when homes were supposedly calmer, families got along, and the biggest problem was when a little boy hit a baseball through a window. Nostalgia plays a powerful role in creating longing, which then is

cleverly attached by the companies to their products. In the Uyghur case, nostalgia is different than American nostalgia in important ways: the Cultural Revolution certainly did uproot people's lives, cultural practices, and sense of community, whereas in America this so-called "war" on people's values is more of an imagined threat: the good old days were not good for everyone. The imagination of the past allows people to emphasize aspects and de-emphasize others. In the Uyghur case, trying to recreate a sense of safety, community, and happiness in the wake of all that happened in China and in Xinjiang specifically in the last seventy years, and is still happening today, fills a strong need to have hope that things can be good again. The collective memory of *meshrep* as a fun, happy space of togetherness provides businesses with a way to harness that positivity for their own marketing endeavors. Attaching the *meshrep*, symbolizing a joyous place where people can gather as families, is a useful, concise symbol, which makes an excellent brand at a point in time when the word is floating around on television and in pop music.

4.8 Summary

The proliferation of *meshrep* as a term symbolic of Uyghurness is an impact of UNESCO status unique from the way *muqam* was reimagined after it was granted protected status. While both *muqam* and *meshrep* went through a process of canonization, *meshrep* took on a whole new identity beyond the formal UNESCO efforts. *Muqam* exists as a more pristine, high art form. Prior to canonization, *muqam* was more improvisational in nature, but still had a more formal structure than a gathering as varied and regionally specific as *meshrep*. Its status was raised even higher through the proliferation of stories about the folk heroes involved in its preservation throughout history. *Meshrep*, in contrast, has a history that is much harder to trace to one specific narrative. In the rather murky past of *meshrep*, described by one researcher as "a blackhole," there is a void that can be filled in myriad ways. The expansiveness of the term gets filled in with

wistful nostalgia for a bygone era for some, with convenient historical fictions to promote certain forms of ethnic identity for others, and with an opportunity to make money and capitalize off of ethnicity for a variety of actors, both Uyghur and not.

Chapter 5

Meshrep, You Live With Us

Dolan Meshripi/Dolan Meshrep¹²

*Ana yurtum ara töhpe, töhpe miras, miras bibaha meshrep,
boghulghandek nepeslerge shipaliq, sap hawa meshrep.
Kamalet tapti qoynungda muqam el-neghme jambazliq,
ezeldin zati Uyghurgha ijazetsiz rawa meshrep.
Béghisen qan-qérindashliq inaqlig jan köyerlikning,
hosul behring adawetlik jarahetke dawa meshrep, jarahetke dawa meshrep.
Yene sen katta seynasi ulugh insan xislitining,
sénингде en-ene resmi yusun shermi haya meshrep.
Yene yüksəl quyastek parlisun pak rohi milletning,
baghash etsun bu alemni ésil neghme naşa meshrep.*

The masterpiece of my motherland, pinnacle of tradition, the priceless heritage of *meshrep*
Like a breath of fresh air to one who had been smothered, so is the healing, pure air of *meshrep*
Folk music and wrestling found their perfection in the bosom of *muqam*
Meshrep has always belonged to the sons and daughters of Uyghur, needing no one's permission
You are the vision of brotherhood by blood and brotherly love
Meshrep, whose benefit of harvest is healing for the wound of hatred
You are the great courtyard of human virtue
Tradition, custom, and humility are in you, *meshrep*
Rise, let the spirit of the nation shine like sun
May *meshrep* embrace the world with music and song.

The Spectacle of Song: Capitalizing on *Meshrep* Fever

In the last decade, the above song has been performed on many stages. The performance involved some of the highest profile Uyghur artists working today: it was written by the esteemed Uyghur poet Memtili Zunun, then set to music by perhaps the most popular Uyghur singer today, Abdulla Abdurehim. While living in Ankara 2012, I saw a Uyghur dance troupe at a celebration of the spring equinox New Year's festival Novruz (a.k.a. Nowruz, Nevruz, etc). The performance included Turkmen, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Azerbaijani, Uzbek, Uyghur, and Turkish

¹² Poem by Memtili Zunun, Set to music and performed by Abdulla Abdurehim (early 2000s)
Translation by Akbar Amat and Amanda Snider

performances, as well as dances from several other Turkic ethnic groups in Russia and Europe. Each group performed to one song of their choice and the Uyghur troupe chose the above *Dolan Meshrep* to represent Uyghurs on a pan-Turkic stage. Both internationally and domestically, *Dolan Meshrep* has become the standard song that Uyghurs see as representing their cultural values. It was part of the 2011 Chinese Lunar Year Gala broadcast on Chinese Central Television (CCTV), as well as on a 2007 CCTV dance competition. The videos of these performances on YouTube have had over 300,000 views. *Dolan Meshrep* was also performed at the *meshrep* for Han tourists I attended in Ürümqi in the summer of 2013. Perhaps the most important performance of this song was at an internationally-viewed 2008 pre-concert of the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony, when Abdulla Abdurehim was invited to perform it.

Fig. 8: *Dolan Meshrep* performed by a Uyghur troupe for Novruz (Ankara, 2012, photo by author)



Earlier in 2008, Abdulla Abdurehim had released his second album sung in Mandarin Chinese entitled *Gherbiy Dunya Nakhsha Cholpini—Abdulla* (The King of Song of the Western

Region: Abdulla) known in Mandarin as 西部歌王: 阿卜杜拉, Xībùgēwáng: Ābodùlā. On the otherwise all-Mandarin album, *Dolan Meshrep* was the only song performed in Uyghur, and no translation was provided (Wong 2013:105). The singer himself claims descent from the Dolans, a culturally distinct group officially subsumed under the Uyghurs living about 200 kilometers east of Kashgar (Arienne Dwyer, personal correspondence 2017). He utilized this to harness Han and Uyghur attitudes toward Dolan as he capitalized on the fame of the region to have a profitable album. Dolan is a region of Xinjiang famous for its music, having forms of *meshrep* and *muqam* that are iconic both in Uyghur culture and in later UNESCO representations of that culture (During & Trebinjac 1991). Today, Dolan is associated with being one of the strongest centers of Uyghur musical traditions and culture and the name “Dolan” is often paired with images of Uyghurs in costumes like the ones in the above picture. Even though Uyghurs do not typically dress like that, the picture in the minds of people who may have never interacted with Uyghurs, such as Han tourists, are influenced by this imagery. The singer drew on the “middle-class Chinese fetishization of the exotic Dolan culture” while also reclaiming his Uyghur roots to align himself with that audience (Wong 2013:106). The song *Dolan Meshrep* drew on this heritage, using musical styling from the region's *muqam* to make the song feel authentically Uyghur: the music is stirring, with its pulsing beat from the Uyghur *dap* [framed flat drum] and utilization of the irregular-meter sections of *muqam* (ibid.:106). While Han Chinese listeners almost certainly have no idea what the Uyghur means, the music takes them to the “exotic Wild West” as Xinjiang is so often marketed. The singer Abdulla Abdurehim walks the line between showing loyalty to his own Uyghur culture and creating a name for himself in the whole of China. He draws from the cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) he has in various realms and from how minorities within China are portrayed to make the most of the situation in which he has to

market his music. The tensions between appealing to Uyghur pride and staying in line with the Chinese state of assimilating it are challenging to navigate both on an individual level (the singer's career) and also on a group level, "protecting" Uyghur *meshrep*. In the case of Abdulla's career, he has successfully struck this balance by making a name for himself within China and among Uyghurs.

The flowery expressions in the *Dolan Meshrep* appeal to the Uyghur audience, as the poet and singer well know. This song draws on a vocabulary that is much more sophisticated than the colloquial language of the Keriya folksong that began my thesis. Both songs, though from different oases, appeal to nostalgia, and draw on the prestige of *meshrep* by looking backwards from a present moment of complicated modernity. In the case of *Dolan Meshrep* poem, however, the words are not everyday words one might use in a conversation: they are charged with meaning, expressing a "nostalgic identification with *meshrep*" in a "proud and emotional recreation of their Uyghur national heritage" (Harris 2015:19). *Meshrep* is portrayed as the pinnacle of Uyghur heritage (*töhpe miras* 'masterpiece legacy') in line 1 of *Dolan Meshrep*, as always belonging to Uyghurs in the statement *ezeldin zati Uyghurgha ijazetsiz rawa meshrep* [*Meshrep* has always belonged to the sons and daughters of Uyghurs, needing no one's permission] in line 4, and as something that represents the highest values of the Uyghur people. Many of the Uyghurs listening to the *Dolan Meshrep* song do not have strong personal associations with *meshrep* practice, based on my research. Even so, using *meshrep* is a powerful way to promote pride in Uyghur heritage. The idea of *meshrep* has come to symbolize Uyghur people and Uyghur values. As in the conversation with the *Mashrap* storekeeper, explaining to me that the *Mashrap* brand reflected the value of Uyghurs families and friends coming together to enjoy life, the *meshrep* in this song also promotes the values of being united as Uyghurs celebrating their heritage. The song presents

values of brotherhood, virtue, and peace. Thus, ideas of ethnic solidarity, pride in shared history, and hope for the future are situated in *meshrep*.

This is unequivocally a song of ethnic pride: its unapologetically Uyghur-centric message has been broadcast so widely, without any qualification about the Uyghurs being tied to China. One of the two men viewing the Ankara 2012 performance of this song commented that the Uyghurs were “*gerçek Türkler* ‘the real Turks’.” These men saw Uyghurs as being tied to Turkic history and as part of the larger Turkic world, not as part of China. That sentiment fit well within the interpretation one could take from the actual lyrics, and gives Uyghurs an identity as Turks instead of as one of the minorities of China.

Given Chinese government regulations put on Uyghurs having any sort of gathering, *meshrep* or other, it is surprising that performances entailing such strong expressions of Uyghur heritage are allowed, not only in Ankara, but in the People's Republic of China as well. Nonetheless, despite the translation-free performances mentioned above, censorship does occur. For example, in a 2011 Chinese state television (CCTV) performance of Dolan Meshrep was posted to Youtube with the following English translation¹³ of this song:

Meshrep, you are our cherished legacy,
Like ancient calls of our mothers from homeland.
When our voices become raucous,
You moisten our hearts, like morning dews.
Meshrep, you are closely linked to our life.
You are a garden where sisters and brothers get together.
When we are in troubles,
You heal our hearts, like mystical medicine.
Meshrep, you live with us.
Meshrep, you laugh with us.

¹³ This English translation was likely first translated into Mandarin, and then a Mandarin speaker translated it into English. The English translator does not appear to be a native speaker of English.

This translation emphasizes how refreshing and joyous *meshrep* is, leaving out the line about the *meshrep* always belonging to Uyghurs and making the song seem more like folksong about a party. It leaves out a direct translation of line 4: *ezeldin zati Uyghurgha ijazetsiz rawa meshrep* [Meshrep has always belonged to the sons and daughters of Uyghur, needing no one's permission]. The CCTV (and live *meshrep* for tourists) audiences are primarily Han Chinese, who do not understand the meaning of the Uyghur words: they can only access the song in translation. have no idea what the Uyghur words are saying: they can only access the song in translation, which the two translations I have provided here show emphasize different aspects of *meshrep*. In the Uyghur language version, *meshrep* is intimately tied to Uyghur heritage and identity, whereas in the above English translation, there is no mention of Uyghurs, only poetic reflections on *meshrep* as some sort of cultural legacy. Detaching the song from the overt Uyghur pride of the original poem makes it fit better within the discourse of *meshrep* I described in the realms of tourism and commodification of *meshrep*.

The malleability of *meshrep* is a big part of why it has become such a powerful symbol of a myriad of things: from the Chinese state's use of *meshrep* to promote a monolithic picture of Uyghurs that focuses primarily on their singing and dancing, to academics pointing to *meshrep* as the key to Uyghur culture, to people who use *meshrep* in commerce to bring up feelings of nostalgia in Uyghur consumers, *meshrep* in current Uyghur life has many meanings. Who finds *meshrep* important and who does not is surprisingly unpredictable. Prior to being in Xinjiang to learn about *meshrep*, I had the idea that the gathering it was important to all Uyghurs. I learned that I could not predict who would find *meshrep* important and who would not. Overall, younger people were less likely to have strong ties to it, but even older people who may have been to *meshrep* in their younger years tended to gloss over the topic in conversations with me, focusing more on how the Cultural Revolution had uprooted their lives, how neighborhood structures had

changed, and how hard they had had to work to raise their families through the tumult. To young people *meshrep* was most often just a Uyghur song and dance since that was all they had seen of *meshrep*. The older respondents recalled enjoying the neighborhood gatherings until something uprooted their lives, but I had trouble getting the depth of meaning of the practice that seemed so prevalent in the academic discourse of *meshrep* to ever surface in discussions with Uyghurs outside of that realm. A key researcher had explained to me that the goal of the efforts to promote *meshrep* was to “explain” it to people, but this promotion seemed to only superficially successful in that it reintroduced *meshrep* back into the public sphere through tourism, music, and commerce. But this reintroduction did not succeed at actually making people passionate about the *meshrep* practice itself. Insofar as *meshrep* could be attached to values such as togetherness and Uyghur pride, the term was successful in getting enough attention to be a way to promote products and businesses to Uyghurs. To the laypeople I met, *meshrep* was not seen as a Uyghur practice stretching back over a thousand years, as some from the academic sphere argue (Turdi, Rehman 2009). The actors that were able to wield *meshrep* in some way to achieve their goals were most interested in the practice (as in the Chinese state, academics, performance artists, and business people, as discussed above and in Chapter 4), while laypeople, especially younger Uyghurs, were less aware that *meshrep* held such importance.

Concluding Thoughts

My aim in presenting my research on *meshrep* was to tell its story across time and space, situating it within the ways it is used by different groups in contemporary Uyghur society. *Meshrep*, as endangered cultural heritage, is a commodity, a cultural practice, and also a light-hearted good time, depending on the person's orientation to the gathering. This multiple functionality sheds light on what life is like for different segments of Uyghur society. The discussion of *meshrep* looks strikingly different because the way people view *meshrep* is dependent

on their identity in relationship to *meshrep*. Some relate to *meshrep* as researchers with an interest in promoting the gathering as something with a long, rich history among Uyghurs. Young urbanites may have had little interaction with *meshrep* at all, but know the word from idioms and understand it represents something valuable in their culture, even if it is not personally meaningful to them. Elderly village farmers, like some I conversed with, may reference *meshrep* in light of how much society has changed and what has been lost. The conversation about *meshrep* is heavily related to how they view their lives and identities.

So often, the conversation about cultural heritage is dominated by people who have the power to make use of state resources to shape the discourses about the culture heritage being examined. These conversations are not value neutral and they disproportionately benefit the people who can stay closely affiliated with the state or other body with power. In the case of *meshrep*, there was strong criticism of how UNESCO efforts were being conducted. Ethnomusicologists, as we saw with Rachel Harris, argued that *meshrep* was not being approached in a way that respected grassroots traditions or aspects of Uyghur society like religion (Harris 2015), which may be more a part of some region's *meshrep* than others. Uyghur scholars, as reflected in Xudaberdi Abijan's critique of *meshrep* fever (Abijan 2013) and more often in informal conversations, also shared concerns about how *meshrep* was becoming too commercialized and simply about getting funding to do research or promote products. Unlike *muqam*, which even in its more improvisational pre-canonicalization era had a higher status and required more musical training, *meshrep* existed in a less formal, home-based realm, and brought with it all of that potential diversity. My work shows that efforts to promote *meshrep* have not had the intended result of “explaining” *meshrep* (as Dr. Dawut shared in her interview, discussed in Chapter 4) to the Uyghurs of Xinjiang, likely because the work being done is not conducted in a way that speaks to the diversity that exists in Uyghur society. Uyghurs are not a monolithic group of

people, yet presentations of their culture, especially when state-sanctioned, can present them as such. My research revealed that many Uyghurs were “bored” with the televised *meshreps* and had no idea that *meshrep* even had UNESCO status.

However, my study also provides evidence that in spite of the lack of interest in formal presentations of *meshrep* as intangible cultural heritage, it has taken on a new life as a word that symbolizes being Uyghur. The gathering is a source of pride, as Uyghurs do know it is their practice and a word with value in their language, even if they themselves are not very well acquainted with the practice. *Meshrep* connotes ethnic identity and pride, acting as a flexible container for any and all positive attributes of Uyghur life and community that people imagine they want to hold onto, as they navigate life in today's Xinjiang.

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