CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1  *Theoretical Framework*

The modern Uyghur, with an official population of almost ten million, constitute the titular majority of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Much recent scholarly work and Western media reports focus precisely upon this issue: the Uyghur as an ethnic group, a recognized national minority within the powerful Chinese nation-state. Their disadvantaged status, sometimes likened to the plight of the Tibetans, is at the centre of attention. The discriminatory policies to which they are subjected are in some accounts balanced by descriptions of Uyghur strategies of resistance and the emergence of ethnic nationalism among them. Some authors discuss the political and social antecedents of the complicated processes of Uyghur ethnogenesis; others focus on the unequal access to resources between the dominant Han Chinese and the Uyghur within the region. Several scholars have investigated the drawing and maintenance of ethnic boundaries between the two major players within the region, the Han Chinese and the Uyghur, while a few have also taken the presence of other groups into consideration.

In his celebrated study of ethnic groups, Fredrik Barth argued that “the critical focus of investigation from this point of view becomes the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses.” Barth insists that certain concepts are relational by nature and that identities are constructed and can be understood only by studying them in relation to what they are not. This approach to

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1 Geng 1984, Gladney 1990.
2 Dillon 1995.
4 Barth 1998: 15.
5 See also Cohen 2000a.
ethnic relations retains its validity in modern social science studies and in the case of Xinjiang in particular, but it does not altogether obviate the need for knowledge and understanding of the ‘cultural stuff’ which lies within the boundaries. Thanks to the works noted above, we now have some insight into how Uyghur self-perceptions and self-definitions are shaped by Chinese ethnic policies as well as by intragroup divisions and competition for resources. This research direction also fits very well the increased interest in minorities, or ‘peripheral peoples’, in the anthropology of China, as recent studies by Louisa Schein, Uradyn Bulag, Stevan Harrell and others have shown.6 But the dominant ethnic discourse also necessitates the understanding of the contents enclosed by boundaries, since, when subjective or objective ethnic identity is promoted, it is nurtured by notions of difference. For this purpose, intellectuals and ideologues also mobilize similarity, as incorporated in essentialized notions of ‘traditions’, ‘custom’, ‘culture’ and the like. In other words, the boundary focus is important but, in itself, unsatisfactory. I agree with Dale Eickelman’s critique of Barth’s instrumentalist approach, which “lacks an adequate notion of how social processes relate to the production of the cultural conceptions with which people distinguish themselves from ‘other’ ethnic categories and with which they account for, evaluate, and weigh the importance of these distinctions”.7

In trying to shift the focus towards this ‘cultural stuff’ circumscribed by ethnic boundaries, I am emphatically not searching for some reified and fixed cultural essence. I focus on forms of social interaction which facilitate self-definition and boundary drawing, but I do not see these as operating with equal force at all times, nor do I believe that all people who consider themselves Uyghur uncritically and unequivocally accept these forms as part of their ‘traditions’. Instead, I understand these as potential resources for identity building that can be selected and mobilized by individuals and groups. Some of these forms may be so obvious that they never need talking about; others may be verbalized in normative judgments and often, but not always, translated into action. In looking at the processual, dynamic nature of social interaction, I focus on strategies that are developed to create, maintain

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7 Eickelman 2002: 196.