CHAPTER THREE

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

A late nineteenth-century author perceptively characterized local Turki society as both despotic and democratic, a formulation which referred to the simultaneous presence of both hierarchical and egalitarian principles.¹ I argue that this egalitarian tendency expressed a normative need for social justice, which was based on the ideal of reciprocity and sharing, through which community could be created, expressed, perpetuated and reproduced. Most people living in towns and villages belonged to a mosque community in which membership was fixed. Although it was perfectly acceptable for a person to attend the mosque of another neighbourhood occasionally as a guest, abandoning one’s own mosque permanently for another one was considered not only inappropriate but unacceptable.² Community membership was therefore ascribed from birth and constituted a stable, given identity. Since membership was closely related to residence, a mosque community could include households of diverse economic and social standing. Its notional equality was far from lived realities, in which differences based on wealth, office and social or religious prestige were regularly emphasized. The strong hierarchical structure emerging from this picture corresponds to the pattern characteristic of other pre-industrial agricultural societies. In this chapter we shall consider the diverse ways in which boundaries were drawn, perpetuated and crossed.

3.1 From Ya’qub Beg to Mao

The political history of the region was characterized by many changes, both upheavals and periods of stability, centralization and power vacuums. Since the second half of the nineteenth century, two events stand out for their direct and dramatic influence upon everyday life. One was the seizure of power by Ya’qub Beg, the other the inclusion

¹ Grenard 1898a: 146. See also Lindholm 1996: 13.
² Prov. 207. I.17.
of the region into the People’s Republic of China in 1949—in socialist rhetoric, the ‘Liberation’. The current official view identifies ‘Liberation’ as the most important turning point in modern history, when political control once again effectively reverted back to Chinese hands.

Political events, rebellions and wars brought temporary disruption, but social practices persisted virtually unimpeded. This pattern was briefly interrupted under Ya’qub Beg’s Islamic theocracy, but his extreme measures to enforce the observance of Islamic law did not go against the grain of local tradition, and—ideologically at least—they even created favourable conditions for its persistence. Following 1949, the socialist authorities maintained imperial traditions of indirect rule, but they also introduced fundamental changes in the local economy and society, which subverted local ideologies and were detrimental to the perpetuation of traditional practices.

In the mid-1990s, social life in Xinjiang prior to 1949 was often presented by local people and my Chinese co-researchers as traditional, monolithic and unchanging. They dubbed it kona jamiyat, or ‘old society’. Such a view is deceptive, since important transformations were taking place in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This overwhelmingly agrarian, peasant society underwent significant changes between these two dramatic upheavals, but the pace of change was slower than the rapid transformations brought about by social engineers after 1949. This slower pace of change was interpreted by numerous Western visitors as stagnation. Their yardstick was often the industrialized Western world. Typical of disparaging views implying backwardness and underdevelopment is the treatment of certain topics like local medicine in Western reports: when such issues are broached at all, they tend to be negative. Travellers and missionaries often acted as medicine men, not only because the drugs of the West were overrated but also because of the perceived gap between local and Western health care. This situation was still characteristic of the Republican period. During his visit to the region in the years 1927 through 1929, Colonel Schomberg remarked,

A good hospital and a travelling doctor would save many lives and much suffering in Central Asia. At present between Kashgar and Urumchi (a distance of 800 miles) no skilled aid can be had; and nowhere in the

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3 Kim 2004.