stances and places); in this light these practices seem to have represented a sort of aberration, to be understood against a particular spiritual and political background, which was eventually integrated in mainstream traditions by eliminating the most problematic aspects and by adopting a tactical use of ‘secrecy’. On the other hand he concludes the book by looking at the tantric practices from ‘inside the tradition’, making them more plausible and presenting them as innovative engagement with the understanding of mind-body relations in an effort to deal with challenges that are inherent to the human condition and which, nowadays, may even interface with current scientific research.

HILDEGARD DIEMBERGER
University of Cambridge

Community Matters in Xinjiang 1880–1949: Towards a Historical Anthropology of the Uyghur

Ildikó Bellér-Hann

In recent years, there has been a shift away from conceptualising Uyghur identity as monolithic and diametrically opposed to that of the Han Chinese. As increasing numbers of researchers do work in Xinjiang, a more complex, uneven picture of Uyghur life emerges. Whereas the bulk of work of this kind rests on evidence gleaned largely from the past two decades, Bellér-Hann’s work stands out by virtue of its time frame: a period stretching from the Islamic rule of Khoqandi warlord Yakub Beg to the dawn of Chinese Socialism in 1949. Her detailed ethnographic accounts of the economy, social organisation, life cycle rituals and religious practices during this period go a long way toward filling a gap in the literature. This is particularly so when we consider the author’s emphasis on the practices of non-elites, a focus which challenges assumptions of what is understood as ‘traditional’ Uyghur life.

Many of the sources upon which this research is based are linked in one way or another to Westerners who passed through or worked in the region during this period. There is the use of local historical accounts written for missionaries at the turn of the century, as well as travel accounts and ethnographies produced by the various English, Russian, German and French contingents present there at this time. The author’s frequent visits to Xinjiang are occasionally drawn upon to support evidence of these written sources. However, due to the politically sensitive nature of the region, access to documents housed in local archives were frequently denied her.

As is evident from the title, an overarching theoretical theme which unites the various chapters in the book is the idea of community – a collection of social
practices, at times overlapping, at times parallel and at times in conflict with one another. These series of interactive practices give rise to an essentially multiple understanding of community. It is for this reason that the author avoids speaking of ‘Uyghur culture’, emphasising notions of ‘the social’ instead. This theoretical approach gives rise to a theme which runs throughout the book: for each exemplary model of what Uyghur culture is – a model often actively promoted by elites - there are a number of alternative social practices which have scarcely been given attention. It is the painstaking unearthing of such details which challenge some of the broader understandings of Uyghur social life.

One such instance of this could be seen with regards to legal matters, which many have argued were solely in the hands of the Islamic courts (with the exception of very serious crimes, which were in the hands of Chinese magistrates). Bellér-Hann, however, shows how locals often had a deep mistrust of the courts; we read, for example, of one judge who would sell judgements to the highest bidder. As a response, locals drew on what the author terms ‘local’ or ‘customary’ law. In Khotan we are given examples of adversaries, accompanied by their wives and children, meeting face-to-face in the street, arguing it out, and then smoking a reconciliatory pipe together. In other instances, instead of taking issues to the court, locals would approach the local bag – an indigenous official, often recruited from well-to-do family but by no means trained in Islamic code. In an interesting mix of customary and Islamic Law, the bag would pass judgement by taking opinion from both officeholders of the mosque as well as communal opinion rooted in local law.

The mutation of social institutions also frequently occurred in the realms of gender relations. Prescribed divisions of labour, with men outside doing agricultural work and women inside doing house work, were flexible. Indeed, women were often found engaging in day-labour and share cropping, often as a means of sheer survival. As Bellér-Hann points out, it was often only women within the wealthiest strata of society who conformed to the stereotype of the domestic wife. This, of course, highlights why certain modes of sociality became dominant narratives; it was often the privileged themselves who landed up dictating the customary norms in the first place. Another interesting aberration in both gender and religious norms was the practice of temporary marriage, which explicitly went against the grain of Sunni legal teachings. These marriages, often lasting less than a week, catered to the vast number of merchants making their way through the various oases of the Tarim Basin. Such marriages were granted not only to men travelling from various parts of Xinjiang, but also to merchants and soldiers coming from Central Asia, Russia and China.

A most welcome discussion – and one given scant attention in the literature – is the role of water in the shaping of political life. Glacial melt, running off the Tian Shan and Kunlun mountain ranges and into the Taklamakan desert gave rise to an entire bureaucratic class whose job was to distribute water. This entailed the upkeep of the canals, control of water flow and the maintenance of a water register. The Mirabs, as they were known, wielded a great deal of power. They could