Chapter Fourteen

Women's *Chay* Gatherings in Kazakhstan

Sustaining Identity in Migrant Communities

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Uyghurs in Kazakhstan

Uyghurs have a long history of settlement in the region known as Yettisu in southeast Kazakhstan. During the 20th century, they moved back and forth across the shifting Soviet–Chinese border, fleeing bouts of violence, famine and unrest on both sides.[1] Earlier settlers are commonly known as *yerlik* 'local' Uyghur. Uyghurs left Xinjiang in large numbers in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and many settled in and around the border town of Zharkent. Today, approximately 300,000 Uyghurs live in Kazakhstan, primarily in Almaty province, where they are concentrated in Zharkent, in small towns along the road from Almaty to Zharkent, and in Almaty's suburbs. Support for Uyghur language, education and culture was a key plank of Soviet nationalities policies, but after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Uyghurs in Central Asia shifted from a position of relative equality within a multi-ethnic polity to that of minority within the new nation-states, and Uyghur communities living in different Central Asian Republics now found themselves separated by new state borders. Kazakhstan has maintained the more prominent aspects of state support for Uyghur community organisation, education and culture, but support at the local level markedly decreased in the 1990s, alongside the loss of state enterprise and economic support in rural areas that impelled significant rural-urban migration. For over a decade, Uyghur community leaders have been voicing a sense of crisis, and fears of the incremental loss of Uyghur language and culture in Kazakhstan.

Since 2016, as is now well documented, Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang have been subject to radical policies of surveillance, mass internment, and coercive forms of 're-education'.[2] Uyghurs in Kazakhstan are also subjected to the extreme pressures emanating from Xinjiang: ties with families across the border have been severed, many have lost relatives to the internment camps, and many livelihoods that depended on cross-border trade have been disrupted. Uyghurs in Kazakhstan are also subject to political pressures at home: speaking out about detained relatives in Xinjiang carries political risks, the community is vulnerable to the accusations of extremism and terrorism which China has used to enable its campaigns against Uyghurs in Xinjiang, and they are also wary of making any moves that might provoke a backlash from resurgent Kazakh nationalism.

Against this troubled backdrop, male gatherings in Kazakhstan called *ottuz oghul* 'thirty boys' or *meshrep* have enjoyed significant attention in recent years, as they have been

[1] Ablet Kamalov, 'Ethno-national and Local Dimensions of the Historiography of Kazakhstan's Uyghurs,' *Central Asian Survey* 31, no. 3 (2012): 343–54.
[2] Joanne Smith Finley, 'Securitization, Insecurity and Conflict in Contemporary Xinjiang: Has PRC Counter-Terrorism Evolved into State Terror?' *Central Asian Survey* 38, no. 1 (2019): 1–26.

reimagined as forms of Uyghur heritage and accorded a leading role in transmitting Uyghur language and customs.[3] Women's *chay* gatherings – which in form and function are in many ways equivalent to men's *meshrep* gatherings – are less highly valued, but they fulfil a similar range of crucial social and cultural roles in Uyghur society. This chapter is based on ethnographic research and extensive interviews conducted by Zulfiyam Karimova with *chay* leaders in Almaty in 2019.[4] In it, we discuss the work done by women's *chay* in Kazakhstan's Uyghur communities, which have undergone successive bouts of upheaval and relocation. Following Yessenova, we argue that the reappropriation of 'tradition' in Kazakhstan figures as an important aspect of migrants' strategies of survival and adjustment to new social environments.[5] The development of *chay* associations in newly formed, often precarious urban Uyghur communities allows them to establish social connections that convey rootedness, belonging and identity.

What Do We Mean by *Chay*?

> When spring comes and the flowers open, the first person to see the first flower picks it and goes to the house of the street *yigit béshi* [local community leader] and puts it on the gate … When the *yigit béshi* sees it, he's happy because there are flowers on our street. Then the people on our street invite other people to a *gül chay* [Flower Tea]. From one street to another, we pass on the flowers.[6]

In *Community Matters,* her foundational study of Uyghur social organisation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Ildikó Bellér-Hann reflects on the importance of tea (*chay*) in Uyghur culture. In accounts of Uyghur hospitality in the late nineteenth century, the first cup of tea served to a guest, called *sin chay*, carried special meaning because it signified the first act of extending community. Upon being served, the guest served moved from his sitting position and uttered the formula *barkalla* 'wishing abundance and prosperity' before drinking his tea. Even if many guests were present, each person rose upon accepting their first cup of tea, and all other guests facing the same direction rose with him.[7] The importance of, and etiquette surrounding, tea has not been lost in contemporary Uyghur hospitality; young women are carefully schooled in how to offer a decorative tray holding two tea bowls, and the importance of filling the bowls not too full and not too empty.

It should not be surprising that *chay* gatherings (essentially tea parties) also assume complex ritual and social meanings in contemporary Uyghur society, overlapping with a

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[3] Rachel Harris and Ablet Kamalov, 'Nation, Religion and Social Heat: Heritaging Uyghur *Mäshräp* in Kazakhstan.' *Central Asian Survey* 40, no.1 (2021): 9–33.

[4] The chapter is supported by a British Academy-funded project 'An alternative approach to heritage as sustainable development.' Blog posts and short films of *chay* and *meshrep*, including many of the scenes described in this article, can be found on the project website: http://www.meshrep.uk/.

[5] Saulesh Yessenova, '"Routes and Roots" of Kazakh Identity: Urban Migration in Postsocialist Kazakhstan,' *The Russian Review* 64, no.4 (2005): 661–79.

[6] Extirim Exmetova, interview, March 2019, Almaty.

[7] Ildikó Bellér-Hann, *Community Matters in Xinjiang 1880–1949: Towards a Historical Anthropology of the Uyghur* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 206.

range of other non-lifecycle gatherings, variously termed *bezme*, *mejli*s, or *meshrep*, depending on local and regional custom. Bellér-Hann describes, for example, the *qar mejli*s, a game played in southern and eastern Xinjiang in the late nineteenth century to mark the falling of the first snow, which took the form of a challenge to host a winter banquet.[8] One of our interviewees in Almaty recalled a very similar *qarliq chay* played by her mother's generation in the Uyghur border town of Zharkent:

> I remember, when I was little, it started snowing and one of our neighbours suddenly turned up at our house … My father whispered to my mother, 'Don't get up, keep your eyes on the tablecloth,' and I wondered why he was telling her that. But my mother went out to make tea for the lady, and the lady got out a snow letter, and after she drank her tea she left it under the tea bowl … Then my father said, 'Now you have to invite your friends to a *qarliq chay* (snow tea).' That's how I learned about *qarliq chay*. It's a celebration *chay*. It brings blessings on your home when the first snow falls. The host has to organise a *chay* before the snow melts. I remember the person who left the letter gets a lot of respect and sits in the place of honour, and the host should say nice words to her, such as, 'Thank you for coming to wish our household good fortune until next year's snow,' and give her a length of cloth. Afterwards my mother said, 'Next year I'll give that letter to another friend, so they can give the *chay* next time.'[9]

In early twentieth-century eastern Qumul, *qar mejli*s took the form of a large party where mixed-gender dancing was permitted. In the Ili region, *mejli*s were also mixed-gender gatherings, and a chance for courting.[10] In the rural south, in contemporary Uyghur communities, this kind of gathering might be termed a *meshrep*.

In 2010, Uyghur *meshrep* gatherings were inscribed by China on UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Urgent Need of Safeguarding. This move followed years of research, led by Uyghur academics, to formalise and categorise the shifting landscape of Uyghur community gatherings into a recognisable set of cultural assets that could be designated and protected as items of heritage under a single umbrella term. Thus the *kök mejlis* in Qumul mentioned by Bellér-Hann[11] appears as the Qumul *kök meshrep*, while the widespread *gül chay* described by Extirim Exmetova above appears as the Khotan Gülchay Meshrep.[12]

The designation brought about a series of changes and new initiatives across Uyghur society, though in Xinjiang they were soon overshadowed by increasing securitisation and repression. Approaches to safeguarding *meshrep* in Xinjiang typically involved the 'top-down' approaches to heritage already well documented in China: staged re-creations and tourist performances led by local government organs, alongside ever-tightening restrictions on

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[8] Bellér-Hann, *Community Matters*, 210.
[9] Rahilem Yunusova, interview, March 2019, Almaty.
[10] Bellér-Hann, *Community Matters*, 210.
[11] Bellér-Hann, *Community Matters*, 212.
[12] Tömür Dawamet, *Junggo Uyghur meshrepliri* (Milletler ün-sin neshriyati, 2008).

grassroots association.[13] In Kazakhstan, however, the UNESCO designation led to a Uyghur community-based *meshrep* revival that drew direct inspiration from the heritaging moves then underway within Xinjiang. The language around the *meshrep* revival in Kazakhstan was strongly focused on 'custom' (*örp-adet*) and tradition: doing things as 'our grandfathers' (*ata-bowilirimiz*) did, in order to preserve Uyghur culture and save the Uyghur nation. The movement was impelled by fears among Kazakhstan Uyghurs of the incremental loss of Uyghur language, culture, and identity in the post-Soviet era.

Meshrep became a regular theme in periodicals in Almaty and in the Uyghur-language newspaper, *Uyghur Awazi*, and subject of historical research.[14] This self-conscious adoption of heritage rhetoric drew on narratives developed by Uyghurs in Xinjiang, but was rooted in the socio-economic realities of Kazakhstan. It was a grassroots instrumentalisation of heritage by a minority community, undertaken without the support or intervention of any government or international organisation. It was aimed at language and cultural revival; moral education and national awareness; and social cohesion and social mobilisation.

Meshrep in Kazakhstan take the form of closed male associations known as *ottuz oghul* (thirty sons), which are typical of the Ili region from which large numbers of Uyghurs in Kazakhstan emigrated in the mid-twentieth century.[15] Primarily for this reason, the revival movement in Kazakhstan has been heavily gendered as male. However, a less recognised parallel phenomenon in Kazakhstan is the women's *chay* revival, which has focused on the same goals of education, cultural revival, social cohesion, and mobilisation, and which often works in tandem with men's initiatives at the local level. *Chay* gatherings are not exclusively associated with women. In contemporary Almaty, for example, mixed-gender groups of co-workers or school friends may attend regular *chay*. But women-only *chay* are notable for the work they do in providing a forum for women's networking and socialising, for managing the affairs of the local community, for mutual assistance, for sustaining Uyghur language and customs, and as a form of community credit.

Playing *chay* is a common social activity; almost every Uyghur woman in Kazakhstan takes part in a *chay*, probably two or three. Each *chay* group typically meets once a month. Busy urban working women may choose to meet in restaurants, but traditionalists frown on this, preferring to sustain the rituals of home-based hospitality. Women play *chay* with their neighbours or their relatives, with their classmates, or women from their hometown. Usually they play with people of their own social status; typically there are separate *chay* for intellectuals or for entrepreneurs. *Chay* are important spaces for transmitting culture and sharing knowledge and skills. Foodways play a very significant part. All of our interviewees were concerned with the art of cooking: to entertain and impress their fellow *chay* members, or to contribute to the celebration of major life-cycle rituals. One interviewee recalled:

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[13] Rachel Harris, '"A Weekly *Mäshräp* to Tackle Religious Extremism": Music-Making in Uyghur Communities and Intangible Cultural Heritage in China,' *Ethnomusicology* 64, no. 1 (2020): 23–55.

[14] Ablet Kamalov et al., *Ottuz-oghul ijtimai instituti: tarikh vä bugun. Sotsialniy institut ottuz-oghul: istoriya i sovremennost* (Almaty: Mir, 2018).

[15] Sean Roberts, 'Negotiating Locality, Islam, and National Culture in a Changing Borderlands: The revival of the *Mäshräp* Ritual among Young Uighur Men in the Ili Valley', *Central Asian Survey* 17, no. 4 (1998): 672–700.

> People today play *dollar chay*, pearl *chay* or *gilem* [carpet] *chay*. As for our mothers, when the pumpkins were ripe they played *manta* [dumplings] *chay*, when the beans were ripe they played *laghman* [pulled noodles] *chay*, when the alfalfa was young they played *chuchure* [small dumplings] *chay*. Among the *chay* we've forgotten is the *mejlis*; that was about making food for Nowruz … We simmered lamb or beef for the whole night with seven kinds of herbs, and overnight it became tender and juicy.[16]

Learning how to make classic Uyghur celebration dishes such as *sangza* (nests of crisp noodles for the table on festival days), or *öpke-hésip* (stuffed sheep lungs and intestines) is regarded as a key signifier of Uyghur identity, and in general the art of cooking and serving food is an important measure of feminine competence. Expressive culture – music, songs, poetry, or joking – also plays a part in *chay* gatherings. Women remembered playing the *dutar* and singing at *chay*. Some women were remembered as excellent singers or *qoshaqchi* (comedians or poets) who made up verses to make the other women laugh. Overall, however, expressive culture is far less prominent than it is in men's gatherings. Other skills more commonly associated with the women's sphere, such as dressmaking or embroidery, may also be shared.

There may also be a religious element to *chay*, especially for older women who are seeking to reconnect with their faith. Members of a *chay* might teach each other basic prayers or how to recite simple *hayat* (verses from the Quran), or invite an older woman with religious knowledge come to talk to the *chay*. They may sit up together all night to celebrate Leyl al-Qadr or gather for the *iftar* meal to break their fast during Ramadan. The family of someone who has been on the hajj might hold a *chay* for their neighbours. All of these aspects of *chay* overlap and reinforce each other. One interviewee described a special kind of *chay* called *Allah éshini bérish* ('giving Allah's food'), which involved making special kinds of food for a healing ritual:

> When a child has fallen ill, we gather to pray for their recovery. We make flat noodles and cut them in seven different shapes: lizard tongues and other special shapes, and then we make soup. We spread the tablecloth on top of the pot, and it absorbs the steam, then we wrap it around the child. Then we take the oily layer of the soup and rub it on the child's body; then we wrap the child warmly and make fried cakes, and then we read some verses from the Quran. Seven older women should take part.[17]

Many of the earlier *chay* remembered by our interviewees took the form of games surrounding mutual hospitality. A variant on the *qarliq chay* described above, was the *towuq chay*, a game with a sheep's knucklebone:

> One of our friends was hosting a *chay* at her home, and they killed a sheep to make naren [lamb noodles]. We said, we should keep the *towuq* [knucklebone]. Afterwards we went out, taking the *towuq* with us, and she saw her friend Halide – we were all neighbours and friends when we were young – and she said to Halide, 'You have to keep this safe for me.' She kept it for a year. Whenever we asked for it, she brought

[16] Extirim Exmetova, interview.
[17] Roshengül Exetova, interview, March 2019, Almaty.

> it out; she didn't lose it. Halide knew she would ask for that *towuq* back one day, so she put a black thread on it and wore it around her neck. After a while it disappeared from around her neck, but she was hiding it under her arm. So the lady who gave her the *towuq* couldn't see it and decided to ask her for it. Halide was very happy; she pulled it out and said, 'Now you have to give a *chay* within a month.' So my friend put on a nice big *towuq chay*. The two of them gave each other presents. My friend said to Halide, 'For the sake of our long friendship, I'm going to give you a beautiful dress.' It was from Tashkent, and she tried it on in front of everyone. That was a fun thing.

Social Organisation: Managing the *Mahalle*

These named celebration *chay* are prominent events in women's memories precisely because they are out of the ordinary, and for the role they play in forging strong and meaningful relationships with peers, but perhaps the greater significance of *chay* is in the regular role they play in the day-to-day reproduction of communal life. Women gather in *chay* groups, organised by locality and age cohort, to learn, discuss and organise community social life. Young girls begin the work of socialisation early on, as Exterim explains:

> When I was young, we used to play at *chay*. We watched our mothers and grandmothers, and we learned the rules of hospitality. We made miniature pots and ovens to play with. We learned how to set a fire without making it smoky. How did we play *chay*? One girl would bring a potato, another would bring a carrot, and we laid out our banquet. Then we would serve each other tea. I think that all little Uyghur girls learned the culture of hospitality in that way.[18]

Uyghur women engage in different kinds of *chay* throughout their lives, using them as spaces to plan and organise the different challenges facing their particular age cohorts. Young unmarried women may form a *chay* to discuss wedding etiquette. Young mothers meet to discuss the rules of how to manage a household. More mature women may hold a 'match-making tea' (*qudilar chay*) to discuss marrying off their children, or a 'consultation *chay*' (*meslihet chay*) to discuss how to organise celebrations. The aim, according to Extirim Exmetova, was to ensure that everything was done the proper way, and 'the veil would not be dropped.' The veil referred to mutual respect between families.

Soviet sociologists frequently commented on the resilience of local forms of social organisation in Central Asia in the face of pressures of modernisation and urbanisation. They noted the continuing importance of the role of local community leaders, the organisation of local communities in urban neighbourhoods (*mehelle*), and the importance of women and the domestic sphere in the transmission of local culture. The *mehelle* served as the focus and the infrastructure of an intense communal life. It also enforced important communal norms and acted as an agent of socialisation and mutual help.[19] Likewise, the continuing resilience and

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[18] Extirim Exmetova, interview.

[19] Deniz Kandiyoti and Nadira Azimova, 'The Communal and the Sacred: Women's World of Ritual in Uzbekistan,' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 10, no. 2 (2004): 327–49.

significance of Uyghur women's *chay* gatherings lies in their embeddedness in local notions of communal participation and sociality. Uyghur women in Kazakhstan, as is typical of societies across Central Asia, are enmeshed with family and neighbours in a dense web of communal activities that demand a sustained commitment of time and effort:

> Uyghurs hold cradle parties [*büshük toy*] for newborns, circumcision parties, engagement parties, weddings … For all those events the mother can't manage on her own. So she calls on her friends and relatives and neighbours. … We sit down over a cup of tea and discuss how to organise the party ... Each woman gets their own job. One stands by the big cooking pot; one organises the trays of snacks [*petmusta*] on the *dastixan* [tablecloth); one pours water for the guests to wash their hands, another organises the gift-giving. In this way, the wedding is done properly. It's not stressful. By organising a beautiful wedding, they wish for the couple to understand each other, that their life with be good, and they will work well with heart and soul.[20]

However, women's *chay* in contemporary Kazakhstan differ in several ways from the *chay* played by their mothers and grandmothers in the Soviet period. They respond directly to emerging social problems and rapidly changing lifestyles, such as the rise in the numbers of women working as company or government employees, or as entrepreneurs, and consequently possessing higher disposable income. They also respond to a developing sense of social responsibility and ethnic identity; people want to make a difference in society and support the community, and engage in significant amounts of charity work and sponsorship. This productive tension between sustaining traditions and responding to contemporary needs underpins contemporary *chay*.

Chay and Migrant Community-Making

Following the downturn of the transitional economy in Kazakhstan in the 1990s, resulting from the termination of state subsidies and inconsistency in economic reforms in agriculture, a disastrous situation developed in rural areas. These policies led to the dramatic impoverishment of villagers, pushing thousands of them to migrate to the cities.[21] Uyghurs from the areas around Zharkent and Chilek were likewise impelled to seek new lives in Almaty city. They arrived in large numbers in Almaty's traditionally Uyghur suburbs, requiring the established communities to find ways to incorporate this diverse group of newcomers into the neighbourhood. *Chay* provided an important tool for their incorporation and socialisation:

> We have eight Uyghur districts in Almaty … Uyghurs have come to live in these neighbourhoods from many different places … It's hard when people move from one place to another. They have to work hard to learn the customs of the new place. When new people arrive in the neighbourhood, they meet with the *yigit béshi* and the women's president. They find out where they've come from, how many are in the family, what they have and what they need, and if they have relatives in the

[20] Extirim Exmetova, interview.
[21] Yessenova, 'Routes and Roots.'

> neighbourhood … We say to them, 'if you attend our *chay* then you will learn our community's customs and rules.'[22]

Chay as Rotating Credit Associations

> Recently women have started to play *kassa chay* [cash till *chay*]. Some people say that it's uncouth [*qopal*], but they actually use the money to educate their children, for celebrations, or redecorating their home, or other things for the family. It's a case of mutual help and support. If they borrowed from the bank, it would charge interest, so it can be rather important for them.[23]

Kassa (cash till) or *qatar* (rotating) *chay* is a newly popular form of *chay* played in urban areas where *chay* members pool money to share on a rotating basis. Women in Almaty bring 15–20,000 tenge (around US$50) to each *chay*, and give it to the hostess to spend as she likes. This kind of *chay* became popular in urban centres in Xinjiang in the 1990s, and developed into a popular practice of networking among Uyghur women in spite of criticism from more conservative sections of society (immortalised in a popular song of the time sung by Ömerjan Alim). In spite of the backlash, Rena Ekrem argues that *qatar chay* became an essential part of social life for many urban Uyghurs, forging new social spaces and new kinds of new social relationships for women.[24] Uyghur women in Zharkent also began to use *chay* to cement their social networks in the 1990s. Verena La Mela, who studied women's *chay* in Zharkent, argues that the money pooled at *chay* provides an economic incentive, but the main aim is social: a whip to impel regular attendance, and an incentive to keep playing.[25]

Although they are generally regarded as a recent phenomenon in Uyghur society, such rotating credit practices are well-established in other parts of Central Asia. Deniz Kandiyoti notes the importance of equivalent women's gatherings called *gap* in communities in Uzbekistan.[26] She argues that these culturally embedded networks are primarily presented and experienced as venues for recreation and sociability, but *gap*s account for the largest volume of cash in circulation within the communities she worked with. These sums help to alleviate the shortage of ready cash and assist in making important purchases or defraying non-routine expenses. Such forms of group-based microcredit have become a globally adopted anti-poverty

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[22] Roshengül Exetova, interview.
[23] Extirim Exmetova, interview.
[24] Rena Aikelamu [Ekrem], 'Forging Their Own Space: "Qatar Chay" Networks of Uyghur Women in Xinjiang, China' (master's diss., Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, 2017).
[25] Verena La Mela, "Economic and Social Transformations in Kazakstan: The Case of Zheti-Suw" (conference presentation, Eighteenth Annual Central Eurasian Studies Society Conference, Pittsburgh, October 16, 2018).
[26] Deniz Kandiyoti, 'Poverty in Transition: An Ethnographic Critique of Household Surveys in Post-Soviet Central Asia,' *Development and Change* 30 (1999): 499–524.

intervention, recognised not only for their provision of credit but also for the social capital and solidarity they provide for women.[27]

Heritaging *Chay*

On 15 August 2019, twenty-three senior Uyghur women belonging to the Ghéyret neighbourhood *chay* met in Parvaz Café to perform a specially curated *bahar* 'spring' *chay* for our project cameras. Ghéyret is a 'new' suburban Almaty neighbourhood, created some twenty years ago as the city expanded in response to the post-Soviet wave of migrants, and the café lay on a wide arterial road crowded with traffic. For this special occasion, the *chay* had invited the Bahar Ensemble, an active Almaty-based amateur Uyghur women's music ensemble, to join them. The ensemble was led by Xelime, a professional folk musician who trained in Tashkent and worked in the state-supported Arzu ensemble in the Uyghur region until her retirement. This *chay* gathering was rooted in regular, community-based association. It practised the rotational credit *kassa*-style *chay*, and it combined this both with *aktivist* support for Uyghur language and institutions, and with a performative engagement with Uyghur customs and culture.

Centred around a lavish table and a multi-course meal, the *chay* included a series of formal speeches from the *chay* leader from Xelime, Aziyem, and from the recipient of the *kassa* for that month. Aziyem reported on neighbourhood births, marriages, and deaths, on their work distributing Uyghur-language publications, and on fundraising for Uyghur villagers in the Zharkent region hit by the recent flooding. After a short prayer, the *chay* turned to the task of transmitting Uyghur customs, and a group of older women acted out a *kélin* 'bride's' *chay*, employing a waitress to take the part of the bride. As she poured tea for each woman, they rubbed their hands on her stomach to wish her fertility. The oldest woman, Aygül, recited a section from the Quran and lectured the bride on the importance of hospitality, of lying with her husband, and getting up for morning prayers. Then they played a teasing game with bread. Each woman in turn offered bread to the bride, then snatched it back: first a whole round of bread, then a single piece, and finally two pieces – symbolising marital harmony – which she was allowed to keep.

The *chay* then turned to music-making, beginning with informal solo singing around the table. The repertoire ranged from lullabies and folk songs to excerpts from popular twentieth-century Uyghur operas featuring the tragic Uyghur heroines Ghunchem and Nuzugum. Then the Bahar Ensemble gathered in more formal presentational style, singers ranged at the back, instrumentalists seated in front, to perform a suite of dance songs. As is customary at weddings and other celebrations, the older women danced first, then the younger ones, and dancers were decorated with scarves in appreciation of their efforts. The women laughed and enjoyed themselves, presenting themselves with style for the dancing, and the gathering 'heated up' (*qizzip ketti*). In accordance with the current community-wide campaigns against waste, everything on the table was carefully distributed and packed into plastic bags to take home.

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[27] Thomas Davidson and Paromita Sanyal, 'Associational Participation and Network Expansion: Microcredit Self-Help Groups and Poor Women's Social Ties in Rural India,' *Social Forces* 95, no. 4 (2017): 1695–1724.

Conclusion

This combination of community networks, rotating credit, active support for Uyghur institutions, and performative engagement with Uyghur culture is characteristic of contemporary women's *chay* gatherings in Almaty, and demonstrates the many ways that this *chay* revival amongst Uyghur women parallels the more prominent men's *meshrep* revival movement. As *chay* leader Roshengül Exetova remarks:

> The most important thing about our *chay* is to make sure that the youngsters don't forget their customs. We're working to save our culture, and our art. We help each other. Our neighbourhood has earned a lot of praise from other people; we're pretty united. We're working hard to bring people together.

While Uyghur men's *meshrep* gatherings have historically been regarded with suspicion by successive external ruling powers, from Russian imperial rule to the contemporary Chinese government,[28] women's *chay* gatherings are more commonly criticised from within the community, largely by men who prefer women to stay at home. However, both kinds of gathering in contemporary Kazakhstan serve not only as important spaces for community organisation, but also as a direct response to the current crisis for Uyghur cultural identity, and a potential model for future grassroots revitalisation of Uyghur cultural heritage in other contexts.

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[28] Harris and Kamalov, 'Nation, Religion and Social Heat'.

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