

Strategies of Social Support and Community Cohesion in Rural Xinjiang

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Summary

Situated in China's northwest, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region has often been characterized as one of China's most notorious "restive" areas. Scholarly enquiries to date have, therefore, often focused on issues of ethnicity, identity, and conflict, demonstrating how the center attempts to control its troubled periphery. In contrast, this paper focuses on the everyday strategies that Uyghur villagers in the eastern oasis of Qumul have at their disposal to make ends meet and to "muddle through" as best they can under the current conditions of the "socialist market economy." Using social support as an analytical concept around which to organize the ethnographic data, the paper is a preliminary attempt to explore how in response to increased exposure to market forces — ones that have created new uncertainties and insecurities for many rural households — Uyghur villagers creatively combine old and new forms of social support, drawing on the state as well as on kinship and religion to ensure social reproduction on both the household and the communal level.

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Introduction

Since 2000 the western provinces of China have been the focus of a massive governmental development campaign to counter the growing regional disparity with eastern China (Lai 2002; Holbig 2004). The "Open up the West Campaign" aims at securing the stability of minority regions through the encouraging of economic growth and prosperity, although minority populations in many areas interpret this as a thinly disguised effort to sinicize and integrate them more closely into the Chinese polity (Moneyhon 2003; Bequelin 2004; Wiemer 2004; Millward 2007). This provides the broader context framing the following, preliminary enquiry into the coping strategies of rural Uyghurs in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

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