#### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### COLLECTIVE CULTURAL PRESERVATION: UYGHUR CREATIVITY IN CHINA

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#### Abstract

Current innovative research in creativity studies have demonstrated the significant role that cultural specificity plays in defining and recognizing creativity. This chapter will present findings from an attempt at using democratizing research methods in order to explore the ways in which creativity is defined by an ethnic minority culture, the Uyghurs, an ethno-linguistic minority group within China whose creative outlets are currently under threat due to the oppressive political environment in their home region of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Within countries there are often dominant cultures and minority cultures. Historically, it has been common for the creative products made by minority cultural groups to be labeled as 'folk' arts or 'traditional crafts', often in a way that humbles that group and belittles their cultural significance. Resultingly, dominant cultures will often assume that minority culture groups are less capable of entrepreneurship and making technological innovations. Findings suggest that Uyghurs consider a product to be creative if it benefits the community and preserves Uyghur culture. Uyghurs also emphasize a creative person's hard work and selfless motivations.

#### Collective cultural preservation: Uyghur creativity in China

Minority cultural groups enact unique forms of resistant creativity and innovation to solve complex problems, such as how to preserve and promote their Identity (Clothey & Meloche, 2022; Meloche & Clothey, 2021). The "East vs West" model of cultural comparative creativity serves as a foundation for understanding how cultural understanding is necessary for equitable creativity assessment (Celik & Lubart, 2016; Lubart, 2010; Morris & Leung, 2010; Weisberg, 2015; Yue et al., 2011). It is unjust to judge the creativity of a certain group using the culturally specific definition of another group (Glăveanu, 2013b; Glaveanu, 2017; Glăveanu, 2019; Hennessey, 2017). An equitable solution would be to allow cultural groups, particularly minoritized, nondominant groups, to establish their own parameters and qualities for defining creativity. Researchers should look at the ways that the culture defines and recognizes creative, with as little of their own bias as possible. The following study uses historic data from an online interactive website run by the Uyghurs in China, to show that qualitative open coding methods can come close to allowing reserchers access to a unique, culturally-defined assessment of creativity, even in the extreme case of an endangered minority culture. This study

can also serve as a potential model for assessing other minoritized, nondominant cultures, particularly those who are unable to speak for themselves. This study is only made possible because posts were preserved by a US researcher before being permanently removed from internet at the behest of the Chinese government.

Dominant culture has historically established the definition of creativity as used by modern creativity researchers and these definitions may be culturally specific (Glăveanu, 2013b; Glaveanu, 2017; Glăveanu, 2019; Hennessey, 2017). When the definition of arts and creativity is formulated by dominant, majority cultures, those definitions do not consider the unique interpretations and applications of minority culture groups and indigenous populations (Celik & Lubart, 2016; Logan et al., 2019; Lubart, 2010; Morris & Leung, 2010; Weisberg, 2015; Yue et al., 2011). As a result, the visual arts, music, dance, and literature of minority culture groups and indigenous populations gets contrasted against dominant culture and labelled 'folk' or 'traditional' (Barton & Barton, 2014; d'Azevedo, 1973; Hallman, 1970; Martin et al., 2017; Wabende & Park, 2017). This in turn leads to that minority culture group not being represented in mainstream or 'high' creative cultural institutions. For example, even seemingly mundane food vessels from 17th century Europe are placed in a museum of fine arts but an indigenous American ceremonial vessel of deep religious significance may be relegated to archaeological, anthropological or even Folk art museums. While many museums work to correct this situation, unlearning creative cultural biases will be a lengthy process.

Dominant culture has also historically established the assessment tools used for determining how creative a person or group of people are. However, when dominant culture determines these assessment tools, the tools often do not take into consideration culturally specific factors from the nondominant groups. As a result, the creative performance of a minority group may be misinterpreted or misunderstood (Lubart, 2010) as lacking in comparison to the dominant group. Soon the narrative around minority culture groups wrongly becomes that they are not capable of developing creative ideas (Hartwig et al., 2017; Junius, 2007; Ruyembe, 2017) or using the most current technology (Czermak et al., 2004). Additionally, dominant cultures will often form the assumption that those minority culture groups are less capable of entrepreneurship and innovations (Sardana, 2018). Recent literature describes how to assess culturally-appropriate creativity (e.g. "East vs West"), but less is understood about minority cultures functioning under the auspices of a dominant culture (e.g. ethnic minority groups in China) ((Meloche & Clothey, 2021).

Understanding how creativity is defined in ethnic minority culture groups can lead to the creation of more equitable education assessments and pedagogical practices. In order to explore the ways in which creativity may be defined by an ethnic minority culture, this study explores the creative aspirations of the Uyghurs, an ethno-linguistic minority group within China. In this paper, the following research questions will be addressed:

- How do Uyghur groups living in China assess creative products?
  How do Uyghur groups living in China describe creative people?

#### **Culturally Constructed Creativity**

In creativity research, Chinese culture has been one of the first examples to arise as a compelling example of a cultural definition of creativity that does not fit examples of popular Western creativity (Celik & Lubart, 2016; Lubart, 2010; Morris & Leung, 2010; Weisberg, 2015; Yue et al., 2011). Western conceptions of creativity, which favor radical novelty 'ground-breaking' creativity, has resulted in Eastern culture, which often favors incremental innovations on tradition, being devalued as ritualistic and unoriginal (Celik & Lubart, 2016; Lubart, 2010). In fact, when understood in cultural context, it is precisely these ritualistic and traditional qualities that have historically made Eastern creative products so culturally valuable (Hallman, 1970).

The comparison of "Eastern" to "western" conceptualizations of creativity awoke many researchers to the fact that much of the creativity research has historically been studied under the narrow perspective of Western primacy (Helfand et al., 2016; Westwood & Low, 2003), and that Western theories about creativity lack applicability to other, global cultures (Glăveanu, 2016a). For example, Western definitions of creativity require that an idea or product have both novelty and task appropriateness (Amabile, 1988; Cropley & Oppert, 2018; Rietzschel et al., 2016) with a strong extra emphasis on novelty (e.g. the term 'groundbreaking idea'). However, this theory does not apply to certain Eastern cultures that may value replications of tradition with gradually increasing novelty (Celik & Lubart, 2016). Glaveanu's theory for cultural creativity argues that creativity should be defined within the context of the creative culture from which it emerges (Glăveanu, 2013, 2017, 2019; Hennessey, 2017).

Although "Eastern vs Western" creativity is a compelling argument, it conflates "Eastern" with China. Further, China is essentialized as the characteristics of the Han Chinese and the Confucian philosophy (Gladney, 2004), effectively neglecting the cultural creativity of socio-linguistic minority groups within China. Considering creativity from the point of view of cultural context gets even more complex when describing the creative values of non-dominant culture groups (Glăveanu, 2013a; Magyari-Beck, 1992). Non-dominant tangible and intangible creative culture can be devalued or even lost when evaluated in contrast to a dominant culture (Clothey & Meloche, 2022; Czermak et al., 2004). Real musical, linguistic and technological advances are then replaced by false stereotypes about the non-dominant culture (Meloche & Clothey, 2021). This loss can lead to younger generations not learning about their artistic and creative cultural history, which has been linked to a lack of fostering creative identity (Ruyembe, 2017).

## Culturally Specific Assessment of Creativity: people and products

Similarly to how there can be multiple cultural constructions of creativity, researchers have identified that there can be differences in the ways that cultures assess and recognize creativity (Celik & Lubart, 2016; Lubart, 2010; Morris & Leung, 2010; Weisberg, 2015; Yue et al., 2011). Once again, Eastern culture has been one of the leading examples of culturally constructed

creativity that is not completely compatible with Western-constructed creativity. Creativity researchers have noted that, historically, in western cultures, leaps of progress and extreme change are valued as more creative than subtle or gradual changes in creativity and respect or knowledge of tradition (Lau et al., 2004; Lubart, 2010). Therefore, Eastern creative products such as artworks tend to feature small changes on traditional motifs and designs, rather than revolutionary novelty. Additionally, it has been theorized that, because Eastern cultures tend to be more collectivist than Western cultures which focus on individualism, recognition of eminent creative individuals may be handled differently in the East than in the West (Morris & Leung, 2010). Lastly, some have suggested that collectivist cultures may encourage that creative products have more utility to society than novelty, or newness (Morris & Leung, 2010; Wong & Niu, 2013). In a comparative study of undergraduate students in China and Germany, Yue, Bender, & Cheung found that Chinese undergraduates associated creativity with politicians, scientists, and inventors while German undergraduates associated creativity with philosophers, artists, and writers. The researchers associated this difference with Chinese students focusing on meritorious salience based on social contexts (usefulness and cultural value).

#### Divergent Thinking

In a review of empirical literature comparing differences between Eastern and Western students' performance in creativity tests, Leung, Au, and Leung (Leung et al., 2004) found that in empirical research, Western students performed better on creativity assessments than Eastern<sup>1</sup>. However, an alternative explanation for lower test results among Eastern individuals is that many of the creativity assessments being utilized were created to measure a Western cultural definition of creativity (Celik & Lubart, 2016). Many instruments for evaluating creativity and innovation feature divergent thinking tasks, elements that are culturally specific to Western nations— often to the detriment of non-Western participants (Hempel & Sue-Chan, 2010; Lubart, 2010). For example, when given a task of coming up with novel and useful ideas, an individual may provide ideas that are more useful than novel, or they may spend more time elaborating on the details of an idea than coming up with many, all depending on the culture in which their creativity was fostered (Hempel & Sue-Chan, 2010; Nouri et al., 2008).

#### Self-Assessment

Celik and Lubart (Celik & Lubart, 2016) theorize that, as societies move to a more globalized world in which cultures frequently interact definitions of creativity are going to become more unanimous as "East meets West." However, some studies are finding that globalization has instead caused individuals to internalize stereotypes about how their cultures' creative abilities are perceived. For example, Wong and Niu (Wong & Niu, 2013) found that Chinese and American undergraduates demonstrated how cultural exposure to stereotypes had partially formed their perceptions of creativity, as both populations believed that American students have better creative abilities than Chinese students and that Chinese have better deductive reasoning skills than Americans.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>Although many of the studies that they reviewed used the word

<sup>&</sup>quot;Eastern," most of the studies were referring primarily to Han Chinese students (Leung et al., 2004).

#### Non-Dominant Cultural Creativity

Despite potential creative cultural devaluation and inaccuracies in potentially biased creative assessments, there is a lot to suggest that non-dominant culture groups could be potentially more creative than culturally dominant peers. Much research has been conducted to suggest that individuals who have exposure to multiple cultures leverage their knowledge and experiences and social connections in order to increase their creative abilities (Çelik et al., 2016; Tadmor et al., 2012). For example, Celik, Storme, and Forthmann (2016) found that individuals who are active in social environments that contain people with different values, and who report regularly having their values and lifestyle challenged by others are more creative than people who do not regularly have to defend their values and lifestyle. They conducted an online survey that targeted individuals with diverse multicultural experiences, sampled people who reported not living in their or their parents' country of birth, and they asked participants to indicate how often they interacted with ethnic minorities in their country of residence.

Researchers have identified integration strategy as a factor that allows for bicultural individuals to reap the benefits of multicultural creativity (Benet-Martínez et al., 2002; Mok & Morris, 2010). Integration strategy is the ability to perceive compatibility between two or more cultural orientations. Benet-Matinez et al. (2002) sampled first generation immigrant Chinese American undergraduates. They measured bicultural identity integration by asking participants how much they agree with statements such as "I feel as someone who is caught between two cultures." Results found that when researchers tried to encourage 'western' characteristics using cultural primes, participants who did not perceive their two cultures as integrated would reinforce 'eastern' cultural characteristics. Uyghurs, who live as a minority cultural group within a country dominated by a different (majority) ethnic group may have low integration strategy because of the stereotypes and legal restrictions which do not allow them to express cultural identity (Clothey & Meloche, 2022).

Understanding creativity as defined by Uyghurs adds to the current literature on creativity research and culture because it is an example of a nondominant cultural group that is acting within the dominant "Eastern," Chinese culture. This study helps to gain a more nuanced understanding of nonwestern creativity, which should not be studied as one monolithic culture. Looking into the Uyghurs specifically also increases current understandings of how creativity is defined by a persecuted culture. Current theory on multiple cultures and creativity (Çelik et al., 2016) suggests that Uyghurs, who are living in a situation in China that causes them to regularly have their values and lifestyle challenged, should be very creative. However, what happens when this talent is not met with opportunity or recognition?

#### **Theoretical Framework**

#### Cultural Capital

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital suggests that dominant cultures will assert their authority to ensure the continued dominance of their culture (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). While the 'culture of reproduction' takes place

in many formal education settings, it also can come from other environments such as media. Alternatively, Jerome Bruner suggests that empowering people about their creative culture will also empower those people to understand what creative culture is (Bruner, 1996). Culturalism studies the ways that culture affects our minds and the way that people create and process truths. Brunner states that cultural constructs can come from parents, religious upbringing, language, local history, pop culture exposure, among innumerable other things. Theories by Bourdieu and Bruner lead to the conclusion that, in order for equality of cultural capital to be reached, non-dominant cultures should be studied and understood in a way that gives them agency over how they are perceived, creating a cultural democracy.

Scholars who are concerned with issues of social justice have written about creating cultural democracy by increasing access to cultural institutions and education. However, Gaztambide-Fernández recommends that social justice should be more focused on democratizing culture, which is about "ensuring that communities have access to resources and opportunities for expanding local cultural practices as means of actively participating in a democratic society" (p.642). While Gaztambide-Fernández was writing about visual arts aesthetics, the same has been theorized for creativity (Gláveanu, 2016a).

#### Culturally constructed creativity

Most creativity research comes from the field of psychology, where it is often studied by examining individual creative characteristics or creative thinking, by giving participants creative thinking or process tasks to complete in a lab. Psychology has also looked at creativity by examining historical, eminently creative individuals. Chaudhary and Pillai, however, suggest that creativity should be taken "from the Western psychological traditions to the world of culture, where it truly belongs, as viewed through the lens of academic research" (Chaudhary & Pillai, 2016, p. 392). They state that creativity belongs in cultural studies. There are others who wish to see creativity in cultural studies because culture is the output of creative making (Glăveanu, 2016a).

Glăveanu noted some flaws in creativity research, mainly from the field of psychology, that contribute to "not noticing or downplaying relationships and context, valuing one aspect over others and, finally, building systems of evaluation that discriminate against those who don't conform" (Glăveanu, 2016b, p. 207). Essentially, treating creativity as one theory that should apply to all has contributed to a cultural creative reproduction that favors a Western definition of creativity and dis-privileges those who's culturally specific definitions of creativity differ from Western standards. He posited that researchers have put a lot of emphasis on creativity being an aspect (trait, skill, characteristic) of an individual and this has allowed psychological researchers to dominate the creativity discussion. This focus on the individual creative person also contributed to the privileging of individualistic cultures, over cultures that are more collaborative. Glăveanu wrote that, "[c] reativity is not a personality trait, a cognitive process, a feature of objects or ideas, a neutral or social structure for as such as it relates to the activity of brains, individuals, groups, and society; creativity is, first and foremost, a quality of human action. To create means to act in a flexible, novel, and

meaningful way in a given context" (Glăveanu, 2016b, p. 210). He therefore calls for a making-first approach to creativity, in which creativity is an action and culture is a result of creativity.

#### Uyghur background and history

Uyghurs have long made claims about ethnic discrimination, oppressive religious controls and cultural infringement under Chinese Communist Party rule (Smith Finley, 2019). However, the time period during which the research for this project was conducted, between 2014-2016, represents a period of change amid increasing restrictions on many Uyghur cultural traditions. After a series of violent acts within Xinjiang that the Chinese government attributed to Islamic terrorism, the situation became more oppressive. In 2015 the Chinese central government passed counterterrorism legislation which effectively criminalized "any Uyghur expression of dissent or religiosity as well as many Uyghur cultural traditions as signs of terrorism or extremism" (Roberts, 2018, 246). China's stated goal for more recent restrictions is to maintain stability by preventing the emergence of radical Islam in Xinjiang, which the government assumes to have fueled ethnic strife and violent attacks and that they attributed to Uyghur terrorists (Roberts, 2018). Although many scholars dispute the characterization of Uyghurs as Islamic terrorists (cf., Roberts, 2018; Rodríguez-Merino, 2019; Smith Finley, 2019), state sanctioned ethnic repression targeting Turkic Muslims, including ethnic Uyghurs and others, has resulted in multiple forms of extrajudicial detention, internment, incarceration, and forced labor. Over 435 intellectuals and scholars who were important Uyghur cultural leaders, including professors of Uyghur literature, anthropologists, writers, and musicians, are among the detained (UHRP, 2019).

According to a report by the Uyghur Human Rights Project (2018), "Uyghur cultural expression, like other aspects of Uyghur society, has come under even greater pressure than in past decades as the government increases its attempts to deepen control over [the region] through a center-led economic development campaign and assimilationist agenda" (UHRP, 2018, p. 3). The report further states:

The government's repressive policies on freedom of speech, religion and assembly mean that Uyghur artists are not free to perform and develop their cultural industries on their own terms, and the Uyghur public is not free to participate in traditional cultural events or maintain the significance of traditional practices... Uyghur culture is being transformed into nothing more than the symbolic diversity of clothing and dance enforced by authorities from above even as the government's assimilative policies intensify (UHRP, 2018, p. 3).

Like all social media in China, the websites considered for this study were censored, whereby posts deemed too political were removed by the webmaster, often within hours after we captured them. However, they were still accessible and active up until 2016, during most of the period of study. All of the websites discussed in this paper were later shut down by the Chinese government and many of their webmasters arrested.

In sum, today many forums for Uyghur cultural expression are closed in Xinjiang. Thus, the data described in this paper represents an opportunity for cultural expression taken by Uyghur webmasters and netizens in a moment of time during which Xinjiang was undergoing a radical change under new "counter-terrorism" policies. Such data are no longer available in the same way. In this context, understanding how the oppressed ethnic minority group described in this study define creativity is all the more salient, and reflects the resiliency of the community.

#### **Research Methodology**

This paper is one in a series of a larger project on Uyghur cultural expression on the internet. (See e.g., R. A. Clothey, 2017; R. A. Clothey et al., 2016; R. A. Clothey & Koku, 2017; R. Clothey & Meloche, 2022; Meloche & Clothey, 2021). To collect the data for this paper, a team of researchers examined the content of four interactive Uyghur-language online community forums, or *munbar* (platform). The websites were hosted in Xinjiang and were actively used by Uyghurs during the research period of 2014-2016.

With funding from our institution's Social Science Research Initiative, two native Uyghur speakers were hired as research assistants (RAs), to monitor the websites over a period of approximately 8 months in 2014 and one month in 2016 for updates<sup>2</sup>. These sites were specifically selected due to their reputation within the Uyghur online community, the variety of content, and their accessibility. All of the sites used primarily Uyghur language.

As a meeting 'space' for expression among a group that shares a common language, the Uyghur forums enabled Uyghurs across Xinjiang to engage in the discussions taking place there, and raise issues of specific concern to their own community (Clothey & Koku, 2017). Because of the illusion of anonymity that the internet provides, we were not able to ascertain identities. However, we surmised from the posts, and from information provided on profile pages of frequent users, that about 60% of users were male, and most were between the ages of 20– 50. A majority of users appeared to reside in southern Xinjiang (where the majority of Uyghurs are), but also throughout Xinjiang, in both rural and urban areas (Clothey & Koku, 2017). Thus, this online activity connected a diverse population of Uyghurs, and the posts illuminate the specific ways in which Uyghur internet users were thinking about issues relevant to them at that moment in time (Clothey, 2017).

The RAs monitored the websites on a daily basis, and captured screenshots from the online discussion threads. With assistance from one of the authors, one RA translated website threads from Uyghur into English, and one RA checked the translations for consistency and reliability. A total of 1,683 distinct posts were captured and translated during the study period, each of which is about 100 words (in Uyghur) on average.

In order to address the research questions of this project, the authors read all of the posts, then selected those related to the broader theme of 'creativity' for data analysis. First, posts were selected if they included forms of the words 'creative' or 'innovative,' because innovation is the result of creativity (Amabile & Pratt, 2016). We sought out posts that discussed new

 $<sup>\</sup>frac{1}{2}$  The research assistants did not wish to be identified or named

as co-authors due to political sensitivities.

ideas, businesses, and services in our analysis of research question 1. Additionally, we analyzed posts that discussed traditional arts and the entertainment industry because these fields are often associated with creative product (Glăveanu, 2013b). Lastly, creativity and culture are often defined by the Big-C (Lebuda, 2016), that is, eminent recognition of an individual or idea; therefore we looked closely at posts that received a lot of comments by other netizens and which discussed novel ideas, businesses, and individuals. Overall, 18 original threads, along with their comments, were selected for data analysis.

#### **Data Analysis**

We analyzed the data by hand using a coding process described by Saldaña (2016). First, we used an iterative process through which we read and reread the threads to assign analytic memos to those threads related to the broader theme of 'creativity,' broadly defined. Threads that were not relevant to the topic were not assigned memos. We then sorted and grouped the memos to reveal emergent patterns, concepts, and themes.

During this phase of analysis, we selected posts that we determined were relevant to creativity during the initial coding process and we inserted the posts along with their comments into NVivo, which is a digital tool for conducting qualitative analysis (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). NVivo allows researchers to store multiple layers of codes as well as sort, search, and index data. As in most digitally-assisted analysis tools, the researcher is still the agent conducting the analysis, nothing is automated except for the ability to easily create reports of what the researcher has done. Within NVivo, we were able to utilize the constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We began with a few major themes ("nodes" in NVivo) that were related to the research questions, such as "Creativity and innovation-example," and "Recognizing creativity." During this process several other codes were added to this list of major "nodes." After this phase was complete, we were able to use NVivo to create a report of everything that had been coded into these major "nodes." We then conducted another layer of coding within these major nodes, creating subnodes, that designated different themes that appeared within the major nodes. For example, when we reviewed the major node "Recognizing creativity" we saw a theme of recognizing someone's "Hard work" as contributing to their success. In the final phase of analysis, we revisited the research questions and visually inspected all the coded data using the "coding stripes" view in NVivo in order to determine which themes best addressed which research questions.

We kept memos of themes and hunches during analysis and shared these together during weekly meetings to facilitate inter-rater reliability. Lastly, we circulated the final review of research questions together with their thematic answers between the two of us, in order to reach a consensus and ensure that no major themes were omitted due to researcher bias or incomplete analysis.

#### Findings

#### *RQ1: A creative product benefits the community and preserves Uyghur culture*

Findings for RQ1 suggest that Uyghurs consider a product to be creative if it benefits the community and preserves Uyghur culture. This applied for both innovative businesses and organizations. For example, one post discussed a new cafe that also sold books. The cafe was praised in the body of the post for being an innovative idea that combined and promoted two aspects of Uyghur culture, tea and reading. This type of post was common in the threads, which frequently featured examples of Uyghur businesses and charitable organizations in an effort to inform people about what opportunities were being created. This specific post, called "A Tea Café in Urumqi is Filled With Books," (12/6/2014) discussed a grand opening of a new cafe in a city in Xinjiang that served food and sold books. According to the post, many notable Uyghurs attended this opening, suggesting that the business was eminently recognized. The post details how this idea was considered innovative because it was novel (a combination of a cafe and bookshop where people who spend a certain amount of money on food are offered a free book) and appropriate because it contributes to community cultural preservation. As one commenter proclaimed:

> Combing our tea culture and reading habit is such an excellent idea! It's our responsibility to protect and enrich our traditional cultures. Thanks!

The above quote also represents many others who voiced a call for community support, encouraging others to go to their shop and expressing wishes that more Uyghurs emulate their success. There were some, however, who saw flaws in the beneficence of this business and placed suggestions to improve in the comments. One commenter pointed out that the price tag for earning a free book was too high and thus the program did not benefit those who need it most:

Unfortunately, those who can afford 300 Yuan of dinner usually have no interest in reading books... on the contrary, maids, shoe fixers, and waiters need this kind of service, but for them, not 300, even 30 Yuan for a meal will kill them...

Many seconded that this was a good point. However, overall, commenters appreciated how this idea helped with cultural preservation. For example:

Commenter: I'm very proud of it!

Commenter: There are more good deeds than evils, it's a natural principle.

Commenter: Makes people proud! Special thanks to the owner of the restaurant and the author of this article.

Commenter: This is the principle of earth's rotation. When I was young, I saw customers reading books in some barbershops. After being left out for a while, it seems like our glorious habits are coming alive now. Another post called "Newly Added Programs in Xinjiang TV" (11/23/2014) explained how having three competing television stations was good for improving the quality of entertainment. Uyghur language TV stations began taking advertisers from some new, culturally-relevant companies and those companies found a market, a situation that benefitted both parties. The author of the post was a worker for one of the Uyghur stations and shared this information in a post to spread awareness and encourage people to watch more Uyghur-language stations:

Post author: In short, the competition among TV stations in Xinjiang is bringing a new hope and opening a new era in Xinjiang TV history... Finally, one thing I'm expecting from you all is that you please support our TV programs, let them shine and work for us!

Unfortunately, the majority of the comments exhibit suggestions to improve, which indicates that this is not an example of innovation. The commenters take umbrage because the goal of this post and the TV stations is commercial success, not community benefit.

Rather than dismissing the post entirely, commenters helpfully suggest ways that the TV stations can *benefit the community* and *preserve Uyghur culture*. One commenter suggests that TV stations can really help with cultural preservation if they make documentaries about Uyghur history and heritage:

> Commenter: Why don't you guys put some effort on making movies that reflect our great history, like the establishment of Karahan kingdom, Sultan Sutuk Bughrahan, Sayida kingdom, Mahmut Kashgary, Yusup Hasajib.... Etc. etc. Others pay extra attention to their history, they even made movies about Yang Nay Wu, Xu Ba Cai, Sun Wu Kong, Sha Jia Pang.... But we, on the other hand, didn't make a single film about our prestigious historical figures. Think about it.

Another commenter suggests having some more programming aimed at education in economics:

11/23, by watandax; Since it is an economical channel, they should play something related to economics, even for an hour a day.

The most common complaint was for the amount and quality of commercials.

#### RQ2: A creative Person's hard work and selfless motivations

Findings for RQ2 suggest that Uyghurs emphasized a creative person's *hard* work and selfless motivations. In a post about Parhat, a Uyghur singer who made the final round of 'Voice of China,' (8/2/2014) a televised singing competition, he is praised for trying to be famous for "the right reasons," not to further himself, but so that he could share connections with the audience. He

was also deeply praised for his hard work and his natural talents were down-played.

Several posts discussed individuals that the web citizens had identified and recognized for their creative and innovative achievements. One was a singer, another was a photographer, and the third was a businessman. The post discussing singer Parhat Halik, "The one that comes close to himself" was highly viewed with many comments. It is a description of a guitarist and singer whom the post's author had been following for many years. The post and comments track Parhat's experience on the Chinese television singing competition "The Voice of China." One of the reasons that Parhat became so famous was because his music contributes to community cultural preservation. He was well-loved in the Uyghur community not just for his talent and success on the show (he was a final runner-up), but because he sang traditional Uyghur songs with modern arrangements. As the post author poetically suggests, when a Uyghur listens to Parhat, they hear their history:

There are spirits of the great land of Taklimakan: green oasis, garden full of fruit, silence from Tarim, and confident, hopeful, and brave Uyghur people in Parhat's voice. There is a goal in it. There is also hope and disappointment in it. There is happiness and sadness in it. There is calm and hatred, even revenge in it.

Additionally, Parhat was praised by the author of the post because his success was the result of the culmination of *hard work*. The author claimed that Parhat may not have the most natural-born talent, but so many people were drawn to him because of the years of practice and the hard work that he put into singing with emotion. The author also used Parhat's work ethic to illustrate how Parhat did not enter the music business just for fame; rather, the author minimized the role of selfish motivations for creative success. As the author states:

> I insist that Parhat chooses to become a musician, not solely aimed to be famous. For a person who tries his best to get close to himself and understand himself, getting other's recognition is not their primary goal. Those who weigh their value based on others' scale are the poorest people in the world, they are the most unconfident and self-bragging people in the world, and they will eventually fall apart from themselves. And some singers spent most of their time on increasing their pitch in order to sing better. They even neglect the limit of their ability and start to sing whatever the song is popular, they will be "beggars" for the rest of their life.

As illustrated in this post, Parhat is appreciated precisely because he is not striving for recognition from others. It is also clear from this quote that people who attempt creativity or innovation for *selfish motivations* will ironically fail to achieve Uyghur standards of eminent creativity.

The comments regarding Parhat were generally positive and encouraging. Netizens returned to this post throughout the weeks that he was on the show, documenting his success, sharing videos of performances, and discussing his choice of songs.

Another post that discussed a creative individual is "Splendid life with Camera" (11/3/2014), which was translated into Uyghur from a Chinese website. It tells the uplifting life story of a successful photographer, Jumahun, who overcame becoming deaf after a childhood illness and developing lymphoma as an adult. This post was a very strong example of Jumahun's ability to overcome adversity. Commenters on the post frequently praise him for his *hard work*:

alsuyer: I hope the best for my friend Jumahun. He is a very good photographer; he doesn't worry about hard work and a tough life. His attitude to his profession is very admirable. Sometimes I pull up a chair and tell him: "Take a break, leave your camera alone," but he always refuses to sit. Good example for youth like us.

A third individual that was recognized in a thread for being creative and innovative is Abduhabir Muhammad, in a post called "Uyghur Boy who came back to his hometown from the US" (9/29/2014). This post is a translation from an article in the "Global Times" that described how Muhammad went to the US for school and came back to China to start a company, despite the fact that he had a job offer in the US. While he was in the US, Muhammad participated in community cultural preservation by sharing information about the Uyghur culture with his US peers:

> Abduhabir introduced Uyghur culture, history, sports, music, and economy in a cultural festival in Binghamton city. He wrote everyone's name in Uyghur and played Uyghur music for them. "Fox News" reporters specially interviewed him and helped a lot of Americans to understand Uyghur culture. He told the reporter that, "if every Uyghur youth spends their one minute to introduce their culture, it would be a great contribution to their nation."

He was also praised because his success as a student resulted from *hard work*, demonstrated by how difficult it was for him to keep up his academic standards in English:

In his own words "In the US, we had to do the homework in a group, with 5 to 6 people together. If one person makes a mistake, it would bring everyone's score down. Therefore, I had to study twice harder than everyone else so that I won't affect the group's grade. Back then, I had to study at least 15 hours a day to keep up with everyone else. I would tell myself, if I don't walk today, I would have to run tomorrow." (see also Meloche & Clothey, 2021).

#### Censorship, many eminent individuals could not be recognized.

Uyghur authors on the threads were acutely aware about how their culture was perceived by the dominant Han Chinese. One post, called "Xinjiang People who Shocked the Whole of China This Summer," (10/10/2014) described

several Uyghur musicians and artists who had entered the public eye. The post included photos and brief descriptions of the accomplishments of these individuals (one of which was Parhat). The post stated: This summer, a group of Xinjiang people has impressed a

This summer, a group of Xinjiang people has impressed a lot of Chinese with their intelligence, beautiful dance skill, and amazing voice. They have become name cards to introduce Xinjiang to people outside.

However, while this post also initiated a string of comments, the general reaction was not entirely positive:

10/10: They are all musicians, seems like nothing can shock China other than dancing and singing.

10/10: Everyone will forget about them after some intense clippings, the only impression left is; Uyghur people are good at dancing and singing, they are born like that and die like that.

These comments illustrate an acknowledgement of Gladney's observation, noted above, that oftentimes ethnic minorities are ascribed an essentialized identity, in this case one that sings and dances, but seemingly contributes no other value. The comments express their frustration with this fact and lament this essentialization. One person captured the desire to be known for more than singing and dancing and proposed: "Let us be a star in every field" (*munbar* post 10/10/2014).

One point of friction was when Parhat sang a Chinese language song in the finale of "Voice of China," not a Uyghur song. Some commenters were upset, but others came to his defense, with one person claiming that statistically, if he wanted to win, he should sing in Chinese because the winners are tallied by popular votes. Another commenter suggested that "my bosses" (likely a reference to government regulators) wouldn't allow him to sing in Uyghur:

salambay: Even cats and dogs wouldn't believe that my bosses, who didn't even allow Abdukeram Abliz, Mamatrozi Sayit, and Dilshat Barat to keep their mustache, would allow Parhat to sing Dolan Muqam in his mother tongue in such a huge stage. Do you guys really think Parhat doesn't want to sing comfortably in his own language...

This post subtly refers to the 2015 Chinese government counterterrorism legislation prohibiting many Uyghur religious and cultural traditions (Clothey & Meloche, 2022; Roberts, 2018). Dolan Muqam, which this online post intimates that Parhat would not be allowed to perform, is a traditional style of Uyghur music. Additionally, television programs were being cancelled and the station was not able to be transparent about why. Language used by commenters in the threads suggest that this was due to government censorship:

11/23, by alkanat; You lied about the reason why "One Book One Universe" got cancelled. We would understand

you if you don't have a chance to speak out the truth. But why do you have to lie then???

There are examples in the literature of the creative potential of certain populations being limited due to overt or subversive efforts of outside forces, such as censorship (Lebuda, 2016; Magyari-Beck, 1992).

Whereas western definitions of creativity suggest that creativity must be "novel and appropriate," and focus on novelty and the creative individual, the Chinese definition of creativity is more concerned with making small changes to traditions, and the creative society (Lubart, 2010). Meanwhile, our findings suggest that Uyghurs emphasize hard work, selflessness, and contributing to the preservation of their culture as creative requirements. Findings present an example of a creativity definition that do not fit with prominent Western or "Eastern" theories, suggesting that more consideration should be spent on how best to teach and assess creativity and innovation accurately.

#### Discussion

## *Uyghur individuals and ideas receive community support and encouragement to be creative*

One thing that is clear from the popularity of the posts about creative people is that the Uyghur community encourages creative individuals and will readily come together to support creative Uyghurs. This strong community support and encouragement is one example of an advantage benefitting Uyghur creative individuals. The Uyghur community unanimously supported Parhat by sharing his videos and reminding everyone to vote for him in the singing competition. They supported Abduhabir Muhammad by sharing news and updates and specifically asked that anyone getting married use Jumahun the photographer. Uyghurs on the message boards also encouraged each other to patron Uyghur-owned creative businesses such as the tea café.

The way that the Uyhgur community rallies behind creative individuals and products adds to the literature currently suggesting that nondominant culture groups could be potentially more creative than culturally dominant peers (Çelik et al., 2016; Tadmor et al., 2012). The threads suggest an environment where individuals feel encouraged to start creative businesses or artistic pursuits and feel safe taking this risk because of the knowledge that the community will support such ventures.

Support was not extended only to creative individual. There were examples in the posts of ideas that were not deemed creative. In these cases, the ideas and individuals were not dismissed, but rather the community provided more support in the shape of helpful suggestions. For instance, there were suggestions that would make the Uyghur television station one that better benefitted the community, and also preserved Uyghur culture. Even if a product failed to achieve Uyghur creativity, it still received encouragement and the collective community used their own creativity to come up with these suggestions. Educating members of the community in ways that they can be more creative seems to also be a community responsibility.

## Being a minoritized culture group impacts the way that Uyghurs are able to be recognized for creativity

The examples of creativity that the Uyghurs enacted demonstrated their knowledge of multiple cultures and their ability to socially navigate between their Uyghur identity and their Chinese nationality. Creative ideas often found unique ways of working within existing systems, even systems that were actively being used to surveil or suppress Uyghur individuals. Examples were shown within the data, but perhaps the strongest example of this was the existence of the discussion posts themselves. Moderators and authors continued their tradition of sharing news among the community despite the fact that they were aware that the message boards were heavily monitored. Moderators had to delete posts or comments that would attract too much negative attention. Uyghur authors in the discussion boards would often use metaphors or proverbs to vaguely infer their true thoughts about a subject that they believed would face censorship.

The findings presented above add to the literature that suggests that bicultural individuals can potentially be more creative than monocultural peers (Benet-Martínez et al., 2002; Mok & Morris, 2010). These conclusions are further enriched by the necessity of navigating as one minoritized culture within another that is actively seeking to repress Uyghur identity (Clothey & Meloche, 2022).

Being a minoritized culture group, especially one that is being culturally repressed, is not without disadvantages for creative recognition. The interactive websites offered a unique and valuable method for Uyghurs to share their creative achievements, however, these achievements did not often receive mainstream Chinese recognition (with the exception of Parhat). Of course, the use of Uyghur language in the posts would make it difficult for this information to be disseminated, but often times posts were actually translated to Uyghur from Chinese as in the case of the article about Jumahun. A clear example of the frustration that Uyghur people felt was captured in the post "Xinjiang People who Shocked the Whole of China This Summer". Uyghur commenters were conflicted between being proud of their music and dance and being disappointed that this was the extent of their recognition for cultural contributions. Here, Uyghurs are essentialized singers and dancers but not credited with technological innovations or literary contributions, furthering the studies that show how dominant cultures will stereotype minoritized groups as novelties, or entertainment, but not capable of serious cultural or technological innovation (Czermak et al., 2004; Glăveanu, 2013a; Hartwig et al., 2017; Junius, 2007; Magyari-Beck, 1992; Ruyembe, 2017; Sardana, 2018).

Uyghurs in the message boards express their desire for certain innovations and individuals to be wider recognized, not only in the wider Chinese media, but among younger Uyghurs. A dearth of Uyghur historical documentaries on television, available Uyghur history books, government internet censorship, and a growing language divide between older and younger generations are all resulting in loss of important creative heritage examples (Clothey & Meloche, 2022). A persistent fear is that there will come a day in which future generations do not know more than the stereotypes that were preserved, surrendering their creative value to the perceptions of others, and internalizing diminished creative self-perception (Wong & Niu, 2013).

# Culturally appropriate assessment of Uyghur creative products and people

Whereas western definitions of creativity suggest that creativity must be "novel and appropriate," and focus on novelty and the creative individual, the Chinese definition of creativity is more concerned with making small changes to traditions, and the creative society (Lubart, 2010). Meanwhile, our findings suggest that Uyghurs emphasize *hard work, selflessness, and contributing to the preservation of their culture* as creative requirements. Findings present an example of a creativity definition that do not fit with prominent Western or Eastern theories, suggesting that more consideration should be spent on how best to teach and assess creativity and innovation accurately.

Creativity often emerges in an individual as a result of the culture in which it was first fostered (Hempel & Sue-Chan, 2010; Morris & Leung, 2010; Nouri et al., 2008). Therefore, researchers who are looking to assess creative ideas as part of a divergent thinking activity from a minoritized culture group should consider including *contributing to the preservation of their culture* as a criteria for usefulness, or appropriateness to a task (as described by Amabile, 1988; Cropley & Oppert, 2018; Rietzschel et al., 2016). This criteria should also be weighted more heavily than novelty, or newness (Morris & Leung, 2010; Wong & Niu, 2013). While there are many examples of eminent creative individuals whose ideas only benefit themselves, it's important for evaluation to reflect that this type of idea would have been expressly discouraged and not considered creative.

The data demonstrates that Uyghurs are an example of a culture that has different priorities in recognizing creative individuals (Lau et al., 2004; Lubart, 2010; Morris & Leung, 2010). For the Uyghurs, the hard work and effort put into gaining a skill or coming up with an idea are more important than how eminent or famous that person or idea becomes. This is partly because a desire to become famous or rich was considered a selfish motivation and thus discouraged, but also because Uyghurs were well aware of their situation as non-dominant cultural minorities. The Uyghur authors in the message boards knew that Uyghur creative achievements would not be widely recognized and, while they wished this was not the case, they knew better than to count on eminent recognition as an indicator of creativity. While studies from China have found recognition from others to be an important designation of creativity (Rudowicz, 2003), this is not true of Uyghur culture. A further consideration for assessing a creative individual or idea from a non-dominant culture is to reflect the priorities hard work over fame and recognition.

#### Limitations

Findings from this study are unique to Uyghurs living in China during this specific time of data collection (2014-2016). Therefore, these findings should not necessarily be applied to diasporic Uyghurs, or Uyghurs in China today who are further restricted in their activities and communication tools. It is

also important to note that the sample of Uyghur-language authors and commenters is not representative of all Uyghurs who were living in Xinjiang at the time. The sample population for this study was likely slightly more educated and of higher socio-economic status than the average Uyghur citizen at the time (Clothey & Koku, 2017) because of their access to and knowledge of the internet as well as their proficiency with Uyghur language.

Furthermore, three methods of selecting posts to include in this study, looking for novel ideas, looking at eminently popular posts, and looking at arts and entertainment, are derived from Western theories of creativity. The researchers wish to acknowledge this implicit bias. We attempted to compensate for this bias by practicing researcher reflexivity. Additionally, once the posts were selected, data analysis proceeded with open coding, in which themes emerge from the data (Saldana, 2021).

#### Conclusions

Based on the findings presented above we would like to suggest that future self and researcher-based assessments of creative characteristics of minoritized culture groups consider including 'hard work' and a 'desire to benefit their community' or 'preserve culture' amongst the attributes. 'Benefitting the community' should be included among the criteria for evaluating a creative product or divergent thinking idea. It may be that other minoritized groups do not share these priorities, however, and in such cases researchers should find the variables that fit the cultural group in question. This is particularly important if the research involves cross-cultural comparisons because these types of studies are potentially subject to approaching minority cultures from a creative deficit bias. Additionally, we recommend that creative characteristic assessments of certain minoritized culture groups look for and remove factors that are not culturally relevant such as 'potential for making personal gain' or 'becoming famous'.

Creative studies that document eminent creative achievement should actively promote and present non-dominant cultures' current technological innovations in addition to a full array of historical creative achievements. Uncovering examples of creative achievement among minoritized culture groups may be difficult if the group has been subject to oppression or censorship. However, findings from this study demonstrate that minoritized culture groups are responsible and resourceful stewards of their own history of creative achievement and are eager to share this history with others.

Lastly, we suggest that creativity researchers looking to assess creative thinking cognitive skills among minoritized culture groups consider alternative tasks that would better showcase that group's abilities. For example, Uyghurs on the message boards displayed individual creative thinking skills when suggesting ways to improve on an existing idea so that it was more beneficial to the community. Therefore, an interesting task would be to present participants with partially formed ideas and ask them to improve those ideas so that they were more in keeping with preserving a collective culture and benefiting the community.

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