
International Uyghur Studies Conference 2024

Thinking gender and queer theory into our approaches of colonialism across Uyghur contexts

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Do Muslim women need saving? Such is the question posed by Lila Abu Lughod. Calling into question “[...] the capacity of any rights framework to capture the complexity of actual people’s lives” (2015, 221), she suggests instead that we “[...] look and listen carefully, think hard about the big picture, and take responsibility” (224). Having written extensively on the woman question in Muslim contexts (Abu-Lughod & El-Mahdi 2011), she contributes to a growing scholarship on the transformation of colonial tropes in a supposedly post-colonial world, where “white men saving brown women from brown men” becomes “white women saving brown women from brown men” and feeds into “white queers (queer men?) saving brown homosexuals from brown heterosexuals” (Spivak 1988, 293; Puar 2017, 99). These trends have been conceptualised by a number of feminist and queer scholars, and have come to be known as liberal feminism and queer liberalism operating through rights discourses where subjects have to make themselves legible to the state in order to secure recognition (Das & Nicholas 1981; Eng et al. 2005).

Do Uyghur women need saving? If so, which women, by whom and from what? Leading on from these purposefully provocative questions, we seek to destabilise our understanding of gender, sexuality and family in Uyghur contexts. A serious exploration of these issues cannot elide the fact that such contexts have been and continue to be intimately linked to the colonial relationship between the Uyghur people and China-based states since the late 19th century. Building on work by Eric Schluessel (2020), who explores the sexual economy of East Turkestan under the sinicizing agenda of later Qing rule, we invite reflection on how patterns of domination affect *yerlik* بىرلىك (native/local) kinship networks, as has been characteristic of the colonial encounter in its varied iterations worldwide (Austin 2020; Bouchène et al. 2014; Rifkin 2012).

In the Uyghur context, the colonial encounter does not lie in the past. Rather, it is re-actualised and enforced by the colonial administration to this day through incentivisation, coercion, restriction and punishment, affecting Uyghur social, political, economic and intimate life. This, in turn, produces the internalisation and normalisation of a number of practices as well as varied levels of resistance to such impositions (Fanon 1961; 1971). Reactions to the colonial organisation of Uyghur life vary throughout time and space. How might we understand different responses to the colonial order? To what extent do class and gender intersect to inform these responses across various rural and urban settings? How are these different realities subsequently coded as progressive or conservative, modern or traditional, civilised or backward, and in doing so on what lexicons are commentators drawing on?

Since Edward Said's foundational work on orientalism, the concept has been mobilised by theoretical interventions in queer studies (Massad 2007), and noted in so-called Western accounts of East Turkestan society (Benson 1993). Moreover, it has been expanded and redeployed through application to non-European imperial settings (Pouillon & Vatin 2011), including in the case of Chinese society towards Uyghurs (Gladney 2004). How do the exoticisation and commodification of Uyghur bodies and culture play into such dynamics? How is gender produced and experienced in these instances? Following the work of Mukaddas Mijit (Marmone et al. 2020) and Aynur Kadir, what is the role of performance and visual arts, building on the growing literature on dance (Putchá 2022; Wilcox & Yoon 2024) amongst others, and of the space of the literal and metaphorical stage? This leads us to *la frontera*, spaces of liminality and in-betweenness where possibilities of existence and realisation are in constant negotiation (Anzaldúa 1987; Hong & Ferguson 2011). While these projections and negotiations are most visible in their production of female colonial subjects, they are constructed along a gender binary that actively and passively creates a male colonial opposite.

Over the past two decades, Uyghur scholars have addressed issues concerning women and gender from different perspectives, such as Guljamal Memtimin's numerous publications on feminism and gender in Uyghur literature (2008b; 2008c; 2008a; 2007; 2012; 2013) and Abide Ibrahim's research on the social issues faced by Uyghur women (2013). Alongside their work, femininity and masculinity have started being explored in the field of international Uyghur studies (Bellér-Hann 2015; Dautcher 2009; Smith Finley 2015; 2014). Nevertheless, very few works have tackled gender as produced and reproduced within colonial and capitalist processes (Byler 2018; 2021; 2022; Tynen 2019). We seek here to interrogate a dilemma engendered by settler colonial projects, specifically the tension between the emasculation of men, actualised by economic and political disempowerment, and their parallel imagination and representation as threats to settler society through their portrayal as aggressive, savage and violent subjects in need of containment and control (Guénif Souilamas & Macé 2004). How do the men subject to this dual dynamic respond? How are these representations created in the interaction with the settler state and translated into forms of becoming? What role do they play in transforming gender relations and in the policing of gender more generally? In a global context of islamophobia, what transnational discourses are mobilised in the demonization of Uyghur male subjects?

As has been demonstrated in a number of works, the Chinese State narrative on the "Uyghur problem" shifted noticeably with the advent of the Global War on Terror (Roberts 2020; Rodríguez-Merino 2023). What can we gain from a critical gender theory analysis of counter-insurgency methods and islamophobic rhetoric (Hajjat et al. 2023; Hirschkind & Mahmood 2002; Puar 2017)? Considering the role of the "woman question" in justifying violence against Muslim societies, to what extent are liberal feminist and human rights discourses reused, adapted, or resisted across sinophone contexts as part of this project of legitimisation? Here we invite engagement with the concepts of femonationalism, developed by Sara R. Farris (2017), as well as of homonationalism (Puar 2007; Schulman 2012), and reflection on how they are applicable, or not, to the case at hand. How can we further complexify our thinking by considering the specificities of queer cultures in the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China (Liu 2015; 2023)?

According to the gendered pattern of State repression, men are particularly targeted for internment in the camp and prison system, while women are overrepresented in forced labour programs. How does this

participate in producing gender in repressive contexts? What impact does this have on the reproduction of Uyghur identity within the family and community? We can add to this the question of forced marriage of Uyghur women to Han Chinese men, the well documented mass violation of Uyghur women's reproductive rights, widespread sexual violence, as well as the forced separation of Uyghur children from their families. Considering the oppression faced by Uyghur communities, what competing pressures are people with non-conforming gender and sexual identities facing? What strategies have they deployed, successfully or unsuccessfully, in the face of intersecting forms of violence?

Faced with these colonial interventions and impositions, how are Uyghurs abroad reacting to the ongoing genocidal policies unfolding in *weten* **ۋەتەن** (the homeland)? What role does this interaction play in the hardening of gender roles and (re)presentations within diasporic communities, community policing and punishments for transgression (Reyhan 2022)? In response, how are individuals re-imagining gender from abroad? What role do prominent Uyghur women of the diaspora play in redefining a multiplicity of ways of being a Uyghur woman? More generally, for them and the many Uyghur women not in the public eye, what is at stake in recognising mothers as powerful and decisive political subjects (Ouassak 2020)? To what extent does the opening of safe spaces enable women to engage in practices of mutual care, skill sharing, trade and craft? And how is this political? Finally, what possibilities and challenges does life in the diaspora bring to Uyghur queer people? How are their new contexts, as well as their socio-economic conditions, determining for their lives outside of the homeland?

Interested participants are invited to submit their CV and a 500-word abstract by Friday 31st May 2024. Notification of paper acceptance will be provided no later than Sunday 30th June 2024. All correspondence should be directed to the organizing team at uyghur.studies@uyghur-institute.org. As for participants' expenses, funding priority will be given to scholars and colleagues lacking affiliation, project budget, or other sources of funding. The papers presented at this two-day conference will be published in a special issue of a gender and queer studies journal.

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