

# Material Culture, Loss and Resilience: Findings in the Uyghur Diaspora

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**Abstract:** Based on the Uyghur collection from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that is housed within the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, the project asks what objects, both those held at the museum and contemporary objects, mean for Uyghurs living in the diaspora today. The research focused on Uyghur traders, makers and consumers of Uyghur objects in Istanbul and Kazakhstan. It revealed different ways of coping with biographical ruptures and the loss and (re-)forming of Uyghur identity in the diaspora. For this purpose, the concepts of nostalgia and resilience are discussed, especially in the context of working with museum collections and exhibitions.

*[Material culture, diaspora, Uyghur, resilience, nostalgia, collaborative exhibiting]*

## Background

The Ethnologisches Museum Berlin houses a collection of more than a thousand objects from Xinjiang province, China. Around 900 of them were acquired before 1914 and can be dated back to the mid-late 19<sup>th</sup> century when the region was mostly known as ‘East Turkestan’. In the current exhibition in the Humboldt Forum, the region is included within the section on ‘Material Culture, Identity and Statehood in Central Asia’. This exhibition takes the collections from Central Asia, most of which came to the museum between 1880 and 1914, as a starting point to examine the role crafts and motifs played in the constitution of national identities during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Uyghur part differs from the rest of the exhibition as it also deals with an emerging national consciousness in the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and especially the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In this case this did not lead to an independent state, as in West Turkestan, but to the increasing repression of Uyghur culture within Xinjiang and, connected with this oppression, a growing Uyghur diaspora worldwide.

The first object to be displayed that represented Uyghur culture was the so-called Yarkand Carpet with a pomegranate vase pattern, which is strongly connected to East Turkestan’s colonial history. Made in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the carpet was part of the house-

hold of a senior Chinese official who resided in Yarkand<sup>1</sup> until 1927. The carpet was acquired by the diplomat and collector Hans Bidder from a trader in Beijing in 1948. Even though Bidder claimed that the carpets of East Turkestan should be regarded separately from Chinese and West Turkestan traditions and took the Yarkand Carpet as an example of this (Bidder 1964:49–53), when it was acquired by the museum, it was registered within the East Asian department and entered the permanent exhibition in Dahlem as part of a diorama-like installation of a ‘Chinese house’, bringing together various objects collected in China and dating from roughly the same time period without further explanation. While (the few) Uyghur visitors coming to Dahlem complained about the presentation of the carpet in this environment, the presentation of an 18<sup>th</sup>-century masterpiece in the Central Asian exhibition in the Humboldt Forum was generally seen positively, despite the obvious colonial context in which it was acquired.

Nevertheless, for conservation reasons the carpet had to be replaced by other objects after some time, though there was no adequate replacement available from the museum collections. Therefore, the idea of this project was to place the material culture of the contemporary Uyghur diaspora in focus, addressing the fact that questions about being Uyghur outside Xinjiang have become more and more important for Uyghur identity.

## Fieldwork and its Challenges

The project included two field trips, one to Istanbul (in February 2024) and one to Kazakhstan (Jarkand<sup>2</sup>/Uyghur district and Almaty in November 2024), planned and carried out by a team consisting of the author and the Uyghur Turkologist Dr Ablet Semet. The focus of both trips was interviews and focus-group discussions with artisans, dealers in and buyers of Uyghur crafts. One central question was what the people themselves would select to present contemporary Uyghur identity and why. This opened up a conversation about Uyghur culture in general and specifically about material culture, what it used to be, and what its creators expect from the future, both of their own and Uyghur culture.

The two communities were selected as they represent different groups within the Uyghur diaspora. The Uyghurs in Kazakhstan are the biggest group of Uyghurs outside Xinjiang. Most of them have been living for generations in the border region to China or in Almaty, the former capital of Kazakhstan and the cosmopolitan centre of

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1 Bidder uses the term ‘former governor general of East Turkestan’ for the Chinese official he acquired the carpet from, but given the unstable political situation in Xinjiang in the 1920s, even if there was still a Qing official with the title of ‘governor general’ in Yarkand, the picture it evokes of a colonial ruler collecting art in a peaceful setting is highly unlikely (Bidder 1965).

2 Not to be confused with Yarkand, the presumable city of origin of the Yarkand carpet, which is in China.

Central Asia.<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that the border between China and the Soviet Union was officially closed from the 1960s to the 1980s, many Uyghurs in Kazakhstan have a family history of living on both sides of the border and mention hardly any problems when crossing borders. It was so normal that I only met one person, a woman in her late 60s, who claimed to have never had the time or money to go to Xinjiang. Everyone I told this to assumed that the woman might be lying because she wanted to hide some suspicious business or special connections to the Chinese authorities, as it seemed more likely she was involved in something illicit than not having family to visit on the other side of the border.

Regardless of these strong contacts with the ‘big homeland’ – as Kazakh Uyghurs often refer to Xinjiang, in contrast to the ‘small homeland’ of Kazakhstan – Xinjiang does not have the significance for them it had for the Uyghurs we met in Istanbul, where all our interview partners had left Xinjiang after 2016 as a direct response to the crackdown on Uyghur businessmen, artists and intellectuals.<sup>4</sup>

Working in Istanbul was especially difficult as the mistrust towards foreigners among Uyghurs was extremely high. Interviews and visits to shops and workshops were only possible where Dr Semet had been in contact with the owner before and had gained trust through mutual long-term contacts. The planned focus-group discussions were also cancelled because of the mistrust within the community, while in this case economic mistrust among traders about their supply chains probably played a role. Even with these precautions, we were informed on the fourth day of our stay that there were rumours in the Uyghur community about foreigners asking questions, and already planned visits at workshops were being called off.

Compared with Istanbul, the situation in Kazakhstan was much more relaxed. One reason was probably that China’s state-sponsored repression seemed to have lifted a bit in the second half of 2024, and the border was open again. Moreover, Kazakh Uyghurs generally felt safer in their ‘little homeland’ than the Istanbul community, who often had not yet received Turkish citizenship and still had close family members like parents, siblings or children living in China.

Nevertheless, the experience in Istanbul made us cautious, so most of our interviewees in Kazakhstan still came through personal friendships Dr Semet had created over past decades. What was a good decision in terms of creating a safe environment for open conversations also led to a predominance of middle-aged and elderly men

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3 The Kazakh Census from 2024 gives a figure of 121,063 Uyghurs in Almaty and 41,460 in Panfilov district (often called ‘Uyghur district’, even though Kazakhs are not the majority with 86.188) near the Chinese Border. Quoted after: <http://pop-stat.mashke.org/kazakhstan-ethnic2024.htm>, accessed October 16, 2025. based on: Qazstat 2024: Population of the Republic of Kazakhstan by selected ethnic groups.

4 The number of Uyghurs living in Turkey is hard to determine, as it constantly changes. There has been a Uyghur community in Istanbul since at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Uyghur Human Rights Project mentions 50,000 in 2023. <https://uhrp.org/report/diaspora/>, accessed March 17, 2025.

speaking for the Uyghur community. Women and younger people in general were under-represented in this setting. The imbalance will hopefully be at least partially levelled out through the inclusion of a younger female artist who will be contracted to develop exhibition designs based on the leading questions of the project from the collected material.

From the beginning, the plan was that the exhibition would connect objects from the museum collections and contemporary objects collected during fieldwork, as well as objects collected by Dr Semet in Xinjiang before 2017. With the decision to complement objects from his private collection with stories about what they meant for him into the exhibition, Dr Semet officially entered into the double role of researcher and resource person.

## The Role of Material Culture in the Uyghur Diaspora: Fieldwork Findings

In Istanbul, interviews were conducted with shopkeepers, mainly one specializing in silk, and two with a portfolio of numerous ‘Uyghur products’ which consisted mostly of dresses and *doppa* (Uyghur hats), but also carpets, musical instruments and souvenirs playing with patterns and forms associated with Uyghur material culture. This included miniature *doppa* as earrings or car décor, atlas patterns on mobile phone cases, and one workshop run by Uyghur women specializing mostly in colourful cushions and blankets for export to Europe and the USA. As we spent several hours in each shop, the interviews were interrupted as well as complemented by conversations with customers and incoming traders. For this group, our approach of asking about the things they sell, buy, or make and what these objects mean for them worked well, as Uyghur material culture provided an important connection to their widespread community and their homeland, both emotionally and practically. Through their trade, the sellers and artisans build and maintain multiple networks within the Uyghur diaspora worldwide, including back in China. Even in the most difficult times in Xinjiang, it was possible for Uyghur craft traders to buy silk from eastern China, where the silk always used to be better than in Xinjiang, as one trader emphasized. As all of them also design their own products, they gain recognition within their community through their designs, as well as making a living from selling them, and therefore have a strong interest in keeping Uyghur material culture and traditions alive. If this means adapting and modernizing traditional crafts, they do not see a problem with that. When it comes to clothes or silk, they all have a product line for ‘our people’, meaning Uyghurs, but also including a wider Central Asian market, mostly in Uzbekistan, and a ‘European’ line intended for the Turkish and tourist market in Istanbul. The ‘for us’ line usually has brighter colours and bolder

colour combinations in the *abr* printing<sup>5</sup> than the 'European' one, which in general combines no more than three colours. 'For us' can also mean the combination of traditional patterns and modern designs: baseball caps or mobile-phone cases with *abr* printing, embroidery on T-Shirts or earrings in the form of the traditional Uyghur hat, the *doppa*. These designs are often made by traders in response to customers' wishes and sold internationally among Uyghur traders: 'People will not wear a *doppa* in Istanbul, even less in Europe. But they don't want to give up the *doppa* completely. That's why we have earrings and hairbands and other souvenirs with *doppa*. Same with *abr*. Not for clothes anymore, but for mobile phones,' as one interview partner explained, describing the new products and their importance. For the feeling of connection in a shared identity, it is not necessary to wear a *doppa* in public, especially if this opens one up to harassment. It is enough to show your Uyghur identity through a mobile-phone case or a *doppa* hanging from your car's rear-view mirror.

In Istanbul as in Kazakhstan, the 'traditional' colourful dresses with gold lace and sequins came mostly from Chinese factories and were sold (or sometimes rented out) to Uyghurs for events like circumcisions, birthday parties and weddings, or for cultural performances which play an important role in keeping the Uyghur community together, whether by children's dances in cultural centres, or as part of craft fairs and festivals. These events were recorded and shared in social media, and posts like this are often found in Instagram feeds of craftspeople and traders, strengthening the connection and the importance of their goods within the community.

In Kazakhstan, the group of interview partners was much wider than in Istanbul. Besides traders and artisans, it also contained local Uyghur politicians, researchers and artists. It might be partly because of this that our interview partners were genuinely astonished by our questions. More than once we heard that we were the first ones to ask for handicrafts and craftsmen: 'Everyone wants to talk about our identity, about our problems, but nobody ever asked about our belongings' was a common comment, even from artisans and traders. Material culture did not seem to play the crucial role it did for the Uyghurs in Istanbul. Even for craftspeople like the carpenters' family we met in the Uyghur district who trace their business back at least four generations and have been connected with the famous wooden Uyghur mosque and Yarkand for more than a hundred years, other aspects of Uyghur identity seemed more important than the carvings they make. Being connected with the Ili region on the other side of the border, speaking Uyghur or being one of the imams of the Uyghur mosque in Yarkand seemed to be equally or even more important in order to distinguish them from their Kazakh neighbours.

It became even more obvious in other interviews that the loss of knowledge about belongings and how they were produced is not considered to be connected with the

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5 *Abr*, in Western literature often known as *Ikat*, is originally a weaving technique producing colourful silk cloth for male and female fashion. Today *abr* patterns are mostly printed on silk, but also on cotton or synthetic fabrics.

loss of identity as much as the loss of language is. This can be linked to the fact that, for the Kazakh population, especially in Almaty, Kazakh material culture and crafts are also of less importance: in general, traditional crafts, their patterns and their techniques did not experience a revival in the economy or the national consciousness as in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan. Therefore, the feeling of being a neglected minority and secondary to Kazakhs is less when it comes to material culture than when it comes to questions of language, schools and media. Seeing the Kazakh language being on the rise and schools teaching in Uyghur under pressure is considered a great threat to cultural identity, but having the same interiors and everyday clothing as one's Kazakh neighbours does not involve the same feeling of loss and forced assimilation. Interestingly, the one person who was most concerned with the vanishing of Uyghur crafts was an art teacher in a local primary school in the Uyghur district, who told us he is not allowed to teach 'Uyghur crafts' in his Uyghur school anymore, but only neutral objects with Kazakh patterns.

## Dealing with Loss: Nostalgia and Resilience

The overwhelming topic of all interviews was the experience of loss. All our interview partners in Istanbul had lost family members and close friends over the last ten years through detention and death in Xinjiang. Many still worry about close ones from whom they have not heard in some years. They had lost places they called home and belongings, and those who had left Xinjiang for Europe or the USA earlier than 2016 lost the feeling of a home they could go back to. This experience usually came up in the first minutes of the conversation. For them, material culture was not lost, but on the contrary was one of the few things that was still there and part of their lives, though maybe in a new form.

In the interviews with Kazakh Uyghurs, the loss of close ones in Xinjiang was not as prominent as it was for the community in Istanbul and Europe or the USA, which was remarkable, as they nearly all claimed to have family on the other side of the border. Their feeling of loss was twofold: the more abstract loss of the 'big homeland' and its great history, and the personal loss of their Soviet homeland with the political security it provided for minorities. The time remembered by the interview partners were not the difficult period of the early decades of the Soviet Union, when Uyghur families fled to China to avoid hunger and oppression (Hess 2019:43–48), but rather the later years when Uyghur schools, media and theatres existed.

To describe the approach of the Uyghurs we met towards material culture and Uyghur identity, the concepts of 'nostalgia' and 'resilience' are helpful, as both concepts describe ways of dealing with loss on an individual as well as a community level.

Nostalgia, in its original meaning of a painful longing to go back home, is what all our interview partners deal with. For a long time, nostalgia was regarded negatively

as a psychological condition that distracts people from reality and prevents them from creating the future (Novack 2017:3). Today there is an acceptance that nostalgia is not just a matter of looking back to the past: it can also make claims for the future (on former Soviet citizens Boym 2001; on Trump voters, Novack 2017). When an elderly professor in Kazakhstan fondly remembers the time when the state-owned carpet factory in Almaty had its own department producing Uyghur carpets and demands that the current Kazakh state should do the same, and taking China's funding of carpet factories in Kashgar as a positive example, he is not just looking back but also formulating his vision of a future, even if this vision is strongly influenced by apparently idealized concepts of the past.

But this example also shows that creating visions out of nostalgia is only possible for an individual living on a certain level of political and economic security. If the demands for more support for Uyghur culture are not heard by the Kazakh state, and no other ways of preservation are to be found, certain aspects of Uyghur culture might vanish, but the immediate existence of the people will not be in danger. For the Uyghurs traders in Istanbul, making claims based only on nostalgia is hardly an option. Refusing to adapt to new patterns and styles in order to keep an imagined homeland alive would put them out of the businesses with which they sustain their families in a foreign and not always friendly country. So, to describe their approach to material culture, memory and the lost past, the concept of resilience fits better than nostalgia, even though they can be linked. For resilience, I use the definition Magis gives in her article on community resilience as 'development, and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterised by change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise' (Magis 2010:410).

The fact that questions of how to 'stay Uyghur' in a rapidly changing world were also controversial among the Uyghur project partners and were widely discussed led to two designs for presentations by the Uyghur artist Mukaddas Mijit focusing on contemporary designs and developments while taking the importance of 19<sup>th</sup>-century objects for Uyghurs today into account. In this context, the private collection of Ablet Semet – collected mainly in the early 2000s, but with few exceptions explicitly focusing on 'traditional', 'real' objects – became important as the bridge between the museum collection and contemporary designs. The collection is nostalgic, as it shows the attempt to preserve the last 'museum-like' objects from Xinjiang, but it also became a source of resilience, first for the collector who deals with his own loss by saving what can be saved, and second as an inspiration for contemporary (museum) design.



Fig. 1 Project display in Humboldt Forum: T-Shirts made by contemporary Uyghur designers in the US installed on a traditional blanket collected by Ablet Semet in Qomul, 2013, brought together by Mukaddas Mijit.  
Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum / Melanie Krebs

## Conclusion

Collections like the East Turkestan collection of the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin have the power to evoke nostalgia, as they mainly consist of exceptionally beautiful textile objects, demonstrating the high skills of craftspeople in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. For many people from Central Asia today – not only Uyghurs – a museum is a place for nostalgia, a place where they find ‘the homeland’ as it exists in their imagination rather than in their memories, an imagination that was in many cases already at least partly built on (museum) collections and books more than their own memories. There is also the belief that a museum as an academic institution is and should present a univocal truth instead of many-voiced narratives. The idea that museum collections and collecting can do more than simply preserve a time in history, and that exhibitions can be more than a re-staging of this time, was as new to our interview partners as it was to many researchers and museum practitioners even a decade ago and still is. Coming from this background, for some interview partners the idea of replacing the Yarkand Carpet with contemporary Uyghur crafts was irritating at first, and not only because they consider contemporary crafts mediocre: at a time when the ongoing destruction of

the Uyghur heritage in China is being met with silence in Europe, and when Uyghur culture was considered important enough to be brought to Europe, the exhibition of these objects is being met with pride and the hope that there is still a part of Uyghur history that is being preserved.

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