

## 102. How to hold modern marriage and weddings for Uyghur newlyweds?

Uyghurs are an ethnic group who are good at singing and dancing. Uyghur people's marriage and weddings were originally supposed to be happy and jubilant gatherings that celebrated peace with songs and dances. In recent years, under the influence of religious extremist thinking (*zongjiao jiduan sixiang* 宗教极端思想), there existed in a few places a phenomenon of not singing or dancing at weddings<sup>1</sup>, and a stifled and repressive atmosphere. Helping newlyweds hold modern marriage and weddings is not just a specific measure to guide them in accordance with modern culture; it is also an important part of "de-extremification" (*qujiduanhua* 去极端化) work.

Overall, Uyghur people's marriage and wedding customs are composed of four stages: proposal engagement; marriage (*yingqu* 迎娶),<sup>2</sup> and the wedding ceremony. Different places practice different customs and the specific steps of each stage also vary due to regional differences. The proposal and engagement are basically like the customs of the Han people. Afterwards, in accordance with national law, newlyweds must undertake the lawful marriage registration process. To integrate modern culture into weddings, planning must be carried out on the marriage (迎娶) and the wedding ceremony, with an attitude of service, to help them forge a modern wedding.

**First, meticulously dressing up the bride and groom.** On the morning of the wedding, newlyweds must hold a kind of *nika* (*nika* 尼卡) religious ceremony. This ritual is carried out at the bride's house. In some regions of Southern Xinjiang, the *nika* is carried out the day before the wedding. After the ritual is over, the groom returns home to prepare to pick up and escort the bride (*yingjie* 迎亲). During this time, their make-up and dress must be arranged. If conditions allow, one can go to the nearby county town to rent a wedding dress for them and have their photos taken, letting them enjoy a day of utmost beauty and romance.

**Second, organising a motorcade and music band to pick up and escort (迎娶) the bride.** Unlike Uyghur newlyweds who live in the city, the quality of life of the masses in Southern Xinjiang is comparatively low. During their weddings, they usually pick up and escort the bride (迎娶) on foot. Work teams (*gongzuozu* 工作组) can organise an escorting motorcade on their behalf, tie colourful ribbons and paste fresh flowers, allowing them to feel a sense of grandeur and joy. The work team can invite folk artists to form a band, performing and singing cheerful tunes alongside. As

<sup>1</sup> As Darren Byler (2017, 8) wrote, "In 2014 the state began to intervene in these ceremonies, demanding that weddings include music and dancing. If state representatives did not observe dancing at the wedding the new couple faced having to pay a fine of over 3000 yuan. Islamic divorce procedures were also outlawed in order to prevent pious men from divorcing wives who did not meet their standards of piety"

(<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/588c2af8be659421ed624113/t/5920cb9d1b631b04d0270d20/1495321508605/Imagining+Re-Engineered+Muslims+in+Northwest+China.pdf>).

In another document, the Xinjiang government also included simple weddings as one of the 75 extremist activities. The document states that "At extremist wedding ceremonies attendees are forbidden to drink, smoke, dance, and sing."

(<https://xinjiang.sppga.ubc.ca/chinese-sources/online-sources/identifying-religious-extremism/>)

<sup>2</sup> In Uyghur, this process is called *qiz yökesh* 'moving the bride.' Traditionally, the bride was taken from her natal home and moved to the groom's parent's house through a ritual process accompanied by singing and dancing.

the motorcade is travelling, the work team must record the entire process, leaving the newlyweds with a lasting mark of love.

**Third, increasing the number of wedding banquet dishes, organising villagers to singing and dancing.** Southern Xinjiang villages' wedding banquets are comparatively simple, generally consisting of flat bread, mutton, or mutton *pilaf* (*yangrou zhuafan* 羊肉抓饭). Before the banquet, work teams can pre-arrange for guests to drink tea and eat wedding sweets, dried fruits, and snacks, prolonging the banquet's duration. After the wedding banquet, work teams can play the *meshrep* (*maixilaifu* 麦西来甫)<sup>3</sup> music prepared in advance and invite guests to get up and dance, creating a ballroom dance like those held in modern cities and enliven the wedding atmosphere. Through lively music and dynamic dancing postures, the work team can build a happy and auspicious atmosphere and let the villagers genuinely experience the new customs of modern culture. This type of lively wedding will also give Uyghur newlyweds an unforgettable life experience.

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<sup>3</sup> Although *meshrep* cultural gatherings—where young Uyghurs were taught Uyghur traditional behaviors and customs through comedy, dance and religious teaching—were banned after 1997, here the popular music called *meshrep* and state organized dance parties are being promoted by the officials to counter what they saw as a trend of Islamization of Uyghur weddings. For a discussion of the fate of *meshrep*, see Jay Dautcher's *Down a Narrow Road: Identity and Masculinity in a Uyghur Community in Xinjiang China* (Harvard University Asia Center; Illustrated edition, 2009).