

Report on the doctoral dissertation of Mgr. Ondřej Klimeš

Awakened Land: Uyghur Ideas of Nation and Nationalism, 1880-1949

In simple terms, the thesis traces the complex story of how, why, and when the sedentary Turkic-Muslims of present-day Xinjiang came to conceive of themselves as a Uyghur nation. This narrative is underpinned by several theoretical lines of enquiry that seek to establish the criteria according to which this community cohered and defined itself as a nation, as well as how the intelligentsia grappled with the issues of determining the communal interest and asserting a national political identity. Based on a close textual study of a wide selection of primary Uyghur language sources, the candidate charts four stages in the development of ideas about a common Uyghur identity from the 19th century to the 1940s, while simultaneously examining how these ideas fed into and shaped the discourse on early Uyghur nationalism.

The thesis is executed in a scholarly fashion and makes an important contribution to the existing literature on the modern history of Xinjiang. Equally important, it situates ‘the Uyghur experience’ within the general body of literature on ethnic identity, nationalism and nation-building. The little used local sources are sensitively analysed to produce a highly nuanced argument and fresh insight is provided into the multiplicity and complexity of the views that characterised the discourse on the development of a Uyghur national identity. The comments that follow are intended for discussion, rather than as criticism. I shall deal with the four main chapters one by one.

I Pre-Modern Basis of National Identity (late 19th century)

This is the shortest of the chapters but I would imagine that it may have been the most difficult to write. It begins with a brief history of the region of modern-day Xinjiang in the pre-modern era. The point that seems to be being made here, but is not explicitly stated, is that there was very little evidence that on the eve of the Qing conquest the oasis dwellers of Altishahr felt any greater sense of community with the sedentary Turks of, for example, Ili or Hami than they did with those of Osh or Andijan etc. Little is said about the first one-hundred years of Qing rule but I would suggest that this might well have been the period in which the Turkic Muslims came to have a sense, albeit a vague one, of ‘their’ territory, a territory that extended north and south of Tianshan. (A number of reasons for this might be posited e.g. Qing movement of begs, criminals, agricultural workers etc). As the candidate’s detailed analysis of Molla Musa Sayrami’s work clearly suggests, by the late 19th century notions of a ‘Musulman’ community that was in and of the region clearly existed, moreover while defined primarily by religious definition other factors also came into play. Thus this clearly defined category was constructed in opposition to Mongols, Manchus and Han etc, but also in opposition to Central Asian Turkic Muslims from outside the region, as represented by the Kokandis, for example, who shared many of the ‘Musulmans’ religious and cultural characteristics. Indeed, it might be argued that what the candidate refers to as the ‘khoja-Ya’qub Beg insurgency’ played an essential role, enveloping those north and south of Tianshan in the type of shared traumatic experience that is so frequently an important ingredient in the

emergence of a 'national' consciousness. As the candidate himself remarks, and this cannot be too strongly emphasised, Sayrami was writing at the end of the 19th century and reflecting on past events, albeit events in which he had to a certain extent participated. His perspective was therefore formed in retrospect, it was not necessarily held by him before or during those experiences but had been shaped by them; and importantly his ideas represented a strand of thinking still prevalent in the early 20th century.

II Transfer of National Ideas and National Agitation (1880s to 1920s)

This chapter provides an excellent account of the diversity of the socio-political ideas and influences that reached Xinjiang during this period and concludes that as reflected in the poetry of Abdukhalik and Memtili Tewpiq, by the 1920s many intellectuals had already begun to conceive of their community as a nation. The candidate emphasises the role of schools and journals both as facilitators for the spread of ideas about nationhood and as expressions of the debate on modernity. I wonder, however, if there were other manifestations of modernity (or obstacles to it). Is there, for example, anything that could be said here about the emergence or lack of a standardized 'national' language?

The candidate cautiously and probably correctly suggests that '(T)hroughout the 1920s Turkic elites saw the goals of mobilization and national movement primarily in cultural arenas and did not generally *articulate* (my italics) political objectives' (p.52), but this should not detract from the political nature of the reforms they supported. While the early Jadids may have been pro-China because they mistakenly viewed China as a progressive state, in the traditional Islamic context Jadidism was, of course, highly political by its very nature. David Brophy's recent work has shown that the developments in Russia after 1917 led to the rapid politicization of its Taranchi and Kashgari communities. Xinjiang at this time was not as isolated from the rest of Central Asia as is sometimes suggested (despite the temporary border closure), with large numbers of traders, seasonal workers as well as intelligentsia going back and forth. Thus as the Turkic people of Soviet Central Asia struggled to define their own national identities, the fate of the future Uyghurs of Xinjiang was very much part of the same political discourse. Hardly surprisingly therefore, not only were these new ideas concerning national identity carried across the border to Xinjiang but as the candidate suggests so were 'new social structures and forms of organization' (p.70), essential for the spreading of socialist political ideas, even if they were little understood at this stage. Following the Chinese perhaps, Western scholars have to date tended to suggest that this was the work of a small number of isolated Soviet agents, but what we are really talking about is Uyghur Communists who organized and radicalised large numbers of their kinsmen. The candidate has not erred in his account of any of this, but I wonder if there is not a case for highlighting the politicization of at least some of the participants, even in this early period. Yet ironically, for all this political ferment among the Muslim reformists, in the 1920s, there was still much confusion about Uyghur identity, and as the candidate illustrates in his discussion of Abdusémet (p.72) there was still little consensus or clarity surrounding the nature of Uyghur identity.

III Politicization of the Nationalist Movement

This chapter illustrates how the ideas discussed in the previous chapter translated into political action. In keeping with the main thrust of the thesis, the emphasis here is not on the action itself but the ‘nationalist’ discourse that surrounded it. Drawing on the unpublished memoir of Emin Wahidi and the short-lived journal *Life of East Turkestan* (*Sherqiy Türkistan Hayati*) together with other contemporary local sources, the candidate has carefully charted the impact that the establishment of the ETIR and the impact that the events of the early 1933-4 had on perceptions of national identity and nationalism. Despite the ETIR’s Islamic overtones which have been emphasised by previous commentators, the candidate convincingly argues that the overriding dynamic behind the republic was that of modernization.

In a well nuanced analysis of Sheng Shicai’s policies, the candidate goes on to suggest that in the early years of his rule Sheng co-opted many of the ETIR activists and in terms of modernization and progress, appeared to be building on the ideas of the earlier Jadids. I wonder if this might not be explained as more of a convergence of thinking as a result of Soviet influence, but perhaps we have to await availability of further sources to answer that question. As Sheng’s policies became increasingly repressive they clearly fuelled nationalist and secessionist sentiments, but the paradox that the candidate illustrates so effectively here, through his examination of the journal *New Life* etc, is that it was Sheng’s very policies that had conferred legitimacy on the Uyghurs as a ‘nation’ and equipped them with a political vocabulary and the rhetoric of national identity. This is critical to our understanding of how by the mid-1930 ‘national [Uyghur] identity replaced religion as the cornerstone of communal *weltanschauung* and principal value of life’ (p.138). Equally important, however (and there may be a case for stressing this even more strongly), by employing the rhetoric of unity and identifying the Uyghurs as one of the fourteen official nationalities of Xinjiang (albeit as distinct from the Taranchis), Sheng emphasised the idea of Xinjiang as a homeland waiting to be claimed by one or more of the ‘local nationalities’ – the intellectual legacy of which still endures today.

IV Significance of National Boundary in Flux.

As I read this thesis I wondered whether as a study of the emergence of nationalism the story could not, or should not, have stopped with the end of Sheng’s rule, but the candidate’s excellent treatment of the writings of the so-called Three Gentlemen (and Polat Qadiri Turfani) who played such an important role in this period, persuaded me otherwise. Nevertheless, we still have only a sketchy understanding of how and why events unfolded as they did in this period which makes it particularly difficult to trace the development of nationalist ideas from the late 30s-40s. In particular, explaining the thinking and inspiration for the policies adopted in the Three Districts remains a challenge. The candidate frames this section around the notion of a national boundary which is an interesting and valid perspective. I wonder, however, whether we may not be giving local leaders (those involved in the Three Districts as well as those in Nanjing) less credit than they deserve in terms of their understanding of the regions geopolitical

position and the importance and difficulty of carving out and controlling a ‘national’ space that bordered two if not three great empires.

Conclusion

There is still much that we do not understand about the development of ideas of nation and nationalism among Uyghur intellectuals in the period under scrutiny. However, there is no doubt in my mind that this thesis takes the scholarly debate forward and that this work, if published, will hold a significant place in the literature. I would be happy to provide the candidate with a list of typographical errors and small factual queries, but one general point he may wish to consider in revising his manuscript is whether the chapter headings might not be rethought in order to reflect a less rigid chronological periodization and to take into account the inevitably fluid and entangled nature of the history of ideas.

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