PURGING XINJIANG’S PAST

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In 2021, the Chinese Party-State’s multidimensional assault on Uyghur society continued. While much international commentary has centred on high-tech innovations in policing and surveillance in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), for the political and intellectual elite in Xinjiang, the campaign has resembled more of a classical Stalinist purge, targeting those — often party members — deemed insufficiently sincere in their ideological commitment. As two professors at Xinjiang Normal University noted recently, with approval: ‘Xinjiang has seen a large number of “two-faced people” and “two-faced factions” punished in the fields of public security, prosecution, law, education and publishing, and propaganda and culture, so as to cleanse the political, religious, and ideological atmosphere.’ With the apparent scaling back of the mass re-education program, the harsh sentences still being meted out to those perceived as disloyal warrant attention.

One of the first such ‘two-faced factions’ to be exposed was in the education sphere, with an investigation targeting officials and scholars who were responsible for Uyghur-language school textbooks that were deemed to carry noxious pan-Islamist and pan-Turkist messaging. Two editors were eventually given suspended death sentences, while others were given sentences ranging from fifteen years to life in prison.

Details on this case were scant until the China Global Television Network (CGTN) included it in the fourth of a series of propaganda films released in 2021. The films were designed to rebut international criticism and substantiate Party-State claims of a looming terrorist menace in Xinjiang. From prison, the editors were shown confessing their sins and acknowledging the ‘harm’ the textbooks had done to Xinjiang’s children. Some of the offending publications were displayed, set alongside more recent ‘healthy’ textbooks that have replaced specifically Uyghur content with material designed to inculcate a pan-Chinese patriotism.

Intense censorship of political and religious themes has existed in Xinjiang for a long time. What, then, were the dangerous narratives these books had been propagating? What sort of subversive code had their
editors been able to insert into them? CGTN gave us only a snapshot of the evidence, but we can assume they were doing their best to build a strong case, with the support of the security agencies.

It is even more telling, then, that the evidence presented was thin and unconvincing. In one shot, for example, a publishing house employee points to a page in a textbook displaying a photograph of Ehmetjan Qasimi (d.1949). Ehmetjan was the president of the second East Turkistan Republic (ETR), or the Three Districts Revolution 三区革命 as it is known inside China, which existed in western Xinjiang from 1944 to 1949. Given Mao Zedong 毛泽东 praised this movement as ‘part of the democratic revolution of the entire Chinese people’, Ehmetjan has enjoyed relative protection as a historical figure. The same portrait of him adorns the cover of his late wife’s memoirs, published in Chinese in 2011. The only difference is that for that book, the image was cropped above his chest. The crime of the textbook editors, evidently, was to include the full portrait, showing Qasimi’s ETR medallion with its star and crescent moon — symbols now exclusively associated with Uyghur separatism.

A second segment of the documentary refers to a legend about seven girls driven off a cliff by assailants whom a publishing house employee identifies as ‘Han Chinese’. The implication here is that the editors were deliberately stirring up ethnic tensions. But in fact, the shot clearly shows that the textbook describes the aggressors not as Chinese but as Manchus — that is, soldiers of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912 CE). Whether the documentary’s misinterpretation was deliberate or an error is hard to say. But given the text, the only possible ‘crime’ here was the choice to include
in this textbook a story of resistance to Manchu rule — a common and officially sanctioned trope in the wider world of PRC letters.

The fate of these Uyghur intellectuals thus provides a window on to the precarious position of Uyghur historical narratives in contemporary Xinjiang. While the topic of Uyghur resistance to communist rule after 1949 is obviously a taboo one, Uyghurs have, until recently, enjoyed certain limited space in which to cautiously cultivate national pride in historical acts of resistance to the predecessors of the Communist Party of China (CPC): the Qing and the Kuomintang. The case of the textbooks shows us that this space is now rapidly disappearing.

**History Wars in Xinjiang**

The historiography of Xinjiang inside China has come a long way since the founding of the PRC, when trends in Soviet scholarship were influential. Before 1949, Chinese communists who studied in the Soviet Union were exposed to the work of historians such as Prokopii Il’ich Fesenko, who served as Soviet consul in Chöchäk (Tacheng 塔城, in northern Xinjiang), before lecturing at the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow. His *History of Xinjiang* (1935) was the first effort to write a history of the region from a Marxist point of view, placing events in the context of global political and economic trends, and interpreting political conflicts as expressions of class struggle. Peasant rebellions play an important role in his narrative: ‘The period from 1765 to 1862,’ he wrote, ‘was a period of continual peasant uprisings in the southern part of Xinjiang and Eastern Turkistan, which the Chinese mandarins suppressed by the cruelest methods.’

As Moscow stepped up its intervention in Xinjiang in the 1930s and 1940s, rendering the province an effective ‘satellite’ of the Soviet Union, these episodes of rural militancy were reinterpreted as evidence of a long-standing *national* struggle of the Uyghur people. When the Soviet Union backed the formation of the second East Turkistan Republic in
the mid-1940s, Uyghur intellectuals on Soviet soil were given a free hand to author books and articles in Soviet Uyghur periodicals such as *Truth of the East* presenting this fledgling state as the culmination of a fight for liberty from Chinese rule — at that point represented by Chiang Kai-shek’s 蒋介石 Kuomintang.

The ETR’s contribution to mid-century Uyghur intellectual life is well known. Less well known is the influence its books and articles had on Chinese authors writing about Xinjiang in the early PRC. Given Mao’s endorsement of the ETR, and the fact its historiography carried the imprimatur of Soviet historical science, ETR works were an obvious resource for Chinese historians in the early 1950s seeking an alternative to the Kuomintang’s historiography of China’s north-west. Pro-ETR publications informed, for example, Turkologist Guo Yingde’s 郭应德 *Outline History of the Uyghurs* (1952). Its second chapter, on the ‘The national liberation movement of the Uyghurs since the Qing’, begins: ‘Under the bloody rule and feudal oppression of the Manchu-Qing regime and the reactionary Kuomintang, the Uyghur people waged a struggle for more than a century for their freedom, happiness and liberation.’ Guo celebrated episodes of independence such as the decade-long rule of Yaqub Beg, whose emirate eventually fell in 1876 to Qing general Zuo Zongtang’s 左宗棠 reconquest of Xinjiang.³

Little did Guo know, however, that just as his book was being published, a conservative turn was working its way through the postwar Soviet academy, bringing with it a critique of what were now deemed ‘nationalist deviations’. Naturally, this campaign extended to Soviet writing on Xinjiang. Intellectual gatekeepers denounced a 1951 book on Uyghur migration into the Russian Empire as glorifying Yaqub Beg’s ‘feudal khanate’, and likewise maligned earlier Muslim uprisings against the Qing as imperialist plots. In 1954, a volume of translations of these writings was published in Beijing, and Guo and like-minded colleagues had to retract their positive appraisal of anti-Qing resistance in Xinjiang.⁴ In 1958, Burhan Shahidi 包尔汉, chairman of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous
Region Government, weighed in with his own characterisation of Yaqub Beg as a reactionary tool of British and Turkish imperialism, and the debate was effectively settled.\(^5\)

In the early 1960s, the Sino-Soviet split ended PRC reliance on the Soviet line in historiography, among other things, but did little to change such verdicts. To accompany its critique of Soviet ‘revisionism’, the CPC decided it now had to produce its own official narrative on Xinjiang, and to this end commissioned a group of scholars to write a *Concise History of Xinjiang*. A draft of the first volume, covering ancient history, circulated internally from 1965 onwards, but as with many intellectual ventures of this period, the Cultural Revolution, beginning in 1966, delayed its completion. It was not until 1980 that the complete three-volume *Concise History* was published.

The *Concise History* offers something of a compromise between statist PRC narratives and Uyghur national perspectives. It begins with the familiar mantra that Xinjiang has been an inseparable part of China from ancient times but avoids trying to substantiate this questionable claim. Its structure reflects Marxist historical sociology, taking the story from slave society, to feudalism, to the abortive bourgeois revolution that brought down the Qing dynasty. Projecting the Qing-period political construct of ‘Xinjiang’ into the past, and positing a timeless national unity, it describes Tang empire-building as the ‘Tang *unification* [统一] with Xinjiang’ (my emphasis). Yet it also recognises that in this period ‘the Uyghurs became the main nationality [民族] of Xinjiang’. In the second volume, on modern history, the involvement of the peasantry gives nineteenth-century anti-Qing uprisings a progressive dimension, but Zuo Zongtang’s reconquest of Xinjiang for the Qing is also described as a ‘righteous’ deed.

This historiographic compromise has been a source of tension inside and outside the academy since the 1980s, and in 2005, a new *Comprehensive History of Xinjiang* was commissioned to revise Xinjiang’s past in line with contemporary political priorities. By 2016, there were reports that the *Comprehensive History* was close to completion, but it has still not been
published, possibly reflecting ongoing turbulence in the field. What we do have is a series of reports on conferences dedicated to its various volumes, which give us a sense of its revisionist mission.

Unsurprisingly, given the growing critique in China of the system of national minority autonomous regions, one theme that emerges in these reports is a negative evaluation of past forms of local autonomy in Xinjiang. At a conference that discussed the Qianlong Emperor’s eighteenth-century enfeoffment of local Muslims as *jasaq* (princes), for example, ‘participants believed that the *jasaq* system was not beneficial for the progress of local society’. In a similar vein, the Republican history conference affirmed that ‘replacing the *jasaq* system with a [Chinese-style] county administration conformed to the people’s wishes and the trend of historical development’. Tellingly, in the conference on contemporary history, the *Comprehensive History*’s editor-in-chief, Wu Dunfu 吴敦夫, highlighted the need to account for ‘certain problems in the party’s nationalities policy at the end of the 1970s and the start of the 1980s’ — a period when Beijing is felt to have shown relative respect for the provisions of national autonomy in regions such as Xinjiang and Tibet. These developments help to contextualise the case of the ‘poisonous teaching materials’.

### The Seven Maidens

The legend of the Seven Maidens is today linked to a concrete historical event: an anti-Qing uprising in the Tarim Basin town of Uchturfan 乌什 in 1765 — the first to occur after the Qing invasion of the region. The story has also come to be associated with a particular shrine in the vicinity of Uchturfan, known as the ‘Tomb of the Seven Maidens’.

As with many of Xinjiang’s shrines, the story surrounding this one has evolved with time. There are in fact various shrines dedicated to ‘the seven maidens’ in Xinjiang, and they occur elsewhere in the Islamic world, too: shrines to ‘Seven Girls’ exist in Manisa in Anatolia, in Tehran
and across Egypt. The precise origin of this popular trope is unknown, but it may lie in the pre-Islamic folklore of the Middle East. In the late Qing, the shaykh of the Uchturfan shrine told visitors that the seven girls were seven daughters of the Prophet Sulayman (Solomon). Scholars see the identification of such locations in the Tarim Basin with figures from the prophetic tradition as part of the Islamisation of the region, with Islamic stories and legends relocated to Xinjiang.

If the shrine originally came into existence as part of the Islamisation of the Tarim Basin, its identification with events of the eighteenth century is the product of a second, more recent rereading of Xinjiang’s landscape. Throughout the twentieth century, guided by a desire to consolidate a new national narrative, Uyghur scholars hypothesised links between shrines of obscure origin and figures from an emerging canon of Uyghur literature and history. A shrine outside the town of Opal, identified in the 1980s as that of eleventh-century scholar Mahmud Kashgari, is one such celebrated rediscovery.

There is some evidence that, by the 1940s, a cemetery on the outskirts of Uchturfan was associated with the martyrs of the 1765 anti-Qing uprising, but it was not until the late 1970s that local scholars publicised a putative link between the Tomb of the Seven Maidens and this historical event. Then, in the early 1980s, Uyghur writer Ibrahim Qurban penned a long verse retelling of the story of this uprising, which consolidated the new narrative of the Seven Maidens as anti-Qing heroines and disseminated it to a wider Uyghur reading public.

Ibrahim’s book played an important role in confirming the story of the Seven Maidens as part of an emerging canon of Uyghur historical narratives that were eventually to be incorporated into school textbooks in the early 2000s. The Chinese state today, in criminalising the dissemination of such textbooks and the stories they contain, is thus undoing the work of Uyghur intellectuals in the 1980s and 1990s to flesh out a distinctly Uyghur historical narrative within the already tight strictures of PRC orthodoxy.
The imprisoned editors in the CGTN documentary have likewise fallen foul of shifting historical winds on the East Turkistan Republic. Alongside the portrait of Ehmetjan Qasimi, president of the ETR, the offending textbooks also included excerpts from popular novels describing the founding of the ETR: Abdurakhman Qahar’s *Waves on the Ili River (Ili dolqunliri)* and Zordun Sabir’s *Motherland (Ana yurt)*. Published with official approval by state publishing houses, such books sustained memories of Uyghur political militancy that are now taboo.

The CPC has not yet explicitly contradicted Chairman Mao’s positive evaluation of the East Turkistan Republic, but pressure to do so has been building. Amid the deteriorating political situation in Xinjiang, Han nationalists have called online for the Party to ‘disavow’ the ETR as a separatist venture. Scholarly revaluations have not been so drastic, but academic discussion now tends to highlight Soviet support for the ETR,
and incidents of anti-Chinese violence, as a way of discrediting it. At a *Comprehensive History* conference in 2013, participants pointed out:

> [N]ewly released archives show that the Soviet Union instigated the Three Districts Revolution for its own interests and always remained in control of its course. In the early days, they stirred up religious fanaticism and ethnic opposition, even bloody riots, and advocated independence [from China].¹¹

In the end, most participants ‘considered it undesirable to fully endorse or disavow the Three Districts Revolution’ and ‘unanimously agreed that Chairman Mao Zedong’s conclusion should be maintained in evaluating it’.

The debate has continued since. In 2018, Uyghur scholar Mehmut Abduweli published an article in the journal *Western Regions Studies* defending the official line — that the ETR was a progressive, popular movement that had willingly allied itself with the CPC against the warlord Sheng Shicai 盛世才, the reactionary Kuomintang, and imperialist aggression.¹² In response, in 2019, a group of Peking University anthropologists published an article disputing these claims point by point, claiming the ETR was neither anti-warlord, anti-Kuomintang nor anti-imperialist, but rather the fruit of a conspiracy between the Soviet Union and Uyghur nationalists to bring Xinjiang into Moscow’s sphere of influence.¹³ Furthermore, they held that the ETR did not implement progressive social policies and therefore its status as a ‘democratic revolution’ was in question. Mao, they pointed out, had been ignorant of the degree of Soviet involvement as well as the local political landscape, and his endorsement of the ETR was best seen as a strategic move to facilitate its integration into the PRC.

The authors here tack as close as one can to opposing Mao’s position while claiming still to uphold it. What must be directly rejected, they insist, is any view of the Three Districts Revolution as an ‘autonomous national
liberation movement’. Without doing so, ‘it will be impossible to make substantial progress in anti-separatist theory and policy’.

Such trends in the PRC academy naturally leave the figure of ETR president Ehmetjan Qasimi in a vulnerable position. Ehmetjan, these authors point out, had many Russians on his staff and was not personally involved in liaison with the CPC. ‘There are many queries about the identity and behaviour of Ehmetjan,’ they conclude, ‘which need to be further investigated.’

Publicly, commemoration of Ehmetjan in Xinjiang is becoming a thing of the past. In 2014, during an event marking the sixty-fifth anniversary of Ehmetjan’s death in a plane crash while en route to Beijing, provincial party secretary Zhang Chunxian 张春贤 praised him as a martyr and a ‘glorious fighter in the liberation cause of the people of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang’.¹⁴ In 2019, by contrast, there was no similar public event to mark the seventieth anniversary of Ehmetjan’s death. Between these two anniversaries, of course, came the purge and coercive ‘re-education’ of much of the Uyghur intellectual elite, along with the imprisonment of the editors of the ‘poisonous teaching materials’. Their case strongly indicates the current direction of official views on Ehmetjan and the ETR.

**Conclusion**

In the Soviet Union, the radical edge of much early post-revolutionary history writing was soon blunted by the Stalinist orthodoxy that the expansion of the Russian Empire was a good thing for the peoples it conquered. Likewise, in China, the view that the boundaries of the PRC represent a natural, historically justified and desirable state of national unity has long constrained alternative views. What we see today, though, is the policing of this standpoint with unprecedented vigilance. Embodying this turn, the forthcoming *Comprehensive History of Xinjiang* will aim to substantiate once and for all the claim that Xinjiang has been part of
China since time immemorial, by seeking to fit the region’s highly complex history into a traditional Chinese dynastic chronology.

Precedents for such a historical narrative exist in Republican-era scholarship. In response to the rise of Soviet influence in Xinjiang in the 1930s, Zeng Wenwu wrote a *History of China’s Administration of the Western Regions*, a narrative of Chinese rule in Xinjiang stretching back to the Han dynasty (202 BCE – 220 CE). This work is in many ways a prototype for the *Comprehensive History*, though now Uyghur nationalism and radical Islam, not the Soviets, serve as the bogeymen. One of the *Comprehensive History*’s themed volumes promises a ‘true chronicle of the anti-separatist struggle in contemporary Xinjiang’.

Observers of Chinese nationalities policy will be familiar with recent debate surrounding proposals for a ‘second-generation nationalities policy’ 第二代民族政策, which saw strong critiques voiced of even the limited constitutional provisions of national autonomy. As we see, the same critique of national autonomy is having an impact on history writing, too. The shifts in this sphere might be described as the emergence of a ‘second-generation Xinjiang historiography’.

Tragically, such shifts can leave those once in relatively safe positions exposed and vulnerable. In the case of these textbooks, the axe fell on Education Department officials Sattar Sawut and Alimjan Memtimin, directors of Xinjiang Education Publishing House Abdurazaq Sayim and Tahir Nasir and writers and editors Wahitjan Osman and Yalqun Rozi. Their story, though, is not unique; we can assume that similar dynamics have been at work in the disappearance and/or imprisonment of many other Uyghur intellectuals — victims of what is effectively the cultural decapitation of Uyghur society. Outside China, Uyghur PEN is dedicated to keeping track of writers and academics who have been swept up in the ongoing purge, while family members of individuals are campaigning for their release. Not only their release, but also their political rehabilitation will be necessary before any semblance of normalcy returns to the Xinjiang academy.