“Green-Colored Uyghur Poet”: Religion, Nostalgia, and Identity in Contemporary Uyghur Poetry

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Abstract
There is wide consensus that Islam is an important rallying point for the Uyghurs and an essential component of their national identity. Yet despite its centrality in Uyghur culture, there is only marginal reference to religion in modern Uyghur poetry. In this article, I argue that poets such as Adil Tuniyaz, Tahir Hamut Izgil, and others, most of whom are secular and urban, choose to relate to religion through mysticism and nostalgia in reaction to the Chinese state’s characterization of Islam as identified with violent fundamentalism and terrorism. By avoiding the use of separatist symbols, these poets contribute to a broad national ethos that strengthens contemporary Uyghur identity.

Keywords
Uyghur, Xinjiang, poetry, Islam, China

Islam is an integral part of the ethnic identity of most Uyghurs, and there is no doubt as to its importance as a unifying and defining factor (Becquelin, 2000: 89; Dautcher, 2009: 49; Fuller and Lipman, 2004: 340–41; Gladney,
Nevertheless, religion is seldom the central theme of modern Uyghur poetry. In most cases, reference to Islam is only indirect, indicating that while it is a major element of Uyghur society, it is not the focus of the poetry. Although frequent mention is made of Allah, Friday prayers, Islamic commandments, and other features of the religion, they appear only as part of the background of the poem and not as its main subject.

It might be argued that the essential reason for this trend is the political sensitivity of the issue. In view of the government measures aimed at stemming Uyghur nationalism by suppressing religion (De Jong, 2018: 21), writers may fear overt avowal of Islam. Although this claim would appear to be a main reason, it falls short in view of the existence of an abundance of contemporary Uyghur poetry and literature dealing with other issues that are no less politically sensitive, such as Uyghur history. In this article I contend instead that religion is marginalized in modern Uyghur poetry because it can be regarded, in Thomas Hylland Eriksen’s words, as a “taken-for-granted structure of relevance,” meaning that individuals objectify their daily life practices as “a culture” or “a tradition” and in this way they become “a people” with a shared history (2002: 85). And so, regardless of changes and limitations, Islam is a cultural norm that cannot be contested although it does not play a major role in the lives of most published poets, who belong to the intellectual elite. This attitude was typical until the late 1990s for a large part of the urban Uyghur population: while they are believers in moderate Islam, they were not well-versed in the Quran and its injunctions (Kaltman, 2007: 44; Waite, 2007: 173).

The poems discussed below were written by famous poets, such as Adil Tuniyaz (b. 1970), Tahir Hamut Izgil (b. 1969), and Ghojimuhemmed Muhemmed (1971–2018), whose work has been published in nearly all major Uyghur literary journals. Considered the first generation of modernist poets, they display a diverse range of themes and styles (Freeman, 2016). While their work may not reflect the attitude toward religion among the Uyghur population at large, it both represents and influences the current Uyghur scholarly discourse. The selected poems depict religion in various ways. However, most refer to it as a cultural/national feature that, among others, distinguishes the community from the Han in China as well as from the rest of the Muslim world.

The evolution of Muslim practices and local customs in Xinjiang has been shaped by, among others, foreign influences in the region deriving from its location on the Silk Road. These influences include belief in spirits and talismans, pilgrimages to the tombs of holy men, and faith in shamans who offer blessings or healing (Bellér-Hann, 2001: 10; Harris, 2009: 166; Schrode, 2008: 404–5). Ildikó Bellér-Hann notes that as far back as a hundred years
ago it was already impossible to separate Muslim from non-Muslim practices in the area (2001: 10).

Consequently, Muslims outside China, particularly in the Middle East, as well as many scholars, define Uyghur Islam as “traditional,” “unofficial,” or even “secular” (Schrode, 2008: 401). These labels tend to create an artificial distinction between “pure” and “traditional” Islam, as they assume the possibility of separating the religion from the social, cultural, and historical frameworks of the faithful and reducing it to no more than a system of laws and commandments specified in the Quran (Rasanayagam, 2006: 220; Viktor-Mach, 2011: 396–97). However, there are numerous examples in Central Asia of other “cultural Muslims,” that is, people who identify themselves as Muslim but are unfamiliar with its laws and texts. This is largely a product of the Soviet regime, which controlled the region until its collapse in the 1990s. Islam was an essential part of Central Asian societies, although, in many places, it was perceived by the Soviets (and before that by the Russian Empire) as “unorthodox” (Keller, 2001: 69–70). As the Soviets regarded Islam as a cultural/ethical tradition rather than a religion, they ultimately came to see it primarily as a feature of ethnic identity and a factor distinguishing between different populations (Viktor-Mach, 2011: 402).

In the case of the Uyghurs, therefore, the existence of religious practices that are not grounded in the Quran testifies to the centrality of local identity and not to a deficiency of religious devotion. Paula Schrode notes the common claim among Uyghur intellectuals that “Uyghurs are free Muslims” (Uyghurlar ärkin Musulman). In this view, fundamentalist Islam (that which defines itself as “pure”) constitutes a threat to Uyghur culture and runs counter to Uyghurs’ heritage (2008: 414). Since these intellectuals consider Uyghur nationalism the foremost feature of their identity, ahead of Islam (Fuller and Lipman, 2004: 340; Smith Finley, 2007: 631), the religious symbols in their poems are primarily expressions of national identity and are not meant to reflect the various groups in their society or the whole range of Uyghur Islam.

Despite the differences, there is a shared sense of nostalgia in respect to local religious traditions. Expressed in poetry as a longing for the mythical past of Xinjiang, this nostalgia reflects the difference in attitudes toward the past and future. Poems by Tuniyaz and Izgil, for example, describe Kashgar as a bastion of Uyghur culture and religion. Inasmuch as religion symbolizes the Uyghurs’ rich historical legacy, the past can become a source of hope and comfort among Uyghurs who look toward an uncertain future with trepidation. In the face of Chinese modernization, urbanization, and constant migration to Xinjiang, there is a growing sense of inequality and discrimination among the Uyghurs (Howell and Fan, 2011: 119–20; Roberts, 2016: 24;
The challenges and dilemmas of today are reflected in poems that deal with faith, fears, and doubts, in contrast to the nostalgic notion of the past.

Nonetheless, the internal religious challenges facing Uyghur society are minor compared to state’s religious oppression. The massive “reeducation campaign,” launched in 2017, has led to the internment of an estimated 1.5 million Uyghurs and other Muslims in Xinjiang (Smith Finley, 2019; Zenz, 2019). Among the detainees are many Uyghur scholars, including the poet Adil Tuniyaz, who was imprisoned in December 2017. This draconian anti-Islamic campaign is the latest in a series of acts of religious repression in this region. At the start of the reform period (1978—), the Chinese government began instituting a more liberal policy toward Islam as part of the carrot-and-stick approach it adopted for the various religions in China. By the late 1990s, 40,000 pilgrims had been issued permits for the haj to Mecca, and there were 23,000 mosques in Xinjiang run by 29,000 religious officials (Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2000: 257). The government hoped the new policy would also promote stronger ties between China and the Muslim countries in Central Asia and the Middle East (Gladney, 2003: 463).

Investors from Muslim countries did indeed arrive in China, along with donations for the construction of religious institutions and schools in Xinjiang, which aroused concern on the part of the government (Gladney, 2003: 463; Smith Finley, 2013: 246). The attempt to import new varieties of Islam during the 1990s was not welcomed by Uyghur Muslims either. In fact, conservatives in Xinjiang had prevented the introduction of new sects from Turkey as early as the turn of the twentieth century (Fuller and Lipman, 2004: 328–29), reflecting the stability of moderate Islam in Xinjiang (Smith Finley, 2007: 632).

From the Chinese government’s point of view, religious loyalty rivals patriotism, which is one of the reasons for the restrictions and supervision to which religious leaders are subject (Hess, 2010: 408). The Uyghurs regard these restrictions as an attempt by the government to annihilate their culture and identity (Baranovitch, 2007b: 491). Religious persecution increased in the mid-1990s in response to the ethnic riots in 1990 in the district capital of Baren (Castets, 2015: 236), northwest of Kashgar. The events of 9/11 in the United States led to even harsher measures, supposedly as part of the war on extremist Islamic terror (Dillon, 2004: 84–85; Human Rights Watch, 2005: 14).

Among the new regulations imposed by the government was the requirement to register every religious institution whatever its purpose, whether social welfare or religious studies. Since the government does not issue
permits for organizations that are not under its control, independent bodies often choose not to submit a request for recognition in order to avoid having it denied and consequently being branded problematic. As a result, many religious entities, including charities, are, in effect, illegal (Becquelin, 2004: 43; Harris, 2014: 294).

The more religious persecution in Xinjiang has intensified, the more Islam has become a major component of national identity. By imposing an array of restrictions to reduce the power of existing or potential national opposition groups, the government actually has caused Islam to be identified with the Uyghurs’ political struggle (Smith Finley, 2013: 260). Consequently, literature, music, dress, food, and other ethnic characteristics have taken on political significance, as it is impossible to detach them from the national context.

In light of global censure of the acts of terror by Islamic extremists around the world, China took advantage of the political climate to heighten its assault on Uyghur nationalism, viewing it as a form of “terrorism.” In 2002, it launched a massive campaign against separast sentiment in the community, including an attack on literature it believed contained nationalist messages. Such literature was viewed as “terroristic,” and brutal actions were taken against writers and poets. In 2002, for instance, at a concert in Urumqi attended by senior officials, the poet Tursunjan Emet read a poem protesting the repression in Xinjiang. The poem was labeled “ideological terror” with an “anti-government message” and a “separatist crime.” The poet went into hiding, was caught and arrested, and apparently was later released at some unknown time (Becquelin, 2004: 43; Bovingdon, 2010: 80–82; Clarke, 2010: 566–68; Human Rights Watch, 2005: 19–21).3 The current situation in Xinjiang, with many Uyghur poets imprisoned and others, such as Tahir Hamut Izgil, in exile, has brought local poetry to a halt.

This long repression has been reflected in the work of contemporary Uyghur poets, where religious indicators express national pride and defiance of the Chinese state, similar to historical references. Indeed, history is a favorite subject of Uyghur authors, as it offers, among other things, an opportunity to relive in their works a former era when the community enjoyed independence, and to remind the younger generation that the Uyghurs were once a free people (Bovingdon, 2004a; Thum, 2014). In a time of political persecution, reflecting on history is spurred by a sense of demoralization and internalization of the fact that the Uyghurs have lost not only their country but their past as well (Baranovitch, 2007a: 67). In contrast to religion, history has pride of place in contemporary Uyghur poetry and prose, as it does in popular music and other forms of art.
Modern Uyghur Poetry

An extensive body of poetry gives expression to the unique voice of the Uyghurs in China. Contemporary poets discuss issues that shape their ethnic-national identity and are related to the dilemmas confronting their society in an age of reform. In particular, they address the impact on the community’s traditions, lifestyles, and identity of the changes instituted in Xinjiang in the 1980s in the wake of modernization and the government’s economic and political agenda for the region.

Book shops and stalls in the bazaars of Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, offer a large number of poetry collections for sale, testifying to the vitality of modern Uyghur poetry. The genre began to revive rapidly at the start of the reform period, when the government began a campaign to undo the destruction of the Cultural Revolution. To a large extent, the 1980s represented one of the “Golden Ages” not only of Chinese culture but also of Uyghur poetry and prose. Beginning in 1981, no less than sixteen literary journals were founded in Xinjiang, along with at least five new publishing houses specializing in Uyghur literature, which brought out numerous books of poetry, short stories, folk tales, and prose (Zelcer-Lavid, 2018: 565). Many older poets and authors who had been arrested during the Cultural Revolution were released and returned from the villages to which they had been confined, and a new generation of young poets began producing works very different from those written in the Mao era (Friederich, 1997). Most of the poetry, like the prose, was initially realistic in style. However, it no longer depicted only peasants, but also city folk, intellectuals, businessmen, and the nouveau riche of the reform period. Poetry thus reflected the changes that had taken place in Uyghur society, including urbanization and commercialization, alongside a return to tradition and religion.

This turn can be seen in the revival of interest in historic poets and intellectuals, who became symbols of Uyghur nationalism. The poet Abduxaliq Uyghur (1910–1933) is a prominent example, with his poem “Wake Up” (Oyghan) becoming a hymn to Uyghur nationalism in the late 1980s (Kashgarli, 1993: 579; Rudelson, 1997: 145–48; Sabir, 1986: 115). Other writers, such as Mahmud Kashghari (eleventh century), Yusuf Khass Hajib (eleventh century), and the poet Edip Ahmet Yükleki (twelfth century), became foci of literary debate during the 1980s as representatives of early Uyghur culture (Schluessel, 2014: 328).

Uyghur literature and poetry seem to have developed as a response to the Islamization of the dominant Turkic literature. Despite the importance of local scholars such as Mahmud Kashghari, from the twelfth to the nineteenth centuries Turkic literature remained focused on Islam and promoted Sufism
In fact, until 1860, Uyghur literature consisted mainly of legends (translated from Persian), biographical and historical chronicles (tazkirah), and interpretations of the Quran transmitted orally by storytellers at local bazaars, since books were rare, expensive, and inaccessible to the illiterate majority (Bellér-Hann, 2000: 27–28; Jarring, 1980: 9; 1986: 200; Thum, 2014: 41–42).

Modern Uyghur poetry emerged at the start of the twentieth century along with Uyghur nationalism. At that time, many Uyghur poets began to express nationalistic ideas and depict the current situation in the Xinjiang area. Their poetry, mostly secular and in free verse, promoted new ideas, such as social reforms and freedom (Kashgarli, 1993: 579–80). From the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 until the beginning of the reform era, writers and poets were forced to adopt the socialist-realist style imposed on all literary and artistic work produced under the Mao regime (Friederich, 1997, 2007).

The liberalization of the 1980s sparked entirely new literary trends. Uyghur poets came under the influence of styles that were emerging in Chinese poetry. Inspired by “misty” or “obscure” poetry (gungga sheirlar), and by translations of Western avant-garde literature, some began writing abstract and symbolic poems. Although these works, mostly published before the mid-1990s, were initially influential (Friederich, 2007: 103–5; Sulitan, 2003: 83–84), the new style was disparaged by readers who did not identify with it, and by critics who attacked its immaturity, and within a decade its popularity plummeted (Chao, 2005: 73).

The majority of contemporary Uyghur poetry contains no references whatsoever to the Han. Even beyond the fact that it is written in the Uyghur language and intended for a Uyghur audience, it mirrors the clear distinction between the Uyghurs and the Han in Xinjiang. In an effort to preserve their culture and religion, the Uyghurs deliberately keep themselves apart from the Han (Smith Finley, 2013: 12). They refrain from intermarriage (Qiang and Xin, 2003: 96; Smith Finley, 2014: 267) and from consuming food forbidden to Muslims (Cesaro, 2000), and many prefer to give their children a Uyghur education 民考民, regardless of the government’s shifting policies on education (Hu, 2003: 135–37; Grose, 2014: 233). This ethnic-based separation—an outgrowth of mutual suspicion, prejudice, and hostility—can be seen in almost every aspect of life (Kaltman, 2007). In the same spirit, the omission of the Han from Uyghur poetry creates a cultural space intended for Uyghurs alone. This exclusion is part of a heated internal critical discourse that serves, inter alia, as a substitute for external criticism of Han-Uyghur relations or of the state, both of which are not often expressed openly because of fear of state reprisal.
Religion and Mystification

As noted above, most Uyghur poets do not write about religion. An exception is Adil Tuniyaz, whose poems depict Islam in a mystical, nearly exotic, fashion that highlights local customs and is thus in line with the label of “traditional Islam.” The poem “Eyes under the Veil” (Chumbeldiki koz), from 2003, is a good example.

Eyes under the Veil
An Indian master tailored a dress
Using black cloth
He made an abaya
To the wood
To the white marble
To the flame
It was given two eyes
By God.
Two eyes in the cloth
Speak in Arabic—
Language of the holy Quran.
Even the deaf can hear
Even the dumb can feel
Above me there are many-eyed skies
Silently I am attracted to myths.

(Tuniyaz, 2003: 3)⁹

Although the subject is the abaya (abayi), a veil worn by Muslim women, the poem does not deal with women. Instead, the veil has an independent, mystic existence: the eyes were given to it by God. In other words, the garment was not created for the woman; the woman was created for the garment. Thus, in Tuniyaz’s poem, this Muslim symbol can be said to undergo mystification. Indeed, in the final line, the poet notes his attraction to myths, explaining his perception of the veil as an exotic object. This attitude seems to indicate his distance from religion: although proud to be a Muslim, he writes as an outside observer captivated by the two eyes peering out from behind the veil. For believers, the veil generates a complex social/gender
issue, but Tuniyaz ignores such questions entirely, thereby detaching the veil from a political context.

The mystification of Islam in “Eyes under the Veil” appears to be deliberate. Mystification is not being used here in the Marxist sense of confusion and befuddlement that needs to be resolved (i.e., demystified) before taking action, but in a more passive sense of obscurity and bewilderment toward the phenomena. Tuniyaz chooses to mystify Islam although he is very familiar with the religion, having lived in Saudi Arabia for several years, a period that features prominently in his poetry. In 1988 he left his hometown of Qarghiliq in southern Xinjiang to study literature at Xinjiang University in Urumqi. After graduating in 1993, he worked for Xinjiang Radio while at the same time publishing his poems in Uyghur literary journals (Friederich, 2007: 91). In the late 1990s, he went to Saudi Arabia to continue his studies, returning to Urumqi a decade later. I was told by several Uyghur intellectuals that Adil Tuniyaz is a highly popular writer whose brilliant poems, alongside those of Tahir Hamut Izgil and Perhat Tursun, represent the best of contemporary Uyghur poetry.

Tuniyaz’s time abroad strengthened his national identity. As he was living in a strict Muslim country, he looked to ethnic features to distinguish himself from the Muslims around him. This may explain the distance from and mystification of Islam in his poem. As a foreigner in Saudi Arabia, he encountered Muslim customs not generally found among the Uyghurs during the 1990s. For example, the dress code in Saudi Arabia is among the most rigid in the Muslim world. Women cover their entire bodies in the abaya, a long dark robe with only their eyes visible under the veil that covers their heads. In Xinjiang, married women typically cover their heads with a scarf, but are forbidden to do so in school or at work in a government office (Human Rights Watch, 2005: 59; Leibold and Grose, 2016: 80).

Before Tuniyaz left for Saudi Arabia, it was common in the religious areas of southern Xinjiang, especially Khotan, for women to wear a veil (niqāb), and those who returned from the haj to Mecca generally covered their whole body in a black robe, but this was a local custom not common throughout Xinjiang (Harris, 2005: 634; Rudelson, 1997: 153). James Leibold and Timothy Grose noted that in the last decade, more and more women in Xinjiang have been wearing veils, both in rural and urban areas (2016: 85). Smith Finley explains this trend as a means of differentiation by creating a boundary between Uyghurs and Han (2013: 278). The increasing veiling has aroused the government’s concern. As it links veiling to religious extremism, the Chinese government is doing all it can to limit the practice (De Jong, 2018: 20). This situation raises doubts as to whether this poem could be published today, since it contradicts government policy by presenting an exotic image of the veil.
In many ways, “Eyes under the Veil” brings to mind Tibetan literature written in Chinese, which is characterized by mystical symbols and draws inspiration from the genre of magic realism, which combines the real and the imaginary. Most of the Tibetan authors who write in this style are unfamiliar with the Tibetan religion itself, knowing only its representations in China (Schiaffini-Vedani, 2002: 148). The Han public, for whom this literature is intended, is well-acquainted with these representations. In contrast, Tuniyaz’s poem is written in Uyghur, and therefore depicting the religion in exotic terms cannot be considered an attempt to appeal to a Han audience. Even if it had been written in Chinese, it is doubtful it would gain the relative popularity of Tibetan literature in Chinese. The Han perception of Islam is similar to that in the West, with Islam associated with terror and violent fundamentalism (Gladney, 2004). Although this differs from the spiritual/mystical perception of Tibetan Buddhism, both religions are regarded by most Han as primitive and rife with superstition (Kaltman, 2007: 42–43).

Tuniyaz portrays the veil in such a way as to contradict the image of Islam in China. By depicting it as a garment that comes from India and not the Middle East, the poet heightens its exotic nature and dislocates it from the context of violent fundamentalism and terror. The poem appears to make no political statement whatsoever. It neither calls on women to cover themselves with the veil, nor protests the religious restrictions in Xinjiang. Instead, it presents the Uyghur reader with a new image of the abaya: a garment with divine qualities unique to Islam. Therefore, the voice that emerges from it speaks the language of the Quran, which even the deaf can hear. By creating this image of an exotic, mystical garment, the poet can promote his interest in Islam without arousing the suspicions of the government.

Another example of the mystification of religion can be found in “I Came to Know” (Men bildim) by Tahir Hamut Izgil, from 2007. The last verses describe a meeting with a dervish—a member of a Sufi Muslim religious order—in a way that is exotic and critical at one and the same time.

**I Came to Know**

In such a morning

A dervish who tied red, yellow, blue, green cloths around his waist

Comes to an Eid celebration

Dim-eyed, dirty-bodied, ugly looking

But, strong-powered, divinely-worded, mysteriously-behaved

His palms are lifted up to me:
—True friend of Allah! Mercy on me!
What should I say? What do I have to give him?!
Should I go following him to deserts
Graveyards, bazaars, mountains, gardens?!
Or should I offer myself to
Snakes, scorpions, lice, fleas?!
What should I do?!
Think about this world or the next?!
I came to know
That we should all die in the end!
I came to know
On the Day of Judgment the rocks will become valuable
Passing from hand to hand without ever touching the ground
On the Day of Judgment the world will burn
And forty men will find refuge in the shade of a licorice bush
In the resurrection, Satan will ride on a donkey
Singing the most mournful songs
It’s said then only the fingernails we cut will save our lives
I came to know
Thus said my aunt Aysham Abduwahid:
— “God will untie the knot which he himself has tied.”

(Izgil, 2007)¹³

Izgil is one of the most prominent creative artists in Xinjiang today. After graduating from Minzu University of China in Beijing 中央民族大学, he established himself as a literary critic and leading member of the avant-garde school of Uyghur poetry. In 1998 he turned to cinema and founded a production company. After teaching cinema at the Xinjiang Arts University in Urumqi 新疆艺术学院 for several years (Freeman, 2015: 144), he fled with his family to the United States in 2017.

“I Came to Know” is the story of the poet’s own journey of enlightenment in regard to himself, his homeland, and his religion. His choice to describe his colorful meeting with the dervish is not random. Sufism is widely practiced in Xinjiang (Zarcone, 2001, 2002). Dervishes are known for their ascetic practices, which are meant to lead them to religious redemption and are considered a gateway to God (Papas, 2011: 129). They fast for long periods, use
intoxicating and psychedelic substances, and follow religious rituals center-
ing on ecstatic dance and singing (Weismann, 2007: 90). Dervishes symbol-
ize religious mysticism, especially since there are few of them in Xinjiang
today (Papas, 2011: 133). Izgil’s mention of snakes, scorpions, lice, and fleas
reveals that he believes the dervish’s asceticism is extreme.

Yet as Devin Deweese and Jo-Ann Grose point out, Sufism is not merely
“Islamic mysticism,” but a system of ethical, social, and religious norms,
whose historical traditions are rooted in the history of Central Asia (2018: 3).
Despite its striking difference from Tuniyaz’s “Eyes under the Veil,” both
poems express spiritual longing for the local traditions and history of
Xinjiang. Indeed, diverse styles and trends from the Islamic world have found
their way into modern Uyghur poetry, but their interpretation is usually local-
ized, particularly in rural Xinjiang (Harris: 2014: 313).

The mystification in “I Came to Know” might also be seen as a criticism
of common practices and beliefs, such as pilgrimages to holy tombs and
shrines, chanting, and spiritual voyages, which Uyghur intellectuals tend to
regard as superstition.14 According to custom, the dervish begs for alms, but
Tahir Hamut Izgil wonders what the beggar has to offer and whether he
should follow him on a spiritual journey leading to a foregone destination.
The questions the poet raises might be interpreted as expressions of doubt
that religion can grant him salvation. His depiction of the Day of Judgment
similarly suggests that he is not a pious believer. He also ridicules the Muslim
custom of cutting the fingernails before prayers, which many people believe
in itself will lead to salvation (Schimmel, 1992). He thus reduces faith to
something as marginal and trivial as a clipped fingernail, perhaps voicing the
critical view that the faithful are devoted more to the practices of the religion
than to its principles.

Nostalgia: Yearning for Kashgar

One of the most prominent markers of Uyghur national identity is the land.
The land symbolizes the homeland, and working the land preserves the
historical continuity that binds the people to it. The underlying idea is that
despite Han sovereignty, Uyghur peasants continue to work the land both in
practice and metaphorically as a symbol of their roots in the Uyghur home-
land. The land was a national symbol that united the Uyghurs long before
the Communists rose to power. In fact, up until 1920, the term “Uyghur”
was seldom used. Rather, the people referred to themselves as yerlik, “of
the land,” or “locals,” an adjective reserved only for members of their own
community as distinct from other ethnic groups in Xinjiang (Dautcher,
2009: 52).
During the Mao era the glorification of farmers was a powerful cultural trope. In the reform era, as part of the reaction against Maoist policies, the Uyghurs began to search for other and unique national symbols that they could embrace as specific to their society. The land remained a national symbol identified mainly with peasants. However, nostalgia for village life and the significance of the farmers and the land for national identity are pillars of Chinese society in general, and not particular to the Uyghur community. Southern Xinjiang, on the other hand, and most especially the city of Kashgar, is a unique Uyghur symbol.

Kashgar, and in fact the south as a whole, is regarded as a Uyghur religious and cultural center. The population is both poorer and more orthodox than in northern Xinjiang, and Kashgar and Khotan, for example, are 90 percent Uyghur. This is in contrast to the high percentage of Han and the Sinification in northern Xinjiang (Dwyer, 2005: 8–9; Fischer, 2014: 32). Less developed than the north, the south is largely agricultural, impoverished, religious, traditional, and overwhelmingly Uyghur (Becquelin, 2000: 68; 2004a: 359; Hann, 2014: 183). Thus, nostalgia for Kashgar is essentially a yearning for authentic Uyghur society, for a past and for a tradition that many believe continues in the villages around Kashgar.

Kashgar is the subject of numerous poems and stories that express the pain inflicted by the injury to authentic Uyghur life in Xinjiang in general, and Kashgar in particular. In the reform period, pride in the geographical features of Xinjiang became a sign of protest against harm caused by the Han to the local ecological balance and the theft of Xinjiang’s natural resources (Smith Finley, 2013: 69). This can be seen, for instance, in Tahir Hamut Izgil’s “Returning to Kashgar” (Qeshqerge qaytish).

**Returning to Kashgar**

I see Kashgar’s mysterious unknown figure
and shudder in terror of grand nights.

Girls that have married, friends that have died, a dry spring.

Eyes are a pinch of earth that has vanished from the land:
a television, moxorka, a dirty sock, the original of a translation.
The green bridge and the greengrocer market are dim in my memory,

I lie stretched out like a boneless animal,
my stomach is hungry, my face is black, my heart is empty!

But in faraway Urumqi someone chews an icy stone,
her eyes, her face are damp; sin before her, and God behind.
Clear steam rises from sugared cornmeal gruel,
sparrows step slowly along the power lines,
in the low sky a frightening heaviness,
dejected elders, wayward youths, eager children,
in just three years all have grown old and ugly.
Kashgar is the moment between eyebrow and eyelash,
paper stuck to the face of the sun, eternal black ink,
a festering old wound, pathetic love.
But you
balled up wind and threw it at the sky,
then you looked at me,
rain drips from a coin-sized hole in our thoughts.

(Tahir Hamut, 2012 [1998]: 131)

The poem associates Kashgar with pain and longing. It begins with a description of the city as a mystical place combining past and future, where anything can happen. In a broader sense, the exoticization and mystification of the city in this poem and others springs from the fact that it is a national symbol of historical and religious significance, similar to Jerusalem for Jews and Muslims the world over. Written in 1998, the poem might well be an allusion to the tense political situation in Kashgar following the violent protests in the region in the 1990s (Millward, 2004: 14–18). Uyghur intellectuals explained to me that the phrase “the moment between eyebrow and eyelash” refers to a state of imminent danger. In the following line, Tahir Hamut Izgil describes the city as “paper stuck to the face of the sun,” and therefore about to be incinerated. The danger threatening to destroy Kashgar stands in contrast to its immortality, depicted as “eternal black ink” that can never be erased.

The poet might be said to have mixed emotions about Kashgar. While the dry city arouses a sense of wretchedness and pain, it also evokes memories of an eternal, mythic place. The poet has a vague memory of the greengrocer market and a green bridge (although I could find no mention of the latter in the many documents relating to Kashgar that I read), perhaps an indirect reference to the razing of the old city to make way for modern infrastructure and buildings. Many Uyghurs regard such changes as suppression of the rich tradition symbolized by the old city. Indeed, the whole way of life of the residents will change with the move to apartment complexes, putting an end to the sense of community shared by those who once dwelled in the ancient alleyways.
The poet portrays Kashgar virtually as his lover. Depicting the city as a woman is typical of the attitude toward the south in general. The Uyghurs view it as the cradle of their culture, and themselves as children of the region. Consequently, they consider it the Earth Mother who gave birth to the Uyghur nation, as evidenced by another of Izgil’s poems, “Journey to the South” (Jenubqa seper).

\textit{Journey to the South}

I have left, my body is all damp traces.
If the wind gusts and desires are stripped bare
the people of distant towns will know the suffering of thought.
Rows of defeated villages
rows of cities that have given up hope
become ever denser.
Boundless sky, boundless land.
I doze off, oases fade into each other
the pale black road flows into an idea
and leaves the sunlight of a whole age lonely.

Man kills man
man is killed
but, the South is not like that[.]
With a dim face she receives her guests
and then sees them off.

(Izgil, 2011 [1995]: 141)

The poem was written in 1995, three years before “Returning to Kashgar.” Even then, Izgil bore witness to the changes taking place in the south. He may have found a striking contrast between the impoverishment of the villages and the modernization that had already begun in the large cities. The title of the poem might allude to the Deng Xiaoping’s 1992 “journey to the south” 南巡 to speed development of “special economic zones” in southeastern China and ensure resumption of the reforms that had been halted after the events in Tiananmen Square in 1989. The analogy between the poet’s journey and that of Deng underlines the gap between southeastern and western China, which remained destitute and abandoned even during the reform period.
In an article on Tahir Hamut Izgil, the translator and scholar Memtimin Ela notes that Kashgar symbolizes the poet’s roots, which he desperately longs to regain:

While returning to Kashgar Tahir Hamut secretly desires to return from it—not to enter into it where he originally started his journey to the world at large. It is due certainly to the deep and irrevocable anxiety, an anxiety of suddenly losing everything that keeps Tahir Hamut at the edge of the unfamiliar world. In the course of the journey towards Kashgar, Tahir Hamut painfully experiences the impossibility of reconciling with his original belongingness, admitting that a romantic intimacy of his dream-like utopia, which is now an unknown Kashgar, is gone forever. (Ela, 2006)

Thus, Ela also interprets the pain in both poems as Izgil’s response to the marked changes in the south. When the poet reaches Kashgar, he discovers that his exile is not over, as there is no way to return to the past that the city represents for him. Ela views the sense of emptiness Izgil feels as a sign of the lack of belongingness to any place in the world. Both of Izgil’s poems reveal his realization that the nostalgic image of his birthplace is nothing but a romantic dream. In other poems, Izgil describes his childhood in Kashgar and the loneliness he feels in Urumqi, where he resided until recently. He portrays Urumqi as a cold, modern city devoid of faith, and Kashgar as a wound that refuses to heal.

The image of Kashgar as a wound appears in other poems as well, attesting to the national significance of the city. The source of the pain is the loss of control, not only in terms of political sovereignty, but also in the sense that Kashgar no longer bears the traditional character of the Uyghurs and their forebears. This idea is expressed in Adil Tuniyaz’s “Journey to Kashgar” (Qeshqerge seper).

**Journey to Kashgar**

I am going to Kashgar
It [Kashgar] is just like
A man who is eating himself
Or it is
Full of the dead bodies of angels
The reddish curtain on the horizon
Is so silently vanishing forever
At such a moment
The iron army of buses is moving desperately
   And invading the deserts
The stones are the remains of the stone palace
The stones are the cut-off heads of the martyrs
   The stones are dry
   And sear the body
Among the people whose lust ran wild
   It is you and I who went astray
   Kashgar—
   It is a hot open wound
   Bit by bit we are being born
   My eyes dazzle gradually
   The sky and earth are full of stars
   In those lonely moments
   That pass transparently
   There are You, Creator, but not me in me

(Tuniyaz, 2003: 26)

Here, Kashgar is an “open wound.” Tuniyaz describes the damage the city has suffered, which has left it “full of the dead bodies of angels.” Bellér-Hann explains that throughout the history of the region locality was embedded in religion and manifested in the names of cities and places. Kashgar was referred to as the City of Saints (Azizanā) (Bellér-Hann, 2011: 44–45), who might resemble Tuniyaz’s angels. The ruined palaces and beheaded martyrs symbolize the glorious past that has been wiped out, leaving a lifeless city behind. The bus that brings the poet to Kashgar is part of an army invading Uyghur territory, a metaphor for the Han-initiated modernization that is changing the face of the city.¹⁸ Like Tahir Hamut Izgil, Tuniyaz describes Kashgar as a site of wretchedness and destruction, something that fills both poets with a sense of pain and emptiness. These recurrent motifs are indications of a national discourse on the subject of Kashgar of which Uyghur intellectuals are well aware. The city is living evidence of the state of the Uyghur nation, and thus its condition is a painful wound in the collective consciousness. By casting Kashgar as a symbol, the Uyghurs solemnize their shared heartache, along with yearning and nostalgia for their tradition, religion, and authenticity.
Religion and National Identity

Many of Tuniyaz’s poems depict the suffering of the Uyghurs and their lack of control over their lives. In “Enter the March” (Üchinchi aygha kirish), for example, he writes: “We are like kites, an unknown hand holding our string.” He uses the term “green tribe” (Yéshil qewm), a religious appellation for the Uyghur nation, to indicate the importance of religion in Uyghurs’ ethnonational identity. For Tuniyaz, Islam is part of the Uyghur identity. His poems describe the national state of a Muslim tribe in decline, but religion is not at the core of his work. Once again, it is a sign of ethnic belonging. The focus of his poetry is national identity. The poet evokes the color green, identified with Islam, rather than the light blue (kök), the “national” Uyghur color seen on the flag of the East Turkistan Independence Movement. This is another example of abandoning isolationist symbols in favor of a broad-based Uyghur ethnonational ethos. The ethos of the green tribe is a unifying symbol that will not provoke the government or promote religious sectarianism among Uyghurs.

Adil Tuniyaz’s poetry voices his national pride as a Uyghur, while at the same time expressing sorrow for the nation’s present circumstances. This can clearly be seen in “Uyghur.”

Uyghur

This is a name of a green tribe
Between the water and the sand
Sometimes the sand comes crawling
To the doorstep of the neighborhood
The white poplars are tall and lively
The azan rings out from the mosque
Someone called our name,
    When we looked up
    There was no one
    Except for the blue sky
The sun is swimming in the sky
    Shedding a golden shell
    A shining word in his palm
    Slowly sinking
Not its name, but its flowers
We are all just like the frail fish that
When the end is near
Can be seen at the bottom of the broken glass of time
One man and countless hundreds,
Born once and dying over and over
The raging wild energy
I kept in a glass bottle the whole day
And opened during the night,
Thus was born the poem I recite

(Tuniyaz, 2003: 16)

By dubbing the Uyghurs “a green tribe,” Tuniyaz links Islam to the birth of the Uyghur nation. The call of the muezzin, like the desert sand and the poplars, symbolizes the traditional Uyghur way of life. But something has changed: God has forsaken the “green tribe.” When the Uyghurs look up expectantly, “there is no one.” God’s withdrawal may explain the current state of the nation, like a “frail fish” at the bottom of “the broken glass of time.” On the other hand, God’s absence might relate to the lack of piety among the Uyghurs. This is a familiar claim of religious propaganda aimed at instilling fear in believers in order to strengthen their faith. Joanna Smith Finley argues that conservative religious scholars often warn Uyghurs against non-Muslim behavior (such as gambling and alcohol consumption) for which they will be held accountable on the Day of Judgment (2013: 111).

Fear of the Day of Judgment is reminiscent of Izgil’s “I Came to Know.” By depicting, or perhaps criticizing, the belief that performing the ritual of trimming the nails will lead to salvation, Izgil emphasizes the role of orthopraxy among believers in Xinjiang. The notion of God punishing or abandoning the Uyghur nation is generally rejected by Uyghur scholars. This can be explained either by the belief in God the Merciful (Bismillah ir-rahman ir-rahim), who bestows grace on believers, even those who are flawed, or by secular ideas regarding the situation of the Uyghur nation. In either case, toward the end of “Uyghur” there is no reference to religion, but only a depiction of the nation’s wretchedness, described as an infinite death experienced “over and over.”

A similar notion is conveyed in the poem “History” (Tarix) by Ghojimumhemmed Muhemmed. Born in a village near Guma in southern Xinjiang, Muhemmed began his literary career with the publication of the
poem “My Paradise” (*Mening jennitim*) in a local literary magazine in 1990. Thereafter, he published countless poems in leading literary journals in Xinjiang, while at the same time working in a cotton garment factory and at the Khotan city bus station. A highly acclaimed and award-winning poet, Ghojimuhemmed Muheemmed was a member of both the Xinjiang Writers Association and the Khotan Writers Association (Freeman, 2016).

**History**

I paged through body bonfires
and saw the sky with an ice-bound sun.
I paged through desert dunes
and saw faith with withered roots.
I paged through rebellions of the soul
and saw Mashrab on a gallows hanged.23

The city withdrew from the countryside,
threadbare stones lying cramped in the ravine,
rivers with parched banks running silently . . .

I took up a handful of dust
and my homeland bathed in my umbilical blood.
I took up a handful of sand
and just then horses neighed in my soul.

I opened my chest
and saw armor full of holes.
I took off the armor
and saw God sleeping on a porch.

I live in the city,
I bring home rivers and lakes,
I bottle and eat the trees.
I watched two people begging for change
on a ten-story building’s front steps
and saw a caravan of riders struggling to mount
their camels in the Uyghur desert.

(Muheemmed, 2017 [2008])
Here the frozen sun illuminates the ruined landscape of Xinjiang, the dry land, the alienated cities, and Uyghurs who have become beggars in their homeland. Historical memory is aroused when the poet picks up a handful of earth soaked with his own blood, signifying his attachment to the land. He depicts the present situation as desperate and hopeless. The mention of Meshrep’s death can be taken as a reference to the religious sacrifices of the past and the notion that they are doomed to be repeated. Ghojimuhemmed Muhemmed depicts a sleeping God, whom he saw after removing his perforated armor, which may be said to symbolize his faith. The references in “History” to the neighing horses and the caravan struggling to complete its journey resemble the final lines in Abdurehim Ötkür’s (1923–1995) poem “Tracks” (İz) from 1985:

Though the horses be starving, our caravan never stopped on the road; and they will find those traces one day, either our children, or our children’s children.

(Ötkür, 2004 [1985])

Abdurehim Ötkür is widely regarded as one of the most important and influential Uyghur writers. In “Tracks” he describes the difficulty the Uyghurs’ ancestors faced in their struggle to preserve their place in the region. Gardner Bovingdon suggests that the wind and sand covering their traces are a metaphor for the Chinese government’s efforts to eradicate the Uyghur journey to independence (2004b: 365). A more recent interpretation of this journey connects it to the Uyghurs’ struggle to preserve their language and culture in face of China’s assimilationist policies (Schluessel, 2007). But while Abdurehim Ötkür believes that future generations will reach the end of the journey, Ghojimuhemmed Muhemmed is pessimistic about the caravan’s struggle to reach its destination.

Nostalgic description of Xinjiang’s landscape is a recurring motif in most of the poems discussed here. The depiction of the green, flourishing land is a metaphor for a symbolic past, in contrast to the dry, wretched present. This motif can be viewed as a criticism of the environmental damage caused mainly by the massive Chinese development in Xinjiang (Baranovitch, 2016: 189; see also Baranovitch, 2019). Uyghurs consider the distinct landscape of Xinjiang, like the city of Kashgar, to be a symbol of Uyghur identity. In another poem by Adil Tuniyaz, “Green-Colored Uyghur Poet” (Yeshil renglik Uyghur shairi), the poet explicitly connects his longing for the past to his national identity.
Green-Colored Uyghur Poet
The green-colored Uyghur poet
Is floating on the surface of the land
Dried up, worn out, disheveled
But a spark gleams in his eyes
He dreamt of his homeland
Green gardens, sand mounts, oil
He wrote poems in worry
The new moon is his comma
and stars suspension points
His God is his own in a foreign land,
Two eyes are his love in a foreign land
He got into his God’s house
Listened to the words in a foreign land
Green-colored Uyghur poet
He himself lost himself
Wandering around the world
Carrying a heavy package

(Tuniyaz, 2003: 19)

This poem demonstrates how the poet defines himself. He identifies first with the green of Islam, then with his national origins, and, finally, with his occupation. Referring to the religion by means of the color green conveys the message without any need for the poet to explicitly mention it. Had he dubbed himself a “Muslim Uyghur poet,” he would have risked being considered nationalistic.25

Guided by the moon and the stars, he writes about his loneliness and longing for his homeland when far from Xinjiang. For expatriates, writing is often a substitute for the lost homeland, or alternatively, a bridge enabling a return home, even if only metaphorically (Baranovitch, 2007b: 468). The poet gives the collective symbols central to Uyghur identity a personal, human significance. Thus, the landscape that appears in his dreams is different from that described in “Journey to Kashgar,” and might be seen as a mythical past that is distinct from the difficult present. The heavy package might also symbolize the burden of the personal or national condition.

Although the poem deals with his self-definition, Tuniyaz indicates that he “lost himself,” a loss he sensed when he lived abroad. While he continued to
follow the tenets of Islam, he felt alienated, as he associated the religion with his homeland. Thus, in another country, God became a private God, since he had nothing in common with the believers in a foreign land. This underscores how closely national identity is allied with religious identity among the Uyghurs. Tuniyaz defines himself as a Uyghur Muslim, accentuating the fact that these two aspects of his identity cannot be separated.

**Conclusion**

Economic conditions in Xinjiang improved in the late twentieth century, bringing about changes in Uyghur society. Consumerism and materialism undermined traditional values and altered the face of the villages, and Han culture began to be assimilated into Uyghur cities, pushing out Uyghur culture. Religious persecution and loss of tradition accentuated the felt need to breathe new life into this culture. Since the mid-1990s, language, religion, history, and popular culture all became avenues for presenting Uyghur identity as a protest against the Sinification of Xinjiang. But the stronger Uyghur nationalism grew, the harsher the control and punitive measures the government applied in order to suppress it.

The government takes a carrot-and-stick approach to Uyghur poetry. On the one hand it responds harshly, sometimes with lengthy incarceration, and on the other it encourages “politically correct” Uyghur literature and cultural activities. Evidently the government considers this the best strategy to avoid escalating an already tense situation. This duality in official policy is also reflected in contemporary Uyghur poetry itself. In addition to dealing with subjects directly associated with nationalism, such as history, poets relate to burning issues in their society, exposing themselves to the possibility of arousing the wrath of the government. However, aware that banning a work of literature may increase its popularity and that coercing poets with an iron fist may elicit further unrest, in some cases the Chinese state prefers to make do with warnings not to publish at all or to avoid certain subjects. Nevertheless, the decision of many authors to continue to publish their work or deal with politically sensitive issues testifies to the strength of nationalistic sentiment and the pivotal role of literature in preserving and disseminating this sentiment. The Uyghurs’ sense of belonging to the land flows from their history: they and their forebears were born on the land and therefore they believe they are its rightful owners. The land distinguishes the Uyghurs from other nations, inasmuch as a sense of belonging stems not only from cultural, but also geographical, factors. Thus, the land symbolizes both culture and place, thereby tying the people to their homeland. This point is expressed in many Uyghur poems. Uyghur poetry echoes the dominant discourse among intellectuals in
the community, and in that sense it may not precisely replicate the beliefs and concerns of Uyghur society at large. In fact, poets are critical of Uyghur society for its lack of cultural preservation, environmental issues, and loss of tradition. This criticism from within is more effective than that which emanates from the government. Since the political situation of the Uyghur nation is of great concern to poets, they employ powerful national symbols, such as the city of Kashgar, to express their pain at the state of the nation. Yet, there is a relative absence of religion from their poetry, a reflection of the urban secular culture of Uyghur intellectuals. Poets portray religion as part of the landscape of their childhood, and it appears as a recurrent motif representing nostalgia for the past. At the same time, the poetry is not totally devoid of disparagement of God and his agents, and it is hard to find any poems that deal with modern religious experience. Religion thus signifies the past and tradition, while the present, at least in poetry, tends toward the secular, whether by choice or as a response to government policy.

**Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank Nimrod Baranovitch and Yitzhak Shichor for their wise and diligent guidance while writing the manuscript on which this article is based. I am also thankful for the insightful comments of the Modern China reviewers, as well as the generous help of two anonymous Uyghur scholars and the Uyghur poets who inspired this research.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Notes**

1. Since the 1980s, many important historical novels have been published in Xinjiang. See Bovingdon, 2004a; Dillon, 2002; Tanridagli, 2006.

2. For example, extremist groups in Sunni Islam in Central Asia and Xinjiang associated with the Wahhabi movement were brought to Kashgar in the mid-1990s from Saudi Arabia by molla (or, imam) Abdulhamid Damolla. He criticized Uyghur religious leaders for their lack of knowledge of the Quran and preached a purer Islam. At first, the government tolerated Damolla out of a desire to strengthen the connections between China and the Muslim world. However, when Damolla’s power began to grow, he was seen as a threat and was arrested.
Wahhabism is a subject of controversy among the Uyghurs, many of whom oppose its religious puritanism. See Waite, 2007.

3. A more prominent example is Nurmuhemmet Yasin Orkishi’s novella “Yawa kepter” (Wild Pigeon). After it was published in November 2004 in the journal Qeshqer edebiyat (Kashgar Literature), Yasin was arrested, and in February 2005 was sentenced to ten years in prison. He reportedly died in prison in 2011. The editor in chief, Korash Huseyin, received a three-year sentence. See Amnesty International, 2013.

4. The first journal, which appeared in 1981, was Bulaq (The Well). It was followed by Qeshqer edebiyat sen’iti (Kashgar Literature and Art), Tarim (Descriptions), Dunya edebiyati (World Literature), Aqsu edebiyati (Aqsu Literature), and other, local journals published in Turpan and Khotan, such as Yengi qaštîši (New Jade). The journal Venus publishes novels, and Tengri tagh (Mount Tengri), established in 1986, concentrates on more modern literature than that which appears in Tarim (Dwyer, 2005: 45; Friederich, 2007: 99; Sabir, 1986: 118).

5. On realism, see Walder, 1995: 18–20.

6. In addition to Abduxaliq Uyghur, famous writers of that period include Kutluk Haji Shevki (1876–1937), Lutpulla Mutellip (1922–1945), and Mehmet Ali Teufik (b. 1910). See Kashgarli, 1993.

7. On socialist realism during the Mao era, see Chung, 1996.

8. Misty Poetry 朦胧诗 was a new, avant-garde style that spread across China during the 1980s. The name reflects the obscure meaning of the poems and the difficulty in understanding them (Hong, 2007: 339).

9. Unless mentioned otherwise, all poems by Adil Tuniyaz that appear in this article were translated by a Uyghur translator who has chosen to remain anonymous.

10. The abaya is actually an outer garment that covers the whole body except for the head, and is usually worn with a headscarf (niqāb/jilbab). In this poem it is regarded as a veil.

11. On the concept of “mystification,” see Jameson, 1974.

12. On magic realism, see Parkinson Zamora and Faris, 1995.

13. The poem was translated into English by an anonymous translator on the internet forum “Uyghur Poetry in Translation,” http://eser.okyan.com/eser/uyghur/terjime/2007/0516/1030.html. Although the translations on the site are not free of syntactical and stylistic errors, the scarcity of translations of contemporary Uyghur poetry make this a highly valuable and useful source. In an attempt to correct mistakes, the poem, taken from the site, was retranslated and edited by a Uyghur translator.

14. Rian Thum describes how, regardless of the government ban, festival traditions and other religious rituals still attract large numbers of believers (2014: 120–22; see also Harris, 2014).

15. According to the 2000 population survey (State Statistical Bureau Department of Population and Social Technical Statistics, 2001). As the survey did not include Han military personnel (soldiers and civilians working for the military who are not local residents), it is reasonable to assume that the Han presence in these areas is actually higher.
16. A strong cheap tobacco common in Xinjiang. It is generally mixed with dry leaves and rolled in newsprint.
17. On the Uyghur protest against the razing of the old city, see Malden, 2016.
18. On negative impacts of Han tourism on Uyghur shrines, see Dawut, 2007.
19. Uyghur nationalists refer to Xinjiang as Sherqiy Türkistan (East Turkistan), and identify the name “Xinjiang,” which means “new territory,” with the Chinese conquest. The flag of East Turkistan is identical to the Turkish flag, except that it is blue rather than red.
20. On orthopraxy in central Asian Islam, see Khalid, 2007; Rasananayagam, 2006; and Schrode, 2008.
21. On the discourse on God’s abandonment, see Smith Finley, 2013: 275.
22. On the concept of “God the Merciful” in Islam, see El-Bizri, 2008.
23. Baba Rahim Meshrep (1657–1711) was a famous poet whose poetry promoted Sufism. He was executed in Afghanistan for his religious beliefs. See Allworth, 1990: 74–77.
24. The poem opens Abdurehim Ötkür’s historical novel, bearing the same name, Iz (Tracks) (1985). Together with another novel of the same genre, Oyghan’ghan zemin (The Awakened Land) (1994), they were very popular during the 1990s and are considered icons of Uyghur nationalism. See Bovingdon, 2004b: 365–66; Rudelson, 1997: 164; Tanridagli, 2006.
25. The arrest of one of the most prominent musicians in Xinjiang, Abdurehim Heyit, in spring 2017 for performing an allegedly “separatist” song entitled “Atilar” (Fathers) is a prominent example of the persecution of artists. Tahir Hamut Izgil referred to Heyit’s arrest, saying, “Whether it is Uyghur intellectuals, artists, writers, or poets: nobody is being spared from the current purge” (http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/musician-11022017162302.html).
26. For detailed discussion of official guidance for Uyghurs in matters of culture and history, see Klimeš, 2018.

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