

## Rian Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History*

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Historical scholarship on the Uyghurs often focuses on the imperial ambitions of the states that surrounded Chinese Central Asia and the political intrigue that surrounded the emissaries of those states. Instead of asking how Uyghurs themselves imagined their community, these studies focus on relations of conquest and resistance and the gravity of wealth and power. Of course, the colonial domination of the Uyghurs is an important part of their history, but it is not the beginning of their story. Drawing on an ethnography of oral traditions and an extensive archive of sacred texts from shrines across the Uyghur homeland, Rian Thum's work seeks to amplify how Uyghurs themselves imagined their community prior to the state, prior to modernity, perhaps even prior to Islam.<sup>1</sup> In essence, Thum is arguing that the identifications of the Uyghurs are not centered around a national imaginary or ethnic community, but rather it was articulated through the oral recitation and amendment of sacred texts during pilgrimages to the shrines of the "bringers of Islam" (*wali*). Since the arrival of Islam in the tenth century (and perhaps even before this), the telling of the stories of mythic heroism and morality tales have functioned as a kind of collective memory that, in turn, has constituted, what I refer to below, as an "indigenous sovereignty" made up of social ties to land and to a constellation of people.

In Thum's telling of this story, a lifeworld appears without being explicitly labeled as Islamic. He argues that the Turkic people that today have come to be identified as Uyghurs in fact have a complex history of attachment to land and to faith. The texts that were recited and amended during shrine pilgrimages served as founding myths that rooted people in place, much as centralized Islamic political, legal and religious formal institutions shaped contemporaneous Islamic societies elsewhere. The geographic and political isolation of the Turkic population of Chinese Central Asia coupled with pre-Islamic animist knowledge systems allowed shrines to function as informal institutional opportunities for popular participation in communal authorship. Thum argues that this performative aspect of Uyghur Islamic cultural life led to a powerful fixing of meaning to points in space (123). Sacred spaces and the practices associated with them thus tied people to the earth and to each other in profound ways. Through this, an element of timelessness was built into places in the landscape of the desert. Places themselves became sacred, not merely sites of first encounter with a new religious system. This place-ness made the production of history extremely intimate. Through this process history was made and the personal was bound to the earth; the past came to be understood as imminent in the present. In practice, the *shaykhs* who tell the stories of the heroes of the past, and the pilgrims who listen and question their telling, came to understand themselves as conduits of sacred history.

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<sup>1</sup> In taking this approach Thum is following in the methodological trajectory of Ildikó Bellér-Hann's *Community Matters in Xinjiang, 1880-1949: Towards a Historical Anthropology of the Uyghur* (Brill, 2008).

Throughout the second half of the book Thum argues that the arrival of the modern nation state in the late nineteenth century had a deep impact on the Uyghur relationship to shrines. A new emphasis on literacy and other practices of knowledge production, profoundly altered the way Uyghurs began to conceptualize their position in the modern system of nation states. Not only did the state begin to control access to shrines and regulate the authority of those who care for them, new technologies and genres of communication began to fragment an indigenous reading of the past. Thum shows how in the 1930s and 1940s, around the time of the founding of the first East Turkistan Republic, Uyghur politicians used newspapers to circulate Soviet and Chinese inspired forms of nationalist Uyghur recognition.<sup>2</sup> Skipping ahead to the 1980s, he notes how sacred myths of Uyghur Islamic history were taken up again in historical novels that reflected the socialist realist ethos of what had then become part of the People's Republic of China. The heroism of the "bringers of Islam" still circulates, but now it has been shaped by modernist politics and much of the participatory nature of communal story telling has been lost. Some *shaykhs* still know the stories, as Thum shows us through beautifully rendered ethnographic vignettes (21-22), but much of the richness of Uyghur connections to the land and the sacred past has been lost through the ongoing process of Chinese settler colonialism.

Thum is making a number of valuable contributions to the anthropology of Islam through this work. In the broadest sense he makes us consider the importance of internal migration and storytelling as a means of forming an Islamic society without the hegemonic force of formal Islamic institutions, prior to modernization and the presence of imperial powers. Reading this through the lens of Native American scholarship on decolonization, I see the social formation that Thum is describing as a form of indigenous sovereignty, or land-based claims to local authority. This sovereignty does not depend on recognition from a nation-state, the disciplining effect of dominant Islamic discourses, or the mass-circulation of print media. Sovereignty, or what Thum refers to as "identity," can exist in other ways.

In order to draw out the work Thum is doing here it is helpful to see his work in contradistinction from other historical-anthropological investigations of the of Islamic societies, such as Brinkley Messick's 1992 ethnography *The Calligraphic State*. In his study, Messick considers the relationship between writing and political-religious authority in Yemen from the late nineteenth century to the present. He argues that the use of texts, such as legal contracts and religious commentaries formed a discourse that sustained a complex social collectivity. Thum does something similar by focusing on the way manuscripts were deployed in shrine contexts, but unlike Messick he shows that in the Northwest China popular religious authority was not dependent on a formal education or legal systems. Instead people across a wide geographic space understood their history through the oral telling and textual amending of mythic stories of the past. By presenting a model of decentering Islamic knowledge production, Thum is making an argument for the importance of analysis of Islamic societies that might previously been read as peripheral to centers of Islamic knowledge and power. His

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<sup>2</sup> For an excellent account of this transformation see David Brophy's *Uyghur Nation: Reform and Revolution on the Russia-China Frontier* (Harvard University Press, 2016).

reading of space, performance and the genealogy of religious authority thus has much to offer as a point of comparison to other deemphasized locations across the Islamic world.

Methodologically, Thum is indebted to the genealogical approach of his advisor Engseng Ho. In *The Graves of Tarim* (2006), Ho narrates a decentered movement of a collectivity over hundreds of years around the Indian Ocean. He examines points of exchange that centered around writing and relatedness that allowed the Hadrami Yemeni descendants of Prophet Muhammad to find feelings of belonging in three distinct regions around the ocean and yet maintain cosmopolitan connections between these regional communities. As in Thum's work, Ho draws out the tension between anthropology and history to uncover the way religion can bind people to place and across time and space. Thum builds on this approach by reading claims to space through points of encounter at shrines and in texts to argue that what has come to be understood as Uyghur identity was first built out of embodied encounters with the past. Thum's multi-sited, multi-modal methodology thus shapes the way his theorization of social complexity emerges from the book.

From the perspective of an anthropology of the Uyghur present, Thum's signal contribution is his forceful argument for the prior-ness of Uyghur sovereignty and religious authority. He is purposefully asking us not to think about the emergence of Uyghur identity in relation to Chinese, Russian or British imperial power or anti-colonial resistance. What Thum is presenting is a genealogy of a Uyghur insistence on sacred space and through a refusal to be reduced to a modernist ethnic identity. As scholars of decolonization such as Audra Simpson (2014) and Carol McGranahan (2016) have noted, refusal is not another word for resistance. Rather, unlike resistance to the state, it rejects external state and institutional structures in favor of the prior-ness of indigenous sociality. They, like Thum, argue that this insistence on a prior-ness to the state is social and affiliative in the way it calls a community into existence. There is a willfulness here. A politics of laying claim to the sociality that underlies human relationships.

Given the sacred routes of their history, Uyghurs can thus see themselves as engaged with a prior system of knowledge, even as they inhabit the Chinese world of the colonizer. Since their history is not dependent on recognition from the state, an insistence on sacred historical spaces helps explain how limited forms of sovereignty persist despite efforts by the state to eliminate them. Understanding the role of shrines and oral traditions in shaping the Uyghur experience of the world gives us a sense of the stakes involved in preserving shrines both in form and function. Now as the Chinese state converts these sacred spaces into sites of consumption for Han tourists we see the sovereignty of the Uyghurs being challenged. Considering the deeply embedded nature of this older form of local Islam also demonstrates the importance for thinking carefully about what is at stake as large numbers of the Uyghur population begin to turn toward new Reformist or Salafi forms of Islam.

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