
Since the 1980s, Western scholarship on modern Chinese history has moved away from the narrative of a tradition-bound Middle Kingdom reacting to the dynamism of Japan and the West. A “China-centered” view of modern Chinese history has by now become standard, much to the benefit of historical research.¹ In more recent years, Anglophone scholarship on Central Asia has increasingly assumed a comparable orientation, combining indigenous and imperial sources to recent modern Central Asian history around Central Asian actors. David Brophy’s *Uyghur Nation: Reform and Revolution on the Russia-China Frontier*, the culmination of a decade of research, represents a major advance in this regard. In a wide-ranging study, Brophy carefully reconstructs the interplay of local elites, intellectuals, community, and state from which the contemporary Uyghur nation emerged: a Uyghur-centered view of modern Uyghur history.²

On the basis of extensive archival, published, and manuscript sources, Brophy has written the fullest and most convincing account to date of the twentieth-century development of the Uyghur national concept. Synthesizing intellectual and political history, he puts persuasively to rest the frequent assertion that modern Uyghur identity was imposed from above by Soviet bureaucrats and passively adopted by its designated subjects. Brophy demonstrates that the Uyghur national idea, and the bureaucratic reification of that idea, emerged from complex negotiations between proto-Uyghur elites and intellectuals, ethnographers of various backgrounds, and Soviet officials on the local and national level. The national framework they worked out, and which has since gained purchase among ten million Uyghurs, was not determined by any single political imperative, ideology, or group. The making of the Uyghur nation, Brophy shows, was very much a contingent process.

Given the transnational nature of Uyghur history, the often scattered and fragmentary source base, and the limitations of archival access in China and the former USSR, scholars must triangulate between far-flung sources in multiple languages. Brophy’s remarkable linguistic breadth is an invaluable asset; in addition to voluminous sources in Russian, Chinese, and various Turkic languages, he draws on texts in Persian, Japanese, and Mongolian. This linguistic range is fully deployed in the first sections of his study, which

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² I should note that I commented on some chapters of the manuscript for the author.
comprise an erudite discussion of the long-range history of the term “Uyghur,” and the term’s intersections over the centuries with communities occupying the area now known as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China. The Uyghur Khaganate of the eighth and ninth centuries, based in the Mongol steppe, gave way to smaller successor states in present-day Xinjiang and western Gansu. Their Turkic-speaking inhabitants followed various religious traditions before ultimately adopting Islam, with the last Buddhist Uyghurs converting in the sixteenth century. The remnants of the Uyghur states were incorporated into Muslim-ruled polities, and the term “Uyghur” had lost much of its ethnic and political content. In the centuries that followed, as the Uyghur homeland was ruled successively by Muslim dynasties, the Zunghar Mongols and the Qing, the word “Uyghur” was used mostly as an amorphous geographical moniker for the region. It was not until the 1920s that Uyghur identity reemerged as a clear communal affiliation, and only in the subsequent decade did it become a focal point for attempts to establish an independent state.

That is not to say, however, that no indigenous sense of community existed among Xinjiang’s oasis-dwelling Turks before their twentieth-century designation as Uyghurs. In the oases of southern Xinjiang’s Tarim Basin, communal identities had long combined membership in a broader Islamic community with a sense of local belonging, and were further strengthened by categories applied by the Qing state to the region’s inhabitants (33). Nonetheless, Brophy does not see these forms of identity as “protonational” (39), and suggests that Muslims in different parts of Qing Xinjiang likely identified as much with their coreligionists beyond Xinjiang as with each other. Here his conclusions differ from those of Rian Thum and Laura Newby, who have argued that modern Uyghur identity has roots in pre-national forms of community shared by Turkic Muslims throughout the Tarim Basin. Brophy also notes a persistent sense of difference between the Taranchis of northern Xinjiang’s Ili Valley—now generally regarded as a subgroup of Uyghurs—and the Muslims of the Tarim Basin, who through the mid-twentieth century were often known as Turki or Kashgaris. This sense of difference would ultimately play a major role in the negotiation of modern Uyghur identity.

While these premodern forms of community did not determine the Uyghur nation’s ultimate form and content, they did provide the scaffolding around which local elites and state ethnographers would build that nation. But the Uyghur ethnonym first traveled a roundabout route back to the region of its origins, passing via ancient Chinese and Inner Asian texts into the heated philological battles of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European Orientalists, who tussled over the ancient provenance and contemporary identity of the mysterious Uyghur people (44-51). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a number of Turkic intellectuals in the Russian and Ottoman empires joined the conversation. They associated the term “Uyghur” with high Turkic culture, and with the region in which the ancient Uyghurs had lived, by then part of the Qing province of Xinjiang. As Turkic reformist ideas and periodicals filtered into the farthest reaches of the waning tsarist empire, the notion of Uyghur identity emerged as an attractive option for a small number of Turkic intellectuals—Taranchis and their Tatar compatriots—living in Semireche, a distant corner of the Russian empire adjacent to Xinjiang (141-144).

By the late nineteenth century, Central Asia was largely divided between the Russian, Qing and British empires, with imperial borders bearing little relation to cultural, linguistic, and religious affinities on the ground. This created potential ambiguity around the question of subjecthood, allowing many Turkic Muslims on both sides of the Qing-Russian (later Sino-Soviet) border to switch subjecthood or citizenship well into the twentieth century. As Brophy details, large-scale migrations from the 1870s through the early twentieth century led to the formation of a substantial Taranchi community in Semireche, as well as settlements of Kashgaris in the Ferghana Valley and elsewhere in Russian Turkestan. At the same time, numerous Russian-subject merchants—primarily Central Asian Muslims—crossed into Xinjiang, where unequal treaties and ambitious Russian consular officials enabled them to conduct business on highly favorable terms, a situation which encouraged some Qing-subject Muslims in the province to apply for Russian passports. In the north of Xinjiang, a small Tatar community took root; like the Tatars of Semireche, they would for the first half of the twentieth century exert a disproportionate influence on public affairs, and on the fashioning of Uyghur culture and identity. The interpenetrating Muslim diaspora communities of Chinese and Russian Turkestan enabled reformist ideas circulating in Russia’s Muslim communities to reach Xinjiang’s Muslim intellectuals in short order—often more quickly than alternative concepts of state, identity, and modernity advocated by Qing (and later, Chinese) officials.

Considering the Russian presence throughout Xinjiang as well as the British consuls and subjects who wielded substantial influence in the south of the province, Brophy points out similarities with the treaty port system in China proper, where extraterritoriality played a comparably disruptive role (74-82). It is an instructive comparison, and helps highlight the complexities of subjecthood and citizenship in late imperial and early Republican Xinjiang. Brophy notes that his study does not involve an analytical distinction between subjects and citizens (282-283, n. 14), yet the text might have benefited from a bit more attention to such questions, given the close linkage of the modern nation with the citizens who are understood to constitute it. Brophy’s narrative centers around diaspora communities that formed along the Russo-Qing border during the imperial era; and it was the rationalizing twentieth-century state that insisted those communities replace imperial loyalty with national belonging.

During the Russian civil war, Bolshevik troops in Semireche massacred a large number of Taranchis, believing them to be in league with tsarist forces (146-150). These events are usually referred to as the “Shooting Tragedy” or the “Taranchi Tragedy,” but in truth much about the Taranchis’ existence in Semireche was tragic. The tsarist government had never known quite what to do with this Turkestani community that was neither native nor foreign, and the new Soviet administration was equally unsure, with the result that Taranchi rights and concerns often fell through the cracks of state policy. This allowed Taranchi elites—notably the wealthy merchant Vali Bay—to exercise near-absolute power within the Taranchi community before the revolution (97); and conditions only deteriorated in the revolution’s immediate aftermath. When Taranchis who had fled across the Chinese border to Ghulja after the Shooting Tragedy returned to Semireche, they faced taunts of “Go home to Ghulja!” from other locals (146-150, 159). The Kashgari communities in Central Asia also came under pressure after the Bolshevik Revolution, but the weakened Chinese government could do little in response to their appeals (160-161). Even so, the Kashgars, lacking alternative communal representation, continued to rely on Chinese-appointed headmen.

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(агсаqал) for some time after the revolution, despite the fact that this class of quasi-diplomatic functionaries had come to be seen as undesirable meddlers by the Soviet state (191).

Uyghur national identity offered a potential escape from this liminal status. In the early Soviet era, with national identities and policies in flux, Taranchi and Kashgari intellectuals worked to use the historic rupture of the revolution to realign their communities’ position vis-à-vis the broader society and state. The Uyghurs would be a full-fledged Soviet nationality, one national’nost among equals, at least in theory. On the cultural level, the name Uyghur commanded respect in the Turkic world, and Taranchis and Kashgaris, as contemporary inhabitants of the ancient Uyghur homeland, were understood to have a special claim on the name. From an economic standpoint, the USSR was increasingly apportioning resources—especially land—on a communal basis, and a Uyghur nation would be better positioned at the bargaining table than scattered settlements of Taranchis and Kashgaris. Politically, if Taranchis and Kashgaris were Uyghurs, the small Soviet Uyghur community could attract state patronage by presenting itself as the vanguard of socialist revolution among the much larger Uyghur population in Xinjiang—itself a potential vanguard for a revolution in China itself (168-172, 186-190).

In this context, early Soviet conceptions of Uyghur identity tended to consider Chinese origin the defining characteristic separating Uyghurs from other Central Asian Muslims. Early Soviet Uyghur organizations thus counted the Dungans—Chinese-speaking Muslims, or Hui—among their constituents. While some local intellectuals scoffed, others gamely offered up historical justifications for the common origin of these groups (184-186). By the mid-1920s the Dungans came to be regarded as a separate community, but their early inclusion under the Uyghur umbrella is a reminder that the ethno-linguistic Uyghur identity that ultimately emerged was far from predetermined. Here as throughout the book, Brophy carefully teases out the complex relationship between ideology and politics, keeping in mind that their influence is inevitably mutual.6

Through much of the 1920s, Taranchi and Kashgari elites competed to define Uyghur identity in terms favorable to their respective communities, and to their own communal authority. These struggles took place against a backdrop of post-revolutionary bureaucratic chaos, as unions and bureaus sprang up like mushrooms and were constantly renamed, reorganized, and shuttered. Despite Brophy’s clear and readable prose, these convolutions of bureaucracy and Uyghurist ideology can be challenging to follow, though a certain density of argument was doubtless unavoidable given the extensive primary spadework needed to unearth this previously untold story. And indeed, the devil is in the details: the backstage struggles for primacy in defining and representing the Uyghur community created substantial enmity between different factions in the leadership, and by 1924, the shaky alliance of Taranchis, Kashgaris, and Dungans had fallen apart (190-194).

The name “Uyghur,” however, retained appeal as a communal designation, and in the lead-up to the 1926 Soviet census the Kashgari leadership claimed it as their own (194-203). At the same time, while Taranchis mostly remained Taranchis—rather than Uyghurs—on the census, Taranchi intellectuals and their Tatar allies were busily working to shape the

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6 One instance in the text does seem to invite question. Pointing to an early Semireche Taranchi/Uyghur newspaper’s development of a literary language based on Xinjiang’s vernacular, Brophy argues that Central Asian intellectuals had as much “desire to create a new and distinct literary standard” as did Soviet planners (220-221). It is difficult, though, to gauge the degree to which the newspaper’s editors may have been responding to incentives generated by the USSR’s emerging nationalities policy.
nascent Uyghur language and culture along Taranchi lines. Not easily cowed, Kashgari intellectuals organized behind their own linguistic standard, and renowned Soviet linguists also weighed in on the controversy. At a 1930 conference on the Uyghur language, participants still felt it necessary to insist that Taranchis and Kashgaris comprised a single nation (220-231). Despite the confusion, over the course of the 1930s the Uyghur category gained increasing currency in Central Asia’s Taranchi and Kashgari communities as well as enhanced recognition by the Soviet state, and the 1937 Soviet census finally subsumed Taranchis and Kashgaris under a single Uyghur category (258). Although many of the Uyghur idea’s most prominent exponents met their ends soon thereafter in the Stalinist purges (264), the ethno-national concept they had developed over the preceding two decades had struck lasting roots in the USSR, and had begun to germinate in Xinjiang as well.

The USSR’s initial policy toward Xinjiang had been halting and confused. Soviet Uyghur activists in the 1920s, angling for state sponsorship, had presented their trans-border community as a potential conduit for Soviet influence in northwest China (186). The Comintern and various Central Asian Muslim organizations similarly cited Soviet anti-colonial ideology in support of revolutionary agitation among Xinjiang’s Muslim communities (166-172). Moscow’s official policy, however, called for nudging China gradually toward socialism via cooperation with the reigning Chinese Nationalist Party. Until this relationship soured in the late 1920s, the Soviet leadership had little appetite for sponsoring revolution along China’s ethnic frontiers. Nonetheless, the Uyghur concept did begin filtering into Xinjiang, transmitted by merchants, students, and others who traversed the Xinjiang-Soviet border. By 1932, the Turpani poet Abdulkhaliq Uyghur was declaiming “Awaken, poor Uyghur!” in his hometown in eastern Xinjiang, and the subsequent year a short-lived Eastern Turkestan Republic established around Kashgar minted coins reading “Republic of Uyghuristan” (246-247).

Still, in early 1930s Xinjiang the Uyghur idea had limited currency among the populace, and remained anathema to the provincial government. All of this changed following the 1933-34 establishment of a Soviet-aligned regime in the province under Chinese warlord Sheng Shicai (254-260). Sheng’s administration transformed Xinjiang into something of a Soviet satellite, complete with Soviet-style cultural policies and rhetoric. Soviet nationality categories were implemented in Xinjiang by 1935, though in direct opposition to the prevailing trend in Soviet Central Asia, Taranchis and Uyghurs were designated as separate nationalities (258-260). Brophy’s study does not address in detail the degree to which Xinjiang’s population accepted these categories after they were officially introduced, concluding instead with an evocative discussion of elite discourse on Uyghur identity in Xinjiang over the subsequent two decades. Particular attention is paid to the second half of the 1940s, when the Chinese Nationalist Party gained control of most of Xinjiang, while the northwest of the province was governed by a Soviet-backed separatist state known—like the breakaway Kashgar-based state of 1933-34—as the Eastern Turkestan Republic (ETR). The ETR promoted the ethno-national Uyghur identity recognized by its Soviet patrons, while the Chinese Nationalists empowered Pan-Turkist intellectuals as a counterweight. The Chinese Communist Party’s victory in 1949 brought an end to the ETR and to Chinese Nationalist rule in Xinjiang, and Chinese Communist policy settled quickly and definitively on a Soviet-style definition of Uyghur identity, with the Taranchis now brought firmly into the fold.

While the concluding sections of *Uyghur Nation* take only limited account of non-elite opinion in Xinjiang, the preceding chapters make sensitive use of intelligence reports and scholarly records to give a sense of public opinion in Soviet Uyghur communities during the
1920s and ‘30s. Given the available sources, though, it is inevitable that a study of Uyghurist politics in this period will focus substantially on the ideas and maneuverings of intellectual and political elites. Those covered in *Uyghur Nation* include intellectuals like the Taranchi writer Nazarkhoja Abdusamadov (pen name: “Uyghur Child”) and the Tatar educator Zarif Bashiri, as well as activists and officials like the leading Taranchi Bolshevik Abdullah Rozibaqiev and his Kashgari counterpart Qadir Haji Hashiev. In many cases, Brophy is one of the first scholars to treat these figures in any detail. Even so, none of them ultimately emerges from the narrative as a fully formed figure. Given that this is a story of ideas and their propagators, politics and its practitioners, *Uyghur Nation* could have been enriched by a more textured treatment of its subjects’ human dimensions: the personal backgrounds, characteristics and relationships that form the undercurrent of intellectual history, and the Central Asian milieu in which these individuals operated.

This, however, is a comparatively minor issue considering the remarkable contributions Brophy’s study makes to our understanding of modern Uyghur history, and to the growing literature on nation formation in socialist states. Scholars of diaspora communities will have much to learn from Brophy’s work, as will anyone seeking to understand the evolution of nationalities policy in modern China. With its impressive scope, unique integration of sources, and theoretical rigor, *Uyghur Nation* will long remain a milestone in its field.

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