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Rian Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History*, Harvard University Press, 2014, 336 pp., \$39.95 US (hbk), ISBN 9780674598553.

The historiography of Eastern Turkestan (Xinjiang) has for some decades been focused on large political questions. While we must commend historians of Eurasian empires for their thorough work, nevertheless, the field as it stands has taken an overwhelmingly statist approach to the region's history. National identity has remained a persistent theme in this literature, but there is remarkably little scholarship that addresses modes of identification outside of the context of a real or aspirational nation-state. It is now established that modern "Uyghur" national identity, which uses this ethnonym to denote the Turkic-speaking Muslims of the oases of Eastern Turkestan, is a phenomenon of the twentieth century. The question of how such Turkic Muslims conceived of their collective subjectivities prior to the expansion of print media and Soviet hegemony, and if they did so, is remarkably complicated. Because manuscript and oral culture oriented towards popular understandings of sacred history predominated in this period, as indeed they did through the mid-twentieth century, the traditional tools of nationalism studies have been ill-equipped to approach it.

Under such circumstances, Rian Thum's *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History* is particularly welcome, as it dares to present and analyze the pre-modern—and in many respects ongoing—ways in which the Turkic-speaking Muslims of southern Xinjiang thought about themselves and their individual and collective place in the world. *Sacred Routes* invites us to consider how people might come to imagine an impersonal, geographically-bounded community, not through the apparatus of the nationalizing state, but through the institutions and cultural practices of a decentralized society bound together by shrine pilgrimage and sacred history. Thum's book is at the crest of a wave of new scholarship on Xinjiang's history that intentionally steers away from high-level political struggles and narratives of national becoming to give voice to the experiences and beliefs of ordinary people.¹ In doing so, Thum presents popular ways of making, participating in, and taking possession of an "our history," a community's imagination of the past in ways that are significant to their common identity and sense of belonging and rootedness.

¹ The central text to this approach is Ildikó Bellér-Hann, *Community Matters in Xinjiang 1880-1949: Towards a Historical Anthropology of the Uyghur* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), which itself turns away from the national identity problem and instead works through the practices of everyday life.

These “habits and strategies” of engaging with the past comprise, Thum argues, a distinct pre-modern identity system (1-2). Let us pause and consider the term “identity system,” which is central to the book, and which Thum seems to have coined. If this euphoric couplet is not his, perhaps it comes from Balibar, who uses it in passing to mean “representations and discourses which enable [nationalism] to produce identities and order them hierarchically.”² *Sacred Routes* is, despite its protests to the contrary, in dialogue mainly with nationalism theory, particularly Anderson’s now familiar notion of the “imagined community,” which Thum mentions frequently.³ Yet it is a book not about how modern Uyghur identity came about—that history belongs mainly to the state and to urban areas, and mainly to the period from the 1930s through the present day.⁴ Instead, it asks what happens when an identity system lacks a particular ideology. How, in Balibar’s terms, are identities produced and reproduced through representations, discourses, and most importantly popular practices when there is no ideologically driven force invested in engendering them?

The book begins with an observation about the Tarim Basin and adjacent areas, what Thum calls “Altishahr.” For the majority of people over the past three centuries, the primary mode of identity construction has not been the articulation of a national, or even an ethnic community, but rather engagement with the world of sacred history through communal consumption and production of manuscripts during pilgrimage to the shrines where those texts are kept. It concludes with the argument that this distinct identity system historically sustained a kind of imagined community that persists in an altered form through the present day. Thum is arguing for no less than a reconsideration of what history is and how it is created and sustained in dialogue with group identity.

However, this is a history that has been partly erased, and partly radically re-sited since the early years of the People’s Republic of China, when the government removed innumerable manuscripts from their shrines. Thousands of manuscripts are indeed stowed in various state offices, where they are kept under lock and key, even away from the eyes of most Chinese researchers. Many of us in the field have been permitted to see the catalogs, as Thum has, but never to actually undertake the philological work necessary for historical research. In order to approach the seemingly herculean task of engaging with Turki popular history through manuscript culture, Thum adopts a historical anthropological methodology. Not only has he conducted a close reading of a large number of texts scattered through archives and hidden in closets across the world, he has supplemented the understanding of how those manuscripts were read through his own participant observation and interviews. I will address either aspect of his methodology in turn.

Thum draws on an erudite knowledge of Persianate literature to place each text in his monumental corpus of Turki and Persian manuscripts in its appropriate historical and social context. The main sources for this book are *tazkirahs* (*tadhkirah*), legends of saints that were traditionally kept at that saint’s shrine, but could also be copied into *majmu‘as* for consumption elsewhere. *Sacred Routes* may be placed in the tradition of scholarship that engages in a large body of popular Islamicate literature, particularly local inflections of sacred history, in a way that both affirms the value of those sources and demonstrates their broader

² Étienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene* (London: Verso, 2002), 71.

³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1997).

⁴ The definitive work on the subject is now David John Brophy, “Tending to Unite?: the Origins of Uyghur Nationalism” (PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 2011).

significance to the history of religion.⁵ Sadly, the book lacks a bibliography or other guide to the manuscript sources used, the inclusion of which would have made it a useful reference work for future researchers.

At the same time, *tazkirahs* must be addressed in their social context. Thum's willingness to wed philology to anthropology is admirable and should be a model for further work on Central Asian history, a field that often bears a reflexive opposition to literary and social theory. Thum's fieldwork consisted of a series of visits to various shrines and participant observation in and of the recitation of their saints' legends, which he recalls in a series of anecdotes. We may question whether or not recitation has changed significantly over the past century, as Rachel Harris has observed of foreign influences in the case of Qur'an recitation in Uyghur villages.⁶ Nevertheless, I find this method appropriate: if Thum's goal is to approach the history of "living, believing humans, with all of their cares and aspirations" (110), and given that the textual record has been stripped out of Uyghur society, then constructing a plausible theory of how texts were used is an important step to reconstructing a historical realm of possibility. Moreover, he has done so cautiously and responsibly, providing his consultants with pseudonyms, while working under difficult circumstances. Thum confirms Ildikó Bellér-Hann's earlier arguments concerning the interaction between oral and written culture in Eastern Turkestan,⁷ and so provides vital context for future work based on manuscript sources. The approach to text is multi-tiered: there is the text, which may be oral or written, but really is simultaneously both; the book, which lends the text authority and has a physicality of its own; and the social context of the book and the text. The six chapters of *Sacred Routes* proceed as a series of explorations of these tiers.

Thum spends the first chapter delineating and introducing the corpus of Altishahri history. His goal is essentially to demonstrate, almost by sheer numbers, that the legends of local Islamic saints were the most important and plentiful textual resources that were available for people to construct their ideas of history. The argument is that, sometime during the period of Qing indirect rule following the conquest of the mid-eighteenth century, the *tazkirah* genre increased in popularity. The *tazkirahs* known from the available collections attest to a nativization and localization of popular history in this period: figures from Persian literature and legendary history became local heroes, while at the same time, the vast majority of Altishahri *tazkirahs* celebrated saints who came from elsewhere but were predestined to die in Altishahr. Thum addresses some of the peculiarities of Turki history and religion, in particular the widespread duplication of shrines from across the Islamic world, such as that of the Seven Sleepers, to be found in Turfan as well as Ephesus. Altishahri sacred history, during this period of relative isolation when the region was also stripped of central Islamic political authority, grew increasingly inward-looking, and common legends that brought central figures of Islam into this peripheral space circulated throughout it. Nevertheless, there is no historical "smoking gun" here—no source that explicitly states that Altishahris understood themselves to be inherently linked to each other and to their common history through these legends. Rather, this is Thum's first step in setting up a realm of historical

⁵ See for example Devin DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde: Baba Tükles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition* (University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994).

⁶ Rachel Harris, "Harmonizing Islam in Xinjiang: Sound and Meaning in Rural Uyghur Religious Practice" in Ildikó Bellér-Hann and Trine Brox, eds., *On the Fringes of the Harmonious Society: Tibetans and Uyghurs in Socialist China* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2014), 292-317.

⁷ Ildikó Bellér-Hann, *The Written and the Spoken: Literacy and Oral Transmission Among the Uyghur* (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 2000).

possibility, a structure of institutional opportunities for people to encounter textual resources that spoke about the past.

This opportunity structure is addressed in Chapter 2, where Thum discusses the textual practices that facilitated encounters with history. Oral recitation of texts was the norm, and this was facilitated by the vernacularization of Eastern Turkestani literature over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as people began to write in vernacular Turki rather than Persian or even formal Chaghatay. Thum argues that this kind of history produced by popular participation, which he likens to Wikipedia, denied texts semantic autonomy. At the same time, he suggests, written history itself was understood to possess ontological autonomy (88). That is, a tradition that did not clearly distinguish between oral and written forms both invited participation and communal authorship, yet aimed nonetheless at producing authoritative texts enshrined in codices. Thus we have stories of people who wanted to write a manuscript for a shrine, so that the legend of the saint would not be forgotten, while at the same time, these manuscripts are full of marginalia recording readers' interactions with them: copying them or reading them, usually as a devotional or pious act. Thum argues that the marginalia acted as a commentary on the text for other readers that guided their interpretations of the texts, and so provided opportunities for a common awareness of a bounded community of readers. Ultimately, Thum hedges his argument: "it is plausible" that community authorship lent authority to texts, but we cannot know for certain. Nor is it possible to determine the extent to which people saw themselves as participating in a broader project of reading and writing that transcended the face-to-face community.

All of this discussion is preparatory to the central historical argument of the book: at a shrine, the convergence of place, the presence of the saint, and the text narrating that saint's miraculous life provide a powerful and attractive context for participation in ritual encounters with history that is simultaneously mass and distributed, or "popular." Put another way, a shrine is the "fulcrum of history," "a locus of meaning, a fixing of meaning to a point in space" (123)—"both the context of historical practice and the very stuff of history" (96). For Thum, history is primarily a personal and communal experience in which people identify with each other and dead or distant figures through scraps of text: they meet history through the *tazkirahs*, and they meet each other through graffiti on shrine walls or marginalia in the manuscripts (147-152). *Sacred Routes* rather poetically describes the shrines of Altishahr as a constellation of loci of meaning, each member of which is separated by the vast gulf of non-place that is the Taklimakan Desert (130). That people traversed these distances to worship at common shrines and listen to their *tazkirahs* demonstrates the ability of popular practice to circumvent other barriers to the formation of large-scale identities, such as limited literacy.

Yet, Thum argues, people necessarily experience their journeys as a sort of rosary, a collection of "moments of meaning." This is certainly true and familiar to students of pilgrimage. The difference is that in Altishahr, the string is broken, and the beads lie scattered. Thum argues that in Altishahr space, or rather the experience of traveling through space, takes on the role that time possesses in "chronologically focused traditions," though it is not immediately clear what he might mean by this term (130-131). For Thum, the holistic physical experiences of shrines, each one separated by the "non-space" of the Taklimakan Desert, enforces the idea that history is made up of eternal points on the landscape, not of a coherent thread through time. Although shrine guides could send a pilgrim on a specific and well-traveled route, because each shrine is a new place formed in a particular historical moment by the death of a saint (125), they do not conspire to project a common trajectory

for an imagined community, but instead engender anarchic historical practices and a distributed identity. To put it another way, there is no common narrative for the collective subject. The typological distinction here is muddy, as Thum implicitly contrasts Altishahri pilgrimage and sacred history, not with the practices of other religious traditions, but with the ideals of nationalism. He explicitly writes against the vision of history as a series of events in “homogeneous, empty time” (202), Anderson’s characterization of nationalist historical consciousness. Nevertheless, nationalism depends both on ideas of territorial boundedness and, as a modern ideology, on a spatial metaphor of progress. A different contrast might be made with historical Japanese shrine pilgrimage, which could apparently be similarly peripatetic, but played as much of a role in reiterating hierarchy through interaction with origin legends as it did in creating *communitas*.⁸ However, it would be better simply to conclude, as Thum later does, that there is no clear boundary between the pre-modern and the modern, but rather an elision in time, space, and the sites that mediate between them.

Thum’s typological distinction as it emerges in Chapter 4 clarifies these propositions: the Altishahri identity system engendered a notion of a spatially bounded community, the borders of which corresponded to the limits of the shrine pilgrimage routes, and that was limited in time by reference to significant events inscribed on that landscape. In contrast, modern Uyghur nationalism imagines a spatially bounded community, the borders of which correspond to arbitrary boundaries that the state defines, existing in teleological developmental time. Where the Uyghur nation searches for foundational figures that support a metaphor of common descent, we may say that the Altishahri conception of history was and is “anti-genealogy,” that it sees saints as figures who make the landscape holy by their presence, not unlike a Chinese city god or a Mongol *oboo* spirit (125, 137-138). The categories “Uyghur” and “Altishahri,” so defined, are not exclusive.

Instead, history in Altishahr is “modular,” and thus is identity distributed (148). Thum disregards the historical absence of a common ethnonym for the people of this region, and he is right to be frustrated with our fetishization of names in the modern history of Xinjiang (150). Large-scale imagined communities can be conceived of, he argues, in the absence both of state-led top-down constructions of identity and bottom-up articulations of alterity (159-160).⁹ Instead, Altishahri historical practice primarily linked the community to God through historical personages. Within the bounds of the community defined largely by conflict with outsiders, particularly the Kyrgyz or Kazakhs of the mountains, pilgrimage produced a group of people who had no name for themselves, but nevertheless could articulate their common identity by drawing on that tradition. By “modularity,” Thum means that Altishahri histories could be aggregated or disaggregated in a number of ways, such that emphasis on one part did not violate the integrity of the whole. Again, there was no canon.

Two of Thum’s sub-arguments in this section are tantalizing: people bound *tazkirahs* together into *majmu‘abs* in ways that reflected their modular, sub-regional visions of community (147-148). As long as the processes of compilation remain opaque, I think, or until the vaults are finally open, we should be careful to address other possibilities suggested by book history. Similarly, Thum argues from his painstakingly collected corpus of shrine

⁸ David Moerman, “The Ideology of Landscape and the Theater of State: Insei Pilgrimage to Kumano (1090-1120),” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 24:3-4 (1997), 347-374, 350, and 362-363.

⁹ I think that Thum understates the significance of the Qing state, but he addresses it elsewhere in: “China in Islam: Turki Views from the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 12 (September 2014), 118-142.

visitors' graffiti that "the constellation of placenames on the interior walls...provided an image of the Altishahri imagined community" (152). Yet how can we know what pilgrims thought or felt? Both arguments make intuitive sense and will make excellent points of departure for future research. Meanwhile, perhaps we can say that Altishahris comprised a "social collective," a collection of individuals living under common conditions and sharing similar experiences who form a more or less homogeneous category without possessing a common identity.¹⁰ Such an analysis does not diminish the significance of Thum's findings. Rather, I think it fits *Sacred Routes* interestingly into the literature on Asian history that has lately come, under James Scott's influence, to focus more on anti-politics in spaces beyond the perception of the state and the hegemony of its categories. Indeed, Chinese officials in the Qing and early Republic seem to have been almost entirely ignorant of shrines.

Thum's broader argument is strikingly similar to the conclusion that Steven Sangren once drew from his research on temple pilgrimage, theatre, and the co-construction of community and history in Taiwan.¹¹ Sangren likewise held that people expressed the origins of their communities through the legends of deities' arrival in a given locality. This work sparked a new and ongoing line of investigation in the anthropology and sociology of religion in China focused on the ways people negotiate communal boundaries through pilgrimage to common sites and public participation in the performance of texts related to those legends. Thum's argument that shrine pilgrimage enabled the modular construction of an "our history" is reminiscent of Sangren's conclusion that "Mythologized historical events...simultaneously authenticate the power of territorial-cult deities and community boundaries."¹² We can hope that *Sacred Routes* prompts a similar resurgence of research in popular religion.

However, Thum's closer attention to manuscript culture and the multiple manifestations of community in both textual practice and ritual makes for a stronger argument less reliant on theoretical extrapolations than Sangren's. These similarities may stem from Thum and Sangren's common methodology, which combines participant observation in the present day with close textual analysis, but I think they point to interesting phenomena worth putting in comparative perspective. How might pilgrimage in the eastern Muslim world look if we consider it in terms of "catchment areas," or even borrow Chinese ritual theory to illuminate it? Thum describes shrine festivals as a critical site of identity formation (120); the similarity to temple festivals is obvious. The arrival of a foreign saint on Altishahri ground is reminiscent of "dividing incense," which similarly promotes a vision of society through a material and spiritual metaphor, but they are clearly different in ways that a scholar of religion might find interesting. Likewise, it would be worth bringing Muslim understandings of piety and saint worship to bear on cult activity in East Asia. Thum's thorough textual and ethnographic work enables us to take that next step.

Through the rest of the book, Thum argues that the main influence of the modern state on Turkic Muslim historical consciousness in Xinjiang has been to dislocate the shrine and the *tazkirah* as a fulcrum of meaning (242). It is not just that officials have put padlocks on many shrines. Reading practices have changed along with the hegemony of print culture, which has been sponsored by a series of states invested ideologically in the power of print media: first the short-lived Turkic-Islamic republic of 1933-1934, which used newspapers to

¹⁰ Iris Marion Young, "Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective," *Signs* 19:3 (Spring 1994), 713-738.

¹¹ P. Steven Sangren, *History and Magical Power in a Chinese Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

¹² *Ibid.*, 212.

propagate modernist and nationalist ideas; then by the Soviet puppet regimes of the 1930s and 1940s, during which time print became a tool of mass education; and since 1949 by the People's Republic of China. The modernist vision of history presented in print is radically discontinuous with that found in the *tazkirabs*, and this fact has been threatening to each of these nationalizing states. While the encounter with print during the half-century after 1934 was important to many Uyghurs' modern educations, that archive is disorganized and largely unexplored, and it would require an entirely new book to tackle it properly.

Instead, Thum picks up in the 1980s with two critical developments: first, the dislocation of the sacred geography of Altishahr, and second, the emergence of the biographical novel as an important means to imagine the past. Infrastructural development has sometimes followed the old roads from shrine to shrine, but often not, and gradual urbanization has meant that Uyghurs increasingly read and talk about past personages far from their tombs. The PRC has confiscated the majority of *tazkirabs*, and so when Uyghurs make pilgrimages, the physical book is often replaced with an oral or imagined text. Novels obviously belong to a different genre from *tazkirabs*, and Uyghurs tend to consume them silently, standing by the stacks for hours in a state-run bookstore, rather than orally. The ironic effect of the PRC's seizure of texts and demand for control over historical production has been a destabilization of textual authority, not its investment in official print media (206-207). Uyghurs generally have no faith in official accounts and so draw on whatever is available to them to articulate an Uyghur "our history."

This change in technologies has not made for a revolution in self-conception. Thum reminds us that the nation-in-a-bottle project of the PRC is incomplete, that the national identity system is far from becoming dominant. Instead, we must understand modern "Uyghur" identity as one that draws on multiple sources and practices, including most vitally the modes of Islamic piety described throughout the book. The balance between text, place, and personage has merely shifted: historical and legendary figures live in the pages of biographical novels, but these incorporate forms from other genres, including the *tazkirah*. One is reminded of the introduction to the celebrated Uyghur novel *Iz*, which is half historical fiction, half history textbook: it presents the image of a dome raised over the grave of Tömür Khälpä, a foundational figure of the modern Uyghur national struggle, which has now been buried beneath a middle school. In light of Thum's argument, the novel appears plainly as a new shrine, not to an Islamizer, but to a "saint of the nation": "We certainly must raise a dome for Tömür Khälpä!"¹³ There is no clear break between sacral and national identities, but an elision between forms of narrative and systems of memory. At the same time, the popular Uyghur mode of engaging with history in the present day is defined in large part by the modes of cultural production the state permits, in particular the elevation of model individuals. Thum puts it poignantly: "An archipelago of history was replaced by a portrait gallery" (208).

Thum thus sets up an interesting typological and historical problem. What is the relationship between manuscript and print, and between reading and orality, when print is controlled and promoted not by capitalists, but by an authoritarian and nominally communist state? There is surely an opportunity for future scholarship to look closely at the histories of education, reading, and cultural production in modern Xinjiang. Meanwhile, *Sacred Routes* will serve as a point of reference and debate for future work on Xinjiang history over the past three centuries. It is an insightful and challenging work that has tackled several longstanding problems in the field. Thum brings significant erudition to bear on his textual

¹³ Abdurëhim Ötkür, *Iz* (Ürümchi: Shinjang Khälpä Nëshriyati, 1995), 6.

work, which is detailed and comprehensive, as well as a laudable attention to practice and social context. Moreover, *Sacred Routes* can inform new directions in contemporary anthropological scholarship on Xinjiang, which has by necessity concerned itself mainly with national identity in urban areas, yet maintains an abiding interest in non-national identity systems. Thum's anthropology-in-history reconstructs modes of interaction in ritual encounters with text and their effects on consciousness. Through this focus on how people experience history intimately, he demonstrates not the radical newness of being Uyghur, but the subtle ways that Altishahri piety informs the ongoing process of identification.

Eric T. Schluessel
PhD Candidate, History and East Asian Languages
Harvard University

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