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Edited by
Svetlana Jacquesson

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Oasis history in eastern Xinjiang: a contested field

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Interdisciplinary research into narratives has enjoyed an unabated upsurge for decades, with numerous studies connecting storytelling to collective memory. In this chapter I explore further the interrelatedness between social action and knowledge practices in a specific context in northwest China in order to gauge how, despite considerable constraints on freedom of expression, local intellectuals continue to engage in the creative process of historical production by mobilising diverse narrative strategies.¹

The Uyghurs, a Turkic speaking Muslim group living today in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) have been, ever since the “peaceful liberation” of this region in 1949, firmly incorporated into the People’s Republic of China.² However, incorporation does not mean integration and, after more than half a century of Chinese socialism and more than 250 years of Chinese colonial domination, relations to the majority Han and to the Chinese political centre today are more strained than ever. Officially recognised as a minority and the target of preferential policies under socialist minority policies, Uyghurs nonetheless experience ethnic discrimination in practically all areas of life, from the labour market to religious and cultural expression. Since autonomy is nominal, they are prevented from meaningful participation in decision-making at all administrative levels. Numerous scholars have demonstrated how, as part of the legitimation struggle between the Chinese state and the Uyghur minority, history has been mobilised by actors on both sides (Benson 1996; Bovingdon 2001, 2010; Bovingdon and Tursun 2004). While Gardner Bovingdon’s work is framed by the parameters of Uyghur-Han opposition at the regional level, this chapter focuses on depictions of sub-regional events by local authors for a local audience.

Taking the example of the oasis of Qumul (Chinese: Hami) in Eastern Xinjiang, I have recently argued that, even though local publications are required by and large

1 I am grateful to the participants of the workshop *History Making in Central and Inner Asia* held in Halle on February 22-23, 2013, and to the graduate students of Harvard University at the meeting on *New Directions in Central and Inner Asian History* (Capstone Conference, Cambridge, MA, April 30, 2014) for their insightful comments which have contributed to improving this paper. My special thanks are due to the anonymous reviewers’ comments. Finally, I would also like to thank the Institute for Advanced Study at Nantes where the writing-up of this material took place for providing excellent working conditions.

2 Historians of Xinjiang tend to refer to the “peaceful liberation” of the region in inverted commas because this represents the official stance of Chinese historiography, see, e.g., Millward 2007: 231.

to follow the contours of the hegemonic national narrative, they also constitute a platform where historical knowledge is actively produced, transmitted and in covert ways contested (Bellér-Hann 2012b). I have proposed that in contemporary Xinjiang history-making acquires somewhat more latitude when it moves away from the grand narrative of national and regional history and zooms in onto small-scale, local events or into genres of fiction. The present chapter pushes this argument further. Attributing more space to the *petits récits* in the spirit of Jean-François Lyotard (2010) does not mean replacing the grand narrative by smaller histories: rather, the aim is to connect the two by exploring the processes through which historical discourses (in dialogue with collective memory) emerge under specific political conditions, simultaneously replicating and challenging the hegemonic metanarrative, and revealing the instability and ideological framing of the latter.

Thus the chapter will demonstrate how the authors of these local histories construct historical knowledge, turning ostensibly small events of local relevance into an indispensable part of the larger narrative of regional and even national significance. Both in content and in methodology, the types of narratives with which I am concerned here are situated at the interface of the state-sponsored master narrative and locally circulating oral accounts. Typically, their authors promote carefully crafted versions of past events which do not overtly challenge the truths propagated in official histories. But, just as a closer look at the classificatory division between oral and written reveals a certain messiness, it is difficult to maintain a clear-cut separation of official narratives from alternative accounts. It will be argued that official and local accounts may rely heavily on each other for factual information and on occasion both draw on the authority of similar methods of data collection. Authors using the same genre and the same publication platform may put forward diverse interpretations of the same basic facts by situating their respective narratives vis-à-vis the master narrative differently. Contestation thus takes place not in relation to the truth-value of specific events but through the skilful deployment of diverse narrative strategies, which have the potential to speak to contemporary agendas and shape group identities in the present.

The event I examine is a “peasant rebellion.”³ I begin by situating narratives of such rebellions in pertinent scholarly literature, also at the specific regional and sub-regional levels. The main part of the chapter consists of an analysis of three narratives of the so-called Köshütä rebellion, which took place three years before the incorporation of Xinjiang into the People’s Republic in 1949. I then connect these accounts to the regional and national master narratives and highlight their significance for regional and ethnic identities.

3 I am aware that “peasant” is a problematic term, not least because of its possible pejorative connotations. Nevertheless, I have opted for using it throughout, partly, because many scholars continue to agree on its usefulness as a sociological concept (e.g., Owen 2005, Spencer 2002) and also since this is the term used by all authors cited in this paper. The concept is also an official one in modern China, and the Uyghur equivalent, *dikhan* is the preferred term used by Uyghur farmers today for self-identification.

Situating narratives of peasant rebellions

In the wake of the reforms introduced by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s following Mao Zedong's death in 1976, which marked the end of the collectivised period, numerous texts about regional and local histories started appearing in China and also in Xinjiang. With the explicit aim of reaching the titular minority of the XUAR, a great bulk of these publications has appeared in Uyghur, either originally written in this language or translated from Chinese. This outpouring of historical works still goes on today and would deserve a study on its own right. This popularising of history taking place on the margins of educational and academic institutions is in itself evidence that historical knowledge is considered an important tool in governing the region and maintaining its status quo: it is also an important constituent of the broader policy of promoting minority culture, history and language. At the same time, such publications also serve as an ideological tool propagating a nationalist view of history, according to which Xinjiang has always been an inalienable part of China and promote the idea of national unity to which ethnic diversity is subordinated. Among the authors of such regional and local histories we find bona fide academics of Han, Uyghur, and other ethnic affiliation. But the production of historical knowledge is also the concern of many local intellectuals in the broadest sense of the word, including self-appointed or hobby historians, cultural cadres, teachers, translators and journalists. Often local journals and book series with either a regional (Xinjiang) or a sub-regional (oasis) focus provide a platform for their activities. These organs are typically published in Uyghur or/and in Chinese, sometimes the same text appearing in both languages at different times. This paper is only concerned with writings published in Uyghur because these are more likely consumed by Uyghurs themselves. Regardless of authorship, these publications are subject to censorship and are produced for internal consumption only, i.e. for the Uyghur "textual community" (Stock 1983).⁴ They appear to occupy a middle ground between mainstream official histories and opposing views even if the latter, if publicised at all, quickly become silenced.⁵

In the oasis of Qumul the main platform for such publications is provided by the series called *Historical Materials Pertaining to the City of Qumul* (*Qumul shähri tarikh materiyyalliri*) which has been published since 1988.⁶ The articles in question

4 This is made clear on the front page of such publications, the implication in the context of Xinjiang being that it is an offence to pass these (officially sanctioned) works on to foreigners. These "internal" (Chinese: *neibu*) publications comprise diverse materials such as scholarly publications and reference works which, however, cannot always be regarded as "secret" or "classified" in the western sense (Wu 1993: 272-273). They also include numerous works dealing with "sensitive" historical topics. On the complexities but also confusion and contingencies concerning such publications, see Hunt and Westad 1990, Cowhig 2006.

5 For a well-known example of such silencing of alternative historical views, see the case of Turghun Almas in Rudelson 1997: 157-159, Millward 2007: 344, Bovingdon 2010: 97.

6 Such local history series are published in other large oases as well. Their regional equivalent is the *Historical Materials Pertaining to Xinjiang* (*Shinjiang tarikh materiyyalliri*) which also include numerous articles referring specifically to events in Qumul.

deal with diverse subjects ranging from the history of saintly shrines to the description of archaeological sites and the lives of locally prominent personalities, but it is possible to identify two dominant topics: 1) the history of the local Turkic-speaking Muslim dynasty (*wang*) who ruled the oasis over 250 years and 2) the history of peasant rebellions which repeatedly shook the oasis in the first half of the 20th century. From a more inclusive historical perspective the two strands are closely connected, since two of the best-known rebellions took place under *wang* rule and the third one emerged in the wake of the demise of this Muslim dynasty. While attempts to evaluate the historical role of the *wang* in these publications have been discussed elsewhere (Bellér-Hann 2012a, 2012b), the focus of this chapter is on selected narratives concerning a peasant revolt in the oasis of Qumul.⁷

Much of China's history can be told in terms of recurrent expressions of rural discontent assuming the form of social movements, rebellions and riots (Chesneaux 1973, Little 1989).⁸ Protests erupting in the first half of the 20th century in the oasis of Qumul in Eastern Xinjiang are generally framed as peasant rebellions of regional relevance (Forbes 1986, Benson 1990, Millward 2007). The locally authored publications mentioned above also take these uprisings as a unit of enquiry, drawing the temporal limit around 1930, which marks the end of the 250 year long rule of the Wang over the Qumul Emirate (Hami Huiwang Jianshi Writing Group 2004).⁹ International and local scholars usually list three waves of rural protests, corresponding to the rebellions evoked by oral tradition today. The first such event took place in 1907 and became known as the Torpaqlar rebellion, named after the lineage to which the three brothers who started and led the uprising belonged. The second is dated to 1912 and was named after its main leader, Tömür Khälpä. The third rebellion in the oasis flared up in 1931 and had wide-ranging significance for the history of the whole of Xinjiang; in addition to roughly coinciding with the end of the Qumul Emirate, it also constituted the prelude to the general unrest across the whole region which eventually led to the proclamation of the first independent East Turkestan Republic (1933-1934), modern Uyghurs' first attempt to achieve political independence from China.

These rebellions resembled numerous peasant insurrections taking place elsewhere in and outside China in the course of history; they were directed against exploitative landlords' excessive demands and they all proved unsuccessful, ending tragically with retaliation and the bloody execution of the rebel leaders. During fieldwork in 2006-2007, I frequently heard brief references to these uprisings. Individual rebel leaders such as Tömür Khälpä and Khoja Niyaz Haji are prominent in collective memory and oral tradition. Judging from research on

7 A more detailed discussion of local historical narratives is in preparation.

8 In spite of the high frequency and significance of such uprisings in both imperial and socialist China, the waves of unrest which took place in China's northwest in the 19th century are often discussed with reference to the religious adherence of the rioters (Kim 2004, Millward 2007). Jonathan Lipman's analysis (1997) of the rebellions among the Chinese Muslims in the northwest goes against the grain when he demonstrates that, among the multiple causes of these insurgencies, the role of religion was in fact insignificant.

9 I thank Äsäd Sülaiman for his translation of the Chinese language materials.

peasant uprisings elsewhere, it is likely that local and regional archives contain much relevant information about peasant discontent among non-Han groups also in Xinjiang. Such documents may include rural petitions and administrators' reports concerning measures taken against the peasantry.¹⁰ At present such archival materials are inaccessible to foreign researchers (Benson 1992a). In the absence of contemporary primary sources, these works are the only available documents which currently serve both as our guides to what happened and how it happened. Equally important is that they also hold the key to understanding processes of history-making in contemporary Xinjiang, which is the main concern of this chapter.

The Köshütä Rebellion

Perusal of these materials reveals one particular outburst of discontent which has not been discussed by international scholarship and which figures less prominently in regional histories. The so-called Köshütä Peasant Rebellion took place in 1946 and therefore falls outside the era of the Qumul Emirate. It took place at the time when representatives of the Chinese Nationalist Party (GMD) and the Uyghur leaders of the second East Turkestan Republic (ETR),¹¹ proclaimed in the wake of the Three Districts Revolution in Northern Xinjiang in 1944, formed a coalition government (Millward 2007: 215-21). The Kazakh Osman Batur broke away from the ETR and led his followers to the Altay and Tian Shan Mountains where they "received covert military aid from the GMD" (id., 221).¹² Three years later, in 1949, the People's Liberation Army entered Xinjiang which subsequently became incorporated into the People's Republic of China. It is at this particular historical juncture between the second, unsuccessful attempt at independence by Xinjiang's minorities and the Chinese communist annexation of the region that the series of events known as the Köshütä Peasant Rebellion is temporally situated.

So far I have found the story told in three different versions: the shortest is also the most recent one. It appeared in the multi-authored official *Handbook of Qumul Prefecture (Qumul wilayiti täzkirisi, 2005)*.¹³ Compared to the other two, it represents a minimalist, skeletal version of the events.

The other two accounts predate the *Handbook*. They were published eleven years apart from each other and can be considered alternative elaborations of the same series of events, one by a Han author Chen Shiti (1991) and one by an Uyghur, Eli Imin (2002). Chen's work was most likely translated into Uyghur from the original Chinese which had been published previously.¹⁴ Apart from his name and ethnic affiliation we learn nothing about the Chinese author's academic cre-

10 Cf. for India Walthall 1983, Amin 1995, Chattervedi 2007.

11 Xinjiang's minorities' second attempt to achieve autonomy.

12 On Osman Batur, see Jacobs 2010.

13 Hence referred to as the *Handbook*.

14 For the Chinese version, see *Hami shi wenshi ziliao*, 1989, vol. 3, pp. 114-125.

dentials or social background from this publication.¹⁵ More helpful is the Uyghur author, Imin's text, which is narrated in the form of a memoir and which reveals some personal information. In spite of this discrepancy, the two articles can be considered as comparable sources for a number of reasons. Both were composed in the reform period starting in the 1980s and are therefore the products of an era when minority cultural production started to be again encouraged, albeit within carefully drawn parameters. Both appeared in the series *Historical Materials Pertaining to the City of Qumul*, both classify the event as a peasant rebellion and both delve into details. The existence of such rare parallel texts allows us to gain an insight into locally available tactics of history-making.¹⁶

The following summary of the Köshütä Rebellion has been extracted from the three texts, mentioned above. All three start by situating the event into the broader historical context. Following the departure of the Chinese warlord, Sheng Shicai from Xinjiang in 1944, the leadership of the Three Districts Revolution and the nationalists (GMD) reached a compromise realised in a coalition government at the regional level, which, however, remained fragile. The "bandits" of the Kazakh Osman Batur, who broke away from the ETR and started cooperating with the Chinese nationalists, were causing trouble for the rural Uyghur and Kazakh communities of the eastern Tian Shan, stealing their animals and making unreasonable demands. In the wake of the farmers' complaints, the Chinese governor of Qumul together with other high-ranking civil administrators encouraged the rural population of two rural mountain districts (Tian Shan and Ghärbī Tagh) to organise their own self-defence groups, supplying them with weapons and gunpowder. Two specific events antagonising the Uyghur and the Kazakh populations respectively, served as trigger.

One day in July 1946, four or five GMD soldiers entered the house of an Uyghur farmer in the village of Namdawan and demanded hospitality. Under pressure, the farmer slaughtered a sheep and fed his uninvited visitors, who then gang-raped his daughter (in Chen's version; in Imin's version it was his wife) on his land, while letting their horses loose on his barley field, which destroyed the crop. The following day the farmer went to Siyit Qurban, the headman of the Tian Shan rural district, to place a complaint. Siyit, together with some other leading figures of the area, decided to take revenge and mobilised the vigilante troops under his command. Soon they were joined by others. They attacked the barracks of the local GMD troops stationed at the village of Köshütä but were soon forced to withdraw because, compared to the soldiers, they were too few and poorly armed. Siyit

15 But there is circumstantial evidence to suggest that Chen, today in his mid-70s, grew up in Qumul and used to be a teacher before becoming a cultural official. In this capacity he carried out substantial research on Kazakh folklore. I thank Joshua Freeman for this information.

16 Although I have been unable to investigate the reception of these specific texts, my fieldwork in Qumul indicates that such publications are very popular among local Uyghur and knowledge generated in these works trickles down to those who have not themselves read the texts, but heard verbal renderings of them and participated in informal discussions about them. Thus these texts have the potential to influence and shape the collective memory of the Uyghur textual community in Qumul, using narratives as a cultural tool.

asked for the help of the Kazakh Onanbay from Ghärbi Tagh. This was an opportune moment for such a request, since the Kazakhs themselves had recently suffered atrocities in the hands of the GMD soldiers: the latter had driven away a large number of their herds and when the herders demanded their animals back, they were beaten and driven away, while some of their animals were slaughtered, and others branded with the seal of the military.¹⁷

Joining forces, the Kazakh and Uyghur rebels, whose ranks included the respective vigilante groups and other volunteers, repeatedly attacked the GMD troops. Chen and Imin describe four main episodes of clashes, most of which took the form of guerrilla attacks. Since the rebels were badly equipped foot soldiers unable to match the enemy's military strength and training, they opted for forays against small groups of soldiers among the mountains, in a terrain where they could use their local knowledge to their best advantage. Each episode ends with the rebels withdrawing to the mountains after having caused considerable loss to the enemy. Wishing to put an end to these armed conflicts, the local government in Qumul tried to persuade the rebel leaders to go to the oasis centre to negotiate, but the latter repeatedly refused. Only after Uyghur members of the coalition government, including Burhan Shahidi and Abdulkerim Abbas,¹⁸ personally visited the rebel leaders, could they be persuaded to leave the safety of the mountains and attend a meeting in town. These negotiations ended with the rebel leaders being taken to the provincial capital Urumchi for "education." All three texts conclude with a happy ending which followed the "peaceful liberation" of Xinjiang by the communists: the most important former rebel leaders were offered leading administrative positions in Qumul and the regional administration.

All three accounts, including the most recent and most skeletal one published anonymously in the *Handbook* include the following sequence of events:

1. setting the scene (exploitation and subsequent suffering of local people by GMD soldiers)
2. ensuing chaos (the setting up of vigilante groups)
3. specific events which served as triggers for the rebellion

17 The potential or realised aggression against local Muslim women committed by Han soldiers can also be found in renderings of a famous episode which allegedly served as a trigger for the Qumul rebellion in 1930. Justin Jacobs doubts whether this incident ever took place, mostly, because "...it is not mentioned in the reports of anyone present on the scene" (Jacobs 2011: 259). The same doubt can be cast over the rape incident ostensibly serving as a trigger to the Köshütä rebellion. Whether such accounts have merely been added as narrative devices or have a kernel of truth remains unclear but they do serve as powerful metaphors for interethnic conflict over resources and are also apt illustrations of interethnic sensitivities which were often, no doubt, violated. I would hesitate to entirely dismiss the possibility of such events having taken place merely based on the absence of eyewitness accounts, since, as is well-known (also from more recent conflicts in former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, etc.), rape is often used by the more powerful as a deliberate device for self-assertion and the humiliation of the other. Even if they were not timed as neatly as narrators would like us have it, such events may have taken place around the major events, as it were; it can be no accident that such accounts conform to the narrative structure of peasant rebellions more generally (Wolf 1969).

18 Well-known figures of the ETR. For brief autobiographical summaries, see Forbes 1986: 235, 237.

4. episodes of fighting
5. efforts of reconciliation by local government officials
6. persuading the rebels to negotiate
7. peace agreement drawn up
8. rebel leaders sent to Urumchi for education
9. system change (communist victory), rebel leaders awarded with high positions

In what follows the narrative specificities of each text will be introduced in relation to one another.

Narrative strategies in specific stories

In introducing the three renderings in more detail, the Uyghur author, Imin's account (2002) will precede the summary of Chen's version (1992). This inversion of the chronological order is due to my decision to privilege the narrator's proximity to his narrative. Following this logic, Imin's work, the only eyewitness account of the three, will be placed first, even though it was published 11 years *after* Chen's version.

An Uyghur author's account (2002)

Significantly, the Uyghur author, Imin, tells the story from the insider's perspective, and emphasises his personal involvement in the events already with his title: *Memoirs Pertaining to the Rebellion of the Peasants of Qumul, Köshütä* (*Qumul Köshötä dikhqanlar qozghilingi toghrisida äslimä*). Eighteen years of age at the time of the events, the author was both an eyewitness and a participant. He hailed from the village of Nerin, which became the rebels' headquarters; furthermore, his credibility as an author is strengthened by his close affinal relations to one of the rebel leaders: he was brother-in-law of Siyit Qurban (Imin 2002: 190-191). Imin narrates the events alternating between the first person singular and first person plural, the first emphasising his eyewitness status, the second his active participation and identification with the rebels and their cause. Like Chen, he also stresses the inspiration emanating from the victories of the Three Districts Revolution over the GMD troops. He specifically names the misrule of the Chinese warlord Sheng Shicai as the main cause of the rebellion (*ibid.*), as well as considerations of Uyghur *realpolitik*. One of his knowledgeable relatives, a person who had studied in Tashkent and participated in the Three Districts Revolution, warned that the People's Liberation Army was expanding its power and "if we don't rebel now against the GMD, then we will be left behind" (*id.*, 193). Like Chen, Imin also admits that the Köshütä Rebellion was short, but he assess its significance by stating that "the rebels fought with resourcefulness and courage, frightened the GMD troops stationed in Qumul and demonstrated the strength of ordinary people" (*id.*, 190-191).

The rebels are described as Uyghur farmers and Kazakh pastoralists, many of whom knew little about the outside world, urbanisation and technological innova-

tion; this ignorance is described with the humorous affection of the insider. One episode (missing from Chen's account below) depicts the rebels capturing of a car from the military. They did not trust the captured enemy to drive but most of them had never even seen a car before, let alone be able to drive one. Eventually one of the rebels who had worked in Urumchi briefly in 1936 and who had some knowledge of cars undertook the driving (Imin 2002: 197-198). Another episode concerned the preparations made by the rebels in anticipation of the visit by members of the coalition government leadership. Afraid that, upon seeing how few and how badly equipped and trained they were, the visitors might decide to send a strong army against them, they entrusted the narrator, Imin, who had had some military training in his secondary school in Urumchi, to drill the peasant soldiers. They also prepared fake weapons made of wood for soldiers standing in the second row as they lined up to greet the high-ranking delegation (id., 206-207). Such details are entirely missing from the Chinese account to be introduced below.

The Uyghur author describes in detail how members of the local Qumul government went into great lengths to persuade the rebel leaders to leave the mountains and go to the city of Qumul to negotiate. The rebel leaders refused because they knew from the experience of previous rebellions that such an invitation could be a trap. After three attempts to persuade them to leave the mountains had failed, the fourth attempt, when members of the coalition government visited them, succeeded (id., 204-209). In this we recognise the well-known narrative technique of intensification and the use of the magic number three, both characteristic of Uyghur folk tales. Imin also emphasises the rebels' identification with the mountains: only here did they feel safe. It was here that they preferred to face the enemy, where they had the advantage of familiarity with the terrain over the GMD soldiers, who were Han outsiders. The Uyghur account provides details of how the agreement drawn up to conclude the rebellion was violated by the other side. Five of the rebel leaders, among them a woman, Razikhan, wife of Siyit, were arrested immediately after their arrival in Urumchi; Imin tells how the clever and resourceful Razikhan managed to get out of prison and found Ahmätjan Qasimi, at the time vice chairman of the Regional Government and a leading figure of the East Turkestan Republic. Following several failed attempts to have the prisoners released, Ahmätjan Qasimi appealed to the authority of the President and Vice-President of the coalition government (id., 209-210). Imin also describes the interrogation the rebel leaders had to endure and their heroic behaviour (id., 211-212). After their release, Ahmätjan Qasimi praised the rebel leaders, attaching the honorific term *batur* to their names (id., 213). Imin goes on to explain how they were later received with open arms in Ghulja by the temporary government of the Three Districts Revolution (id., 214).

Imin then relates how, in a further breach of the peace agreement, following the main leaders' departure the secondary rebel leaders left behind in the mountains were subjected to persecution. The GMD troops encircled the armed rebels and used various strategies to try to make them leave the mountains, which included threatening their families and forcing the religious dignitaries to take an oath on the Koran when questioned about the rebels' whereabouts. This did not yield any result. Throughout the three months' long encirclement, the inhabitants of the rural

district of Ghärbi Tagh supplied the rebels with the necessary provisions. The siege came to an end only when, following elections to choose the governor of Qumul, the GMD troops were withdrawn from the oasis altogether (Imin 2002: 214-216). In the Uyghur author's narrative the rebels appear as noble freedom fighters who, after killing their enemies, carried their bodies to a suitable place in order to bury them. They also distributed the food confiscated from the military among ordinary people. When encircled and persecuted in the mountains, they were in turn secretly provided for by ordinary villagers. In this way, the rebellion is shown to have served to further cement existing solidarity and community ties (id., 215).

A Chinese author's account (1991)

Chen's account was published in the journal *Historical Materials Pertaining to the City of Qumul*, in 1991, therefore it precedes the Uyghur version by eleven years. The author introduces the Köshütä Rebellion as the fourth in the sequence of Qumul's famous peasant rebellions. He explains that, although "this rebellion was short and its dimensions small, it made a definite impact on the history of Qumul" (Chen 1991: 81). Chen meticulously names his sources and simultaneously establishes the reliability of his account. All his data is derived from personal interviews. He visited and talked to numerous surviving participants and relatives of the leaders of the revolt. He adds that, in spite of this, his account remains incomplete because many eyewitnesses and participants had died by the time of his data collection (id., 81-82). Chen explains how the people of Xinjiang were inspired by the Three Districts Revolution, and, how the revolutionaries of the latter were supported by the Chinese Communist Party. The CCP secretly sent its propagandists all over Xinjiang to enlist their help against the GMD. One of the Uyghur protagonists, Döwlätkhan, was also visited by such a propagandist, named Yüsüp,¹⁹ who explained how the official agreement signed by the GMD and the leadership of the Three Districts Revolution was bound to be broken soon and how, when the two sides were once again in open conflict, weapons would be sent from the Altay district to Qumul (id., 85).

Chen mentions three rebel leaders by name, Siyit, Onanbay and Döwlätkhan and proceeds to introduce Döwlätkhan in more detail (Chen 1991: 92). Here he interrupts the storyline and uses the narrative technique of flash-forward to tell his readers how, following the communists' victory in 1949, Döwlätkhan first became appointed deputy director of Xinjiang's Political Affairs, and after 1953 he served as deputy director of the Security Department of Qumul Prefecture. Chen emphasises that because Döwlätkhan hailed from Chöchäk, i.e. northern Xinjiang, he had for long known Ahmätjan Qasimi,²⁰ the legendary leader of the Three Districts Revolution, and that under the influence of this revolution he had come to hate the degenerate behaviour manifested in robbery and plunder of the GMD adherents. It

19 An Uyghur, judging by his name.

20 On Qasimi, see Forbes 1986: 236, Benson 1992b.

was on his initiative that contact was established with Yüsüp, the communist propagandist (id., 93).

In elaborating on the Kazakhs' discontent, the Chinese author adds an episode entirely missing from Imin's account. According to this, the Kazakh rebel leader, Onanbay, was visited by a Han surnamed Sang, fluent in both Uyghur and Kazakh, who wished to persuade Onanbay to go to Qumul to negotiate. Onanbay refused, and a thorough interrogation revealed that, had Onanbay accepted the invitation, he would have been killed in Qumul. Sang had received instructions to kill Onanbay and take his head back to Qumul if he could not persuade him to go to Qumul. Following his confessions, the rebels tied the spy on the back of a camel and took him to the entrance of the hamlet of Köshütä where he was killed (Chen 1991: 91, 94). Chen describes another scene also missing from Imin's account: when, following the killing of the Chinese spy Sang, the Kazakhs wished to pull out of the rebellion and return to their villages Siyit, the Uyghur leader objected by saying: "We have been in this together, now you Kazakhs want to leave with your camels, we Uyghurs, how should we move our adobe houses?" Upon hearing these words, the Kazakh Onanbay changed his mind and agreed to continue to honour their alliance against the GMD (id., 95). The inclusion of this episode suggests that the Uyghur-Kazakh alliance might have been very fragile indeed. Chen then relates the cold-blooded killing of the Chinese Sang and the shooting of the hated officer Liu Lian Zhang by the rebels. While Chen mentions that, following the rebellion, the rebel leaders were habitually referred to as *batur* (hero), he does not trace the application of this epithet to the rebel leaders to Ahmätjan Qasimi, as we find in Imin's text. In contrast to Imin, his otherwise detailed account makes only a cursory reference to the role played by Ahmätjan Qasimi in the Köshütä events (id., 83, 106).

At the same time, Chen's narrative contains a number of striking quotations attributed to various characters about the rebels, which are invariably pejorative and range from the mildly disapproving to the humiliating. In the episode where the Kazakh leader Onanbay is persuaded by his Uyghur counterpart, Siyit, to continue co-operation and their joint fight against the GMD, the two leaders reconfirm their alliance by slaughtering a sheep and ritually dipping their fingers in a cup containing the slaughtered animal's blood before taking an oath. According to Chen, this served as a basis for the rumour which later spread in Qumul, according to which "the mountain thieves performed black magic" (Chen 1991: 95). In describing a demonstration taking place in the city centre of Qumul, in the ensuing chaos an unknown person denigrated the rebel leaders calling them "thieves." Yolwas,²¹ the famous local political figure is also quoted to have referred to the rebels as thieves (id., 98). Chen skilfully repeats such negative depictions of the rebels, but always in quotation marks, thus keeping a distance from the negative evaluations as befits an impartial historian.

21 Cf. Forbes 1986: 254, Millward 2007: 192-194.

Qumul wilayiti täzkirisi (2005)

The story is related in the large, two-volume *Qumul wilayiti täzkirisi* under the heading “Military affairs” (Qumul wilayitlik täzkirä komiteti 2005). This *Handbook* follows the imperial genre of gazetteer, a geographical index which provides a wide range of eclectic information about specific localities.²² The anonymous author(s) make no reference to their sources of information. In so far as the section makes passing reference to the conflict between the GMD forces and local farmers, expressions of discontent and the elevation of the rebel leaders to important political positions after the communists’ victory, it does tell the same story; but, compared to the other two accounts, it does so in a cursory manner, presenting a chain of events following each other in temporal sequence, without recourse to a wider range of narrative devices, a plot, with a well-defined beginning, middle and end, connections made between the events and an identifiable narrative voice (Wertsch 1997: 11).²³ While its factual statements do not disagree with the other two accounts, it lacks numerous details and embellishments used in the latter. For example, it fails to mention the rape of the Uyghur woman which served as a direct trigger to the Uyghurs’ uprising. Nor does it make any mention of the arrest and interrogation of the rebel leaders included in the Uyghur author’s work. Since this narrative was published later than the other two, its anonymous author(s) are likely to have made ample use of the previous articles.²⁴ In this case, we can be certain that the selection and omission of details are deliberate.

Analysis

We can be certain that Imin was familiar with Chen’s account. Not only did the latter appear in the same series some years previously, but the similarity of the wording of some corresponding parts of the two accounts also point to this. The incident in Namdawan which served as one of the two main triggers of the rebellion follows the Chinese author’s account almost word by word, the one difference being that where Chen states that it was the Uyghur farmer’s daughter who was raped, Imin claims that his wife was the victim. There is also a close correspondence between the two accounts concerning the rendering of the theft of the Kazakhs’ herds. As mentioned above, it is also likely that the *Handbook* published in 2005 also draws on these previous accounts. Such “intertextual practices” may therefore explain why the list of the main themes drawn up on the basis of the *Handbook* article so closely coincides with the main themes of the other two narratives as well. Its skeletal rendering corresponds more closely with Chen’s inasmuch as it also keeps quiet about the arrest and interrogation of the rebel leaders.

22 Its Uyghur title, *täzkirä*, evokes a well-known genre in the Islamic context, which referred to a memorandum or an anthology of biographies.

23 It therefore corresponds closely to the genre of the “chronicle” as defined by Wertsch (1997: 10), following Hayden White.

24 My assumption is based on the personal observation that often local intellectuals have been involved in the production of both official and local histories, see Bellér-Hann 2012b.

Both the Chinese and the Uyghur authors lay exclusive claim to the authority of local oral tradition rather than relying on the authority of archival sources, through which they identify themselves as the chroniclers of the people, rather than as professional historians. The Chinese author claims to have interviewed numerous local people who participated in the event. The Uyghur author, on the other hand, was closely related to several of the rebel leaders and presents his historical knowledge in the form of personal memoirs. Although Chen has more distance to the events and this apparently neutral stance lends his writing the aura of a more scholarly piece, in line with the accepted norms of these publications, his work includes neither references to any other published texts, nor does it reveal anything about the author himself. The same is true of Imin's article, which uses the first person (singular alternating with the plural) throughout the narrative but makes no claim to be a neutral scholarly piece. This is a passionate and openly biased account of an eyewitness who clearly identifies with the rebels and their cause throughout. Through listing some of his close relatives who actively participated in the events, and one who had been educated in the Soviet Union, Imin also situates himself in the complicated political landscape of the times, siding with the educated, enlightened pro-Soviet Uyghur intelligentsia, who were typically supporters of the Three Districts Revolution and, by extension, of the East Turkestan Republic.

The considerable overlap in the narration of the specific events listed in the summary above has already been pointed out. Using Louis O. Mink's work as his point of departure, James Wertsch has drawn attention to the difference between propositional truth ("the truth of individual propositions") and narrative truth ("that applies to the ensemble of relationships") which are simultaneously present in one and the same narrative (Wertsch 1997: 12; Mink 1978). Applying these distinctions to the materials presented here, the commonalities and divergences between the Chinese and the Uyghur authors' texts are all the more remarkable and appear as strategies employed to allow for two different interpretations of the same events. There appears little disagreement between the two accounts over propositional truths. However, the narrative truths of the accounts appear to be contested, albeit in subtle ways, through differences in emplotment, using techniques of expanding the series of events which do not fundamentally alter the storyline but considerably modify it.

The arrest and persecution of the rebel leaders and their followers, in breach of the peace agreement are elaborated in the Uyghur account but are omitted entirely from the Chinese author's work. Chen simply relates how the rebel leaders were persuaded to leave the mountains and flew to the regional capital Urumchi, where they were received by Ahmätjan Qasimi, then went on to Ghulja in northern Xinjiang, from where they returned to Qumul in 1949 following the occupation of Xinjiang by the People's Liberation Army. The Chinese author's account lacks details concerning the important role played by Ahmätjan Qasimi in securing the main rebel leaders' release from prison in Urumchi just as it says nothing about the clever escape of Razikhan, the Uyghur woman from prison, narrated in detail by the Uyghur author (Imin 2002: 211-213).

I suggest that the specific details of the Chinese and Uyghur authors' accounts are intentionally used as tools to influence the text and through it collective

memory to which they both appeal as a major source. Where Chen acknowledges causal links between the Köshütä Rebellion and the Three Districts Revolution, Imin considers the former a constituent part of the latter.²⁵ The Uyghur author foregrounds the rebels' resourcefulness, intelligence and strength and sees their motivation in their striving for social justice, which is lacking in Chen's account. Imin celebrates the rebels' heroism even when he apologetically repeats that their withdrawal was due to their limited numbers and bad equipment, or in his depiction of Razikhan's escape. In the scene where the rebel leaders are interrogated, they are told: "You have killed numerous government soldiers in Qumul. How much money did you expect in return?" To this provocative question Siyit Qurban immediately replied: "We did not think such a thing. We rebelled for justice, because we could not endure the oppression by the GMD any more..." (Imin 2002: 212). Imin also extolls the key role played by Ahmätjan Qasimi, while he refers to Burhan Shahidi, another leading Uyghur politician of the time in a neutral tone. The contrasting narrative treatments of the two politicians accurately reflect modern Uyghurs' perceptions, which glorify Ahmätjan Qasimi and view the turncoat Burhan Shahidi with much less enthusiasm.

Imin repeatedly points to historical continuities between the Köshütä events and previous peasant rebellions in Qumul, for example when he explains that the best shots in the self-defence teams were trained under the last local Emir, Shah Makhsud as hunters (Imin 2002: 195); when the rebel leaders refuse to leave the mountains to go to Qumul to take part in the negotiations because they had learnt from previous rebellions about similar strategies to lure leaders into a deadly trap; or when he points out that one of his relatives, Adil Sopi, who acted as a clerk to Siyit, had also participated in the famous Khoja Niyaz Haji peasant rebellion in the early 1930s (id., 193).

In contrast, Chen's account (as well as the *Handbook*) omits the arrest and interrogation of the main rebel leaders (episodes which occupy a considerable part of Imin's narrative). Chen plays down the role played by Ahmätjan Qasimi, adds the importance of Communist support and propaganda through the figures of Yüsüp and especially Döwlätkhan and quotes several derogatory remarks about the rebels uttered by others, calling them "thieves" and "bandits."

Why is this rebellion included at all in the official *Handbook* on Qumul in 2005? We may speculate that, in spite of its brevity and localised, guerrilla character, the story of the rebellion has been singled out for attention by the authors of the *Handbook* entry because it addresses a complex and important period in local history which otherwise appears to be full of gaps. This may also serve as a partial explanation for why two local authors have chosen to extensively deal with this event which, at the same time is well-suited to be included in the series of peasant rebellions.

25 A recently published book on famous local personalities in the history of Qumul mentions one episode of the Köshütä Rebellion missing from all the above accounts, namely that at some point six rebels, among them Adil Sopi, who were about to be captured by the GMD forces, made an unsuccessful attempt to escape and join the Three District Revolution (Hämdulla 2012: 204).

In some respects both Imin and Chen's accounts follow the pattern displayed by other narratives published in the same series, which focus on the earlier, better known peasant rebellions and both authors situate their accounts as the last in the series of the Qumul peasant uprisings taking place in the early 20th century. However, based on these texts, several factors mark out the Köshütä Rebellion as somewhat different. One important deviation from earlier patterns is that this uprising was not provoked by excessive demands for tax, rent and *corvée* by feudal overlords, it was the excesses of the Chinese nationalists represented by the GMD soldiers which constituted the backdrop to this particular wave of violence. In contrast to the earlier insurgencies, which typically ended with the rebels' defeat and the public execution of their leaders, the Köshütä Rebellion ends in the rebel leaders being elevated to high administrative positions after the communists' victory over the GMD.²⁶ These and the mixed composition of the rebels (Uyghur farmers allied with Kazakh pastoralists) render the characterisation of the event as a *peasant* rebellion somewhat problematic. This labelling was probably necessitated by the official historical narrative's requirement to demonstrate the struggle of ordinary people against the nationalist troops, aligning it to its revolutionary discourse (Perdue 2010).

Peasant rebellions have occupied a particularly prominent place in Chinese socialist historiography since the Chinese Communist Party itself has its origins and legitimation in such movements (Liu 1981). As David Apter has shown, Mao Zedong himself made ample and conscious use of storytelling in consolidating his power. Cultivating Chinese folklore traditions and positively reassessing peasant uprisings throughout Chinese history were both encouraged because they perfectly suited the Communist Party's legitimation needs. The portrayal of peasant rebels as Robin Hood-like outlaws and their fight against the militarily superior GMD forces as described in the Köshütä accounts, must be understood as part of the narratives created around the Chinese communists before their seizure of power (Apter 1993) because the national historiography fostered by the Communist Party needed to explain the complicated events immediately preceding the annexation of Xinjiang. From this point of view tying the Köshütä Rebellion to the official narrative through local publications and its framing as a peasant rebellion appears as a localised revolutionary discourse simultaneously legitimating Chinese and communist rule over Xinjiang's minorities. This explains Chen's emphasis on the presence of an Uyghur communist propagandists in Qumul. In the multi-ethnic context of Xinjiang telling the story of the alliance of the two most important national minorities of the region, the Uyghur and the Kazakh, in their fight against the GMD soldiers also appears to be in complete harmony with the overarching

26 Significantly all three accounts emphasise the remarkable elevation of the rebel leaders to high positions under socialism. However, all three remain quiet about the later fate of at least some of them. In 1962 Siyit Batur was framed and imprisoned for eighteen years, while Adil Sopi became victim of the Cultural Revolution: he was badly beaten, lost his job and spent the following decades working the land in the village of Tokhulu in Aratörük (Hämdulla 2012: 196-197, 205-206). Presumably some of the other rebel leaders also suffered a similar fate on account of their "local chauvinist" leanings.

aim of the nationalist project to prove non-Han groups' support for the Chinese communists on China's geographical peripheries. Chen's emphasis on the fragile nature of this alliance may be read as indication that local peoples are unable to organise themselves without external support.

In the highly charged political atmosphere of contemporary Xinjiang every story receives an "ethnic twist," every story has the potential to be reinterpreted from the perspective of interethnic relations without, at the same time, openly challenging or contradicting the national master narrative.²⁷ The accounts by Chen and Imin both testify to this potential. Although the two authors rarely make explicit mention of the ethnic affiliation of individual actors, their names make their group affiliation clear. Minorities who came into conflict with the GMD may not have experienced the rebellion in terms of an opposition between Chinese communists versus nationalist forces, as implied by Chen. Reading Imin, the main opponents appear to be Kazakh and Uyghur "peasant" fighters against Han GMD troops. The former were also highly suspicious of the Han civil servants manning the highest offices in the Qumul local government. For contemporary actors the most important political events of the time must have been the recent proclamation (1944) and ongoing activities of the second East Turkestan Republic, as well as the competition over resources, especially land, between Uyghur farmers and incoming Han Chinese agricultural colonists. As Linda Benson reminds us, prior to 1949 these border regions had little contact with the Chinese Communist Party (1992a: 25). Under such conditions the conflict arising between the GMD troops and rural minorities (Uyghur and Kazakh) could have been experienced primarily in terms of an ethnic conflict between dominant Han and minority peoples.

On the regional level, the history of the Three Districts Revolution has been made to fit the history of communist victory, and its leading figure, Ahmätjan Qasimi, "emerged as an officially sanctioned cultural hero for the people of Xinjiang" in the 1980s (Benson 1992b: 44). James Millward identifies local anti-Chinese and Turkic nationalist sentiments as the main causes of the Three Districts Revolution and warns against all kinds of reductionist explanations, stating that "... to suggest that the movement was merely an extension of the Chinese revolution... is equally disingenuous, and hard to reconcile with its strong anti-Chinese thrust" (Millward 2007: 229-230). Linda Benson concludes in her assessment of Ahmätjan Qasimi's double political role as both a Chinese and an Uyghur cultural hero, that for the people of Xinjiang he is likely to retain his symbolic status as political and cultural hero "with or without the sanction of the Chinese authorities" (Benson 1992b: 47). The complexities pointed out by Millward and Benson are only partially borne out by the narratives. In fact, the narrative strategies employed by the Chinese and the Uyghur authors' renderings point to a preference for polarised

27 Publication of the accounts closely follows the gradual worsening of conflict between the Uyghur of Xinjiang and the Chinese state. Chen's account was published one year after the first major interethnic conflict taking place in the region since the launching of the reforms in the early 1980s. Imin's publication in 2002 came one year following 9/11, which also marked a deterioration of the Uyghurs' structural position in the PCR since clamping down on oppositional voices could now be connected to the war on terror.

representations, for precisely the type of reductionism these modern historians are wary of: the heroisation of the minority rebels against the Han soldiers together with the important role attributed to Ahmätjan Qasimi, the legendary Uyghur leader of the ETR, representing the second, brief attempt of Xinjiang's non-Han groups at independence, as depicted by Imin, stands in diagonal opposition to Chen's account in which the Köshütä Peasant Rebellion is presented as part of China's revolutionary history and the oppressed people's just struggle against the GMD soldiers. This account does not deny but merely plays down the ETR connections as well as the heroism of the minority rebel leaders.

To make sense of these narrative strategies, it is useful to recall James Wertsch's distinction between two different levels of narrative organisation, specific stories and schematic narrative templates. The latter have "abstract, generalised functions" and, as templates, they may underlie several specific stories. Besides, they "belong to particular narrative traditions that can be expected to differ from one cultural setting to another" (Wertsch 2004: 57). For Wertsch, templates involve a higher level of abstraction than specific events and a generalised (typically unconscious) narrative framework which underlie a cultural tradition. While this is no place to provide a comprehensive analysis of the narrative schematic templates displayed in various accounts of collective memory emerging in modern Xinjiang, the above representations of the same series of events as part of China's national history and as part of Xinjiang's regional history respectively appear to be such templates which have the capacity to engender very different interpretations of the same basic series of specific events.

In so far as both accounts make an effort to connect the Köshütä Rebellion to the bigger picture, the regional and national narratives, they both deviate from the standard scholarly treatment of peasant rebellions as parochial and localised (Walker 2006: 17). This fact alone is significant and points to the potential of further mobilisation of narratives of peasant discontent beyond the boundaries of specific geographical and temporal parameters. The broader political context for this is created by the numerous expressions of ongoing peasant protests which have been taking place all over China since the 1980s. In an article published in 2006 which, however, has not lost its actuality to the present day, Kathy Le Mons Walker argues not only that China's peasants retain a long historical memory of previous earlier struggles, but also that, in spite of their seemingly localised character, peasant discontent in Chinese history has often become manifest simultaneously on a transnational and even national level (Walker 2006: 17). This observation has also been borne out by the historical experience of Xinjiang. The non-Han rural populations of Xinjiang may be more cautious today in taking initiatives due to fear of harsh consequences, but anecdotal evidence and my own observations indicate that their concerns, such as the demand for social justice in face of infringements of their interests and rights are very similar to those of Han farmers both in Xinjiang and elsewhere in China. This circumstance renders narratives of peasant insurgencies all the more important, not only because of the lessons that can be drawn for the past but because of their potential as symbolic capital for the future.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have suggested that James Wertsch's narrative toolbox, originally developed to understand the narrative organisation of collective memory, can be adapted to make sense of strategies of history-making under totalitarian conditions more generally. I have compared three publications which, targeting the same readership, describe the same series of events, which took place at a particularly sensitive historical juncture. These narratives have a significance which goes beyond the time and place of the event. In the words of Shaid Amin: "When historical significance is attached to an occurrence independent of the event, the facts of the case cease to matter" (Amin 1995: 10). This significance in our case lies in the tension between socialist historians' efforts to legitimate Chinese communist rule over Xinjiang and local voices wishing to interpret past events in a different light.

I have shown that the two elaborate narratives exemplify parallel local attempts to influence the ideological stance of the same textual community, of which only one of them is a member. They transmit messages that differ, if not in propositional truths then in the manner of their employment. The differences are achieved through the skilful deployment of narrative tools which frame the same story using very different schematic narrative templates. The Chinese author, assuming an ostensibly more "neutral" stance, elaborates the official interpretation of Xinjiang history in the second half of the 1940s by extolling the minorities' struggle against the imperialists and GMD forces, supported by the communists. In contrast, using the genre of memoir, the Uyghur author presents the heroic fight of the local minorities against their alien oppressors.

The story lends itself well to diverse representations of a complex and very sensitive period in both national and regional history. From the official perspective it fits in nicely with the legitimisation narrative of the Chinese Communist Party, which arrived in Qumul at the very time when GMD oppression of the locals was becoming unbearable. Its positive depiction of the labouring minorities' struggle against the GMD forces and their eventual elevation and rewarding in the People's Republic exemplifies how the communists honoured the promises they had made to the country's minorities prior to their seizing power. This line of argument is clearly delineated by the official *Handbook* and is explicitly elaborated by our Chinese author, Chen. Imin, the Uyghur author takes a different stance when he focuses on the heroism of the rebels and the outstanding qualities of several Uyghur leaders, of both local and regional importance. Although the Three Districts Revolution is today officially interpreted as part of the nationwide struggle against imperialism, the same events are generally viewed by Uyghurs as a brief but glorious attempt at independence. These different readings of Xinjiang history are also present in the significance attributed to Ahmätjan Qasimi in the events. His inclusion into the official Chinese hagiography on account of his struggle against the nationalists does not prevent the simultaneous emergence and perpetuation of alternative interpretations, including the ethno-national one. Our two authors' use of this figure in their local narratives exemplifies how these possibilities can be operationalised. Chen's message is consistent with the official line but it

penetrates the platform aimed at an Uyghur readership. He makes claims to precisely the same sources of authenticity (oral history, eyewitness accounts) as the Uyghur writer. Both narratives remain within the parameters of official history, yet simultaneously they have the potential to shape collective memory in very different ways.

Narratives of peasant unrest, an important legitimating constituent of socialist historiography, appear to be a suitable site for articulating current, ongoing discontent in subtle ways. Many inhabitants of Qumul today take pride in the rebellious past of their oasis, making references to the waves of unrest of the Republican warlord period. Siyit Qurban and Onanbay are sporadically mentioned as local heroes, alongside Tömür Khälpä, the Torpaq Brothers and Khoja Niyaz Haji. While both Imin and Chen target the same textual community and make use of the same basic “stock of stories,” they present versions of events which, though not openly contesting each other, remain open to fundamentally different readings and interpretations. This case demonstrates how the seemingly insignificant arena of local history may become an important site where, under totalitarian conditions, history can be produced with more vigour than in the official sites of national historiography.

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