

*Enslavement and Forced Marriage
in Uyghur Literature*

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Situated at the meeting point of nomadic and sedentary societies, and frequently contested by rival empires, the region of northwest China known today as Xinjiang has seen forms of slavery and servitude for much of its known history. Some of the oldest surviving documents retrieved by explorers from the sands of the Taklamakan desert – dating to more than a millennium ago – concern the buying, selling, and freeing of enslaved people. With the Tarim Basin’s conversion to Islam from the tenth century onwards, local dynasties there acquired humans that they enslaved from surrounding non-Muslim peoples, but the oasis towns strung out around the rim of the Taklamakan desert were themselves vulnerable to ongoing raids from the steppe. The perils of long-distance caravan travel also put Muslims at risk of falling captive to their non-Muslim neighbors, particularly the Mongols who resided to the north of the Tianshan (Heavenly Mountains). Known as Oirats (but to locals as Qalmaq), these Mongols figure as the non-Muslim enemy par excellence in a range of Central Asian literary traditions and were themselves sold into various forms of military and state service throughout Turkistan.

The presence of enslaved Muslims in Qalmaq hands was a considerable source of anxiety for the region’s elites, and to redeem such captives was a meritorious deed. In the fifteenth century, for example, the Naqshbandi Sufi shaykh Khoja Ahrar dispatched one of his disciples from Samarkand to the Tarim Basin “for the sake of releasing the Muslims who are imprisoned in China.”¹ Khoja Ishaq Vali, who proselytized in the region in the late sixteenth century, is said to have taken pride in liberating “Muslims who had fallen captive to the Qalmaq on the road to China and had given up hope of life.”²

From the point of view of the settled, agricultural population of the Tarim Basin – the people today known as the Uyghurs – the risk of enslavement was heightened from the late seventeenth century onwards, as the local Chaghatayid dynasty (a branch of Chinggis Khan’s Mongol

empire) went into decline, and a steppe-based Oirat Mongol polity led by the Junghars rose to regional hegemony. Hostage-taking was an integral part of Junghar state-building strategies. As one local historian put it, the Junghar court “became the meeting place for the khans of Piskend, the nobles of Tashkent, and the kings of Badakhshan.”³ With their growing empire centered on the Ili Valley, in the north of what is now Xinjiang, the Junghars also put Muslim captives to work in agriculture and animal husbandry. These became known as ‘Taranchis,’ from a Mongolian word for ‘peasant.’ Some were presumably also employed in mines in surrounding regions. Other Muslims who were pressed into forms of unfree labor served as an official merchantry and were known as Bazargan (*bederge* in Mongolian).

Evidence for the growing number of enslaved Muslims in Junghar society can be seen in a decree issued by the Junghar Galdan Khan in 1678 to regulate the affairs of the Taranchi and Bazargan.⁴ This was two years prior to Galdan Khan’s first full-scale invasion of the Tarim Basin, which led to new deportations. Islamic sources also mention occasions at which Tarim Basin Muslims engaged in raids of their own and were able to free some of these captives, but the net effect of Junghar dominion was a significant redistribution of Muslims to the north of the Tianshan. One estimate puts the total population of Muslims in Junghar service by the middle of the eighteenth century at as high as 17,000.⁵ Although visitors from imperial Russia often described these captives as ‘Bukharans,’ the majority hailed from the Tarim Basin (which was known to Russians as ‘Little Bukhara’). Some of these Muslims resided in compact communities with official hierarchies of their own, and which were integrated into the Junghar social structure. Others were assigned to work on the lands of Buddhist monasteries or gifted to Oirat aristocrats residing elsewhere on the steppe. As the armies of the Qing encroached on the Junghar state in the eighteenth century, escapees to the Qing camp testified to the experience of being bought and sold among these Oirat elites.⁶

When a Qing invasion in the 1750s brought an end to Junghar rule, most of these Taranchis returned to the Tarim Basin, effectively depopulating the Ili region. To revive local agriculture in what was now the center of the Qing occupation, Qing officials recruited new cohorts of Muslims to cultivate ‘Muslim farms’ (Huitun) in Ili. Official sources indicate that these migrations were voluntary, though how the mobilizations were carried out in practice is hard to say: sometimes, local Muslim begs (officials) provided parties of migrants *en bloc* as a way of demonstrating their loyalty to the dynasty. These Qing Taranchis remained tied to the

land, either as part of the tax-paying population or as *yanchi* – a term for those who cultivated lands assigned to begs.⁷ They were not technically ‘slaves’ in Qing terms (*ni*). This category was reserved for Muslims who were destined for exile, either for serious criminal offences, or because they were family members of political enemies of the dynasty. While the Ili region served as a destination for such criminals from elsewhere in the empire, initially the practice in Xinjiang was the reverse: enslaved locals were sent to Beijing or to the south of China.⁸ This policy shifted in the 1820s, however, in the wake of the uprising of Jahangir Khoja, the first major Sufi-led rebellion to wrest control of the Tarim Basin from the Qing. On the recommendation of Qing officers involved in putting down the rebellion, Muslims who were identified as relatives of its participants were sent to Ili and Ürümchi, where they were given as slaves to officers of the local garrison. As Joanna Waley-Cohen has described, the Qing state retained ultimate responsibility for such individuals: “the master had the use but not the ownership of his slave.”⁹

This historical experience of subjugation and enforced migration has been reflected in various forms of literature among the Uyghurs. Here I discuss two such genres: hagiographies that belong to the region’s Sufi traditions, and folk literature. In an Islamic society such as this, the depiction of enslavement in hagiographic narratives drew on a rich body of religious legends centered on captivity and deliverance. In that sense, Sufi texts often look backwards in their construction of saintly lives. Folk literature, by contrast, was more responsive to the changing times, with narratives of oppression easily adaptable to new contexts and the construction of a national literary canon in the twentieth century. In the second half of this essay, I explore the evolution of one such story, that of Nazugum, as a vehicle for political imaginings up until to the present day, and the expression of sentiments considered too subversive for more explicit formulation.

5.1 Junghar Captivity in Sufi Hagiography

As a literature of frontier proselytization, the Central Asian hagiographic corpus contains diverse stories and anecdotes of interaction with non-Muslims, with slavery a common theme. The first literary depiction of Junghar captivity is provided by texts from the late eighteenth century, i.e. written in the wake of the Qing invasion. One of these, the *Book of Islam* (*Islamnama*), reflects the point of view of a devotee of the ‘White Mountain’ khojas, a hereditary lineage within the Nashqbandiyya Sufi

order who descended from Khoja Afaq, a seventeenth-century figure whose tomb remains the most prestigious in Kashgar to this day. The hero of the *Book of Islam* is Khoja Afaq's grandson Khoja Ahmad, while Ahmad's two sons also feature towards its end. Both sons grew up in captivity until their release in the 1750s, at which point they led a combined Qing-Muslim army to take possession of the Tarim Basin.

The work's author, Muhammad Abd al-Alim, describes the Junghar raid which carried off Khoja Ahmad (an event dating to ca. 1700) in cataclysmic terms:

These infidels with tassels on their caps,
 Were heralds of misfortune and mishap.
 Their arrival was a curse,
 People saw their ruinous intent.
 Wherever their steps led them,
 It was nothing less than a dragon's fiery breath,
 Like an alligator advancing with mouth agape,
 It was impossible to escape by flight.
 As they went about their trickery,
 And worked their deceptive ways,
 They conquered these Five Cities,
 And not just these Five Cities, but the entire world.
 They subjugated the people of Islam,
 And caused tears to flow.
 They gave the Muslims no chance,
 Putting them to work (*alban*) night and day.
 All those they took were scattered across the mountains,
 Lost among the falcons and the crows.¹⁰

The author explains the Muslim community's subjugation in conventional terms as the product of their deviation from "the work of the sharia." It was, in effect, divine punishment. Abd al-Alim's narrative then turns to the tribulations of Khoja Ahmad, who was singled out for captivity by decree of the Junghar khan. Cautioning his fellow Muslims against resisting, Ahmad meditates on his fate, then decides to voluntarily offer himself up – thereby exemplifying the saintly virtue of *tawakkul*, "reliance on God."

He said to his aggrieved companions:
 "Strategy is no use against fate.
 They are waiting for me,
 Even if I remain safe, it will bode ill for you if I don't go."
 So saying he chose the mountains,
 And entrusted his abode to the care of God.

As they took his freedom into their hands,
 He accepted his captivity.
 He left straightaway, setting out by the mountain road,
 While the people were left lamenting in confusion.
 The world dimmed for the Muslims,
 As if the sun was hidden from view.
 He went and took up residence in Land of the Infidel (*Kāfristān*),
 And lit a candle amid the darkness.
 With the coming of his blessed presence,
 The Realm of the Infidel became the Abode of Peace (*Dār al-Amān*).¹¹

To the chagrin of the Junghars, Ahmad survives the persecution and hardship awaiting him in Ili. They then isolate the shaykh in a mountainous region far from any Muslim settlement, where he is unable to receive well-wishers. Again, Ahmad emerges triumphant from the testing experience, and by his example succeeds in converting his Junghar jailers to Islam.

Dating to roughly the same period, but much less stylized in its depiction of Junghar captivity, is Muhammad Sadiq Kashghari's *In Remembrance of the Saints (Tazkira-i Azizān)*. Kashghari's narrative centers on a different branch of the Tarim Basin Naqshbandiyya: the family of Ishaq Vali, a saint active in the region in the sixteenth century. While members of this family were often held hostage, on the whole they had a much more collaborative relationship with the Junghars, and it was they who fell victim to the White Mountain khoja invasion of the Tarim Basin in the 1750s. Reflecting this Mongol-Muslim *modus vivendi*, Kashghari points out that while the Junghars "shipped Khoja Aḥmad off like a prisoner and kept him under strict surveillance on the outskirts of Ili, with God's blessing Khoja Danyal [Ishaq Vali's great grandson and a patriarch of the family] lived with dignity and honor in the land of the infidel."¹²

Kashghari's narrative gives a more intimate sense of Junghar captivity, relying far less than Abd al-Alim on the theme of saintly suffering. One important vignette involves a wife and son of Khoja Danyal, who were carried off in a raid and given to a Junghar aristocrat who resided far from Ili. According to the story, the wife was pregnant at the time of her abduction from Kashgar but remained chaste until the delivery. After his birth, her son receives a standard Mongol upbringing until he is seven years old, at which time a traveling merchant encounters the family and brings news of the boy's existence back to Khoja Danyal in Ili. An investigation ensues, and despite a trial that is rigged in favor of the Junghars, a timely request for divine intervention sees the boy eventually

reunited with his father and returned to the fold of Islam. Whether by contrivance or coincidence, the story is obviously reminiscent of the Biblical and Quranic narrative of Joseph, or Yusuf – the traveling merchant here playing the role of the passing caravan that frees Yusuf from the pit and takes him to Egypt. The tale seems to have been on the minds of the Muslims at the time as well: after being circumcised and made a Muslim, the boy is given the name Khoja Yusuf.¹³

Captivity was obviously still far from a desirable condition, and Kashgari maintains that the Ishaqiyya khojas were at all times determined to eventually liberate their fellow Muslims from servitude in Ili. There are mentions in the story of members of this Sufi family redeeming captives and bringing them into their employ. At one point in the narrative, for example, Khoja Danyal's son Khoja Jahan berates one of his staff, who has proven unreliable: "Didn't I once buy you from some Qalmaq and set you free?"¹⁴ On various occasions throughout the story, Khoja Jahan's brother, the Junghar-raised Khoja Yusuf, tells of his resolve to "rid the Muslims of this unjust oppression, liberate those various groups of Muslims who were captive in Ili—including the khans, the khojas, and everyone else—and declare Islamic rule openly."¹⁵ But the long anticipated opportunity to throw off Junghar domination never presents itself.

5.2 Nazugum and the Female Heroine in Xinjiang

As mentioned above, while recruiting a new Taranchi peasantry, Qing policy was to send enslaved Xinjiang Muslims to the interior – an experience not depicted in any local sources I am aware of. When the rebellion of Jahangir Khoja was put down in 1828, however, some 1600 family members of participants were identified and deported to Ili and Ürümchi. This was part of a suite of policies designed to restore Qing control in the face of growing influence of the neighboring Kokand khanate. Many of these policies – including a trade embargo – were soon deemed a failure. Emissaries from Kokand demanded the return of any Kokandis who had been enslaved, and by the early 1830s, most captives – foreigners and locals alike – had been freed. In 1835, the Daoguang Emperor received information that only thirty-six remained in Ili, and he decreed that all those who so desired should be able to return to their home south of the mountains.¹⁶

This amnesty is described in the work of a local historian, Molla Musa Sayrami, writing circa 1900. The author's hometown of Sayram lies just south of the Muzart pass connecting the Ili Valley to southern Xinjiang. In

his account, freed slaves returning along this route brought with them a new folksong, entitled “Nazugum.” “In the intervening four years [of exile],” Sayrami writes, “some had fallen into Chinese hands and had borne children. When they were delivered from exile and sent back with these children, they were overjoyed at being able to return home, and all alike raised their mournful voices and improvised (*ikh̄tirā’ q̄ilip*) the song ‘Nazugum! O Nazugum!’ As they traveled along the highway, people came from afar to see them, and when they heard their mourning they too were moved to tears.”¹⁷

In its simplest form, “Nazugum” is a short verse, with only vague mention of any political context. The earliest version from the Ili region, recorded by Turkologist Wilhelm Radloff in the 1860s, describes Nazugum as a young woman held captive by a “Chinese infidel” whose advances she resists.¹⁸ Radloff’s visit to the region coincided with an anti-Qing uprising, which eventually led to the decade-long Russian occupation of the Ili Valley. During the occupation, Russian official Nikolai Pantusov took down a similar song, describing Nazugum’s flight from pursuing Chinese, Qalmaqs, and Solons (‘Qalmaq’ here refers to local Oirat Mongol members of the Qing garrison in Ili, while the Solons were from Manchuria).¹⁹ Nazugum (meaning ‘my slender one’) is not identifiable with any historical figure, and these lyrics can probably be seen as adaptations of already existing love songs, in which ‘Nazugum’ represents an abstract female beloved. Versions of the song from elsewhere in Qing Xinjiang which lack any mention of captivity and flight were also in circulation at this time: Nikolai Przhevalsky recorded one such song in the Khotan region in the 1890s.²⁰

As an imperial official on the frontiers of the tsarist empire, Pantusov’s literary and ethnographic pursuits complemented his role as an administrator during the Russian occupation. When this occupation ended in the early 1880s, much of the local Taranchi population took the opportunity to migrate westward into Russian territory, laying the foundation for the Uyghur community in today’s Kazakhstan. One of Pantusov’s main local collaborators in recording this community’s literature was a man by the name of Molla Bilal Nazim, who provided Pantusov with a version of the Nazugum story that the Russian eventually published in translation in 1909.²¹ Drawing on popular songs he attributed to Nazugum herself, Molla Bilal interspersed these verses with a more elaborate prose account of Nazugum’s trials. It is this version of the story that has become best known, with French and Turkish translations following on Pantusov’s Russian.²² Although no manuscript copies of this work are currently available, a

modern Uyghur edition of the story was published in the literary magazine *Bulaq* in 1981. This corresponds closely to Pantusov's text, though with some of its more explicitly anti-Chinese wording edited out.²³

In Molla Bilal's version, Nazugum is deported from Kashgar with her brother Abdullah Khoja, after her husband and son have been executed by Qing troops. Among the Kashgari women sent north to Ili, Nazugum is the prettiest of all, and a Qalmaq official in the village of Chong Yulduz determines to make her his wife. Nazugum resists and flees down the Ili river to Almaliq, in today's Kazakhstan, where she is sheltered by a local family. The Ili Military Governor dispatches a hundred cavalymen to pursue her, who torture her protectors to force her out of hiding. On this occasion, the Ili Military Governor hands her to a Solon officer. Rather than submit, Nazugum kills her new captor and escapes once again. When she is captured for a second time, Nazugum is publicly executed on the emperor's command.

Writing in 1882, Molla Bilal's interest in expanding and elaborating the story of Nazugum may well reflect the predicament of his Taranchi community at that time. Having revolted against Qing rule a decade earlier, many were now migrating into Russian territory in the face of the returning Qing army – literally following in the footsteps of Nazugum's flight. The emergence of such figures in situations of foreign domination is of course a ubiquitous phenomenon in world literature. The popularity of a militant heroine in a society which tended to frown on female assertiveness seems paradoxical, but rigid gender norms may in fact heighten the salience of this trope. Qing, or Chinese rule represents the failure of Uyghur manhood to perform its appropriate role – the defense of the home against foreign aggression. At many points, Nazugum asks when her father, or indeed any man, might come to rescue her. Communal anxiety as to the loss of land and property naturally extended to the possibility of the generalized theft of women, and with it miscegenation; "All of your children will become Qalmaqs," Nazugum's brother warns her, "and you will become just like these black infidels."²⁴ The bravery of the unyielding woman thus provides an instructive contrast to less courageous male compatriots, and symbolizes the fighting spirit of the entire community. Martyrdom, and its recompense in the afterlife, receives heightened emphasis in Molla Bilal's version: on the eve of her execution, Nazugum comforts herself with the fact that "I'll become an exulted martyr, as the mullas say."²⁵

Unsurprisingly, Nazugum was to prove attractive to twentieth-century authors interested in cultivating new national narratives for the modern

Uyghur nation then coming into being. The first of these retellings was produced in the wake of the Russian Revolution by Nezerghoja Abdusémetov, who wrote under the penname ‘Uyghur Child’ (*Uyghur Balisi*). A native of the town of Zharkent in Semirech’e, Abdusémetov had made links to the pre-revolutionary Russian Muslim world of letters by writing for such reformist journals as *Shura*. In these early works, Abdusémetov’s interest had been to construct a historical narrative for the Taranchis, with an abstract, often personified figure of ‘Uyghur’ serving as a link in their communal genealogy. Some of this Taranchi-centrism remained in his 1922 *Nazugum*, in which he made the heroine a native of Ili, not of Kashgar. This plot change has the effect of removing the themes of punitive enslavement and exile from the story; *Nazugum* is simply taken as booty (*olja*) one day by a party of ‘Manchu-Chinese’ hunting in the mountains. At the same time, *Nazugum* also evinces Abdusémetov’s post-revolutionary turn towards Uyghur nationalism. The hero of the story is the daughter of a Taranchi herder whose name is ‘Uyghur,’ and in the middle of the story, *Nazugum* recites an ode to the glory days of the Uyghur people (*Uyghur éli*) – the Qarakhanids and Idiqtuq dynasties of a millennium earlier. At its conclusion, as she prepares to face the executioner’s block, her last words are an address to the nation: “From tyranny, injustice, and wickedness, and from brutal terror / The days of freedom (*āzād bolush*) are coming soon, may *Nazugum* rest in peace. / . . . / The Uyghur people will be cleansed of Chinese tyranny / A flag of unity in their hands, may *Nazugum* rest in peace.”²⁶ One feature of Abdusémetov’s text was its identification of a cave as the location where *Nazugum* took refuge from Qing troops. The cave itself became a place of pilgrimage for Uyghurs in Kazakhstan, who were thereby able to commune directly with the story.

Uyghur literature took large steps forward in Soviet Union during the 1920s and 1930s, as political imperatives, along with growing literacy, widened the field of Uyghur-language publishing. As was typical in the construction of Soviet nations, the Uyghur national history that emerged in this period centered on traditions of struggle against both foreign aggressors and local tyrants. In the 1930s Ismail Sattarov (1916–1944) wrote his own *Nazugum*, which an official history of Soviet Uyghur literature praises for “displaying the spirit of liberation which captured the people’s minds, and their high human qualities.”²⁷ The construction of Uyghur history as a national liberation movement stretching back to the eighteenth century received particular emphasis during the 1940s, when Moscow gave its backing to the formation of an East Turkistan Republic

in the north of Xinjiang. Ershidin Hidayetov's 1946 article, "Nazugum – A Patriotic Uyghur Girl," published on Soviet soil in the journal *Truth of the East*, exemplifies the rhetoric of this short-lived republic. Here he explains that despite their subjugation by the "Manchu-Chinese empire" in the 1760s, "the Uyghur people never ceased to wage great struggles against the colonizers for their freedom and independence. In our people's history there are many patriotic heroes who have emerged from such freedom struggles, and one of them is the famous Uyghur girl Nazugum."²⁸

In the postwar period, Nazugum continued to be a popular theme for Soviet Uyghur authors, with political conditions in the wake of the Sino-Soviet split proving particularly conducive for the expression of anti-Qing, and by extension anti-Chinese, themes. One of the longest versions of the Nazugum tale within this tradition is Hézim Iskenderov's longform verse retelling, published in 1970.²⁹ During the same period, Q. Hasanov wrote a play version of the story, and provided the libretto for a popular operatic production of *Nazugum* in Russian.³⁰ Meanwhile, as Xinjiang emerged from the Cultural Revolution in the 1980s, authors there such as Memtimin Hoshur fashioned their own images of Nazugum, with the short story proving the most popular vehicle for doing so.³¹

Uyghur literature and arts have thus shown a sustained interest in the heroic figure of Nazugum, but she is not alone in attracting this attention. Resistance to forced marriage is a common theme in Uyghur folklore, and a range of heroines similar to Nazugum have received modern elaborations. There are also comparisons to be drawn with figures such as Iparkhan, the Kashgari woman who became the Qianlong emperor's concubine in the eighteenth century, and who is known in Chinese tradition as the 'fragrant concubine' (Xiang Fei). As James Millward has described, Uyghur versions of this story provide a counter-narrative to Chinese legends that position the concubine as a symbol of inter-ethnic unity.³² These Uyghur stories emphasize her determination to remain chaste while in the imperial city, and some modern versions build on this theme to depict her as Uyghur resistance fighter. In Ziya Semediy's play *Iparkhan*, for example, the heroine tries in vain to unite the feuding religious factions of the Tarim Basin in the face of the looming Qing invasion.³³ After her capture, she is shipped to Beijing, where she is kept in a luxurious Islamic-style residence. Not taken in by the emperor's generosity, she declares: "This extravagance is a golden cage for me. The arrogant Qianlong wants to drown me in comfort and pleasure, and make me forget my country and my people, to subdue me and turn me into an

emotionless plaything. No, your highness, for a criminal like you, the murderous enemy of my people, I have nothing but outrage and contempt."³⁴ For her defiance Iparkhan is eventually executed, a fate she welcomes with an impassioned vow:

You will not silence me. My voice will resound from the Altay mountains to the fields of Khotan, from the Ili valley to the Qumul [i.e. Hami] plain, the Junggharian steppe to the Taklamakan desert! My call will sound in the hearts and minds of my descendants; it will rouse them to struggle. My ideals will burn like a torch, lighting the road to freedom, and leading them to independence.³⁵

Whether or not stories like those of Nazugum or Iparkhan themselves reflect historical events, the tensions they embody have at times figured in political events in Xinjiang. We might note, for example, the similarity between these poetic narratives and accounts of the 1931 uprising in the eastern Xinjiang town of Hami, which eventually led to the establishment of the first Eastern Turkistan Republic in Kashgar. Some, though not all, accounts of this uprising cite the lechery of a Chinese officer towards a local woman as the spark for the conflagration. Guomintang official Aitchen Wu, for example, describes how a certain Captain Chang "had no principle of conduct save the satisfaction of his own immediate desires," and "on a day of evil omen . . . laid hands upon a Moslem girl."³⁶ While Wu says that local religious elites stirred up a mob to take revenge on the Chinese officer, this story, like Nazugum's, has evolved with time. Former chairman of the provincial government Seypidin Ezizi, for example, heightens the drama in his memoirs. Here he tells how local Uyghurs at first went along with the Chinese captain's request to marry the girl and prepared for the wedding festivities. They then took the opportunity to ambush Chang's troops during the party, launching what eventually became a province-wide insurrection.³⁷ While the event seems to have some basis in reality, therefore, it also seems to have quickly undergone its own folklorization at the hands of authors such as Ezizi. If that is the case, it provides us with some perspective on the formation of the earlier traditions such as Nazugum's.

5.3 Muffled Echoes in Contemporary Xinjiang

The intersection of literary representations and political realities in Xinjiang is equally worthy of consideration in the present day. Since

2016, the Chinese Communist Party has implemented an unprecedented campaign of ideological indoctrination and cultural assimilation in Xinjiang. One of the aims of these hardline policies is to encourage identification with an all-embracing 'Chinese nation' (*Zhonghua minzu*). From that perspective, officials identify the low rate of intermarriage in Xinjiang as something to be remedied. For some time now, various incentives and forms of suasion have been applied to encourage Uyghurs to intermarry with Han Chinese migrants. More recently, activists outside China have circulated video footage of wedding ceremonies that they claim show Uyghurs who have been compelled into such marriages against their will.³⁸ A second dimension of today's policies that resonates with stories such as that of Nazugum involves forced labor – both within the network of 're-education' camps themselves, and in large-scale labor programs designed to send 'surplus' non-Han labor to factories elsewhere in Xinjiang or in the Chinese interior. The Chinese government insists that such programs are voluntary, but there is evidence of pressure being applied to fill recruitment quotas, and the risk of saying 'no' to party officials must be high. Human Rights Watch is among those who believe these programs meet a definition of enslavement, and on this basis they accuse the Chinese government of committing crimes against humanity.³⁹

At the same time, the political environment today sees heightened scrutiny of Uyghur literary narratives and the intellectuals who transmit them. While resistance against the Qing dynasty is in theory something to be celebrated from the Chinese Communist Party's point of view, stories like Nazugum contain a political message that can discomfort paranoid officials. Since a crackdown on cultural nationalism at the end of the 1980s, Uyghur writers have had to be cautious in rendering explicit any such link between the past and present, but such implications have remained palpable. In 2000, one writer in *Bulaq* described the significance of Molla Bilal's story in these terms:

Through the tragedy of *Nazugum*, the poet emphasizes the importance of not expecting any mercy from the colonialists. The only solution is to take up arms and rise as one with firm unity. No one else will liberate the homeland: one must rely on one's own strength. It is necessary to have faith in one another, and carry on the struggle to the last, just like Nazugum. Only in this case will the blood of freedom fighters such as Nazugum not have been spilt in vain.⁴⁰

Here, praise for the exploits of an anti-Qing rebel carries an indirect, but obvious message for Uyghur politics in the present.

Among the many dimensions of today's security crackdown, a hunt has been on among the Uyghur political and intellectual elite for insufficiently loyal 'two-faced' individuals. As in the Stalinist witch-hunts of the Soviet Union, political blackmarks from earlier periods have come back to incriminate people, and past words and deeds have been reinterpreted in a new, more suspicious, light. One of the most high-profile instances of persecution in this campaign has been the 'case of the textbooks,' which involves a series of Uyghur literature textbooks for primary schools. These were published with government approval in the 2000s but have now been deemed to be replete with subversive 'pan-Turkist' and 'pan-Islamist' messaging. The officials and scholars responsible for these books have received severe sentences, including two suspended death sentences (i.e. life in prison). From available evidence, the material that has incriminated them consists of precisely the kinds of folklore I have discussed here. A propaganda documentary points to the inclusion of the story of the "Seven Maidens" (*Yette qizlirim*), a legend of female martyrs associated with resistance to Qing rule in the 1760s.⁴¹ Online discussion indicates that the story of Nazugum was also cited as evidence of their guilt.⁴² New, heavily Sinified Uyghur language textbooks have been printed to replace the offending textbook. Clearly, the party is determined to prevent any possibility that romanticized stories of past oppression might inspire young Uyghurs to reflect on their present. The fact is, of course, that the harsh punishment meted out to these scholars will very likely only serve to stimulate those kinds of comparisons.

Notes

- 1 Jo-Ann Gross and Asom Urumbaev, *The Letters of Khwāja 'Ubayd Allāh Ahrār and His Associates* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 192.
- 2 Shah Muḥammad ibn Ḥisām al-Dīn Payravī, *Jalis-i Mushtaḡin*. Institut vos-tochnykh rukopisei Rossiiskoi akademii nauk, A232 (1004/1595-6), fol. 8b.
- 3 Muḥammad Amin Ṣadr Kashghari, *Aṣar al-Futuḥ*, Abu Rayhon Beruniy Nomidagi Sharqshunoslik Instituti, 753 (1220/1805-6), fol. 124a.
- 4 S. D. Dylykov (ed.), *Ikh tsaaз / Velikoe ulozhenie: Pamiatnik mongol'skogo feodal'nogo prava xvii v.* (Moscow: Nauka, 1981).
- 5 Hosung Shim, 'The State Formation of the Zunghar Principality: A Political History of the Last Centralized State of the Eurasian Steppe', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Indiana University (2021), 568.
- 6 See, for example, Zhongguo diyi lishi dang'anguan (ed.), *Yongzhengchao manwen zhupi zouzhe quanyi* (Hefei: Huangshan shushe, 1993), vol. I, pp. 887–888, vol. II, p. 1862.

- 7 L. I. Duman, 'Feodal'nyi institut iantsii v vostochnom turkestanе v xviii veke,' *Zapiski Instituta vostokovedeniia akademii nauk SSSR* 3 (1935).
- 8 Xinjiang thus features in a range of literary traditions that fall outside the scope of this essay. See, for example, the case of Jahriyya martyrs among the Hui, discussed in Tommaso Previato, "A Neglected Genealogy of the Martyred Heroines of Islam: (Re-)Writing Women's Participation in Jihad Into the History of Late Imperial Gansu," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 38, no. 3 (2018).
- 9 Joanna Waley-Cohen, *Exile in Mid-Qing China: Banishment to Xinjiang, 1758-1820* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 166. For the detailed regulations governing the dispatch of Muslim slaves to northern Xinjiang, see Zhu Qingqi (ed.), *Xing'an Huilan* (Shanghai: Tushu jichengju, 1834), juan 58.
- 10 Muḥammad Abd al-Alim, *Islamnama*, Institut vostochnykh rukopisei Rossiiskoi akademii nauk, C311 (1190/1776-7), fol. 34b.
- 11 Abd al-Alim, *Islamnama*, fol. 36a.
- 12 Muḥammad Ṣadiq Kashghari, *In Remembrance of the Saints: The Rise and Fall of an Inner Asian Sufi Dynasty*, trans. David Brophy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 47.
- 13 Kashghari, *In Remembrance of the Saints*, pp. 47–51.
- 14 Kashghari, *In Remembrance of the Saints*, p. 194.
- 15 Kashghari, *In Remembrance of the Saints*, p. 89.
- 16 *Daqing Xuanzong Cheng (Daoguang) huangdi shilu* (Taipei: Huawen shuju, 1964), pp. 4700–4701. The exiling of Muslim criminals to the north of Xinjiang is also discussed in Laura Newby, "Bondage on Qing China's Northwestern Frontier," *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 3 (2013): 968–994.
- 17 Molla Musa Sayrami, *Tarikhi Hemidi*, ed. Enver Baytur (Beijing: Millelder Neshriyati, 1986), 154–155.
- 18 W. Radloff, *Proben der Volksliteratur der türkischen Stämme* (Saint Petersburg: Tipografia Imperatorskoi akademii nauk, 1886), vol. VI, p. 271.
- 19 N. N. Pantusov, *Taranchinskiia p'esni* (Moscow: Akademiia nauk, 1890), 7–8, 85–86.
- 20 Nikolai Mikhailovich Przheval'skii, *Ot Kiakhty na istoki Zheltoi Reki: Izsledovanie severnoi okrainy Tibeta, i put' cherez Lob-Nor po basseinu Tarima* (Saint Petersburg: Tipografia V. S. Balasheva, 1888), 429.
- 21 N. N. Pantusov, "Obraztsy taranchinskoi narodnoi literatury," *Izvestiia obshchestva arkeologii, istorii i etnografii pri imperatorskom kazanskom Universitete* 21, no. 2–4 (1909): 49–60.
- 22 E. de Zacharko and W. Bang, "Contes Du Turkestan," *Le Muséon* 36, no. 1–2 (1923): 101–125; Emel Esin, "'Nāziḡim'in Destani,'" *Türk Kültürü* 73 (1968): 89–97.
- 23 Molla Bilal binni Molla Yusup, "Nuzugum," ed. Mehemmet Tursun Bahawidin, *Bulaq* 1 (1981): 208–225. Where Pantusov's text has "Chinese" (Kitai), the Bulaq edition has "Manchu."
- 24 Pantusov, "Obraztsy taranchinskoi narodnoi literatury," 51.

- 25 Pantusov, "Obraztsy taranchinskoi narodnoi literatury," 58.
- 26 Uyghur Balasi, *Nazugum* (Almaty: Uyghur kommunistlirining vilayet byurasi, 1922), 28–29. For a modern version in Cyrillic script Uyghur, see Nezerghoja Abdusémetov, *Yoruq sabillar* (Almaty: Zhazushi, 1991).
- 27 N. Smailov and Q. Tokhtemov (eds.) *Uyghur sovét edebiyatining tarikhi* (Almaty: Akademiia nauk kazakhskoi SSR, 1986), 148.
- 28 Ershidin Hidayetov, *Ili Uyghurlarning milliy-azatliq heriketliri* (Almaty: Nauka, 1978), 30.
- 29 Hézim Iskenderov, *Nazugum* (Almaty: Zhazushi, 1970).
- 30 K. Kuzham'iarov, *Nazugum* (Moscow: Sovetskii kompositor, 1963). For Hasanov's play, see Smailov et al., *Uyghur sovét edebiyatining tarikhi*, p. 217.
- 31 For further discussion of the treatment of Nazugum in Xinjiang, see Kara Abramson, "Gender, Uyghur Identity, and the Story of Nuzugum," *Journal of Asian Studies* 71, no. 4 (2012).
- 32 James Millward, "A Uyghur Muslim in Qianlong's Court: The Meanings of the Fragrant Concubine," *Journal of Asian Studies* 53, no. 2 (May 1994): 427–458.
- 33 Ziya Semediy, *Mayimkhan* (Almaty: Zhazushi, 1984), 393–439.
- 34 Semediy, *Mayimkhan*, p. 426.
- 35 Semediy, *Mayimkhan*, p. 439.
- 36 Aitchen Wu, *Turkistan Tumult* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 65. Modern historians take the basic story seriously, e.g. Chen Zhao and Chen Huisheng, *Minguo Xinjiangshi* (Urumchi: Xinjiang renmin chubanshe, 1999), 248.
- 37 Seypidin Ezizi, *Ömür dastani* (Urumchi: Minzu chubanshe, 1990), p. 183.
- 38 For discussion, see Darren Byler, "Uyghur Love in a Time of Interethnic Marriage," *SupChina*, 7 August 2019.
- 39 Human Rights Watch, "Break Their Lineage, Break Their Roots" *China's Crimes Against Humanity Targeting Uyghurs and Other Turkic Muslims* (2021), 44–45.
- 40 Abduréshit Hélimhaji, "Vetenperver Uyghur qizi Nazugum toghrisida," *Bulaq* 2 (2000): 90.
- 41 "Propaganda Films Attempt to Cloak Xinjiang in Disinformation," *China Digital Times*, 6 April 2021.
- 42 Ruhe pingjia Xinjiang fankong jilupian disibu 'Anliu yongdong – Zhongguo Xinjiang fankong tiaozhan?'" *Zhibu*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20210509093854/https://www.zhihu.com/question/452494324/answer/1815284055>.