Asia Rising – La Trobe University Uyghur Nation

James Leibold
Welcome to Asia Rising the podcast of La Trobe Asia where we discuss the news, views and general happenings of Asian states and societies. I'm your host today, James Leibold, Associate Professor in Politics at La Trobe University and today we're here to discuss the emergence of the Uyghur Nation and what it has to tell us about the fascinating history of the Eurasian region.

The Uyghurs are Turkic speaking, Muslim minority that predominantly inhabit the far western region of China known as Xinjiang. Joining me today to discuss the Uyghurs is Dr David Brophy, Lecturer in History at the University of Sydney and the author of the new book, *Uyghur Nation: Reform and Revolution on the Russia – China Frontier,* which was just recently published by *Harvard University Press*.

Thank you for joining me today David.

David Brophy
Hi Jim.

James Leibold
Let's start general, I wonder if you could tell the listeners a little bit about the Uyghurs, who the Uyghurs are and why they're significant, both historically as well as in the contemporary politics of China and Eurasia?

David Brophy
Well there's a few ways to answer that. I'll start with the Uyghurs today. Most people would come across the Uyghurs as one of the large, so-called ethnic minorities of China. So the Uyghurs inhabit this vast territory known as Xinjiang to the North of Tibet, it occupies about one sixth of China's territory and there about between 10 to 11 million Uyghurs living in that territory. Outside of Xinjiang there's probably about half a million Uyghurs scattered throughout the former Soviet Union primarily in republics of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and then now there's a worldwide Uyghur diaspora as well including a relatively large Uyghur population here in Australia.

Now historically there have been moments in history where people identifying as Uyghurs have played important roles. Actually not in Xinjiang but in what's now Mongolia. Originally the Uyghurs emerged as People of the Steppe, practising a pastoral, nomadic way of life, then through a process of migrations, Uyghurs eventually make their way down into sedentary regions of central Asia but gradually over time, particularly with the conversion to Islam in the 15th, 16th, 17th centuries, the Uyghur ethnonym loses its salience in that context. That's not to say that it dies out completely, but people begin to identify more with a larger Muslim community. It's really only in the beginning of the 20th Century that people seek to revive this ethnonym as part of a new national project that emerges from the borderland between Russia and China in the period of the Russian Revolution, that's really the story that my book seeks to tell.

James Leibold
Why you're initial interest in the question of the Uyghurs and their origin?

David Brophy
Well I originally came to Xinjiang through a route that many people follow I think through Chinese studies, being drawn to part of China that seemed to open up Chinese history in a number of different directions. It's the point at which the Chinese world intersects with the Turkic and Islamic worlds and more recently with the Russian and Soviet world and its quite challenging to try and

disentangle that.

I first spent time there in the year 2000 just very briefly, and then I went back there in 2003 – 2004 for a year of study, I was still working on my Chinese at that time but, I had developed enough of an interest to try and study Uyghur. The more time I spent in Xinjiang, the more I felt that it was very hard to understand the modern history of that region without having some sense of what had taken place across the border in Russian territory and the way people moving back and forth between these regions had shaped history.

James Leibold
Yeah it's a really fascinating time in history I think. Yeah as you said, many possibilities that today have been foreclosed by the rise and prominence of the Nation State. You mentioned the term 'Uyghur' is of modern origin. So what did people in what is now called Xinjiang, how did they identify themselves? What type of ethnonyms did they use to describe themselves?

David Brophy
My sense is it would very much depend on who was asking the question. We don't have a lot of sources from this region where people really talk in the first person about how they feel about themselves and their identity. So what we have, are sources produced in interactional context where people are communicating something to someone else and adopt a particular form of identification. Often this is simply belonging to a larger Muslim community, in the Qing period you get a lot of interesting sources when people are just calling themselves locals. The word 'local' seems to correspond quite closely to the term 'Muslim' and so teasing out what is a territorially grounded term versus something that is confessional identity is quite complicated.

People identify according to native place, that's pretty common in Chinese history and again, but that would depend very much on who was familiar with these places, when people went abroad they often simply identified themselves as Kashgari, regardless of whether they were actually from Kashgar. So that's a term you encounter a lot in the sources.

So on top of that you've had various forms of administrative regime applied to this territory that have created terminology that's has been applied to people by outsiders, and sometimes those terms have stuck. There's a process by which peasants from the South are transported to the North, this actually begins under a Mongol ruling power, that of the Junghars and they refer to these peasants using a Mongol word, Taranchi. Over time people who are part of this transportation process, mostly living in the Ili valley to the North of Xinjiang, they adopt this term Taranchi for themselves. The Qing would either refer to these people simply as Muslim, as Uyghurs. It's not uncommon to find people, when they're appealing to the Qing authorities to refer to themselves on those terms.

If they wanted to distinguish the Turkic speaking Muslims from the Chinese speaking Muslims, the people today we talk about as Uyghurs, they had another word which is *chantou* which is today regarded as a derogatory term by Uyghurs, it means people who wear a turban on their head. But if you go into the historical sources you can actually find people are happily adopting the term *chantou* as a way of identifying.

James Leibold
Fascinating. So many terms being bandied about it makes one think that this concept of a Uyghur nation emerged in 20th Century China is like an accident of history. There could have been so many other terms. What were some of the drivers behind the elites who decided to invest themselves and their state and nation building project in this term Uyghur?

David Brophy
Well you're right, it's a very complicated question. Uyghur makes a comeback in the late 19th Century, not initially in Xinjiang, but in circles of discussions among Turkic speaking intellections in Anatolia in the Ottoman Empire, and also in Russia where there's a broad interest at that time in developing a new, more racialized sense of Turk identity and a civilizational narrative that attaches to that, that harks back to a golden age of the Turkic past. This is something that you see in a lot of different intellectual projects of this period, the construction of the Aryan and the Semite and whatever; and it just so happens within this Turkic narrative the history of the Uyghurs of the Steppe plays an important role.

It was the Uyghurs when they migrated down into what's now China, who first developed quite advanced written culture in the Turkic language. For that reason they were recruited into the armies of the Mongols as scribes, various technicians and a reputation for literacy so to speak. So it was understandable that Turkic nationalists of various stripes would take an interest in the Uyghurs. It then went in two different directions, on the one hand you had people in Turkey who just fitted the Uyghurs into this story about the Turks more broadly. The term Uyghur actually in Turkish came to mean any Turk who was civilised. And the term now in modern Turkish just means civilised. Any sort of geographical or historical specificity has been lost.

In the Russian case people went in a slightly different direction because: while they were very sympathetic to what was going on in the Ottoman Empire and in Istanbul, they felt that they had a role to play themselves fostering a new form of national politics inside Russia. Out of that emerged this idea of a sort of Tatar, specifically Tatar national project that was connected to a larger Turkic family but had its own specificities. So that sort of became a template for people throughout the Russian Empire who, I guess identified with the wider Turkic family to some extent but still were primarily interested in their own specific ethno-national project, in that context it was the Uyghur legacy becomes available from Xinjiang who feel that they have a particular historical claim to that legacy and we start to see that around about the time of WW1, people actually from Xinjian laying claim to this heritage.

James Leibold
The point you make in the book, is the irony of this occurs under Chinese administration. It's through the patronage of Chinese rulers in Xinjiang in the 20th Century and eventually the Chinese Communists that this Uyghur national project which started outside of Xinjiang in Russia takes then root and becomes institutionalised. It's this deeper irony that I think is still significant today.

It must have been extremely difficult to trace individuals across these archives due to changes in the spelling of names, different languages involved, I'm sure there are times are you 'is this the same guy, or someone else? Who are they talking about and how…'? The beauty of the book, I mean it has so many strong qualities but, there are so many individuals that you've literally exhumed from the archives. Really colourful characters with interesting lives; people that no-one has ever written about, they've simply been lost from human memory.

I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about one character, you could take a central character or one of the more interesting characters, and tell us a little bit about their background, so we can get a feel for the individuals involved?

David Brophy
You know on either side of the border there's not much discussion of the people who went back and forth who were active in the Soviet Union but remained as Chinese citizens, partly because these people weren't really intellectuals. They weren't putting out newspapers, they weren't writing

pamphlets, these were people who were caravan traders going over and working in the bazaar and were quite vulnerable through the revolution. The one who interested me the most in this respect was a guy called Qadir Haji, who's from a village just outside Kashgar, as his name would suggest he's a haji, he's been on the hajj with his father. He comes back to Russian territory in 1916, he sets up shop in the Almaty Bazaar. Through the revolution he rises to a position of leadership within this Kashgari community. These are people who have Chinese passports but they're stranded in Soviet territory because the border's closed.

He comes to see himself as the natural leader of the Chinese citizens in Soviet territory and as significant a figure as any of the other Russian born Uyghur intellectuals that emerge, but there's a significant rivalry between these groups. What's interesting about him is he's something of a survivor, there are various points at which there are crackdowns on cross-border activity. He manages to get through these periods despite having a lot of connections across the border and throughout Soviet Central Asia, to people who were being regarded pretty suspiciously by the party; to religious figures and so on. So he's someone who works in the margins rather than following Soviet orthodoxy.

He's also interesting because he ties the book together quite well. He is actually someone who, in the late 1930's when the Soviets intervene in Xinjiang when a big rebellion breaks out, eventually they back a new Chinese warlord in Urumqi, his name is Sheng Shicai. But in the South they have to shore-up this new regime by sending a lot of Soviet trained Communists who are not Chinese who are Uyghur, Kyrgyz, Kazakh, whatever. So he comes back to Kashgar at this time and becomes the Deputy Chief of Police in Kashgar. So he's someone who crosses the border on the hajj, comes back, goes through the revolution returns to his home town as a Soviet trained Chief of Police and of course that makes him quite a controversial figure as well.

He has a fairly black name actually because of what he did, but I don't depict him in the book as the villain of the piece by any means, I just think that he as an individual embodies a lot of the contradictions in this…

James Leibold
Compromises people had make…

David Brophy
…in this political project, so ….

James Leibold
And what happens to him in the end?

David Brophy
Well, as is the case with most of the people in this book, he's recalled to Soviet territory in 1937 and I don't have any files to indicate what happened at that point, but this is the great purge and many of his ilk perished in the great purge. So my assumption is that he was recalled and shot. It wouldn't have been difficult to manufacture a case against him given his past associations, but…

James Leibold
That's a great example of someone who you've, as I said, literally exhumed from the archives, and with a final question about the contemporary politics of Xinjiang. This is a highly sensitive area, you're dealing with a number of different nationalist agendas, you've got the Uyghur nationalist agenda which has many strains, represented partially by the World Uyghur Congress, you've got now the rise of radical Islam inside Xinjiang as well as throughout Central Asia, you've got the Chinese Nationalist Agenda which seeks to increase mingling between the Han majority and the Uyghurs.

This must have made it very difficult to try to write, to be true to your historical sources and write a history against a lot of these contemporary nationalist narratives?

David Brophy
I mean I can't say that I've negotiated all of the potential pitfalls in writing this kind of history. I have to say that the situation has changed considerably over the last ten years since I first began researching this project. I mean ten years ago, it seemed as if the national framework or the *minzu* framework was still the primary basis for political contestation in Xinjiang. But as you well know and you've written more about this than I have, there's been challenge from both directions.

On the one hand you have Chinese theorists who are calling this into question, people who are quite critical of the whole *minzu* concept as what they see as a barrier to integration, and that's reflected on the other hand by Uyghurs who may be less interested in rallying around the symbols of Uyghur nationhood. They feel that's an avenue that has reached a dead-end for them.

You do start to notice a difference now between those more interested in religious approaches to politics and life in general, downplaying the significance of Uyghur national identity. So in that sense maybe if I wait another ten years I'd have to write this book in a different vein, focusing much more on Islam and on the currents of Islamic modernism that I touch on in the book, but are not by any means the centre of it.

The book is still largely grounded in the Xinjiang, Kashgar-Tashkent, Ili,/Ghulja axis and that naturally leave out certain stories that are also important to our understanding of what's going on in Xinjiang today. I mean as for the larger question of how I situate myself in this particular conflict, I think there are elements of the book that both sides may take issue with; it's just inevitable when you write a book about a national movement that you will call into question certain pillars of that movement. The position I come to at the end of the book is not to emphasise the distinctiveness of the Uyghur position or the Uyghur plight or anything like that, but simply to ask and this is I suppose, directed more towards Chinese readers perhaps or readers in China, that the Uyghur case is really not very different from the broader challenge that confronted Chinese in the earlier 20th Century. They went abroad looking for inspiration from various sources whether it was from Japan, or whether it was from the Soviet Union and when you put these stories side by side, there's a lot they have in common.

James Leibold
What a great way to end. I'm afraid that's all the time we have for today's podcast. I'd like to thank my guest Dr David Brophy of Sydney University. Here is your souvenir Asia Rising Mug, I hope it will find a nice place on your mantelpiece.

You can follow David on Twitter on @dave_brophy or myself @jleibold.

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