

Teaching Xinjiang in Chinese History

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“How should I teach Xinjiang in the ‘Modern China’ survey?” is a question I now encounter often in emails, professional listservs, and online groups. China historians’ growing interest in integrating the Uyghur homeland into general teaching is a laudable response to changes both in and beyond the field: Headlines have made students newly curious about this region and the origins of the conflict there, and English-language scholarship on it has increased dramatically over the past twenty years. Moreover, the politicized discourse around Xinjiang’s past demands that instructors provide evidence-based accounts informed by reliable research, at minimum to combat ignorance and misinformation.

While there are good reasons to include Xinjiang in the “content” of a course, I would argue that the question of “how to teach about Xinjiang” must begin with the question of “why to teach about Xinjiang.” That is, what do we learn by studying Xinjiang in the context of a “Modern China” course that we could not learn otherwise? How can the history of a particular region contribute to the overarching narrative that a student is meant to retain, such that they will be able to speak and write about Chinese history with the expected level of expertise? Even if a student eventually forgets all of the course’s content, what is the education that they will retain—the skills and habits of mind—from learning Xinjiang history? In this sense, teaching Xinjiang history is a matter of course design, and decisions related to it must proceed from learning goals.

This short essay offers a series of potentially effective approaches for integrating the Uyghur homeland into a survey and points out pitfalls to consider. No pedagogy is perfect, but I argue for a deliberate approach that connects Xinjiang to a course’s central themes and questions.

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Recent scholarship on Xinjiang is not yet integrated into postgraduate training in Chinese history, even as it increasingly appears on social science reading lists. Moreover, this scholarship, following historical evidence, frequently ties indigenous experiences more closely to events in Russia and Central Asia than to those in “China proper.” Consequently, teaching twentieth-century Xinjiang often means providing extensive background from Soviet history, which instructors might not have, and which takes classroom time away from key events in Shanghai, Yan’an, or Beijing. Integrating Xinjiang into a Modern China survey can thus place a significant intellectual burden on the instructor.

Fortunately, struggling instructors can turn to James Millward’s newly updated *Eurasian Crossroads*, which provides historical overviews that are accessible to undergraduates.¹ Sean Roberts’ *The War on the Uyghurs* also offers a highly digestible historical background chapter.² Instructors may also familiarize themselves with recent English-language works that explicitly connect events in Xinjiang with those in China proper, although many are unpublished dissertations.³

Secondary literature, however, cannot replace engagement with primary sources. In the spirit of centering the voices of people living in Xinjiang, the simple solution would seem to be to add a source translated from Uyghur or Kazakh in a genre that students will easily grasp, perhaps a memoir. However, this approach runs the risk of tokenism, of flattening Uyghur experiences in the midst of our efforts to demonstrate the complexity of the Chinese past. The elite and strongly male-gendered romantic nationalism of early Uyghur leaders, for example, is relatively accessible in translation, but it is a poor representation of Uyghur life in general. Just as we would not limit women’s voices to “gender week,” but instead demonstrate the integral importance of the critical study of gender throughout the course, likewise should we situate Xinjiang sources within the broader problematization of ethnonational and religious identities that is a key component of the Modern China survey.

Indeed, the current discourse around Xinjiang’s history provides an obvious case study in the politicization of the past. New resources enable instructors to teach about contemporary Xinjiang through documents, including PRC government and Party sources, and to think about the contested nature of historical representation.⁴ However, reducing Xinjiang to a lesson in politics can mean reproducing the discourse that we mean to criticize. An instructor may put themselves in the awkward position of fighting ideology with empirical data, or unwittingly reinforce the false belief that non-Chinese historians mean to “harm China” by discussing sensitive regions.

One option is to approach Xinjiang as a recurring case study in foreign relations and geopolitics in which local actors possessed clear agency. A survey course could visit Xinjiang for the Muslim uprisings of the 1860s, court debates on coastal or Inner Asian defense, and the later diplomatic wrangling over Ili, which are all discussed in British Foreign Office and India Office files or already-published source readers. Thanks to the Wilson Center, documentary collections are also available in English translation that cover Xinjiang between the Chinese Communists and the Soviets (1934–1949) and the mass cross-border migration of 1962.⁵

An instructor could also consider elite articulations of nationalism, for example by placing Sun Yat-sen into dialogue with Isa Yusuf Alptekin or Memtimin Bughra in order to show how Chinese and Uyghur nationalisms intertwined and diverged. Translated passages from elite writings are available in published scholarship.⁶ Memoirs and documents from the “Campaign Against Local Nationalism” (Xinjiang’s version of the Anti-Rightist Movement) address how Mao-era politics intersected with a nationalist movement that existed before 1949 and with ethnic discrimination after.⁷

Yet I fear that focusing on these aspects of Xinjiang history in the survey runs the risk of assimilating both Han and Uyghur social and intellectual change to a reductionist narrative of secularization. Subaltern history is meant to challenge, not

affirm, our received social discourse of the past. I think that it is generally an error to emphasize the minority views of a cosmopolitan elite in control of print media over those of the rural majority engaged with a textual tradition centered around manuscript and oral traditions. It is in fact within those traditions that much of the contestation between local and national, traditional and modernizing, Islamic and secular, and Uyghur and Chinese narratives has taken place.⁸

In my opinion, Uyghur region history in the context of a Modern China survey class is best presented alongside other critical engagements with historical time. Typically, I offer a selection from my own translation of the *Tārīkh-i Ḥamīdī*, an important Uyghur chronicle from the dawn of the twentieth century that reflects on Chinese power in Islamic sacred time.⁹ We revisit those issues with a 1927 text that similarly attempts to make sense of the Warlord Era,¹⁰ and then with a manuscript account from 1960 that draws on the same tropes and traditions, updated for the Mao era. Importantly, these texts are built on an epistemic and textual tradition quite distinct from that which informs the majority of a Modern China course's primary source readings. While this difference is a major reason for the texts' pedagogical value, it also means that they are difficult to understand fully without reference to the genres of hagiography (*tadhkira*) and epic (*dāstān*). I recommend that instructors consult Rian Thum's *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History* for background on these traditions in modern Xinjiang.¹¹

Nevertheless, students in the Modern China survey can be primed through their engagement with Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, and others to think critically about shifting conceptions of history's relationship to the national community. Similarly, Rachel Harris' recent *Soundscapes of Uyghur Islam* offers recollections by rural women who negotiated complex identities as Quran reciters and labor models.¹² These memoirs engage with "campaign time" in a way that reflects experiences of rural women elsewhere in China.¹³ It can be useful to complement such Xinjiang sources with readings from

Mongolia and Tibet, where sacred history remained an important vehicle for understanding the post-Qing condition, or mythology could draw Buddhism and the Cultural Revolution together.¹⁴

By emphasizing the persistence of the "old society" within the new, and the struggle to make sense of a rapidly shifting world, we can see how Uyghur sources resonate with the persistence of Qing-era ideas and institutions elsewhere, much as Henrietta Harrison documents in *The Man Awakened From Dreams*, another common undergraduate reading.¹⁵ Indigenous sources from Xinjiang can serve as a mirror for China history, as they show how people grappled with many of the same phenomena from a very different perspective. They can also prompt us to center other experiences of the past two centuries that are expressed in Chinese, yet fit uneasily into the narrative of modernization, such as ritual texts. In the longer term, the standard China survey courses should be broken down into courses that consider particular regional geographies or briefer spans of time, which would enable this sort of comparison and analytical depth without sacrificing core knowledge.

Meanwhile, students can learn from the Xinjiang case how to look for counternarratives and consider the voice of the subaltern, particularly when the subaltern speaks in a way that is fundamentally dissonant with our expectations. Given the evident determination of bad-faith actors to misrepresent the Uyghur homeland's past in pursuit of present goals, it is important to get students past international debates conducted mainly in Chinese and English and put them into contact with voices from people who lived there, presented as faithfully as possible. Such recentering has been an important goal in China history teaching in the Western academy for decades, and the same principle should inform our approach to Xinjiang.

¹ James A. Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*, 2nd edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

² Sean Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Campaign Against Xinjiang's Muslims* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 1–20.

³ 1877–1911: Peter B. Lavelle, *The Profits of Nature: Colonial Development and the Quest for Resources in Nineteenth-Century China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020); Eric Schluessel, *Land of Strangers: The Civilizing Project in Qing Central Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020). 1912–1930s: Justin Jacobs, *Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016). 1930s–1970s: Joshua L. Freeman, "Print and Power in the Communist Borderlands: The Rise of Uyghur National Culture," PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 2019; and Jacobs, *Xinjiang*. Cultural Revolution: Sandrine Catris, "The Cultural Revolution from the Edge: Violence and Revolutionary Spirit in Xinjiang, 1966–1976," PhD dissertation, Indiana University, 2015.

⁴ Xinjiang Documentation Project, online at <https://xinjiang.sppga.ubc.ca/>.

⁵ "China and the Soviet Union in Xinjiang, 1934 – 1949," online at <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/collection/234/china-and-the-soviet-union-in-xinjiang-1934-1949>; "The Yi-Ta Incident, 1962," online at <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/collection/191/the-yi-ta-incident-1962>.

⁶ For example, David Brophy, "The Qumul Rebels' Appeal to Outer Mongolia," *Turcica* 42 (2010): 329–41; Ondřej Klimeš, *Struggle By the Pen: The Uyghur Discourse of Nation and National Interest, c. 1900–1949* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

⁷ Söyüngül Chanisheff, *The Land Drenched In Tears* (Hertfordshire Press, 2018); "Local Nationalism' in Xinjiang, 1957–1958," online at <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/collection/491/local-nationalism-in-xinjiang-1957-1958>.

⁸ Ildikó Bellér-Hann, "Feudal Villains or Just Rulers? The Contestation of Historical Narratives in Eastern Xinjiang," *Central Asian Survey* 31, no. 3 (2012): 311–25.

⁹ The translation remains to be published, but I freely share an important chapter for teaching. On this source, see also Schluessel, *Land of Strangers*, chapter 6.

¹⁰ Eric Schluessel, *The World As Seen from Yarkand: Ghulām Muḥammad Khān's 1920s Chronicle Mā Tīṭayniṭ wāqi'asi* (Tokyo: NIHU Program Islamic Area Studies, 2014).

¹¹ Rian Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

¹² Rachel Harris, *Soundscapes of Uyghur Islam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020).

¹³ Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

¹⁴ Melvyn C. Goldstein, Ben Jiao, and Tanzen Lhundrup, *On the Cultural Revolution in Tibet: The Nyemo Incident of 1969* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Matthew King, *Ocean of Milk, Ocean of Blood: A Mongolian Monk in the Ruins of the Qing Empire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

¹⁵ Henrietta Harrison, *The Man Awakened From Dreams: One Man's Life in a North China Village, 1857-1942* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).