Book Reviews


Thum’s book, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History*, combining ethnographic and historical data, provides an extremely deep and systematic analysis of the unique manuscript-based historical practices in the Turkic Muslim community of Altishahri, in Xinjiang, China.

The uniqueness of the historical practices in the community lies in that the whole community was involved in the process of local history writing. Usually, history-writing was left in the hands of educated elites, yet in Altishahri, in every stage of the tazkira [*tadhkirah*] production and dissemination, such as composing, editing, binding, delivering, reciting, reading, listening, commenting, lending, owning, copying, etc., and in the interface of these activities, local people from all kinds of backgrounds, whether literate or illiterate, were involved in one way or another. In this case, the texts were allowed to be changed to reflect the changing needs and understanding of the community of readers, but at the same time, they were seen as immutable knowledge from unquestioned and ancient sacred authorities. Briefly, the boundaries between the roles, which people got involved in with regard to the manuscript-based history-writing process were pretty much blurred, yet the sanctity of the tazkira remained firm.

Moreover, the tazkira, as an essential element of pilgrimages and shrine rituals, was thoroughly integrated into the religious life of the community. In the activities of the villagers, the tazkiras were distributed regularly to people.
at shrines and other places on a daily, weekly and annual basis. Reflections on those tazkiras were also exchanged and shared at those events, and thus shrines also served as sites where historical meaning was communicated and negotiated. Overall, the local history in the community was also a sacred history and never a profane historical practice that would rival the influences of the ritualised, sacred systems of the tazkira and shrines.

Evidently, this manuscript-based process of local history-writing and circulation in the Turkic Muslim community of Altishahri had literally become a process of community integration. By constantly participating in the writing, sharing, and exchanging of understandings of their local history, people in the community developed a strong collective ethnic and religious consciousness and identity.

In addition, the texts of the tazkira had deep roots in Arabia and India as well as Turkey, and some unwritten texts in the local community were absorbed into the tazkira as well. Eventually, all these texts from diverse and transnational sources were merged, and together comprised the local history through which the local population felt connected. Thus, the group identity developed in this context was not just local, but rather transnational, deeply and continuously linked to its original roots.

This study successfully demonstrates the linkages between historical construction, community integration, and identity formation. It provides a new way to understand the extremely strong ethnic-religious identity and group cohesion often found among Muslim diaspora communities around the world today.

This history practice became regular in the community during the eighteenth century, under the rise of manuscript tradition. The implementation of new printing technology in the early twentieth century, governmental intervention in pilgrimage and shrine rituals, and the recent development of the tourist industry in the area all dramatically pushed this historical practice toward change. Eventually, it transformed into a new form of expression in the genre of biographical fiction. In the contemporary context, the role this newly-developed form of unofficial historical writing (biographical fiction) still actually plays in identity formation and collective cohesion is very much uninvestigated yet and thus unclear, and more empirical studies are called for with regard to this issue.

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