

Towards a Historical Anthropology of the Uyghur of Xinjiang in the 19th and 20th Centuries

Ildikó BELLÉR-HANN

1. Historical Anthropology

The aim of this article is to introduce the research perspective of my monograph on the historical anthropology of Xinjiang.¹ This is a first attempt to bring this perspective into the more conventional political and social historical research of this region. The perspective of historical anthropology is not new, but because, to the best of my knowledge, it has not been taken up in a systematic way for studying either Xinjiang history or the history of other Central Asian societies, a brief definition is in place. This will be followed by presenting an example of how the various sources may be used to widen our understanding of the past.

Precise definitions of historical anthropology continue to vary.² There is, however, sufficient consensus concerning thematic and methodological directions to allow us to speak, if not of an academic discipline in the classical sense, at least of a diffuse, increasingly globalized “scholarly community.” A number of intellectual traditions have played a part in the emergence of historical anthropology, a circumstance which helps to explain the multiplicity of related or quasi-synonymous designations: ethno-history, micro-history, cultural history, history from below, *Alltagsgeschichte*, etc.

Impulses shaping historical anthropology were coming both from anthropologists and from historians. This is no place to give a detailed account of the various developments in Europe, the United States and Britain. Let it suffice here to mention the example of the British school of anthropology which experienced a problematic turning away from evolutionism which for long had dominated the discipline. This in turn culminated in a radical break with history in the name of synchronic functionalism. This school, largely created by Bronislaw

¹ BELLÉR-HANN, Ildikó 2008 *Community Matters in Xinjiang 1880–1949. Towards a Historical Anthropology of Uyghur*, Leiden: Brill. This work, and also this paper are the outcome of research supported by a grant from the Economic and Social Research Council of Great Britain (R00023-5709).

² DRESSEL, Gert 1996 *Historische Anthropologie: Eine Einführung*, Wien: Böhlau, pp. 13–17.

Malinowski in the inter-war decades, together with the “structuralism” of Radcliffe-Brown, led a whole generation of anthropologists in effect to exclude history from the anthropological enterprise. From around 1950 onwards, however, Evans-Pritchard played a pioneering role in promoting new forms of engagement with history by British anthropologists, although the full re-discovery of history by British anthropologists was not completed for several decades to come.³

Among the many antecedents of historical anthropology, one of the most influential roles was played by the *École des Annales*, which emerged around the journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, founded by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch in 1929. The first generation of the Annales School demanded a new, global and interdisciplinary history to end the hegemony of political history. More specifically, they promoted economic and social history as well as the history of *mentalités*. The second generation went further in its efforts to achieve a new paradigm in the historical analysis of social structures and trends over the *longue durée*. Scholars began from the 1960s to identify new topics such as death, childhood, ritual, love and marriage, women etc. and made an effort to distance themselves from the structuralism of their predecessors.⁴

Historians, like anthropologists, have started taking an interest in “local knowledge,”⁵ “plebeian culture” and “proctological history.”⁶ This “new history”⁷ can be best defined in terms of what it opposes: it turns against the historical paradigm that is preoccupied with political history and instead promotes all other dimensions of human life. Without completely neglecting narratives of events, it also promulgates an analysis of structure; it offers a view “from below” rather than a focus on the elite perspective, and in addition to traditional historical sources it advocates the inclusion of other kinds of evidence.⁸ In recent decades one can speak of a genuine convergence: numerous historical studies show the strong influence of anthropological insights while at the same time anthropologists are increasingly

³ LEWIS, Ioan M. ed. 1968 “Introduction,” in *History and Social Anthropology. A.S.A. Monographs 7*, London: Tavistock, ix–xxviii.

⁴ About the *Annales School* see e.g. BURKE, Peter, 1990 *The French Historical Revolution: the “Annales” School, 1929–89*, Cambridge: Polity.; ROJAS, Carlos 2004 *Die “Schule” der Annales: gestern, heute, morgen*. Leipzig: Leipziger Univ. Verlag.

⁵ GEERTZ, Clifford 1983 *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*, New York: Basic Books.

⁶ A term introduced by COHN, Bernard S. [1987] 2001. *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, Repr., 2001, pp. 39–42.

⁷ *La nouvelle histoire*, named after the title of the French mediaevalist Jacques Le Goff (1978).

⁸ BURKE, Peter 1991 “Overture: the New History, its past and its future,” in BURKE, P. ed. *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, Cambridge: Polity, pp. 1–23.

turning their attention to the past.⁹

This perspective is interested in all areas of social life and social relations and it includes political and economic history but does not limit itself to these areas. It also problematizes ritual and the everyday, relations of dominance, which includes but also goes beyond imperialist/colonial domination as well as other types of inequalities arising from differences in age, gender, social status etc.¹⁰

2. Historical Anthropology in Xinjiang

Practitioners of historical anthropology often work with “unusual sources,” that is, unusual for more traditional historians interested in political and elite history. They are not satisfied with “conventional” sources, official historiographies, but also search for and prioritise, whenever possible, indigenous and subaltern perspectives. In my work I have limited my enquiries to the period from the late 19th century up to the end of the 20th century and have combined textual sources with the results of empirical research on the ground.

Given the diversity of social actors and interest groups in Xinjiang, the question of the emic (indigenous/insider) vs. etic (outsider) views is a tricky one. I would certainly say that some Chinese and Manchu sources produced by those settled there permanently qualify as reflecting “insider” views. On the other hand, if our enquiry is limited to the social life of the Turkic speaking sedentary Muslims, then our definition of emic sources must be adjusted accordingly. My own work relies on the following sources:

1. indigenous sources in this restricted sense which do not consider Manchu/

⁹ For examples of such studies see BURKE, Peter 1978 *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, London: Temple Smith; BYNUM, Caroline 1987 *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, Berkeley: University of California Press; DAVIS, Nathalie 1997 *Changing Identities in Early Modern France*, Durham: Duke University Press; DAVIS, Nathalie 2000 *The Gift in Sixteenth Century France*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; GINZBURG, Carlo 1980 *The Cheese and the Worm: the Cosmos of a Sixteenth-century Miller*, Baltimore: Hopkins.; MEDICK, Hans 1996 *Weben und Überleben in Laichingen 1650–1900: Lokalgeschichte als allgemeine Geschichte*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht; SCHAMA, Simon 1987 *The Embarrassment of the Riches*, London: Collins; BLOCH, Maurice 1996 *From Blessing to Violence: a History and Ideology in the Circumcision Ritual of the Merina of Madagascar*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; COMAROFF, Jean and John L. Comaroff 1992 *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination*, Boulder: Westview Press.

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion of these issues see BELLÉR-HANN, Ildikó 1996 “Narratives and Values: Source Materials for the Study of Popular Culture in Xinjiang,” *Inner Asia: Occasional Papers*, Cambridge: Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit. 1, no. 1, pp. 89–100.

Chinese materials. (Given their volume, these deserve a monograph on their own right).

2. outsider views, basically European sources (in French, English, Russian, German)

The first group of indigenous sources consists of unique manuscripts written by local authors. Members of the Swedish mission were especially keen to immerse themselves in local culture, and at their mission stations in Kashgar and Yarkand they operated orphanages, hospitals and even a printing press. To improve their knowledge of the locally spoken Turkic language, the Swedes also employed members of the local Muslim elite as language teachers. Their writing skills and general knowledge were no doubt well above the average of their contemporaries. They were asked to write about aspects of local life and society, and the resulting collections of essays are of primary importance for ethnographic knowledge of the pre-socialist period. Two of these are dated from 1905 to 1910 in Kashgar and are the work of Muhammad Ali Damolla and Abul Wahid Axun, respectively. The third group of texts was written by Molla Abdul-Qadir in Yarkand, probably around 1930. Finally, another body of authentic indigenous texts was authored by Dr. Nur Luke, from Khotan, who probably committed his work to paper around 1950 in Poonah, India, at the Swedish Hindustani Mission.¹¹ In spite of its relatively late date, it seems certain that the author describes the state of affairs in southern Xinjiang as he remembers it from his stay there before 1949. In contrast to the other authors, Nur Luke, as his name reveals, was a Christian convert who eventually fled to India and went on to earn himself a doctorate. The other authors in this group are likely to have been educated in the traditional Islamic schools and, therefore, were representatives of Islamic scholarship, a supposition borne out by their more sophisticated writing of the Arabic script. Finally, use is also made here of further manuscripts collected or purchased by the Swedish missionaries, most probably dating from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, though neither their exact provenance nor their authors can be identified.

A major group of sources for the pre-socialist period may be considered “indigenous” even though it comprises texts collected and published by foreign scholars. In the second half of the nineteenth century, interest in the language and social life of the Muslim inhabitants of Eastern Turkestan increased among foreign scholars,

¹¹ Prov. 207. I. [*A collection of essays on life in Eastern Turkestan*] by Muhammad Ali Damolla, Kashgar, 1905–10, 117p. (Turki). Prov. 207. II. [*A collection of essays on life in Eastern Turkestan*] by Abul Wahid Axun, Kashgar, 1905–10, 52p. (Turki).

Prov. 212. [*A collection of essays on the habits and customs of Eastern Turkestan*] compiled by Dr. Nur Luke of Khotan, probably 1950s in Poonah, 137p. (Turki).

Prov. 464. [*A Collection of Eastern Turki folkloristic texts*] Lund University Library, Yarkand, cca. 1930. 49p. (Turki).

who collected specimens of what became commonly known as the “Eastern Turki dialect.” These texts are of great ethnographic as well as linguistic value, and they largely consist of indigenous accounts about aspects of daily life, local tradition, religious and life-cycle rituals, moral norms. In their publications, alongside their translation, these European scholars typically reproduced the original texts as dictated to them by their native informants, often naming the person in question and recording the place and date of the interview. Even though different editors such as Katanov and Menges, Pantusov, Malov, Jarring and Tenishev used different transcription systems, the texts provide rich material for both sociocultural and linguistic study.¹² Although transmitted by European scholars, there is no reason to doubt that these texts provide faithful renditions of local narratives, comparable in quality to (and often superseding in precision) the field data brought back by modern anthropologists.

In addition to indigenous narratives, these and other texts collected and published by foreigners also include specimens of oral tradition such as tales and proverbs, which were sometimes accompanied by explanatory remarks. These sources certainly do not belong to the “conventional type” normally utilised by historians, which is easy to explain. Classified as “folkloric texts,” specimens of oral tradition are often impossible to date and are ignored by mainstream historians. This is especially so when the historian has to do with societies with a long and

¹² In this group the most important sources are JARRING, Gunnar 1933 *Studien zu einer osttürkischen Lautlehre*, Lund: Borelius and Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz; JARRING, Gunnar 1946–51, *Materials to the Knowledge of Eastern Turki: Tales, Poetry, Proverbs, Riddles, Ethnological and Historical Texts from the Southern Parts of Eastern Turkestan*, Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup; KATANOV, Nikolai 1936, 1976 *Volkskundliche Texte aus Ost-Türkistan*, I.–II., Aus dem Nachlass von N. Th. Katanov. Herausgegeben von Karl Heinrich Menges. 1936, *Abhandlungen der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*. 1976, Mit einem Vorwort zum Neudruck von Karl Heinrich Menges und einer Bibliographie der Schriften Menges’ von Georg Hazai. Leipzig: Zentralantiquariat der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik; MALOV, Sergei E. 1961 *Uigurskie narechiia Sin’tsyana*, Moskva: Izdatel’stvo vostochnoi literatury; PANTUSOV, Nikolai 1897, 1898, 1900a, 1900b, 1901a, 1901b, 1901c, 1907a, 1907b *Materialy k’ izucheniyu narechiya taranchei iliiskago okruga*, I, II, IV, V, III, VI, VII, VIII, IX, Kazan’: Tipo-Litografiya Imperatorskogo Universiteta; RADLOFF, Wilhelm 1886 *Proben der Volkslitteratur der Nördlichen Türkischen Stämme. VI.: Der Dialect der Tarantschi*, Sankt-Petersburg: Eggers & Co und J. Glasunow. One such collection published by Tenishev dates from a more recent period (1984), but the materials it contains were collected in the early 1950s (TENISHEV, Edgem R. 1984 *Ujgurskie teksty*, Moskva: Nauka.). However, it is impossible to provide a full list of all the relevant works here. For a more detailed bibliography see Bellér-Hann 2008.

rich literary tradition. Xinjiang definitely falls into this category.¹³ In contrast to the indigenous manuscripts mentioned above, these are all published texts which have been available in public libraries for several decades, but probably deemed uninteresting both by historians as well as by anthropologists as mere “folklore” and therefore of no historical value.

Many of us are brought up to respect the written world and to give more weight to it than to orally communicated messages, but at the same time we often encounter the fallibility of such messages, e.g. in misreporting in newspapers. As far as written sources are concerned, there is also a tendency to over-privilege the evidence of manuscripts over printed texts, even though printed texts based on indigenous accounts (written or orally transmitted) may also yield valuable information. I am arguing for the occasional re-reading of hitherto neglected sources alongside the frantic search for new, sensational discoveries. All these sources should of course be placed within a wider historical and social context, but this should hold true of all sources, not just historiographies and other documents traditionally recognized as respectable historical testimonies. If this is accepted, then all kinds of works could be used as historical texts, including texts prepared with linguistic and ethnographic purposes as well as missionary reports and specimens of oral tradition. These texts, which include numerous emic interpretations of local society and are firmly embedded in space and time may become important testimonies about everyday norms and practices.

The second major group of sources includes accounts of the region by Westerners from the late nineteenth century onward, mostly in English, Russian, German and French. These are extremely varied in their length and contents. While some provide only fragmentary references to social norms and practices, other authors go into considerable detail. Most can be categorised as travel literature, the work of “gentleman travellers” or explorers, but there were also some whose interests were scholarly: geographical, archaeological, ethnographic or linguistic. Pride of place has to be given to the Frenchman Ferdinand Grenard, whose extensive work on Eastern Turkestan contains one of the most detailed ethnographic descriptions. Members of the British Forsyth mission to the region, contributed informative accounts, and special mention must also be made of the scholarly output of the German Orientalist Martin Hartmann, who spent six months travelling in

¹³ It is no accident that oral tradition was first utilised in researching the past of such societies which lacked writing and literary traditions. For example, Africanists for pre-colonial periods have started using oral histories for reconstructing the past. My point is that there is no reason to ignore such evidence even in cases when we have numerous other times of apparently “more serious” sources.

the region in 1902.¹⁴ Among the archaeologists, Albert von Le Coq is the outstanding figure. Even the more archaeologically oriented descriptions of his expeditions include useful references, but he also published a collection of Eastern Turki texts and proverbs, as well as an article devoted to aspects of local ethnography.¹⁵ Some authors' interests in the region derived from the political manoeuvres of the "Great Game," while others, notably Robert Shaw, were motivated by commercial enterprise.¹⁶ Finally, members of the Swedish Mission were active in the region for half a century, and it is to them that we owe some of the most valuable information about life among the indigenous population.¹⁷

Although I am fully aware of the "Orientalist bias" of the Western authors, their works yield much useful information when the focus of our enquiry shifts from political/elite history to the concerns of historical anthropology. While a few of these, such as Grenard often give sophisticated sociological analysis, much of the information in the other works may appear as no more than historical anecdotes. Their value becomes evident when the anecdotes are collated and their testimony coincides with or is corroborated by the evidence of other sources, be it Western or indigenous. Although the European travel literature has been occasionally used and cited by historians, up until now there has been no attempt to systematically coordinate the materials contained in them to reconstruct their representations of indigenous values. In these materials the "orientalist bias" is usually blatantly clear, and they do not distort the general picture to the extent which would render these

¹⁴ GRENARD, Ferdinand 1898 *Le Turkestan et le Tibet: étude ethnographique et sociologique*. J.-L. Dutreuil de Rhins: *Mission Scientifique dans la Haute Asie 1890–1895, Deuxième partie*, Paris: Ernest Leroux; FORSYTH, Thomas et al. 1875 *Report of a Mission to Yarkund in 1873, under Command of Sir T.D.Forsyth...with Historical and Geographical Information Regarding the Possessions of the Ameer of Yarkund*, Calcutta: Foreign Department Press; HARTMANN, Martin 1908 *Chinesisch-Turkestan. Geschichte, Verwaltung, Geistesleben und Wirtschaft, Angewandte Geographie* 3, Reihe 4 Band, Halle: Gebauer-Schwetschke Druckerei und Verlag m.b.H.

¹⁵ LE COQ, Albert von 1911 *Sprichwörter und Lieder aus der Gegend von Turfan*, (Baessler-Archiv Beiheft 1–8, 1910–17), Leipzig and Berlin: B. G. Teubner; LE COQ, Albert von 1916 *Volkskundliches aus Ost-Turkistan*, Mit einem Beitrag von O. v. Falke. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer (Königlich Preussische Turfan-expeditionen); LE COQ, Albert von 1919 *Osttürkische Gedichte und Erzählungen*, Budapest: Franklin.

¹⁶ SHAW, Robert B. [1871] 1984. *Visits to High Tartary, Yarkand and Kashgar*. London: John Murray. Repr., Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1984.

¹⁷ E.g. JARRING, Gunnar 1975 *Gustav Raquette and Qasim Akhun's Letters to Kamil Efendi*, *Scripta Minora Regiae Societatis Humaniorum Litterarum Lundensis* 76 no. 1, Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup; JARRING, Gunnar 1979 *Matters of Ethnological Interest in Swedish Missionary Reports from Southern Sinkiang*. *Scripta Minora Regiae Societatis Humaniorum Litterarum Lundensis* 80 no. 4, Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup.

materials useless as historical sources.¹⁸ While these views represent external, etic perspectives, they cannot be classified as “colonial,” which adjective must be reserved for the works of Chinese and Manchu authors.

In fact, a large part of the printed material which I have used for my work cannot be classified as “new” historical sources, since they have been around for several decades, even if some of them are more difficult to access than the others. They are new, nevertheless in their capacity of historical sources. So the novelty of a source is not necessarily determined by the time of its physical discovery or sudden accessibility. Our re-definition of history itself may turn well-known materials into new sources of history.

So far, the study of the more ‘trivial’ aspects of life in Xinjiang, such as the organisation of work, rituals, kinship, co-operation, conflict resolution have been left to anthropologists, who, however have mostly stuck the investigation of such subjects within a contemporary, “presentist” framework. This takes us to another point. In Xinjiang studies both history and anthropology tend to focus on change, and transformation. This approach has its *raison d’être* but this is to neglect the fact that there are periods of stability and, more importantly, some social institutions are more resistant to change than others. This is one of the fundamental questions which baffle anthropologists: why do some social institutions change rapidly and others not? But it is a recognised phenomenon, and the analyses, if carried out from the thematic perspective of the “new history,” should not fail to address it.

3. Poverty and Social Security in Pre-socialist Xinjiang

In what follows I shall briefly illustrate the outcome of using “unusual” sources in reconstructing historical phenomena which so far have not been the focus of attention. My example focuses on the issue of poverty in the pre-socialist period and simultaneous, but by no means co-ordinated efforts by the local authorities and by traditional social institutions to provide the poor with a measure of social security.

All sources give plenty of information about the poor and the destitute (*faqir-miskin, ajiz*) and accounts of poverty and social marginality reveal diversity rather than imply homogeneity.¹⁹ At the end of the nineteenth century, many people survived on charitable donations. Beggars’ ranks included individuals with diverse physical or mental conditions and social background, young and old, male and

¹⁸ A rather similar argument has been put forward in a recent analysis of German views of Central Asia (SIDIKOV, Bahodir 2003 “*Eine unermessliche Region*”: *Deutsche Bilder und Zerrbilder von Mittelasien (1852–1914)*, Berlin: Logos.)

¹⁹ Prov. 464. 1, 207. I. 44.

female, sane and insane, mutilated and able-bodied—ruined rural debtors, unemployed labourers and pious idlers. This diversity is indicated by the multiplicity of words used to label them, although it seems that most of these were employed interchangeably: *tilämchi*, *diwanä*, *khäyrichi*, *qäländär*, *gaday*, *sädiqichi*. Some beggars were reportedly not ashamed of their trade, and children habitually begged if they did not get enough food at home. There was general consensus that beggars were favoured by God and therefore had to be treated with politeness and kindness.²⁰ Begging was regarded by many as a profession.

As elsewhere in the Islamic world, voluntary poverty characterised members of various Muslim brotherhoods.²¹ Mendicants formed an occupational underclass: their economic status and standard of living differed little from that of beggars, the difference being that they were voluntarily poor. Some claimed a semi-holy status, a claim often appropriated by ordinary beggars. Beggars fit uneasily into our modern category of the unemployed, since we know that they often offered their services to earn their bread. Classifying them as beggars may have been justified by their appearance, their general poverty, the fact that they lived as beggars, perhaps in an almshouse, or that they simultaneously engaged in working for money and begging. But their activities were underlined by principles of reciprocity. Not only did they distribute blessings and good wishes to those who gave them alms; some male beggars worked as public entertainers and could also be hired to join funeral processions as singers,²² while others tried to earn a living doing handicrafts.²³

Providing the poor with a minimum amount of social security by the government in Xinjiang most likely began at different localities at different times. The distribution of regular grain aid to the needy started in Kashgar just before the end of the nineteenth century, after the oasis had been hit by an earthquake. As a result, there was a dramatic rise in prices, which in turn increased poverty. The Chinese authorities had a certain amount of grain put aside for the victims from the state granary. Each person was given a board which he had to take monthly along to the granary to get his grain allowance. Those who had no such board could not receive their grain ration. By the early twentieth century, taking care of the poor in Kashgar (*ajizlarni baqmaq*) had become a public concern. Almshouses (*qäländärkhana*, *ajizlar üchün olturghali yurt*) were established by the Chinese authorities where the destitute could become permanent or temporary boarders,

²⁰ Grenard 1898: 64–66.

²¹ SABRA, Adam 2000 *Poverty and Charity in Medieval Islam. Mamluk Egypt, 1250–1517*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 27–28.

²² CABLE, Mildred and Francesca French 1942 *The Gobi Desert*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, p. 193.

²³ MANNERHEIM, Carl G. [1940] 1969 *Across Asia from West to East in 1906–1908, I-II.*, Helsinki: Suomalais-Ugrilainen Seura. Repri., Oosterhout, N.B., Netherlands: Anthropological publications, 1969, p. 65.

but saintly shrines and cemeteries also continued to serve as alternative abodes.²⁴ The almshouses were adobe houses divided by long, narrow passages into small cubicles similar to caravanserais. One almshouse in the south had one hundred and thirty rooms, and two hundred and eighty-four people resided there either in groups, as married couples or as single individuals. Each boarder was entitled to forty *jing* of maize monthly from the municipal authorities. Some were cheated out of their due by the greed of the Chinese officials who used false weights. As part of the aid package, each winter a pair of padded trousers and a coat were handed out to each person, but no special provisions were made for the sick.²⁵ In Turfan, which at the turn of the century had about 6,000 inhabitants and 1,690 houses, the local almshouse had ninety-two residents. Boarders received two sets of clothes annually, one padded for winter use and the other for the summer. Their grain allowance was one hundred and twenty *jing*, although we are not told how often they received this, and a small amount of cash was also provided for them. Their funerals were also paid for from the public coffers. On the negative side, bribes had to be paid to be able to get into the almshouse, and due to corruption, sometimes able-bodied young people benefited from the system while old and ill people were left to their own devices.²⁶ Occasional forms of public charity were very popular: when in the end of the nineteenth century, the governor of Khotan announced a general distribution for the poor, apparently 3,000 people turned up.²⁷

In addition to the government's feeble attempts to care for the poor, there were other mechanisms in local society which served the periodic redistribution of resources, rooted in religious and local understandings of morality and reciprocity. Unlike institutionalized aid initiated and implemented from the top down, these charitable acts were embedded in local social institutions.

The presence of the poor and destitute could be a nuisance—and threatening—but they were also credited with bringing good luck and blessing to a house. This ambiguous status reflected their position on the very margins of society. It was commonly held that if no beggar entered a courtyard for more than seven days, then some calamity would befall members of the household, the underlying logic being that of reciprocity: donation of alms gave an opportunity to the family to fulfil their religious obligation, and they would receive blessings in exchange. In fact, the giving and receiving of alms were embedded in local understandings of Islam and constituted an inseparable part of ritual life, complementing “top-down” government efforts to redistribute resources.

²⁴ Prov. 207. I. 44.

²⁵ DE FILIPPI, Filippo 1932 *The Italian Expedition to the Himalaya, Karakorum, and Eastern Turkestan (1913–14)*, London: Edward Arnold & Co., p. 475.

²⁶ Mannerheim 1969: 352.

²⁷ Grenard 1898: 165.

As one of the five pillars of Islam, payment of the alms tax is considered the obligation of every adult Muslim who does not suffer from mental infirmity, possesses a minimum amount of property and has accumulated a sufficient amount of wealth within a lunar year.²⁸ Ability to pay *zakat* was an important indication of economic and social status: in effect, it divided local society into those benefiting from donations and those making these donations.

Both religious and life-cycle rituals were occasions for communal almsgiving. Ritualised almsgiving typically took place at the time of religious festivals, a practice well known in other parts of the Islamic world.²⁹ In the first half of the twentieth century, alms were regularly distributed on the Night of Power (*qādir kechisi*) to commemorate the revelation of the Koran. Although this was normally identified as the twenty-seventh day of the month of Ramadan, a beggar's Ramadan song implies that almsgiving could start as early as the fifteenth day of the fast.³⁰ This may have corresponded to the Islamic *zakāt al-fiṭr*, typically due at the end of the month of Ramadan, which corresponded to the quantity of food needed to feed one person for one day.³¹ The Festival of Sacrifice was another occasion when redistribution assumed institutionalised forms. On this day, among the Turki-speaking Dolanis of the Yarkand river valley, "Sheep were only sacrificed at the houses of the well-to-do; those who cannot afford one of their own go around in batches to the houses of their wealthiest friends for the "salaam" ceremony. Standing before the owner of the house they bow with a sweeping movement of the arms and a stroking of the beard intoning a sonorous "Amin" the while, after which each person is entitled to a sup of sacrificial mutton. On the first two days of the Festival of Sacrifice only men perform the salaam; second is the women's day, when separate tables are spread in the andarun for the fair visitors. The skin of each sheep sacrificed goes to the Imam, the head and feet to the Mu'azzin, the neck and offal to the butcher and a portion of the meat to the beggars."³² The *Barat* celebrations took place in the middle of the Islamic month of Shā'bān. During this religious festival, ritual cakes were taken to the graves of the dead and were consumed by mendicants and beggars.³³ Each year on the eleventh of the month of *Sāpār*, rich people gave food or grain to the very poor living in their

²⁸ Sabra 2000: 33.

²⁹ Sabra 2000: 53–58.

³⁰ JARRING, Gunnar 1986. "Ramazan Poetry from Charchan," (On the dignity of man: Oriental and classical studies in honour of Frithiof Rundgren), *Orientalia Suecana* XXXIII/XXXV (1984/86), p. 193.

³¹ Sabra 2000: 34.

³² SKRINE, Clarmont P. 1926 *Chinese Central Asia*, London: Methuen. Repr., New York: Barnes & Noble, 1971, p. 186.

³³ Grenard 1898: 247.

neighbourhood.³⁴

Life-cycle events were also occasions for charitable redistribution. After a wedding ceremony, the wedding party started with musicians playing their instruments and guests dancing. The music informed beggars and the poor of the neighbourhood about the event, and many of them gathered to have their bowls filled. “No-one left empty-handed, because we believe that Allah will listen to the prayers of the poor and we were anxious that they all should pray for our prosperity.”³⁵ In the first half of the twentieth century the concluding ceremony of the wedding ritual in Kashgar, known as the ceremony of ‘White Road’, took place after the bride had entered her new husband’s home. At this point, some cotton and flour were placed in front of her and later given to the poor.³⁶

On the last day of the hair-tying ritual, a *rite de passage* for young women, beggars were invited to be entertained.³⁷ On the day of death, alms consisting of cash and a piece of soap were distributed among beggars.³⁸ On the fortieth day following death, invited guests arrived to take part in the festive meal offered to commemorate the dead. In the courtyard, all male guests who as a sign of mourning had left their hair and facial hair grow for forty days, had their hair cut as a sign of breaking the mourning. The barber’s expenses were met by the landlord, and beggars were also invited to join and benefit from the communal ritual of ending the mourning.³⁹

Healing ceremonies and other special events were also marked by almsgiving. In the early twentieth century to ease her approaching delivery, a woman from Kashgar engaged a healer to perform a *séance*. Following the conclusion of the ritual, she paid the healer and gave alms to the poor.⁴⁰ Offerings to the poor could be made to help cure the sick, presumably even without the explicit framework of a healing ritual.⁴¹ Almsgiving was also an integral part of the male communal entertainment, the *māshrāp*. Before the main dishes were served to the guests, piles of large bread were placed on the tablecloths in front of the guests with piles of small round breads on top. The latter were for the guests to consume, but the large breads underneath were distributed among the poor.⁴² The *māshrāp* was the

³⁴ Prov. 464. 32R.

³⁵ Jarring 1975: 27.

³⁶ SYKES, Ella and Percy 1920 *Through Deserts and Oases of Central Asia*, London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, p. 312.

³⁷ Jarring 1975: 29–30.

³⁸ Skrine 1926: 204.

³⁹ Prov. 212: 90–8. For similar examples for the connection between death rituals and charity see Sabra 2000: 95–7.

⁴⁰ Sykes & Sykes 1920: 314.

⁴¹ Jarring 1951b: 81.

⁴² Jarring 1975: 15.

prerogative of the well-to-do, and a display of one's wealth in the form of offering a lavish feast to one's social equals had to be balanced with the distribution of alms. Free meals were offered to the poor upon completing the building of a new house.

All ritualised communal meals involved the charitable distribution of food, which was known as *nāzir*. Indigenous explanations consider *nāzir* an altruistic act, when food is offered to others with no expectation of return. This definition contradicted reciprocal ideology, which considered charity a meritorious deed. Beggars and other alms-receivers habitually prayed for the well-being of the donor and asked blessings on him and his household. According to a Taranchi informant, when a poor mendicant begged in the street and received alms, in return he prayed for the donor, therefore the sacrifice pleased God.⁴³ The theme of almsgiving also found its way into oral tradition:

*Whatever you give with your hands will follow you.*⁴⁴

The eschatological significance of almsgiving and the reciprocal assumptions underlying it were elaborated by the indigenous informant as follows:

*If you give alms to please God while you are alive,
it [the good deed] will accompany you in the afterlife.*⁴⁵

On a more pragmatic level, religious and secular officeholders exercised charity as a device to build up prestige and extend their circle of clients. Exceptionally rich individuals used almsgiving to generate and maintain prestige. A'la Khan, of Khotan, regularly kept an "open table" in his house which was always buzzing with visitors, ranging from *mollas* to mendicants and other clients.⁴⁶ Although voluntarily poor mystics had no possessions to give away, they shared the donations brought to them, as was the case with the superintendent of a Kashgar dervish convent, Egerchi Ishan. He once received a thoroughbred mount as an offering from a disciple. He refused to sell the horse. Instead, he had it slaughtered and distributed the meat among the poor. Later, other offerings brought to him by the Kirghiz in the form of camels, horses and cattle were also slaughtered, and thus he fed many of the poor.⁴⁷

Property relations and piety were intimately connected to the idiom of charity:

⁴³ Radloff 1886: 5.

⁴⁴ *hār nā bārsāng qolung bilān, ol barur sāning bilān.*

⁴⁵ Pantusov 1909: 61, 85.

⁴⁶ Grenard 1898: 232.

⁴⁷ Jarring 1979: 18.

the rich and powerful converted some of their property into symbolic capital to increase their social influence, as well as their religious merit. Their prosperity depended on the prayers of the poor. The poor made a living from the donations and reciprocated with blessings and prayer. The beggar's blessing was gratefully received, and his curse was greatly feared. This, and the ambivalent perceptions which reduced differences between mendicant dervishes and ordinary beggars, further increased the reputation of recipients of charity as possessing magical powers. Charity was conceived in reciprocal terms, and in addition to functioning as a redistribution mechanism, it also served as a means to integrate members of the lowest social groups into religious and life-cycle rituals from which they would otherwise be excluded. Through this participation, community was temporarily extended to those who were not in a position to host rituals.

Conclusion

Finding new sources for historical research may take diverse forms, such as Jun Sugawara's spectacular discovery of the kadi documents in Kashgar. I am arguing that it is possible to identify new sources, both in the archives and in published volumes, if only we are prepared to widen our definition of history. I have made a case for introducing historical anthropological themes into the history writing of Xinjiang, which go beyond political, economic and social history that mostly concentrates on the macro-level, without questioning their *raison d'être*. If our definition of history also includes the experiences of local actors of the everyday, of the trivial, but always against a background of major political and social changes, if we also take an interest in groups other than the elite, including also the social marginals both in the more distant and in the recent past, then we must be prepared to make use of a wider range of source materials: archival sources may be usefully augmented by western travelogues and linguistic and folkloristic texts. As a general rule of thumb, to achieve a "thick description" it is necessary to juxtapose as wide a range of both indigenous and outsider views as possible. Finally, applying anthropological insights to materials collated from various historical sources may open up new perspectives and draw attention to new types of sources.

Realistically, in the Xinjiang context the use of such methods can only become widespread in a more open political climate when free access is granted to the archives and when there is no danger of putting local people at risk. A re-definition of our concept of history may turn many hitherto ignored or neglected texts into historical sources, and, vice versa, a systematic study of both conventional and unconventional sources including memoirs, specimens of oral tradition and oral history could open up many new fields of historical enquiry.

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