CHAPTER 1

Protonational Identity and Interest (c. 1900)

This opening chapter examines elite perceptions of protonational communal identity and interest as manifested by Turkic Muslims in late Qing Xinjiang (during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). Detailing Kim Hodong’s previous reading of two historiographical texts written by Molla Musa Sayrami (2004), this chapter looks into how these texts describe forces acting toward and against Xinjiang Turkic Muslims’ feeling and acting as a unified community in the late premodern era. It also observes aspects such as a shared mythology, descent, history, culture, territory, linguistic ties, and sense of belonging and identifies a number of ways and contexts in which Xinjiang Turkic Muslims cogitated and acted as an ethnic community similar to modern nations. At the same time, this chapter also illustrates that in other contexts their protonational centripetal dynamics, which reinforced communal identity and action, did not necessarily prevail over other communal loyalties and interests, such as local or factional objectives. Although this entire study strives to refrain from an anachronistic projection of a national lens onto premodern times and of general theories of nation-formation and nationalist movement onto the Uyghur case, it also does not resign from the quest for predecessors of features of modern nations and nationalism in premodern times and in a non-Western context. In other words, this chapter seeks to ascertain predecessors of a modern Uyghur national identity and nationalism in a premodern setting.

1.1 Qing Administration and Muslim Rebellion (1759–1878)

The conquest of the region today called Xinjiang (Figure 1.1 [Map of Xinjiang]) by the Qing dynasty in the mid-eighteenth century was an epochal moment from several points of view. This projection of the Qing imperial mandate onto Central Asia was yet another phase of a complex empire-building process, which had started in the late sixteenth century with Nurhaci and Manchu ethnogenesis and based its legitimacy on even earlier Jurchen and Mongol conquest empires of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The result was an empire of massive territorial expanse that largely exceeded those of the revered Han and Tang dynasties. The subsequent Qing administration and development of Xinjiang was also an ingenious elaboration on previously established patterns of rule over the region by various ethnonopolitical powers during the course of
more than 2500 years. Qing rule in Xinjiang coalesced with the unprecedentedly changing nature of the Chinese imperial polity, with modernity in the surrounding regions and with the emergence of a new world order. In this sense, the Qing administration of Xinjiang functioned as an immediate predecessor and model for successive Republican and Communist governments and laid the cornerstone of modern and contemporary Xinjiang reality. Qing policy thus naturally generated potent stimuli for the formation of what later became the modern Uyghur national consciousness and nationalism.

The Manchu elimination of Junghars in northern Xinjiang and the appropriation of the Tarim Basin by 1760 both occurred as annexations of the region by preceding China-based dynasties. It was the Western Han (西漢; 206 BC–9 AD) who were the first to resort to a campaign against a hostile nomadic power centered in Jungharia and opportunely also took control of the oases in the Tarim Basin, which the nomads were exploiting in tax, harvest, production, and labor. Han Wudi (武帝; ruled 141–87 BC) was pressed into a campaign against the Xiongnu (匈奴), who were proto-Turkic nomads who subdued the various Iranian-speaking peoples of present day Xinjiang, namely the Sakas of the Tarim Basin as well as the Yuezhi (月氏) and Wusun (烏孫) of the Jungharian Basin, for economic reasons throughout the second half of first