Rian Thum

The Uyghur ethnic group based in the Xinjiang province of the contemporary People’s Republic of China (the PRC) are, along with the Tibetans, arguably the most visible of China’s 55 minority groups. This is in large part due to recent ethnic violence between Uyghurs and Han Chinese that has been attributed to Uyghur demand for increased cultural understanding and political and economic opportunity in the PRC. However, the culture and history of these oasis-dwelling Turkic Muslim communities is not a simple tale of conflict, resistance or alternative nationalisms. Rian Thum’s engaging and thought-provoking new book, The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History, deftly avoids simplistic examinations of Uyghur identity by exploring the way that the people known today as Uyghurs have imagined, recorded and performed their own histories. Thum has managed to avoid reductionist explanations through steering his study away from the Sinocentric and Sinophone sources radiating out of Beijing, and instead towards popular sources from the space Uyghurs call Altishahr, the agricultural oases around the Taklamakan Desert where they developed a rich and unique culture. Even the decision to use the indigenous term used by Uyghurs of Altishahr (in Uyghur, “six cities”) and for Uyghur people, Altishahri, demonstrates Thum’s commitment to avoiding state-centric, nationalistic paradigms. He argues that the terms used today by both the PRC and Uyghurs for the areas where Uyghurs are based in contemporary Xinjiang are “a product of conquest and colonisation” from the period of the Qing dynasty until the present (p. 3). Included in the “sacred routes of Uyghur history” that make up the book and inspire its title, is Thum’s realisation that Altishahri identities pre-date these statist constructs, and are far more complex than is allowed for by current political polemic (Pp. 3–7).

The complexity of these identities come from what Thum calls an alternative form of “imagined community” to nationalism which was based around “a relatively homogeneous regional identity nourished by manuscript technology and internal pilgrimage in an agrarian society.” (Pp. 12–13) The manuscript technology which contributed to these forms of community included multiple languages, such as Persian, Arabic and Altishahri, as well as multiple genres and formats. These manuscripts are now part of global archives in Europe that were assembled in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, Chinese state archives, and as part of an active manuscript and antiquities market present in contemporary Xinjiang. Thum provides an overview of these archives, Altishahri manuscript technologies and textual landscapes in Chapters 1 and 2, but they are not his
only source materials. Instead, he argues that the key element that allowed for the creation of imagined communities from this textual landscape was social interaction and performative traditions connected to these texts. To illustrate this point, Thum focuses on the complex textual form of the tazkirah, which appeared in the 13th century and encompassed prose, poetry, hagiographical traditions of Sufi saints, epics, romances and tales of holy war (Pp. 41–48). The connection between different elements of tazkirah is not immediately clear, unless one considers that they were used at shrines in order to outline the tale of the site and the prayer and worship to be performed there. These manuscripts were therefore not static but changing textual traditions, created through committees of orators, commentators and scribes. They were then performed in various community spaces, such as shrines and teahouses, and were the subject of discussion and debate. In Chapter 3, he outlines the historical role of shrines and pilgrimage in the transmission of these textual traditions and their social elements. This chapter stands on its own as a fascinating exploration of contemporary Islamic practice in Xinjiang due to its rich ethnographic description of how shrines function today and thereby continue to provide pilgrims with "an elaborate communion with the past." (p. 132) Chapter 4 expands on pilgrimage and sacred space as sources of imagined community. Here Thum outlines how the mobility that pilgrimage encouraged worked along with participatory rites at shrines, including mundane ones such as graffiti (Pp. 144–152), to enrich and complicate ideas about ownership of the past and identity in relation to space. The chapter concludes with an examination of the impact of the Qing entrance into Altishahr on local historical practices.

The past in Altishahr was multiple and contested even before the advent of the PRC. However, with the rise of Uyghur nationalist identity in the 1930s and in response to PRC censorship through selective publishing and book confiscation practices after 1949, Altishahris have embraced new alternative technologies and genres to keep their historical practice vibrant. In Chapter 5, Thum outlines how printing has affected social interactions with texts, and how the rise of new forms of text, such as the fictionalised historical biographical novel, has allowed new avenues for community participation in textual histories and new forums for contested, alternative histories. These new popular formats have been important sites of agency for Altishahris to resist the limitations imposed on representations of the past by state practices. The final chapter, Chapter 6, expands on the issue of the state’s selective appropriation of historical narratives and shrines in its attempts to assimilate the residents of Altishahr through a case study of representations of the saint Afaq Khoja in contemporary texts disseminated by both Uyghur Nationalists and the PRC State.