

Exiled by Definition: The Salar of Northwest China¹

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The scene at the crossroads seems typical of anywhere in Central Asia. The air is arid; walls and sidewalks are made of pressed mud; the sandy dust eddies and swirls down the road. The streetscape is unmistakably Turkic and Islamic. Along the road from a mosque, on one side of the cross-street leading into the junction is a row of explicitly Halal eateries. Outside, at stools, the customers are all men, most sporting embroidered hats and prolific beards. Round the corner are a number of hardware and motor vehicle repair shops, with outside, younger men sitting around on motorcycles, smoking. Women almost invariably wear a black headscarf, and have their arms, legs and shoulders also clothed. If accompanying their husbands, they walk at a discreet distance behind. At the crossroads itself, there are rows of shaded stalls where open-air butchers have legs and shoulders of lamb hanging on hooks in full view, the blood dripping onto the ground. Opposite, dry farming vegetables—chillies, capsicums, cabbage—are on sale from the backs of trucks.

Despite appearances, the location is Central China rather than Central Asia. It is the market crossroads at Gaizi (Jiezi)² the largest town in the Xunhua Salar Autonomous County of Qinghai Province, though not its administrative centre.³ As a map of the

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² Qinghai is an inherently multicultural environment. Xunhua for example, despite its Salar presence is also heavily Tibetan. This makes the rendering of personal and place names and all proper nouns a little less than straightforward. Names will be presented as far as possible in their most commonly used format and where appropriate reference will also be made to Modern Standard Chinese.

³ The term 'autonomous' in PRC usage indicates the presence of a significant non-Han nationality,

People's Republic of China [PRC] quickly reveals, Xunhua County is close to its physical centre; where the upper reaches of the Yellow River cross from Qinghai Province into Gansu Province. Xunhua in general, and Gaizi in particular—with its central Salar Alitiuli Mosque—is the epicentre of population and spiritual home for the close on 100,000 Salar. The Salar are described by the PRC as a Turkic and Islamic (Sunni) people. The majority live in Xunhua County, with a small minority based outside in the neighbouring counties of Hualong and Tongren (both in Qinghai) and Jishishan and Xiahe (both in Gansu.)

Long before the Chinese Communist Party [CCP] came to power in 1949 it had committed itself to the principle of a multinational state for China, in order to politically manage the approximately 6 percent of the population who were not regarded as Han Chinese but had been subjects of the Qing Empire and became (in principle) citizens of the successor Republic after the collapse of the Empire in 1911 (Mackerras 1994;1995; Chih-yu Shih 2002). This was no small matter in Northwest China generally, and in particular the region on either side of the contemporary border between Qinghai and Gansu Provinces where there had been almost interminable violence after 1780 over the search for appropriate religious and political identities amongst local Muslims (Lipman 1997). An immediate general problem for those responsible for nationality policy in 1949 was the codification of the non-Han Chinese. This became a state project for the first half of the 1950s and resulted (often though not always through compromises between the state's desire for both bureaucratic neatness and manageability, on the one hand, and local demands for self-identification, on the other) in the recognition of 55 'minority nationalities.'

The Salar became an officially recognized nationality in the PRC process of codification in this way at the beginning of the 1950s. Though they were one of the smallest in numbers, they were, as already noted, geographically concentrated. They also had both a high degree of self-identity, and were fairly well known in the wider community outside Xunhua, though not always for positive reasons. In addition to being long known as merchants and traders throughout the Northwest, in Ningxia,

often involved in government and party-state activity.

Gansu, and Xinjiang, as well as across Qinghai, they also had a reputation for being ferocious and violent (Lipman 1991, 65).

The relationship between anthropological definitions of ethnicity and the PRC's nationality status is often contested, not least because for the PRC conceptions of nationality are employed in very specific political and ideological contexts.

Differences among nationalities are always explained in terms of both stages in society's unidirectional development towards (Han) civilisation, and appeals to hereditary and racial purity (Dikötter 1992). Consequently the definition of any specific minority nationality usually identifies language and homeland within the PRC as its major determinants.⁴

In the 1950s the Salar became a state-recognised nationality defined through their distinctive Salar language, their homeland in Xunhua County, and additionally their origins as exiles from the Samarkand area in today's Uzbekistan.⁵ Exile is not only central to the definition of the Salar, a sense of banishment and of being 'outsiders' are also part of common consciousness in Xunhua County and indeed for the Salar as a whole. In addition, there are various underlying accounts of migration in explanations of Salar identity, including not only their origin but also their interaction with both the Islamic world and Chinese society.

The Salar understanding of exile is somewhat different to the ways in which that term has been used elsewhere, especially in the 20th and 21st centuries. In the first place, it is a pre-modern nation-state notion of banishment that is not associated with, or the consequence of a nationalist discourse. The word that is used in Chinese—*fangzhu*—was more usually employed in imperial times for the act of being sent into exile, away from the political (and cultural centre) to the frontiers of civilised culture. Given that the Empire ruled 'all under heaven' with control and influence stronger at the centre and weaker at the periphery there was necessarily little of the 20th century notion of exile to beyond the boundaries of the state to be found in this conceptualisation. To complicate matters, in the Salar case the experience now recounted as 'exile' was not

⁴ The PRC interpretation of this process is outlined in Fei 1981. A more critical view is provided by Harrell 1994, 28 ff.

⁵ *Salazu jianshi bianxiezu* 1982, 3.

even a state-organised legal banishment, but more a migration driven by hostile conditions at a presumed point of departure; and to complicate matters still further, the centre of the universe for those who are now said to have migrated was inner Asia, not the Imperial Court, which they moved towards, not away from.

These features help explain why the self-understanding of the Salar as exiles has not bequeathed an imperative to return, as is often the case for exiled communities elsewhere in the world. Another, possibly more fundamental reason, is that Salar identity apparently only starts with exile. There is no pre-exile homeland that is the subject of nostalgic romanticisation. Indeed, there is considerable uncertainty as to the precise point (or for that matter, time) of origin for the Salar, or those who are now called by that name.

The lack of an imperative to return is also presumably related to the ways in which Salar identity has been involved in the tortuous (and often violent) search for a Sino-Muslim identity, at once both politically Chinese and socially Muslim. Originally, this was physically grounded in the area around Hezhou (now Linxia) in the south of Gansu, which had become a major centre of Islamic culture, at the end of the 17th century. For the Salar, at times their interaction with the Qing Empire and its successor states resulted in considerable violence, as in the Rebellion of 1781, the uprisings of the late 19th centuries, and the frequent outbreaks of resistance during the 1950s. In the 20th century there were though more constructive results, including the establishment of Qinghai Province in 1928, under first Ma Qi and then later his son, Ma Bufang, as essentially a Muslim state within the Chinese political system, a process in which Salars from Xunhua played a leading role as part of Ma Bufang's military organisation (Yang Xiaoping 1986; Chen Binyuan 1986).

One result of these cultural politics is that in contrast to the experience of other exiles, the Salar do not present themselves as victims. On the contrary, the evidence of a recent survey of Salar businessmen and community leaders suggests that discourses of exile and migration are now once again in use as instruments of Salar mobilisation and wealth generation towards the positive creation of a Sino-Muslim identity. Qinghai Province was generally slow to adapt to the social and economic opportunities presented during the 1980s and 1990s by the reform of the earlier

system of state socialism. Not so the Salar, or at least a group of highly successful Salar community leaders and business-people, who have been in the forefront of change throughout the province for the last two decades.

Xunhua and the Salar

Xunhua County is located at the southern edge of the Haidong District of Qinghai Province. Haidong literally means 'East of the Lake' and the lake in question is the large inland saltwater Qinghai Lake (sometimes more familiarly known outside China as Kokonor.) The Haidong District is the most heavily populated part of Qinghai Province⁶ (67.2 percent of the population live on 2.84 percent of the provincial land area) and contains almost all its arable land. Xining, the provincial capital and a Chinese outpost of empire from the 7th century on, is at the centre of this district. While Xining is close to Xunhua in terms of the scale of Qinghai, it remains the best part of a day's travel away by road. Xining and Haidong were for a long time part of Gansu Province and the region on either side of the Qinghai-Gansu border is perhaps best understood as China's cultural frontier in the northwest. West to east this is where Mongols and Tibetans interact; south to north where Chinese culture meets Central Asia.

Xunhua is a county of 2,100 square kilometres that runs for 90 kilometres along the course of the Yellow River as it moves into Gansu Province, at between 1780 metres above sea level (the low point is exactly where the Yellow River enters Gansu Province) and 4498 metres above sea level (the Lazi Mountains.) It is a county of mountains and valleys, poorly connected to the rest of China and poorly integrated in itself. Until 1972 there was no paved road into or out of the county. The main communication route was along the Yellow River into the Linxia District of Gansu. There is an extremely fertile strip along both sides of the Yellow River, with a heavy clay soil, where annual yields of 800 *jin* of grain per *mu* are normal. At the same time a large part of the county is barren mountains, referred to by locals as 'the land where nothing lives,' and not even suitable, as elsewhere in Qinghai Province, for grazing.

⁶ For a general introduction to Qinghai Province see Goodman 2004, 379-399.

In 2001 Xunhua County had about 120,000 people, and just under 30,000 households, living in 147 towns and villages.⁷ Jishizhen is the county town, the seat of local government and the residence of the few Han Chinese who live in the county. Xunhua's population is predominantly Salar (62 percent) though a substantial minority (24 percent) are Tibetans, largely agriculturalists living in the Tibetan villages at the east of the county. The last (10th) Panchen Lama was a native of Xunhua. Relationships between the Salar and Tibetans are complex. For the most part they have long lived and even worked together. Most adult Salar speak a fair amount of Amdo Tibetan. Salar refer generally to Tibetans in extremely friendly tones as *ajiou* meaning 'maternal uncle,' a term denoting as close a relative as can be without being parent, child or sibling (Ma Wei, Ma Jianzhong, & Stuart 2001, 33), and during the 1950s the two communities cooperated on several occasions in acts of resistance to the PRC. At the same time, under Ma Bufang and the drive to emphasise Sino-Muslim identity, especially in Xunhua and neighbouring (and also Islamic) Hualong, a more aggressive policy of turning Tibetans into Sino-Muslims was pursued (Cui Yonghong 1994, 71 ff). For the rest the resident population in Xunhua County includes Muslim Hui (8 percent) and Han Chinese (6 percent).

At the start of the 21st century county leaders are wont to describe Xunhua in terms of its poverty. While this is not inaccurate against the standard of Eastern China provinces, Xunhua has been one of the more successful economic stories among Qinghai counties since the early 1990s. By 2001 GDP had reached 30 million *yuan* renminbi (US\$3.75 million.) The mainstays of the local economy are energy production, the export of labour outside the county, the wool industry and the production of cloths and clothing with Islamic religious significance.

There is a strong and growing electricity-generating industry, centred on two still fairly new hydroelectric stations on the Yellow River. It is common to meet Salar all over China's northwest. Some, as in the past, are travelling merchants and salesmen. In more recent developments Xunhua now also supports a substantial number of

⁷ Information on Xunhua County from interview with Ma Fengsheng, county head, 5 August 2002, Jishizhen, Xunhua.

county-based construction companies with workers sourced from the county, as well as a number of transport companies that work throughout the northwest. One consequence of this out-migration has been a demand for more Salar restaurants and eateries to support migrant Salars and this too has contributed to the export of labour.

The increased economic development of Xunhua is perhaps most apparent in the ways in which older, well-established industries have rapidly found new markets, and become mechanised and automated. In particular, the expansion of the woollen goods industry has been quite spectacular. Xunhua previously had one small and inefficient mill, spinning sheep's wool. Since the late 1980s Xunhua has become a major centre in China for washing and spinning sheep and yaks' wool. It now has five large-scale enterprises all recapitalised with new technology and all led by native Salars. This restructured and revitalised industry has contributed significantly to Xunhua's wealth, with the mills producing a range of products, including luxury products for export to Europe and North America. The woollen goods industry aside, mechanisation and automation have also come to older industries making religious cloth, hats and embroidery, some of which is specific to the Salar, and some of which has wider Muslim applicability.

Minority nationality participation in the administration of local government and the local party-state in Qinghai Province is very variable, even though most of the province is organised into areas of minority nationality residence. Clearly the degree of minority nationality representation is a function not only of each group's relationship with the Chinese party-state but also of that group's self-articulation. In the case of Xunhua County, there were nineteen people holding leadership positions in 2002 for the CCP, local government, local people's congress and local Chinese People's Representative Conference. Of those, nine were Salar, two were Tibetan, two Hui and six Han Chinese.

As these proportions suggest when compared to relativities in the population as a whole, there may at times have been an uneasy relationship between the Salar and the Chinese state. The key to understanding that interaction lies in Xunhua's cultural geography, or more accurately that of the wider environment outside the county. Although for the Chinese empire and even for those Chinese who lived in the Gansu-

Qinghai border region this part of the world was always regarded as the extreme periphery, for other local peoples this was far from the case. Specifically for local Muslims the Hezhou area was a major centre of Islamic learning from the late 17th century on. Hezhou itself just across the border in Gansu from Xunhua was known as 'Little Mecca' and was a centre of Islamic civilisation at times when the Chinese state was regarding Lanzhou (the capital of Gansu Province) and Xining as 'wild-west' frontier towns. Looking at a current map for Xunhua's location might focus attention on new state boundaries but its interaction with Xining and the rest of Qinghai Province is to many ends still less important than the Salars' main cultural communications with the Islamic world of Linxia District (Lipman 1996, 97).

Hezhou's Islamic influence was such that it rapidly began to interact with movements beyond its immediate hinterland. At a time when the Islamic world was awash with intellectual curiosity and new ideas about spirituality and social activism, new teachings from Yemen and Arabia which had inherently political as well as religious messages began to catch hold in the areas around Hezhou. The result was initially not so much direct conflict with the Chinese state as in religious and political violence in the local Islamic communities. It was more the destabilising of local society rather than any particular religious ideas that brought the Salars into conflict with the Chinese state. When the Qing Empire acted to restore order it invariably acted very heavy handedly, thereby ensuring an even higher level of violence. This was a repeated pattern of violence in both the 18th and 19th centuries centred on Xunhua and the Salar, (Lipman 1997) which presumably helps explain a large part of the Salar's reputation for ferocity and violence.

It seems reasonable to assume that Islam came to Xunhua during the Mongol conquests of the 13th century, as throughout China. Many Muslims saw service with the Yuan Dynasty and large numbers were settled in nearby areas of Gansu. Until the middle of the 17th century Islamic social and political life in Xunhua centred on the individual community and mosque. This started to change, as elsewhere in the Muslim world, with the impact of Sufi, a movement of both mysticism and activism that created supra-communal and often highly competitive orders. One of the first Sufi proponents, Muhammed Yusuf visited Xunhua in the late 1640s and converted the Salar (Mi Yizhui 1982).

During the 18th century a number of Hezhou District Muslim preachers and scholars started to travel to the Middle East, on pilgrimage and to study. One of the more charismatic of these was Ma Laichi who on his return gained considerable publicity and following for his particular ideas (known as Khafiya) by instigating and winning a court case about the correct order of prayer and eating during Ramadan: he argued that at that time it was more appropriate to eat before evening prayers as against the then current practice of eating after (Trippner 1964, 264). In 1750 Ma Laichi successfully converted the Salar to Khafiya teachings and practices.

Another similar, but slightly later traveller was Ma Mingxin, who returning in 1761 brought more radical and intolerant ideas of Sufi revivalism, known as Jahriya—the ‘New Teaching’ as opposed to Ma Laichi’s ‘Old Teaching.’ His impact in Xunhua was to lead to extremes of communal violence. At stake were access to the wealth and assets of religious institutions, and control of converts and their communities. Increases in the number of law cases and the incidence of street fighting between the two schools brought the Qing legal process to Xunhua in 1781. The decision to outlaw the New Teaching and disband its communities as a threat to social security merely escalated the level of violence. A group of Salars, under Su Fortythree (Su Sishisan) raised the banner of revolt and captured Hezhou. When the Governor of Gansu sent officials to Hezhou to deal with the revolt, Su Fortythree had them killed, and marched on Lanzhou in return. As was later to be the case on a number of occasions the Salar rebels found taking Lanzhou to be beyond them, and after a siege were defeated by the locally raised forces (including other Muslims) of the Chinese state (Mi Yizhi 1982, 17; Salazu jianshi bianxiezu 1982, 17). Just over a hundred years later, in 1894-95 a similar sequence of events was played out again when an increase in law suites between adherents of the ‘New Old Teaching’ and the ‘New New Teaching’—which by then had become the polarities of conflict for Sufi adherents—as well as an increase in communal violence led the Qing legal process to find in favour of the latter (Lipman 1997, 142).⁸

⁸ Jonathan N Lipman *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China* University of Washington Press, 1997, 142.

After the fall of the Qing the Salar came to play a more central role not only in Muslim China's development, but also in the development of the Chinese state. At the turn of the late 19th and early 20th centuries the continued frustrations of Islamic resistance to the Chinese state gave way, at least in the minds of some activists, to the construction of more Sino-Muslim identities and courses of action. In part these were religious and intellectual in construct, but they also produced the notion of a semi-autonomous political system for Sino-Muslims which reached fulfilment through the establishment of Qinghai Province, with its capital at Xining in 1928. Its major proponent was the Muslim Hui Ma Qi, the onetime Qing Commander of Xining and subsequently the local warlord, who became the province's first governor. He was effectively succeeded in 1931 by his son, Ma Bufang, who had his firm base of support in Xunhua and Hualong counties where he had previously been the district's leading official. Many Salar served with Ma Bufang, especially in the military, and he remains an important figure in the Salar pantheon.

Ma Bufang's association with the republican government that had granted the establishment of Qinghai Province placed him firmly on the side of the Nationalist Party in the Civil War, and the Salar equally as firmly on the other when the CCP came to power in the PRC and the People's Liberation Army [PLA] moved into Qinghai in late 1949. After the province had been secured the CCP wanted to demonstrate its human face in contrast to, in its interpretation, the more inhumane political behaviour of Ma Bufang. Instead of keeping those of Ma Bufang's soldiers it had captured or those civilians who had served with the Ma Bufang regime it had arrested in prison, everyone was released back into the community. This proved to be a serious mistake, as precisely those people then raised the flag of violent resistance. In Xunhua in particular there were a series of serious attacks on the new regime. The most successful of these was led by Han Yimu during 1951-52. His forces, consisting entirely of those who had previously served with Ma Bufang, surrounded the local garrison of 90 PLA soldiers and wiped them out. A much larger PLA force was sent to retake Xunhua, and Han Yimu left the county town to become a guerrilla (Zhang Pu, Jia Dawu & Guo Jing 1996, 150).

Han Yimu's act of resistance continued to the end of the decade. In 1958 he came out from working underground to lead a revolt of Salar, many of whom remained Ma Bufang loyalists, in an attack on the Chinese state alongside and in concert with the wider Tibetan uprising of that time (Chen 1991, 92).⁹ When rallying the troops and local Salars in Xunhua, he is reputed to have said 'Tomorrow Xunhua, after two days Lanzhou, and in three days we will take Beijing.' Eventually captured and taken for trial and execution in Beijing he is said to have reflected, perhaps apocryphally, on his misunderstanding of China's size and scale: 'China has more people than Qinghai has yaks.'

The revolts of the 1950s in Xunhua led the PRC to instigate a severe crackdown on the Salars in every respect in and after 1958. Those thought to constitute the leaders of the Salar community were imprisoned or executed. About ten per cent of the male population were rounded up and sent to 'reform through labour camps' elsewhere in Qinghai. The use of the Salar language was discouraged and religious expression was largely suppressed. An early 13th century handwritten Koran (one of only three worldwide) said to have come to Xunhua from Samarkand with the original settlers and previously kept in the Alitiuli Mosque, was taken to Beijing for 'safe keeping.'¹⁰ Almost needless to say, the measures employed by the state to sinicise the Salar were not successful, and merely drove Salar religious and social practices underground and out of sight.

Repression continued for the best part of twenty-four years. In the early 1980s as the reform agenda started to emerge from the CCP in Beijing, a new approach was adopted towards all minority nationalities, including those such as the Salar who had demonstrated their opposition in the more recent past. The more tolerant approach was almost certainly a pragmatic response to the needs of economic rationalism. Nonetheless it was cautiously welcomed in Xunhua, especially when all but a few (those identified as 'the leaders') of those arrested for involvement in the rebellions of the 1950s were pardoned. This included those who were still in 'reform through labour camps' as well as those who had already been released from other state

⁹ The 1958-59 Tibetan uprising eventually led to the Dalai Lama's exile.

¹⁰ Details of the Alitiuli Koran are provided in a conversation between Han Jianye and Ma Wei, reported in Ma Wei, Ma Jianzhong, & Stuart 2001, 11.

security establishments or indeed who had subsequently died or been executed. Full religious expression was permitted once again, the Alitiuli Mosque Koran was returned from Beijing (in 1982) and local mosques became totally operational again. Salar community institutions came out from underground and indeed in some cases became the foundation for new economic enterprises, such as those making religious products.

At the same time, Salar acceptance of a more positive relationship with the PRC remains both cautious and a coexistence (rather than a closer integration) in some regards. A small act of resistance was the communal refusal to adopt the new state-provided script for the Salar language. Salars effectively use three languages: the Salar spoken language, which they speak routinely, but which was and remains written in Chinese characters; Linxia Chinese, which has many Mongolian and Turkic influences in any case; and Arabic which is used for religious purposes. In the early 1980s at the direction of the Central Nationalities Commission of the PRC Government, Professor Han Jianye of Qinghai Nationalities College designed a new Salar alphabet which was propagated in Xunhua (Han Jianye 1988, 46-79). It did not achieve any acceptance and has been quietly shelved as an idea. Another example is the experience of schooling. State school enrolments in Xunhua are some of the lowest in the PRC. A major reason for this is that the Salar, like other Muslims in the northwest, would prefer that the sexes are segregated at school and that in any case there should be more religious education for their children, as provided for through the *madrasas* attached to each mosque.

The myth of exile

The codification of nationalities in the early 1950s defined the Salar as exiles, and all the available evidence would suggest that contemporary Salars believe passionately in their status as a people in permanent exile. Contemporary official and less formal published accounts all stress the origins of the Salar in the act of banishment from central Asia. Visitors to Xunhua all receive a similar introduction, and the fact of exile is usually the first thing mentioned by Salar business-people and officials when their

nationality or ethnicity is being discussed with other Chinese or external visitors.¹¹ An interesting additional aspect of their belief system, which reinforces the notion of permanent exile, is the equally as strong attachment to being citizens of the Chinese state, demonstrated not least by the insistence on the continued use of Chinese characters in writing.

One reason for this apparent passionate belief and its clear articulation may well be precisely because the fact of exile was central to the definition of the Salar in the early 1950s. This provides a certainty and a consciousness that over-rides any doubts and contestations about origins that equally as clearly still remain. The official view of Salar origins is met by considerable uncertainty, not least about when the people now known as the Salar came to Xunhua, where they came from and who the original 'they' may have been. The historical record, scholarly observation of local society and customs, and even local folk stories all reinforce the notion of Salar exile not so much as false but more as a constructed public belief, though one that significantly predates the establishment of the PRC, even if it were formulated more clearly in the 1950s and then pursued more passionately since the early 1980s in the most recent era of Salar revival.

The first recorded use of the name 'Salar' appears to have been in Qing records. When describing the impact of the visit of the early Sufi, Muhammed Yusuf, to Hezhou and its surrounds during the late 1640s, local magistrates described his influence in converting the Salar (Mi Yizhi 1982; Lipman 1997, 59). Assuming that the Salar (whether by that name or otherwise) were regarded as a well established local feature at that time, these events might explain why prior to 1949 their presence in Xunhua was dated even earlier by one or two centuries. More recent accounts that followed the 1950s definition of the Salar as a state-recognised nationality have started to accept an earlier and more precise date for arrival in or about 1370.¹² All the same earlier sources do not provide any explanation of why the Salar were or are called by that specific name.

¹¹ Certainly this was the experience of research conducted throughout Qinghai during 2001-2003 and in Xunhua specifically in 2002.

¹² See for example: *Salazu jianshi bianxiezu* 1982, 9.

The current dominant discourse of exile is enshrined in the standard PRC histories of the Salar nationality.¹³ More complex versions of essentially the same story of exile from the Samarkand region, though incorporating different elements that had sometimes previously been related separately, have then been elaborated in still more popular accounts of Salar folk tales and culture. In the late 1980s Han Fude and Han Derong (1988) recorded (without attribution) one such folk tale about the origins of the Salar—*Camel Spring*—that drew heavily on other local stories and folk practices related by other sources and observers.

As related to or by Han Fude and Han Derong this story of the origin of the Salars starts with two brothers in Samarkand—Kharimang and Ahmang (Gallima and Akhma.) They felt that life in their home village had become intolerable because of discrimination against them by the village headman, so they decided to leave for somewhere more amenable. They set off from the village accompanied by various relatives, clanspeople and possibly others from the village. They took with them a white camel for portorage; a bowl of soil and a kettle of water from their home village; and a copy of the Koran. The journey was long and arduous and involved crossing many mountain ranges and rivers. They moved eastward through present day Xinjiang into present day Gansu and then into present day Ningxia. Once there, they turned back westward. Sometime after the two brothers had left their native place other of their clanspeople, villagers and relatives (about forty-five people in all) also decided to follow. They too had an arduous journey, but instead of following the brothers' tracks exactly ended up going south of Qinghai Lake. A couple of this company decamped there but the others continued and were able to eventually meet up with Kharimang and Ahwang in present day Xunhua County at Mengda, from where they moved on to Alitiuli.

Once everyone arrived in Alitiuli they were all exhausted, and the camel was tired, hungry and thirsty. Rest was called for. At midnight Kharimang woke up to find the camel had disappeared. He woke everyone else up and they went off looking for the camel. By dawn they had not been successful but by now were very thirsty. Looking for water they found the camel had turned into stone, next to a spring, with water

¹³ For example: Gong Jinghan 1981; *Salazu jianshi bianxiezu* 1982; Chen Yuanfang & Fan Xiangshen 1988; Ma Chengjun 1999.

coming out of its mouth. This was a shock to the travellers who had become quite attached to the camel during their wanderings. Kharimang took up the Koran they had brought with and asked for Allah's blessings for the camel and themselves. They then drank the spring water and found it more than acceptable. They then compared the water and soil in Alitiuli with the water and soil they had brought with and decided both that they were the same and that Allah had helped them find a good place to settle. According to this folk tale the date was the 13th day of the 5th moon in the 3rd year of the Hongwu Reign of the Ming Dynasty (7 June 1370.)

The various elements of this version of the Salar myth of origin are not hard to place. At its core is the *Camel Play* (*Döye oyna*) that was performed regularly as part of wedding celebrations in Mengda (Munda) village of Xunhua until the 1920s, but subsequently disappeared as a village-based performance (Ma Jianzhong & Stuart 1996, 287-298). The *Camel Play* is essentially a re-enactment of how the Salar came to Xunhua, and was banned completely, along with other representations of Salar culture, from 1958 to 1982. A version based on the memory of a seventy-four-year-old Mengda native was revived in 1994 as part of the celebrations of the 40th Anniversary of the Establishment of the Xunhua Salar Autonomous County. The play has five performers, representing the brothers Kharimang and Ahmang, a Mongol (to portray the local people who welcome the wanderers) and two who play the camel by covering themselves with 'a fur-robe turned inside out. One holds a sleeve high in the air to represent the camel's head, while his partner lowers the other sleeve behind to suggest the tail. Their heads protrude underneath the fur robe, resembling the camel's humps' (Ma Jianzhong & Stuart 1996).

The action of the *Camel Play* is fairly limited but essentially has the brother's recounting to the Mongol the difficult journey they have taken, and all the places they have stopped along the way from Samarkand to Mengda. Interestingly in this version the *Camel Play* does not have the brothers travelling all the way to Ningxia before heading back east to Xunhua. It recounts how they left, taking very little with them, but mentioning the Koran, and the soil and water, all borne by the 'sublime' white camel. It then relates how Allah brings them to Xunhua to settle, and has the camel turning to stone, but then moves into a final act of audience participation as befits performance at a wedding party. The Mongol suggests to Kharimang that he should

lead the camel around to entertain the guests. Kharimang points out that 'My camel has turned to stone. He can't stand and dance unless he has food from Samarkand' and adds 'Our camel shits walnuts after eating dates, dumplings and fried bread.' This is the key for the wedding host and bridegroom to bring food for the camel (and presumably the acting troupe) and the performance ends with the camel moving forward and showering the audience with walnuts (Ma Jianzhong & Stuart 1996).

Several somewhat conflicting alternative accounts, drawn from documentary historical research, also appear to have found their way at least in part into the greater elaboration of the account of Salar origins. One quite clearly is the expansion of Islam into the area from today's Xinjiang through Gansu to Ningxia alongside the Mongol expansion that led to the establishment of the Yuan Dynasty. The Mongols brought with them both soldiers and administrators who were Muslims (Lipman 1997, 32).

Mi Yizhi, a senior researcher at Qinghai Nationalities Institute during the 1980s, traced a possible source of the Salar back to a people originating as the Qaluer or Saluer. These people were an Oghaz tribe living in the Yili Region (in the Northwest of today's Xinjiang Province.) Between the 9th and 12th centuries the Oghaz tribes, including the Saluer, moved into Northern Iran and Eastern Anatolia. Under the Seljuk Empire (1055-1258) the Salar were forcibly removed from the areas where they had settled and separated. Most moved westward but those who stayed in an area in today's Turkmenistan became the people known as Turkomans. Other Saluer continued on eastward between 1370 and 1424 moving through Samarkand, the Turpan Basin (in today's Xinjiang,) and the area of the Gansu Corridor, ending up in Xunhua (Mi Yizhi 1981, 63).

Mi Yizhi also highlighted another possible documentary source providing a further potential origin for the Salar. In considering the various explanations and approaches that might be employed he mentions a 1917 source examining the origins of the Hui, published in Kashgar by a Mullah Suleiman. This refers to two brothers Kharamang and Akhmang who lived near Salark, in today's Turkmenistan. According to this source, which remains unidentifiable beyond Mi Yizhi's textual reference, the two brothers moved east to the area that is now Qinghai with 170 members of their tribe (Mi Yizhi 1986 vol. 1, 295).

The oral tradition in Xunhua is equally as confusing, but this too seems to have contributed in various ways to the elaboration of the myth of origin. Various Salars in Xining and Xunhua at the start of the 21st century provided different numbers of the size of the original migratory Salar who came east, ranging from 18 people to 180 households. Other versions of the story of exile around Kharimang and Ahmang have the camel turning to stone and sinking to the bottom of a small lake fed by a spring in Alitiuli. Indeed in the not-so-distant past, the lake in question was turned into a walled park, not least because it was said that for the faithful it was possible to see the stone camel at the bottom of the lake. For the less faithful, a replica stone camel has been erected in the park. Moreover, a much earlier observation of the oral traditions surrounding the Salar has them being thrown out of their home villages because of their violent behaviour, an understandable possible cause of adverse reaction from a worried headman dealing with a troublesome family (Trippner 1964, 247).

These inconsistencies and confusions throw doubt upon the specific current accounts of Salar exile but not necessarily exile or migration in general, for at least some of the ancestors of those now described as Salar. The Salar language certainly has a confirmed Turkic base though it also has considerable Chinese and Amdo Tibetan modifications and additions (Dwyer 1996). The difficulties in understanding the genesis of the Salar are only really irreconcilable because of the straightjacket of requirements presented by the PRC for confirmation of nationality status. In this case in particular all those who are Salar have to share the heritage and bloodlines of having been exiled several centuries earlier. This then excludes other possible explanations such as that while some of those whose descendants later became known as the Salar might have been migrants from Turkic areas (including but not exclusively from Samarkand) others could also well have been local peoples with whom they intermarried or otherwise interacted. It also precludes the possibility that the different villages which are now taken to be part of the Salar nationality homeland might have had different origins and experiences. In the past it was not abnormal for external observers to stress the mixed pedigree of the Salar, reflecting the mixed cultural environment in the Qinghai-Gansu area: 'Many (have) tried to describe the Salar anthropologically ... Such an undertaking has very little value ... the Salars, at least in the past two hundred years, are the result from a mixing pot of Turks,

Mongols, Tibetans, Chinese and Chinese speaking Muslims (Trippner 1964, 261).'¹⁴ If more scientific certainty is required about the genetic background of the Salar, then there is clearly an interesting research project ahead for someone involved in examining their DNA.

Social activism

While there may be no solid evidence of exile or banishment, to concentrate on this omission is to miss the point. Interesting as questions of historical accuracy may be they are less than relevant for understanding the role of Salars in the contemporary society of Northwest China. The revival of Salar identity that started in the early 1980s is in many ways yet another example of the emergence of explicitly localist discourses of development that encourage and facilitate increased economic development, particularly beyond the boundaries of the state sector, that has been a fairly common feature of the PRC's political economy since the early 1990s (Oakes 2002, 837-62).

At the same time the Salar revival is distinctive because it was not (as was the case elsewhere in the PRC) state initiated, though it has clearly gained a substantial measure of later state support.¹⁵ Moreover, the Salar case is particularly unusual in Qinghai where almost uniquely among the PRC's provincial-level jurisdictions the encouragement of provincial and localist discourses has generally been absent from the agenda of the party-state (Goodman 2004, 379-99). Religion, language, and Xunhua have been key pillars in the elaboration of Salar identity, that reinforce feelings of community and solidarity and encourage individuals to economic activism. So too is exile, which helps the Salar believe they have a competitive advantage that comes from not being fundamentally native to the area in which they live and operate, despite having been born and grown up there. They see themselves as being both more mobile than those around them and more dynamic elements in the development of society.

¹⁴ Joseph Trippner 'Die Salaren: ihre ersten Glaubensstreitigkeiten und ihr Astand 1781' ['The Salars: Their First Belief Conflicts and Rebellion, 1781'] in *Central Asiatic Survey* Vol.9, no.4, 1964, 261.

¹⁵ Evidenced considerably in Ma Chengjun 1999.

The self-attributed case for Salar exceptionalism, and in particular the link between the nationality's origins in exile, on the one hand, and social and economic activism, on the other, were constant themes in interviews with both Salar community leaders and business people interviewed during 2001-2003. The following examples drawn from those interviews convey the spirit of Salar activism in the development not only of Xunhua, but also of Qinghai and China's northwest. These vignettes provide evidence of the range of motivations, as well as of activism and leadership to be found among community leaders and business people. In particular, they highlight the ways in which individuals proceeded to activism from an understanding of a special Salar 'outsider' status; emphasised Salar physical mobility and outwardness in outlook; and developed local products, including religious artefacts, for the wider market. The final two interviewees considered here are additionally interesting for the light they throw on the internal dynamics of Salar identity formation: one with a Salar folklorist, the other with a woman entrepreneur. Their approach to the shaping of Salar identity strongly suggests its malleability rather than its deeply entrenched social roots.

'Ever since I was young I've been an entrepreneur' admitted Manager Ma.¹⁶ His group enterprise now owns a transport company with twelve trucks that shuttle between Qinghai and the Tibet Autonomous Region; and three hotels, one in each of Xunhua, Xining and Ping'an (the Dalai Lama's birthplace just east of Xining.) At a young age he had been a trader in Qinghai, the Tibet Autonomous Region, Gansu and Ningxia, selling clothes and food products. With the money he generated from these activities in the 1980s and early 1990s he invested in hotels and trucks. When asked about the secret of his success he referred to the large spirit and high energy levels of the Salar. 'As our history of exile clearly demonstrates' he said 'Salars can suffer a lot and still prosper.' This was a message echoed both explicitly and implicitly by other interviewees.

One was another Ma, this time a village CCP branch secretary, and a long time leader of his village.¹⁷ A peasant in Xunhua until the 1980s, he was one of the first to harness

¹⁶ Interviewed in Jishizhen 6 August 2002. Ma and Han are the most common Salar surnames. Ma is usually equated with Muhammed, of which it is the first syllable. The names of those interviewed have been changed to preserve anonymity, except where identification is obvious, germane and explicitly approved by the interviewee.

¹⁷ Interviewed in Wajiangzhuang Village, Qingshui Township 6 August 2002.

the opportunities presented as part of the Salar revival to mobilize his fellow villagers to economic goals. His village has limited arable land (less than 0.5 *mu* per capita) so he encouraged others to engage in economic activities outside Xunhua. 'Our ancestors were forced to leave Samarkand, so we can certainly travel less permanently for work.' In the early 1980s he led a group of villagers from his home and adjacent villages to undertake odd jobs at a copper mine elsewhere in Qinghai, and then to mine gold in Sichuan. Fifty of the village's 215 households have now been running restaurants outside Xunhua for many years. Eighty of the village's households have formed odd job teams that travel outside the county for work in summer and return for winter. In addition, nine of the village's households have been able to afford to buy trucks or buses that shift people and goods around the Northwest. For himself Ma has become fairly wealthy, now has seven sons, and eventually (2001) opened a brick plant.

A similar story was told by another Ma, also a village leader.¹⁸ Since the early 1980s he has led his village's 310 households to such good effect that only three households now live in poverty. Yields are good on the available arable land (1000 *jin* of wheat per *mu*; the village also grows prickly ash and walnuts) but there is precious little workable land. Under Ma's influence and appeals to moving to the work (as opposed to expecting the work to come to it), the village now has twelve private trucks or buses, with about 100 villagers going to work outside Xunhua on a regular basis. There are about 20 households from this village working in Xining, 30 in Golmud and over 30 households responsible for eateries in the coastal cities of the PRC. As Ma pointed out 'historically, we're used to moving about' and 'now [2002] Salar restaurants in coastal cities can bring in about 50-60,000 *yuan* each per year.'

Manager Han has developed one of Qinghai's largest companies, based on the production of wool from sheep and yak, and attributes the success of the company directly to the fact of Salars being 'outsiders' and so therefore willing to always go that step further in making an effort, as well as to new technology.¹⁹ In the 1980s Manager Han had been the manager of a small state-run enterprise in Xunhua engaged in wool production. Through the 1990s he restructured the company, expanded it and

¹⁸ Interviewed in Dasigu Village, Qingshui Township, 6 August 2002.

¹⁹ Interviewed in Gaizi 4 August 2002.

turned it into a local collective. Based initially on sheep's wool—in his view 'Qinghai Xunhua sheep, and their wool, are the best'—he then thought to branch out into yak's wool production. He traveled widely throughout north and northwest China to find out about new equipment, which he eventually ordered from Italy. The company became so successful that by 2000 they had moved their headquarters operation to Xining, exporting not only to Italy and Europe, but also to North America. As with many new Salar industrialists, Manager Han's localist discourse leads him not only into providing jobs and economic opportunities for his local community but ensures that he is a major donor to communal causes.

Ma Yitzhak (Yisihake)²⁰ is an even more large-scale entrepreneur and the effective owner of Qinghai's largest private enterprise, the Xuezhou Sanrong Group, whose Snow Lotus brand is familiar to many cashmere sweater-wearers outside China. This was a village-based company established in the late 1980s as a self-help endeavour led by Ma. Though he is clearly heavily influenced by his Salar background and upbringing, like many others of those interviewed, this is not an inward-looking perspective on the world. His stated goal has been to 'Take Australia's history and economic growth on the sheep's back as a model for Qinghai's development.'²¹ He has in his own words, applied 'Salar dynamism to develop pastoral products and build a business in the international market.' The company now exports all over the world and even imports wool from Australia. Interestingly Ma Yitzhak was quite outspoken in his criticism of officials in Xining whose behaviour in repeatedly telling him that Xunhua was one of the most undeveloped places he found offensive. According to Ma, since 1989 Xunhua's growth had been one of the strongest in China's West, thanks to the Salar. At the same time, and reflectively, he accepted that buildings and technology change faster than people's patterns of thinking.

Another Han is General Manager of a Salar cloth and hat maker, that has taken traditional Salar products to a wider market, largely through automation.²² The company grew out of a small village factory producing animal products (leather and

²⁰ Interviewed in Gaizi 4 August 2002.

²¹ Unfortunately he somewhat marred this worldliness later over lunch by remarking that he had 'greatly enjoyed the thick chocolate cake and the Alps last time he visited Australia.' A clear reference to the other Australia that lies next to Switzerland and that produced W. A. Mozart.

²² Interviewed in Gaizi 5 August 2002.

skins) in the early 1990s. Through bank loans and with local government support Han and his father (who runs the headquarters office in Xining) have been able to expand the business significantly with sales now going all over China, even to non-Salar clients. There is apparently a sizeable and growing market for minority nationalities products. Necessarily because of its output the factory is a center of community focus. In particular, designs and product ideas are provided from the community. Han's own experience had previously been that of a trader around north and southwest China, which he said had provided him with a broader perspective than most people in Qinghai had.

Manager Ma runs a chili paste production factory in Gaizi.²³ Chili paste production is a major industry in Gaizi, with three other competing plants, though Manager Ma's is the biggest. He buys in chilis from the nearby five villages and produces three product lines, which are then marketed quite widely in northwest China: beef complement, prickly ash paste, and chili paste. He sees his competition as coming from Sichuan, Anhui and Gansu. According to Manager Ma the secret of the factory's success has been the excellence of the Xunhua chilis, grown on the soil and with the special climate that exists there; and the activism of the local Salar people. At the same time, he recognizes that 'chili production is part of poverty,' and he was driven by a need to do something to help his native village. 'Like our earlier ancestors when they first arrived here, we do our best with the available resources.'

Han Zhanxiao was a quite well known Salar folklorist before the suppression of Salar customs and practices in the late 1950s.²⁴ Together with his family he now produces Salar embroidery for ceremonial purposes as well as other Salar musical and secular artifacts. In the 1950s he had been a music folklorist and had left Xunhua for Beijing and the Central Nationalities Institute. Amongst other activities he had been a specialist performer of and commentator on the *Camel Play*. After his release from imprisonment at the end of the Cultural Revolution he started work again with the Beijing Folklore Festival which took him around the PRC. By the time he eventually retired and returned to Xunhua in the 1990s he had come to see the 'need for creation and representation of our nationality. I had particularly come to realize this lack after

²³ Interviewed in Gaizi 6 August 2002.

²⁴ Interviewed in Gaizi 7 August 2002.

a visit to Inner Mongolia. We need logos and symbols to represent Salar identity to the outside world as well as to ourselves.’ One result was the development of his family folklore enterprise.

Han Zenaibai (also known as Han Yulan)²⁵ is an ‘outsider’ not only because she is Salar, but also because she is a woman, in a society that for all its progressiveness in some ways also remains essentially fundamentalist about the role of women. She is now a well-known entrepreneur in Xunhua, and even to some extent beyond, but originally she made her name as a basketball player in regional and national championship teams (1958-1964) at a time when Salar society heavily disapproved of women exhibiting themselves in public in any way. Nonetheless, she became something of a local celebrity even then, and was widely known as ‘Player Number Eight,’ a nickname that persists still. She now owns and runs the Tangsaishan Agricultural & Livestock Development Company of Xunhua County, owning amongst other undertakings a fairly sizeable hotel (the Daughter of the Mountain—Saina’er in Salar—Hotel in Jishizhen) as well as several herds of sheep and cattle. Clearly a bit of a tomboy in her youth, Han Zenaibai is probably Xunhua’s first feminist. She admitted to being a Salar traditionalist but explained that this meant in her interpretation that (amongst other things) the Salar could achieve anything they set out to do, and from the start she could not see why all of Salar customs had to privilege men. ‘In the very beginning (of reform) men started to set up businesses. I knew there were women starting businesses in foreign countries, and I wanted to try. In 1996, I successfully applied on my own to get 400,000 *yuan* from the Development Bank in Xining.’ For her pains she became enshrined as the prototype of the Salar woman entrepreneur in a Central China Television [CCTV] series ‘The Yellow River on the Left, the River Branch On the Right.’

Salar identity in the 21st Century

Exiled by definition, revitalised by the opportunities presented by the changes of the reform era—especially those related to religious and nationality expression—the Salar have emerged as a significant economic force for change in northwest China, and

²⁵ Interviewed in Jishizhen 5 July 2002.

particularly in Qinghai Province during the last two decades. The extent to which Salar community leaders, the community as a whole, or individual Salars believe in the fact of their ancestors' erstwhile exile is necessarily an open question. It may truly have become an entrenched part of Salar socialisation, even before 1949. Certainly the evidence of the last twenty years is that the orthodoxy of Salar identity has become more intense and more focussed, raising certain characteristics, of which exile is central, to an even higher level of importance. It may simply even be that the Salar collectively and individually accept in various ways the need to articulate their experience and identity in terms that enable them to work peacefully within the Chinese state, and see the economic advantage of going further when circumstances permit. In short, exile is a necessary myth for the Salar, not in the sense of a historical deception but in the sense of public belief.

In many ways the Salar revival and stronger sense of communal solidarity during the last two decades seems counter-intuitive. It was certainly the case that in the wake of the Cultural Revolution the removal of the strictures of that era on religious observation and minority nationality customs generally led to a resurgence in their practice around China. At the same time, economic growth and development are generally assumed to be agents of greater homogenisation, and not just by the PRC party-state. At least one linguistic specialist examining the use of the Salar language at the beginning of the 1990s argued that it was in danger of disappearing (Dwyer 1994). From the Salar perspective then the myth of exile has another important role to play. The Salar would by no means be the first people to have emphasised their collective suffering and survival through participation in 'long marches.' The experience of both the Jews and more recently the CCP itself demonstrates how such migrations provide legitimacy to successor generations and may help maintain the faith.

Conversions

1 *jin* = 0.5 kilos = 1.1 pounds

1 *mu* = 0.06 hectares = 1/6 acre

1 *yuan* renminbi = 0.12 US\$ = 0.16 AUD\$ (approximately)

Map of Xunhua and environs



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