

BOOK REVIEW

***Tarikh i-Hamidi: A Late Qing Uyghur History* Translated by Musa Sayrami and Eric Schluessel. New York: Columbia University Press, 2023. 520 pp. \$140.00 (cloth), \$35.00 (paper), \$34.99 *eBook)**

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Eric Schluessel took a decade to translate and annotate Musa Sayrami's *Tarikh i-Hamidi*—a feat for which we can be immensely grateful. As the most comprehensive Uyghur eyewitness account of a major nineteenth-century rebellion on the western edge of the Qing Empire (1636/1644–1912), *Tarikh i-Hamidi* is a landmark of Uyghur literature. Sayrami (1836–1917) wrote in Chaghatay, with an admixture of Persian, Arabic, and even Chinese (in transliterated form) terms. Although historians such as Hodong Kim (2004) and Rian Thum (2014) have used Sayrami's chronicle for its rare window into the Uyghur experience of late Qing rule, a full translation into English has remained out of reach due to the text's difficulty in terms of language and accessibility: at least eight manuscript editions of the text survive, each with its own peculiarities.¹ Schluessel's philological skills and scholarly dedication in making sense of a 1911 edition of the manuscript for scholars and students alike marks a major contribution to the fields of Qing history, Central Asian history, and Islamic studies. The translation also serves as a nice classroom complement to the author's award-winning study of the late Qing transformation of Xinjiang (East Turkestan), *Land of Strangers: The Civilizing Project in Qing Central Asia*.²

The translation faithfully follows the structure of the original text, with four sections tracing historical events from the beginning of the world through the 1890s. The Prolegomenon traces the history of the “Seven Cities” of Uyghur Central Asia—Kashgar, Yarkand, Khotan, Ushturfan, Kucha, Aqsu, and Turfan—through Qur'anic-Biblical narratives sprinkled with pieces of folklore, including a fascinating nod to myths surrounding

¹Hodong Kim, *Holy War in China: The Muslim Rebellion and State in Chinese Central Asia, 1864–1877* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Rian Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

²Eric Schluessel, *Land of Strangers: The Civilizing Project in Qing Central Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

the invention of kebabs and the use of salt in cooking (13).³ Schluessel's translation of this introductory material makes for compelling reading alongside Johan Elverskog's recent book, *A History of Uyghur Buddhism*, which documents the slow, gradual conversion of the Uyghurs to Islam from the tenth century under the Qarakhanids through the sixteenth century.⁴ Sayrami's text references historical Islamic conversions in the region (4, 17, 52, 77–78, 114) while embodying the erasure of earlier faiths: with a few exceptions, specific sectarian terms like “Buddhist” do not appear in the primary text.⁵

The Prolegomenon narrates the history of the region through the Manchu conquest and up to the eve of Ya'qub Beg's rebellion against the Qing in the 1860s. Students of Qing history will find much here to ponder, as Sayrami, in Schluessel's words, “does not unambiguously favor any ruler or state” (xii) but rather offers a uniquely local-yet-informed perspective that undercuts later politically inflected narratives. For instance, he introduces the Daoguang Emperor (r. 1820–1850) by writing “his power was mighty, and on none of his borders was there any trace of enemy” (71). Rather than viewing such observations as evidence for Sayrami's ignorance of the Opium War (1839–1842) and its colonial aftermath, I take Sayrami—who possessed adequate knowledge about China and even identifies the social problem of opium addiction (61, 123)—as recording only recent historical events that seemed relevant to his community and the world it inhabited. Sayrami was aware of Western colonialism, not just in the Russian form directly evident in Muslim Central Asia, but also of the British kind unfolding much further afield in Burma (79).⁶ Qing historians have increasingly demonstrated that the coastal skirmishes at the center of the First Opium War were not watershed, cataclysmic events, as rendered by later twentieth-century nationalist narratives.⁷ Sayrami confirms this revisionist view, and he is worth reading and discussing not only for his narration of Uyghur history but also for his insights into Chinese history writ large. More on this point later.

The two Epics that follow the Prolegomenon trace, first, the rise of the Katakhi Khojas of Kucha and their temporary occupation of towns on the edge of the Tarim Basin in the 1860s, and second, the short-lived reign of the Khoqandi officer Ya'qub Beg in Kashgar from 1865 through 1877. The final section of the book offers a social and economic description of the Seven Cities of the Tarim Basin across time to 1908, on the eve of the Qing's fall. In line with broader themes in Central Asian historiography, Sayrami gives ample space to genealogical descent lines (especially to the Prophet and Chinggis Khan),

³Salt, both as a mineral substance and as a metaphor for the relationship between ruler and servants, appears throughout Sayrami's narrative (13, 85, 92, 174, 215, 294, 301, 322, 360–365), indicative of its cultural and practical importance in nineteenth century Xinjiang. I flag this detail here to demonstrate the wide variety of ways Schluessel's translation might be employed for social, cultural, or economic histories that may or may not center the East Turkestan rebellion of 1864–1877.

⁴Johan Elverskog, *A History of Uyghur Buddhism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024), 135–69. See also James A. Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 51–54.

⁵The term “polytheist” makes a couple of suggestive appearances (20, 139), while “infidels” appears a great deal more (e.g., 5, 16–17, 142–143, 155, 180, 238). Future research may well examine the nuances of these terms in Sayrami's chronicle. As Schluessel observes, Sayrami excluded Dungans, or Chinese-speaking Muslims, when using the term “Muslim” (xxxii). Consider the following sentence: “They laid hands on the infidels, established Islam, and whether they were Chinese or Dungans, massacred them just the same” (217).

⁶Here (79), as noted by Schluessel, Sayrami appears to make a reference to the Second Opium War.

⁷See for instance Paul A. Cohen, “Remembering and Forgetting National Humiliation in Twentieth-Century China,” *Twentieth-Century China* 27.2 (2002), 1–39.

charismatic power, and astrological signs to explain the success and failures of those who sought to consolidate their rule over the Seven Cities.

One of the central *problématiques* for Sayrami becomes evident in the two Epics at the heart of the book. On the one hand, Sayrami viewed “Chinese” rule in the cities as “tyrannical,” with corrupt officials exerting unjust, extractive control over the local population. On the other hand, by the time of Sayrami’s writing, it had become obvious that the Muslim khojas and political figures who rose to prominence in the 1860s and 1870s had failed to sustain independent regimes against Chinese rule. How could God, presumably on the side of believing Muslims, permit such a fate?

Sayrami answers this question by stressing many virtues in the figure of the Chinese emperor (*Khāqān-i Chīn*), identifying him with “greatness” (68), as a “mighty king” (70), as possessing “consummate wisdom” (72), as one who “does not discriminate” against Muslims (78), and as even capable of sniffing out local officials’ corruption surrounding salt taxes in the Tarim Basin during the 1840s (360–364). Since Sayrami wrote in Chaghatay while situated around 2,500 miles from Beijing, one cannot dismiss these flattering portrayals of the Qing emperors as products of literary inquisitions or censorship. Nor can one read these portrayals as unambiguous endorsements of Qing rule, since Sayrami also decries the “grim soldiers” (279) and exploitative officials dispatched by Beijing to Xinjiang through the end of the dynasty (358). Just as in domestic political discourses of Chinese leaders past and present, the ruler far away in Beijing was a swell guy; local officials were the problem.

The motives behind his distinct political framing are much more interesting. Courtesy of Hui (Sino-Muslim) popular literature, Sayrami adopts the idea that the Chinese emperor’s “ancestor,” Tang Gaozong (r. 649–683), had converted to Islam.⁸ While the faith had not been consistently maintained by the emperor’s descendants, who are envisioned as emerging from a singular dynastic line, a secret covenant between them and Muslims persisted over the continuous state maintenance of *shari’ah* (Islamic law) for governing Muslim subjects. This covenant in turn legitimized longstanding Qing rule over the Tarim Basin. One is left wondering how widespread such an understanding of Qing imperial rule was among Uyghur-speaking communities, but it is nonetheless significant that the *Tarikh i-Hamidi* expounds upon the story.

Yet, Sayrami’s position on the secret nature of “Chinese” rule over Xinjiang poses another question: if the emperor was wise and just, why did numerous traumatic rebellions break out in the mid-nineteenth century? Here, astrology does the heavy narrative lifting. Due to inauspicious astral portents, the empire fell into disarray, leading to heightened official corruption in Xinjiang and eventually, the rebellions of the 1860s. Schluessel renders Sayrami’s text as follows:

...during the reign of Tongzhi Khan, the land of Khaqan-i-Chin and its surrounds fell into great chaos. The fortune tellers and astrologers cast the lots, studied the khan’s star of fortune, and reported to him, saying, “Until the Great Khan gives up the khanship and goes down under the ground, this ill omen will never be lifted from the Great Khan’s lands. This is known from the movement of the spheres.” There is a cemetery for the imperial ancestors one *paotai*’s distance from the capital at Beijing.

⁸For more on related tales among Chinese-speaking Muslims, see Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, “The Marrano Emperor: The Mysterious Bond between Zhu Yuanzhang and the Chinese Muslims,” in *Long Live the Emperor! Uses of the Ming Founder Across Six Centuries of East Asian History*, edited by Sarah Schneewind (Minneapolis: Society for Ming Studies, 2008), 275–308.

The khan, in accordance with this prediction, left his capital for that cemetery, where he had a tunnel built under the ground, with a path running through. He remanded the khanship to his son, or perhaps one of the other princes, whose name was Guangxu.⁹ He lowered his head and, joining the ranks of the Brahmins, he went underground, believing “Now I shall be forbidden from walking up on the surface of the Earth!” The stories say that he may have left that cemetery but hid himself. They say that the tunnel might have been there since the khans of old, and this was the rule whenever something like this happened (349–350).

This intriguing passage, which explains the decline and restitution of the Qing Empire’s fortunes, is worth considering carefully. Schluessel is correct in observing that “Astrology was no mere literary device but rather a key component in a broadly accepted theory of power that chroniclers applied across Muslim Eurasia” (xx). But I would add that astrological writing appears across Chinese local records (gazetteers) and dynastic histories too.

Sayrami’s discussion of imperial astrologers and his tying their calculations to terrestrial manipulations around the imperial tombs strikes me as uncannily close to the administrative roles of the Astronomical Bureau (*Qintianjian*). Qing emperors indeed were interested in reports of inauspicious comets and other astronomical phenomena throughout the nineteenth century for explaining challenges ranging from the Yellow River’s flooding to regional rebellions.¹⁰ Even more, selecting a good site for the next emperor’s tomb in the environs of greater Beijing was paramount to the well-being of the royal line and ultimately to the security of the Qing Empire. In fact, the search for auspicious grave land was ubiquitous across much of China during this era.¹¹ Is there a possibility that Sayrami, rather than just appealing to traditional historical tropes in Muslim Eurasia, also was aware broadly of Qing divinatory practices?¹² As I noted above, and as Schluessel’s translation makes clear, Sayrami knew about the world beyond the Tarim Basin and Mongolia. He refers at various points to Armenia (394), Beijing (e.g., 13, 28), Bukhara (e.g., 26, 80, 90), Chengdu (403), Egypt and Syria (30–35), Hindustan (Northern India; e.g., 46–48, 330), Istanbul and Ottoman history (244–246), Jiang Ziya (27–28), Jinjipu and Jiayuguan (77–79), Kazan (e.g., 25, 73), Lanzhou (72), Mecca and Medina (e.g., 43), Palestine (394), the Taiping Rebellion (80), Tibet (e.g., 46, 116), Xining (79), and Yunnan (80). Even London and Queen Victoria (247–248, 277–278) make appearances in the chronicle.¹³ In other words, while this tale of poor astrological royal portents fits within the traditional motifs of Sayrami’s chronicle, one might also assume he had heard—or even witnessed through the actions of Qing

⁹Sayrami’s hesitation regarding the pedigree of Guangxu is well-founded: since the Tongzhi Emperor (r. 1861–1875) died without a male heir, a grandson of the Daoguang emperor (r. 1820–1850) assumed the throne as the Guangxu Emperor (r. 1875–1908).

¹⁰Tristan G. Brown, “From *Fenye* to *Fengshui*: Applying Correlative Cosmography in Late Imperial China,” *HoST-Journal of History of Science and Technology* 18.1 (2024), 61–85.

¹¹Tristan G. Brown, *Laws of the Land: Fengshui and the State in Qing Dynasty China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 20–60.

¹²Consider that the Ming and Qing states oversaw a “Muslim Section” (*Huihui ke*) of the Astronomical Bureau in Beijing that operated through 1657. Ping-Ying Chang, *The Chinese Astronomical Bureau, 1620–1850: Lineages, Bureaucracy, and Technical Expertise* (London: Routledge, 2023), 19.

¹³Note that Sayrami does not explicitly refer to Yunnan as an administrative unit in the text but rather alludes to the area’s Muslim population.

officials stationed in Xinjiang—that the imperial government paid a lot of attention to these practices.

One's ability to speculate about what exactly Sayrami knew, saw, and experienced during the second half of the nineteenth century demonstrates the significance of Schluessel's seminal contribution to the historical discipline across geographical regions. This is a book to read and cherish for its insights into Islamic history, Central Asian history, Qing history, and Chinese history. As a single text, it has ample content to fill many seminar discussions about the topics introduced here and beyond. *Tarikh i-Hamidi* was not easy to render into English, and Schluessel should be commended for working through its multilingual nuances, literary allusions, and esoteric references. Such translations are essential to the continued vibrancy of research and teaching in these fields.

Schluessel's work is even more important considering two recent developments: controversies over the official compilation of the *History of Qing* in the People's Republic of China, and PRC governmental attempts to erase Uyghur culture from places where it has existed for centuries. One feels an odd irony when reading this Chaghatay-language history of the Tarim Basin from the turn of the twentieth century. In these early decades of the twenty-first century, Sayrami's works have become sensitive in the tightly monitored academic landscape of the PRC, where this title has been pulled from the shelves of libraries and bookstores (xiii). But how subversive is it, honestly? While Sayrami displays varying degrees of sympathy for the historical actors, including those who resisted Qing rule, for him, the Qing was China. Sayrami pays little attention to the Manchu character of the dynasty; "Chinese" in his history includes Manchu and Chinese speakers broadly. He even imagines unbroken descent lines of royal Chinese dynasties stretching back centuries. Careful readers will see that the *Tarikh i-Hamidi* both informs scholarship called the "New Qing History" and complicates some of its underlying claims. Of course, even that level of nuance appears too subtle for the powers that be in Beijing. So, while we wait for the official issuance of the *History of Qing* as Estragon and Vladimir wait for Godot, books like this one will continue to inspire scholars to search high and low for those rare voices who can tell us the stories we thought we already knew in terms we have never heard before.