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ORAL EPICS ALONG THE SILK ROAD: THE TURKIC TRADITIONS OF XINJIANG

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Along the Silk Road(s) from north-western China (Xinjiang) to western Anatolia we find a number of shared oral epic traditions. For many oral epics a continuous line from the Uyghurs of Xinjiang to the Turks of Turkey can be established. The main creators and bearers of this oral tradition are both Turkic-speaking and Iranian-speaking ethnic groups. When studying the oral epics that have flourished along the Silk Road, a number of theoretical questions arise: the interaction of oral and literate traditions; the crossing of language borders and the concomitant transformations; and the contrast and mutual enrichment of nomadic and urban civilizations. In this article the focus is on the Turkic-speaking peoples of Xinjiang and their rich oral epic heritage. Despite the considerable negative effects of the period of the Cultural Revolution, the performance of oral epics has continued into the twenty-first century among the Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, and Uyghurs of Xinjiang. While in many areas of post-Soviet Central Asia the oral epic has become an “endangered species,” the Turkic ethnic groups of Xinjiang have tenaciously preserved their oral traditions. These traditions therefore play an important role in the study of the epic as a living form of oral verbal art.

KEYWORDS: Oral epics, orality and literacy, Kyrgyz, Kazakh, Uyghur, Xinjiang

When in the late 1980s the concept of the “Silk Road” was brought to the attention of UNESCO, this set off a series of activities, comprising conferences, concerts and the earmarking of works of art for UNESCO’s World Cultural Heritage program. Now, in the late 2010s, UNESCO maintains an online platform entitled “Silk Roads: Dialogue, Diversity and Development,” which

aims to reopen dialogue along these historic lines of communication by collecting and making accessible worldwide scholarship about the Silk Roads and engaging a global audience in a deeper understanding of the diversity and interdependency of the cultures and peoples along these routes.¹

Quite correctly, the UNESCO statement speaks of the Silk Roads, in the plural, as there were several caravan routes that lead from Xi’an, the traditional starting (or end) point, via the Central Asian oasis towns south and north of the Taklamakan

¹ See <https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/unesco-silk-road-online-platform> (last accessed 27 June 2018).

and via the urban centers of Transoxania to the Mediterranean.² While it is preferable to use the plural when speaking of the Silk Roads in general, it is customary to use the singular when referring specifically to the Central Asian stretch. According to the latter convention, I will use the singular form in this paper.

Modern scholarly interest in the Central Asian part of the Silk Road, in particular the “heart piece” running through present-day Gansu and Xinjiang, dates back to the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. The geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen is credited with having coined the term “Silk Road” in 1877. Sven Hedin’s expeditions to Chinese “Turkestan,” beginning in 1894, were an incentive for archaeologists to further explore the region. The four German Turfan expeditions between 1902 and 1914 and Sir Aurel Stein’s research trips to Central Asia, in particular his discovery and partial acquisition of the hidden library in Dunhuang in 1907 and 1914, have enriched our knowledge of the flowering civilizations along the Silk Road, and they have filled Western libraries and museums with precious objects and manuscripts in a number of different languages and scripts, some of them little known or even unknown before these finds.

The Silk Road as a web of caravan routes from eastern China to Central Asia and beyond has been used since Antiquity. From early on, not only material goods—most notably Chinese silk—traveled on these caravan routes, but also immaterial cultural goods. Some of the most precious “merchandise” imported to China on the Silk Road were the Buddhist scriptures the monk Xuanzang 玄奘 brought back in the middle of the seventh century CE. In addition to the written word, orally transmitted lore of various kinds has also been traveling from East to West and West to East on the Silk Road. Among the folklore genres flourishing along the Silk Road the oral epic has a special place. It is particularly vigorous in Central Asia, especially in the Turkic and Mongolian-speaking areas, with many links to the surrounding oral traditions in Central Asia and along the Silk Road. In this article, I will focus on the oral epic in Xinjiang and more particularly on the oral epic traditions of the Turkic-speaking peoples of Xinjiang.

THE TURKIC PEOPLES OF XINJIANG

Six Turkic languages spoken in Xinjiang are officially recognized as minority languages, Uyghur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tatar, and Salar. Uyghur, Kazakh, and Kyrgyz are written languages, written in Xinjiang with a reformed Arabic script, while Uzbek, Tatar, and Salar do not have the status of written languages in Xinjiang. Uzbek is written in Uzbekistan in Cyrillic letters and increasingly also in a new Latin script; in Xinjiang the Uzbeks (numbering ca. 17,000) write in Uyghur. Tatar speakers form a very small minority (ca. 5000); their language is written in Cyrillic letters in the Russian Federation (Tatarstan). The Salars live mostly in the provinces of Qinghai and Gansu; in Xinjiang they number ca. 4000. None of these three Turkic groups has an oral epic tradition in China; the Uzbeks

² There is a sizable literature on the Silk Road(s); many publications have maps. For a useful bibliography, see Nathan Light, “Annotated Bibliography of the History and Culture of Eastern Turkistan, Jungharia/Zungaria/Dzungaria, Chinese Central Asia, and Sinkiang/Xinjiang (for the 16th–20th Centuries CE, Excluding Most Travel Narratives),” *The Silk Road* 3 (2005): 28–49.

and the Tatars, however, do have a rich epic heritage “across the border,” in Uzbekistan and in the Russian Federation.

The Uyghurs³ are the largest Turkic-speaking ethnic group in Xinjiang, or rather as north-west China is officially called, in the “Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.” Their number is estimated at about eight million people, comprising 47% of the population of Xinjiang. Outside Xinjiang, Uyghurs are mainly found in the neighboring Central Asian republics, especially in Kazakhstan (ca. 240,000 Uyghur speakers). It was only in 1921 that it was decided that the various Turkic dialects of what is now Modern Uyghur be given the common name “Uyghur.” Formerly the Uyghurs of Russian Turkestan were called “Taranchi” (“farmers”), while the speech of the Uyghurs of Xinjiang was known by the various dialects of the oases where they dwelt, such as “Qasgharliq,” “Turfanliq,” etc.⁴ Uyghur is very similar to Uzbek; both languages go back to Chaghatay, the Turkic literary language of Islamic Central Asia from the Middle Ages to the end of the nineteenth century. This is the language of poets like ‘Alī Shīr Navā’ī (1441–1501), who is claimed as a national poet by both the Uyghurs and the Uzbeks.

The Kazakhs in Xinjiang, numbering about one and a half million people, have traditionally been very close to the Kazakhs in Kazakhstan and other parts of Central Asia. This is due to their common history, with shifting political borders in the course of centuries. In earlier periods their nomadic stock-breeding economy resulted in wide-ranging trails from winter camp to summer pasture, over a vast area subsequently partitioned into different political entities, the Soviet Union (later Kazakhstan), the Peoples’ Republic of China, and the Republic of Mongolia. The Kazakhs are traditionally grouped into three tribal confederations, the Great Horde (*ulı jüz*), the Middle Horde (*orta jüz*) and the Little Horde (*kishi jüz*); the Kazakhs of China belong in their majority to the Middle Horde. Due to their position between two empires, the Kazakhs came under Russian and Chinese supremacy from the early eighteenth century onwards. By the middle of the eighteenth century the Russians had made decisive advances in the expansion of their dominion over the Kazakhs; in the course of the first half of the nineteenth century the khanates of the Middle Horde, the Little Horde, and finally the Great Horde were abolished. Between the 1680s and 1770s, the Kazakhs (together with the Kyrgyz) were involved in lengthy wars with the Oirats, a confederation of west Mongolian tribes, among them the Dzungars and the Kalmucks. These conflicts are vividly reflected in the heroic epics of the Kazakhs and other Central Asian Turkic peoples. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the Dzungars were finally defeated by the Chinese (Manchu) and their territory, then extending beyond Lake Balkhash into the Kazakh steppes, was taken over by Imperial China.

The majority of the Kyrgyz⁵ live in Kyrgyzstan, formerly a part of the Soviet Union and since 1991 an independent state, where they form the majority of a

³ Also spelled “Uighur” or “Uigur.” For my transliteration of the Turkic and other languages, see the note at the end of this article.

⁴ For a detailed account, see Omeljan Pritsak, “Das Neuigurische” (Modern Uyghur), in *Philologiae Turcicae Fundamenta. I* (Foundations of Turkic Philology), ed. Jean Deny, Kaare Grønbech, Helmuth Scheel, and Zeki Velidi Togan (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1959), pp. 525–63.

⁵ Also spelled “Kirghiz;” in Turkological works also spellings with *q* instead of *k*, *g* or *γ* instead of *gh*, and *i* or *ı* instead of *y* are used (“Qyrghyz,” “Qırğız,” “Qırqız,” etc.).

population of ca. six million people. In Xinjiang the Kyrgyz number only about 190,000. The Kyrgyz in Xinjiang live in the south-western part of the province, mainly in the Kizilsu (Qizilsuu) Kyrgyz Autonomous Prefecture, which lies on the border with Kyrgyzstan and consists of the town of Artush as its administrative center and the counties of Akchi (Aqchiy), Akto (Aqtoo), and Ulughchat (Uluuchat).

From a linguistic point of view, all the Turkic languages of Xinjiang are fairly closely related and speakers of one Turkic language are generally able to understand speakers of another Turkic language. Some Turkic languages are closer to one another than others, and some speakers are more versatile than others, but one can basically assume that there are no serious language borders between the Turkic languages of Xinjiang, in particular between the three “majority languages.” This “permeability” extends also to other Turkic languages in Central Asia and the Middle East. There is a linguistic continuum within the Turkic languages along the great trade routes from Central Asia to the Mediterranean. Even a certain symbiosis with Iranian languages can be observed, both in the form of bilingualism (in parts of Uzbekistan and Afghanistan) and as a result of a significant amount of lexical borrowings from Persian (Tajik) especially in Uzbek and Uyghur, but also in other Turkic languages. These fairly open linguistic borders also encourage the free movement of oral traditions along the Silk Road.

THE INTERACTION OF ORAL AND LITERATE TRADITIONS IN UYGHUR EPIC POETRY

With Chaghatay as the linguistic and literary heritage of the Uyghurs, it is not surprising that literacy and written literature have played an important role also in the oral epic tradition of the Uyghurs. Many narratives have passed from the oral to the written and from the written to the oral. Many popular epics and romances have been written down and transmitted in manuscripts or in printed form and have in turn influenced orally performed versions. Literacy and orality, reading and oral performance, memorization of fixed texts and “composition in performance” are intricately related in a linguistic and cultural space that has known the flowering of literature, both in Chaghatay and Persian, for centuries.⁶ In this respect, the oral epic poetry of the Uyghurs differs markedly from that of Turkic-speaking peoples whose traditional culture is or was predominantly nomadic rather than urban.

The Uyghur “singer of tales,” to use A. B. Lord’s term, is today generally called *dastanchi*, “performer of dastans.” “Dastan” is a term that comes from Persian (where its basic meaning is “tale”), and it is used by a number of Turkic-speaking peoples, not only in Central Asia, to designate an “epic-like” narrative. The qualification “epic-like” is in need of a short explanation. In the Western canon the prototype of the epic is represented by the Homeric poems. These are long narratives in verse, their action set in a world of the past and focusing on heroic valor and the deeds and adventures of heroes and heroines. Uyghur dastans are generally not

⁶ “Composition in performance” or “composition by formula and theme” are the terms A. B. Lord preferred to the term “improvisation.” See Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, ed. S. Mitchell and G. Nagy, with audio and video CD, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). On orality and literacy in Uyghur, see Ildikó Bellér-Hann, *The Written and the Spoken: Literacy and Oral Transmission Among the Uyghur* (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 2000).

composed consistently in verse, as the Homeric epics are, but are in a mixture of verse and prose. This kind of “prosimetric” narrative is widespread in world literature.⁷ In Turkic oral traditions we find one and the same heroic narrative both in verse and in a mixture of verse and prose. When both are identical as to their contents, style, and conception, it would seem illogical to call only the narrative in verse an epic and to deny this genre term to a prosimetric narrative.⁸

There is, however, a second restriction for applying the label “epic” to Uyghur dastans. Many dastans are love and adventure stories rather than heroic narratives. The plots and motifs of many of these narratives derive from the pool of Oriental stories as they have been circulated in tale collections such as the *Arabian Nights* or the *Tuti Nameh* (“The Book of the Parrot”). In these love and adventure dastans the verse portions are mostly monologues or dialogues, in which the protagonists express their emotions and feelings. By their plots and motifs, and also by their style, these dastans show many similarities to the genre that in medieval literature is generally termed “romance.”⁹

Native scholars make a distinction between heroic dastans (*qährimanlıq dastanliri*), love dastans (*muhäbbät dastanliri*), religious dastans (*diniy dastanlar*), and historical dastans (*tarixiy dastanlar*).¹⁰ Their contemporary diffusion as orally performed narratives is not easy to establish. Many dastanchis perform religious dastans, especially at *mazar* festivals, festivals held in honor of saints and saintly persons at the sites of their tombs (*mazar* means “graveyard” and “tomb”).¹¹ Due to political pressures, however, both the *mazar* festivals and the performance of religious dastans are discouraged or even suppressed. Many of these religious dastans are found also in other traditions, generally in the form of written texts. Wilhelm Radloff collected a number of them in Kazakh and published (and translated) them as “book epics” (*Büchergesänge*).¹² Of these *Kiyiknamä* (“The Deer”), *Qiyamätnamä* (“The End of the World”), and *Imam Hüseyning shehitnamisi* (“Imam Hussein’s Martyrdom”) are also known in the repertoire of Uyghur dastanchis.¹³

⁷ For a comprehensive survey, see *Prosimetrum: Crosscultural Perspectives on Narrative in Prose and Verse*, ed. Joseph Harris and Karl Reichl (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997); on prosimetric narratives in Turkic oral poetry, see my chapter on Turkic oral epics, *ibid.*, pp. 321–48.

⁸ For a more detailed argumentation, see Karl Reichl, *Singing the Past: Turkic and Medieval Heroic Poetry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 21–36.

⁹ On medieval romance, see *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 751–54; on romance as a genre in the *Arabian Nights*, see Peter Heath, “Romance as a Genre in ‘The Thousand and One Nights,’” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 18 (1987): 1–21; 19 (1988): 1–26.

¹⁰ See Osman Isamayil Tarim, *Uyghur xälq eghiz ädäbiyati häqqidä omumiyy bayan* (A general introduction to Uyghur oral folk literature; Ürümqi: Shinjang Universiteti nashriyati, 2009), pp. 625–69. See also the detailed study by Abdulhakim Mehmet, *Uyghur Halk Destanları ve Destançılık Geleneği Üzerine Araştırmalar* (Uyghur folk dastans and studies on the dastan tradition; Uşak: Elik Yayınları, 2010).

¹¹ See Rachel Harris and Rahilä Dawut, “Mazar Festivals of the Uyghurs: Music, Islam and the Chinese State,” *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 11 (2002): 101–18.

¹² In Wilhelm Radloff, *Proben der Volksliteratur der türkischen Stämme Süd-Sibiriens. III. Kirgisische Mundarten* (Samples of the folk literature of the Turkic tribes of South Siberia. III. Kyrgyz [= Kazakh] dialects; St. Petersburg: Akademia Nauk, 1870), pp. 665–766 (text volume), 751–856 (translation volume).

¹³ See Tarim, *Uyghur xälq eghiz ädäbiyati*, pp. 661–63.

It should be stressed, however, that religious inspiration is not limited to religious dastans, but also pervades other subgenres of the Uyghur dastan.¹⁴

The editions of dastans published in Xinjiang do not reflect the actual performance situation. About one hundred dastans have been published. A “canonical” collection of Uyghur dastans is found in volumes eight and nine of the *Treasury of Uyghur Oral Folk Literature*.¹⁵ There are thirty-one dastans in this collection, of which the group of love dastans is the largest. Earlier records of the oral epic tradition of the Uyghurs are Wilhelm Radloff’s collection of Taranchi tales (1886), G. Raquette’s publication of an Uyghur version of the romance of *Tahir and Zöhrä* (1930), and Gunnar Jarring’s collections of folktales in different Uyghur dialects (1946–1951).¹⁶ Radloff’s texts are either retellings of written versions by his informant, Hemer Waki, or oral dastans in the form of folktales. Jarring’s material, too, is predominantly in the form of prose folktales. Closer to oral dastans is Raquette’s text, although it is not clear whether the text was written down from oral performance, presumably dictated by the singer, or copied from a manuscript.¹⁷ Modern editions of Uyghur dastans were published in Xinjiang mainly from the 1980s onwards. Many dastans were first published in the journals *Bulaq* (“Spring Source”) and *Miras* (“Heritage”) and then reprinted in various collections. The sources are not always indicated; in many, probably most cases, the published texts come from manuscripts and have undergone editorial revision. The group of religious dastans is absent from current editions, including the *Treasury*. A number of Uyghur dastans, taken from various editions, have also been reprinted and translated into Turkish.¹⁸

At a conference entitled “The First International Symposium on Uyghur Folk Dastan in China,” held in Beijing in 2015, three dastanchis performed extracts from four dastans: Ubulhäsän Mämät from Khotan (b. 1955) performed an extract from *Chin Tömür Batır*, the blind singer Ibrahim Yaqub from Qomul (b. 1973) an extract from *Yüsüp and Ähmäd* and from *Yachibäg*, and Bäxtiyar Abdurahit from Kashgar (b. 1956) an extract from *Seyit Nochi*.¹⁹ As is typical also of other Turkic oral traditions of Central Asia and the Near East, the prose parts of the prosimetric epics and dastans are recited, while the verse parts are sung to the

¹⁴ See Karl Reichl, “Hero and Saint: Islamic Elements in Uighur Oral Epics,” *Journal of the History of Sufism* 3 (2001): 7–24.

¹⁵ *Uyghur xälq eghiz ädäbiyati qamusi* (Treasury of Uyghur oral folk literature), general ed. Abduraxman Äbäy, 12 vols. (Ürümchi: Shinjang xälq nāshriyati, 2005), hereafter *Treasury*.

¹⁶ See Wilhelm Radloff, *Proben der Volksliteratur der nördlichen türkischen Stämme*. VII. *Der Dialect der Tarantschi* (Samples of the folk literature of the northern Turkic tribes. VII. The dialect of the Taranchi; St. Petersburg: Akademia Nauk, 1886) (text and translation volumes); G[ustav] Raquette, *Täji bilä Zohra. Eine osttürkische Variante der Sage von Tahir und Zohra* (Täji bilä Zohra. An Eastern Turkic variant of the legend of Tahir and Zohra; Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup and Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1930); Gunnar Jarring, *Materials to the Knowledge of Eastern Turki: Tales, Poetry, Proverbs, Riddles, Ethnological and Historical Texts from the Southern Parts of Eastern Turkestan. With Translation and Notes*, 4 vols. (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1946–1951).

¹⁷ See Raquette, *Täji bilä Zohra*, p. 5.

¹⁸ See Alimcan İnayet, *Uygur Halk Destanları* (Uyghur folk dastans), 2 vols. (Ankara: Türk Dil Kurumu, 2004, 2013); Abdulhakim Mehmet, *Uygur Halk Destanları*, vol. 3 (Uyghur folk dastans; Ankara: Türk Dil Kurumu, 2011).

¹⁹ The dastans *Yachibäg* and *Seyit Nochi* take their names from their main characters.

accompaniment of an instrument. Ubulhäsän Mämät and Bäxtiyar Abduwahi used the *rawap* (Persian *rubāb*), a plucked string instrument with a small pear-shaped membrane belly. This instrument comes in various regional forms. Ibrahim Yaqub played the *satar*, a long-necked bowed lute. Uyghur dastanchis accompany themselves also with other plucked lute-type instruments such as the *tambur* and the *dutar*.²⁰ Every singer had a different musical style, evidence of the variety of dastan performance among the Uyghurs.

According to Uyghur scholars (and the *Treasury*), *Chin Tömür Batur* and *Yüsüp and Ähmäd* are considered heroic dastans, while *Seyit Nochi* and *Yachibäg* are classified as historical dastans. The group of Uyghur heroic dastans shows some idiosyncracies. The heroic epic of *Alpamish*, which is widely diffused among the Turkic peoples of Central Asia, is surprisingly absent from Uyghur folklore.²¹ The same is basically true of the epic cycle about the heroic deeds and adventures of Köroghlu (or Göroghli) and his companions. This cycle is found in the oral lore of Turkic, Iranian and other peoples from Anatolia to Central Asia. According to the main hero's birth and events during his youth, he is either called Köroghlu, "the son of the blind man," or Göroghli, "the son of the grave."²² Although we know of dastanchis who performed the epic, to my knowledge only two Uyghur texts of this cycle have been published to date, both taken from manuscripts. In the Aqsu district in southern Xinjiang a dastanchi by the name of Yaqub Hatip is said to have known thirty-eight "branches" (Uyghur *shax*) of the epic; he died in the 1990s.²³ In 1983–1984, Ä. Tatliq published a version by the dastanchi Äbäydulla Haji from the beginning of the twentieth century, which was preserved in revised form as a manuscript copy.²⁴ A second Uyghur version was published in the journal *Bulaq* in 1984, which differs markedly from other versions of this cycle.²⁵ The hero is born half-way through the narrative and there is no episode that explains the choice of his name. As author of "this book" (*ushbu kitapning süxändani*) a

²⁰ On the performance of Uyghur dastans, see Rahile Dawut and Elise Anderson, "Dastan Performance among the Uyghurs," in *The Music of Central Asia*, ed. Theodore Levin, Saida Daukeyeva, and Elmira Köchümkulova (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016), pp. 406–20. On Uyghur musical instruments, see Tursunjan Letip and Ilshat Tursun, *Uyghur chalghuliri/ Uighur Musical Instruments* (Kashgar: Qäshqär Uyghur nāshriyati, 2006) (text in English and Uyghur).

²¹ It is very popular among the Uzbeks, linguistically and culturally so close to the Uyghurs. On this epic, see Karl Reichl, *Turkic Oral Epic Poetry: Traditions, Forms, Poetic Structure* (New York: Garland, 1992; rpt. London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 160–70, 333–51. The Chinese translation of this book incorporates revisions; see *Tujueyu minzu koutou shishi: chuantong, xingshi he shige jiegou* 突厥语民族口头史诗: 传统、形式和诗歌结构 (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2011).

²² On this cycle, see B. A. Karryev, *Épicheskie skazaniya o Ker-Ogly u tyurko-yazychnyyx narodov* (Epic narratives about Kör-Ogly among the Turkic-speaking peoples; Moscow: Nauka, 1968); Reichl, *Turkic Oral Epic Poetry*, pp. 151–60, 318–33.

²³ According to the information given by Yüsüp Ishaq of the "Xinjiang Federation of Literary and Art Circles" in a letter from February 2017; Yüsüp Ishaq mentions all in all four dastanchis and the two editions discussed here.

²⁴ It was first published in the journal *Miras* in 1983 and 1984 and republished in Ärshidin Tatliq, *Ämir Göroghli. Uyghur xälq dastanliri*, vol. 1 (Ämir Göroghli. Uyghur folk dastans, Ürümqi: Shinjang yashlar-ösmürlär nāshriyati, 1986), pp. 1–280; this text is found, together with a Turkish translation, also in Mehmet, *Uygur Halk Destanları*, vol. 3, pp. 18–277.

²⁵ Wahat Qadir, ed., "Göroghli," *Bulaq* 13 (1984): 1–119.

certain Molla Änwär Ibin Bowayi Qämbär is mentioned;²⁶ the text does indeed show many bookish traits.

The dastan of *Chin Tömür Batur* ("Hero True-Steel") was published by W. Radloff in the form of a folktale (or *chöchäk*).²⁷ This is not an unusual case, as many Uyghur dastans are close to folktales. Chin Tömür lives together with his sister Mäxtumsula. He forbids her to leave the house when he rides out hunting. She disobeys and falls into the clutches of a seven-headed *yalmawuz* (witch), who, vampire-like, drinks her blood. Eventually, however, the witch is overcome by her brother. Mäxtumsula disobeys her brother again and combs her hair on the bank of an irrigation canal. One of her hairs floats away and is seen by a Kalmuck prince who falls in love with her, goes out to search for her, and finally forces her to marry him. These are motifs widely current in folktales; in Stith Thompson's *Motif Index of Folk Literature* they are listed as "G11.3 Cannibal witch" and "T11.4.1 Love through sight of hair of unknown princess."²⁸ Then the dastan takes a different turn: Mäxtumsula flees and risks losing her two children when crossing a river. She is finally reunited with her brother, who had unsuccessfully searched for her and become blind from crying. Chin Tömür's eye-sight is miraculously restored by his sister and he then, with his sister's help, fights valiantly against the Kalmuck prince and his army. The martial ending of the dastan links *Chin Tömür Batur* to a great number of heroic epics of the Central Asian Turkic peoples in which the plot revolves around the fighting of the Turkic peoples against the Kalmucks, an echo of the Kalmuck wars of the seveneenth and eighteenth centuries.

Perhaps the most interesting group of Uyghur oral epics and romances are the historical dastans. To this subgenre belong about ten dastans, of which the best known are *Seyit Nochi*, *Abdurakhman ghaja* and *Nuzugum*.²⁹ In these dastans the risings against the Qing (Manchu) dynasty in north-western China at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries are reflected. In *Seyit Nochi* the hero begins his career as a baker's apprentice in Kashgar, then joins in the Xinhai Revolution as a member of the local resistance group. In the dastan the conflict between Seyit Nochi and the Hui military commander Ma Fuxing is highlighted, a conflict which leads to Seyit Nochi's execution.³⁰ He was sent by Ma Shaowu, the *daren* (governor) of Üch Turpan, to Kashgar with a letter ordering his death (a Uriah letter).³¹ Seyit Nochi knew the letter's contents but delivered it loyally to the *titai* (district commander) Ma Fuxing. Ma Fuxing has him thrown

²⁶ Qadir, "Görogli," p. 53.

²⁷ See Radloff, *Tarantschi*, pp. 168–74 (text volume), 221–29 (translation volume). A modern Uyghur version is edited in Abdukerim Raxman, *Uyghur xäq dastanliri* (Uyghur folk dastans; Ürümqi: Shinjang xäq nashriyati, 1981), pp. 21–44; this text is republished with a Turkish translation in İnyet Uyğur Halk Destanları, vol. 1, pp. 143–66; for a German translation, see Karl Reichl, *Märchen aus Sinkiang. Überlieferungen der Turkvölker Chinas* (Folktales from Xinjiang. Traditions of China's Turkic peoples; Cologne: Eugen Diederichs, 1986), pp. 82–100.

²⁸ See Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, 6 vols., rev. ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1955–1958), vol. 3, p. 227; vol. 5, p. 334.

²⁹ See Tarim, *Uyghur xäq eghiz ädäbiyati*, pp. 663–69.

³⁰ The name Hui (also Dungan) denotes the Chinese-speaking Muslims of Central Asia and China. It is an official term for one of China's minorities.

³¹ From the biblical story of Uriah in 2 Samuel 11; see also Thompson, *Motif-Index*, vol. 4, p. 359 (motif K978).

into the dungeon and then hanged: *Äzizänä Qäshqärning/shungqari ada boldi*, “Dear Kashgar’s/falcon came to an end.”³²

While in publications the love romances are the best represented subgenre of the Uyghur dastan, it is reported that contemporary dastanchis do not perform them. One reason for the absence of love dastans from the repertoire of contemporary dastanchis is the present state of oral epic art among the Uyghurs. In present-day Xinjiang the performance of dastans has been marginalized and the traditional transmission of the oral heritage from master singer to apprentice singer has become rare. While the changes effected by the modern world on oral traditions can be observed everywhere in Central Asia, the situation in Xinjiang is characterized by a certain tension that makes the survival of the oral dastan seem precarious.³³

A second reason for the lack of oral versions of the Uyghur love dastans in the present period is that these romances have also been transmitted as written texts, destined to be read rather than performed. This is also true of other Turkic traditions; but while orally performed versions have been recorded from Uzbek, Turkmen, and other singers, often with significant variations of the written versions, the Uyghur dastans that have been published are generally very close to manuscript texts or earlier lithographic editions. One example will have to suffice to illustrate this. The Uyghur love dastan *Pärhad and Sherin* (also *Farhad and Shirin*) has a venerable written ancestry. Its source is a verse narrative in Chaghatay by ‘Alī Shīr Navā’ī, whose work goes back in turn to a verse romance in Persian by the twelfth century poet Nizāmī Ganjavī. In Nizāmī’s *Khusrou and Shirin*, comprising over 6,500 couplets, the story of the Sasanian king Khosrou II Parviz and his long suit of the beautiful princess Shirin is told. An episode in this verse narrative features a stone-mason by the name of Farhād, who falls in love with Shirin, a love so desperate that he dies when he is falsely told that Shirin has died. Navā’ī’s *Farhād and Shirin* was composed in 1484 and comprises about 5780 couplets. Navā’ī focused on this episode and changed Nizami’s narrative in substantial ways. As in Nizami’s verse romance, Farhād kills himself when he hears the false news of Shirin’s death, and Shirin, although she marries Khosrou, dies in the end and is buried close to Farhād.

Apart from these written works, both of which have inspired the composition of further narrative poems,³⁴ the story of Farhād and Shirin has also been widely diffused in oral literature. In Turkish there are a number of *hikâye*, stories in verse and

³² Edited in Raxman, *Uyghur xälg dastanliri*, pp. 45–84, at p. 84. This text is republished, with a Turkish translation, in İnayet *Uygur Halk Destanları*, vol. 1, pp. 23–68; for another version see Ä. Bäqiev, *Seyt Nochi* (Tashkent: Fan, 1972) (in Uzbek); this version is republished, with a Turkish translation, in İnayet *Uygur Halk Destanları*, vol. 2, pp. 27–58. On the historical background, see Anthony Garaut, “From Yunnan to Xinjiang: Governor Yang Zengxin and his Dungan Generals,” *Études orientales* 25 (2008): 93–125; see also Alimcan İnayet, “Seyit Noçi Destanı ve Seyit Tipi Üzerine” (On the dastan *Seyit Nochi* and the character of Seyit), *Türk Dünyası İncelemeleri Dergisi* (Journal for research in the Turkic world) 5.2 (2005): 219–28.

³³ At the moment of writing (end of 2018) a politically motivated “reeducation campaign” in Xinjiang is severely affecting the activities of traditional artists and the work of scholars in the fields of folklore and traditional art. All main Turkic-speaking groups of Xinjiang are suffering from these measures. See <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/10/world/asia/china-xinjiang-rahile-dawut.html>>.

³⁴ See H. W. Duda, *Ferhād und Shīrīn. Die literarische Geschichte eines persischen Sagenstoffes* (Ferhād and Shīrīn. The literary history of a Persian legend; Prague: Orientální ústav, 1933), and

prose, which are performed by the Turkish *aşık* (singer). There are also folktales in Uzbek and other Turkic languages. And there are finally also a number of dastans, in Azeri, Turkmen, Uzbek, and Uyghur. Metin Özarslan has edited and studied six versions of the story, four Turkish *hikâye*, an Azeri dastan, and an Uyghur tale.³⁵ The Uyghur narrative studied by Özarslan is a folktale taken from Radloff's text collection; its plot follows, with contractions and some changes, Navā'ī's tale in the main.³⁶ Closer to Navā'ī's *Farhād and Shirin* is the Uyghur dastan, collected and revised by Häsän Selim. This version is clearly based on Navā'ī's verse epic, both with respect to plot and to style. In comparison to Navā'ī's text, however, there is more emphasis on the lyrical element in this dastan.³⁷

This love dastan is quite typical of the whole subgenre: Two young people fall in love and are prevented from marrying by a number of obstacles. The verse passages of the dastan are devoted to the expression of the protagonists' feelings, effusions of love or outpourings of grief about their separation. Some of these love dastans end unhappily, such as the Uyghur version of *Farhād and Shirin* or the Uyghur dastan *Tahir and Zöhrä*. There are, however, Uzbek versions of both dastans with a happy ending.³⁸ Other love dastans end traditionally with the thwarted lovers' union. This is the case with *Gherib and Sänäm*, which elaborates in its concluding part the motif of the "Return of the Husband," i.e., the return of the hero in the nick of time, just before his wife or betrothed is forced to marry another man.³⁹

Gherib and Sänäm is, like *Tahir and Zöhrä*, one of the Turkic romances that is popular among the Turks, Azerbaijanians, Tatars, and Turkic peoples of Central Asia.⁴⁰ The stories are known to a wide audience, often through popular editions, going back to earlier chapbooks, and also through adaptations for television or the cinema. As far as these romances are still current in oral tradition, it is often the verse parts only, the songs, which are performed by folk musicians to the accompaniment of an instrument. In Uyghur music, songs from the love romances, in particular from *Gherib and Sänäm*, have been incorporated into the *muqam*. The *On-ikki muqam*, the "Twelve Muqam," of Uyghur music are a series of suites, each

G. Yu. Aliev, *Legenda o Khosrove i Shirin v literaturakh narodov Vostoka* (The legend of Khosrow and Shirin in the literatures of the peoples of the East; Moscow: Izd. Vostochnoy Literatury, 1960).

³⁵ Metin Özarslan, *Ferhat ile Şirin. Mukayeseli Bir Araştırma* (Ferhat and Shirin. A comparative study; Istanbul: Doğu Kitaphanesi Yayıncılık, 2006).

³⁶ Radloff, *Tarantschi*, pp. 72–86 (text volume), 95–114 (translation volume).

³⁷ Published in Abdurusul Ömer, ed. *Uyghur xälq dastanliridin tallanma* (A choice of Uyghur folk dastans; Ürümqi: Shinjang xälq nashriyati, 1998), pp. 1–96.

³⁸ There is no space here for a comparative analysis; see Mansur Afzalov, "Farhād va Shirin dāstānining xälq varianti haqida" (On the popular versions of the dastan *Farhād and Shirin*), in *Fāzil Shāir* (The singer Fāzil Shāir), ed. Tora Mirzaev et al. (Tashkent: Fan, 1973), pp. 81–85; Mamatqul Joraev and Feruza Mamatqulova, eds., *Tāhir va Zuhra. Ozbek xälq dāstāni* (Tāhir and Zuhra. An Uzbek folk dastan; Tashkent: Muharrir nashriyati, 2011), pp. 3–25.

³⁹ See tale type 974 in Hans-Jörg Uther, *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography, Based on the System of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson*, 3 vols. (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2004), I, 608.

⁴⁰ Three different Uyghur versions have been edited; see (1) Raxman, *Uyghur xälq dastanliri*, pp. 237–97; this text has been republished and translated into Turkish in İnayet, *Uygur Halk Destanları*, vol. 1, pp. 167–233; (2) Batur Ärshidin, "Gherip vā Sänäm" (Gherip and Sänäm), *Bulaq* 11 (1984): 212–85; (3) Ömer, *Uyghur xälq dastanliridin tallanma*, pp. 180–260. On the Turkish romance, see the study and edition of Fikret Türkmen, *Âşık Garip Hikayesi. İnceleme – Metin* (The *hikâye* of *Âşık Garip*. Study and texts; Ankara: Baylan Matbaası, 1974).

with a specific sequence of movements. The suites are melodically based on the modal system of Oriental music and get their name from the Arabic word for scale, *maqām*. The Uyghur muqam are particularly close to the Uzbek “Six Maqām” (*Shash maqām*), but also similar to the *maqām* suites and *maqām* systems of other Middle Eastern and Central Asian musical traditions.⁴¹ They consist of various sections, of which one is called “Dastan;” it is here that songs from the love romances are found.

Abdushukur Muhämmät Imin states that in the “Twelve Muqam,” songs from *Gherib and Sänäm* occur far more often than songs from any other dastan.⁴² In a heavily revised and “standardized” edition of the “Twelve Muqam,” edited by the Association for the Study of the Twelve Muqam and the Association for the Study of Uyghur Classical Literature of Xinjiang, four extracts from dastans are given in the “Dastan” section of the muqam “Rak” (the first muqam), of which three come from *Gherib and Sänäm*.⁴³ The first song, beginning “Mundin ketär bolsang Baghdad shähriğä” (“If you leave from here for the city of Baghdad”), is a dialogue between Sänäm and Gherib, who in alternate stanzas lament their separation. The text given in the edition of the muqam (on pp. 136–37) is fairly close to the text found in Ömer’s edition of the romance.⁴⁴ In a recording of this text in a set of VCDs, produced for the 2002 Symposium on the Uyghur Twelve Muqam in Beijing, the first and second stanza are sung by a woman’s and a man’s voice, respectively, in accordance with the poem, which is a dialogue between Sänäm and Gherib. Then the singers jump to the penultimate and the ultimate stanza of the poem, the former sung by women, the latter by men.⁴⁵ The musical renderings of dastan poems in the muqam differ in many points from that of a dastanchi: in melody, rhythm, the use of accompanying instruments, and also in their theatricality. While the dastanchi sings alone, in a muqam performance there are a number of musicians and singers. In 2005 “The Uyghur Muqam of Xinjiang” was declared a “Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” by the UNESCO. As far as such measures can strengthen local traditions, there is a chance that with the muqam the songs from Uyghur love dastans will also survive.⁴⁶

⁴¹ On the Uyghur “Twelve muqam” see Rachel Harris, *The Making of a Musical Canon in Chinese Central Asia: The Uyghur Twelve Muqam* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); Nathan Light, *Intimate Heritage: Creating Uyghur Muqam Song in Xinjiang* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2008); Rachel Harris, “The Uyghur Muqam,” in Levin et al., eds., *The Music of Central Asia*, pp. 344–53.

⁴² Abdushukur Muhämmät Imin, *Uyghur xälq kilassik muzikiy «On ikki muqqam» häqqidä* (On the Uyghur classical folk music “Twelve muqam”; Beijing: Millätlär nāshriyati, 1980), pp. 176–77.

⁴³ *Uyghur On ikki muqami. 1 Rak* (The Uyghur Twelve muqam. 1. Rak), eds. Shinjang Uyghur Aptonom Rayonluq On Ikki Muqam tātqiqat ilmiy jām’iyiti, Shinjang Uyghur Aptonom Rayonluq Uyghur klassik ädäbiyat tātqiqat jām’iyiti (Ürümchi: Shinjang Qamus nāshriyati, 1997), pp. 41–42 (text section), 71–77 (music section). On the editorial method, see pp. 30–32 of Tomur Dawamat’s introduction.

⁴⁴ Ömer, *Uyghur xälq dastanliridin tallanma*, pp. 195–96.

⁴⁵ *Junggo Uyghur On Ikki Muqami Ilmiy muhakimä yigini xatirisi* (A souvenir of the conference on the China-Uyghur Twelve muqam), edited by the Ministry of Culture, The People’s Republic of China, and The People’s Government of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, China (2002), VCD 1.

⁴⁶ See Harris, *Making of a Musical Canon*, pp. 109–36.

THE WORLD OF THE NOMAD: KAZAKH ORAL EPICS

The epics of the Kazakhs, especially their heroic epics, reflect a tribal society, in which for centuries pastoral nomadism was the predominant way of life. The protagonists are generally clearly placed with regard to their clan and tribal affiliations, and the scene of action is set in the nomads' encampment and on the wide steppes and grasslands over which they roam during their migrations for pasture and on their raids for booty. Strife and warlike expeditions are in the foreground, in which the prowess of the Kazakh heroes—and of their horses, the nomad's most faithful companions—is extolled. In the course of time, the warriors of the steppe became pastoralists and were progressively settled. The forced collectivization of the Kazakhs in the Soviet Union in the early 1930s led to a massive exodus to China. Today seasonal pastoral nomadism is marginalized, but not yet extinct.⁴⁷ The epic heritage of the Kazakhs, however, does not reflect the present-day situation; it harks back to earlier times and has been preserved, thanks to the importance that a predominantly nomadic society has placed on tribal lore and the deeds of its tribal heroes.

Despite some regional differences in customs, traditions, and language, the folklore of the Kazakhs both in Kazakhstan and in Xinjiang is remarkably homogeneous. The various folklore genres found among the Kazakhs outside China are also found in Xinjiang. Songs, folktales, epics and other forms of oral verbal art are diffused in the entire Kazakh-speaking area. The most esteemed genre is the epic. The importance accorded to the oral epic in Kazakh culture is manifested by the recent scholarly edition of the Kazakh epic heritage in one hundred volumes, a series entitled *Babalar sözi*, "the words of the forefathers."⁴⁸

In volumes 23–32 of this series, epics collected and published in Xinjiang are reprinted. In Xinjiang, most of these texts first appeared in literary journals, most notably the journals *Shalghin* ("Grasslands") and *Mura* ("Heritage"). Later they were published in a series of books, beginning in 1982 and entitled *Qazaq qiyssalari*.⁴⁹ The word *qiyssa* (also spelled *qiyssa* and *xiyssa*) comes from Arabic *qisṣa*, "tale." It is often found in the titles of dastans or epics in printed editions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and is therefore often used by scholars for narratives, especially romances, with a written source. The epics and romances collected in the series *Qazaq qiyssalari*, however, represent a motley group of narrative genres and are by no means primarily examples of written transmission.

In the reedition of the Xinjiang Kazakhs' epic heritage in *Babalar sözi*, the texts are divided into four subgenres, *Xiykayaliq dastandar* ("novellistic romances," volumes 23–24 and 30–31), *Ghashiqtiq dastandar* ("love romances," volumes

⁴⁷ See Linda Benson and Ingvar Svanberg, *China's Last Nomads: The History and Culture of China's Kazaks* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1998).

⁴⁸ *Babalar sözi* (The words of the forefathers), ed. S. Qasqabasov et al., 100 vols. (Astana, Kazakhstan: Foliant, 2004–2014). Strictly speaking only sixty-six volumes are devoted to epic and romance. For a survey of Kazakh oral and written literature (up to the middle of the twentieth century) in English, see Thomas G. Winner, *The Oral Art and Literature of the Kazakhs of Russian Central Asia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1958). See also Huang Zhongxiang 黄中祥 *Hasake yingxiong shishi yu caoyuan wenhua* 哈萨克英雄史诗与草原文化 (Kazakh epics and grassland culture; Beijing: Central Compilation and Translation Press, 2007).

⁴⁹ There are some earlier book publications from the 1960s before the Cultural Revolution.

25–26), *Tariyxiy jirlar* (“historical epics;” volumes 27–29), and *Shejirelik dastandar* (“genealogical romances;” volume 32). As in Uyghur, the genre term *dastan* generally denotes a romance-like narrative. In Kazakh tradition, however, the dastans are almost always in verse; the mixture of verse and prose is not as widespread as in Uyghur. The poems of the first subgenre are called *xiykayaliq dastandar*, translatable as “novellistic dastans.” *Xiykayaliq* is derived from *xiykaya*, an Arabic loan-word, which in Arabic (*ḥikāya*) means “tale;” this is the common term for the popular romance in Turkish (spelled *hikāye*). The verse narratives gathered under this genre term are novella-like tales, some quite short. The “xiykayliq dastan” *Altın balaq aqsungqar* (The golden-legged white falcon), for instance, comprises only 248 lines.⁵⁰ It is called an *angiz*, a legend of former times. It tells the story of a mighty khan by the name of Sultanmaxmut, who sees a golden-legged white falcon in a dream and is filled with longing for the bird. His vizier Sabir is sent out to find the falcon. After a six-year search he gets to where once a year the falcon descends from the sky. The first and second year the falcon is advised by a goshawk to leave the bait of a sparrow untouched; the third year a kite advises him to take the sparrow. This the falcon does and is caught in the vizier’s net. When the vizier brings back the bird, the khan is overjoyed. His second vizier, Sam, urges the khan to use the falcon for hawking. This the khan foolishly does, risking the loss of his prize bird. After a while the falcon does indeed fly away; he only comes back to give the khan three pieces of advice: Value the things you have got! Beware of the counsel of fools! Do not grieve about what you have lost!

Some of the love dastans of the Xinjiang Kazakhs are shared with those of the wider Kazakh community, such as *Qozi Körpesh and Bayan Suluw* and *Qiz Jibek*, two of the best-known Kazakh love romances.⁵¹ *Qozi Körpesh and Bayan Suluw* is the story of two lovers who were promised to each other at birth but later forbidden to marry. The two lovers are united in the end, but find an early death. The dastan is transmitted in many versions and has also been adapted for the theater. *Qiz Jibek*, “The Silk Girl,” is the story of the unhappy love of Qiz Jibek and Tölegen, who is killed on his way to take his bride home. The story ends, however, happily with Qiz Jibek’s marriage to Tölegen’s younger brother San-sizbay, who had saved her from a forced wedding to a Kalmuck khan. Like *Qozi Körpesh*, *Qiz Jibek* has been rewritten for the stage and has enjoyed great popularity as an opera. One of the versions of *Qiz Jibek* was written down from the Xinjiang Kazakh singer (*aqin*) Müslimbek Sarqitbay-uli (born in 1946).⁵² From this singer I was able to record a heroic narrative song, *Tawke batir*, in Ili (Yining) and also some songs in a Kazakh encampment on Lake Sayram in 1989.⁵³ In volume 25 of *Babalar sözi* love dastans specific to the repertoire of the Kazakh singers of Xinjiang are collected. An example is a short dastan, entitled *Olja Qiz*, “The Booty Girl.” The poem

⁵⁰ Edited in Qasqabasov et al., *Babalar sözi*, vol. 23 (2005), pp. 128–35; the tale was first published in *Shalghin* 1980.3: 1–5; as narrator Aday Aqtaylaq uli and as collector Asqar Asghat uli are mentioned.

⁵¹ Both epics are edited with Russian translation and commentary in the series “Epics of the Peoples of Eurasia”: *Kozy-Korpesh i Bayan-sulu. Kyz-Zhibek. Kazakhskiy romanicheskii èpos* (*Qozi Körpesh and Bayan Suluw. Qiz Zhibek. Kazakh love epics*), ed. S. S. Kirabaev, E. A. Potseluevskiy (Moscow: Vostochnaya Literatura RAN, 2003).

⁵² Published in *Mura* 1982.1: 37–75.

⁵³ See Reichl, *Singing the Past*, pp. 75–86, 181–88.

begins with the adventures of a Kalmuck girl, who was taken captive by the Kazakhs and then adopted by the khan, who had no children of his own. She was called Olja Qiz, “Booty Girl,” and given into the care of an old widow. She is brought up together with a boy the khan had also adopted, by the name of Sawiq (“Joy”). The two young people fall in love and Olja becomes pregnant. They have to flee from the khan’s wrath, but are caught. When they are about to be executed, a man appears and asks the khan to hand the culprits over to him so that their sinful bones would not soil the earth. The khan orders them to be driven into the desert on camels. In this way they are saved. Despite its brevity (a mere 456 lines), this narrative poem skillfully varies the conventional motifs of the love romance. It is introduced as an *änggime*, a tale from the beginning of the fourteenth century, and celebrates love across ethnic borders. There is also a realistic touch in this tale with the girl’s pregnancy. It ends somewhat wistfully with the question: “And this man [the young people’s savior], what kind of man was he? Is this true or is it a lie?” (*Äligi adam qanday adam? Shün ba, jalghan?*).

The heroic epics are collected in the volumes on “historical epics” (*tariyxiy jırlar*) (volumes 27–29). In Kazakh the word *jır* (“song”) rather than *dastan* is used for heroic epics. Looking at Kazakh heroic epics from the point of view of the chronological period they purport to portray, three groups can be distinguished. There are epics that specify tribal affiliations and suggest a historical background to the action, but whose protagonists cannot be identified with known historical persons. One of this group is the epic of *Alpamış* (*Alpamish*), with versions in Kazakh, Uzbek, Karakalpak, Altaian, Tatar, and Bashkir. Various datings and origins of this epic have been proposed, none of them conclusive. In a second group of epics the action is placed in the time of the Golden Horde and in particular of the Noghay Horde (fourteenth to fifteenth centuries). Perhaps the widest diffused epic of this group is *Edige*, an epic whose protagonists, Edige, Tokhtamysh, and Timur, are historical persons of around 1400. This epic is shared by the Kazakhs with the Karakalpaks, the Bashkirs, the Noghays, and others.⁵⁴ Finally, a third group of heroic epics (and also shorter heroic songs) take place in the time of the Kazakh khans, extending from the late fifteenth to the end of the eighteenth centuries. These epics are on the whole restricted to the Kazakh tradition. Representatives of this group are the epic of *Jänibek*, a Kazakh sultan who together with Kerey founded the Kazakh khandom in the 1460s, epics about military leaders of the eighteenth century such as *Bögenbay batır* or *Oljabay batır*, and heroic songs about *Abılay*, the great Kazakh khan of the eighteenth century (1711–1781). It is the third group of epics that predominates in the repertoire of Kazakh singers in Xinjiang, and it is this group that is generally designated as “historical epics.”

One of the epics of this group is *Bögenbay batır*. In volume 29 of *Babarlar sözi* this epic is reedited from the version of the Xinjiang Kazakh singer Sheriyazdan Sultanbay-uli (1933–2005), a version first published in the journal *Shalghın*.⁵⁵ This epic

⁵⁴ For a Karakalpak version, close to the Kazakh epic tradition, see Karl Reichl, ed. and trans., *Edige: A Karakalpak Oral Epic as Performed by Jumabay Bazarov* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2007).

⁵⁵ Qasqabasov et al., *Babalar sözi*, vol. 29 (2006), pp. 106–240; *Shalghın* 1980.4: 1–33 and 1981.1: 48–78. A version of the epic was edited in 1935 and reprinted in volume 58 of *Babalar sözi* (2008). It was written down from the Kazakh singer Qusayın Müsäpir-uli in eastern Kazakhstan.

has a fairly involved plot. Sheriyazdan's version of the epic comprises over 4000 lines. In 1989 I was able to record the third and last part of the epic from him. The text he sang is remarkably close to the edited text. Before saying more about the singer, I will give some information about the historical background of the epic and a very sketchy summary of its contents.

Bögenbay batır, "Hero Bögenbay," lived from 1690–1775, during the reign of Khan Abilay. As a young man he was chosen as a military leader of the three Kazakh hordes and he spent his life fighting against the Mongolian Dzungars, together with Oljabay, Qabanbay, and other *batırs*. In the epic, Bögenbay is a mighty military leader who has no children of his own, only two nephews, Sarıbay and Qasqabay. There is internal strife in the Great Horde, which is aggravated when Qasqabay, persuaded by his bride Zeynep, leaves Bögenbay's tribe together with 5000 families. His brother Sarıbay stays with Bögenbay. Zeynep is the daughter of Quljabek, one of two noblemen opposed to Bögenbay. The self-willed Zeynep insults Bögenbay on account of his having no children, whereupon Sarıbay decides to take vengeance. He kills his own brother and takes Zeynep captive. Zeynep's life is, however, saved when she is allowed the privilege captive girls have, namely to choose a husband. She chooses Sarıbay and Bögenbay in his magnanimity is ready to forgive her.

In the second part of the epic the action revolves around a raid of Bögenbay's followers, which leads to the marriage of one of Bögenbay's men and the beautiful Khanshayım. In the third part of the epic (ll. 3182–4295) the Kalmuck khan Qaranay is in the foreground. Qaranay, whose father lost his life in a war with Bögenbay, decides to take vengeance and attacks the Kazakhs with an army of 19,000 men. In the ensuing battle, the Kazakhs suffer heavy losses, but Beksultan, one of Bögenbay's warriors, manages to kill Qaranay and to put the Kalmucks to flight.

The three parts of the epic are basically three separate stories, with some overlap of the protagonists on Bögenbay's side. Bögenbay himself is described as *qart*, "old," and does not take part in the action. Two strong women are in the center of the first two parts, self-willed and unyielding Zeynep and daring Khanshayım, who spurns all advances by her suitors and goes out herself to find the husband she wants. The first part is dominated by internal strife, quarrels about leadership in the Kazakh hordes, and the tragedy of tribal splits. The third part takes as its subject the Kalmuck wars, and the bloodshed caused by both sides in this prolonged series of aggressions, raids, and retaliations. This epic has like others of this subgenre a number of realistic traits.⁵⁶

Sheriyazdan Sultanbay-uli was an experienced singer/narrator, who contributed a number of epics to the Xinjiang Kazakh series *Qazaq qıysalari*.⁵⁷ When I interviewed him in 1989, he said that he knows about fifteen verse narratives, both heroic (historical) epics and romances. He sang without the accompaniment of the *dombıra* (a plucked lute-type instrument). In former times he did accompany himself on the *dombıra*, but he felt that singing solo helped to make the text more understandable. Sheriyazdan began early to learn oral epics. In the late 1940s he

⁵⁶ See on this: Z. Seytzhonov, "Kazakhskiy real'no-istoricheskij èpos" (The Kazakh realistic-historical epic), *Sovetskaya Tyurkologiya* 1990.5: 33–39.

⁵⁷ See Reichl, *Turkic Oral Epic Poetry*, pp. 81, 107–108, 266.

lived with a teacher who had a keen interest in Kazakh oral epics and gave the boy a manuscript of *Bögenbay*. Sheriyazdan learned the epic, somewhat untraditionally, from this manuscript and in 1951 he performed the whole epic to an audience of two hundred people. The performance lasted for about eight hours, with intervals for drinking tea. According to him, he was the only Kazakh from the Altay region in Xinjiang who knew the epic. In 1962, when scholars were sent out by the government to collect oral epic poetry, they were referred to him as a well-known singer. Customarily epics are sung during the night, and Sheriyazdan has sung epic poetry through many a night. By 1989, his voice had deteriorated. He felt that no one was interested in his performances any more, at least not in Ürümqi. He earned his living as the manager of a fruit company. Sheriyazdan's biography is no doubt typical of Kazakh singers; unfortunately, editions of Kazakh epics from Xinjiang give little information on the singers' life, especially their training, repertoire, and mode of performance.⁵⁸

Finally, in volume 32, *Shejirelik dastandar* ("genealogical dastans"), fifteen texts are published, which treat of the genealogical origin of various Kazakh tribes and sub-groups. In genealogical texts, often in poetic form, traditional knowledge about the history of clan and tribe is preserved. These genealogies are an important element of the cultural memory of a tribal (or originally tribal) society like that of the Kazakhs. In a culture that has for centuries been oral, both the genre of genealogy and of the heroic epic play a key role in preserving not only the "words of the forefathers" but also their deeds. Among the Turkic peoples it is particularly the nomadic ethnic groups that have preserved their oral heritage up to the present time. While love romances are widely current, heroic epics take pride of place in Kazakh tradition, especially heroic epics on Kazakh military leaders of the eighteenth century. The art of the oral epic has been flourishing among the Kazakhs of Xinjiang still at a time when the Kazakh oral epic has been moribund or even dead in other Kazakh-speaking areas. This is no doubt also due to the comparative isolation of "China's last nomads" until the early 1980s. As with the Uyghur tradition of oral epic poetry, however, the heyday of the Kazakh singer of tales lies almost certainly in the past. Epics survive mostly in songs from the romances (as in the Twelve Muqams) and in brief excerpts that are often performed on stage rather than in the traditional context of a gathering of people.

THE KYRGYZ AND THEIR EPIC MANAS

Although the smallest Turkic-speaking ethnic group in Xinjiang to be discussed here, the Kyrgyz have the most vigorous oral epic tradition. Kyrgyz oral epics are performed by two types of singer-narrators, the *aqın* ("singer; poet") and the *manaschi* (*Manas*-narrator). The *aqın* accompanies himself or herself (most singers are men) on a plucked instrument, generally the three-stringed *qomuz*, while the *manaschi* sings the epic without musical accompaniment. This distinction into two types of

⁵⁸ The study by Huang Zhongxiang is not specifically concerned with Kazakh singers from Xinjiang. Huang Zhongxiang 黄中祥, *Chuancheng fangshi yu yanchang chuantong: Hasakezu minjian yanchang yiren diaocha yanjiu* 传承方式与演唱传统。哈萨克族民间演唱艺人调查研究 (Transmission patterns and performance tradition: a study of the Kazakh folk singer; Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2009).

singers and performance modes corresponds to the epic subgenres that are performed. In Kyrgyz the epic repertoire is divided into the epic of *Manas* on the one hand and all the other epics on the other, which are collectively referred to as *kenje epos*, “the little epic(s).” These so-called little epics can be sizeable, comprising 10,000 and more lines, but they are nevertheless “little” in comparison to *Manas*, a cycle of epics that in some versions reaches several hundred thousand lines. The *kenje epos* is composed of a generically motley group; we find heroic epics, often treating the struggles of the Kyrgyz against the Kalmucks, as well as mythological and legendary epics.⁵⁹

While many of these epics have been recorded from Kyrgyz singers in Xinjiang, research has focused on the performers of *Manas*, especially on the great *manaschi* Jüsüp Mamay (1918–2014). From this singer not only the *Manas* cycle has been recorded, but also various representatives of the *kenje epos*, among them *Qurmanbek* and *Er Töshtük*.⁶⁰ Jüsüp Mamay’s version of *Manas* is exceptional in that he has extended the cycle to eight generations, while the “canonical” form of the cycle comprises only three generations, *Manas*, his son *Semetey*, and *Semetey*’s son *Seytek* (*Manas*, *Semetey*, *Seytek*). Jüsüp Mamay was also the last *manaschi* who was able to recite the cycle in its entirety. When I first met him in Ürümqi in 1985, he told me how he acquired his repertoire and learned to perform the epic.⁶¹ Crucial for Mamay’s interest in Kyrgyz epics and his mastery of them was the influence of his elder brother Balbay (1892–1937). Balbay was a keen collector of the epic *Manas*, who wrote down versions he heard and collected manuscripts of versions by various epic singers. He passed his collection on to Jüsüp Mamay, whom he had taught to perform the epic. When Mamay was given his brother’s collection, he was already able to read and write. A special trait of Balbay’s manuscripts was the extension of the customary three generations of the epic cycle to eight, the last five based on the version of the singer İbrayım Aquzbek (1882–1959). While much of İbrayım’s extension was in prose, Mamay’s is entirely in verse. When I asked him whether he would be able to make an epic out of a story I would tell him, he

⁵⁹ The literature on Kyrgyz oral epics is mostly in Kyrgyz and Russian; a detailed survey of the *kenje epos* and *Manas* is given in volumes 2 and 3 of the multi-volume history of Kyrgyz literature: *Qırghız adabiyatının tarixi. II “Manas” jana manschılar* (A history of Kyrgyz literature. II *Manas* and *manaschis*) and *III Kenje epostor jana poemalar* (III *Kenje epos* and *verse narratives*), ed. A. Aqmataliev et al. (Bishkek: Manastanu, 2002). For a short introduction to *Manas* in English, see Elmira Köchümkulova, “The Kyrgyz Epic *Manas*,” in Levin et al., eds., *The Music of Central Asia*, pp. 52–68. The *Manas* epic collected by Radloff has been reedited and translated into English: *The Manas of Wilhelm Radloff*, reedited, newly translated, and with a commentary by Arthur T. Hatto (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1990).

⁶⁰ For *Er Töshtük* a French translation exists (combining two versions): *Aventures merveilleuses sous-terre et ailleurs de Er-Töshtük, le géant des steppes. Épopée du cycle de Manas*, trans. Pertev Boratav (Paris: Gallimard, 1965). For *Qurmanbek* there is only a Russian translation: *Kurmanbek. Geroicheskaya poema* (Qurmanbek. A heroic verse narrative), trans. A. Tarkovskiy (Frunze: Kirghizskoe gosudarstvennoe uchebno-pedagogicheskoe izdatel’stvo, 1961).

⁶¹ See Reichl, *Turkic Oral Epic Poetry*, pp. 85–86. See also Lang Ying, “The Bard Jusup Mamay,” *Oral Tradition* 16.2 (2001): 222–39; Toqtobübi İsaq qızı and Adil Jumaturdu uulu, *Zalqar Manaschi Jüsüp Mamay* (The great *manaschi* Jüsüp Mamay; Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2007; republished in Bishkek: Print Ekspres, 2014). For Mamay’s autobiography, see “Men ‘Manas’i qanday aytıp qaldım?” (How did I become a *manaschi*?), in “*Manas*” *eposu jöniündö. Ilmiy iliktöölör jana maqalalar* (About the epic *Manas*. Studies and articles), ed. Kengesh Qırbashev (Bishkek: Sham basması, 1994), pp. 5–12.

answered: “Yes, I can turn prose into verse!” This is, of course, what he did with İbrayim’s text. In 1985 he also told me that he was able to sing for twenty-four hours if necessary, but would not do so any more on account of his voice. In 1961 he sang continuously for several months. That was the time when scholars began to write down his version of *Manas*. Then came the Cultural Revolution and the recording of his poetry had to wait until a new start could be made in 1978.

Jüsüp Mamay’s *Manas* with its over 220,000 verse lines is too huge an epic to be discussed here. Even the first part only, *Manas* proper, comprising ca. 55,000 lines, is barely manageable.⁶² Mamay’s version, at least as far as the first three parts of the cycle are concerned, is basically similar to that of other manaschīs from Kyrgyzstan. Also his diction and style are traditional. There are, however, also a number of idiosyncrasies. Some of the episodes are only found in his version, others have a different place in the sequence of events, some are differently motivated, and some episodes are elaborated while others are shortened or missing altogether. Jüsüp Mamay is not the only manaschī of the Kyrgyz in Xinjiang. According to Adil Jumaturdu the greatest number of *Manas*-singers is found in the county of Akchi (Aqchiy) in the Kizilsu (Qizilsuu) Kyrgyz Autonomous Prefecture, where in the course of the twentieth century forty-eight manaschīs have performed the epic.⁶³ All in all about eighty versions of the epic are preserved in the archives of the Institute of Ethnic Literature of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Xinjiang Folklore Society.⁶⁴

During my research stay in 1989 I had the possibility to record a complete version of the Kyrgyz heroic epic *Qurmanbek* from the singer Sart-aqun Qadīr (1942–2014). The events of this epic take place in the period of the wars between the Kalmyks and the Kyrgyz (and Kazakhs). Qurmanbek, the hero of the epic, is the son of the khan of the Kyrgyz-Kipchak, who fights against the Kalmyk khan Dölön and his warriors. Due to his father’s lack of support, Qurmanbek has to ride against the enemy on a second-rate horse and tragically meets his death on the battlefield. When I recorded this epic from Sart-aqun a second time in 2011, he presented some of his pupils, who performed extracts from the epic of *Manas*. Presenting his pupils to me was clearly a demonstration of continuing oral epic tradition among the Kyrgyz into the twenty-first century.⁶⁵ How long the Kyrgyz oral epic tradition—together with that of the Uyghurs and the Kazakhs—will survive in an age of globalization and with the “New Silk Road” (a branch of China’s ambitious “One Belt, One Road” project) running through Xinjiang, is a question difficult to answer. Just as the world of the South Slavic oral epic, which A. B. Lord and other scholars before him have described so vividly, has disappeared, so have many of the various

⁶² Two volumes of my translation of Mamay’s *Manas* into English have appeared; a third is in print; see *Manas. In the Version of Jüsüp Mamay*, trans. Karl Reichl, vols. 1 and 2 (Xinjiang “Manas” Research Centre Publications 4, “Manas” translations 3; Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 2014–2015).

⁶³ Adil Zhumaturdu [Adili Zhumatu’erdi 阿地里 居玛吐尔地], *Manasi shishi geshou yanjiu* 玛纳斯史诗歌手研究 (A study on the singers of the *Manas* epic; Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2006), pp. 203–16.

⁶⁴ See Adil Jumaturdu, “A Comparative Study of Performers of the *Manas* Epic,” *Journal of American Folklore* 129.513 (2016): 288–96.

⁶⁵ See also Karl Reichl, “Oral Epics into the Twenty-First Century: The Case of the Kyrgyz Epic *Manas*,” *Journal of American Folklore* 129.513 (2016): 327–44.

Central Asian epic traditions dwindled away and become a thing of the past. Initiatives like those sponsored by UNESCO try to inject a new vitality into local oral traditions.⁶⁶ Their success, however, depends on more than encouragement. The art of the epic singer must have an interested and appreciative audience and a favorable social and political environment. Changes, of course, occur continually; whether they are for the better or worse, generally only time can tell. Sart-aqun, when I first recorded him in 1989, was wearing a green army-type jacket and a green cloth cap as was still usual at the time. In 2011 he was wearing national clothes, a Kyrgyz *chapan* (coat) and a white felt hat. But he meanwhile possessed a mobile phone, which had as its ringtone the opening interjection *Ey!* of the *Manas* epic, sung melodiously and fortissimo. The sound of *Manas* continues; hopefully not only as a ringtone.

A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

For the transliteration of the Cyrillic and Arabic scripts used for the Turkic languages a modified Turkological Latin alphabet is used. The vowels a, e, i, u, o are pronounced as in Italian; ä is an open e [ɛ], ö is a rounded o as in French *pneu*, ü a rounded u as in French *mur*, and ĭ is an i pronounced further back with unrounded lips (as Russian ы or the sound written ı in Turkish). In Uzbek words, ā symbolizes a long velar a [ɔ:], as in Persian. The consonants are pronounced as in English (ch as in church, sh as in ship, etc.), with the exception of q, a velar k-sound, and gh, a velar fricative (somewhat similar to the Parisian pronunciation of r). For Russian, the system of the US Board on Geographic Names is used; Arabic, Persian and Chaghatay words are transliterated according to the transliteration system of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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⁶⁶ In 2009 the Xinjiang-Kyrgyz *Manas* was inscribed in UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, which provoked protests in Kyrgyzstan. On the problems of the revitalization of the Yakut oral epic with UNESCO support, a comparable case, see Robin P. Harris, *Storytelling in Siberia: The Olonkho Epic in a Changing World* (Champaign, IL: The University of Illinois Press, 2017), esp. pp. 89–107, 135–55.