

Chinese colonialism in translation:

## TRANSLATION OF UYGHUR NAMES INTO MANDARIN UNDER COMMUNIST CHINA

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*The poet and writer Aziz Isa was born in East Turkistan (aka: Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China). He spent his adulthood in Shahyar county which is located close to the Tarim River on the northern edge of the world's second largest desert, the Taklamakan Desert. Since the Uyghurs' country was taken over by Communist China in 1949, the Uyghurs have waged a long campaign to re-establish their independence but it has resulted in many Uyghur intellectuals being forced to leave their country as refugees. Aziz Isa has been living in London since 2001.*



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### Chinese colonialism in translation

In this paper I focus on the historical and contemporary context and conception of Uyghur names and places in translation under the Manchu Qing dynasty, Chinese Nationalists and Chinese communist rulers of the region in the last two centuries. More recently this has combined with the current so called "Bilingual education" policies that have unofficially abandoned Uyghur language instruction in Uyghur education to produce a real threat to Uyghur identity and sense of ownership over this territory.

It is useful to remind ourselves that similar procedures and methods were applied by the British and Russian empires during their vast colonial expansion over the last three centuries, and it is now aggressively copied and implemented by China in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

I ask whether the Chinese state can ultimately achieve its Sinification of Uyghur geographical place names, or whether Uyghurs will be able to preserve the Uyghur language names that currently co-exist with the Chinese names in the Uyghur region.

With the lack of Uyghur language representation in the Chinese official press and in international media, will there be any future change in the current understanding, usage and representation of Uyghur language names and Mandarin names in the Uyghur region. It is likely that the situation will become still more problematic after China's recent more aggressive implementation of Chinese language usage among the Uyghur people.

If we look at history we can see that western colonial powers were able to obtain the wealth by depending on their warship and cannons. In return they introduced their own culture and languages to the the local inhabitants and even renamed the indigenous peoples names and their towns. This all ultimately helped to achieve a full colonization of the subject countries.

We can get many useful examples of this from the history of the British and Russian empires' colonial ambitions, and it is useful to compare this to the later Manchu-Qing empire, the early 20th century Chinese nationalists, and new Chinese Communist Party rule after 1949.

When British explorers 'discovered' new territories, rather than seeking to learn what the natives called these places, they named them after the ruling monarch "Victoria" or after existing British towns: "London" (Canada), New York (America).

History demonstrates that language and translation have always been a vital tool for sustaining a colonised territory. After the decline of the British Empire at the beginning of last century and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990s, many newly independent countries changed their geographical names back to reflect the historical roots of the owners.

In New Zealand, many of the early Māori names were replaced by Europeans during the late 18th and early 19th century. Today, many names have alternative or dual English and Maori names.<sup>1</sup>

Since declaring its independence from the United Kingdom in 1947 after centuries of colonial rule, a number of India's biggest cities and states have undergone place name changes.

Mumbai was formerly known as Bombay, which has its origins in the 1600s with the Portuguese. During their colonization of the area, they began calling it Bombaim -

Portuguese for "Good Bay." In 1661 though, this Portuguese colony was given to King Charles II of England, and the British called it Bombay. This name stuck until 1996 when the Indian government changed it to Mumbai, which derives from the Hindu goddess Mumbadevi.<sup>2</sup>

The history of St Petersburg reflects political twists in Russia's past. It was founded in 1703 on the order of Peter the Great, who named it after his patron saint, Peter.

But as the European powers went to war in 1914, the name was changed to Petrograd to sound less German. Ten years later, the city was renamed Leningrad in honour of the deceased leader of the Russian revolution. The city's inhabitants voted to revert to the name St Petersburg in a referendum in 1991.<sup>3</sup>

Under Soviet rule, in 1926 the capital city of Kyrgyzstan was renamed *Frunze* (Фрунзе), after the Bolshevik military leader Mikhail Frunze. In 1991, the Kyrgyz parliament restored the city's historical name to Bishkek.<sup>4</sup>

## Place names in the Uyghur region

Chinese histories of the Uyghur region term it the 'Western Regions' (Xiyu=西域), a term which clearly makes sense only when viewed from China. As is well documented, the name 'Xinjiang' (新疆=New Dominion) was imposed by the Manchus during the Qing period, a name which clearly reflects the colonial perspective. Meanwhile, Central Asians (both Soviet and post-Soviet) term the region 'East Turkestan', viewed from the perspective of nineteenth century Russian or West Turkestan. Uyghurs in exile remain divided in their preferences between the pan-Turkic 'East Turkestan' and the less inclusive 'Uyghuristan'. Both these names are banned in China.<sup>5</sup>

Place names in this region represent a symbolic appropriation of space. Places, and ownership over them, are politically contested through the way they are named. Chinese names are used in the public domain – on TV, on maps, etc - to denote places which Uyghurs and most other minorities refer to using traditional Turkic designations. Thus, the Uyghurs name one of their eastern oasis towns: Qumul, but officially – and in the increasingly important tourist industry - the town is called Hami (哈密), known in China as the home of the famously sweet Qumul melons (Hami melons). Likewise, the town known by Uyghurs as Ghulja is marked on the maps as Yining (伊宁). Ghulja was the capital city of the second East Turkestan Republic from 1945 till 1949. In Chinese histories, Yining housed the 'three areas revolution' (sanqu geming=三区革命). In the south of the region, the Uyghur town of Yarkand – an important centre historically for Uyghur culture - is called in Chinese Shache (莎车). Chochek is called in Chinese Tacheng (塔城). Probably these divergent names developed through the process of Han (汉) immigration into the region under the

Qing dynasty, when new Chinese towns were established alongside the existing Uyghur towns, with their own infrastructure, culture, and names.

The regional capital was established under the Qing dynasty in 1763 as Dihua (迪化), meaning 'enlightenment' - in a typically colonialist move, following the not so-enlightened extermination of the ruling Dzungar Mongols. In 1955, the Chinese Communists, in a gesture to localism, renamed it Urumchi according to how Uyghurs used to call. Many believe the name Urumchi in Mongolian language means 'beautiful pastures' and it is commonly known in the Chinese transliteration Wūlǔmùqí (乌鲁木齐).

Uyghurs are well used to operating this dual level of naming, easily translating official place names in news reports into local parlance. The situation is equivalent to the way that Uyghurs operate two separate times: local time (新疆时间) and Beijing time (北京时间). For Chinese in the region, however, it is unlikely that they are even aware of the local names, just as they operate consistently on one time system: Beijing time. For Uyghurs, the use of dual names and times may be understood as acts of resistance.

When the region's history and culture are represented to the outside world, the use of names also has directly political meaning.

The Tian Shan (天山), literally "heavenly mountains"; Mongolian: Tenger ul; Uyghur: *Tengri Tagh*, is a large system of mountain ranges which crosses the Uyghur region and stretches into Kyrgyzstan. This Chinese translation has a long written history, first appearing in Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian*. Today, the mountains appear on all international maps as Tian Shan, and even in the Turkic speaking Central Asian republics they are referred to by the Chinese name. There is even a brand of Kazakh beer called Tien Shan. Only the Uyghurs seem to maintain the Turkic language Tengri Tagh, and regard this act of naming as a key part of their ownership of the territory.

In May 2004 the British Library in London put on a major exhibition, 'The Silk Road'. The exhibition included many loans from the Chinese government, among them a recreation of a Dunhuang cave complete with Buddhist frescos. The term 'Uighur' [Uyghur] appeared only once, in reference to a document written in the Old Uyghur script. It included a letter on the joys of drinking wine from the kingdom of Gaochang, written in Chinese characters. The notes explained: 'By the eighth century there was a Chinese winemaking industry using mare's teats grapes from Gaochang'.

In 2005 another major exhibition, 'The Turks', was held in the Royal Academy in London. This exhibition included many loans from the Turkish government. Here the Uyghurs featured more prominently as examples of Old Turkic culture, the forerunners of artistic forms which developed via the Seljuks and Timurid Samarkand towards the glories of Ottoman Turkey. The exhibition included a ninth century fresco from the capital of the Uyghur kingdom of Khocho (Idiqut). It would have taken an

observant visitor to both exhibitions to realize that Gaochang is in fact the Chinese name for Idiqut (Karakhoja), and that the kingdom in question was one and the same.<sup>6</sup>

## Chinese language policy in Uyghur region

Arienne Dwyer argues that the PRC's original language policy in the Uyghur region, was integrationist but not assimilative, and generally well received by both party officials and by the national minorities themselves. Such a pluralistic policy, which arguably supported both national stability and local ethnic groups, stood out positively in comparison with Soviet policies of the time. Yet beginning in the mid-1980s, Beijing began to shift from cultural accommodation towards an overt policy of assimilation.<sup>7</sup>

Language policy is a central tool in national consolidation and permeates all aspects of society. Language policy affects the domains, status, and use of language varieties and the rights of their speakers. It shapes the media, the education system, and provides a rallying point for or against ethnic identity.

Article 53 of the September 1949 Common Program (Interim Constitution), stated that national minorities should have "*freedom to develop their dialects and languages, and to preserve or reform their traditions, customs, and religious beliefs.*"

Beginning in the late 1950s, the XUAR Language and Script Committee made efforts to modernize the Uyghur language. The committee was given the task to standardize vocabulary and to introduce terms from Chinese. By 1970, Chinese words were "being introduced in a compulsory manner as a result of the official language policy and... numerous Chinese words in the realm of sociopolitical, scientific-technological, and other terminology are infiltrating the language by dislodging Uigur, Arabic, Persian, and Russian words".<sup>8</sup>

The increase in Chinese loan words into Uyghur that began in the 1960s, was also due to Han Chinese in-migration.

The trend in Xinjiang towards monolingual education in the Han Chinese language began in the 1980s. For years, it has been widely assumed within the region that education in Han Chinese schools, as opposed to Uyghur language schools, gives children greater opportunities in employment. Moreover, Chinese officials have frequently claimed that Uyghur and other minority languages are 'backward', not suited to the needs of development and modernisation in the region. By 2004, government policy called for the integration of Chinese and Uyghur schools, and insisted on Chinese as the medium of study at all levels of education: even Uyghur literature classes taught by Uyghur teachers to Uyghur students were to be taught in Chinese.

## Conclusion

As compulsory Han Chinese language education increases across the region, it seems likely that the memory of local place names will become less. With the loss of local names, claims on the territory, ethnic ties to the land, and sense of identity are also threatened. The official use of Chinese place names in minority areas reinforces the impression that minority languages are being deliberately eradicated.

In the last 20 years, China has poured resources into infrastructural development and natural-resource exploitation in the Uyghur region. At the same time, it has reduced resources for local language support, a move that has created bad feeling among local people. If the Chinese central government wants to win back hearts and minds, it needs to devote resources to supporting local languages.

The argument put forward by Chinese officials - that Uyghur is not suitable for development and progress - has no basis. Dwyer argues that each and every human language is uniquely adapted to a social environment by its speakers. All languages, then, are of equal quality; all languages are up to the task of communication in any number of domains.<sup>9</sup>

With Han Chinese majority dominated politics in China serving the Han peoples' interests, it is very difficult predict the survival of Uyghur language in living usage and the Uyghur towns' names beyond the next few decades if Chinese state keeps implementing its current language assimilation policies. Because of the fast development of media propaganda under the Chinese communist party, indigenous Uyghur names have been almost cleansed from existence in official Chinese media and subsequently in the international media. I suggest that Uyghur intellectuals in exile need to take the lead in demanding Uyghurs' rights to use Uyghur language in education, and to urge the Chinese authorities to change their so called "minority language policies".

<http://www.uyghurpen.org/Chinese-colonialism-Uyghur-name.html>  
<http://www.uyghurpen.org/Chinese-colonialism-Uyghur-name.pdf>  
<http://www.uyghurensemble.co.uk/Chinese-colonialism-Uyghur-name.html>

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New\\_Zealand\\_place\\_names](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Zealand_place_names)

<sup>2</sup> <http://geography.about.com/od/specificplacesofinterest/a/indianames.htm>

<sup>3</sup> City names mark changing times, Becky Branford

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/4579905.stm>

<sup>4</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bishkek>

<sup>5</sup> Bellér-Hann, Ildikó; Cesàro, M. Cristina; Harris, Rachel & Smith-Finley, Joanne (eds.), *Situating the Uyghurs: between Central Asia and China* (Aldershot: Ashgate Press, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Bellér-Hann, Ildikó; Cesàro, M. Cristina; Harris, Rachel & Smith-Finley, Joanne (eds.), *Situating the Uyghurs: between Central Asia and China* (Aldershot: Ashgate Press, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Dwyer, Arienne M. 2005. *The Xinjiang Conflict: Uyghur Identity, Language Policy, and Political Discourse*. Policy Studies 15. Washington, D.C.: East-West CenterWashington.

<http://www.eastwestcenter.org/fileadmin/stored/pdfs/PS015.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Bruchis 1988: 221, cited in Dwyer 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Dwyer, Arienne M. 2005. *The Xinjiang Conflict: Uyghur Identity, Language Policy, and Political Discourse*. Policy Studies 15. Washington, D.C.: East-West CenterWashington.

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