

Families Divided and United in Late-Qing Xinjiang

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Introduction

1877 was a glorious year for the Hunan Army. The fighting force under the command of Zuo Zongtang (1812-1885) completed its campaign to retake Xinjiang, lost in the Muslim uprisings of 1864, from the Khoqandi regime of Ya'qūb Beg (1820-1877). The army settled in to rule. For thirty more years, its officers directed a program to transform the Inner Asian region into their vision of a Chinese provincial society.

For ordinary people who lived in Xinjiang – Uyghur, Hui, and Han alike – 1877 was simultaneously a relief and a shock. Individuals' narratives of the uprisings, reconquest, and reconstruction are recorded mainly in local *yamen* documents, which have been inaccessible for most of the past century. Fortunately, the late-Qing archive of the Turpan prefectural *yamen* was recently published in facsimile, and its ninety-one volumes contains thousands of stories.¹ Complaints and testimonies tell us that, for the people of Turpan, a Muslim-majority city in Eastern Xinjiang, the preceding thirteen years had been very difficult, especially for the Hui. After the Han had fled, conflicts continued between Hui and Uyghurs. At one point, Ya'qūb Beg's forces besieged the Hui of Turpan for six months, starving them out, then marched many of them off to Kashgar as slaves. Later, when the Hunan Army arrived, many others fled. When the army wintered in Turpan, they stretched the local supply of grain, causing food prices to rise sharply. While the army's presence meant an end to the ongoing violence between groups, it ushered in a new kind of turmoil as displaced people struggled to survive.

The Turpan prefectural archive attests to the nature of those struggles and the means that people used to address them. At the same time that economic instability and sudden shifts in the social fabric of the region threatened the livelihood of many residents, the Hunan Army's reconstruction agencies (*shanhou ju* 善後局) began to process displaced people and establish them in new households. Demobilized soldiers were often "assigned" women to be their wives, including Hui and Turki who had no interest in marrying a non-Muslim Han, as well as women who were already married. If their husbands reappeared, the agencies ruled that this original marriage was no longer valid. An agency marriage was a permanent reassignment.

The documents in the "rites section" archive speak to the ways in which Xinjiang society changed on an intimate level in the wake of the uprisings and reconquest. They point to the attitudes of Han soldiers and merchants with regard to sexuality and gendered relationships. Most importantly, perhaps, they provide a rare chance to listen to women themselves, who have been almost invisible in scholarship on Xinjiang history. Despite layers of convoluted representation, editing, and self-censorship, we may get some

¹ *Qingdai Xinjiang dang'an xuanji*, (Guilin: Guangxi Shifan Daxue Chubanshe, 2012).

sense of what life was like for a woman struggling to survive in 1870s Xinjiang and what her range of possible actions might have been.

GX 07.06 “吐魯番廳為回婦韓氏婚變之批文” in *Qingdai Xinjiang dang'an xuanji*, (Guilin: Guangxi Shifan Daxue Chubanshe, 2012), vol. 28, 218.

Original Text

懇呈

具懇恩回民婦韓式，年四十五歲，係本屬人，為懇 恩存案，以杜後患事。

情於光緒三年大兵克復吐城，氏夫馬朝昇彼[被]安逆擄赴南台，氏在吐母子三人，日謀升斗幫工盤養。

於四年春間斗價昂貴，口食難度。氏自行主嫁與漢民李朝榮為妻，將兩個兒女亦帶在李家。

去春氏將女許配姜興順為婚。李朝榮把氏與小兒搬往山北納戶。不幸將至瑪納斯，氏小兒病故。李朝榮見小兒喪命，心情義斷，每日嫌怨，無可奈何，請憑綏萊[來]街約等理處，着氏返吐，到女婿家中安身。

不料本月初四日，氏回夫馬朝昇由南台歸來，在街相認。氏無著落，正在兩難，原配相認，不敢苟，且請本城鄰約理處，且現在女婿家安身，恐離別之後，氏後夫李朝榮聞知，來吐與女婿姜姓另生枝端，眾等不敢定奪，只得呈明，懇祈 青天大老爺作主存案，賞准氏婦與原配，則氏感戴 深恩於生生世世矣。

懇恩：回婦韓氏

批：X 飭該管鄉約查案核奪，此批。

光緒七年六月六日

Translation

A petition.

I, the Hui woman Han *shi*, 45 *sui*, from this jurisdiction, petition to preserve a plaint on file in the *yamen*, so as to prevent trouble in the future.

In Guangxu 3, when the great army retook Turpan, my husband Ma Chaosheng was carried off to the South by the Andijani bandits. I was in Turpan with two children, scraping by, doing odd jobs to keep us fed.

In the spring of Guangxu 4, the price of grain shot up, and it was hard to get ahold of food. I, of my own volition, married a Han man, Li Chaorong, as his wife and brought along two of my children into his household, a boy and a girl.

Last spring, I married my daughter to Jiang Xingshun. Li Chaorong moved me and my little boy north over the mountains to farm. Sadly, when we got to Manas, my little boy got sick and died. After Li Chaorong saw my little boy die, his resentment grew day by day. There was nothing else for it: he asked a local headman in Suilai to mediate. I was ordered back to Turpan to live with my son-in-law.

Suddenly, on the fourth day of this month, my Hui husband Ma Chaosheng returned from the South. We recognized each other on the street. Now I have no solution for this – I am stuck between a rock and a hard place. When my first husband and I recognized each other, we dared not act carelessly. Instead, we asked a local headman to mediate. Right now, I am at my son-in-law's. I am afraid that, now we are separated, my second husband Li Chaorong will hear about this, and he will come to Turpan and start some new trouble with my son-in-law Mr. Jiang. We do not dare make a decision on our own, so we can only beg the just magistrate to step in. If you will permit me to return to my first husband, you will have our gratitude for generations.

Petitioner: the Hui woman Han *shi*

Order from Magistrate Yang [Danian]: Order the village headman to investigate.

Guangxu 7.6.6 [1 July 1881]

Analysis

The life of Han *shi*, a Hui woman from Turpan, reflects the social and economic conditions described above: first her husband was carried off by Ya'qūb Beg's army of local Muslims and "Andijanis." Like so many other separated during the Muslim Uprisings, she gave her husband up for dead, or lost for good. She worked as best she could to keep her family fed, until rising grain prices in 1878, one year after the Hunan Army's arrival, pushed them to the edge of starvation. Han *shi* responded to these worsening conditions by finding a new husband who could maintain her and by marrying off a daughter. That her second husband was Han mattered little – such arrangements were common enough. Like many demobilized soldiers, after arriving in Turpan, he sought out some land to farm in one of the Northern, Chinese-majority towns that the Muslim Uprisings had reduced to ruins and fallow land. Along the way, her last child died, and the couple's relations soured.

When Han *shi* returned to Turpan to stay with her son-in-law, a familiar story played out: her first husband returned. Now Han *shi* now had two husbands. According to her petition, she wanted to clear the air and receive permission from the magistrate to return to her first (Hui) husband.

Like many documents concerning these matters, it is a loner in the archive – it does not form part of a larger case documented at the level of the prefecture. As was normal in cases dealing with the family, the magistrate sent the matter back to a village headman for mediation,² effectively ending the paper trail. Nevertheless, Han *shi*'s case points to a number of questions of agency and representation that are relevant for a critical reading of the Xinjiang archive.

² Some may wonder at the translation of *yue* 約 as "headman," and *xiangyue* 鄉約 as "village headman." While it is true that in China proper this term denoted a "village compact," it came in the Northwest to indicate the individual elected to lead a village.

When the people of Xinjiang approached the Qing authorities, either on their own or through translators and other intermediaries, they tended to weave their own stories into the grand weft of history. They positioned their own narratives in relation to the traumatic events of the Muslim uprisings, the disasters of the Ya'qūb Beg period, and the further terror and displacement caused by the Hunan Army's reconquest. Indeed, through wave after wave of violence, internally displaced people and refugees really did struggle to maintain their lives. In the context of the *yamen*, however, the language of the empire's loss and recovery of territory could lend legitimacy to their stories. In this document, Han *shi* represents herself as a victim of Ya'qūb Beg's military adventures, now a Qing subject seeking the magistrate's help to restore her proper familial relationship.

Moreover, Han *shi* was not the only Hui woman who ended up married to a man of the "wrong" creed in the aftermath of the Muslim uprisings. Xinjiang's provisional government assigned many such women to Han husbands, and then settled the couples together in areas slated for land reclamation. Still others were trafficked by (mostly Hui) merchants, who "married" them to Han soldiers. After a few weeks, the traffickers would affect their disappearance, or the women would sneak back on their own, only to be married to other men. Prostitution also became increasingly common.

When someone approached the *yamen*, of course, they were likely to present any and all of these arrangements in terms of normative marriage. Words like "to marry" (*jia* 嫁, *qu* 娶) and "wife" (*qi* 妻) euphemized a broad range of relationships that Han officials or Muslim commoners might find suspicious, inappropriate, immoral, or illegal. Men who trafficked in women presented themselves as their "husbands," for example, while a group of prostitutes living in a common home might present themselves as a family unit. On the other hand, someone might depict a marriage they sought to disrupt as "kidnapping and selling" (*guai mai* 拐賣) or "Stealing a woman" (*qiang nü* 搶女).

Similarly, we ought to consider Han *shi*'s presentation of her personal narrative of loss and recovery in its broader cultural context. First, narratives of familial separation had become common in the Northwest after 1864, when communications between people in Shaanxi or Gansu and family sojourning in Xinjiang were cut off, while after 1875 stories of recovery became a means to talk about the reclamation of both relatives and imperial patrimony. Thus, Han *shi*'s narrative fit into a common set of narratives with which the *yamen* staff would have been familiar and possibly sympathetic.

Second, Han *shi*'s specific problem – the return of a lost husband – became a trope in the stories of the Turpan archives. Because of the social and economic changes described above, Han *shi* was one of many women said to have remarried in error. Yet, the *yamen* would have possessed no record of such a woman's first husband – so how could the magistrate have known if their claim to be husband and wife was genuine? Perhaps, all over Xinjiang, families really were reuniting – or perhaps people found a

way to convince the magistrate to extract women from abusive or difficult relationships by inventing long-lost husbands.