A century of Chinese research on Islamic Central Asian history in retrospect

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The term Central Asia is not precisely defined. In this paper, we will consider it to cover the territory of the present-day Chinese province of Xinjiang, former Soviet Central Asia, the northern parts of Pakistan, Afghanistan and the eastern parts of Iran. We will concentrate on Xinjiang and the areas that border on it. The term Islamic Central Asian History covers the period from the Arab conquest until the end of the 19th century.

China has a long tradition of Islamic Central Asian studies since part of its territory is situated in this area and it has been linked with the West since ancient times by the famous Silk Roads.

Not long after the death of the prophet Muhammad, the news of the political and cultural changes taking place in Western Asia reached the court of the Tang empire. According to the Description of Da Shi (大食, Arab) of Xin Tang Shu (« 新唐书 », “A New History of the Tang”), in the year 651 the king of the Arabs Han Mi Mo Ni (瞰密莫末腻, Medieval Chinese *k'am-miet-mak-mei, is a transcription of the Arabic Amir al-mu'minin, namely Caliph Othman, 644-656) sent “tribute” to the Tang. According to Che Fu Yuan Gui (« 册府元龟 ») and other Tang sources, between 651 and 798, 39 Arab delegations arrived at the Tang court. The close relationship that existed between Central Asia and the Central Plain of China enables us to find a number of descriptions of Islamic Central Asia in Chinese sources compiled at different times, amongst which, histories written by scholars sponsored by Chinese governments as well as by private historians, gazetteers compiled under the supervision of different local governments at different times, private works, inscriptions, etc.

In a book entitled Mi Shu Jian Zhi (« 秘书监志 ») written by Wang Shidian and Shang Qiweng in the early 14th century, there is a list of so
called “Hui Hui books,” namely Islamic books which was prepared in 1273 (all the titles of the books collected in this list were transcribed into Chinese characters, as well as being provided with Chinese translations). The 17th book on this list is entitled “Tie Li Hei” (帖里黑) and contains three chapters. The Chinese translation is given as “Histories and Names of Countries”.  

Apparently, this “Tie Li Hei” is the Chinese transcription of the Persian or Arabic “Tarikh”, and it could be either a Persian or an Arabic historic book. In the early 18th century Liu Zhi, a famous Chinese Hui Muslim scholar, published two books entitled Tian Fang Dian Li (« 天方典礼 ») and Tian Fang Xing Li (« 天方性礼 »), in which he cited about 70 Islamic books, mainly Arabic and Persian. Both transcribed names and translations were given. Among these books, we find several historical books like Ji Suo Mi Er La Zhi (古所一密迩剌直, Qisas-i Mi’raj), Ji Suo An Bi Ya (吉所一安秘雅, Qisas al-Anbiya’), Te Zi Qi Er Qao Li Ya (特白启尔一奥理雅, Tadkir al-Auliya), She Zhe Er Na Me (设哲尔拿默, Shajar Nama), etc.  

Unfortunately, all these above mentioned sources were unknown to Chinese scholars of that time. Despite the fact that missionaries increasingly introduced Chinese sources to Europe from the first quarter of the 16-century onwards, when the Portuguese arrived in Southeast China, until the end of the 19th century Chinese scholars relied mainly on Chinese sources for their research. Apart from the Secret History of the Mongols, they had almost no idea about the sources written in non-Chinese languages, nor of the contributions of their foreign colleagues.  

Things changed at the end of 19th century. In 1887 Hong Jun (洪钧), minister-counselor of Qing China in Russia, Germany, Holland and Austria arrived in Europe for 3 years. Hong Jun himself was very interested in Mongolian history. He found two important works during his period of service: one was the History of the Mongols written by H.H. Howorth and published in London between 1876 and 1888, and the other was the original Persian text and Russian translation of Jami‘ al-Tawarikh, namely the Collection of Histories written by the Persian historian Rashid al-Din around the beginning of the 14th century (published by I. N. Berezm). The former is a work based on Islamic sources and the later is an original source that was unknown to Hong Jun. With the help of his translators, he introduced this discovery to Chinese scholars when he returned to China (Yuan Shi Yi Wen Zheng Bu « 元史译文证补 », published in 1897 in Beijing). His work opened a new world to Chinese scholars and this in turn led to a new era of comparative study between Chinese and Islamic sources. Under his influence many Chinese scholars realized that sources written in Persian, Arabic, or Chaghatay Turkish, contained important descriptions, which should be given the same value as those contained in Chinese sources.
After the 1910s more and more Chinese scholars learned foreign languages, such as English, French, German and Japanese. They thus gained direct access to publications in these languages and more and more European and Japanese works were introduced to China through their efforts. Increasingly Chinese scholars compared Chinese sources with the non-Chinese sources mentioned by foreign scholars. This represented great progress. The most representative researches of this period were the papers of Wang Guowei 王国维 and Chen Zhongmian 岑仲勉 and the work of Tu Ji 屠寄 entitled Meng Wu Er Shi Ji 蒙兀儿史记.

Unfortunately none of them realised the importance that the knowledge of Islamic languages had for their studies. It is therefore not surprising that many faulty identifications were made during this period between Chinese terms and those of the Islamic sources which were known through western-language translations of the originals. Here is a typical example: in the Tarikh-i Jahan Gusha, Ata Malik Juwaini mentioned that after Gur Khan, the founder of the Qara Khitay, was enthroned, he sent his Shihnas to Qam-Kemchik, Barskhan, Taraz and Yafinch. Only Taraz is correct. The other three of these four places names were spelled Kum-Kidjik, Barserdjan, Tamdj in “Mediaeval Researches from Eastern Asiatic Sources” of E. Bretschneider. Based on Bretschneider’s transcription, Chen Zhongmian, a famous Chinese scholar identified the Kidjik of Kum-Kidjik with Hai Ya Li 海押立, Qayaliq, Barserdjan with Ba Er Zhin 八儿真, Barjin, Tamdji with Te Er Mi 夤儿迷, Termez. Actually, Bretschneider’s transcriptions of the above mentioned four place names were based on the incorrect transcriptions made by C. D’Ohsson’s in his Histoire des Mongols. Chen Zhongmian’s identifications are wrong and of no value at all when we check the original Persian forms of these names in Juwaini’s works. Because information on Islamic Central Asia in Chinese literature is so rich that it is possible to do research only relying on Chinese sources, the tradition of this school has continued till our days.

From the 1930s a new generation educated in faculties of oriental studies in either European or American universities appeared. They realized that the field of Mongol-Yuan studies is unique in Islamic Central Asian Studies because Yuan Shi 元史, History of the Yuan Dynasty), Sheng Wu Qin Zheng Lu 圣武亲征录, A History of the Campaign of Chingis Khan), The Secret History of the Mongols and Jami’ al-Tawarikh originated from a common source. Since then Mongol-Yuan studies have been one of the most vibrant fields in Islamic Central Asian studies in China.

Reading the works of Paul Pelliot, they realised that good research could never be achieved on the basis of a second hand translation. Islamic sources of this period were all written in Arabic script. The pronunciation of a word written in this script relies on diacritical points: the pronunciation changes when the number and position of the points
change. Manuscripts of Islamic sources are usually full of mistakes of points in place names, personal names and official titles of non-Persian or Arab origin. In these cases relevant descriptions in Chinese sources can be very useful for correcting these copyists’ mistakes in Islamic sources.

Representatives of this generation were Han Rulin (韩儒林), Shao Xunzheng (邵循正) and Weng Dojian (翁独健). Following the example of Hongjun, they were specialists of Mongol-Yuan Studies. They all knew Persian, Mongolian and European languages, and some of them knew Turkish and Tibetan, and used both Chinese and Islamic sources in their researches. The main method of their research was the comparative study between these two kinds of sources namely Chinese and Islamic, especially Persian. The works they used most were the Jami’ al-Tawarikh of Rashid al-Din and the Tarikh-i Jahan Gusha of Ata Malik Juwaini.

Between the second half of the 1930s and the end of the 1940s, they made many valuable contributions. The most outstanding achievements were: Prof. Shao Xunzheng's identification of the Chinese version of a diplomatic letter of the Ming emperor contained in Ming Shi (« 明史 », History of the Ming Dynasty) with the Persian version of this letter given in Hafiz Abr’s work of the 15th century “Zubdat al-Tawarikh” and the papers on the comparative studies of Chinese and Persian sources by Prof. Han Rulin. Their research can be considered to be up to international standards.

For more than 25 years, between 1949 and the end of the Cultural Revolution (1976), studies of Islamic Central Asian history in Mainland China almost ceased. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) the only topic remaining for Chinese scholars was to try and prove that the area along present-day China’s north-western border occupied by Russian from the 1860s was historically Chinese territory.

After this period, like in all fields of scientific research, studies of Islamic Central Asian history revived in many universities and institutions. In 1978 China joined the project of “A History of the Development of Civilizations in Central Asia” organized by Unesco. Realizing the huge differences between their own research and that being conducted in the Western world, the Institute of Asian Studies of Nanjing University  by Prof. Han Rulin started a project to get it’s young scholars to learn one or two Central Asian languages in addition to their mother tongue, Chinese, and at least two modern Western languages. Meanwhile young scholars of Beijing University headed by Prof. Ji Xianlin (季羡林) and Prof. Zhang Guangda (张广达) began to learn Arabic, Persian and Tibetan. Their investigations extended beyond the Mongol-Yuan period, from the early Islamic period to 1900, but were all confined to the eastern part of Central Asia. Meanwhile, however, most scholars in other universities still followed the traditional path of education and research.
Nowadays the most valuable contributions are usually published either in *Zhong Ya Xue Kan* («中亚学刊», Central Asian Studies), a non periodical publication since 1983; *Xi Yu Yan Jiu* («西域研究», Studies of the Western Regions), a quarterly published in Urumqi and *Xi Bei Min Zu Yan Jiu* («西北民族研究», Studies on North-western Ethnic Minorities), a biannual publication edited in Lanzhou. The most important studies of this period are: *Xi Yu Shi Di Cong Gao Chu Bian* («西域史地丛稿初编», Collection of Papers on the History and Historical Geography of the Western Regions) of Zhang Guangda张广达;13 *Tang Tu Bo Da Shi Guan Xi Shi* («唐吐蕃大食关系史», Studies on Relations between the Tang, Tibetan and the Arabs) of Wang Xiaopu 王小甫;14 *Xi Yu Li Shi Yan Jiu Ba Zhi Shi Ji* («西域历史研究八至十世纪», Studies on the History of the Western Regions) of Hua Tao华涛;15 Wei Liangtao’s *Xi Liao Shi Gang* (魏良韬 «西辽史纲», A History of the Qara Khitay)16 and *Ye Er Qiang Han Guo Shi Gang* («叶尔羌汗国史纲», A History of Yarqand Khanate);17 and Liu Zheyin and Wei Liangtao’s *Xi Yu He Zhuo Jia Zu Yan Jiu* (刘正寅, 魏良韬 «西域和卓家族研究», A Study on Khwaja’s Family of the Western Regions), etc.18

Chinese scholars have been interested in the Qarakhanids since the 1930s. Their interest mainly focuses on the problem of the origin of Qarakhanids rather than on their history. Wang Riwei was the first Chinese scholar who suggested that the Qarakhanid dynasty was established by Uygurs who migrated from Mongolia to Central Asia after 840 A.D. in two papers published in 1935 and 1936.19 It is obvious that Wang Riwei was influenced by Bretschneider. The Japanese scholar Abe Dakeo agreed with Wang Riwei in his book “Xini Uygur Kokoshi No Kenkiju” (安部健夫: «西 ワイグル国史の研究») published in 1953.20

In 1955, Feng Jiasheng and his assistants followed the idea of Wang Riwei in their book.21 After the Cultural Revolution, based on the researches of Russian and western scholars, above all the studies of V.V. Bartol’d and O. Pritsak, some Chinese scholars raised new suggestions about the problem of the origin of the Qarakhanids. For instance Wang Zhaiai suggested Turk and Uygur in 1977, Guo Pingliang suggested Qarluq, Yaqma and Toghusghuz in 1980.22 Meanwhile Liu Yitang, a Taiwanese scholar writing in 1975 continued to believe that the Qarakhanid dynasty was established by Uygurs.23

In the 1980s Qarakhanid studies was one of the most active areas in Islamic Central Asian research in China. Wei Liangtao was the most important Chinese scholar in this period in Qarakhanid studies. Most of his publications about Qarakhanids were published between 1982 and 1984. His most important papers are:

“Sources and Literature about the History of the Qarakhanids”.24 It is the first paper looking for Chinese sources about the history of the
Qarakhanids. The main Chinese sources he mentioned were the
descriptions of Turks and Uygurs (Hui Hu Zhan «回纥传» Hui He
Zhan «回纥传» and Tu Jue Zhan «突厥传» in Jiu Tang Shu
(«旧唐书», the Old Tang History) and in Xin Tang Shu
(«新唐书», the New Tang History); descriptions of Khotan, Uygurs
and Qocho (Yu Tian Zhan «于阗传», Hui Hu Zhan «回鹘传» and
Gao Chang Zhan «高昌传») of Song Shi (the History of the Song
Dynasty («宋史»); descriptions of Khotan and Qucha (Yu Tian
«于阗», Qiu Ci «龟茲») of the Fragments of the Memorial of the Song
Dynasty (Song Hui Yao Ji Gao «宋会要辑稿»); and the History of the
Liao Dynasty (Liao Shi «辽史»). His list of Chinese sources (about)
the history of the Qarakhanids is based on the idea that the Qarakhanid
dynasty was established by the Uygurs who had escaped from Mongolia.
Basing himself on these Chinese sources, Wei published another paper
entitled “Relationships between the Qarakhanids, Song, Liao and Uygurs
of Qocho”\(^{25}\) one year later.

“A Short Political History of the Qarakhanids.”\(^{26}\) The history of the
Qarakhanids given in this paper was based on the researches of
V. V. Bartol’d, O. Pritsak and E.A. Davidovich. A little earlier, Geng Shimin,
a Chinese Turkologist, published an article discussing the same topic: “Ka
La Han Chao Li Shi Jian Shu”(A Short History of the Qarakhanids) in a
journal entitled Xinjiang She Hui Ke Xue, Urumqi, 1982,
N°1 (耿世民: «喀拉汗朝历史简述», 刊于 «新疆社会科学»,
1982年,第1期).

“Supplement to the Hypothesis of the Uygur Origin of the
Qarakhanids.”\(^{27}\) This paper is based on another paper of his entitled
“The Origin and the Names of the Qarakhanids” (魏良韬:
«关于喀喇汗王朝的起源及其名称», 刊于 «历史研究», 1982
年, 第2期). The main ideas of these two papers are that the Qarakhanid
dynasty was established by Uygurs and that the Uygur Hei Han (黑汗) of
Khotan in the Song Sources should be a Chinese transcription of Qara
Qaghan because Hei Han in Chinese means Black Khan. Based on his
above mentioned papers, Wei published a monograph entitled History of the
Qarakhanids in Urumqi in 1986.

In fact, apart from the descriptions of the activities of the Qarluq in the
Chu valley and a short sentence saying that some Uygurs moved westwards
looking for the protection of the Qarluq after 840A.D. no sources mention
that the royal family of the Qarakhanids was Uygur. The most important
paper denying the racial link between the royal family of the Qarakhanids
and the Uygurs was Qian Baiquan’s “Ka La Han Wang Chao Shi Pang Te
Qin Chuang Jian De Ma-Hui Hu Xi Qian He Pang Te Qin Wen Ti” (Was
the Qarakhanid dynasty established by Pang Tegin? -the problems of the
westwards movement of Uygurs and Pang Tegin) published in Xi Bei Min
Zu Wen Cong (Studies on Northwestern Ethnic Minorities), Lan Zhou,
We should not forget that the Uygurs experienced many political changes during the time when they were in Mongolia as well as in the early stage of their settlement in the eastern part of Xinjiang. The Uygurs that settled in Xinjiang were quite different from those who had resided in Mongolia.

Additionally, the term Hei Han (黑汗) of Khotan in the Song sources is apparently a Chinese transcription of Qaghan rather than a Chinese translation of “Black Khan” (Qara Qaghan). The most valuable source mentioning the name of the tribe living in Quz Ordu (Bala Saghun) before the period of the Qara Khitay is the description in the Biography of Nian Ge Han Nu (Nian Ge Han Nu Zhuan « 粘割韩奴传 ») in the Jin Shi (History of the Jin Dynasty, « 金史 ») saying that in the period of Da Ding (大定, 1161-1189) three people of Hui He Yi Xi Lan (回纥移习览) arrived at the Jin border. They reported that they belonged to a tribe called Hui He Zou Kuo (回纥邹括) living in a town called Gu Si E Lu Duo (骨斯讹鲁朵). They heard from their ancestors that when the Qara Khitay came, their forces were so weak that they had to surrender to the Qara Khitay.²⁸ Apparently the term Hui He Yi Xi Lan could be a Chinese transcription of Uygur Islam (Muslim Uygur), and the name of the town Gu Si E Lu Duo is a Chinese transcription of Quz Ordu. The most important dung here is that the author says that the tribe living in Quz Ordu in the time of the Qarakhanids is called Hui He Zou Kuo. Hui He was the Chinese transcription of Uygurs in the Tang period. But in the Jin period, this term usually means Turkic-speaking Muslims, like the Uygur Islam (Muslim Uygur) mentioned above. Therefore the key word in this term is Zou Kuo. I suggest that this Zou Kuo could be a Chinese transcription of the tribe name of Cigil. If this hypothesis is correct, daś would mean that the royal family of the Qarakhanids came from the Cigil.

Another problem in Wei’s researches is that he identified A Sa Lan Hui Hu (Arslan Uygur) of Liaow Shi with the Qarakhanids.²⁹ The History of Liao compiled during the first half of the 14th century mentioned that shortly after 1012 Liao troops started a western campaign, reached the Irrtish area and then met the forces of Arslan Uygur at a place called Bai Ba Lie (白拔烈). This Bai Ba Lie was mentioned several times in the Chinese sources of the Mongol-Yuan period and is apparently a Chinese transcription of Berbaliq. The Chinese name of this town was Du Shan Cheng (独山城) situated not far from Beshbaliq. Therefore it is clear that this Arslan Uygur is another name for the Uygurs in the area of Beshbaliq and Qocho and that it has nothing to do with the Qarakhanids.

Another scholar interested in the Qarakhanids in the 1980s was Liu Ge (刘戈). She published several papers in different publications of Xinjiang between 1985—1986, but made no important contribution. One of the main problems with the publications of this period is that none of the
authors could read Arabic or Persian and that they had very limited idea about the regulation of vowel harmony in the Turkic languages. In addition they paid less attention than would have been necessary to the rules of Chinese transcriptions of non-Chinese terms in the literature of the 11th and 12th centuries. Therefore we find many transcription mistakes in their publications.

From the second half of the 1980s, the old generation of scholars noticed the difficulties in the comparative study between Islamic sources and Chinese sources and progressively withdrew from Qarakhanid studies. Meanwhile a new generation of Islamic Central Asianists appeared. Hua Tao is one of the most distinguished amongst them. In 1986 and 1987 he published his annotated Chinese translation to Jamal Qarshi’s *Supplement to the Surah’s Dictionary.* In 1989 he finished his Ph.D. University entitled “The Activities of Turkic Speaking Tribes in the Tianshan Area and the Beginning of Their Islamisation” in Nanjing. In his paper entitled “On the Origin of the Karakhanids” Hua Tao rejected the hypothesis of an Uygur origin by using evidence showing that the ancestors of Satuq Khan appeared in the western Tianshan area before 840 A.D. when Uygurs began to migrate towards west. His monograph entitled *Xi Yu Li Shi Yan Jiu*–*Ba Zhi Shi Shi Ji* (Studies on the History of the Western Regions--between the 8th and the 10th century) was published in 2000. This work represents the latest result of Qarakhanid studies in China.

During the last twenty years numerous books and articles concerning this field have been published. They show us that each university has it’s own tradition and that different tendencies have existed. Not all of them were up to the same level: some universities did not even ask their scholars to concentrate first on some specialist topic and publish their papers before starting to write a book. They judged the level of their scholars simply according to the number of books they wrote, with no regard for quality, while some institutes adhered to scientific criteria in their research.

Thanks to its huge population and territory and its economic development, China has many publishing houses, and therefore the number of the books on Islamic Central Asian history published in the past 20 years is more than that in the previous centuries combined. Unfortunately not all of them are up to the standards followed by scientists all over the world. For instance, two authors wrote a book entitled *A History of Documentary Exchanges between Last and West* and published in 1999 without having published any previous papers on this topic. It is therefore not surprising that this book says nothing about the relations between the Tang court and the Central Asian kingdoms during the Arabic conquest, the intermarriage between the royal dynasties of the Liao and Ghaznawids, the period of the Qara Khitay, about the contacts between the Mongols and the Popes, between the Yuan court and the
other Mongolian khanates, between the Ming and the Timurids. There is no need to mention all the unqualified publications of this kind here.

In one word, two great leaps forward were made in the first half of the 20th century. New competition has just begun in the last twenty years of the 20th century between science and non-science. We will never be satisfied with our passed efforts.

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GLOSSARY

Abe Dakeo: 安部健夫
Ba Er Zhin: 八儿真, Barjin
Bai Ba Lie: 白拔烈, Berbaliq
Che Fu Yuan Gui: 册府元龟
Chen Yonggang: 陈永刚
Chen Zhongmian: 岑仲勉
Da Shi: 大食, Arab
Du Shan Cheng: 独山城, Berbaliq
Gao Chang Hui Hu: 高昌回鹘, Uygurs of Qocho
Gu Si E Lu Duo: 骨斯讹鲁朵, Quz Ordu
Guan Tang Ji Lin: 观堂集林
Hai Ya Li: 海押立, Qayaliq
Han Mi Mo Ni: 瞰密莫末腻, Amir al-Mummen
Han Rulin: 韩儒林
Hei Han: 黑汗, Qaghan, Qara Khan
Hua Tao: 华涛
Hui He Yi Xi Lan: 回纥移习览, Uygur of Islam (Turkic speaking Muslim)
Hui He Zou Kuo: 回纥邹括, Uygur/Cigil (?) (Turkic Cigil?)
Hong Jun: 洪钧
Ji Suo An Bi Ya: 吉所一安秘雅, Qisas al-Anbiya’
Ji Suo Mi Er La Zhi: 吉所一密迩剌直, Qisas-i Mi’raj
Ka La Han Wang Chao: 喀喇汗王朝, Qarakhanids
*K’am-miet-mak-niei: 瞰密莫末腻, Amir al-Mummen
Liu Ge: 刘戈
Liu Zhengyin: 刘正寅
Meng Wu Er Shi Ji: 蒙兀儿史记
Mi Shu Jian Zhi: 秘书监志
Ming Shi: 明史
Pan Yutian: 潘玉田
Pang Te Qin: 庞特勤, Pang Tegin
Qian Baiquan: 钱伯泉
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>作者</th>
<th>作品</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Qiong Lu Ji</td>
<td>《穹庐集》</td>
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<td>Shang Qiweng</td>
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<td>《新唐书》</td>
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NOTES
Chinese research on Islamic Central Asian History / 129

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