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Ibrahim's story¹

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The article details the personal and professional life of Ibrahim Muti'i (1920–2010), a well-known Uighur linguist. Through a series of interviews, Mr. Muti'i sketched the events he wanted to be remembered. Mr. Muti'i's life story corresponds with many of the significant events in Northwest China both in the Republican era (1911–1949) and the first decades of the People's Republic of China era.

Keywords: uighur; xinjiang; warlord era; cultural revolution; Uighur-Han interaction; Zhou Enlai

Introduction

Ibrahim Muti'i (1920–2010) was a well-known Turkic linguist, and one of the most respected Uighur intellectuals in China. He was widely seen as one of the top scholars of his generation. As a youth Ibrahim, was among the first generation of Uighurs who studied a modern curriculum under Tatar teachers from Kazan, Russia. The teachers represented a late nineteenth to early twentieth century reform movement within Islam, called Jadidism, which sought to bring a revitalization to Muslim societies through education. After graduation and a brief teaching stint, Ibrahim went to university in the USSR and witnessed Stalin's purges first hand. After returning to Dihau (later reverting back to Urumqi), he began his career as a lecturer at the first teacher-training institute in the region. A new Uighur cultural elite based on education was forming that was not directly tied to the medieval Islamic culture then current in northwest China. Being part of that elite resulted in Ibrahim's going to prison in 1940. Sheng Shicai, the Republican Warlord of Xinjiang, 1932–1944, perceived Ibrahim and other educated youth as a threat. Released in 1945, Ibrahim married, worked for a newspaper, and continued his career as an educator at the Xinjiang Institute. Urumqi was to become the cultural center for Uighur intellectuals due to its educational centers first represented by the Xinjiang Institute.

Shortly after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Ibrahim and his family moved to Beijing where he came under the patronage of Zhou Enlai, China's first Premier. During the 1950s, Ibrahim interacted on an equal

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level with Han scholars and academics while employed at the Minority Press. He was familiar with, and sympathetic to, the socialist goals of the new PRC regime. China was founded as a ‘unified country of diverse nationalities’ with the accompanying ideology that all the ethnic groups of the nation were given equal legal recognition. An early intellectual project that represented the government’s commitment to this ideology was the reproduction in three volumes of the *Wu Ti Qing Wen Jian* (Five Languages Dictionary or Pentaglot) which included Mongolian, Tibetan, Uighur, Manchu and Chinese. Ibrahim was the head of the Uighur section of the dictionary project. It was published to international acclaim in 1957.

Beginning in 1956, there was a shift in the domestic politics of China to a more radical line. The Communist Party encouraged the intellectuals of China to speak their minds in a movement known as the Hundred Flowers campaign. The resulting candor led to a nationwide movement, the anti-Rightist campaign, which targeted intellectuals. Minority scholars were not exempt and Ibrahim was arrested in 1960 as a ‘Rightist’ and spent the next 15 years in prison. He was exonerated from all crimes in 1975, but only sent to internal exile in Southern Xinjiang. In the early 1980’s, he was appointed Director of the Language Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. He later directed the team of translators who edited the three-volume translation of Mamud Kashgari’s famous eleventh century dictionary, *Lughat Diwani*, into modern Uighur. This work, along with the *Kutaqu Bilig*, or the Wisdom of Royal Glory, is the most famous piece of Uighur literature dating from medieval times. These two literary classics of the Karakhanid dynasty (840–1211) were written within a decade of each other and, according to Professor Robert Dankoff, lay the foundations for a Turco-Islamic literary culture.

In 1989, Ibrahim made his one trip to the US, toured several of the universities with a Central Asian focus, and was a featured presenter at the Joseph Fletcher Symposium at Harvard University. At the time of these interviews, in 1995, Ibrahim Muti’i was among the Xinjiang local elite invited to meet the Chinese central government leaders who visited Xinjiang on the occasion of the region’s fortieth anniversary as an autonomous region. I have known Ibrahim Muti’i and his family since 1985, when I taught his daughter-in-law at Xinjiang University. Years later, I was back in Urumqi, the regional capital, for my dissertation research at the University of Washington. I was in the process of learning about recent Uighur family change through collecting life histories, and I approached Ibrahim about sitting down for a series of interviews. He agreed with the proviso that my wife, Julie, teach English to his grandchildren. So, during the 1995–1996 academic year, Julie and I would walk over to his home for our respective tasks. For the hospitality of Ibrahim and his family we will always be grateful. Ibrahim’s story both summarizes a half-century of Xinjiang history and gives us the gritty details of a life lived with great personal suffering yet amazing courage and perseverance.

I have edited his account to fit into a narrative form, below. Several of the anecdotes Ibrahim told are only indirectly related to his life, but they were important to him, and help give the reader historical context for his remarkable life.

Childhood

Ibrahim Muti’i was born in May 1920, in Lükchün, a village outside Turpan, in eastern Xinjiang. The town of Turpan was known then as the residence of the ‘King

of Turpan'.² In reality, Turpan and the rest of the Xinjiang region was under the control of Yang Zengxin, a former Qing dynasty official who consolidated his power in the region after the revolution. Recognized as the governor by the weak central government, Yang ran the province as his private fiefdom until 1928, when he was assassinated by one of his officials.

Ibrahim's early life was marked by tragedy. Two years after his birth, Ibrahim's father, Muti'i, a tailor, died. In the year he began elementary school, at age seven, his mother also died. His family, nonetheless, managed to provide funds for his education.

The school he attended as a child was a *yengi mektep*, or new school, in contrast to a *kona mektep*, literally, an 'old school'.³ There was no money in their home for tuition, so his family paid in wheat. It was common to pay for tuition in foodstuffs in rural Xinjiang up to the 1950's. His teacher, Ali Ibrahimov, was a Tatar from the Kazan region of Russia.

In Ibrahim's youth, Turpan still had a 'King' or hereditary ruler. Ibrahim grew up in the *mahalla*, or neighborhood, around the king's palace. He remembers going there once as a boy for a party, accompanying his older brother. The throne room had four soldiers on duty for that occasion. Ibrahim dismissed the king as an insignificant person who only consumed what others produced.

He recalled that when he was a boy, he had a relative named Yüsüp Bay who was a trader, or *Karawanchi*,⁴ between Lükchün and Urumqi, Xinjiang's capital city.⁵ Yüsüp also did a lot of business with camel caravans between Turpan and India. He was wealthy and eventually bought three Ford trucks, which were among the first motor vehicles in Xinjiang. At the time, the USSR had signed a contract with Ford Motor Company that prevented Russian cars from being imported into Xinjiang, so all the early cars in the province were Fords. In the 1920's and 1930's, Uighur traders like Yüsüp Bay were making big profits in cross-border trade, as well as trade with China.

After Liberation,⁶ during the early years of the land reform movement, Yüsüp Bay was arrested, given a negative class label of 'rich landlord', and sentenced to several years in prison. During the criticism sessions before his sentencing, people would say, 'this man has not done anything bad', or '*Bu adam yamanliq qilmighan*', much to the frustration of the communist cadres who were trying to get his tenants

²While this is a grand sounding title, in fact the title 'King' was a minor hereditary office which had been maintained by the Qing [1644–1911] since their eighteenth century conquest of Xinjiang. After the 1911 revolution in China, Governor Yang allowed the office to continue.

³The new schools were part of an Islamic reform movement, often know as the Jaddist movement, that was spreading across Turkic Central Asia in the early twentieth century. They offered parents a new option to the parents who wanted more than religious education for their children, as the new schools also taught science, math, geography and literature. The movement began among Kazan Tatars who supplied many of the teachers in these new schools. The old traditional Islamic schools, or '*madrassa*,' focused on religious subjects and were always attached to a mosque.

⁴I used Uyghur Latin Yeziqi (ULY) for all the Uyghur terms. ULY is becoming more popular than Pinyin based Uyghur Yengi Yeziqi. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uyghur_Latin_Y%C3%A9ziqi

⁵At that time, the city was called Dihua. After 1949, the local named of Urumqi was restored. Editor's note.

⁶'Liberation' refers to the 1949 victory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over the nationalist forces of Jiang Jieshi (Chaing Kai-shek).

to denounce him. Ibrahim went to see him as soon as he was released. Five days later Yüsüp Bay died at the age of 90. Ibrahim praised him as a man who was able to get things done in a wise manner. There were ten other businessmen like Yüsüp Bay in Turpan who controlled most of the pre-1949 economy. When Yüsüp Bay died, even though he had the bad class label of a *pomichik*, or ‘rich landlord’, his entire *mahalla*, or neighborhood, came out to bury him, as a way of showing him their respect.

Ibrahim went on to explain how generous Yüsüp Bay had been to the poor and how he had shared his wealth as an Islamic duty, that is, one fortieth of his net worth every year went to the poor. Most of the other landlords did the same. Ibrahim made a great distinction between the rich Han landlords of China proper who, in his opinion, were the real exploiters, and the wealthy Uighur landlords and traders of Xinjiang.

In 1928, Ibrahim’s extended family decided he should move to Urumqi to be closer to his older brother, Jamal, and continue his education. After school hours he helped his brother around the tailor shop as an apprentice. Jamal was well-known as the only European-trained tailor in the capital. He spent three years in Moscow learning his trade. Jamal, who was more commonly called by his *leqem*, or nickname, Seypung, meaning tailor in Chinese, sewed clothes for Sven Hedin as well as some of the other well-known European explorers who came through the city. Ibrahim and Jamal’s home was located on present-day Shengli Road, across from the Russian Club [Dostluq Tiyatéri], and down the street from the present Xinjiang University.

Jamal was quite an innovator and was the first to bring a movie projector to Urumqi, along with four silent movies. He brought the equipment back from Moscow after he finished his apprenticeship there. The projector was a small contraption that was operated by a hand crank. Large crowds gathered in, and outside, their home during public showings of the films.

Ibrahim also reminisced about another innovation of Jamal’s. His brother started a European-style restaurant near the present-day People’s Park, in central Urumqi, during the governorship of Jin Shuren, who followed Governor Yang, in 1928. A major attraction of the restaurant was a merry-go-round with 30 carved horses. After only three days, however, the Islamic religious leaders complained bitterly to the city government about its corrupting quality, and, consequently, it was soon shut down. ‘*Mollilar kapir bir ish, bolmaydu, dep*’ or, ‘The mullahs said it was not acceptable because it was a heathen contraption’. Merry-go-rounds were apparently only for unbelievers. Jamal was left in debt as a result. This anecdote highlights the Islamic basis of Uighur society at this time. The struggle over the merry-go-round is also an example of the change in values between conservative mullahs and the new Uighur urban elite, who, while still embracing Islam, had a more open-minded world view that allowed for a secular education and such pleasures as merry-go-rounds. It is very instructive that the religious leaders appealed to the secular warlord government for help against the ‘worldly’ influences of the new elite, and that the government sided with the conservatives.

Jamal not only introduced the first home movie and carousel, but also bicycles. He brought a bike down to his hometown of Lükchün and rode it to the city wall, to the amazement of those gathered to watch. Local peoples named it a ‘*Sheytanning Harwisi*’ or ‘Satan’s Cart’. Ibrahim was to say of his brother, ‘*Akam leqem qoydi, Jamal Sheytan dep*’, meaning ‘My brother acquired a (second) nickname. After this

incident he was known as Jamal Satan'. This is a great example of the use of nicknames in Uighur culture.⁷

The Tatar run school, attended by Ibrahim, had moved from the Turpan area to Urumqi in 1928 and thus Ibrahim literally moved with the school to continue his education. He recalled his journey to Urumqi where, on the road, he was terribly frightened to see his first car. Another Tatar, Burhan, was the principal. Ibrahim had nothing but praise for the Tatar School and Ali Afendi, his teacher who trained at the Kazan Teacher's College. The Tatar School was located on the grounds of the current Number 35 Kazakh Elementary School. The curriculum was brought from Kazan and included history and literature. In the fifth and sixth grades, the teachers phased out Uighur and exclusively used Tatar as the teaching language. Tatar, then, became the unifying language in all the Jadidist schools across Central Asia. The great fear of a succession of Chinese regimes in Xinjiang has been that the Turkic peoples across Central Asia would organize politically. In retrospect, it is surprising that the Warlord regimes of Yang and Jin allowed the Jadidist schools in the first place. Ibrahim would go on to graduate from the school after six years, and then go on for a year of teacher's training. He then taught the younger children at the school from when he was 13, to age 15.

In 1989, Ibrahim was at Harvard University for a conference and tells the story of meeting a relative of his beloved Tatar elementary school teacher. It was a joyful encounter that gave Ibrahim an opportunity to express how significant a role model his teacher had been.

Ibrahim's life was to change dramatically in 1932 when his brother Jamal left his family and business to become the adjutant for Khoja Niyaz, a Uighur political figure from the oasis of Qumul (Hami), who rose to prominence during the Uighur/Hui uprisings in Qumul (Hami) in 1931–32.⁸ Ibrahim said of his brother, '*akam inqilapqa qatnishi ketti*' or 'my older brother joined the revolution and left.' The word 'revolution', then, was in use in the 1930s to describe political resistance to the Guo Ming Dang (GMD)/Nationalist authority.

Jamal placed his wife, children and Ibrahim under the care of his neighbor. They were to stay with that family for five years. When it snowed Ibrahim would do the shoveling and clean up the courtyard. As part of his chores, he would take a donkey cart to Liu Dao Wan, an Urumqi suburb, to pick up a load of coal and bring it back to the city proper where he would sell it before returning home. The money he earned he called 'vegetable money'. During Jamal's absence, Ibrahim took increasing responsibility for his nieces and nephews, some of who went on to study at the colleges where he was later to work.⁹ Jamal's story ended tragically in 1938 when was

⁷This incident raises some questions about the use of powerful religious symbols, such as 'Satan', in a seemingly light-hearted fashion. An initial response is that in popular or folk Islam, verbal religious symbols were in daily use and did not have the power of the formal religious system behind them. A teacher in the Chinese Language Department at Xinjiang University has a father whose name is *Huda Bergen*, or Given by God.

⁸For a full account of the Qumul uprising, see Andrew Forbes, *Muslims and Warlords in Chinese Central Asia*, 1986. Forbes provides an overview of the political history of Xinjiang during the 1911–50 period. In 1932, Sheng Shicai, a Manchu officer, took over the defense of Urumqi from Governor Jin and became Xinjiang's 'Warlord' until his departure in 1944. With Soviet military assistance he was able to resist the Chinese Muslim (Hui) attack and later to rout their army.

⁹Ibrahim shared an interesting anecdote about one of these nephews who achieved some notoriety by becoming a fighter pilot in People's Liberation Army (PLA) at the time of the

killed by Sheng's forces. During the next two years, Ibrahim continued to look after his brother's family until he, too, was to fall under Sheng's suspicion.

Youth (1935–40)

In 1935, after teaching in the Tatar school for two years, Ibrahim took an exam to study in the USSR. The minimum age was 16 and Ibrahim was only 15 that year. His brother Jamal returned at that time for a brief visit and put '16' as Ibrahim's age on the application. Ibrahim was accepted, given a full scholarship for the two-year course and joined a cohort of 50 other young Uighur people to study law in Tashkent at the Central Asian University.¹⁰ Ibrahim was able to see personally Stalin's purges of the period. He recounted that in 1938, over 7000 Uighurs in Tashkent were arrested and sent to labor camps in Siberia. After that season of terror, many local Uighurs changed their ethnonyms on their identity papers to Uzbek.

When he first arrived in Tashkent, Ibrahim was quite proud of his Tatar language ability, but quickly learned that the Soviet Army had used Tatar troops in their pacification of Central Asia. Contrary to the Jadidist's hopes, Tatar was not to be the unifying language for the Turkic people's of Central Asia. Ibrahim learned Russian well during his two years in Tashkent, which was later to help him during his years in Sheng's prison system.

After returning to Urumqi in 1937 with his law degree, Ibrahim began teaching methodology to future teachers at the only institute of higher education in the province, Xinjiang Teacher's College, known locally among Uighurs at the *Si Fan Mektep*. All the teachers of the institute attended a course taught by General Sheng on Marxism.

One humorous incident from these years took place on a visit back to Turpan. One member of Ibrahim's cohort in Tashkent was the King of Turpan's son. When Ibrahim was back home on a visit, the King's family invited him over for a visit. While at the palace, the Prince insisted that Ibrahim sit on the King's throne, a major breach of etiquette. News travels fast in a small town. As Ibrahim was returning later that day to his relative's home, he met his uncle who was driving a sheep before him. 'What an impolite kid you are', the uncle said. 'This lamb is a peace offering to ask the King's forgiveness for your sitting on his throne'. The King accepted both the sheep and the apology. The story is a good example of the feudal relationships still in place. What a generation gap there must have been between the prince, just home from two years in a Soviet university, and his father, a feudal relic in his last days of power.

Ibrahim enjoyed describing some of the layout of Urumqi in the late 1930s. Prisons played a major part on the urban landscape. There were four in a very small area, a clear indication that incarceration played a major part in Sheng's domestic program. There was a wall around the whole of the Han and Manchu quarters that was quite formidable. Very few Hui or Uighurs lived inside the walled city. South of

Korean War. He flew several missions, including a bombing run of Seoul. His commanding officer, however, cut short his combat career, because he did not want the responsibility of overseeing the death of the only Uighur pilot in the PLA. His nephew died in Tashkent in 1993, having joined the exodus of many Uighurs and Kazakhs to the USSR in 1962.

¹⁰According to Ibrahim, there were three classes of 100 each from Xinjiang that went to Tashkent during 1935–37. In the mid-1990s, he knew of only seven who were still alive.

the city were there were distinct Uighur, Hui and Russian suburbs. The Yang Hang (foreign suburb) was one of these suburbs, an upscale district, housing businesses and homes of Uzbeks, Tatars and Russians. Husayn Bay was the wealthiest of these foreign traders. Ibrahim's wife was to come from an Uzbek trading family that had a store in the Yang Hang.

Prison years (1940–45)

Ibrahim's first few weeks in prison were quite difficult as he was interrogated for two straight weeks to get him to confess to 'crimes' against the state. When asked to describe that period he said, 'Crimes were put on innocent people'. His interrogators used his students' words against him, saying he had distorted Xinjiang history. At one point in those first weeks in prison, Ibrahim was kept on his feet for 15 days and not allowed to sleep. His feet became quite swollen, and when he returned to his group cell, his cellmates had him soak his feet in the communal urine bucket, while mixing in boiled water. During our interview, Ibrahim had a good laugh about the medicinal value of urine, 'a great disinfectant', he said. There was no medical treatment available in the prison at this point. His feet still gave him pain from that period.

One anecdote from these prison years was his meeting three intrepid American mechanics, who were in Xinjiang as employees of one of the many expeditions that were to go through the area.¹¹ He talked about the rotten sorghum which figured prominently in their diet. It helped cause dysentery, and three out five prisoners died from the disease. Two of his Tashkent classmates were among the dead. By this time there were doctors in the prison, and one of them took pity on Ibrahim. Comrade Billow asked what a young man like himself was doing in prison. 'I am a political prisoner', Ibrahim replied. Later the doctor called him to her room and gave him a bottle of fish extract to help fight the dysentery. Ibrahim took the pills for a month

¹¹The saga of the three American auto workers is a story all of its own, as they had been arrested by Sheng's police three different times. They were from Detroit and had worked in the Ford factory there. The Xinjiang provincial government had an exclusive contract with Ford Motor Co., which might explain their presence. They started their journey from Alaska hoping to find work in the USSR. They were arrested as spies and sent to Irkutsk. The authorities believed them, and asked where they would like to go. They said China and were sent to Ili (a prefecture capital in the west of the province 64 kilometers from the Soviet border). Soon after they arrived in Ili, they were heard criticizing the Soviets for their arrest and imprisonment there. They were promptly arrested, but word came back from the USSR, '*biz ularni tekshürüp bolduq*' or 'we have already investigated them'. 'Let them go free'. They then planned to go to India, but on their way through the oases of southern Xinjiang, they were heard criticizing Sheng's regime for their shabby treatment in Ili, and were re-arrested and taken back to Urumqi. They had a hard time realizing that what one said about the government could get one thrown in prison. Here was where they met up with Ibrahim, and spent over a year in the same prison. During the period when they were served rotten sorghum, the Americans refused to eat it. They went on a five day hunger strike, and the prison authorities finally gave in and gave them bread and milk.

It was the 1944 visit of U.S. Vice-President Henry Wallace that finally set them free. As a good will gesture to Wallace, Sheng released them into Wallace's custody. They returned together to Eastern China and somehow managed to enlist in the US Marine Corps. In 1946, upon his release Ibrahim was in Shanghai on business and ran into his old prison mates. They were naturally delighted to see him, and, after taking him to their Marine enlisted men's club for a fancy meal, offered to smuggle Ibrahim back to the USA on their troop ship which was soon to depart. Ibrahim had already married by this time and declined their offer.

and is convinced they were what saved his life from the disease. He later heard the doctor was recalled to the USSR, arrested at the border, and sent to the Gulag.

Ibrahim gave an account of a personal interview he had with Sheng Shicai in 1943, when the Americans were still in prison with him. He was not fluent in Chinese, so the interview was conducted through another Uighur prisoner. The interview took place in Sheng's personal quarters. When Sheng asked if he was being treated well, Ibrahim began to complain bitterly about prison conditions. His translator was an older man with a bit more experience in dealing with officials, and said everything was fine and thanked Sheng for the kind treatment they were receiving. Later when they were alone, his companion asked Ibrahim if he was crazy answering a question like that truthfully. After several years of prison food, Ibrahim still remembers the food that was set out in Sheng's quarters. Sheng told him to help himself to a snack before he returned to his cell. Ibrahim stuffed his coat with all that he could carry and took it back to his cell.

Ibrahim was not intellectually idle during those GMD prison years. He began learning Chinese from a Han writer, Xie Min, in exchange for teaching him Russian. He memorized the Chinese textbooks used in local elementary schools. He practiced writing Chinese characters on scraps of wood. In 1943, the guards let him begin reading his own books. Burhan Shahidi, a Tatar intellectual who was later became governor under both the GMD and CCP regimes, was also in the same prison. Burhan kept busy by translating Sun Yat-sen's *San Min Zhu Yi* (Three People's principle, the main theoretical work for the Chinese Nationalists) into Uighur. Burhan needed an editor for the work, so Ibrahim was recruited. Prison officials organized these two men and three others into a working group that focused on the project. He began working on a typewriter imported from Istanbul. The project lasted 18 months.

During an eight-month period, Ibrahim shared a cell with Ma Liangjun, a prominent Hui Islamic leader from Gansu. Ma was in his 70s at the time and prayed *namaz* faithfully five times a day.¹² He was a member of a Sufi order, Naqshabandiyya, which has a long history in northwest China. One of their distinctives is a silent *dhikr*, which meant he said his prayers silently. Ma was fluent in Arabic and Persian but did not speak Uighur. The two became quite close, and Ibrahim became his valet of sorts, performing many useful duties for his senior cellmate.

After Ibrahim got over his dysentery, he refused to eat the sorghum, and Ma would scold him for it. 'God gives us both good and bad, who are you to refuse the bad?'. Ma's attitude made a big impression on Ibrahim, and he learned to eat more of the prison food that he had previously refused. He learned from Ma, '*Shükri bilen yéyish kérek*', or, 'It is important to give thanks for food'.

Ibrahim was not a practicing Muslim and did calisthenics in the morning before a cold-water bath rather than say his prayers. Ma told him one day that he was doing *namaz* for the both of them, so not to worry. Ma was to later help Ibrahim at the time of his wedding.

Prison regulations were for Muslims to pray silently, but it was well known that Hajji Khoja Niyaz, as a form of protest, shouted out his prayers while in prison. The former leader of the Qumul (Hami) uprising was taken out one night and shot by his

¹²In Sunni Islam, one of the duties of the faithful is praying Qu'ranic prayers, the *namaz*, at five set times during the day.

guards. Ibrahim heard that those guards were themselves shot in order to cover up the affair.

In the later part of his 1940–45 prison stay, the city government wanted to open a class for Uighur-Han translators and the most likely teachers were in prison. Ibrahim was chosen for the job and, for the six-month period of the class, was escorted daily out of prison by two guards on horseback, who provided a mount for him as well. They stood guard at the back of the classroom while Ibrahim taught class. When he was finished in the classroom, the guards escorted him back to prison. Many of Xinjiang's well known translators in the following years were Ibrahim's students at this time. There were 72 students representing most of Xinjiang's ethnic groups. He had a laugh over how his students were afraid of him at the time because corporal punishment was actively used for students who did not do their homework.

Sheng Shicai left Xinjiang permanently in 1944 for Chungking (Qongqing), the Republican capital. In 1945, the new Republican appointed governor set Ibrahim and the other political prisoners free. After his release, he resumed teaching at the Teachers College (*Si Fan Mektep*) in Urumqi.

Republican era (1945–49)

Ibrahim was married in 1946 to Anwar-apay, the daughter of a wealthy Yang Hang businessman, and a teacher at the Number 5 Elementary School. They were re-introduced to each other by a common friend, but knew of each other since childhood. Anwar-apay's father, a wealthy merchant, had also been in Sheng's prisons, and died soon after his release. He was from Chöchek (Tacheng), a frontier town in northwestern Xinjiang on the Soviet-Chinese border, and was among the wealthy group of Yang Hang traders that Sheng had arrested, and ruined financially, during his tenure as Warlord. Ibrahim's father-in-law had been head of customs in Chöchek during Governor Yang Zengxin's era (1911–28). The elite Uighur/Uzbek/Tatar/Kazakh weddings of that era were spectacular affairs. Ibrahim reflected that the elite marriage parties in Urumqi of the mid-1990s could not compare to those lavish weddings of an earlier era. In contrast, poor families married their children with only a token bride price. Ibrahim said, '*bir parche kégiz bilen toy qilidighan*', or, 'with the gift of a woven mat a wedding can be undertaken'.

Ibrahim, however, had no financial resources when he was released from prison in 1945. His parents, as well as his older brother, were all dead. Anwar-apay's family was willing to agree to the marriage on the basis of his character. The marriage of a wealthy merchant's daughter would, in the pre-Sheng era, be an anticipated event, but now Anwar-apay's wedding to the impoverished intellectual recently released from prison looked like a wedding among the poor families of Xinjiang. The class differences in Xinjiang oases can be seen by the relative simplicity of the weddings of the poor. In the pre-1932 Sheng Shicai era, the local elites competed with one another over who could put on the most lavish wedding parties. It was not uncommon for upwardly mobile Uighur merchants to borrow in order to keep up with wedding expectations. Bankruptcy often followed.

The *toyluq*, or bride price, that Ibrahim paid was only one bolt of cloth. The low bride price was also an indication of the difficult economic times. Ibrahim's classmates from his student days in Tashkent formed the core of his wedding party. They each gave a financial gift so Ibrahim would be able to host the groom's side of the wedding activities. Ibrahim remembers still needing finances for the meat, so he

appealed to his older cellmate, Ma Liangjun, the Hui Sufi leader who had also recently been set free from prison. Though he was unable to attend personally, Ma did not disappoint and sent both a sheep and a calf as his wedding gift to his young cellmate.

In 1947, Ibrahim took a job with *Erkin* (*Freedom- Zi You Bao* in Chinese), a private newspaper in Urumqi, in addition to his teaching responsibilities. He was given an assignment to tour southern Xinjiang along with two reporters from the Australian Times.¹³ While in the south, Ibrahim received a telegram from Burhan Shahidi, his boss and former prison colleague, to recruit a class of students for the next school year at Xinjiang Institute/*xue yuan*, the predecessor of Xinjiang University. In each oasis, Ibrahim put up an advertisement for students, gave an exam, and, from the test takers, recruited a cohort of 200 young people to come to Urumqi for college. What began earlier in 1928 with the Tatar School moving to Urumqi, continued now with the recruiting, for the first time, of a province-wide class of students for the region's one institute of higher learning.¹⁴ Ibrahim noted that almost all of these students remained in Urumqi for their subsequent careers during the PRC era as they filled key leadership roles.

In Hotan, Ibrahim arranged for each student to be given a donkey for his journey north. There was a direct but difficult caravan route through the desert to Aqsu and then Būgūr. Ibrahim did not think one young fellow of 16, who passed the exam, could survive the trip. When he broke the news, the youth protested vigorously until Ibrahim relented. An older boy promised to look after him. The young fellow, Bahawidin Tohti, went on to become a professor of philosophy at the provincial level Communist Party School and retired in the mid-1990s. In the 1960s–70s, Bahawidin was later to repay Ibrahim's kindness by helping his family in many practical ways during the years Ibrahim was in prison.

The new students were assigned to the law, literature and medicine departments. The school leaders felt the medical students had to know English, so Ibrahim recruited a Tatar from Tianjin who had graduated from a Franciscan college there. The medical students also attended an English class organized by the United States Consulate which had opened in Urumqi in 1943.¹⁵ Ibrahim used his prison and Tashkent years to good advantage as he recruited many of his colleagues for positions at the Institute. Abdixukur Yalkun, who became a well-known writer, was one of the early teachers recruited by Ibrahim. After 1950, the Medical Department of the Institute was transformed into an Institute itself and re-located to the northern part of the city.

¹³One of the reporters, Barbara Stephen, died later that year in a plane crash in China. See footnote Linda Benson, *The Ili Rebellion*, 228.

¹⁴This focus on education was part of the early formation of a new cultural elite that was not tied to Islam. Ibrahim himself, with his Tatar education and training in the USSR, represents perhaps the earliest example of this new elite. During the PRC, the growth of this new class accelerated. Urumqi was to become the cultural center for Uighur intellectuals due to its educational centers, first represented by the Xinjiang Institute.

¹⁵During the Cultural Revolution, the authorities accused him of being a friend of America because of his warm friendship with William Paxton, the last US Consul. Ibrahim taught Uighur language classes to Paxton and Douglas McKiernan, the vice-Consul. Paxton replaced E.O. Clubb who resigned from the Foreign Service to teach at Columbia University. Oliver Clubb, *China and Russia: The Great Game Columbia University Press*, 1971, mentioned earlier in the article, is helpful background for the region.

The American Consul taught the men and his wife taught the women. Later, during the political movements of the 1950s/1960s, these students were accused of accepting imperialist propaganda. Ibrahim takes great pride that two of the students he recruited, Rahman and Rahim, went on to become the first Uighur full professors of medicine at the Xinjiang Medical College. The young doctors were forced to give up the active study of English in the 1950s, because of the anti-English bias that evolved out of the strong political link with the USSR, but later were able to use it as their second foreign language in their comprehensive exams.

One day, while working at the newspaper office, Ibrahim described a race riot that broke out in February 1947. Many people were killed or injured in inter-ethnic violence. Ibrahim was inside the walled city at the newspaper's offices, but escaped the violence through the kindness of a Han colleague who kept him hidden at home until the furor had passed.

In 1948, in his capacity as a journalist, Ibrahim traveled to Nanjing, where, one evening, he was a guest at the home of the Afghan ambassador. Several of the other Uighur guests had made the pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca. The joke that evening was: were they Hajjis from Mecca or Moscow? Many emerging Uighur leaders were making the 'pilgrimage' to Moscow at the time. The transition of urban Uighur society from an Islamic base to a secular base was well under way. In the 1990s, rural families who were moving to Urumqi for economic opportunities were reintroducing Islamic practices into the urban areas.¹⁶

After a year of work at the college, Ibrahim became vice-director of the Xinjiang Institute along with a Han teacher, Tu Zhi, who had studied in the US. Burhan was the college president, but was not involved in the day-to-day decisions of running the college. In 1948, a Russian took Ibrahim's place and he became the *mudir*, or director of the Language Institute. The languages taught included Russian, Chinese, Uighur and English.

It was in November of 1949 when the leaders of the still-extant Eastern Turkistan Republic (ETR), based in Ghulja (Ining), came to Urumqi in the flush of the PLA victory in the Chinese civil war and the establishment of the new Chinese state.¹⁷ There was a lot of resentment between Ibrahim and the Ili leaders. He said, '*Ular mini yaman kördi*', or, 'They hated me', apparently because Ibrahim choose not to take part in the ETR leadership structure. Accordingly, Burhan sent him to Beijing for safe keeping with a note of introduction to Zhou Enlai. He talks of Burhan as his *ustaz* or mentor. Sayfudin, a classmate from Tashkent and one of the ETR leaders, later became governor of Xinjiang in the 1950s and early 1960s. He admitted to Ibrahim in the mid-1990s that it was the right thing to oppose the Soviets in 1944–49 when they were backing the Ili Rebellion. He said, '*San yiraqni köridikensen*', or, 'You were able to see far into the future', and apologized for his bad treatment of Ibrahim during those early years of the PRC. Ibrahim mentioned that he did not join the Ili Rebellion because of his years in Tashkent in the 1930s, when he saw Stalin's reign of terror first hand, and then suffered five years in prison as a result of Soviet policy in Xinjiang.

¹⁶In March 1996, I met a Uighur household that lives less than 100 meters from Xinjiang University in the Tonggan Mahalla or Hui Neighborhood. The children, seeing I could speak Uighur, ran to get their Arabic primers. Their parents have chosen not to send the three school age children to school, but teach them a *madrassa* curriculum at home.

¹⁷For a detailed study of the 1944–49 independent state that challenged Republican Chinese authority in Xinjiang, see Linda Benson, *The Ili Rebellion*, 1990.

There were two other well-known intellectuals who took a similar anti-Soviet position, Abdurêhim Ötkür and Isa Yusuf Alptekin. Together they founded *Erkin* (*Freedom*), the newspaper Ibrahim worked for until 1949. The company also published the *Tien Shan Hua Bao* in several languages including Chinese, Uighur and Russian.

Beijing Years (1949–60)

In late 1949, an Asian women's conference (*au-yuan fu nu dai-biao hui*) was about to take place in Beijing, and Ibrahim was pressed into service as a translator. As such, Burhan's wife accompanied him. There were representatives from Syria, Iraq and Turkey who were without translators. Ibrahim helped them, and they were very pleased. When Zhou Enlai was told of Ibrahim's assistance to the foreign delegates, he was appreciative. Ibrahim and Anwar-apay had two children by the time of the Beijing sojourn.

Zhou Enlai kept Ibrahim in Beijing and found him a job at the State Nationalities Commission (*Dölet Milli Ishlar Komitêti*). He worked there for three years until the founding of the Minorities Press (*Milletler Neshriyati*) in 1955. At that moment in time, there was no Uighur language printing press in Beijing. There was an old press in Nanjing, which had been used by the Republican (GMD) government that was brought up to Beijing. Ibrahim was appointed the director of the Uighur language department at the new press. During Ibrahim's first years in Beijing, he went to Zhongnanhai, the elite PRC leader's compound, on three occasions to be a guest at Zhou Enlai's home. Ibrahim's family was among the first Uighur families to move to Beijing in the PRC era. Ibrahim recalled only one other Uighur family who had lived in the official residence of the King of Qumul (Hami). Slowly, other families began to trickle in as the Minority Press became more active.

Until the anti-Rightist movement of 1957, Ibrahim was able to work without political restraints. 'I worked without fear', or, '*men qorqmay ishlidim*', because 'I had Zhou Enlai behind me'. Zhou told him, 'You keep on working, I am here', or, '*Sen ishlewêr, men bar*'. Zhou told him to work boldly, without fear. Ibrahim said in admiration of Zhou, 'Zhou is a big-hearted man', or, '*Zhou qorsiqi keng adem*'.

During this period, Ibrahim was part of a larger team of scholars who helped prepare for publication an eighteenth century volume, *Besh Tilliq Lughet*, *Wu Ti Zi Dian*, or a Dictionary in Five Languages. The languages included Manchu, Tibetan, Mongolian, Uighur and Chinese. Facsimile copies were sold to academic libraries abroad that were very appreciative of the end result and wrote back letters of gratitude to the translation team. Unfortunately, Ibrahim and the other minority language editors were severely criticized for this particular project during the Cultural Revolution. They were physically beaten at mass meetings, often called struggle sessions, with the dictionary itself used as a weapon to inflict pain.

At the start of the 1957 anti-Rightist movement, Ibrahim said that he was aware of the current political currents, and did not take part in the '100 Flowers Blooming' discussions. The movement was relatively quiet by 1960 when Wang Feng, the head of the Minorities Press, came to him and said, 'You have not said much. Let's sit down the two of us and have a chat'. In their conversation, Ibrahim criticized the

leadership of the Press for what was known as ‘Great Han Chauvinism’, or the tendency for the Han leaders, as the most powerful ethnic group, to dominate the smaller ethnic groups. His remarks were taped, and Ibrahim was implicated in the anti-Rightist campaign after all. The very next day he was denounced as a Rightist, and arrested soon thereafter. Later, during the Cultural Revolution, Wang Feng was sent to Xinjiang where he served as the region’s Communist Party Secretary for two years. I asked why Wang Feng had it out for him, to which Ibrahim replied, ‘*Men uni tenqit qilghan*’, or, ‘I criticized him’, in their private interview noted above. I asked if Wang was angry, and Ibrahim replied, no; he very calmly wrote everything down, and after the interview made sure Ibrahim was branded a Rightist.

In the struggle sessions after his arrest, Ibrahim was criticized for intentionally distorting Mao’s work in his Uighur translation as well as producing ‘old books’ and reactionary literature. The Five Language Dictionary, which had been such a literary success in recent years, was now a reactionary document. One of Ibrahim’s colleague’s in the Press collected all the overseas telegrams from the academic institutions that had sent congratulations to Ibrahim and the translation team for their accomplishment. He gave these to Zhou Enlai, who then intervened on Ibrahim’s behalf. Zhou said these scholars should be praised and given awards, not punished. After that, the criticism stopped.

Ibrahim was placed in a labor camp together with Fei Xiaotong, perhaps China’s most well known social scientist. They were at a place called Nan Kou Mountain, near the Great Wall. The third well-known member of their group was Xing Gang, Peng Dehuai’s private secretary. They worked as shepherds. Ibrahim was reunited with Fei when he came to Urumqi in the late 1980s for lectures at the Xinjiang branch of the Academy of Social Sciences.

PRC prison years (1960–75)

At the time of his arrest in 1960, all six of Ibrahim’s children had been born. After his initial time in the labor camp, Ibrahim was placed in the Qing Number 1 Prison. Anwar-apay and his children were forced to move back to Urumqi, where the regional Publishing House gave them an apartment. The head of the work unit also was from Lükchün, Ibrahim’s home village, near Turpan. The home town connection was quite important and the help timely, as this man continued to look after Ibrahim’s family during these prison years. The 1960–63 famine years were particularly difficult when the family’s daily goal was simply to find enough food to stay alive.

Ibrahim’s class label was what he termed a ‘respectable rightist’ or ‘*hörmətlik youpai (ongchi)*’. This seems to be a special category for intellectuals. While in prison in Beijing, they were under the direct protection of Zhou Enlai. Ibrahim remembers the conditions as excellent. The cells were clean, the food was good, and prisoners were able to meet freely together. They also had unlimited reading privileges, and were able to request any type of book. In many ways, these years were like an extended graduate seminar. Ibrahim expressed gratitude for being able to experience these tranquil years.

Zhou Enlai had given an order that there was to be no violence against these intellectuals, and indeed there was none, until well into the Cultural Revolution. Among his fellow prisoners was Ye Du Jiang, a scholar who translated most of Darwin’s work into Chinese. Ibrahim remembered Jiang as being a personal friend

of Zhou's.¹⁸ Ibrahim said they all agreed amongst themselves that there was much good that came out of their time in prison.

As we have seen, from 1960–64, this group of 'respectable Rightists' were treated relatively well; the prison had orders to not let any of them die of violence. One day in 1964, all the professors, around 250, were rounded up and taken to the Yan Qing area, in the Beijing countryside. There they did physical labor, but nothing too strenuous, until 1967. After this time Zhou's authority was not enough to protect them and they were returned to the Number 1 Prison in Beijing. From 1967–69, Ibrahim and the other prisoners were organized to work in a rubber sandal factory within the prison.¹⁹ It was during these years that there were frequent struggle sessions and physical beatings. Ibrahim remembers the day when the current head of the Minority Press, Sha Kong Liao, dropped the Five Language Dictionary onto his head. The director of the Number 1 Prison repeatedly told them that their suffering inside the prison was nothing compared to what it would have been had they been on the outside.

In 1969, Jiang Qing gave the order to clear out all the political prisoners from Beijing's prisons. It was to be a 'clean' city, with all of the city's prisoners from outside Beijing sent to their own provinces. Ibrahim clearly enjoyed recounting his train journey back to Urumqi. The entourage included Ibrahim, another prisoner from Xinjiang, and five prison guards. The train was bursting with Red Guards getting a free ride back to Urumqi, but as soon as the young people wandered into Ibrahim's car and saw the two characters, *lao gai* (prisoner) on their prison uniforms, they quickly left, and the seven of them had the car to themselves for the rest of the journey.

In Urumqi, Ibrahim worked in the prison library, and began work on his masterpiece, a rendering into modern Uighur of Mamud Kashgari's cultural and linguistic dictionary, the *Diwani Lughat-it Turk*. In the final years of his incarceration, 1972–75, Ibrahim was allowed to see his family once a week.²⁰ What troubled Ibrahim the most during this period was the suffering of his children due to his criminal status. His oldest son was refused entry into university under the farmer-soldier-worker program because of his father's status.²¹ In 1973, Ibrahim wrote to Zhou Enlai, through Zhou's wife, and expressed how difficult it was to see his children miss out on opportunities due to his status.

After a week, a reply came back from Zhou, where he wrote, '*Ni bu gou pengyou . . .*', or 'you are not a good (enough) friend! Why have you not written? I could have sprung you loose much earlier. We did not know!'. Zhou asked a Beijing

¹⁸Also with him in prison was the young nephew of Singapore's former Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, a son of his older brother. He was accused of taking pictures of Da Zi Bao (politically inspired calligraphy hung from buildings) and selling them to the CIA. Young Lee was a student at Tianjin's Gong Ye Da Xue. He was in Ibrahim's small group during the Beijing prison years.

¹⁹The sandals were made for Vietnamese soldiers in the midst of their war with America. As a 6-footer, Ibrahim was given the job of working the steam press lever. He is quite proud that he became an expert on working the complicated levers and air pressure valves. It took 70,000 tons of pressure to produce the sandals.

²⁰Ibrahim's youngest son, who was born in 1958, was visibly upset when he first saw his father in Urumqi. It took his family some time to convince him that Ibrahim was, in fact, his father.

²¹In 1974 Xinjiang University accepted their first group of *dixan-esker-ishchi* or *nung-bing-gong* (farmer-soldier-worker) group of students. The 30+ who came to the Language department had only one student who had finished high school.

court to investigate Ibrahim's case. In 1975, the court verdict finally came: 'The whole affair was a terrible mistake. You have not done anything wrong'. Even then, Ibrahim's trials were not over. There was continued tension between Ibrahim and Sayfudin, the regional governor, so Ibrahim was sent to Korla, where he remained in internal exile until he received permission to return to Urumqi in 1979.

As he reflected over those years when he was an absent father, Ibrahim praised his wife for being a woman of good character, who raised their children on her own. At one point he said the children told themselves, 'Our father is in prison. If we mess up, we will receive very serious punishment. All right then, we will not go down the wrong road'. Therefore, they were very responsive to their mother's admonitions. During that particular conversation, Ibrahim turned to me, and said, 'Look at them, they have all turned out well. If I had not been in prison, they might have just thought about playing around, and not really grown up'.

Ibrahim also mentioned how his prisoner status brought out the true character of his friends and relatives. The test of character was simple: how did they treat his wife and children while he was in prison. Many who he considered his good friends deserted him by simply ignoring his wife and children. It was an act of civil disobedience to help the family of a political prisoner during those years. However, a whole network of relatives, home oasis friends, and former students and colleagues braved the risks involved and gave practical help during those difficult years.

One of the hardest times during Ibrahim's absence was the death of his oldest son in 1966. He was killed in a street battle between opposing factions in the early months of the Cultural Revolution, when a metal fragment struck him as he was dragging an injured friend to safety. Because of Ibrahim's political status, the young man was careful not to take sides, but dreamed of erasing the family's negative political status through a heroic act.²² He bled to death in the Number 3 hospital next to Xinjiang University. The armed conflict produced so many serious injuries there was not enough blood for a transfusion for the young man. He was 20. Ibrahim did not learn of his son's death until many years later when he was moved to Urumqi. Every time the family gathered to visit their father in prison, someone would cry because the oldest brother was not there. Anwar-apay would make up a story of why their son could not visit. Finally, a prison official told him the truth of his son's death. After recounting that story, Ibrahim mentioned again his belief that something good can come from evil. He mentioned that, due to his years in prison, he was spared the violence that ruined so many other lives. He shook his head at the irony of his innocent 20-year old son dying in the violence, while he, an older man with a bad class background, escaped relatively unharmed.

Speaking from the perspective of 1996, he said, '*Xudagha shükri, amanliq keldi*', or, 'Thanks be to God, peaceful times have come'. He highlighted that compared to past decades, there has been much improvement in both intellectual freedom and living standards.

Reflections

I want to reflect briefly on Ibrahim's development into one of the most important intellectuals of his era. His roots were firmly in his home village of Lükchün, near

²²I learned more about the eldest son's story through ongoing conversations with the younger siblings.

Turpan. During the 1990s, he returned once a year to visit relatives and partake of the sand baths that are beneficial to rheumatism. His Turpan relatives, in turn, visited Urumqi regularly and stayed with Ibrahim's family. His move to Urumqi at seven-years old, however, was probably the turning point of his life. Like thousands of other Urumqi Uighurs from a rural background, he came to the city to join an older sibling. The Tatar School relocating to Urumqi demonstrates that even in the late 1920s, Urumqi was starting to exert a pull that would begin to draw together a new Uighur cultural elite. The new elite began to draw nourishment from intellectual streams other than classical Islam, including the Jadidist (Modernist) reform movement spearheaded by the Kazan Tatars.

The Chinese cultural influence on Ibrahim's development as a young man was limited. He was fluent in Russian from his two years in Tashkent. It would not be until his early twenties, while in prison, that he would learn Chinese from his fellow prisoners. As a young man in Sheng Shicai's prison network, he encountered Han intellectuals for the first time, and slowly was able to read the wealth of material available in that language. In the late 1940s, in his capacity as a reporter for *Erkin*, Ibrahim was able to see much of the rest of China and expand his horizons through travel and personal contacts.

His ten years in Beijing in the first decade of the PRC era were certainly unique, as very few Uighurs had that opportunity. During this time, he traveled in the highest political and cultural circles of the capital. Yet, it was probably his second time in prison that was to have an even greater impact. Chinese domestic politics threw him together with some of the nation's foremost scholars in the Qing Number 1 Prison. With no other commitments or distractions, these scholars were able to read and discuss freely. It is not surprising that Ibrahim looked back to those days with a certain amount of wistfulness.

Yet, after the violent phase of the Cultural Revolution was over, Ibrahim started his life's work, translating Mahmud Kashgari's eleventh Century cultural dictionary. After over 20 years of interaction with the elite of China's intellectual community, Ibrahim was convinced that rendering this medieval work into modern Uighur was his most important intellectual contribution. Uighurs feel an emotional pride towards this dictionary in much the same way Egyptians feel pride in the pyramids and Americans in their constitution.

While there was much about Ibrahim that was extraordinary: his bravery in the midst of intense physical and emotional suffering, intellectual development in two different Chinese prisons, friendship with much of China's Han elite, and academic excellence in his work on two major collaborative projects; there was another side of him that was quite ordinary. He had a passion for his children and grandchildren, who all regard him with quite sincere love, fondness and respect.

He made use of his extensive network of contacts developed over the years to help his children in their careers. Upon his release from prison in 1975, he strategized with each child on how to get them back to Urumqi. Like many of their peers, Ibrahim's young adult children had been sent down (*xia fang*) to the countryside around Urumqi and needed official permission to return. Each of his five remaining children had been sent to a different village, and, because of their father's negative class background, several had been kept back in the village while their classmates were given residence permits and allowed to return to Urumqi.

In my larger study of the Uighur family, I demonstrate that it has been absolutely essential for elite parents to be involved in the process of seeing their children first

established in a post-secondary school, and then in a state-sector job.²³ Ibrahim was no an exception, he interceded successfully for both of his younger sons in their attempts to enter university. His oldest son lives at a huge chemical plant, 20 kilometers outside the city. Even though there are Uighur language schools there, the family decided that it was best for their daughter to go to an Urumqi school, so she lived with her grandparents and saw her parents on weekends. The strategy of having a grandchild live with the grandparents is quite common, especially for children in the younger years. In his retirement years his two daughters cared for him at his home in Urumqi. Since the early 2000s, Ibrahim has not been able to speak clearly, and was well looked after by his adult children until his death in January 2010. He is mourned by all who knew him.

Notes on the contributor

William Clark is currently a Visiting Scholar at University of Washington in Seattle, Washington, USA where he received his Ph.D in 1999. He taught English in Xinjiang for five years in the 1980s before beginning his graduate work. For most of the 2000s he and his family lived in Almaty, Kazakhstan where he, most recently, was a scholar in residence at the Oriental Institute at the Kazakh Academy of Science.

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