Conferences and Lecture Series

IFEAC Regional Conference, "Tengrism as a New Factor in the Construction of Identity"[1]

Almaty, Kazakhstan, February 25, 2005

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The French Institute for Central Asian Studies (IFEAC) held a regional conference on its premises in Almaty on the movement to promote Tengrism. It was attended by Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Tatar scholars. Tengrism can be defined as an intellectual and religious phenomenon found in Central Asia and Mongolia and among Turkic Muslim and Buddhist peoples in Russia. Its adherents aim to present Islam (and, to a lesser extent, Buddhism) as a foreign belief for these peoples and to rehabilitate the ancient cult of the god Tengri.

This movement appeared in the 1990s in Naberezhnye Chelny (Tatarstan) where the only Tengrist journal, *Bizneng yul*, is still published; from there it spread throughout Central Asia. The movement, which is so far minimally institutionalized, is however organizing itself: there is now in Bishkek a Tengrist society, "Tengir Ordo," which organized an international conference promoting Tengrism in 2003 and, in Almaty, a gallery of Tengrist paintings, "Tengri Umai." There are more and more articles about this topic in scholarly publications of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Proponents of this movement can be found in academic and artistic circles. They try to exert influence in political circles and have succeeded in spreading their concepts to political power holders. Evidence of the latter includes references that Kazakhstan President Nazarbaev and especially former Kyrgyzstan President Akaev have made to Tengrism as the Turks' national and natural religion.

Several scholars taking part in the IFEAC conference proposed in their papers a very nationalist conception of the role of Tengrism in Central Asian societies. Among the local specialists of this question, two scholars from the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of Kazakhstan, Napil Bazylkhan and Kenje Torlanbaeva, pointed out that Tengrism must be presented as monotheism: different gods would be only incarnations of the supreme God, Tengri. These scholars claim that Tengrism is a natural religion whose last traces can be found in shamanism. Proponents of Tengrism assert that this religion proposes a cosmogony which would perfectly match the contemporary world: it is an ecological religion and would invite man to live in harmony with nature; it advocates tolerance and accepts coexistence with other religions; it is an individualist religion, with no holy book, dogmas, interdiction, or prayers.

Nigmet Ayupov, Professor of Philosophy at the National Pedagogical University (Almaty, Kazakhstan) and Amanjol Kasabekov, Professor of Philosophy at the Academy of Law of Kazakhstan (Almaty) focused in their presentations on the cosmogonic aspects of contemporary Tengrism. They argued that Central Asian Tengrism can be viewed as a Turkic version of Russian neopaganism already present in intellectual circles in Russia. Slavic neopaganism also exists in Ukraine, and other forms of Tengrism can be found among Crimean Karaïts (Jews). The rehabilitation of Zoroastrianism in Tajikistan can also be included in this tendency. Indeed, by denying the universality of the main monotheist religions and by asserting that Islam would serve foreign interests, Tengrism constitutes the religious version of many Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Tatar nationalist discourses.

Zira Nauryzbaeva, editor of the culturological journal *Rukh-Miras*, published in Astana, Kazakhstan, promulgates the official discourse of

[1] The title of the conference in French was "Le tengrisme comme nouveau facteur de construction identitaire."

the government's program on "National Heritage." Her presentation echoed the journal's approach, which views Tengrism as an important part of contemporary nation building in Central Asia. That is, Tengrism is part of the current culturological movement that asserts the unique originality of a people, its presence on the national territory over several millenia, its ethnic continuity since antiquity, and its specific religious conceptions. Several supporters of Tengrism do not hide their political commitment, such as in Tatarstan, where Tengrists support the independence of the republic, or in Central Asia, where Tengrists support the "purification" of their countries of foreign influences coming from both Russia and the Middle East.

The movement to promote Tengrism is striking in its extreme instrumentalization of the religious idea, which is actually completely subjected to the nationalist feeling; for example, in her presentation, Zira Nauryzbaeva stressed the idea that religion can only be national: each people has its own religion. Nothing in the field of religion can be supranational. From this we can probably attribute the current spreading of Tengrism to the legacy of Soviet atheism: that is, certain nationalists searching for a strictly national system have difficulty accepting the Muslim or Christian message and prefer a so-called religion that has no regular ritual practices and theological foundation, and that exalts the nation and the motherland.

This conference gave rise to lively debates. For example, some Tengrism proponents challenged the IFEAC attempt to analyze this question scientifically and refused to accept the idea that Western researchers have the right to express their views on the phenomenon. They objected to any constructivist approach aiming to explain that identity referents are not "natural," voicing those objections first in the name of the "national 'authenticity' of Tengrism," and, second, because the Central Asian peoples are "recovering" today some ancient cultural elements after the Russian-Soviet "parenthesis."

Situating the Uyghurs between China and Central Asia

Center of Contemporary Central Asia and the Caucasus, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London University, London, UK, November 5-6, 2004

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Sixteen academics and scholars based in Europe, China, the United States, and Australia, who work on Uyghur culture and society from diverse perspectives, were invited to participate in this conference which was primarily funded through grants from the China and Inner Asia Council of the Association for Asian Studies (CIAC/CCK, Conferences in China and Inner Asia Studies Grants Program), and the British Academy, which supported travel and accommodation for two speakers.

To facilitate discussion during the event and feedback to the authors, papers were circulated among participants in advance. The conference — the first of its kind focusing on the Uyghurs to be held in the UK — attracted an unanticipated level of interest. More than 50 people audited the event, including students, members of the Uyghur community, academics, writers, and representatives of NGOs and the media. Speakers and auditors contributed to lively but always amicable discussion of presentations. Two extra presentations were included at short notice, the first by Jun Suguwara of the Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa in Tokyo, Japan, on a new Uyghur database; the second about a recent fieldwork trip around Xinjiang's Sufi shrines, with stunning photos by Lisa Ross, independent photographer from New York, and accompanying text by Alexandre Papas of the School of Social Sciences in Paris.

The tightly focused conference theme worked very well. A great deal of original research was presented in the course of the two days, and the cross-disciplinary and broad range of backgrounds

of the speakers produced many fascinating juxtapositions and contrasts. A paper by Laura Newby of Oxford University on Uyghur identity in the 19th century, drawing on Qing Dynasty sources, contrasted well with the work of Ablät Kamalov of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of Kazakhstan (Almaty) on the early Russian ethnographers and nation builders in the region. Gardner Bovingdon of Indiana University's Department of Central Eurasian Studies (USA) spoke on the diminishing possibilities for peaceful Uyghur opposition from within the Central Asian states, while Nicolas Becquelin of Human Rights in China (Hong Kong) discussed possibilities for the "betterment" of the Uyghurs within the Chinese state framework. Two speakers from Xinjiang University (Urumchi, China) — Rahilä Dawut and Asad Sulayman — showed how Uyghur intellectuals based within Xinjiang are pressing for small changes in concrete ways. Dawut's paper on Islamic shrines and tourism provoked particular interest. David Wang of the University of Queensland (Brisbane, Australia), formerly of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, produced some previously unreleased figures demonstrating the disparities in income and living standards between the different ethnic groups in the region.

A paper by Joanne Smith from the University of Newcastle upon Tyne on ethnography of identity formation among Chinese-educated Uyghurs in Xinjiang contrasted with that of Sean Roberts of the United States Agency for International Development on Uyghur communities in Kazakhstan. And a presentation by Ildikó Bellér-Hann of Martin Luther University in Germany on ritual practices across the wider region provided a useful framework for the fieldwork-based study of Edmund Waite of the Institute of Education, London University (UK), on the rise of orthodox forms of Islam. Rachel Harris of SOAS provided a survey of musical traditions across the region, while independent scholar Cristina Cesàro of Italy demonstrated the complex interplay of Chinese influences and Uyghur identity formation in the sphere of food culture. In addition, Arienne Dwyer of the University of Kansas, USA, provided insight into local Uyghur identities through the lens of language usage. And Michael Friederich of Bamberg University (Bamberg, Germany) considered new trends in contemporary Uyghur literature, while Nathan Light of the University of Toledo (Ohio, USA) argued that shifting metaphors used by Uyghur writers reflect shifts in Uyghur cultural identity.

In seeking to answer the question of how far Chinese rule has succeeded in disembedding the Uyghurs from the Central Asian cultural context and integrating them into China, the Uyghurs' "in-between-ness" was explored through the varied dynamics of historical and contemporary sociocultural assumptions and practices. The strong attendance and lively discussions following the delivery of each paper, together with the generally positive atmosphere, testify that the conference succeeded in its aim of promoting dialogue across national and disciplinary borders, bringing together Xinjiang specialists who have hitherto worked in relative isolation and narrowing the chasm of perspectives between Sinology and Central Asian studies.