


THE EASTWARD MIGRATION FESTIVAL: CONSTRUCT THE “LES
LIEUX DE MEMOIRE” OF YUGUR SOCIETY

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Tao Hong-yu

Gansu University of Political Science and Law,
Lanzhou 730070, China

Abstract: *The “Eastward Migration Festival” is an emerging festival initiated by Yugur scholars, with the collective participation of the masses, and held in some areas of the Yugur, now held four times. As it carries the collective heritage of the Yugur people, the “Eastward Migration Festival” draws on Pierre Nora’s theory of “Les Lieux de Memoire”, and explains why the “Eastward Migration Festival” activity has become the “Les Lieux de Memoire” of Yugur society from three aspects: history, symbol and narrative.*

Key words: *The Eastward Migration Festival, Les Lieux de Memoire, history, symbol, narrative*

These are revealed when I listen to the elderly chant:

Xizhi-Hazhi is the hometown of our ancestors.

Xizhi-Hazhi is under the towering snow-capped mountains,

There is a rich and beautiful place.

There has an endless grassland,

The grassland is full of tents of Yugur people.

...(Xue Li, 1989, p.27)

This is an ancient song of the Yugur people sung in northwestern China. The lyrics roughly tell us the Yugur people’s nostalgia for the place of origin of the ethnic group—Xizhi-Hazhi and the past nomadic life on the grasslands. Without a stable place to live, migration is the daily reminder of this life.

As a unique ethnic minority in Gansu, the Yugur people mainly live in the northern foothills of the Qilian Mountains and the middle section of the Hexi Corridor, which is roughly equivalent to the current Zhangye Sunan Yugur County and Jiuquan Huangnibao Yugur Township. Due to some historical reasons, the Yugur character has been lost, but its language—Eastern Engel (belongs to the Mongolian of the Altaic language family) and Western Yaohur (belongs to the Turkic of Altaic language family)—has been preserved and is still used and passed down to the people. Taking the Hexi Corridor as the boundary, grassland nomadic culture and farming culture have been intertwined here for ages. Multi-ethnic cultures such as Han, Tubo, Turkic, Mongolian have mingled here for a long time, and the Ganzhou

Huihu, an ancestor of the Yugur ethnic group, has been active here for a long time. This makes the present Yugur culture a complex and diverse feature. That is, a cultural community of “one source with multiple streams” formed by the ancient Huihu culture as the main body and the integration of Mongolian, Tibetan, Han and other cultural elements.

Looking back on the development of various nations in the world (such as the North American Indians, the Adiges of the Russian Federation) for any minority group in a diverse and heterogeneous culture, the self-protection and survival of its group culture is based on the premise of concealment, compromise, acceptance of mainstream culture, and integration into mainstream society, and can be recalled and documented to a certain period of time. Under the identity of the Chinese national cultural community, the Yugur nationality and other nationalities also added their own cultural elements when celebrating traditional festivals. Examples: Spring Festival ritual supplies “Shringle” (什灵勒), Dragon Boat Festival custom “Hang Jujube Flowers”. Some religious festivals also take place, such as “Sacrifice Olue” (祭乌垒), “New Year Lom” (正月法会) etc. The holding of so many festivals has always been unavoidable for the homogeneity of the festival culture of other ethnic groups in the surrounding area.

Based on this, an exclusive festival initiated by local scholars of the Yugur and participated in the construction of folk groups with the theme of reminiscing the origin of the ethnic and with unique ethnic characteristics—The “Eastward Migration Festival”—was officially established on June 10th, 2017 and has been held for four years. However, how to make such a new festival become a tradition and gain the recognition and inheritance of the whole nation is still a difficult problem for the Yugur people. This article attempts to use the “Les Lieux de Memoire” theory of French historian Pierre Nora, takes the “Eastward Migration Festival” as the research topic and starting from the three dimensions of history, symbolism and narration, it expounds the possibility of constructing the “Eastward Migration Festival” into a “Les Lieux de Memoire” of the Yugur society.

Historical Dimension: The historical basis of the “Eastward Migration Festival”

The “Les Lieux de Memoire” is a new theory put forward by French scholar Pierre Nora in the face of the decline of traditional French nationalism in the 1970s. Unlike the historical research which has over-examined what has happened in the past, the “Les Lieux de Memoire” is about another kind of history, that is, an analysis of the collective memory that connects the present with the past and is carried by the reality of French society. In Nora’s words, it is to “use the ‘Les Lieux de Memoire’ to perform an operation on France”. (Pierre Nora, 2020, p.85) This theory provides a new theoretical perspective and theoretical support for the author to construct and study the “Eastward Migration Festival” in light of the “Les Lieux de Memoire”.

The eastward migration is a major event in the history of the Yugur, related to the formation of its ethnic group and the expression of the psychological identity of ethnic group members. The “Xizhi-Hazhi” in the ancient song mentioned in the beginning of this article is the starting point of the Yugur people's eastward migration, and it also symbolizes the memory that carries the feelings of the ancestors of the Yugur people. Historically, the eastward migration of the Yugur people, which can be verified by historical documents, has occurred twice over 144 years. The first migration was due mostly to normal military transfers in the 10th year of Emperor Hongwu of the Ming Dynasty (AD 1377), the Sha Zhou, Chi Jin and Han Dong Zuo Wei tribes moved eastward to Nanshan in Ganzhou. The second migration was primarily tribal fleeing and took place in the 7th year of Emperor Zhengde of the Ming Dynasty (AD 1512), An Ding, Qu Xian, A Duan and Han Dong Wei moved east to the upper reaches of the Shule River.

Sha Zhou Wei was established in the 2nd year of Emperor Yongle of the Ming Dynasty (AD 1404), and was located in the old land of Shazhou County (now Dunhuang City). In the 10th year of Emperor Xuande of the Ming Dynasty (AD 1435), it was moved to Kuyu (now Anxi territory). In the 11th year of the Emperor Zhengtong of the Ming Dynasty (AD 1446), Sha Zhou Wei was moved to Nanshan, Ganzhou.

Chi Jin Wei was established in the 8th year of Emperor Yongle of the Ming Dynasty (AD 1410), located to the western of Jiayuguan. During the reign of Emperor Chenghua of the Ming Dynasty, it was an important military force in the Ming Dynasty against Turpan. In the 8th year of Emperor Zhengde of the Ming Dynasty (AD 1513), Chi Jin Wei led the tribe to migrate to Nanshan, Suzhou.

In the 15th year of Emperor Chenghua in the Ming Dynasty (AD 1479), Han Dong Zuo Wei separated from Han Dong Wei and became independent, was located in the old city of Shazhou. In the 11th year of Emperor Zhengde of the Ming Dynasty (AD 1516), Han Dong Zuo Wei moved eastward to the territory of Suzhou for self-protection.

An Ding Wei was first established in the 8th year of Emperor Hongwu of the Ming Dynasty (AD 1375), was located in the Ruoqiang county. In the 10th year of Emperor Hongwu of the Ming Dynasty (AD 1377), due to the civil strife, the guard was forced to disband. Later, An Ding Wei was re-established in Saali Uguer (撒里畏兀尔) area. In the 7th year of Emperor Zhengde of the Ming Dynasty (AD 1512), An Ding Wei was broken, part of it moved to the Bazidun grassland with Han Dong Wei, while others moved up to the upper reaches of the Heihe River valley against the Shule River.

Qu Xian Wei was first established in the 4th year of Emperor Hongwu of the Ming Dynasty (AD 1371), was located in the western of An Ding Wei (the Lop Nur area). Later, due to the civil strife, the guard was forced to disband. In the 4th year of Emperor Yongle of the Ming Dynasty (AD 1406), Qu Xian Wei was restored, and was

located in the Yao Wang Tan (the northern shore of Gaskule Lake in the northwest of Qinghai Province). In the 9th year of Emperor Chenghua of the Ming Dynasty (AD 1473), it was attacked by Turpan. Its tribe was divided into two parts, some of them were captured to Turpan, the other fled to the north of the Qaidam Basin, and then moved to the interior with A Duan Wei.

A Duan Wei was established in the 8th year of Emperor Hongwu of the Ming Dynasty (AD 1375), was located in the Tيير Valley (near Qiemo, Xinjiang). In the 10th years of Emperor Hongwu of the Ming Dynasty (AD 1377), due to the civil strife, the guard was forced to disband. Its tribes later scattered among Qu Xian Wei. In the 4th year of Emperor Yongle of the Ming Dynasty (AD 1406), A Duan Wei was re-established, was located in the south bank of Gaskule Lake. In the 9th year of Emperor Chenghua of the Ming Dynasty (AD 1473), it was attacked by Turpan, and the tribes fled eastward to the interior.

Han Dong Wei was established in the 30th year of Emperor Hongwu in the Ming Dynasty (AD 1397), which was located in the Shazhou City. From the 22nd year of Emperor Yongle of the Ming Dynasty (AD 1424) to the 18th year of Emperor Chenghua of the Ming Dynasty (AD 1482), Han Dong Wei gained a lot of military exploits and flourished for a while. From the reign of Emperor Chenghua of the Ming Dynasty to the middle of Emperor Hongzhi of the Ming Dynasty, it began to decline. In the 9th year of Emperor Zhengde of the Ming Dynasty (AD 1514), Han Dong Wei was broken again. Among them, the Zhidan tribe moved inward and later moved to Ganzhou, while the other minions remained in their original places. In the 18th year of Emperor Wanli of the Ming Dynasty (AD 1590), Zheng Luo resettled Han Dong Wei again, and later they also moved inland.

“For us, the past is a completely different something else. A world that has been cut off from us forever. Our memory expresses its authenticity by showing the distance from us—It's like a one-cut operation.” (Pierre Nora, 2020, p.20) In history, the two eastward migrations of the Qiwei outside Jiayuguan in the Ming Dynasty were exactly the process of forming the Yugur tribe today. The Ganzhou, Suzhou, Bazidun and Shule Rivers where Qiwei's tribes migrated are exactly the Hexi Corridor where the Yugur people live today. The past eastward migration history connects the Yugur people's emotional connection between the past and the present reality. The festival—The “Eastward Migration Festival”—presents the essence of the ethnic group's historical memory of the Yugur ancestors. Through the holding of the festival, members have a common experience, expectations and behavior space, which strengthens the identity of ethnic group members who share this memory.

Symbolic Dimension: The Sacrifice presented in the memory of The Eastward Migration

“The weaker the internalized experience of memory, the more it needs external support and tangible symbolic goods of existence. This existence can only continue through these symbolic goods.” (Pierre Nora, 2020, p.13-14) In holding the “Eastward

Migration Festival” activities, there are many such symbolic goods that contain the inner experience of the ethnic group, such as a Mani pole (玛尼杆), a soderger (扫德尔) and camel hair rope (驼毛绳). It is these sacrificial objects with sacred significance that create the structure of the entire ritual and achieve the established goal of commemorating the ancestors and give the essences of family and country as much as possible.

Mani pole. In ancient times, a wooden magic pole is used for sacrificial ceremonies by nomads, it is often found in the northwest minority areas where shamanism remains. In the religious concept of the Yugur people, the Mani pole is a special symbol of the god “Khandinger” (Yugur's name for the gods). It is a flag pole wrapped with various colored cloth strips and hairy spikes. In the past, it was erected on the west-side of the graveyard of every household, meaning good luck. In the “Eastward Migration Festival” ceremony, the decorations carried by this flag pole and the meaning expressed are more abundant: Before the festival begins, the pious Yugur villagers build a Mani poles on the sand dunes to the northwest of Xihaizi Lake. There, 66 prayer flags are hung around it. The outside of the prayer flags are wrapped around a camel hair rope connected by eight wooden posts. Seen from a distance, the entire image of the Mani pole presents an irregular “pyramid” shape. At the festival, people circle around the Mani pole. During this period, there will be prayer behaviors such as throwing wine and milk on the land, throwing fengma flags (风马旗) in the air. The ritual process came to an end after three rounds of the Mani pole. In addition, people simmer mulberries at the simmering platform in front of the Mani pole. As an externalized marker of the common beliefs of the Yugur people, the Mani pole provides an object and ritual for the maintaining the identity and collective memory of ethnic members.

Soderger. A special food made by filling beef or sheep heart or stomach minced meat and fried noodles. It is an important sacrifice in the fire ritual. The introduction of this festival element came from a traditional folk gathering called “Yangwente” (雅恩格温特) (also called “Yengwente” 叶恩格温特) by the Yugur people before the 1950s. It is basically about a meeting of several families. Each family will prepare wine and food, and choose a wild meal with rich water and plants. Burning “soderger” is an essential part of it, which is equivalent to a picnic activity for modern residents. According to the elders’ memories, “Hundreds of years ago, a war swept through the homes of the Yugur people. In distress, the old people had to be left behind, while the young and middle-aged people led the people to migrate, and finally came here. The ‘soderger’ burned on ‘Yangwente’ is to commemorate them.” Nowadays, the “Yangwente” event is not common anymore, but its core elements are reflected in the “Eastward Migration Festival”. Participants in the sacrificial ceremony must slice the cooked “soderger” prepared in advance and throw them into the fire on the west-side of the Mani pole. The West being in the direction of their hometown—the direction of Xizhi-Hazhi.

Camel hair rope. A rope woven from camel hair. The Yugur people generally believe that this kind of rope is divine, so people often use it to worship the sky and worship the gods. Over time, it has evolved into a “hair rope” belief custom, which has been passed down until today. As for why they did not choose other animals and only gave camel hair such noble meaning, this is probably related to the geographical environment of the Yugur people living in the desert and Gobi for a long time, and their natural dependence on the camel, a drought-tolerant desert animal. It is also because of the feelings for the camel in the folk tale “12 Chinese Zodiac” that the image of the camel is further sacred being a combination of the unique physical characteristics and abilities of the Chinese zodiac. In the “Eastward Migration Festival”, the Mani pole is surrounded by camel hair ropes, which not only facilitates the people to worship Hada, but also carries the same sacred meaning of offering sacrifices to the “god” as the Mani pole.

After the sacrificial ceremony is over, the young people usually invite the elderly to join the event to eat in a tent which is built in advance, they will toast and sing for the elderly. The elderly will also talk about the past for everyone. After the meal, there are mass singing and dancing performances full of Yugur characteristics, and there is a bonfire party with celebrating when the night falls. On the day of the festival, Xihaizi Lake becomes an enthusiastic carnival venue. In such a field as the “Eastward Migration Festival”, “Group and space constitute an organic community on the level of symbolic meaning”, (Jan Assmann, 2015, p.32) With the help of the reification of the deceased homeland, people have reconstructed a space for “communication” with the ancestors in their memory, and adhere to this community recognized by the ethnic group.

Narrative Dimension: The “Eastward Migration Festival” and Folklore

“The nutritional source of memory is obscure, mixed, general, wandering, individual or symbolic memories, which are easily affected by various empathy, shielding, suppression and projection.” (Pierre Nora, 2020, p.6) This conscious overall planning and flexible handling of the past has been more fully utilized in the oral presentations of the people. Among the people, they tend to include things which happened in history, or things that have not happened but were added to history by imagination, and they are all incorporated into narrative works such as myths, legends, stories and folk songs, to construct a “historical memory” about the group or shared among group members. Nowadays, the Minghua Township area where the Yugur people live is still telling the legends of the “Eastward Migration” handed down from their ancestors. They are the foundation of the basic emotions of the Yugur people. The author has compiled a legend of the “Eastward Migration” that has been included in the book “Research on Western Yugur Language” (Chen zongzhen, 2004, p.365), it was narrated by Zhong Tiancheng and An Liren in Minghua Township, translated by Chen Zongzhen. The excerpt is as follows:

A. Migrate to tʃenfudu (千佛洞) and vanfuʃa (万佛峡): There were more than 100,000 Yugur ancestors who believed in Buddhism in the early years. They followed the tribe Khan from the Xizhi-Hazhi to the sunrise mountain, and finally settled in tʃenfudu and vanfuʃa.

B. B.Khan snatches Ketun (可敦, The ancient Uighurs 回鹘 called the queen): The head of the Yugur tribe bribed Geser's uncle, a monk named Chaoden, and successfully snatched Ketun from Geser (格赛尔).

C. Geser rescues Ketun: Geser fought our leader for three days and three nights, killing more than 100,000 people, but Ketun was rescued and the leader was killed.

D. Abandoned old man: The head of Toxʃi (妥氏) negotiated to leave the two old men, Ton Maier Gai (妥恩麦尔盖) and Yang Ni Duoren (杨尼多仁), the others continued to move to the place where the entigen (兔儿条) and julyəm (红柳) grow.

E. Take the old man away secretly: A pair of parents gave birth to seven sons. They secretly packed their old man into a box and took them away.

F. Bull find water: According to the old man's idea, the young men found water from where the bull was digging the soil and saved the tribe.

G. Short shoes (短靴鞋, The Yugur people's earlier called to the Han people): The tribes went to the area of the short-shoed people and lived there.

H. Entigen (兔儿条) and julyəm (红柳): People found Entigen and julyəm, those with livestock lived in the mountains, and those without livestock lived on the flat ground.

I. Tribute gifts to Lanzhou: Local officials in Lanzhou regarded them as rebels and asked them for tributes such as horses and Buddha beads. The officials gave them tea. They were granted permanent residency rights.

J. Give official positions and clothes to Yugur: Lanzhou officials asked the old man's seven sons to be the leader of the Yugur area and let the old man be the Chiefleader, and gave the old man a yellow mantle.

The similar legends can also be found in the book “Discourse Materials in Eastern Yugur Language”. (Bao Chaolu, Jia Laseng, 1988, p.225) The content is roughly the same as the above, but the details are increased or decreased: Added plots such as “A tribe named An as the leader”, “Compete with the red-hat people”, “Rely on the color of the hat to distinguish the tribe” etc, while details such as “Tribute gifts to Lanzhou”, “Exchange tea and horses” and “Give official positions and clothes to Yugur” have been deleted.

“The most important part of ‘historical memory’ or ‘foundation history’ is the initial part of this ‘history’. That is, the common ‘origin history’ of the ethnic.” (Wang Mingke, 2001, p.138) Reflecting these common historical memories through oral forms such as folklore will inevitably appear to be untrue, absurd, or even contrary to

history. But if they are placed in a specific situation, it is enough to give us a deeper understanding of the historical memory and social culture of this nation or ethnic group. From a certain perspective, the above-mentioned legend about eastward migration seems to be a conscious choice of Yugur folks, but it is integrated with the history of “Eastward migration” in terms of content. And it strengthens the emotional connection with “Xizhi-Hazhi”—the “hometown” in the memory of this ethnic group—in people's continuous narration activities. It provides rationality for the construction of the “Eastward Migration Festival” and also provides “legitimacy” for the people's sacrificial behavior.

CONCLUSION

The existence of a festival culture is an effective way to gather ethnic identity and inherit/preserve ethnic culture. With the rapid development of modern civilization and the disappearance of ethnic minority cultures, the establishment of a comprehensive group activity that integrates traditional beliefs, folklore, and entertainment for the Yugur people, who have a small population and have no language, seems especially urgent. The “Eastward Migration Festival” emerging in local areas of the Yugur is exactly the product of the beneficial collision between the elite thoughts of the Yugur tribe and the folk wisdom. The conception of its establishment originated from the historical facts of the “Eastward Migration” in history, the sacrifices of the event were taken from symbols with the symbolic meaning of Yugur people's belief and its “legal rationality” was strengthened in the continuous oral narration of the people. Through the holding of the “Eastward Migration Festival”, a “Les Lieux de Memoire” belonging to all the Yugur people has been constructed. In this common field, the emotional exchanges between ethnic groups have been further shortened, and the Yugur people's sense of identity and self-confidence in their own ethnic culture have also been further enhanced.

COMMENT

Xizhi-Hazhi (西志-哈至), a place name. There is no record in history books, only found in Yugur folklore. As for what it specifically refers to, there are different opinions among scholars such as Khotan, Kashgar, Hami and Gaochang. In recent years, the statements of Shazhou and Guazhou are more common.

Shringle (什灵勒), Yugur language. It is a pagoda-shaped sacrificial product made with a mixture of ghee and fried noodles, sometimes red jujubes added for decoration.

Bazidun Grassland (八字墩草原), a place name. Located in the northwest of Qilian County and Tianjun County, Qinghai Province today. It is the upper reaches of the Heihe River, the upper reaches of Tuolai River and Shule River.

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