

Dossier monografico

From Barbarians to Citizens: Shifting Representations of the Salar Myth of Origin in Media *

di Mario DE GRANDIS
The Ohio State University

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Riassunto: Il presente articolo esamina le rappresentazioni di «La Sorgente del Cammello», il mito di fondazione dei Salar. Secondo questo mito, gli antenati dei Salar giunsero in Cina nel quattordicesimo secolo affrontando un lungo viaggio lungo la Via della Seta. Nei secoli, questo leggendario viaggio ha trovato espressione in varie forme e media. L'articolo analizza il significato politico alla base delle divergenti rappresentazioni del mito negli ultimi due secoli.

Abstract: The Salars, as many groups of Muslim Chinese, have long been framed as foreign *others* on the margins of Chinese society. Since the early Tang dynasty many of these groups, in fact, reached China traveling from the Middle East and Central Asia along the network of routes referred as the Silk Roads. Not surprisingly, the theme of travel figures prominently in the vast corpus of Muslim Chinese's oral and written folk narratives. The myth «Camel Spring» (*luotuo quan*) narrates the thirteenth century migration of the Salar ancestors from the Samarkand area to Alitiuli, in present-day Qinghai Province. Oral accounts of this myth have circulated for centuries among the Salars and their neighboring communities. Earlier extant written records of the myth – most likely related by Tibetans or Han Chinese narrators – portray the Salars as barbarians, a representation echoed in official Qing documents. After Mao's demise and even more prominently since the early 1980s, public institutions and local-Qinghai entrepreneurs have purged negative portrays of the Salars and favored more sympathetic representations of the «Camel

* I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for suggestions that helped me improve the article substantially.

Spring» in written, visual, and more recently digital media to pursue State and market-oriented agendas. These representations of the «Camel Spring» are indeed geared at both validating the State-assigned designation of the Salars as a distinct ethnic minority (*shaoshu minzu*) and at generating profit for the local tourist industry. To these ends, representations of the «Camel Spring» have tended to emphasize both the Salars' foreign origin and their long permanence in China. Thus, I suggest, the case of the Salars counters pre-modern representations of ethnic minorities as barbarians. No longer framed as Muslim *others*, the Salars are represented as a *Chinese* group that can bridge China to Central Asia. This discourse has become prominent especially after the launch of the Belt Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. At the same time, the insistence on selected ethnic features – most apparent from the almost ubiquitous inclusion of stereotypical elements reminiscent of the Salar ancestors' travel on the Silk Road – folklorizes the Salars positioning them as foreign others.

Keywords: Salar; Camel Spring; Chinese ethnic minorities

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Introduction

The process of reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping involved the valorization of local, regional, and ethnic folk traditions to reinvigorate the official ethnic rhetoric of China as a «unified, multiethnic country» (*tongyi duominzu de guojia*) and, at the same time, to create cultural and economic exchanges with countries and groups related to China. This article focuses on the processes of representation of the Salars, an officially recognized ethnic group with an ethno-religious Islamic heritage. In particular, the article looks at the narratives surrounding the promotion of the «Camel Spring» – the myth of origin central in the processes of the Salar ethnic-identification – and at the rhetoric surrounding the myth as a narrative to foster international relations with the origin region of Salars' ancestors.

The «Camel Spring» traces the origins of the Salars to legendary travelers from the Samarkand area who reached China in the fourteenth century. Based on a widespread version of the myth, most of the Chinese scholarship claims that the Salar ancestors reached Alitiuli in 1370¹.

A central character of the myth is the white camel that carries across the desert a priceless handwritten copy of the Koran. The camel travels along with the two noble brothers – Garaman and Ahkman – and a group of men. Variants of this myth have circulated for centuries in form of oral narratives². Because of the absence of an indigenous Salar script, until very recently the myth did not find expression in written form. The earliest textual reference to the myth was, according to available sources, published in 1878 by the British explorer and diplomat Robert Barkley Shaw³. In the early 1950s, references to the myth began to appear in accounts by Chinese ethnographers⁴ and in historical overviews of the Salar ethnic group⁵. With no doubt, around this time the «Camel Spring» has become a staple in the State's representation of the Salar's culture⁶. A performed

¹ *Salazu jianshi* 撒拉族简史, Xining, Qinghai renmin chubanshe, 1982, p. 9.

² T. SAGUCHI, *Historical development of the Sarig Yughurs, Memories of the Tōyō Bunko*, vol. 44, 1986, pp. 1-26.

³ R.B. SHAW, *On the Hill Canton of Sálár: The Most Easterly Settlement of the Turk Race*, in « *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* », 10 (1878), pp. 305-316.

⁴ S. SONG 宋蜀华, L. WANG 王良旁, *Guanyu Salazu lishi laiyan de wenti* 关于撒拉族历史来源的问题, in « *Zhongguo minzu yanjiu jikan* 中国民族问题研究集刊 », (1957).

⁵ For instance see, *Salazu jianshi*, 1982.

⁶ R.W. WEINER, *In the Footsteps of Garamann or Han Yinu? Rebellion, Nationality, Autonomy, and Popular Memory among the Salar of Xunhua County*, in M. P. HILLE, B. HORLEMANN, P. KOCOT NIETUPSKI (eds.), *Muslims in Amdo Tibetan Area: Multidisciplinary Approaches*, Lanham, MD, Lexington Books, 2015, p. 52.

version of the myth was, for instance, selected for exhibition at the 1954 «National Show of Ethnic Minorities' Song and Dances» held in Beijing⁷. Rebellions in the Salar area brought to an almost complete stall in the promotion of Salar culture for the remaining part of the Mao era. Only starting with the early 1980s – as a consequence of changes in the ethnic policies – local authorities also sponsored the restoration of practices, locations, and artifacts associated to the Salar's myth of origin⁸. Full-length accounts of the «Camel Spring» appear in folk literary anthologies geared at the promotion of the Salar culture. In 1994, a stage performance of the *döye oyna* – a type of play that relates the Salar's migration – has been reenacted in occasion of the 40th anniversary of the establishment of the Xunhua Salar Autonomous County (XSAC, hereafter)⁹. In addition to the State's intervention, the myth has also been ingrained in a wide-array of commercial and popular practices. In 2008, under the entrepreneurial leadership of Han Youchong – a Salar himself – the location associated with the arrival of the Salar's ancestors in Alitiuli has been renovated to attract domestic and international tourism¹⁰. The icon of the white camel appears also

⁷ ZHONGGUO MINZU MINJIAN WUDAO JICHENG BIANJIBU 中国民族民间舞蹈集成编辑部编, *Zhongguo minzu minjian wudao jicheng* – Qinghaijuan 中国民族民间舞蹈集成–青海卷, Beijing, Zhongguo ISBN zhong xin, 2001, p. 672.

⁸ D.S.G. GOODMAN, *Exile as Nationality: The Salar of Northwest China*, in P. ALLATSON, J. MCCORMACK (eds.), *Exile Cultures, Misplaced Identities*, New York, Rodopi, 2008, p. 67.

⁹ J. MA, K. STUART, *Stone Camels and Clear Springs': the Salar's Samarkand origins*, in «*Asian Folklore Studies*», vol. 55, 2 (1996), p. 289.

¹⁰ X. YU 于晓陆, *Xiaoying bafangke de Salaren 笑迎八方客的撒拉人*, in *Zhongguo Shaoshu minzu wenshi ziliao shuxi Salazu Bainian Shilü (xia)* 《中国少数民族文史资料书系 撒拉族百年实录 下》, QUANGUO ZHENGXIE WENSHI HE XUEXI WEIYUANHUI, QINHAI SHENG XUEXI HE WENSHI

in children books¹¹ and in videos of pop-songs¹². Through the rhetoric surrounding and upholding the «Camel Spring», top-down interventions combined with grassroots initiatives have propagated internal-orientalistic representations of the Salars as a «colorful» ethnic minority inclined to dance and sing. At the same time, representations of the «Camel Spring» have also re-framed the Salars as an integral component of the *zhonghua minzu*, the Chinese multi-ethnic State.

The framing of the Salar culture as «ethnic» and «Chinese» fits into the post-Mao attempts to promote provincial regions. Tim Oakes has argued that these strategies to forge identities claiming «a foundation on ancient, unique, and attractive regional cultures that, at the same time, can be called upon to spur a dynamic, innovative entrepreneurialism and sense of self-confidence» are especially common in «China's interior»¹³. This rhetoric of selecting an «ancient, unique, and attractive» local element – a myth of origin, in this case – to appeal to a broader audience is clearly at play in the promotion of the Salars. The group is primarily located in the XSAC, in the southeast of Haidong Prefecture of Qinghai Province. This area has long been poorly connected with the rest of China as the absence of a paved road until 1972 attests¹⁴. Promoting the regional/ethnic myth of

WEIYUANHUI (eds.), 全国政协文史和学习委员会, 青海省政协学习和文史委员会编惠爱宁, Beijing, Zhongguo wenshi chubanshe, 2015, pp. 392-393.

¹¹E. MU 牧二, *Salazu 撒拉族*, Beijing, Waiyu jiaoxue yu yanjiusuo chubanshe, 2011.

¹² «On the Shore Camel Spring» *luotuan quan bian*, URL (accessed 11/5/2018), <<https://tv.sohu.com/v/dXMvMjYzMjg4NTQzLzgwODEzMDExLnNodG1s.html>>

¹³ T. OAKES, *China's Provincial Identities: Reviving Regionalism and Reinventing «Chineseness»*, in «The Journal of Asian Studies», vol. 59, 3 (2000), p. 675.

¹⁴ GOODMAN, *Exile as Nationality*, p. 61.

the «Camel Spring» has been an effective strategy to assert a place for the Salars within China.

Weiner has commented in passing that the State-promotion of the myth is a form of folklorization¹⁵. The scholarship about this phenomenon has put great emphasis «on the corrupting and stifling effects of a process that promotes external agendas at the expense of local creativity¹⁶». The analysis of representations of the «Camel Spring» questions this one-sided interpretation of folklorization as an eroding practice. On the one hand, folklorized representations of the «Camel Spring» have replicated the stereotypical representations of ethnic minorities emphasizing their carefree attitude to life mirrored in the ubiquitous representations of ethnic minorities in colorful outfits, and enjoying music and dances. On the other hand, the folklorization of the Salar culture has also contributed to counter-balance the group's stereotypical representations as barbarians confined to remote regions. After the launch of the Belt Road Initiative (BRI, hereafter), a variety of local, national and foreign institutions deployed the myth of the «Camel Spring» with the stated goal of bolstering cooperation between the Salar – the ethnic group being framed as *part of* or even a *representative* of China – and their land of origin. Elevating a local myth to the attention of national and international audiences signals a shift in the representation of Muslim Chinese, traditionally segregated at the margins of Chinese society. Most groups of Muslim Chinese identify their origins to forefathers who reached major trade-hubs along the Silk Road during imperial times and intermarried local women. In consideration of their perceived foreign origins on patrilineal line, Muslim Chinese were framed as an anomalous and

¹⁵ WEINER, *In the Footsteps of Garamann or Han Yinu?*, p. 52.

¹⁶ J. MCDOWELL, *Rethinking Folklorization in Ecuador: Multivocality in the Expressive Contact Zone*, in « Western Folklore », vol. 69, 2 (2010), p. 205.

potentially rebellious group on the margins of the Chinese society. The suspicion toward groups of Muslims, exacerbated at times of social unrest, largely depends on an essentialist interpretation of Islam as incompatible with the Chinese central authority. The Salars were not exempt from such forms of negative representation. Early accounts of Western travelers in the present-day XSAC inform that the Salars «above all other Muhammadans have the greatest reputation for hostility and fanatical ruthlessness»¹⁷. The study of Qing-era official documents further confirms this negative reputation. Based on the close examination of many of these sources, Jonathan Lipman has surmised that the Salars were portrayed as «inherently, genetically violent and ferocious»¹⁸, labels partially related to their engagement «in dangerous, low-status occupations such as long-distance trade by raft and caravan»¹⁹. Some of these stereotypes percolated into early accounts of the «Camel Spring», as I will illustrate later in this article. In contrast to such stereotypical representations of the Salars as threatening *others*, more recent variants of the «Camel Spring» and of the complex of practices surrounding and sustaining its valorization embrace the Salars' foreign origin and grant them a legitimate position within China. Thus, I suggest, *folklorized* representations of the «Camel Spring» and the cohort of elements surrounding the myth itself contribute in capsizing the traditional stigma associated with Muslim Chinese.

In what follows, I begin by looking at the rationales provided to explain the Salar migration to China before and after the founding of the People's Republic of China. This sets the stage

¹⁷ A.L. MOFFATA, *The Salar Muhammadans*, in « *The Geographical Journal* », vol. 85, 6 (1935), p. 526.

¹⁸ J.N. LIPMAN, *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, p. 104.

¹⁹ LIPMAN, *Familiar Strangers*, p. 105.

for my comparison of performative versions of the «Camel Spring», followed by an analysis of the framing of sites that are at the center of Salar ethnic identification. While the representations of the Salars have changed over time from barbarian others to colorful, dancing minorities, the new emphasis on the Silk Road appears to have elevated the Salars to representatives of their land of origin.

Although the cases analyzed in this article primarily relate to a specific locality in China, the valorization of local culture to promote an ethnic group in and beyond the People's Republic of China borders is all but uncommon. The case of the Salars in Northwestern China can thus illuminate the complex of practice shaping the representation of the others in China from the late nineteenth century up to the present²⁰.

Camel Spring: Mythical Origin of the Salar

Historical records show that at times the Salars had an uneasy relation with their neighboring Tibetan communities and, even more prominently, with the Chinese State²¹. The last series of conflicts date back to the early 1950s and lead to suppression on expressions of the Salar culture during the great majority of the Mao era. David Goodman has perceptively summarized the Salar's condition during the Mao era in these terms:

²⁰ It should be made clear that this article investigates the representation of the Salar through official and official-related channels. Of course, officially promoted discourses do not necessarily reflect grassroots-practices. In the case of Muslim groups, the tragic events following the 2009 riots are the clearest indication on this regard. While the official framing of the Salar – and by extension of Chinese Muslims – has radically shifted since the post-Mao era, the situation on the ground is considerably different.

²¹ GOODMAN, *Exile as Nationality*, pp. 66-67.

The revolts of the 1950s in Xunhua led the PRC to instigate a crackdown on the Salars in every respect in and after 1958. Those thought to be the leaders of the Salar community were imprisoned or executed. About ten percent of the male population was rounded up and sent to «Reform through labor camps» elsewhere in Qinghai. The Salar language was discouraged and religious expression was largely suppressed²².

Only in the early 1980s, amid the process of ethnic reforms promoted by Hu Yaobang²³ and coupled with the promotion of economic development, the discourse on the Salar identity began to be recovered. The valorization of the «Camel Spring» is central in the process of rehabilitating the Salar ethnic identity. In this section I analyze the bundle of folk narratives detailing the arrival of the Salars to China. Variants of these narratives are generally titled «Camel Spring» and dated between the late nineteenth century up to the present. No extant version of the myth is known from the years of the Cultural Revolution, when the government attempted to Sinicize ethnic minorities²⁴. The absence of references to the myth, at least in printed sources, confirms the attempt to eradicate local expressions of ethnic identification.

On the basis of available sources, it is only possible to attest the circulation of the myth at least since the late nineteenth century, even though most likely the myth has a much earlier origin. Ma and Stuart have documented that until the 1920s, a variant of the myth called «Camel Play» was performed in occasion of wedding celebrations in the village of Mengda²⁵.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ G. BOVINGDON, *Hu Wants Something New: Discourse and the Deep Structure of Minzu Policies in China*, in S.H. WILLIAMS (ed.), *Social Difference and Constitutionalism in Pan-Asia*, Cambridge University Press, 2016, 173-178.

²⁴ BOVINGDON, *Hu Wants Something New*, p. 173.

²⁵ MA, STUART, *Stone camels and clear springs*, p. 289.

References to such a performance indicate the oral-connect nature of the myth. Because of the absence of an indigenous Salar script, these narratives have only recently been textualized as part of the State-directed collection of folk literature²⁶. Song and Wang have informed that in 1953 ethnographers were dispatched to Xunhua where they recorded several versions of the myth²⁷. These ethnographic reports are however unidentifiable beyond Song and Wang's reference. More recently, several variants of the origin myth have been reproduced in print in Mandarin, English, and in Romanizations of the Salar language²⁸. A comparison of these textualized versions indicates that the basic plot is overall consistent. The excerpt I translate provides the gist of the Salar's myth of origin:

Garaman and Ahkman, the two ancestors of the Salars, moved eastward in order to spread the sacred religion of Islam. Departing from their original settlement in Samarkand they went eastward. They traveled with a group of a hundred or so people, a camel that carried a precious [copy] of the Qur'an, soil and water from Samarkand. They crossed thousands of miles facing many hardships along the way and eventually arrived in this place, Jiezi. [...] By the time everyone had satisfied his thirst and eased off the fatigue, they gathered around the spring to rest and prepare a meal. Realizing that the camel had disappeared, they all panicked. [...] They searched from night to dawn. Then, they saw something white near the source of the spring. They ran over and found the camel [...] but it had already transformed into stone. [...] Promptly they took the Qur'an, the water and soil from the back of the camel. Comparing them with the local water and soil, they realized that they had the

²⁶ M. BENDER, *Oral Narrative Studies in China*, in « *Oral Tradition* », vol. 18, 2 (2003), p. 236.

²⁷ SONG 宋蜀华, WANG 王良旁, *Guanyu Salazu lishi lai yuan de wenti*, pp. 217-218.

²⁸ For an English translation that attempts to register the oral prosody of Salar language see MA, STUART, *The Folklore of China's Islamic*.

same weight. Everyone said «This is Allah's will. We will settle down in this land»²⁹.

The myth sketches the travel of the Salar's ancestors from Samarkand to Jiezi (Alitiuli in the Salar language's Romanization). According to this variant of the myth, they ancestors undertook the journey to spread Islam. Some other variants explain the departure from Samarkand not or not only in terms of religious proselytization but mainly in response to political or religious conflicts³⁰. Elaborating on one of this type of variant, David Goodman observed that in the case of the Salar, the exile was not «a state-driven legal banishment, but a migration driven by hostile conditions with a presumed point of departure». This self-imposed exilic condition is at the center of Salar ethnic identification as the group deploys it to construct an exilic communal identity³¹.

Similar versions appear in a variety of written accounts published since the early 1960s. The State-sponsored re-editions of the *Concise History of the Salars* (Salazu jianshi), part of the officially endorsed historical series compiled under the aegis of the Party for each ethnic group, all include excerpts from the myth. The first *Concise History of the Salars* was released in form of document for internal circulation (*neibu*) in 1963 and then followed, in the post-Mao era, by three re-editions for public consumption published respectively in 1982, 2008 and 2014³². According to the most recent edition, «Camel Spring» is

²⁹ G. ZHU 朱刚 (ed), *Salazu minjian gushi xuan* 土族撒拉族民间故事选, Shanghai, Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1992, pp. 289-290.

³⁰ A.M. DWYER, *Salar: A Study in Inner Asian Language Contact Processes*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2007, pp. 1-3.

³¹ GOODMAN, *Exile as Nationality*, p. 59.

³² ZHONGGUO KEXUEYUAN MINZU YANJIUSUO, *Salazu jianshi jianzhi hebian* : *chugao* 撒拉族简史简志合编: 初稿. Zhongguo kexueyuan minzu yanjiusu, 1963, pp. 5-8.

the Salars' most widespread narrative of origin³³, a claim supported also by the ethnographic fieldwork of scholars operating in Western institutions³⁴. The myth is also anthologized in all the collections of Salar folk literature, and it gives the title to the first anthology of Salar literature published after Mao's demise³⁵. Visual and textual representations of the white camel – indexical of the mythical travel from Samarkand – provide in fact an element of cohesion for the Salar community. The cover of the 2014 edition of the *Concise History of the Salars* portrays a squatted camel, a clear reference to the Salar myth of origin. Certain versions of the myth highlight the devotion for the camel. In one account of the myth, for instance, after the camel had transformed into a stone all the travelers wept thinking of all the hardships it had endured during the travel from Samarkand³⁶. The almost ubiquitous inclusion of the myth of the white camel in publications related to the Salars shows its centrality in sustaining the notion of a distinct ethnic group.

On the contrary, accounts of the «Camel Spring» by foreign travelers who visited the Salar area between the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century cast at least a partially negative light on the Salars. What follows is an excerpt taken

SALAZU JIANSHI BIANXIEZU 《撒拉族简史》编写组, *Salazu jianshi* 撒拉族简史, Qinghai renmin, 1982, pp. 8-9.

SALAZU JIANSHI BIANXIEZU 《撒拉族简史》编写组, *Salazu jianshi* 撒拉族简史, Beijing, Minzu chubanshe, 2008, pp. 15-17.

Y. MI 牟一之, K. ZHANG 张科, (eds.), *Salazu jianshi* 撒拉族简史, Qinghai renmin, 2014, pp. 9-12.

³³ MI 牟一之, ZHANG 张科 (eds.), *Salazu jianshi*, p. 10.

³⁴ DWYER, *Salar*, p. 1.

³⁵ X. MA 马学义 (ed.), *Luotuoquan: Salazu minjian gushi ji* 骆驼泉: 撒拉族民间故事集, Xining: Qinghai renmin chubanshe, 1982.

³⁶ MA, MA, STUART, *The folklore of China's Islamic Salar nationality*, p. 9.

from the account of Abbot Low Moffat during his visit to present-day XSAC:

According to tradition the Salars once lived in Samarqand, but their freebooting propensities were a cause of embarrassment to their neighbors and, when some of their young men one day stole a cow, they were finally ordered into exile. Before their departure however they were presented by the ruler of Samarqand with a white camel, a sack of earth, and a flask of water. «Follow the white camel and he shall lead you to a place where the earth is as this earth and the water as this water». For years they trekked eastward, contending against the great wastes of the desert and the hostility of strange peoples. At last one day the white camel failed to rise. They beat him vainly and then suddenly remembered the sack and the flask. These were reverently opened; the earth in the valley where they were camped was the same as that in the sack; the water in the Hwang Ho River the same as that in the flask. A mighty shout went up that their wanderings were over. They turned to the camel. He, his mission ended, had changed to stone³⁷.

This version of the myth connotes the Salars as having a reputation of freebooters and rustlers. They even beat the legendary white camel. Even though Moffat withholds referencing the source for this narrative, it is likely that he heard it from an oral account by non-Salar people. In support of this hypothesis, in his travel account Moffat mentions having contracted (among others) Chinese boys as local guides³⁸. In addition, the characteristics associated with the description of the Salars indicate an attitude of animosity. This further suggests that Chinese or Tibetans – groups with whom Moffat describes interactions during his travel – related this version of the myth. Similarly to Moffat, other earlier travelers have explained the Salar ancestors' migration as a consequence of their wrongdoings. In Grigory Nikolayevich Potanin's account of the myth, the Salars fled after having stolen a cow. Few scholars

³⁷ MOFFAT, *The Salar Muhammadans*, pp. 528-529.

³⁸ *Ivi*, p. 526.

have also analysed variants of the myth in which the Salar ancestors' migration is triggered by an episode of theft or alleged theft³⁹. The account mentioned by Rakhmievich Tenishev connects the fled of the Salar migration with the accusation of having stolen a cow⁴⁰. In the version analysed by Mi Yizhi, Garaman is caught stealing a cow and sentenced to death by the king. Before his execution Garaman reads the Koran and «under the tacit assistance of Allah, the king is transformed into an odd creature. Garaman is hence unjustly saved» and eventually embarks on the journey that will lead him and his companions to China⁴¹. In this version not only the Salars are depicted as rustlers, but also their religion is under accusation. Despite Garaman's guilt, Allah takes his side and saves him from death. The implicit message suggests a wide-spread suspicion toward Muslims in China. All these unsympathetic variants of the «Camel Spring» – most of which predating the State's official recognition of the Salars as a Chinese ethnic group and, most likely, collected from non-Salar informants – portray the Salars as barbarians.

Side by side, the two sets of narratives show that the «Camel Spring» is deployed in defining the Salars as a distinct group. The myth has been used either way to eulogize the Salars or to spatter them. While both of the versions have likely co-existed and might continue to co-exist, it is noticeable that before the establishment of the People's Republic of China (hereafter, PRC) the great majority of «Camel Spring» accounts link the Salars with banditry, an element that fades away after 1949 when more favorable explanations of the Salars' migration are

³⁹ G.N. POTANIN, *Tangutsko-Tibetskaia okraina Kitaia i Central'naia Mongolija*, Moskva, Gos. izd-vo geogr. lit-ry, 1950 [1884 or.], p. 295.

⁴⁰ E.R. TENISHEV, *Salarskie teksty*, Moskva, Nauka, 1964, pp. 119-121.

⁴¹ Y. MI 卞一之, *Salazu de lai yuan qianxi tanshi 撒拉族的来源和迁徙探*, in «Qinghai minzu xueyuan xuebao», vol. 3 (1981), pp. 59-60.

provided. The State directed-engineering of the Chinese population in ethnic groups can, at least partially, explain the considerable change in which the Salars are represented in textual sources.

Dancing and Singing: «On the Shore of the Camel Spring»

Narratives related to the «Camel Spring» have long been performed among the Salar communities. The *döye oyna* is a play that re-enacts the Salar migration from Samarkand to Alitiuli. Based on interviews among Salar elders, Ma Jianzhong and Kevin Stuart have ascertained that the *döye oyna* was performed until the 1920s and then faded into decline, to be eventually forbidden during the Cultural Revolution. Prior to its ban, the play «was performed in great seriousness exclusively by males, with little variation in content and execution»⁴². It involved almost no singing nor dancing, and it was not accompanied by musical instrument but with the exception of a small bell to represent the sound of camel's tread⁴³. Traditionally, the location for the performance was simple and unadorned. The play was generally performed «in threshing grounds and family courtyards»⁴⁴. In contrast with this stern type of performance, the staged version enacted during the official celebration for the 40th anniversary of the establishment of XSAC added a touch of humor; and also included one female performer in the cast⁴⁵. Elements of scatological humor are also embedded in an anonymous version of the *döye oyna* performed in occasion of a Salar wedding. This version was published in

⁴² MA, STUART, «*Stone camels and clear springs*», (1996), p. 289.

⁴³ *Ivi*, pp. 289-290.

⁴⁴ *Ivi*, p. 290.

⁴⁵ *Ivi*, pp. 289-290.

1989⁴⁶. The excerpt below, part of the finale, features the interaction between the two legendary brothers, the white camel and audience at a live performance enacted during a wedding celebration:

Garaman⁴⁷: “In Samarkand, our camel ate hard bread and stuffed dumplings. Our camel shits walnuts after eating dates, stuffed dumplings, and fried bread.”

(The master of the home then brings some fried bread and dumplings and gives them to Garaman. He takes what is offered, then turns and hands the items to one of the audience. Next the bridegroom and one of his knowledgeable companions offer jujubes and fried food to Garaman and Akhman. When they offer the food they say:) “Greetings!”

Garaman and Akhman: “Greetings!” *(They take the proffered food and put it in the dalian.*⁴⁸ *The camel stands.)*

Audience: “The camel is standing! It’s shitting walnuts!” *(The camel walks forward several steps, shaking its head and wagging its tail. It scatters walnuts among the crowd. The crowd rushes forward, with everyone snatching as many walnuts as possible.)*

The information provided by the translators of the play is insufficient to assign a precise date to the performance. On the basis of extra-textual information, it is possible to infer with a certain degree of approximation that the play was performed sometimes after the late 1920s. This version of the play was related by Ma Paixian (b. 1920)⁴⁹, one of the prominent Salar performers during the early Mao era⁵⁰. Most likely – as it is typical with the transmission of performing arts – Ma has been

⁴⁶ *Ivi*, p. 290.

⁴⁷ In the original this is Romanized as Kharaman.

⁴⁸ The dalian is «a long narrow woolen bag». See MA, STUART, «*Stone camels and clear springs*», p. 291.

⁴⁹ *Ivi*, p. 290.

⁵⁰ ZHONGGUO MINZU MINJIAN WUDAO JICHENG BIANJIBU 中国民族民间舞蹈集成编辑部编, *Zhongguo minzu minjian wudao jicheng Qinghai juan* 中国民族民间舞蹈集成-青海卷, p. 672.

exposed to the play since his early age. The inclusion of the «shitting camel» in the plot suggests an evolution of the play that slightly departs from more conservative versions.

The re-enactments of the *döye oyna* during the celebration for the establishment of XSAC and the version performed at the Salar wedding signal that performances related to the «Spring Camel» are in continuous alteration. A most recent incorporation of the myth has appeared in the context of the «Happy Sunshine China Children's Song Karaoke TV Contest» (HS, hereafter), a cultural initiative supported by national institutions as the Ministry of Education, Women's Federation, and CCTV⁵¹. The show features a karaoke contest between Chinese children from all over China. Promotional videos are produced for each of the songs participating in the contest. «On the Shore of the Camel Spring»⁵², a pop-song realized in 2015, features Cui Jiayuan – a young girl, supposedly from the Salar ethnic group – singing and dancing while playing with a camel. As the following excerpt illustrates, the lyrics refer to elements central to the Salar myth of origin:

In a dreamy-state we reached the shore of the Camel Spring
 I jump in a dance to entertain the white camel
 Salars, Salars, Salars, Salars, Salars
 Salars, Salars
 The white camel offered me a white peony
 A white-jade carving of the white camel
 I thank you for the legend that accompanies my childhood
 I want to use my hijab to adorn you
 I pet and pet your kind smiling face
 Under the moon you reached the Camel Spring
 I sing the Camel Song to lead you, white camel, on your way

⁵¹ H. CAO 曹海波, '快乐阳光'儿歌电视大赛的意义与挑战, 2016, no. 6, p. 17.

⁵² *Luotuo quanbian* 骆驼泉边, URL (accessed 11/5/2018), <https://v.qq.com/x/page/m0148ylkhfp.html>

The song is a variation of the Salar' myth of origin. Many elements resonate with the textual versions of the myth. In this version, any reference to the legendary brothers is removed. Instead, the narration begins with the Salar's arrival at night – «under the moon» – at the Camel Spring, the location in XSAC where – according to the myth – the white camel turned into a stone. The first line of the lyrics begins with «in a dreamy-state», a way to suggest that the narrative of the «Camel Spring» is not to be mistaken with historical truth. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the protagonist of the video is a young girl. In other words, both verbal and visual elements frame the «Camel Spring» as a fantastical narrative.

The analysis of the lyrics and of the video shows that the white camel provides the Salars with a means of ethnic identification. The lyrics, in fact, express a sense of gratitude for the white camel. The myth (lit. the «legend» in the Chinese version) is said to accompany the Salars during their childhood. In other words, the myth is framed as part of the development of Salar children into adults. Also, the lyrics contribute in humanizing the camel: the young girl playfully puts a hijab on the animal's head, pets the camel's «smiling face» and receives gifts from it. These actions are also enacted in the video. Sequences of the young girl singing and dancing around a camel are juxtaposed with sequences in which she plays with a stuffed camel. Actions take place in a variety of landscapes that include a desert, a river shore, and a wild flower field. While the desert and the river shore evoke the theme of travel from Samarkand to China, references to flowers – both in the video and in the lyrics – appear to be more related to the trope of representation of ethnic minorities as colorful and feminized. Generally, ethnic minorities are indeed «portrayed in public media as more

colorful than the Han»⁵³. «On the Shore of the Camel Spring» falls within this kind of representations. The colorful quality of the Salars is conveyed at the visual level by the flowers and by the alternation of the young girls' outfit. Throughout the video she changes between a bright pink and a bright blue costume. The version of the Salar' myth of origin proposed in this musical video innovates on other forms of documented performances by including as the only human protagonist a young girl, and by replacing narration with music and sang lyrics. Considering that the video was broadcast on national television, the re-enactment of the Salar myth of origin functions as spectacle for a larger Han audience. Such type of representation falls within the spectrum of what Lousia Schein has defined internal-orientalism, «a set of practices that occur within China» and that refer «to the fascination of more cosmopolitan Chinese with “exotic” minority cultures in an array of polychromatic and titillating forms»⁵⁴. Even though this representation of the Salar culture has moved away from the trope of the Salars as barbarians, it still hinges on othering elements typical in the portray of Chinese ethnic minorities.

The White Camel: Public Representations

Representations of the white camel are not confined to textual sources and performances. They also find tangible expression in public spaces through a variety of forms including statues, narratives on commemorative tablets, and museum signboards.

⁵³ D.G. GLADNEY, *Dislocating China: Reflections on Muslims, Minorities, and Other Subaltern Subjects*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004, p. 64.

⁵⁴ L. SCHEIN, *Gender and Internal Orientalism in China*, in « *Modern China* », vol. 23, 1 (1997), p. 70.

During my fieldwork in 2008, I saw statues of white camels in Salar-populated areas such as Yining, a county-level city in northwestern Xinjiang; the Xiahe County, in central Gansu; and in the XSAC. Within this county – more precisely in the Majia village, in the Jiezi township – the location named Camel Spring attracts locals and outsiders. This section focuses on textual narratives surrounding physically and metaphorically the Camel Spring. Some of the narratives are in fact carved in the stone at the Camel Spring; other instead are gathered from local media. The juxtaposition of these narratives shows that the myth of the white camel is co-opted by different agents for rather divergent but not incompatible reasons.

As already suggested, the Camel Spring has become the centerpiece of Salar' ethnic identification. Top-down and bottom-up discourses concur in recognizing the site's significance. A comparison of State and local narratives about the site reveals the divergent agendas in valorizing the Camel Spring. David Goodman has observed that the case of Salar's ethnic promotion has been quite unusual in that in Qinghai province the discourses of local promotions have almost been absent⁵⁵. Still, at least in respect to the valorization of the «Camel Spring» and of a series of practices interconnected with the myth, the Haidong District in the XSAC appears to have played a crucial role. The website of the Haidong Chinese Communist Party frames the Camel Spring as «a provincial key cultural relics protection unit, and a patriotic education base»⁵⁶. In this rhetoric, the site of the Camel Spring upholds the national cause. Local narratives instead emphasize the religious

⁵⁵ D.S.G. GOODMAN, *Structuring Local Identity: Nation, Province and County in Shanxi During the 1990s*, in « China Quarterly », vol. 172, pp. 837-862.

⁵⁶ *Xunhua Luotuoquan 循化骆驼泉*, URL (accessed 11/5/2018), <<http://www.qhddj.gov.cn/html/10507/202856.html>>

connotation of the site. The Camel Spring is in fact commonly referred as the «Salar' sacred place»⁵⁷, an expression that highlights the religious connotation of the place. In other words, while the State's narrative emphasizes the site's contribution to China, local expressions of ethnic identification stress the elements of ethnic-religious affiliations. Despite the diverging angles adopted, by centering on the Camel Spring, in both top-down and bottom-up discourses the two narratives concur in propagating the notion of the Salars as a distinct ethnic group.

Despite the divergent vantage points adopted in articulating the centrality of the Camel Spring for the nation and for the Salars, State and local discourses are not necessarily polarized. The convergence of top-down and bottom-up discourses is best exemplified by the economy surrounding the XSAC. Since the early 2000s, the XSAC has progressively attracted tourists. Han Youchong, a local entrepreneur, played a central role in the development of the local tourist industry. In 2000 he first established the «Mengda Lake Tourism Development Company» which had a considerable success and became known nation wide. In 2007, Han also invested capitals to promote the Camel Spring. In an interview Han explains the rationale behind his decision to promote the Camel Spring:

I grew up along the Camel Spring and saw how chaotic [*luan*] it used to be. It is our sacred place and therefore it should be respected. At the time, I went to discuss this matter with the mosque's management committee for about a year or two. Many religious people disagreed with the idea of developing the area. However, I thought that it was very promising⁵⁸.

⁵⁷ For instance see C. WEN 闻采, *Jiezi-Salazu de shengdi* 街子-撒拉族的圣地, in «Zhongguo Tuzu», 中国土族, no. (2003), pp. 62-63.

⁵⁸ X. YU 于晓陆, *Xiaoying bafangke de salaren*, p. 392.

In Han's rhetoric not only there is no contradiction between development and preservation of the Salar' «sacred place», but the development is seen as instrumental in improving the site and conferring the respect it deserves. With his capital Han was able to channel support from local and regional institutions, as the numerous commemorative plaques and steles at the Camel Spring document. These narratives included in the plaques and the steles reveal the intermingling of governmental discourse with the local myth in the promotion of Salar ethnic identity. The plaque above the entrance of the Camel Spring was realized from a calligraphy by the renown poet Jidi Majia. The calligraphy simply reads «Camel Spring» and it is signed by the poet. The original calligraphy from which the plaque was realized hangs in Han's office, as one notices from the picture strategically accompanying his interview. More importantly, a poem that Jidi Majia published in 2009 is reproduced on a stele located within the perimeter of the Camel Spring:

Camel Spring

—The arrival of the Salar ethnic group

You accept life
 And also accept death
 for an ethnic group [*minzu*]
 But this is not the only meaning
 When they come to you
 Those who have experienced the darkness, misfortune
 and strikes of fate
 will disappear in an instant
 Because of your existence, their faces are merry
 Always filled with the radiance of bathing
 That is what they believe, in your holy soul
 More eternal than human life⁵⁹.

⁵⁹ JIDIMAJIA 吉狄马加, *Yingchi he tai yang* 鹰翅和太阳, Beijing, Zuoja, 2009, p. 341.

The poem, as the subtitle indicates, is about the arrival of the Salars in China. On the textual level, the poem expresses appreciation for the site of the Camel Spring and for the white camel who has given his life to signal the Salars that they had reached their destination. The imaginative invocation of the poet locates the camel outside the limited temporal dimension of human life and thus confers to it a tone of sacrality. Redemptive qualities are associated with the camel: it is said to be able to ease all sorts of sufferings. When one considers the text in reference to Jidi Majia's authorial persona, the poem acquires an additional layer of meaning in which poetic and political representations coalesce. Besides his fame as a poet, Jidi Majia has occupied a number of prominent administrative positions including that of lieutenant governor of Qinghai province from 2006 to 2010⁶⁰. Hence the act of dedicating a poem acquires also an institutional recognition of the Spring Camel as a centerpiece of the Salar' ethnic identification.

Other elements at the Camel Spring reveal the interplay between official discourse and local beliefs. Submerged within the spring stands a large stone that can be barely seen. This is said to be the legendary camel that turned into a stone. Next to the spring, a sculpture in form of an open book dated May 1st, 2009 explains:

At the center of this spring it is located the authentic petrified camel that came here marching eastward eight hundred years ago. It is pure white and flawless. According to experts, this is not a common stone. It was identified as white marble. However, stones of this kind are not found in a radius of dozen miles. Its shape resembles a camel and it has also a similar volume. If it was forged, it would have required tons of stone. Eight hundred years ago, there was no such means of transportation At the beginning of the last century, the

⁶⁰ JIDIMAJIA 吉狄马加, *Huigui de linghun yu yuanyou de sixiang* 回归的靈魂与远游的思想, Xining, Qinghai renmin, 2012, p. 392.

former Qinghai Provincial Nationalist militia sent troops to excavate the original stone in order to destroy the Salar' landscape. They made three cuts on the stone. In the early 1980s, when the Camel Spring was restored, the environment was cleaned and the original stone was exposed. The chisel marks were obvious, the stone was covered with a succession of "scars." Due to the exposure to the natural elements, the surface [of the stone] had turned gray as granite. During the 2008 reconstruction, a natural spring suddenly emerged from the stone and it washed its surface. The spring is not artificial. We hope that visitors will show their respect.

This narrative contrasts the CCP's efforts to renovate the Spring Camel with the Nationalists' attack on the Salar culture. The positive role of the CCP manifests through the structural interventions at the site in the early 1980 and with the subsequent improvements in 2008. Other official sources inform that since the early 1980s, the local government invested over thirty thousand RMB to finance projects at the Camel's Spring⁶¹. The celebratory language used on the Haidong CCP's website suggests that this was a considerable financial contribution for a site like the Camel Spring, even though no figures of comparison are available for this specific time period in the XSAC. The restructuring process consisted in walling the site, building a large gate, installing three granite statue of a white camel near the spring, building a waterside pavilion, and planting trees and flowers⁶². Despite the positive framing of the CCP, the omission from this brief historical overview of any reference to the Mao era is equally revealing. For obvious reasons, the narrative silences the conflicts between the Salars and the State that occurred in the late 1950s. The unspoken contradiction emerging

⁶¹ *Xunhua Luotuoquan* 循化骆驼泉, URL (accessed 11/5/2018), <<http://www.qhddj.gov.cn/html/10507/202856.html>>

⁶² XUNHUA SALAZU ZIZHIXIAN GAI KUANG BIANXIEZU 循化撒拉族自治县概况编写组, *Xunhua Salazu zizhixian gaikuang* 循化撒拉族自治县概况, Beijing, Minzu chubanshe, 2009, 202-203.

from this official narrative and the grassroots historical events ironically also functions as a counter-discourse to the message of the CCP government's support to the Camel Spring. At the same time, the interpenetration of top-down and bottom-up discourses also suggest an alliance between the governmental institutions and the Salars in promoting the Camel Spring. In fact, the State deploys the Salar myth of origin to validate the introduction of ethnic designations to organize the Chinese population in ethnic groups. Many Salars, on the other hand, have embraced this official recognition and hence valorized their myth of origin.

Another element that signals the intertwined relation between top-down and bottom-up discourses manifests through the use of quasi-magical features associated with the Camel Spring. Transcendental properties associated with the location have long been part of the local lore. Moffat had referred (in not very enthusiastic terms) that, according to local beliefs, the loss of size of the stone of the white camel located in the spring «was caused by the chipping away of small pieces by countless generations of those who believed that swallowing water in which the stone had soaked would cure a stomach-ache»⁶³. In a similar way, the narrative in the book sculpture above referred closes with an almost magical reappearance of the spring inviting visitors to be respectful. The deference toward the Camel Spring lingers on elements of superstition, notoriously opposed by the government official line. Respect for the location filters also from the atmosphere of sacrality in Jidi Majia's poem. The narratives surrounding the Camel Spring thus blur the line between locals and governmental institutions. While frictions might still exist at other levels, narratives of the Salar's origin have selectively incorporated elements lingering toward

⁶³ MOFFAT, *The Salar Muhammadans*, p. 529.

both the popular and the institutional to legitimate the notion of the Salars as a distinct ethnic group.

Bridging China to Central Asia: the Salars as China's Ambassadors

The representation of the Salars has gone through multiple transformations. Thus far I have shown how the Salars have been portrayed as barbarian others and as a legitimate ethnic group characterized, in its folklorized version by colorful dances. The reshaping of ethnic forms of identification has recently been impacted by China's political agenda. In fact, the most recent change in the representations of the Salars has taken place astride the promotion of the BRI in 2013. Before this transitional event, the Salars were not or only tangentially associated with the Silk Road. In May 2008 during my visit at the Camel Spring, I noticed that the small exhibition hall located within the site showcased the history, the customs and «traditional» elements from the material culture of the Salar people. One of the panels in the exhibit displayed on a map the legendary route of the Salar's ancestors from Central Asia to Jiezi. Even if this is one of the routes along the Silk road, none of the signboards referenced it. Similarly, all the editions of the *Concise History of the Salars* avoid emphasizing the relation between the Salars and the Silk Road. The first edition only mentions in passing the existence of route between China and Central Asia called the Silk Road⁶⁴. Even the 2014 edition avoids emphasizing the relation between the Salars and the Silk Road. The only incidental reference consists in a list of locations along which the alleged forefathers traveled from Central Asia to China⁶⁵.

⁶⁴ SALAZU JIANSHI BIANXIEZU 《撒拉族简史》编写组, *Salazu jianshi*, p. 12.

⁶⁵ Y. MI 牟一之, K. ZHANG 张科 (eds.), *Salazu jianshi*, p. 10.

The lack of emphasis on the Silk Road from this last edition might be explained from the fact that the volume was ready before the launch of the BRI but published only a year later.

Despite some exceptions, after the launch of the BRI the Salars have been increasingly connected to the Silk Road. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), announced on its website⁶⁶ the publication by two of its affiliates of an article titled «On the Role of Salars in the Construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt». The article argues in favor of deploying the Salar' similarities with Turkmen historical memory and languages to foster «a bond between China and Central Asian countries»⁶⁷. A similar intent frames the edited volume *Studies on the Social Cultures of the Salars and other Ethnic Groups on the Silk Road*⁶⁸. Significantly, the preface opens referring to Xi Jinping's 2013 speech at Astana University and then describes the international cooperation between China and Central Asia. In this type of discourse, the local Salar community becomes emblematic of the whole China and is seen as instrumental to foster international cooperation. This rhetoric has become prominent in the recent promotion of the Salar' ancestry in relation to the development of the BRI.

Leveraging on a shared ethno-Islamic heritage to foster a connection with other parts of the world is a relatively common strategy. It is noticeable that the government in the post-Mao era has deployed a similar rhetoric to promote other ethnic groups.

⁶⁶ Lun Salazu zai sichou zhilu jingji dai jianshe zhong de zuoyong 论撒拉族在丝绸之路经济带建设中的作用, [URL \(accessed 11/5/2018\)](http://iea.cass.cn/issuePaper-AA0h70-20160422024014412914.htm), <<http://iea.cass.cn/issuePaper-AA0h70-20160422024014412914.htm>>

⁶⁷ C. MA 马成俊, X. YU 于晓陆, Lun Salazu zai sichou zhilu jingji dai jianshe zhong de zuoyong 论撒拉族在丝绸之路经济带建设中的作用, Guangxi minzu daxue xuebao, vol. 4, 36 (2015), p. 97.

⁶⁸ C. MA 马成俊 et al., *Salazu yu sichou zhilu minzu shehui wenhua yanjiu*, Beijing, Minzu chubanshe, 2015.

For instance, the government was instrumental in revamping Islamic customs among the Fujian Hui ethnic group. Leveraging on a shared Islamic heritage, in the early 1990s local authorities were able to attract Kuwaiti fund for the building of the nearby Xiamen International Airport. Commenting on this and related international cooperation fostered by a common ethno-religious roots, Dru Gladney has affirmed that «[t]he Hui in Fujian are not only free to believe but they are encouraged to do so »⁶⁹. The cases of the Hui and of the Salars shows the fluidity of forms of ethnic identification in relation to the political circumstances.

Coda

The «Camel Spring» stands at the center of the Salar' ethnic identification. Variants of the myth have been propagated through a variety of media and forms including but not limited to folk narratives, public spaces, performances and music video-clips. The analysis of these representations shows competing framings of the Salars in a process of shifting emphasis on the group from outsiders to insiders. In earliest accounts, the Salars tended to be represented as uncivilized *others*, a representation that has been progressively abandoned. Early travelers accounts of the «Camel Spring» from the late nineteenth century up to the early 1960s explain the Salar' migration in response to some sort of wrongdoing in their land of origin. These accounts were most likely collected among non-Salar people. After the establishment of the PRC, the myth has received some attention from Chinese ethnographers. Around this time, most of the accounts collected have shown a more sympathetic representation of the Salar' migration. Following the Salar' riots at the end of the 1950s, and even more

⁶⁹ GLADNEY, *Dislocating China*, p. 124.

prominently during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), expressions of Salar ethnic identification have been discouraged. Since the 1980, in consequence of changes in the Chinese ethnic policies, the Salar culture has been revived and the «Camel Spring» has been, once again, valorized. Overall, these variations seem to suggest a tendency toward a more sympathetic representation of the Salars. Despite such a trend, in the post-Mao era the folklorization of the Salar – exemplified in this article through the «On the Shore of the Camel Spring» – has shown the deployment of the Salar’ myth of origin to appeal to mass audience-gaze. By showing a singing and dancing young girl in bright outfits, the video-clip reproduces the stereotypical representation of ethnic minorities as joyful and colorful.

While some of the post-BRI representations reproduce the stereotype of ethnic minorities as carefree, colorful and inclined to sing and dance – as in the case of the pop-song – other representations elevate the Salars to representatives of China in Central Asia. This is best exemplified in the academic discourse that emphasizes the Salars as descending from travelers along the ancient Silk Road. All together the shift in representations of the Salars show that a plurality of voices, competing and overlapping agendas have come together in the shaping and reshaping of the «Camel Spring». Although this article has focused on one specific ethnic group, the case of the Salars suggests that similar dynamics are at play in the framing of other groups ethnically framed within China and perhaps also around the world.

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