

Lisa Carducci

These Wonderful People of Xinjiang



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
THE LOVER OF THE CELESTIAL MOUNTAINS	
Tusipbek, Kazak	7
COOKING, NOTHING ELSE	
Tursun·Mammet Hadji, Uyghur	19
A JAUNT IN NATURE	27
TURPAN AT 47 DEGREES CELSIUS	33
GRANDMOTHER MELON	
Wu Mingzhu, Han	43
IN THE HEART OF EMBROIDERY	
Ajiahan·Sahmet, Uyghur	55
PEAKS REACHING THE SKY	
Wang Tienan, Han	65
SELF-TAUGHT AND HUMANIST	
Liu Yulian, Han	75
A LIFE FOR A TREASURE	
Zhou Ji, Han	87
THE HIDE AND SOUL OF A WILD HORSE	
Zhang Hefan, Han	97
BOWS AND ARROWS	
Yilari·Chunguang, Xibe	109
HUMAN WARMTH AS A BONUS	119
WE ARE COMPEERS	
Bahetichan·Salimbahe, Kazak	127
CAPS THAT FLY	
Jina, Russian	135

THE DOOR OF DESTINY	
Jiang'er-Rehati, Kazak	141
URUMQI, CENTRE OF ASIA	151
LOVE IS ALL HER LIFE	
Dalia, Russian	157
GONE WITH THE SOUND OF A FLUTE	
Eerdexi, Tuva	167
TO GUIDE THE MUSLIMS	
Abdurakip-Damullah Hadjim, Uyghur	175
RETURN TO THE EAST	
Lindai, Mongolian	185
MY FRIENDS, THE WOLVES	
Gendengjiap, Mongolian	195
I FOUND MY CITY	203
IN THE REALM OF THE TARIM DEER	
Liu Hexin, Hui	209
AS IN THE PHOTOS	221
MY KIRKIZ FAMILY	227
A UNIQUE BORDER GUARD	
Burmakan-Moldo, Kirkiz	239
FROM THE IRON WIRE TO THE STEEL BLADE	
Yasen, Uyghur; Upur-Rahman, Uyghur	249
THE MIRACLE OF AN OASIS	257
KASHGAR, THE FASCINATING	261
Conclusion: The Happiness of "Belonging".	267

Introduction

It was 1993, the first time. I was accompanying one of my students of Italian to her hometown, Urumqi, for the summer holidays. We reached our destination after 72 hours on the train. In the passing years, rail transportation has improved to the point where one can make the distance in 60 hours, and 48 hours, presently. Living conditions have also improved and more people travel by plane now.


The second time, it was 2005; then, I spent 11 days in Xinjiang. Today, July 4, 2007, I leave Beijing to realize a long-harbored dream: to live in Xinjiang for more than one month. In three and a half hours, I fly the 2,842 km between the two airports.

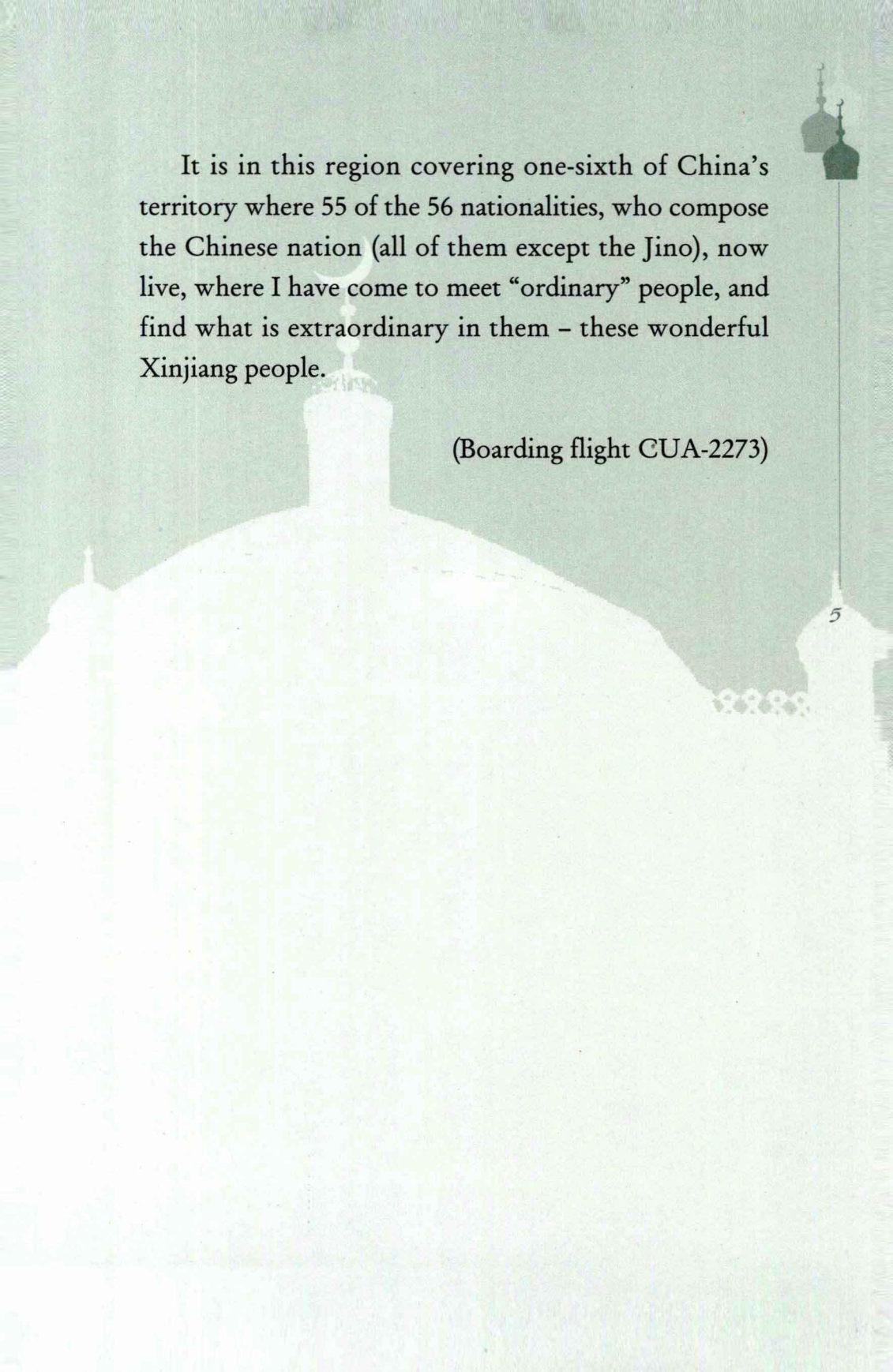
The sky is blue... a glowing and indefinable blue. We fly over a layer of clouds that look like a flock of sheep. And immediately I see myself among the sheep breeders on the summer pasture. And when I see another kind of cloud formation, like cotton balls, I am transported to the eternal snows of the 18,600 glaciers, big and small, of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Elsewhere, a flat sheet of immaculate white is pierced by peaks of

“whipped cream,” which remind me of yurts (tent houses).

4

Suddenly, between the clouds, I see spots of ochre: the desert. They become larger and larger. There are no longer any clouds, only sand. The desert... sometimes as flat as a beach, sometimes striated with scars left by the wind or with the 600 km of roads that once served mainly for oil transportation, or sometimes covered with dunes as in images from my childhood. Yesterday, the *China Daily* newspaper reported on the increasingly serious desertification in Xinjiang – 1.03 million sq km in this region suffer greatly from land erosion. Desertification affects 80 out of the 90 counties and cities and almost two-thirds of the territory. At least 12 million persons suffer the consequences – from the lack of drinkable water to the soil aridity. Sand occupies one-third of the reservoirs’ capacity, and at least one-third of the arable land has become salt marsh. The desert area expands by 100 sq km a year. Also, to avoid the silting of the roads, herbs have been planted in square plots to dam the sand and, in some places, the herbs have succeeded in “greening” the area. This is visible from high in the air, in the middle of nowhere. In the last six years, 2.3 billion sq m of water have been diverted to save the threatened vegetation along the Tarim River. Xinjiang has controlled erosion on more than 5,700 sq km of land. There is hope then.





It is in this region covering one-sixth of China's territory where 55 of the 56 nationalities, who compose the Chinese nation (all of them except the Jino), now live, where I have come to meet "ordinary" people, and find what is extraordinary in them – these wonderful Xinjiang people.

(Boarding flight CUA-2273)



THE LOVER OF THE CELESTIAL MOUNTAINS

Tusipbek, Kazak

After the Uyghurs (more than 8 million), the Kazaks are the ethnic group that ranks second in number in Xinjiang with 1.25 million nationals.

Tall, with an erect bearing, thick hair, and even, very white teeth, Tusipbek (pronounced Tu's'biek) welcomed me punctually at the entrance of his apartment with a wide smile. The 60-year-old man had just retired, but he did not spend his days in idleness, as we will see. Tusipbek was not the type of man who sought publicity; he displayed great modesty, even though he had been interviewed several times in the past few years. As he was not very talkative, I had to extract his revelations one by one.

His wife, who is rather small, with brilliant eyes that captured my attention, is called Hanipa. I asked them



about their family name, and I learned that Kazaks of both sexes just add their father's given name after their own, but it is not necessary to mention it except in official situations. For example, their son's name is Ayden·Tuspbek. Here I must clarify something for the rest of the book. Written Kazak language uses the Arabic alphabet in Xinjiang, while in Kazakhstan, people use the Slavic characters. When it comes to a phonetic translation in the Western alphabet, the Xinjiang Kazak use Latin alphabet mixed with Cyrillic. When Ayden had his name cards printed for international use, he chose to write his father's name without an "i," in such a way to make it easy to read and memorize for the people of different countries and languages he has contact with. In the present gallery of portraits, I transcribed the names as I heard them, to be read using the English pronunciation.

Conversation took a while to really begin. At first, my two interlocutors answered with a "yes" or a "no" only. Did they fear the foreigner that I am? Were they timid by nature? I learned that their daughter Aixia married a doctor last year, also Kazak, whose name is Erken. The young couple live in an apartment they bought not far from their parents. Tusipbek and Hanipa also own their very comfortable and pleasant apartment. I envied the three carpets of different styles that cover





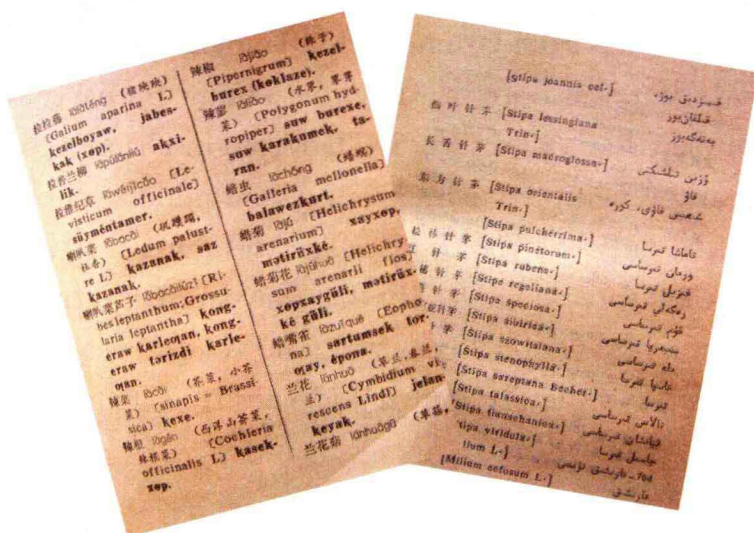
the living room, the dining room, and the hallway, which are all open space. The house was remarkably clean, and visitors, as well as the owners of the place, remove their shoes when they arrive.

Tusipbek is from Urumqi, while Hanipa, both Kazak and Muslim, was born in Altay, the administrative centre of the Altay Prefecture. She has lived in Urumqi for 30 years. When they were primary and middle school students, only the Kazak language was taught. It was when they entered university that they started learning Chinese as the national language. They could speak it a little but completely ignored the written language.



Tusipbek attended Minzu Daxue or University of Ethnic Minorities in Beijing from 1962 to 1968. Then, for two years – in the middle of the “cultural revolution” – he was sent to the countryside to be “re-educated” by the peasants. Things went differently for Hanipa, who was born on the “right side,” while Tusipbek came from a family with “bad origins,” meaning that his father and mother were part of the *heiwulei*, or peoples’ enemy, such as landowners, wealthy peasants, counter-revolutionaries, criminals, and rightists.

When I asked Tusipbek about the impressions he kept from these two years of re-education, he answered enthusiastically, “Oh! I learned lots of things! First, how to cook. We were three students living together and we had to manage. In another field, I was studying politics before; in the countryside, for sure, it was out of the question. I decided to become useful and I served as an





interpreter for the Kazak peasants who didn't know a word of Chinese. That gave me the idea, then, to compile a dictionary of botany and zoology for them, first a little one, and later this one, in Chinese and Latin to Kazak, written in Latin-Slavic phonetic alphabet. It adds up to over 800 pages."

Hanipa graduated from Xinjiang University in 1968. It was later that Tusipbek met her in the *chuanlian* (literally "establishing ties" or "making contacts") period, at the beginning of the "cultural revolution," when the Red Guards used to travel all around the country – and for free – to gather their forces and chase heads to cut off.

11

Their son, single then, still lives with them. He is a specialist in the Russian language. After several years with the regional information bureau, he had recently established a company of international commerce. Business was just starting and the staff numbered only a handful, but progress could be seen already. Surprised that Ayden had abandoned his Russian schooling for the business world, I asked the obvious question. Tusipbek clarified, "Ayden does business with Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Russia, where everyone works in Russian." The elder daughter, Aixia, is an employee in the financial field.

From 1971 to 1991, Tusipbek was an editor for the Kazak language section of the Renmin Chubanshe (People's Publishing House) where Hanipa also worked



until her retirement. Then, he was with the *Xinjiang Ribao* (*Xinjiang Daily*) until 2006 when he retired. He used to be deputy editor-in-chief with the title of senior reporter. But Tusipbek had remained active, as I could tell when he pointed to a pile of 100 envelopes that were ready to be mailed and that contained negatives or photos for the illustrated section of his former journal. His cooperation is deeply appreciated and he offers it willingly, because photography is much more than a hobby for him. It is a passion!

Under my eyes Tusipbek turned the pages of what seemed to be his favourite work, *An Overview of Kazak Folk Customs*, which required a decade of preparation. This large book speaks with images of landscapes, cultural relics, ballad singers, traditional clothing and accessories, literature and art, yurts (or “felt houses”) as family homes, musical instruments, handicrafts, games and sports, tourism, hunters, fauna and flora, sciences and technologies, culture, education, health, agriculture and husbandry, developing market, food and, finally, Nature’s masterpieces. It is not without basis that Tusipbek is known as a photographer: he is the producer of 20,000 photos about the Kazak people.

Yet, it was only for recreation that Tusipbek started taking photos when he was a university student. Up to now, more than 5,000 of his photos have been published,





Photo : Tusipbek

six of them winning an international prize and 40, a national prize. In May 2007, Tusipbek was invited to the Great Hall of the People in Beijing during an exhibition on Xinjiang in the national capital and the presentation of an album on Kanas – a wonderful natural region in the north of Xinjiang – to which he had generously contributed.

13

Also, in 1993, he wrote in the Kazak language a handbook of tricks and tips for photo enthusiasts, and another modest work in 2003 on hard-to-access places that he had visited. When Tusipbek leaves for a photo expedition, he leaves for 10, 30, or 60 days. With one or two companions, and with as little luggage as possible, a horse drawing a sled, and a dog, this explorer moves forward with difficulty through the thick layer of soft



snow, with his equipment on his back, climbs slopes that the horse can't traverse, and changes the films with his bare hands at temperatures of -30 or -40°C, because wearing gloves restricts freedom of movement. Where he goes, there is neither a hotel nor an inn. Sometimes he walks the whole night long with only melted snow to drink. Sometimes the explorer stops behind the sled, illuminated by the moon, and eats a piece of *nang* (bread) with *sarmai* (butter). Sometimes he finds an opportunity in a village where he can enjoy a herdsman's hospitality. In that case, he can let the horse rest for one or two days and buy hay for the rest of the voyage.

A mountain lover, Tusipbek spent three years exploring the Altay Mountains in the north, two years in the mountain ranges of Kunlun in the south, and seven years in the Tianshan Mountains in the centre of Xinjiang – all to dislodge their secrets and to embed them on film.

He considers himself first as the explorer of the Tianshan Mountains, and it is he himself who suggested to me the title of this chapter. Tianshan means “Celestial Mountains,” in fact. It was easy to feel his burning passion for the high mountains and his deep love for the incomparable ranges of Tianshan in particular.

When we see the photographs taken by Tusipbek, we can understand that with so much beauty around him in his own region, the photographer doesn't feel the need to

