

Small Business in Xinjiang

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This article, stemming from field research in China, is about small business in Xinjiang, the country's largest administrative region. Here, the Han-Chinese are a minority, and most people are Muslims. Whereas the Han-Chinese introduced a firm-type economy to Xinjiang, the non-Han sphere of activity is concentrated in the bazaar economy. While the firm-type economy is a means to an end (monetary reward), the bazaar is an end in itself; the bazaar helps the indigenous Uygurs to preserve their cultural identity. Their bazaar is a social and cultural system. Given that these people have a Turkic culture and they speak a Turkic language, this has facilitated trade with bazaar entrepreneurs in the rapidly developing, newly independent republics of central Asia.

Keywords: Xinjiang, China, Uygurs, bazaar, indigenous entrepreneurship, pluralism, small business, micro-enterprise

Introduction

A very rich literature has examined the Han-Chinese and their business enterprises, even outside China. Examples include a study of entrepreneurs among Han-Chinese in the State of Mississippi (Loewen 1971); research on Han-Chinese entrepreneurs in the United States (Light 1972); a study of self-employment among Han-Chinese in New York (Wong 1987); a report on Han-Chinese entrepreneurs in Calgary (Ray, Momijan, McMullan and Ko 1988); a study of Han-Chinese entrepreneurs in Canada (Brenner and Toulouse 1990); a description of Han-Chinese in Vietnam (Dana 1994); and an analysis of Han-Chinese entrepreneurs from Hong Kong (Dana 1995).

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In contrast, less is known about non-Han business in China. Although the non-Han people are a minority in China, they form majorities in over half of the republic's territory. Xinjiang is a vast region of China, where the Han are a minority.

Xinjiang means 'new frontier' in Chinese. Most of the people here are members of non-Han ethnic minorities, particularly Uygurs, along with Kazakhs and Kirghiz. The Uygurs are Muslims with Indo-European features. They have been here since the times of the Tang Dynasty. The Kazakhs and the Kirghiz are also Islamic, with a Turkic language. In contrast to the Uygurs who have been cultivating the land, the Kazakhs and Kirghiz have retained their traditional nomadic lifestyle, which includes breeding camels and horses, both of these for meat and for milk, as well as for transport. Among the Kazakhs, in Xinjiang, horseback courtship is still practiced, and a suitor must kiss his woman, on the gallop.

Recently, a new class of international merchants has been emerging with a pan-Turkic scope. Rather than doing business with Han-Chinese, the Muslims of Xinjiang express a preference to trade with co-religionists from the Turkic republics of the former Soviet Union. While the majority of the world's international trade takes place in the firm-type economy, Uygur traders prefer the bazaar. Definitions are appropriate at this point:

- The *firm-type* economy is an economic institution involving a mode of commercial activity such that industry and trade take place primarily within a set of impersonally-defined relationships.
- The *bazaar-type* economy is a social and cultural system, a way of life and a general mode of commercial activity such that most of the flow of commerce is fragmented into numerous, disconnected transactions between individuals. The unit of interest is the micro-enterprise and drinking tea may be allocated more attention than would be turn-over or market share.

Methodology

The research, upon which this essay is based, was conducted using ethnographic methods, in Xinjiang. Open-ended interviews proved most valuable. It was deemed preferable to interview each respondent in the latter's language of preference. The author arrived by train from the Commonwealth of Independent States (C.I.S.) along with a Mandarin-speaking interpreter and a native Uygur translator. A Kirghiz translator was hired on location.¹ Given

that many Kazakhs study Arabic, in some cases the author preferred to interview directly in Arabic, rather than to rely on third persons.

As noted by Shenkar (1994), it is notoriously difficult to conduct empirical research in China. Among the methodological difficulties, here, is the lack of infrastructure. Railway lines by-pass important settlements, such as Turpan. Furthermore, main highways have disappeared due to the lack of upkeep. Where there are trains, foreigners are supposed to travel by 'Soft-Sleepers' which by-pass smaller towns. These towns are served by 'Hard-Sleepers', tickets for which are controlled by the black market. In order to get a better understanding of Xinjiang and its peoples, the author had to make special arrangements to travel by 'train reserved for local nationals only'.

The purpose of this exploratory study is to stimulate future research. A word of caution, however, is that winter in Xinjiang is harsh and heating is primitive. At the other extreme, summer is stifling, and in Turpan, at 154 meters below sea level (the second lowest depression in the world after the Dead Sea), temperatures can exceed 120°F. The temperature of the sand in the Taklimakan Desert reaches 150°F. In between winter and summer are two windy seasons, during which sandstorms are common. Weather changes rapidly, and an old saying states that one wears a fur coat in the morning and changes into a silk shirt at noon.

Historical Background

The Chinese have been making silk for three millennia. Until the year 138 B.C., however, the export of silk was prohibited. Then, during a horse-buying mission in Fergana (in today's Uzbekistan, west of Xinjiang), Han-Chinese envoys realized that merchants in central Asia were willing to pay a high price for Chinese silk. Suddenly, the export ban was dropped, and the Silk Road was born.

On two occasions, in 138 B.C. and in 119 B.C., Emperor Wu of the Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C. to 24 A.D.) dispatched Zhang Qian to develop relations with central Asia. In this part of the world, trade was not only a means of livelihood, but also a self-expressive art, a game to fathom destiny. As trade increased, the oasis towns of Xinjiang prospered, thanks to the traders whose caravan route took them across the second largest desert in the world – the Taklimakan, the name of which, means 'traditional homeland' to the Uygurs. In Mandarin Chinese, in contrast, it is translated as 'the place where those who enter never come out'.

In time, the Chinese became increasingly interested in this non-Han region. Camel caravans crossed the area with silk bound for Europe; going the other way, caravans transported coral, glass, pottery and gold from Europe to China. Whoever controlled the oasis towns could tax the flows of goods across the Taklimakan Desert, thereby controlling the Silk Road, as this web of caravan routes would come to be known. In 60 B.C., the Han Dynasty claimed Xinjiang as part of the Chinese Empire.

The Silk Road and the oasis towns of Xinjiang flourished until the 17th century. Then, the establishment of sea routes began to divert intercontinental trade. Xinjiang would no longer be in the limelight.

In January 1945, capitalists, in that which is now known as the Xinjiang Autonomous Region of China, declared the independence of the anti-Communist Turkestan Republic (nothing to do with the formerly Soviet Republic of Turkmenistan located further west, and made independent in 1991). To their dismay, Turkestan was absorbed into the People's Republic of China (P.R.C.), which proclaimed its independence on October 1, 1949. Citizens were organized into work teams, and the new China would be divided to include 21 provinces and five autonomous regions.

In 1955, the Xinjiang province was officially renamed the Uyghur Autonomous Region. (Locally, however, people still call it Xinjiang.) Its population being 70 percent Uyghur and 90 percent non-Han at the time, the Beijing government offered incentives for people from other areas of China – primarily Sichuan (China's most populated province) – who accepted to 'colonize' the new frontier. Each year, a quarter of a million Hans immigrate to Xinjiang. The Hans spread Mandarin to this region, but most of them cannot read, write or speak the native language, Uyghur.

Had the Republic of Turkestan survived, it would have been an island of free enterprise between the P.R.C. and the U.S.S.R. Its strategic location might have made it an important ally of the U.S.A. during the Cold War. Yet, in the course of human events, this land became Chinese, although its people did not.

Pluralism

When different people, from different cultures, share activities in a secular mainstream arena, the expression of cultural differences tends to be limited to private life. Often, employment is shared in a common sphere of life, while cuisine, customs, languages and religion are a domestic concern. This may

be termed 'melting pot pluralism', and this is descriptive of the situation in the United States. This, however, is not the case in Xinjiang.

When the P.R.C. was proclaimed in 1949, there were only 200,000 Hans in Xinjiang. Incentives to colonize the region attracted many more. Today, there are over a million Hans in Urumqi (formerly Dihua City) alone. Yet, they do not integrate with the indigenous people and as a result, there is no melting pot pluralism here.

Urumqi is more than 2,000 km from the nearest sea. This makes it, physically, more landlocked than most cities around the world. Yet, in 1992, Beijing declared Urumqi a port, such as to give the same tax incentives as Shanghai and other seaside ports. Although Urumqi is the principal city in this Uygur region, the majority of Urumqi's inhabitants are Han-Chinese. So Urumqi's status as a landlocked port serves primarily Han-Chinese enterprises, including joint ventures with entrepreneurs from Hong Kong.

In Xinjiang, members of different ethnic groups do not share a secular mainstream arena, and there is minimal interaction across cultures. While the Hans speak Mandarin, the non-Han Uygurs speak a Turkic tongue which is written with an Arabic script. The Uygurs have more in common with their Turkic neighbors of the formerly Soviet, central Asian republics, than with the Han-Chinese. The Uygurs adhere to Islam, which was spread to this region by entrepreneurs traveling the Silk Road. The Uygurs have their own culture and their cuisine reflects the laws of their religion. Perhaps because they are often looked down upon by Han-Chinese, the Uygurs do not generally identify with Chinese nationality, but rather they consider themselves under Chinese occupation.

In February 1997, Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping died at the age of 92, just days after celebrating the new Year of the Ox. World media had been focused on the last days of British rule in Hong Kong, as the P.R.C. prepared to take over the colony on July 1st. Also in the limelight, were China's desires to reunify with Taiwan. Meanwhile, Uygurs in Xinjiang spoke of secession.

Different Spheres of Entrepreneurship

In July 1979, China set up four Special Economic Zones. Next to British Hong Kong: Shenzhen; next to Portuguese Macao: Zuhuai; and next to the Taiwan Strait: Shantou and Xiamen. The opening up of China brought in foreign investment, and new technology helped develop industry. In 1993, the annual conference of the World Assembly of Small and Medium Enterprises was

hosted in China's national capital. Yet, none of this had much impact on the indigenous people of Xinjiang, who felt linguistically, culturally and geographically removed from Beijing.

In contrast, the demise of the U.S.S.R. meant little to the average Chinese individual. However, the independence of the five central Asian states – Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic in particular – had a great symbolic lift for Uygurs, for Kazakhs and for Kirghiz living in Xinjiang. These Turkic-speaking minorities had historical, religious and cultural links with their Turkic-speaking neighbors in the newly-formed Commonwealth of Independent States.

For centuries, camels pulled caravans of goods along the Silk Road system, passing through Xinjiang and thereby linking the Orient with the Middle East and with Europe. The Uygur towns, including Turpan, were stopover stations for the camel caravans, and travelers would replenish on caravan food, such as raisins, and Turpan became well-known for its pitless variety.

Uygur entrepreneurs in Xinjiang have begun to rebuild commercial links between east and west. In Khorghus, formerly a Silk Road town, now on the Kazakhstan side of the Xinjiang-C.I.S. border, a new bazaar is sprawling. Russian soldiers patrolling the C.I.S. border are happy to chug beer from China. Thus, Xinjiang resumed its ancient role of commercial hub, as was the case during the zenith of Silk Road entrepreneurship, centuries ago.

Xinjiang is the meeting place of Han and Islamic cultures. Side-by-side are ads using Chinese characters next to those in Uygur requiring the Arabic alphabet. A Muslim Uygur sells nan, a flat bread with plov (rice mixed with religiously prepared khalal mutton), along with shashlik (khalal mutton broiled on charcoal). On another street, Han cuisine includes tofu, noodles, dumplings, fried vegetables, white rice and eggs cooked in tea.

Members of different ethnic communities, within Xinjiang, have distinctly different tastes. A particular favorite among the Hui is soup made of flour. In contrast to the Hans who use chopsticks, the Kazakhs in Xinjiang eat with their hands; these people enjoy smoked meat and horse intestines as well as mutton with noodles eaten without utensils. The Kirghiz prefer eating rice mixed with milk, and they exhibit a preference for horse's milk. A popular meal among Uygurs consists of hand-pulled noodles mixed with bits of lamb and vegetables, with strong tea. They enjoy fried sanzi (made from dough), and a variety of steamed foods including buns and dumplings; they also like roasted cubes of mutton on skewers. They eat zhuafan with their fingers and their favorite cake is nang. For the Xibe people, a special meal would include

sheep entrails. The Mongolians, the Uyghurs and the Xibe drink milk-tea. As for the Kazakhs and the Kirghiz, their favorite drink is fermented horse milk, known in central Asia as koumis, and in China as manaizi.

Members of each ethnic group, in Xinjiang, appear to stick to themselves, and each is physically distinguishable. Rather than wearing Chinese slacks, Uyghur women sport colorful dresses or skirts with matching, brightly-colored scarves. Among the Uyghurs, both men and women wear a colorful head cover. Daggers are fashionable among Uyghur, Kazakh, Kirghiz and Mongolian men.

Different groups also select different habitats. Surrounded by harsh conditions of the Taklimakan Desert, the ancient Uyghurs managed to develop a thriving agriculture sector, by making use of karez, a highly sophisticated system of underground irrigation channels. For the camel caravans, it was refreshing to stop at an Uyghur oasis before continuing for thousands of miles in either direction. The Uyghurs continue to cultivate cotton, grapes and melons. Local green grapes are still dried in the traditional manner, producing export-quality pitless raisins. At local markets, such as that in Turpan, donkey carts wait for local loads. Closer to the Kyrgyz Republic, trucks at the Kashgar market represent major international business. The Uyghurs are therefore divided; some have opted to urbanize, while many have decided to remain in rural areas, residing in rectangular farmhouses with scuttles on flat roofs.

Nomadic Kazakhs, and Kirghiz, in Xinjiang live in felt yurts, which are transported on the backs of camels. In contrast, the Han-Chinese, who are newcomers to Xinjiang, usually reside in modern blocks, and these tend to be concentrated in urban centers.

Not only do different groups in Xinjiang eat, dress and live differently, but most importantly, the Han-Chinese and the non-Han view enterprise from different angles. The Han-Chinese, who have come to Xinjiang, are generally those who identified an opportunity for economic advancement. Entrepreneurial spirit among them is focused on the firm-type economy. In contrast, for the indigenous people here, entrepreneurial spirit is centered on the bazaar.

As long as each ethnic group sticks to itself, both types of economy can co-exist. One might expect, however, that some inter-group relations will develop over time. Then, the bazaar may become less isolated from the firm-type economy. This may cause changes to business processes, when entrepreneurs no longer feel compelled to follow the ways of their respective traditions.

Entrepreneurial Spirit Reborn

Economic development in Xinjiang was stunted when Silk Road caravans were replaced by other modes of transport. During the 20th century, cold relations between China and the Soviet Union aggravated the situation, especially between 1971 and 1983 when the Horgas Pass was closed.

Since the demise of the U.S.S.R., however, the rate of development in Xinjiang has escalated, reflecting new prosperity made possible by growing trade relations between Xinjiang and its three newly-independent neighbors, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan.

On June 9, 1992, Beijing approved preferential policies for Xinjiang. The regional government was granted the power to approve foreign investment without reference to Beijing. In addition, Xinjiang was given the power to approve co-operation with its eight neighboring states. Furthermore, each border prefecture in Xinjiang became entitled to set up a border trade company, and barter was encouraged. In 1995, all entrepreneurs in Xinjiang were given the right to import freely, electrical and mechanical products made in the C.I.S. countries.

All this prompted an increase in trans-border trade. Then, more trade justified capital expenditures in infrastructure, and in turn encouraged more entrepreneurial activity.

Until the time of World War II, the telecommunications infrastructure in Xinjiang relied essentially on camels, donkeys and horses. From 1949 to 1992, 250,000 telephones were installed in the region. Another 250,000 phones were installed during 1993 alone. In late 1994, a numerical optical cable linked Xian with Urumqi.

The region's first railway was built in 1962, with other lines opened in 1984, 1990, 1992, and 1994. During the spring of 1992, a new train service linked Xinjiang and the newly independent Republic of Kazakhstan.

The establishment of Xinjiang Airline Company, in 1985, contributed to the airport at Urumqi becoming one of the four largest in the P.R.C. Flights now link Xinjiang with Europe and North America as well as with other cities of Asia.

Up until 1993, foreigners in the P.R.C. were not allowed to use local currency (renminbi yuan). Instead, they were required to use Foreign Exchange Certificates (F.E.C.), a regulation which complicated otherwise simple transactions. Foreigners are now permitted to use the same currency, as do the locals.

Improvements in infrastructure, coupled with gradual liberalization since 1979, have facilitated entrepreneurship, and this has helped the region's economy to grow impressively. Unpublished government sources in Beijing claim that GNP for this region grew at an average rate of 11.2 percent during the fifteen year period from 1979 to 1994. Similar statistics suggest that gross production in Xinjiang exceeded 63 billion yuan in 1994, an increase of 10.9 percent over 1993, with growth in the service sector leading at about 15 percent during the mid-1990s. Xinjiang's international trade reaches \$1 billion US annually. Over 500 foreign firms are in business in this region, of which more than 400 are involved in joint ventures.

Uygur Entrepreneurship

In contrast to the Han-Chinese entrepreneurs, who are often industrialists, Uygur entrepreneurs generally focus their efforts in one of two activities: many Uygurs are farmers selling produce to the bazaar; others are traders in the bazaar economy.

Since ancient times, the Uygurs have been able to farm successfully, despite desert conditions. This has been possible, thanks to their discovery of karez wells, which are underground shafts sunk along mountain slopes, and converted such as to form a network of subterranean canals, used as irrigation ditches.

In addition, Xinjiang built about 500 water reservoirs, with a total storage capacity of approximately six billion cubic meters. Today, this region of 1.6 million square kilometers includes almost four million hectares of arable land – more than any other province or region of China.

Xinjiang has long been famous for its quality and abundance of fruit, and unpublished sources at the agricultural ministry claim that the per capita fruit share is 112 kg, which is 2 times higher than that of the world average. Local fruit include apricots (especially near Kuqa), figs (from Artush), musk melons (near Qishan), perfume pears (from Kurle), watermelons (from Qapqal), and the famous seedless white grapes which are dried in traditional towers, to produce clear raisins.

Other than fruit, beets, cotton, maize and wheat are the dominant crops here. Unofficial figures, provided to the author by the agricultural ministry, report that during the mid-1990s, Xinjiang's annual grain output exceeded six million tons, while beet harvests approached three million tons and cotton, almost one million tons.

Also, vast prairies have made it possible for the Uygurs to develop high quality livestock, including large-tail sheep, milk-beef cattle, Baicheng chickens and large Turpan donkeys. Annual meat production in Xinjiang has been about ½ million tons.

Turpan has long been a market town for Uygur farmers. In the markets here, merchants buy and sell foodstuffs, clothing, saddlebags and home-made knives among other things. Much of the food, which is on display, including dried apricots, raisins, almonds and walnuts, is classified as caravan food. This is the food that the merchants of the Silk Road once stocked up on, in the same markets.

Kashgar is also a major town on the Silk Road. Here, one finds so much Arabic influence that it is easy to forget that one is in China. Alongside barbers and food vendors in the bazaar, traders sell camels near donkeys pulling carts piled high with cargo. The Sunday bazaar, in Kashgar, may be the largest in central Asia. Each Sunday attracts 100,000 individuals who buy and sell in this bazaar with tents and stalls that easily cover a square mile. Among the merchandise are clothing, electronic goods, knives, spices, wood, chickens, sheep, horses, camels and even small birds, which are kept as musical pets, in wooden cages. Several vendors, sell fast food called girde nan, i.e., circular bread sprinkled with sesame seeds and served warm.

At Hotan, yet another node of the Silk Road, horses are more important than camels, as horse oil is used for medicinal purposes – specifically to mend bones. As is normally the case in a bazaar economy, the market is segmented according to producers. (This is quite a contrast with the firm-type economy in which segmentation refers to consumers.) An important sector of the market in Hotan is reserved for curbside doctors and dentists. Here, dentures are prepared next to carts hitched to donkeys waiting for freight.

Perhaps the most striking bazaar is at the Horgas Pass, to the south-west of Bortala. Like other towns of the Silk Road, the settlement was impoverished when caravans stopped passing through it. In 1971, all international activity was banned here, as the border with the U.S.S.R. was closed. The local inhabitants had no electricity, no running water, and no trade.

Life finally improved in 1983, when the border was re-opened, and trade indeed has grown rapidly. According to information obtained by the author during an interview in Almaty, the capital of Kazakhstan until recently, entrepreneurs carried 20 million kilos of goods across this border in 1984; the same official projected that trade would surpass 500 million kilos in 1998. Dana (1997) elaborates on entrepreneurship in Kazakhstan.

A unique feature along the border of China and Kazakhstan is 'The Bazaar for Entrepreneurs from Both Sides'. This market has two entrances, one in Xinjiang and the other in Kazakhstan. Uygur entrepreneurs from Xinjiang bring beer, vodka, sugar, candies, clothing, leather goods, sporting apparel, toys, housewares, tools, cigarettes and jewelry, all of which they sell to the buyers from Kazakhstan, including Kazakhs and Russians, most of whom arrive by bus.

All persons who enter the market from the Kazakhstan gateway pay admission, in American dollars. Entry costs \$3 per couple. Once inside, people can buy Chinese renminbi that can be used to buy merchandise, which is normally stuffed into the shopping bags that the buyers bring with them. Excess baggage will travel by truck; waiting outside the gate is a long row of empty trucks with Kazakh plates. At the end of the day, the Uygur vehicles are empty, and the vendors have money in their pockets, in their bags and even in their stockings.

Although the bazaar is not simply a means to monetary reward, it is producing wealth among the Uygurs. More importantly, it allows Uygur traders to socialize among others sharing similar cultural values. The flow of commerce is still fragmented into numerous disconnected transactions between individuals – just as it was generations ago. This allows the sharing of cigarettes over tea; of greatest significance, from an economic perspective, it helps to spread risks.

Toward the Future

In September 1991, *The Economist* suggested that central Asia could fall to Islamic fundamentalism. In 1998, there were over 22,000 mosques in Xinjiang – one per 400 worshippers. Fundamentalism, however, is not on the agenda, as the Muslims here are Sunni and not extreme in their religious views. Instead, much effort is being focused on enterprise.

Economic development in Xinjiang has escalated, as Han-Chinese entrepreneurs prosper in the firm-type economy, and indigenous Muslim Uygurs thrive in agriculture and/or trade in the bazaar. In specific, pan-Turkic trade is on the rise, between Uygur entrepreneurs in Xinjiang and other Muslims in republics to the west.

Of course, the independence of the formerly Soviet republics in central Asia sparked the rekindling of cultural, religious and business links between entrepreneurs in these republics and with their Turkic cousins in Xinjiang.

Their common cultural, linguistic and religious background also facilitated pan-Turkic business.

Interestingly, watching neighboring Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic as they begin to prosper since independence, many Uyghurs are wondering whether their own enterprises might fare better in an independent Xinjiang, free from regulations imposed by China. In 1993, anti-Chinese violence broke out in Xinjiang, but the Han-Chinese police quickly crushed this.

Officially, all of China has only one time zone, which is the same as that of Beijing. All of China respects this, however, Uyghurs function according to an unofficial time zone. Uyghur entrepreneurs, in Xinjiang, are more concerned with conducting business with Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic, than with pleasing politicians in China's capital; although the Han-Chinese in Xinjiang respect Beijing time, most Uyghurs set their watches two hours behind the official time of China. This presumably facilitates pan-Turkic trade between Uyghurs and entrepreneurs in Kazakhstan and in the Kyrgyz Republic; more importantly, it is a highly symbolic gesture.

Conclusion

This article has provided an ethnographic account of the bazaar economy, as operated by indigenous entrepreneurs in western China. This institution contrasts sharply with the firm-type economy of the Han-Chinese.

The study found that while the firm-type economy is a means to monetary gain, the bazaar is an end in itself, as it helps the Uyghurs preserve their traditions. The Uyghur entrepreneurs of the bazaar are more concerned with social relations and less focused on the maximization of profits; nevertheless, their bazaar is an institution that gives rise to considerable profitability.

Whereas traditional economic theory assumes that the decision-maker of the firm-type economy is rational, this research reveals that in the bazaar, focus is on personal relations. In contrast to the firm-type economy where segmentation refers to market, in the bazaar context, segmentation refers to the clustering of producers. In the bazaar, competition is not limited to sellers; competition takes place between the buyer and the seller who negotiate prices.

The growth of firms, among Han-Chinese entrepreneurs in Xinjiang, is often related to advances in technology and to government incentives. Among the Uyghurs, growth is a function of personal relations.

*It matters not if a cat is black or white.
As long as it catches mice, it is a good cat.*

– Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997)

Notes

1. The author would like to express special gratitude to the three armed body guards whose presence was also much appreciated, especially after dark.

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