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Empire Besieged: The Preservation of Chinese Rule in Xinjiang, 1884–1971

A dissertation submitted in partial
satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

History

by

Justin Jacobs

Committee in charge:

Professor Joseph W. Esherick, Co-Chair
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2011

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Co-Chair

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University of California, San Diego

2011

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Empire Besieged: The Preservation of Chinese Rule in Xinjiang, 1884–1971

by

Justin Jacobs

Doctor of Philosophy in History

University of California, San Diego, 2011

Professor Joseph W. Esherick, Co-Chair
Professor Paul G. Pickowicz, Co-Chair

This is an ethnopolitical study of the majority non-Han, Muslim province of Xinjiang in China's far northwest during the transition from empire to nationalizing state. After achieving provincial status in 1884, the final decades of Qing rule witnessed fatally weakened attempts by the central government to integrate Xinjiang into an emerging Han-dominated polity. Following the 1911 revolution, Xinjiang became a Han colony abandoned by the Chinese central

government. Over the next four decades, the fate of this Han colony hinged upon the degree to which outside powers could exploit the Han crisis of colonial legitimacy, countered by the ability of the Han ruling class to neutralize, disguise, or otherwise suppress this challenge. This study is a detailed chronological narrative analyzing the nature of this threat as well as the evolving response of Han administrators. It is the first comprehensive study of this period to be conducted entirely from Chinese archival sources in the mainland and Taiwan, both published and unpublished. I find that the Han ruling class, despite numbering less than five percent of the total population and despite conditions of extreme financial hardship, proved adept at countering both internal and external threats to its position. This accomplishment ensured the preservation of Chinese sovereignty in a non-Han land until such time as a strong central government was able to reassert control along the frontier. As a result, the largely peaceful and seamless integration of Xinjiang back into the Chinese state after 1949 stands in stark contrast to the situation in Tibet and Outer Mongolia, the only other majority non-Han lands claimed by the Chinese central government.

Introduction

In 1995, Joseph W. Esherick observed that “one of the most pernicious characteristics of the historiography of modern China is an excessive focus on revolution. Modern Chinese history has been dominated and distorted by a teleology of revolution.”¹ Two decades on, much has changed, and this charge could not be repeated today without serious caveats. The field of modern Chinese history is now as diverse as it is rich, and the revolution does not set our agendas as it once did. Yet these momentous changes have largely passed the northwestern borderlands by, leaving the history of modern Xinjiang in a virtual time warp. The situation today is much as it was thirty years ago. The majestic *Cambridge History of China*, whose four volumes on the Republican and Communist eras were published between 1983 and 1991, do not include a single chapter on any peripheral region of the country. This despite the stress placed by one of the series’ editors, John K. Fairbank, on the overriding importance for Chinese elites of the ideal of national reunification, a goal that was most endangered on the fragile borderlands.² This glaring omission in the *Cambridge* series had no immediate precedent. Indeed, *Cambridge* coverage of the Republican era’s temporal predecessor, the Qing empire, includes two stellar chapters by Joseph Fletcher on the inner Asian frontiers of Tibet, Mongolia, and Xinjiang, all of which endure to this day as exemplary works of scholarship.³

¹ Joseph W. Esherick, “Ten Theses on the Chinese Revolution,” *Modern China* 21, no. 1 (1995): 69.

² See Chapter 1, “The Reunification of China,” in Roderick MacFarquhar and John K. Fairbank, *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 14, pt. 1: *The People’s Republic: The Emergence of Revolutionary China, 1949-1965* (Cambridge, 1987), 1–23.

³ Joseph Fletcher, “Ch’ing Inner Asia c. 1800,” and “The Heyday of the Ch’ing Order in Mongolia, Sinkiang and Tibet,” in John K. Fairbank, ed., *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 10, pt. 1: *Late Ch’ing*,

But then again, the field has never lacked for an industrious coterie of scholars interested in the non-Han borderlands of the imperial era. Over the long stretch of Chinese history, the important role played by inner Asian nomads and their frequent conquest dynasties has been widely acknowledged and analyzed.⁴ This is particularly true in the case of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), whose Manchu ancestors forged a powerful ruling alliance made up of Mongol and Han partners. The fact that the Manchus originated from a non-Han borderland, and that they, with their Mongol and Han allies, conquered and retained a vast swath of alien territory unequaled in Chinese history meant that the Qing frontier was never far from the minds of its historians. In addition to Joseph Fletcher, a steady stream of scholars have continued to produce monographs on all aspects of the Qing borderlands, expanding in recent decades to incorporate sources in Manchu, Mongol, and Turkic.⁵

The 1911 revolution imposed a temporal glass ceiling on borderland scholarship.

With the swift departure of the Manchus, loss of Outer Mongolia and Tibet, and

1800–1911 (Cambridge, 1978), 35–106, 351–408.

⁴ See, for instance, Morris Rossabi, *China and Inner Asia: From 1368 to the Present Day* (London, 1975); Morris Rossabi, *The Jurchens in the Yuan and Ming* (Ithaca, NY, 1982); Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989); Nicola di Cosimo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002); and Naomi Standen, *Unbounded Loyalty: Frontier Crossings in Liao China* (Honolulu, 2007). In addition, within the *Cambridge History of China* series, the entirety of Volume 6 is devoted to “alien regimes and border states” of the tenth to fourteenth centuries.

⁵ Excluding numerous important articles, the steady stream of historical monographs on the Qing borderlands and Manchu identity includes Robert H.G. Lee, *The Manchurian Frontier in Ch'ing History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970); Pamela Kyle Crossley, *Orphan Warriors: Three Manchu Generations and the End of the Qing World* (Princeton, 1990); Joanna Waley-Cohen, *Exile in Mid-Qing China: Banishment to Xinjiang, 1758–1820* (New Haven, Conn., 1991); James A. Millward, *Beyond the Pass: Economy, Ethnicity, and Empire in Qing Central Asia, 1759–1864* (Stanford, 1998); Pamela Kyle Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror: History and Identity in Qing Imperial Ideology* (Berkeley, 1999); Mark C. Elliott, *The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, 2001); Hodong Kim, *Holy War in China: The Muslim Rebellion and State in Chinese Central Asia, 1864–1877* (Stanford, 2004); Laura Newby, *The Empire and the Khanate: A Political History of Qing Relations with Khoqand, c. 1760–1860* (Boston, 2005); Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005).

embattled position of early Republican Han revolutionaries, scholarly attention transfixed on the plight of Han revolutionaries agitating in the Chinese heartland. Any region or person not associated with the revolutionary ferment of inner China quickly dropped off our collective radar screen. This meant the non-Han borderlands. The narrative of twentieth-century China that nearly all historians aspired to tell became one of national liberation from Japanese and Western imperialism, as played out against the backdrop of a revolutionary struggle between the Nationalist and Communist parties. The seminal event that most scholars attempted to explain was the unlikely triumph of the Communist Party in 1949. That Xinjiang, Tibet, and Outer Mongolia were largely neglected within this historiography should not surprise us in the least. After 1911, Chinese authority in Tibet ceased to exist, to be followed by the complete eradication of Han appointees in Outer Mongolia a decade later. Scholars interested in understanding the Chinese revolution could hardly expect to find much of interest in places where there were no longer any Chinese to speak of.

Yet the fates of Tibet and Outer Mongolia during the first half of the twentieth century were quite distinct from that which befell Xinjiang. Over the next five decades, Xinjiang was the only majority non-Han region of the former empire to remain consistently under Chinese rule. The Han ruling class was small, to be sure, amounting to only five percent of the total population. But there it was. And at no point during the chaos of the Republican era was the question of continued Han rule in Xinjiang ever seriously in doubt. Having attained provincial status in 1884, Xinjiang was home to a vast bureaucratic apparatus whose records of daily administration and high diplomacy were written exclusively in Chinese. Though some contemporary scholars did turn their

attention to these records during the early years of the Cold War (among them Owen Lattimore and Allen Whiting), theirs were not the works of professional historians.⁶ This changed in the 1970s and 80s, as the first crop of graduate students emerged from Lattimore's tutelage. Surprisingly, however, neither the great wealth of Chinese-language documentation nor the surprising perseverance of the Chinese administration took center stage. Instead, the interests of these pioneer historians, having taken shape amid the heyday of postcolonial and subaltern studies, dovetailed with those of social and cultural anthropologists also working along China's borderlands. That is, their work gravitated toward historical events and sources that spoke to the complex identity politics and ethnic tensions that were believed to have long defined the region's history.

The first and most enduring work to emerge from this school is Andrew D.W. Forbes' 1986 monograph, *Warlords and Muslims in Chinese Central Asia: A Political History of Republican Sinkiang, 1911–1949*. A student of Owen Lattimore at the University of Leeds, Forbes relied mostly on archival materials from the British consulate at Kashgar (and, in the 1940s, Dihua) to craft his narrative, supplemented by Western-language accounts of travelers and diplomats who visited the region. In other words, his narrative of Republican Xinjiang does not make use of Chinese sources. As a result, *Warlords and Muslims* is rich in detail for those people and events that happened to catch the attention of foreigners. Not surprisingly, then, Forbes weaves his greatest tapestries

⁶ I say this not to disparage the quality of their work. In fact, Allen Whiting, despite being trained in political science, has written the best English-language historical account of Sheng Shicai to date. See Allen S. Whiting and Sheng Shih-ts'ai, *Sinkiang: Pawn or Pivot?* (East Lansing, Mich., 1958); and Owen Lattimore, *Pivot of Asia: Sinkiang and the Inner Asian Frontiers of China and Russia* (Boston, 1950). One other work on Republican Xinjiang to be written from the perspective of a discipline other than history is Mary Patricia Joan Rouse, "Search for a New Dominion: Revolt and Rebellion in Xinjiang, China during the Republican Period, 1911–1949" (doctoral dissertation, Cornell University, 1992). Rouse, writing as a historical sociologist, does not consult Chinese sources.

around those brief periods when the non-Han peoples appeared to rise up in wholesale resistance to their Han overlords. Given especially short shrift is the reign of Governor Yang Zengxin (1912–28), who, despite being in power for nearly half of the Republican era, is allotted just ten percent of Forbes' total narrative. Working against Yang's prospects for extended analysis was the fact that he presided over a period of relative peace and acquiescence among his non-Han subjects, and that documentation for his reign is almost entirely in Chinese.⁷

Working in a similar vein was Linda Benson, another student of Lattimore whose graduate studies partially overlapped with that of Forbes. The title of her 1990 monograph, *The Ili Rebellion: The Moslem Challenge to Chinese Authority in Xinjiang, 1944–1949*, evinces the same interest in anti-Han resistance that defines the work of her contemporaries in history and anthropology.⁸ In addition to utilizing many of the same sources as Forbes, Benson also relies on U.S. government records and sources in Chinese and Turkish. Unfortunately, owing to the parameters of scholarly access at the time, these latter sources are mostly public-source newspaper accounts and exile narratives written abroad. This means that the optimistic self-assessments of Chinese rule found in contemporary media accounts emerge in her study as sitting ducks waiting to be shot down. Benson's exposes of Han misrule are based in turn on the jaundiced ruminations of

⁷ Andrew D.W. Forbes, *Warlords and Muslims in Chinese Central Asia: A Political History of Republican Sinkiang, 1911–1949* (Cambridge, 1986). Though Forbes does include a handful of Chinese sources in his bibliography and appears to have consulted a few of them, a brief cross-checking of some of these sources reveals his command of Chinese to have been shaky at best.

⁸ See Linda Benson, *The Ili Rebellion: The Moslem Challenge to Chinese Authority in Xinjiang, 1944–1949* (Armonk, NY, 1990); Linda Benson and Ingvar Svanberg, eds., *The Kazaks of China: Essays on an Ethnic Minority* (Uppsala, 1988); Dru C. Gladney, *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991); Nathan Light, *Qazaqs in the People's Republic of China: The Local Processes of History* (Bloomington, IN, 1994); Justin Jon Rudelson, *Oasis Identities: Uyghur Nationalism along China's Silk Road* (New York, 1997); and Jonathan N. Lipman, *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China* (Seattle, 1997).

foreign diplomats and Turkic memoir accounts penned for an audience in Istanbul. The subtle sympathy expressed in Benson's work for the political agendas of the non-Han peoples of Xinjiang instigated a backlash of sorts, quite a novelty in such a small field. In 1999, David D. Wang, an Australian-based scholar raised and trained in mainland China, published *Under the Soviet Shadow: The Yining Incident: Ethnic Conflicts and International Rivalry in Xinjiang, 1944–1949*. Constantly taking aim at the work of a certain unnamed "American scholar," Wang's monograph has received irresponsible accolades in the scholarly press. It is, in Benson's defense, little more than a summary of mainland Chinese scholarship on the Ili rebellion up to the early 1990s, and not a work of original research.⁹

The debate between Benson and Wang, unknown to all but a handful of scholars who work on Xinjiang, effectively underscores the scholarly agenda of their generation. Shut out of a mainstream Chinese historiography obsessed with revolution in the heartland, anyone stubborn enough to turn to the non-Han borderlands could only justify their pariah interests by emphasizing the theme of indigenous resistance to Han rule. The parameters of the debate thus fell into an elliptical discourse concerning the degree to

⁹ David D. Wang, *Under the Soviet Shadow: The Yining Incident: Ethnic Conflicts and International Rivalry in Xinjiang, 1944–1949* (Hong Kong, 1999). For the debate over its merits and demerits, see the glowing book reviews of Donald McMillen (*The China Journal*, vol. 46, July 2001), Odd Arne Westad (*The International History Review*, vol. 23, no. 4, December 2001), and Nicolas Becquelin (*The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 61, no. 1, February 2002), as well as the more critical take of Linda Benson (*China Review International*, vol. 9, 2002). As with Benson, my main point of contention concerns Wang's use of sources. Though in his bibliography he includes an impressive list of archival holdings on both the mainland and Taiwan, his footnotes do not cite these archival sources, nor are their contents referenced in the main text. It is almost as if Wang had access to an index of archival holdings, but was not granted physical access to the files. Despite this, he gives every impression that his conclusions are based upon these sources, despite the fact that virtually all of his actual references are to memoirs and secondary scholarship published on the mainland during the 1970s and 80s. The kudos Wang has received in the academic press are from scholars who have deemed the quantity of footnotes and the size of the bibliography (seventy pages, as pointed out by Becquelin) to be impressive, but apparently have not actually scrutinized their contents.

which chauvinistic Han administrators alienated their non-Han subjects, and what sort of strategies the natives pursued to attain some measure of autonomy from their oppressors. That Han ethnocentrism and chauvinism consistently undermined the attempts of Chinese rulers to govern Xinjiang effectively is an unquestioned premise of such studies. The scholarly pedigree of this position can be traced to the works of cultural and social anthropologists, who were among the first foreign scholars to visit Xinjiang during the reform era in the 1980s. To be fair, this is the same impression any foreigner will glean from a visit to the region today. When I traveled through the province in the summer of 2007, I filled my letters back home with riveting accounts of Uighur taxi drivers openly cursing their Han neighbors as I sat beside them in anxious silence. In one letter to my wife, I eagerly recounted how a proprietor of Khotan rugs had told me of his fervent desire that the United States might invade Xinjiang as it had Iraq.

Thus, as amply attested to by the July 2009 riots in Urumchi, there is little doubt that ethnic tension haunts the region today. But was it always so? There are many reasons to believe that the ethnic tension so clearly in evidence over the past three decades does not trace its proximate lineage back to the Republican era. During the four decades from 1911 to 1952, when the last pocket of anti-Communist resistance was finally eliminated, the number of Han in Xinjiang never exceeded five percent of the total. In many of the southern oases, the sole Chinese presence was a lone magistrate and his staff, seldom seen and heard. Even in areas with a larger Chinese presence, relations with the non-Han populace were usually brokered by Turkic and Mongol intermediaries. For the vast majority of Xinjiang's sedentary and nomadic communities, opportunities to incur direct contact with a Han were few and far between. Those who did, such as urban merchants

and government employees, often had a stake in the maintenance of the status quo. For example, in 1912, the first Han governor of the new Republic faced four major battlefield confrontations, all of which were sparked by the chaos of the revolution. Yet not a single one of them was rooted in ethnic conflict. In fact, many of the governor's Muslim subjects actually rallied to the administration's side. And, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, in nearly every instance where previous scholarship has suspected non-Han discontent, newly available sources reveal the heavy hand of manipulation from abroad. The ethnic tension so much in evidence today is largely a consequence of policies pursued by the Chinese state in the post-1949 Communist era, when massive state-sponsored migration and intrusive political campaigns forced ethnoculturally distinct communities into sudden and violent competition with one other.¹⁰

In order to gain a fuller picture of the ethnopolitical history of Republican Xinjiang, we must turn to a body of sources heretofore neglected in the historical record: archival documents in Chinese. Of course, for the history of much of the Republican era, most notably the 1930s and 40s, we cannot hold our predecessors accountable for ignoring sources that were unavailable to them. Nevertheless, there is still a substantial portion of the history of Republican Xinjiang for which a gentlemanly disapprobation is long overdue. Case in point: during his own lifetime, Governor Yang Zengxin published nearly 5,400 pages of telegrams from his own archives. After his death in 1928, his circle of admirers published an additional six hundred.¹¹ As if this were not enough, during the

¹⁰ To date, the only full-length study of Xinjiang during the Mao years is Donald H. McMillen, *Chinese Communist Power and Policy in Xinjiang, 1949–1977* (Boulder, Colo., 1979).

¹¹ Yang Zengxin, *Buguozhai wendu* [Records from the Studio of Rectification], 6 vols. (1921; repr. ed., Taipei, 1965); Yang Zengxin, *Buguozhai wendu xubian* [Records from the Studio of Rectification:

1960s and 70s the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Taiwan published a further several thousand telegrams, all taken from Yang's correspondence with the central government during the Russian civil war.¹² In addition, the two most important first-hand accounts of Chinese travelers to Yang's jurisdiction, those of Xie Bin and Xu Xusheng, were published in 1923 and 1930.¹³ All this is to say that there are probably more Chinese-language primary sources available to the historian of Yang's reign than for any of his warlord contemporaries. Not only that, they have been accessible in public libraries for more than half a century, in some cases far longer. Inner Chinese warlords such as Feng Yuxiang and Yan Xishan long ago received lavish treatment in lengthy scholarly monographs.¹⁴ Yet the reign of Yang Zengxin remains shrouded in mystery, making only the occasional cameo appearance in demeaning orientalist guise.¹⁵

additional compilations], 14 vols. (Shanghuan, 1926); and Yang Zengxin, *Buguozhai wendu sanbian* [Records from the Studio of Rectification: three compilations], 6 vols. (n.p., 1934).

¹² Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, ed., *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: E zhengbian yu yiban jiaoshe (yi)* (*Zhonghua minguo liu nian zhi ba nian*) [Historical materials on Sino-Russian relations: the Russian revolution and general diplomacy (1) (1917–19)] (1960; repr. ed., Taipei, 1984); Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, ed., *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: Xinjiang bianfang* (*Zhonghua minguo liu nian zhi ba nian*) [Historical materials on Sino-Russian relations: Xinjiang border defense (1917–19)] (1960; repr. ed., Taipei, 1983); Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, ed., *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: E zhengbian* (*Zhonghua minguo jiu nian*) [Historical materials on Sino-Russian relations: the Russian revolution (1920)] (Taipei, 1968); and Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, ed., *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: Zhongdong tielu, E zhengbian* (*Zhonghua minguo shi nian*) [Historical materials on Sino-Russian relations: the Chinese Eastern Railway affair and the Russian revolution (1921)] (Taipei, 1974).

¹³ Xie Xiaozhong, *Xinjiang youji* [An account of travels in Xinjiang] (1923; repr. ed., Lanzhou, 2003); and Xu Xusheng, *Xu Xusheng xiyou riji* [A diary of Xu Xusheng's western travels] (1930; repr. ed., Yinchuan, 2000).

¹⁴ James E. Sheridan, *Chinese Warlord: The Career of Feng Yü-hsiang* (Stanford, 1966); and Donald G. Gillin, *Warlord: Yen Hsi-shan in Shansi Province, 1911–1949* (Princeton, 1967).

¹⁵ In any summary of Yang's reign, historians invariably retell the unsubstantiated story of his surprise decapitation of two foes at a banquet. I address this story in more detail in Chapter 2. In all fairness, there are to my knowledge at least two relatively unknown treatments of Yang's reign in the English scholarly literature, both of which utilize Yang's collection of self-published telegrams, *Buguozhai wendu*. See Richard Yang, "Sinkiang under the Administration of Yang Tseng-hsin, 1911–1928," *Central Asiatic Journal* 6, no. 4 (1961): 270–316; and Yu Sau Ping, "The Governorship of Yang Zengxin in Xinjiang, 1912–1928" (master's thesis, University of Hong Kong, 1987). Yang's article is weighted heavily toward the various crises attending the 1911 revolution in Xinjiang, with passing reference to the Russian civil war but no treatment of the 1920s.

This is simply unacceptable. Though we may pardon Forbes' cursory treatment of Governor Yang on account of his shaky grasp of Chinese, for the rest of the field, the gross neglect of such an abundant source base can only be explained by a marked indifference toward the twentieth-century borderlands. As alluded to above, there seems to be a perception that the history of a region where ninety-five percent of the population are not Chinese cannot properly be written from the perspective of Chinese sources—surely they are biased and compromised beyond all hope. This was certainly my own naïve assessment of the task at hand when I first began to study Xinjiang a decade ago. In order to avoid parroting what I was convinced would be little more than a history of “The Man” in what was an overwhelmingly “subaltern” land, I spent three years studying Uighur, the language spoken by approximately seventy percent of the population during this time. I even dabbled in Kazak for a little while. Then I departed for a year of field research in China, determined to transcribe an oral history of the region and produce a damning indictment of what I was then referring to as “Chinese imperialism.” Fortunately, before I ever made it back to the land of disgruntled taxi drivers and embittered rug sellers, I stopped in Taiwan and visited the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. What I found there convinced me that the entire history of Republican Xinjiang needed to be rewritten, and it needed to be done from the perspective of Chinese sources.

I started my reappraisal with Yang Zengxin, who published the first half of his collected telegrams in 1921, halfway through his tenure as governor. Right there, plain as day in documents available to the world for nearly ninety years, was a Han governor openly critical of the central government's intent to colonize Xinjiang with Han migrants.

“Over the past several decades,” he lamented in 1914, “Xinjiang has become the colony (*zhimindi*) of the inner provinces.”¹⁶ Not only that, Yang went on to praise the non-Han inhabitants of his jurisdiction, reserving open disapproval only for his Han subjects. “The natives of Xinjiang, be they Mongols, Kazaks, Hui, or Turbans, are engaged peacefully in agriculture and industry,” he wrote. “It is the roaming vagrants hailing from inner China who, having a mouth to feed but no livelihood, connive with bandits and destroy the peace.”¹⁷ Han stewardship of Xinjiang was clearly more complex and multifaceted than I had ever suspected. Combined with the discovery that archives in both Taiwan and the mainland were teeming with Chinese-language reports, memorials, and letters written by the non-Han inhabitants of the province, there was only one possible conclusion. Like it or not, the sole language of administration in Xinjiang was Chinese. Thus it is to Chinese-language documents that we must turn if we are to write a comprehensive history of the Republican era.

Fortunately I did not have to start completely from scratch. Though I had viewed Chinese-language secondary scholarship on Xinjiang with suspicion, I now came to appreciate the grasp Chinese scholars evinced toward their source base. There are, of course, several major blindspots in their work. For instance, to this day, neither historians in Taiwan nor mainland China are inclined to acknowledge what Governor Yang himself admitted as early as 1914: that modern Xinjiang was a Chinese colony. Yet to disregard an entire corpus of scholarship on account of a few persistent flaws is most inadvisable. That said, the earliest work of enduring quality was undertaken in Taiwan. Zhang Dajun,

¹⁶ Yang, *Buguozhai wendu*, vol. 1, 56.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

a former Nationalist military officer stationed in Xinjiang during the 1940s but who fled to Taiwan in 1949, led the way. His mammoth twelve-volume work, *Seventy Years of Turbulence in Xinjiang* (*Xinjiang fengbao qishi nian*), was published in 1980.¹⁸ It is a curious beast. Partly documentary compendium and partly historical narrative, Zhang's *magnum opus* faithfully toes the Nationalist Party line in all matters, largely negating its analytical value. Its true worth, however, lies in the wealth of original sources that Zhang reprints in their entirety, many of which survived only in the author's possession. Most valuable among these specimens are reports from local security bureaus during the 1940s, especially those dealing with the Kazak "bandit" Osman Batur. For the three decades in which the Nationalists did not wield power in Xinjiang, Zhang does an admirable job of uncovering and reprinting telegrams and pronouncements that were frequently found in contemporary newspapers. Of inestimable value on this front are large portions of the court transcripts for the trial of Jin Shuren in 1934–35, and communications between Yang Zengxin and the new Nationalist government in Nanjing in 1928. In this sense, *Seventy Years of Turbulence* should be utilized first and foremost as an encyclopedia of rare primary source material, indispensable for the scholar of Republican Xinjiang.

Zhang Dajun was mostly interested in the Nationalist stewardship of Xinjiang. For a clear introduction to the first half of the Republican era, however, we must look to Li Xincheng, whose 1993 monograph on Yang Zengxin, *Yang Zengxin in Xinjiang* (*Yang Zengxin zai Xinjiang*), is the most comprehensive treatment of his subject to date.¹⁹ Of particular value to the Western scholar is Li's analysis of Yang's philosophical and

¹⁸ Zhang Dajun, *Xinjiang fengbao qishi nian* [Seventy years of turbulence in Xinjiang], 12 vols. (Taipei, 1980).

¹⁹ Li Xincheng, *Yang Zengxin zai Xinjiang* [Yang Zengxin in Xinjiang] (Taipei, 1993).

metaphysical writings, which are often impenetrable to the foreign historian. Though Li's account is often dry, dense, and chronologically disjointed, *Yang Zengxin in Xinjiang* is the only work of scholarship to evaluate the reign of this misunderstood man in a comprehensive fashion.²⁰ Jumping ahead several years, the only other serious scholar of Republican Xinjiang on Taiwan is Gao Sulan. From 1997 to 2008, she published three informative articles on Sheng Shicai, all based on archival research in Taiwan: his ascent to the governorship (1933–34); his relationship with the Chinese Communist Party (1937–42); and how the Nationalists managed to dislodge him from Xinjiang (1942–44).²¹

Gao's work on Sheng Shicai focuses on the delicate balancing act he maintained with several outside players. For insights into how Sheng actually governed Xinjiang itself, we need to turn to scholarship produced on the mainland. Due to the sensitive nature of the material, few individual monographs relating to modern Xinjiang have been published in China. Most mainland scholars relegate their work to short, insightful analyses of individual events or policies, issues that do not require the author to engage in far-reaching implications. Some of the more distinguished examples of this breed include

²⁰ In their survey of two-and-a-half decades of scholarship on Yang Zengxin, Wang Jin and Duan Jinsheng criticize the field for its tendency to focus on narrow article-length topics, instead of tackling a comprehensive analysis of his entire reign. Though they do not cite or discuss Li Xincheng's book, it is not clear whether this oversight is due to the fact that they are unaware of it or if they are simply confining their analysis to mainland scholarship. See Wang Jin and Duan Jinsheng, *1980 nian yilai Yang Zengxin yanjiu zongshu* [A summary of scholarship on Yang Zengxin since 1980], *Xibei minzu yanjiu* 2, no. 45 (2005): 107–14.

²¹ See Gao Sulan, "Sheng Shicai ru Xinjiang zhuzheng jingwei (minguo shijiu nian ~ ershisan nian)" [An account of Sheng Shicai's assumption of power in Xinjiang (1930–34)], *Guoshiguan guankan* 22 (June 1997): 135–54; "Sheng Shicai yu zhonggong (minguo 26 nian zhi 31 nian)" [Sheng Shicai and the Chinese Communist Party (1937–42)], *Guoshiguan xueshu jikan* 1 (December 2001): 55–75; and "Zhanshi guomin zhengfu shili jinru Xinjiang shimo" [An account of the takeover of Xinjiang by the Nationalist government during the war years], *Guoshiguan xueshu jikan* 7 (2008): 129–65. During my visits to Taiwan in 2010–11, I met with another young scholar, Wu Zhe, who had just completed a dissertation on Xinjiang ethnopolitics spanning the 1949 divide. For reasons of political sensitivity, however, his dissertation was still under lock and key, and has yet to be made available to the public in either published or unpublished form.

Huang Jianhua's many excellent articles on diverse aspects of Republican Xinjiang, as well as Luo Shaowen's groundbreaking reassessment of the assassination of Yang Zengxin in 1928.²² One striking exception to the tendency to shy away from individual monographs, however, can be found in the work of Cai Jinsong, a resident scholar at the Number Two Archives in Nanjing. Taking advantage of unprecedented access to sensitive archival materials, almost none of which are available to outsiders of any nationality, Cai has written the definitive work on Sheng Shicai's reign. Since its publication in 1998, *Sheng Shicai in Xinjiang (Sheng Shicai zai Xinjiang)* has remained unsurpassed in breadth of analysis, depth of source base, and narrative flair.²³ Among Cai's many achievements, perhaps none are equalled by the zeal with which he pursued an answer to the following critical question: Who was responsible for the mysterious death of Sheng Shiqi, the governor's younger brother, in March 1942? Cai's riveting account of his quest to track down and interview the last surviving sister-in-law in Sheng's family circle is the highlight of the book. Invaluable as well is Cai's ability to

²² Huang Jianhua's many excellent articles, several of which make use of Wu Zhongxin's long before it was published, include "Jin Shuren an tanxi" [An examination of the Jin Shuren case], *Kashi shiyuan xuebao* 4 (1994): 46–50; "Dihua hetan qian youguan Xinjiang wenti de Zhong Su jiaoshe" [Sino-Soviet negotiations on Xinjiang prior to the Dihua peace talks], *Xibei shidi* 1 (1996): 68–73; "Wu Zhongxin yu Mai-si-wu-de" [Wu Zhongxin and Masud Sabri], *Xinjiang difang zhi* 3 (1996); "Wu Zhongxin cizhi ji qi yuanyin" [The resignation of Wu Zhongxin and its reasons], *Kashi shifan xueyuan xuebao* 17, no. 1 (1996): 21–24; "Beiyang zhengfu de Xinjiang dui Su zhengce" [Xinjiang's policies toward Russia during the Beiyang warlord period], *Xibei shidi* 4 (1999): 63–67; "Wu Zhongxin zhaoxiang Wu-si-man de huodong" [Wu Zhongxin's efforts to urge Osman to submit], *Xibei minzu yanjiu* 2 (1999): 241–47; "Guomin zhengfu cong Jin Shuren shouzhong mouqu Xinjiang de shexiang yu shibai" [The Nationalist government's attempt and failure to wrest power from Jin Shuren], *Wulumuqi chengren jiaoyu xueyuan xuebao* 9, no. 3 (2001): 35–42; and "Guomin zhengfu cong Sheng Shicai shouzhong mouqu Xinjiang de liang ci cehua ji shibai de yuanyin tanxi" [An investigation into the reasons for the failure of the Nationalist government's two attempts to wrest power from Sheng Shicai], *Kashi shifan xueyuan xuebao* 23, no. 1 (January 2002): 47–52. Some of Huang's articles have been collected into his book, *Guomindang zhengfu de Xinjiang zhengce yanjiu* [Research on the Nationalist government's policies toward Xinjiang] (Beijing, 2003). For Luo Shaowen's groundbreaking work on the assassination of Yang Zengxin, see "Yang Zengxin, Feng Yuxiang zhijian de maodun he Xinjiang 'sanqi' zhengbian" [On the contradictions between Yang Zengxin and Feng Yuxiang and the July 7 coup in Xinjiang], *Xibei shidi* 4 (1995): 67–83; and "Fan Yaonan zhuanlüe" [A short biography of Fan Yaonan], *Hubei wenshi* 1 (2007): 156–81.

²³ Cai Jinsong, *Sheng Shicai zai Xinjiang* [Sheng Shicai in Xinjiang] (Zhengzhou, 1998).

ascertain, with rare documentation, the fact that the Nationalist government was clearly responsible for the attempt, undertaken in December 1933 and January 1934, to destroy Sheng by mobilizing Zhang Peiyuan and Ma Zhongying in a pincer attack against his base in Dihua. The consequences of this once mysterious event would reverberate for more than two decades to come, extending even in the post-1949 era.

As enlightening as the last two decades of Chinese scholarship on Taiwan and the mainland have been, however, even these scholars did not have access to the glut of new and exciting sources that have become available since the last decade of the twentieth century. In Taiwan, the relaxation of archival restrictions has opened up exciting new frontiers for the study of the Nationalist presence in Xinjiang during the 1930s and 40s.²⁴ As a result, our understanding of the Soviet role in indigenous uprisings against Nationalist rule in the 1940s has been completely turned on its head (thanks also, in part, to the work of a Russian scholar, V.A. Barmin, to date the only person in the world to have gained access to Soviet archives concerning Xinjiang).²⁵ Also once unheard of is the liberal access foreign scholars now enjoy with regard to nearly every archive in Taiwan. My own time spent in the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has yielded the first ever primary-source analysis of the five consulates that Yang Zengxin managed to establish in Soviet Central Asia in 1925. Knowledge of the role they played throughout the complex struggles of the 1930s and 40s contributes greatly to our understanding of

²⁴ The most useful collection of published archival sources on 1940s Xinjiang to emerge from Taiwan is Waijiaobu, ed., *Waijiaobu dang'an congshu—jiewu lei: Xinjiang juan* [The Ministry of Foreign Affairs documents series—border affairs: Xinjiang files], vols. 1–2 (Taipei, 2001).

²⁵ See V.A. Barmin, *Sin'tszian v sovetsko-kitaiskikh otnosheniakh, 1941–1949 gg.* [Sino-Soviet relations and Xinjiang, 1941–1949] (Barnaul, 1999); Shen Zihua, “Zhong Su jiemeng yu Sulian dui Xinjiang zhengce de bianhua (1944–1950)” [The Sino-Soviet alliance and the shift in Soviet policy toward Xinjiang (1944–1950)], *Jindaishi yanjiu* 3 (1999); and Xue Xiantian, *Zhong Su guanxi shi (1945–1949)* [A history of Sino-Soviet relations (1945–1949)] (Chengdu, 2003).

the tripartite relationship among Xinjiang, the Chinese central government, and the Soviet Union.

The situation with mainland archival material is somewhat different, yet no less fruitful for the foreign scholar. Whereas access to mainland archives concerning any aspect of twentieth-century Xinjiang is severely restricted, many of these same archives frequently publish invaluable compendia chock full of their own holdings. The most exciting *terra nova* to emerge has come from the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region Archives in Urumchi and the Number Two Archives in Nanjing. Since 2001, the archives in Urumchi have published three separate collections on the expeditions of foreign archaeologists in Xinjiang, without which I could not have written the first chapter of the present study.²⁶ They outdid themselves in 2007, however, with a 457-page collection of documents concerning the history of Mongols in Xinjiang.²⁷ Since the bulk of the material stems from the Sheng Shicai era, these documents shine a blazing light into the impenetrable fog that has long obscured the nine years from 1934 to 1942, the period of Sheng's greatest isolation from the central government. Ostensibly concerned only with the Mongols of Xinjiang, most of the documents also speak to Sheng's policies toward nomads in general, including the Kazaks of northern Xinjiang, who were responsible for

²⁶ All three of these collections were published in a partnership with Bukkyo University in Japan. See Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiq dang'an guan and Riben fojiao daxue Niya yizhi xueshu yanjiu jigou, eds., *Jindai waiguo tanxianjia Xinjiang kaogu dang'an shiliao* [Historical documents concerning the archaeological activities of foreign explorers in Xinjiang during the modern era] (Wulumuqi, 2001); Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiq dang'an guan and Riben fojiao daxue Niya yizhi xueshu yanjiu jigou, eds., *Zhong Rui xibei kexue kaocha dang'an shiliao* [Historical documents concerning the Sino-Swedish Northwest Scientific Survey Expedition] (Wulumuqi, 2006); and Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiq dang'an guan and Riben fojiao daxue Niya yizhi xueshu yanjiu jigou, eds., *Si-tan-yin di si ci Xinjiang tanxian dang'an shiliao* [Archival historical documents regarding Stein's fourth expedition in Xinjiang] (Wulumuqi, 2007).

²⁷ Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiq dang'an ju, Zhongguo shehui kexue yuan bianjiang shidi yanjiu zhongxin, and "Xinjiang tongshi" bianzhan weiyuanhui, eds., *Jindai Xinjiang menggu lishi dang'an* [Historical documents on the Mongols in modern Xinjiang] (Wulumuqi, 2007).

the first and only indigenous uprising against Sheng. Combined with my own brief stint in the Xinjiang archives in 2010, during which time I concentrated exclusively on obtaining primary sources for the anemically documented Sheng years, the raw material for a more mature understanding of the “orphan warlord” is finally at hand.²⁸

The other significant breakthrough for our Republican Xinjiang source base is the diary of Wu Zhongxin, whose short tenure as the first Nationalist-appointed governor of Xinjiang (1944–46) straddles an important transitional era. Our first glimpse into its contents came in 1999, when the Number Two Archives published a partially edited version of the second half of Wu’s diary, as part of its monumental series—currently stretching to more than sixty volumes—on the entire Republican era (two other volumes contain supplementary documentation regarding the Nationalist attempt to oust Sheng in 1933–34).²⁹ In 2006, however, the scholarly world was blessed with the publication in Beijing of the entire seven-volume unedited manuscript, as written in Wu’s original

²⁸ Other collections of documents published from the Xinjiang archives include the extremely useful Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqiang dang’an guan, ed., *Xinjiang yu E Su shangye maoyi dang’an shiliao* [Historical documents on commerce and trade between Xinjiang and Russia/Soviet Union] (Wulumuqi, 1994); and Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqiang dang’an guan, ed., *Ma Zhongying zai Xinjiang dang’an shiliao xuanbian* [Selected historical documents pertaining to Ma Zhongying in Xinjiang] (Wulumuqi, 1997). A volume on donations for the anti-Japanese effort is decidedly less useful. See Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqiang dang’an guan, Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan bianjiang shidi yanjiu zhongxin, and “Xinjiang tongshi” bianzhuan weiyuanhui, eds., *Kang Ri zhanzheng shiqi Xinjiang ge minzu minzhong kang Ri mujuan dang’an shiliao* [Historical documents on donations by the various ethnicities of the Xinjiang masses during the anti-Japanese war of resistance] (Wulumuqi, 2008).

²⁹ Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, ed., *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian—di wu ji, di san bian: zhengzhi (wu)* [Collection of archival materials concerning the history of the Republic of China—vol. 5, no. 3: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5] (Nanjing, 1999). For other published documents relating to Republican Xinjiang from the No. 2 Archives, see Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, ed., *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian—di wu ji, di yi bian: zhengzhi (wu)* [Collection of archival materials concerning the history of the Republic of China—vol. 5, no. 1: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5] (Nanjing, 1994); and Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, ed., *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian—di wu ji, di er bian: zhengzhi (si)* [Collection of archival materials concerning the history of the Republic of China—vol. 5, no. 2: *zhengzhi*, pt. 4] (Nanjing, 1998).

longhand form.³⁰ The wealth of material included in these 4,200 pages simply beggars belief. We see Wu jotting down damning evidence about his predecessor Sheng Shicai, only to be crossed out later in preparation for publication (an event Wu did not live to see). We see the original telegrams, both edited and unedited drafts, that were sent back and forth between Wu and his subordinates in Xinjiang, as well as between Wu and important officials in Chongqing. Most enlightening is the intelligence gleaned from emissaries sent to Kazak “bandit” Osman Batur, as well as Wu’s frequent disagreements with policies advocated by his colleagues (and superiors) in Chongqing. An entire dissertation could be written on this single source base alone.

Taken together—archival access in Taiwan, collections of archival material published on the mainland, and the contributions of Chinese scholarship—and we now have enough material to lay the foundation for a sophisticated understanding of the political superstructure in Republican Xinjiang. At long last, we can now tell the story of how the Han rulers of this abandoned colony weathered the loss of their central government and managed to preserve the northwestern borderlands for whomsoever emerged victorious from the civil war. It is about time. From a similar source base, historians working on Tibet and Outer Mongolia, two border regions where virtually no Chinese authority was exercised throughout the Republican era, have already produced outstanding studies in English.³¹ The time has come to let Xinjiang have its day in the sun.

³⁰ For the complete original manuscript of Wu’s diary, see Gansu sheng guji wenxian zhengli bianyi zhongxin, ed., *Zhongguo xibei wenxian congshu, er bian* [Collection of documents relating to northwest China, series two], vols. 10–16 (Beijing, 2006).

³¹ Thomas E. Ewing, *Between the Hammer and the Anvil? Chinese and Russian Policies in Outer Mongolia, 1911–1921* (Bloomington, Ind., 1980); Hsiao-ting Lin, *Tibet and Nationalist China’s Frontier:*

Geats, Dragons, and Subalterns

Why is it so important that we understand the political superstructure of Chinese rule in Republican Xinjiang? Couldn't our scholarly energies be put to much better use, such as the history of cultural and ethnic tensions in the region, themes so much in vogue today? In order to answer this question, let me tell you a story. Once upon a time, there was a young graduate student who knew very little about Xinjiang. He was completing a master's degree in International Studies at the University of Washington, and intended to pursue a career in government upon graduation. One day, while shelving books at his part-time job in the East Asia Library, he came across three issues of a pictorial magazine published in 1947. Inside were many arresting photographs of the scenery, people, and products of Republican Xinjiang. Mesmerized by this rare and visually compelling find, he decided to write his first-year seminar research paper about it. His conclusion, based on little more than the three issues at hand, was that its Uighur editors had managed to strike a subtle blow for subaltern agency amidst a suffocating atmosphere of Han ethnocultural chauvinism and political imperialism in late 1940s Xinjiang. Upon the urging of his advisors, the manuscript was submitted to the *Journal of Asian Studies*, where it was accepted for publication.³² The student, now convinced that he had hit upon a foolproof formula for scholarly advancement and intellectual profundity, forsook a

Intrigues and Ethnopolitics, 1928–49 (Vancouver, B.C., 2006); and Xiaoyuan Liu, *Reins of Liberation: An Entangled History of Mongolian Independence, Chinese Territoriality, and Great Power Hegemony, 1911–1950* (Stanford, 2006).

³² Justin Jacobs, "How Chinese Turkestan Became Chinese: Visualizing Zhang Zhizhong's *Tianshan Pictorial* and Xinjiang Youth Song and Dance Troupe," *Journal of Asian Studies* 67, no. 2 (May 2008): 545–91.

career in government and decided to continue his graduate studies at the University of California, San Diego.

I was that student. And for the past several years, I have lived with an acute sense of guilt over the article that kickstarted my academic career. It began not long after December 2007, when I saw the new *Beowulf* film in the theater. It presented Beowulf as a capable yet overly vainglorious warrior, whose quest for fame and glory leads him to frequent hyperbole and exaggeration of his exploits. Only Angelina Jolie can see through him. “Underneath your glamor,” she taunts him as Grendel’s nude mother, “you’re as much a monster as my son, Grendel.” Decades later, Beowulf’s hollow deeds catch up to him. He is forced to make amends by slaying a mighty dragon, itself the spawn of Beowulf’s less than heroic exploits with Ms. Jolie.

Upon repeated viewings, the connections to my academic career became apparent. Just as Beowulf’s misleading and self-serving account of his encounter with Grendel’s mother had won him a kingship he did not deserve, so too had my sweeping yet shallow analysis of Han-Uighur relations in 1940s Xinjiang won me a measure of academic fame and privilege I had not earned. It was only when I began to familiarize myself with scholarship concerning the Soviet borderlands that the contradictions in my work became clear. It was there that I encountered two models of scholarship seemingly at odds with one another. On one side I saw a relative amorality that repulsed me to the core. If I did not quickly re-evaluate my own approach, I began to worry, I too might one day end up

describing Uighur violence against women as an “impressive” act of “resistance” against the alien state.³³

Thus floundering about in academic purgatory, I began a year of dissertation fieldwork abroad. When my trail of sources led me back into the 1940s, I found that I had come full circle. And yet, up to that point my knowledge of Republican Xinjiang had been premised upon a handful of impressionistic readings from photographs in three skinny issues of an obscure magazine. What did I know of Uighur resistance against the Han political order? Very little, as it turned out. Documents from both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the desks of various high-level Chinese officials told a much different story than that which I had conjured into existence many years prior. Far from uncovering an “impressive” display of subaltern resistance against the so-called Han “imperialists,” what I found instead was a premeditated attempt by the Nationalist government to showcase “authentic” Uighur “resistance” on the national stage as a counterweight to Soviet sponsorship for a non-Han rebellion in Ili. In short, those “subtle blows” for subaltern agency that I found had been deliberately encouraged by their Chinese financiers. The unpleasant reality was that these so-called bearers of subaltern “resistance” were actually willing agents of the Nationalist cause in Xinjiang. Sure, they found some wiggle room to pursue their own agenda, but it was only slightly at odds with that of their Chinese employers. It was only much later and in a different part of the world that they tried to gloss over their extensive history of “collaboration” and portray their career in a nationalist light. The lesson? That the political superstructure of Chinese

³³ This particular example, from an analysis of Uzbek interactions with the Soviet state, comes from Douglas Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca, NY, 2004), 278, 317.

rule was an inescapable fact of life for the majority non-Han residents in Xinjiang. As a result, the actions of Uighurs, Kazaks, Kyrgyz, Hui, and Mongols can only properly be understood within the context of a Chinese administration of which they were integral—and often voluntary—actors.

Such a conclusion carries wide-ranging implications. Not least of which is that a political history of post-imperial Xinjiang, based on Chinese sources, stands as a prerequisite both to any further study of the region and to any attempts at transnational comparisons. In the aftermath of September 11, with interest among young scholars toward China's northwestern Muslim border regions at a peak, it is imperative that historians of modern China produce a clear chronological narrative of Republican Xinjiang, one that takes as its chief subject of analysis the political fortunes of those Chinese administrators who sat in the governor's mansion.³⁴ That they sat there at all, and in unbroken succession throughout the period in question, demands explanation. It is also justification enough for the copious amount of attention required to decipher and decode their administrative output. In China like nowhere else, politics plays second fiddle to none. Without a solid foundation in the trials and tribulations of Chinese officialdom in Xinjiang, precocious studies of the cultures, ethnicities, philosophies, gender, or economy of the region, though often refreshing and innovative in their own right, are destined to founder on the rocks of misinformation. It is my sincere hope that the completion of this

³⁴ Almost every published work on Xinjiang over the past two decades, written variously by political scientists, journalists, anthropologists, and historians producing secondary scholarship, defers to Forbes or Benson for the history of the Republican era. See, for example, S. Frederick Starr, *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland* (Armonk, NY, 2004); Christian Tyler, *Wild West China: The Taming of Xinjiang* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2004); Michael Dillon, *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Far Northwest* (New York, 2004); and James A. Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang* (New York, 2007).

dissertation may serve as a cornerstone from which the rest of the edifice may finally be constructed.

If that is the case, then I will have slayed the dragon of my academic youth.

Xinjiang in the World

But what of the historical profession at large? What will historians of the rest of the world gain from a political history of Republican Xinjiang written from the perspective of the Chinese ruling class? I will answer this question with two words, the second of which is distinguished only by the abbreviation for a German web domain: colonization and decolonization. The post-imperial Chinese state was unique in being both an active colonial power itself and a state simultaneously colonized by other foreign powers. China was not just a “semi-colony”; large parts of its territory were actively colonized by the Japanese, and, one could argue in Xinjiang, the Russians. But it is only during the transition from empire to nationalizing state that this Janus-faced paradox emerges. Until the final decades of the imperial era, the Manchu rulers of the Qing dynasty made it a conscious matter of policy to keep the ethnically dissimilar components of the empire distinct and separate from each other. They began to repudiate this longstanding policy in the 1880s, a decade that coincided with the reconquest and incorporation of Xinjiang as a formal province. The assimilationist and nationalizing policies of the last two decades of the Qing, largely ineffectual in Xinjiang, subsequently ran into the brick wall of the 1911 revolution. Over the next decade, Xinjiang became what I call an “abandoned Han colony,” cut off from central government life support, but not so mortally weakened as to compromise the position of the Han ruling class. This was

the defining feature of the ethnopolitical landscape in Republican Xinjiang, one whose fundamental characteristics underwent a facelift only with the arrival of the Chinese Communists in 1949.

The characterization of Republican Xinjiang as an “abandoned Han colony” is significant precisely because historians of this era are not accustomed to viewing post-imperial China within the framework of colonizer. Colonized, to be sure, but colonizer? As a result, the possibilities for comparative history in Republican China have been restricted to comparisons with the colonial experiences of other Third World countries. Had Tibet and Outer Mongolia not been lost to the Chinese state for most of the Republican era, the international profile of the Dalai Lama and infamous legacy of Genghis Khan certainly would have facilitated the prompt rectification of this oversight. And indeed, this is what we find for the post-1949 era, where the assertion of Chinese hegemony in Tibet ensured a respectable spate of scholarship on the colonial activities of the Communist state. Even the Inner Mongols of the Communist era have their own historical muse.³⁵

Yet the discovery that Republican China also played host to a Han colony opens up an entirely new horizon in comparative scholarship. We no longer have to wait for the establishment of Communist power in Tibet in 1951 to analyze the phenomenon of post-imperial colonial rule in China.³⁶ The defining features of an imperial colony in transition elsewhere in the world can now stand side-by-side in a police lineup with Republican

³⁵ I am referring, of course, to the many works of Melvyn C. Goldstein and Uradyn E. Bulag.

³⁶ Some important work is beginning to emerge on the ethnopolitical transformations occasioned by the transition from empire to nation in Republican China. See Joseph W. Esherick, “How the Qing Became China,” and Uradyn E. Bulag, “Going Imperial: Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhism and Nationalisms in China and Inner Asia,” both in Joseph W. Esherick, Hasan Kayali, and Eric Van Young, eds., *Empire to Nation: Historical Perspectives on the Making of the Modern World* (Lanham, Md., 2006), 229–95.

Xinjiang. There are three questions scholars outside Chinese history should ask of developments in post-imperial Xinjiang. First, how was the precarious position of the colonizing class maintained against the backdrop of chaos and warfare brought about by the collapse of the imperial state? Second, once these methods of self-preservation no longer proved tenable, how did the ruling class cope with their newly delegitimized status? And finally, when all other options had been exhausted, how was the phenomenon of decolonization actually implemented? Though stretching beyond the temporal parameters of the current study, I have attempted to answer this last question elsewhere, through a transnational case study of the life and many afterlives of the Kazak “bandit” Osman Batur. Burdened with a legacy of national humiliation and occupying a vastly superior demographic and military position, after 1949 the Chinese Communists decolonized Xinjiang via a relentless flood of Han migrants and assimilationist policies. Indeed, so thorough was the handiwork of the state that after a single generation there was little about Xinjiang that could be called colonial anymore. An intrusive nationalizing state, perhaps, but one that intruded equally in the lives of all its subjects, with nary a colony in sight.³⁷

As for the first two questions, each touching upon the preservation and reformulation of colonial legitimacy prior to actual decolonization, they are explored in-depth in the chapters that follow. But to whom am I addressing myself? Which historians are naturally endowed with subject matter most likely to yield fruitful comparisons with Republican Xinjiang? Without a doubt, historians of Russia and the Soviet Union, the

³⁷ Justin Jacobs, “The Many Deaths of a Kazak Unaligned: Osman Batur, Chinese Decolonization, and the Nationalization of a Nomad,” *American Historical Review* 115, no. 5 (December 2010): 1291–1314.

Ottoman Empire and its successor states, and the Japanese Empire can all have a field day in northwestern China. Since the turn of the millenium, much excellent scholarship has emerged concerning Leninist and Stalinist nationality projects in the 1920s and 30s. Despite being most famously synthesized in Terry Martin's *The Affirmative Action Empire* (2001), this revolutionary field of scholarship also includes important case studies on Soviet Turkmenistan, Kazakstan, and Uzbekistan.³⁸ These studies are all of direct comparative relevance for Xinjiang during the 1930s and 40s, when Han rulers in Xinjiang attempted to rework Soviet policies from across the border to suit their own needs. Somewhat more distant but always at the forefront of elite concerns were Japanese nationality projects both in northeastern China and among the Inner Mongols.³⁹ The threat to Han colonial legitimacy posed by both Soviet and Japanese overtures to the non-Han peoples of the borderlands forced Han rulers to deal with the rhetorical fallout of global decolonization.⁴⁰ The loss of Outer Mongolia in the 1920s stood as a bitter reminder of the fate likely to befall other non-Han regions of the former Chinese empire should the Han administration prove unable to mount an effective challenge to the Russians and Japanese.

³⁸ See, for instance, Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY, 2001); Adrienne Lynn Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton, 2004); Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, NY, 2005); Michael Rouland, "Music and the Making of the Kazak Nation, 1920–1936" (doctoral dissertation, Georgetown University, 2005); Marianne Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling under Communism* (Seattle, 2006); and Adeeb Khalid, "The Soviet Union as an Imperial Formation: A View from Central Asia," in Ann Laura Stoler, Carole McGranahan, and Peter C. Perdue, eds., *Imperial Formations* (Santa Fe, NM, 2007), 113–39.

³⁹ I refer here mostly to the well-known work of Prasenjit Duara, though others have also examined these issues.

⁴⁰ Carol McGranahan has done some interesting work on rhetorical effects of decolonization in Tibet. See her "Empire Out of Bounds: Tibet in the Era of Decolonization," in *Imperial Formations*, 173–209.

Although the sprawling Eurasian continental empires offer the most direct comparisons to Republican Xinjiang, there is really no good reason to exclude the overseas empires of the central and western European states as well. Certainly the establishment and maintenance of rule were experienced quite differently. But the coping mechanisms devised in response to challenges against that rule in the early twentieth century are directly comparable. The overseas empires of the British in India and the French in Africa dealt with the loss of colonial legitimacy in ways that are highly instructive for the situation in contemporary Xinjiang, even if they can be most profitably viewed as counterexamples rather than historical models.⁴¹ Even the German empire, both at its late nineteenth-century peak and in its emasculated interwar form, offers ready parallels for the Chinese in Xinjiang. By providing a rare example of a proud yet defeated former imperial power, we can better understand the zeal among Nationalist circles after 1928 to reunify, at any cost, the oft invoked “lost territories” (*sangshi tudi*) of the Qing empire. Much as the glory days of the German empire “remained in the heads of the Germans in the Weimar Republic,” so too did the ambitious yet consistently besieged interwar and wartime state in Nanjing and Chongqing continue to set its sights on former imperial borderlands over which it exercised no control whatsoever.⁴²

The above examples are merely the tip of the iceberg. Because most of the world’s surface in the early twentieth century was administered by empires undergoing a

⁴¹ Jacobs, “The Many Deaths of a Kazak Unaligned,” 1299, 1312–13. On the French empire, see, in particular, the work of Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, 2005); and his “Provincializing France,” in *Imperial Formations*, 341–77. On the British empire, some of the most promising work for future comparative scholarship on Republican Xinjiang includes David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (Oxford, 2001); and Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford, 2004).

⁴² Philipp Ther, “Imperial instead of Nationalist History: Positioning Modern German History on the Map of European Empires,” in Alexei Miller and Alfred J. Rieber, eds., *Imperial Rule* (Budapest, 2004), 47–66.

transition to nationalizing states, the revelation that Republican China also played host to such a transition opens up near limitless possibilities for comparative scholarship.

Xinjiang, the largest and most ethnically dissimilar region to remain under continuous Han suzerainty throughout this period, deserves to be one of the first examples in the East Asian orbit against which the experiences of the rest of the world can be compared.

Xinjiang in China

If we are to address ourselves to an audience oriented chiefly toward the core regions of Han-dominated China, then our general framework cannot be premised on the ethnic relations and tensions so often commented upon, as this paradigm carries little resonance for such scholars. Instead, we must use the evolving relationship between Xinjiang and the central government during the Republican era as a reflection of how the transition from empire to nationalizing was experienced within China as a whole.

So what does the case study of Republican Xinjiang tell us about China that we did not already know? First, the early years, where we will revisit one of the most infamous events of the early Republic. In fact, we cannot even talk about President Yuan Shikai's restoration of the monarchy in 1915–16 without falling into the same rhetorical trap set by his many detractors. In their and nearly every subsequent historian's analysis, the monarchical movement was a comical grab for power by a dictator unable to stomach the thought of pluralistic government and representative politics. It was, we are told, a morally bankrupt enterprise that inexplicably used the discredited idea of a monarchy as

rhetorical gloss.⁴³ The response of Xinjiang's governor, however, tells a different story. Yang Zengxin, one of Yuan's most steadfast supporters, was an enthusiastic supporter of the restoration. Men who fell into this category have heretofore not been taken seriously. In Yang's writings, however, we catch a glimpse of his conservative affection for the office of the emperorship. But we also see, for the first time, the geopolitical attractions of the imperial enterprise, an aspect neglected by both the revolutionaries and their sympathetic chroniclers in our own profession. In short, the perspective of an embattled Han governor on the non-Han frontier shows why we should refer to the 1915–16 movement not only as a restoration of the “monarchy,” but also as a restoration of the “empire.” The distinction is crucial. In changing the formal name of the polity from the Republic of China (*Zhonghua minguo*) to the Chinese Empire (*Zhonghua diguo*), Emperor Yuan was trying to mitigate widespread disaffection among separatist non-Han nobles in Outer Mongolia, which shared a border with Xinjiang. The gambit worked, and the Outer Mongols once again pledged their allegiance to the Chinese state. In all of this Governor Yang was a nervous spectator in neighboring Xinjiang. Far away on the fragile frontier, where the disruptive Han ethnocentrism of the revolution made life exceedingly difficult for a lonely Han governor, we see how the ethnopolitical neutrality of “empire” still carried widespread appeal long after the 1911 revolution.

⁴³ The standard treatment of Yuan Shikai's reign in English is Ernest P. Young, *The Presidency of Yuan Shih-k'ai: Liberalism and Dictatorship in Early Republican China* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1977). In general textbooks on modern Chinese history, Yuan Shikai is always assessed in a negative light. Much of the vitriol originated with Chinese scholars. See, for example, Tao Juyin, *Yuan Shikai qieguo ji* [How Yuan Shikai's sold out the country] (Taipei, 1954); Wu Changyi, ed., *Bashisan tian huangdi meng* [Dreams of an emperor for eighty three days] (Beijing, 1983); and Zhang Huateng, *Hongxian dizhi: Yuan shi dimeng pozai ji* [The Great Constitutional Emperor: how Yuan's dreams of the emperorship collapsed] (Beijing, 2007).

Moving right along, the immediate post-Yuan era offers further justification to historians of China for learning about the vicissitudes of Han rule in Xinjiang. We now turn our attention to warlordism, that oft lamented scourge of the Republican era. In short, how did it begin, how did it evolve, and how did it end? Despite the fact that, for reasons that will become clear in the early chapters, I do not consider Yang Zengxin to be a warlord on par with his contemporaries, his relationship with Yuan's successors in Beijing still offers us an intriguing case study on the origins of warlordism, and it is one that is ripe for extrapolation. Over the course of three chapters on Yang's reign, I have been able to document the precise course of events that led to the political estrangement of this old-style imperial official from the central government he had once pledged to serve. The immediate context was supplied by the Russian civil war, and the need to safeguard Chinese territory from the depredations of Red and White partisans. With Beijing issuing the same orders to Governor Yang that eventually led to the loss of Outer Mongolia, and no financial assistance in the offing, the governor of Xinjiang finally realized that the central government had become more a liability than an asset. The mountains of untouched telegrams authored by Yang allow us to pinpoint the the exact moment (November 18, 1919) and the exact reasons (provincial security and fiscal abandonment) why the governor finally lost his temper and turned his back on Beijing. Few other provinces offer an integrated source base capable of yielding such detail.

We can also track the evolution of warlordism in the 1920s and 30s as it rubbed shoulders with the nationalizing Leninist party-state of the Nationalists. The many failed attempts of the Nationalist government to capture Xinjiang within its orbit were ingenious in formulation yet often reckless in execution. The rich documentary record for this era

allows us to get at the problem from several different angles: the Nationalist-sponsored expeditions of foreign archaeologists as well as the Hail Mary pacification missions of ambitious Nationalist entourages. Though the Nationalists were ultimately shut out of Xinjiang for most of the late 1930s, opportunity knocked once more during the three years from 1942 to 1944. It is here, amidst a cloak-and-dagger world of threefold political intrigues among the Soviets, Nationalists, and General Sheng Shicai, that we see in fascinating detail just how shrewd Chiang Kai-shek was in outmaneuvering his warlord competitors. Indeed, the conclusions of my own research as well as that of other recent scholarship are beginning to suggest a much more positive appraisal of Chiang's regime.⁴⁴ It now seems clear that, without the Japanese invasion of 1937, there would have been little to stand in the way of Chiang's eventual unification of the nation. The Nationalist experience in Xinjiang over two turbulent decades evinces an impressive degree of political ingenuity, stubborn determination, and pragmatic flexibility. One of the more surprising findings of the later chapters is just how willing Chiang Kai-shek was to pursue a course of action on the ground that was in express violation of his own frequently expressed—and even more frequently maligned—ethnic dogma.

Situated at the end of our Republican timeline, the final chapter of this study explores some of the ways in which the Nationalist state laid the groundwork for its Communist successors. By and large, the Chinese Communists did not have to conquer and reconquer the warlords that had so bedeviled Chiang's state. The Nationalists had

⁴⁴ The most recent and sweeping reappraisal can be found in Jay Taylor's biography of Chiang Kai-shek, *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek and the Struggle for Modern China* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009). Taylor's work was the subject of extensive criticism in a special issue of *The Chinese Historical Review* (vol. 17, no. 1, Spring 2010), in which five scholars took issue with what they saw his overly sympathetic portrayal of Chiang's government. I happen to find Taylor's response, which was comprehensive in scope, to be quite convincing in refuting many of his critics' complaints.

already done that for them. All the Communists had to do was beat the fatally weakened Nationalist party-state, then tighten the screws of state control that their predecessors had put in place. The Communists benefited immensely from not having to shoulder the burdens of the internationally recognized establishment. This comes through clearly in the case of Xinjiang, where the costly half-decade-long experiment in direct governance laid the groundwork for the Communists to march in and assume stewardship with scarcely a hiccup. The Nationalist tenure in Xinjiang during the 1940s was a financial and moral drain on the central government, which was forced to allocate important officials and precious troops to meet its many demands. It was a thankless task, however, and one which benefited only the Communists, who waltzed in unopposed by Chinese warlords or Soviet-sponsored insurgents. They had been neutralized, at extraordinary political and financial cost, by the Nationalists. Not only that, we will also see how even the groundwork for a future Communist discourse on regional and ethnic autonomy was explored first by the Nationalists.

In short, there is no longer any excuse for historians of inner China to look upon the non-Han borderlands with passive indifference. Even in regions where nary a single Han administrator could be found, such as Tibet, recent scholarship has clearly shown how (as in the case of the Weimar Germans) the former empire “remained in the heads” of Chinese policymakers in the heartland.⁴⁵ But when we are blessed with a source base as rich as the one bequeathed to us by successive Han administrations in Xinjiang, the possibilities to enrich our knowledge of modern Chinese history as a whole are virtually limitless.

⁴⁵ Lin, *Tibet and Nationalist China's Frontier*.

Structure of the Dissertation

The structure of the dissertation is as follows. The first chapter offers an indirect foray into many of the themes encountered in the dissertation as a whole. It examines prominent foreign archaeological expeditions undertaken in Xinjiang from the last decades of the Qing to the last decade of Nationalist rule. In the process, this introductory chapter outlines the evolving relationship between the shifting central government in inner China and provincial Han administrators in Xinjiang. The next eight chapters are a strict chronological narrative of the travails of Han administration in Xinjiang, from the revolution of 1911 to the Communist takeover in the early 1950s. All findings are based on Chinese archival sources. The final chapter traces the continuing Nationalist effort to represent Xinjiang among the refugee community throughout the Middle East after retreating to their island stronghold of Taiwan in 1949.

Chapter 1

Indiana Jones in Xinjiang, 1893–1944

“To know that there is still so vast a land, wholly undeveloped, replete with resources, and within the boundaries of our state, is to realize the potential for colonization and industry. The commencement of such an enterprise offers inexhaustible hope for the future of our nation.”¹ Throughout the twentieth century, whenever educated Han reflected upon the relationship between the inner Chinese heartland and the distant, non-Han province of Xinjiang, they tended to echo the sentiments of revolutionary statesman Sun Yat-sen, who penned the above passage in 1920. The message was simple. The ability of the central government to coordinate a steady stream of Han migrants to the northwestern frontiers, followed closely by the development of industry and resource extraction, constituted a direct correlary with the strength of the national polity. Should progress on this front be continually frustrated, it could only mean that China was still beset by political disintegration. During the last three decades of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), a reinvigorated Manchu court attempted to bring its borderlands into closer alignment with the ethnopolitical milieu of inner China. In Xinjiang, this shift was underpinned by its conversion to a province in 1884. What followed were more than two decades of haphazard Han migration, assimilationist education policies, and resource extraction enterprises. The results were less than spectacular, succeeding only in transplanting the same anti-Manchu Han grievances once confined within inner China to the new Han armies in Xinjiang. Thus, in late 1911, when disgruntled Han officers in

¹ See the preface in Xie Xiaozhong, *Xinjiang youji* [Travels in Xinjiang] (1923; repr. ed., Lanzhou, 2003), 1.

military garrisons throughout inner China rose up in revolt against the Qing dynasty, their martial counterparts in Ili and Dihua, the capital of Xinjiang, duly followed suit.

Unlike in much of China, the conservative and pro-monarchist governors of Xinjiang did manage to quell the revolt and restore stability to the province. But by that point, the damage had already been done. The diverse and loosely governed ethnopolitical components of the Qing empire soon drifted apart, and local military leaders began to manage their regional satrapies as warlords. Xinjiang would have to wait another four decades before a central government strong enough to glue all these newly autonomous pieces back together would feel confident enough to revisit the nation-building enterprises of the late Qing. In the words of Chiang Kai-shek, successor to Sun Yat-sen as leader of the Nationalist Party during the Republican era (1912–49), China at this time resembled “a pile of sand,” whose centrifugal components “triggered the aggression of enemies.”² These “enemies” could come to China in many forms: as soldiers or diplomats, as merchants or missionaries. They also came as archaeologists. Over a period of four decades, from the 1890s to the 1930s, a number of high-profile, adventure-seeking scholars and art connoisseurs came to Xinjiang in search of sand-buried antiquities. Before long, European, American, Japanese, and, somewhat later, Chinese archaeologists made startling discoveries of Eurasian mummies, Buddhist cave murals, and manuscripts bearing traces of more than twenty ancient languages, many long since extinct. No sooner were these priceless artifacts uncovered than they were shipped off to libraries and museums across Japan, Europe, and North America.

² Jay Taylor, *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek and the Struggle for Modern China* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009), 329.

It has become customary nowadays to apply a moral lens of analysis to these archaeological enterprises, one in which abstract notions of cultural sovereignty and scholarly preservation are marshaled in an attempt to prove the “criminal” or “benevolent” nature of the original transactions. Such debates, however, trace their rhetorical ancestry to an era many decades after the first archaeological excavations were actually undertaken.³ As we shall see, for those Chinese officials sweating away on the bureaucratic front lines in Xinjiang, there was nothing at all abstract about the foreign archaeologists then passing through their province. To these officials, moral indignation, never expressed and seemingly unfelt, was a tactic poorly suited to the challenges at hand. Of far more importance was that they treat these “casual foreign travelers” (*youlizhe*) in a manner that preserved political—not cultural—sovereignty. During the waning years of the Qing, negotiations surrounding the arrival, departure, and daily activities of foreign archaeologists in Xinjiang clearly demonstrated the prostrate status of China as a whole vis-à-vis the foreign powers. After the fall of the Qing, the rise of ambitious warlords all along Xinjiang’s borders transformed the relationship between Xinjiang and inner China to the point where any visitor to the province—Han and foreigner alike—was assumed to harbor ulterior motives. The strains occasioned by such mutual hostility posed a prickly dilemma for the young Nationalist government in the late 1920s. Still too weak to project its authority to the northwestern periphery via guns and

³ For a study on the debates surrounding foreign archaeologists in modern China, as well as my own revisionist account of Stein’s reception among Chinese intellectuals during the Republican era, see Justin Jacobs, “Confronting Indiana Jones: Chinese Nationalism, Historical Imperialism, and the Criminalization of Aurel Stein and the Raiders of Dunhuang, 1899–1944,” in Sherman Cochran and Paul G. Pickowicz, eds., *China on the Margins* (Ithaca, NY, 2010), 65–90.

diplomacy, Nanjing instead conferred its blessings on foreign and domestic archaeologists, who attempted to breach the Xinjiang cocoon on its behalf.

This is the story of how Xinjiang officialdom interacted with these distinguished scholar-adventurers over a period of forty years. Through this seemingly innocuous prism we will witness the changing relationship between center and periphery during the Republican era.

Hitched to a Sinking Ship

“Order your men to transport ... [their] crates and luggage to the Liu *yamen* in the Main Hall at Karashahr with great care,” wrote Wen Lishan, the sub-prefect of Turpan, in March 1903, clarifying instructions to his chief of staff. “Then wait for a stamp of receipt and bring it back for our records. The servants assigned to this task must not impede or otherwise obstruct these orders. If they do, the gravest of blame will fall upon them.”⁴

This brief sampling of bureaucratic drudgery from Chinese officialdom in Xinjiang opens a window into the unequal relationship that existed between foreign powers and the Chinese state during the final decades of the Qing dynasty. The luggage in question belonged to Albert Grünwedel and Albert von Le Coq, two prominent German archaeologists whose fame would later derive from their excavations and removal of frescoes on this and future expeditions. The Chinese officials saddled with the task of ensuring the safety of their expedition, however, expressed scant interest in their scholarly achievements. For them, Grünwedel and Le Coq were little more than walking

⁴ Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqu dang'an guan and Riben fojiao daxue Niya yizhi xueshu yanjiu jigou, eds., *Jindai waiguo tanxianjia Xinjiang kaogu dang'an shiliao* [Historical documents concerning the archaeological activities of foreign explorers in Xinjiang during the modern era] (Wulumuqi, 2001), 158.

diplomatic liabilities, to be handled with kid gloves and promptly sent on their way. If these treaty-protected foreigners lodged the slightest complaint with their powerful ambassadors, it could spell professional disaster for the unlucky official in whose jurisdiction the alleged infraction occurred. The frequent transport of luggage is a case in point. Desperate to avoid allegations of neglect, Sub-Prefect Wen took great pains not only to ensure strict compliance down the chain of command, but also to procure a complete trail of bureaucratic paperwork that would absolve him of blame should an incident arise in the future.

All negotiations regarding a possible foreign expedition were handled by the central government and foreign embassies in Beijing. Because the Qing court was far too weak to deflect foreign pressure for their entry, Xinjiang's officials had no choice but to fall dutifully in line. Even when foreigners failed to obtain the necessary paperwork, entry to the province could not be refused, especially since most of them came via railways in Russian Siberia, far from the shrinking radius of Qing power. Furthermore, neither bandit uprisings nor ecological disasters seemed capable of dissuading these archaeologists from their destinations. This vexed local officials to no end, for the simple reason that safe passage and freedom of movement was a treaty right enjoyed by all Western and Japanese travelers in China. As a result, the single most common directive to appear in any document relating to foreign archaeologists in Xinjiang during this time warned Chinese officials to "afford them the necessary protections in accordance with treaty provisions" (*anyue tuowei baohu*). Out of the many multitudes of humiliating diplomatic agreements China had signed over the course of the nineteenth century, no specific treaty was ever singled out, for everyone knew what they cumulatively entailed.

In short, anytime a foreign citizen hailing from one of the great powers found himself in desperate straits or a diplomatic pickle—often, though not always, of his own making—he could simply call upon his or a friendly nation’s diplomatic corps to come to his aid. Aware of how widely the gulf in economic and military disparity stretched between his own nation and that of China, the disgruntled foreigner and his ambassadorial lawyers could then proceed to invoke tortured treaty logic to shift the blame for any quarrel onto Chinese officialdom.

In order to avoid such blame, Chinese officials in Xinjiang treated foreign archaeologists as if they were visiting dignitaries. No detail of their expedition was deemed too petty or mundane to escape scrutiny at the highest levels. During the twilight years of the Qing, the biggest concern was that a predilection for shortcuts and unpatrolled routes would lead to an ambush by bandits, still widespread in the aftermath of major Muslim rebellions in the 1860s and 70s. These fears were realized in the wake of the 1911 revolution, when the Buddhist monk and explorer Count Otani appealed to his nation’s diplomatic corps to protest on his behalf. “The Japanese ambassador claims that the Count suffered the pillaging of his silver currency and pack animals by bandits while he was in Khotan county,” the Office of Foreign Affairs wrote to Xinjiang’s governor, “and that local officials were unwilling to protect him. The situation is dire. Find a way to make amends.” Left unspoken in such crises was the fact that the foreigner often brought such troubles upon himself. Warned against taking dangerous mountain routes, Count Otani simply brushed his naysayers aside. “He is adamant, and tells us not to worry, since he took this route last year without incident.” Still, throwing caution to the winds was not a prudent career move for a Chinese official tasked with Otani’s safety.

“Should anything happen en route, we will fail to live up to our neighborly responsibilities and problems will arise. We have no choice but to instruct Magistrate Zhang in Yangi Hissar county to gather horses and manservants and prepare for his safe escort.”⁵

Whenever foreigners proved less than forthcoming in divulging the details of their daily itinerary, Chinese officials simply turned to their Mongol, Turkic, or Chinese interpreters to obtain the necessary information. “According to our Mongol interpreter,” wrote the Turpan sub-prefect, Peng Xuzhan, in 1893, “the Russian spends his time making drawings in the mountains, traveling seven to ten miles per day. Not once has he taken a main road.” Not surprisingly, this unwillingness to stick to the safety of beaten paths worried officials in both Xinjiang and Beijing alike. The central government advised its border officials “not to allow them to proceed to any restricted regions or areas where local sentiment is not conducive to their arrival.” Yet as we saw in the case of Count Otani, such restrictions were meaningless in the face of determined resistance by gun-toting foreigners and their powerful consular corps. This led Sub-prefect Peng to try and cover all possible contingencies, imploring his subordinates to “protect this foreigner wherever he goes, without the slightest neglect.”⁶ In 1906, the American climatologist Ellsworth Huntington made the trip from Karashahr to Toqsun, with an unscheduled stop in Loxsin en route. In an effort to stay one step ahead, the magistrate of Toqsun called in his Turkic interpreter, a man by the name of Arin. “He passed through the southern mountains with five attendants, on his way to Loxsin,” Arin reported. “Then

⁵ Ibid., 232–33.

⁶ Ibid., 101.

he sent me to accompany the armed escort for his luggage and pack animals to Toqsun.” Based on this information, the magistrate ordered officials in Loxin “to despatch forthwith a servant to protect them in accordance with treaty regulations, await their arrival, escort them to the county office, and report their entry and exit dates.”⁷

Failure to report with swift accuracy the exit and entry dates of foreigners on the move was met with a torrent of abuse. When the names of two Japanese explorers in separate regions of the province were erroneously reported as one, the offending official was swiftly castigated. “The lack of clear reporting does not provide a channel for prudent foreign affairs,” observed Rong Pei, the *daoyin* of Dihua and Barikol. “In the future, whenever you encounter a foreign traveler, do not submit muddled reports that serve to obstruct our work and lead to further inquiries.” In 1909, when officials in southern Xinjiang inexplicably lost track of the Hungarian-born British archaeologist Aurel Stein for a brief spell, the same *daoyin* ordered them to clean up their act. “Henceforth, whenever foreign travelers enter your district, you absolutely must attach servants to their party and escort them in accordance with treaty regulations. Exit and entry dates must be reported, and you must check their passports to see where they have been and what they have been up to. We do all this in the interests of caution, and no dereliction of duty can be countenanced.” Fortunately for Rong *daoyin*, the extensive trail of paperwork he maintained allowed him to identify the precise location of an infraction among his staff. When a Finnish explorer managed to escape official oversight for a time in 1907, Rong traced his files back to the source. “When he left for Turpan,” Rong discovered, “the local magistrate sent a courier ahead to Fuyuan county. Why did the

⁷ Ibid., 251.

magistrate of Fuyuan not come out to take charge? ... It seems that someone has shirked their responsibility, and gross neglect has occurred as a result. Who shall shoulder the blame for this lapse?”⁸

As we have seen, most bureaucratic slips and instances of foreign disobedience could be papered over by an interrogation of the native interpreters attached to the expedition, each of whom was legally obliged to answer an official summons. Not surprisingly then, the most troubling expeditions were those that arranged for their own private translators, who then enjoyed the same legal protections as their employers. This was the case with the 1908 expedition of Count Otani, whose “specially employed translator started causing trouble, demanding the procurement of wine and food, and the provision of an additional cart.” Seeing his demands go unrequited, this translator proceeded to “beat up commoners,” and refused to pay for those supplies he did obtain. This was an ominous beginning to the Otani expedition, which everywhere left peevish officials and an acrimonious trail of documents in its wake. At the opposite end of the spectrum was the French sinologist Paul Pelliot, whose fluency in Chinese was a breath of fresh air to his monolingual counterparts. “He is of good moral character and disposition, and his elegant speech is pleasing to the ear,” wrote one official in 1907. “He lived in Beijing for many years, and is thoroughly conversant in Chinese script and speech. He is an erudite connoisseur of all things ancient, and there is nothing vainglorious about him.” Beneath such flowery praise was the pragmatic recognition that Pelliot would not constitute a diplomatic liability for Xinjiang officialdom. In order to find out where he was going, they simply asked him. If there were bandits in the area,

⁸ Ibid., 225, 112, 288.

they told him to steer clear, and he usually did. Officials paid little attention to any artifacts and scrolls Pelliot removed from the province. They were more than grateful just to know where he was in the first place, and that they need not fret over diplomatic incidents while this Chinese-speaking Frenchman was in their charge.⁹

Regardless of the diplomatic threat foreign archaeologists posed to Chinese authority in Xinjiang, each expedition—be it well-behaved or decidedly ill-mannered—proved extremely costly to a provincial administration already on financial life support. The only way to maintain a vast Chinese bureaucratic and military establishment in far-off Xinjiang was to provide enormous subsidies from the central government in Beijing. Before the twentieth century, this had been an onerous yet consistently undertaken task. That all changed with the disastrous Boxer debacle in 1900–1, precisely the sort of international brouhaha (foreign missionaries crossing paths with local bandits) that officials strived to prevent with foreign archaeologists in Xinjiang. In retaliation, the foreign powers, after unleashing a deadly punitive expedition on Beijing, levied a crippling indemnity upon the Qing court, one that sent it into a downward fiscal spiral from which it never recovered. Silver subsidies for Xinjiang plummeted, to be severed completely when the last emperor finally abdicated his throne in February 1912. In light of the fact that the provincial administration gained no tangible benefits from playing host to foreign explorers—they were parasites to be endured, not resources to be exploited—any financial burden incurred by the locality during the course of their travels merely exacerbated the economic crisis already afflicting the province. So rare was the archaeologist who looked after his own debts that Chinese officials encountering such a

⁹ Ibid., 200, 204, 262.

man felt it worthy of special commendation in their reports. Taking stock of the Huntington expedition in 1905, one grateful official observed that “this foreigner has offered to pay for all of his provisions and other expenses.”¹⁰

Most, however, did not. The Japanese were the most notorious offenders, refusing to pay for peddlers and pack animals employed on their journey. When Tachibana Zuicho, a disciple of Count Otani, insisted on traveling to sensitive oases such as Charchan, located in the impoverished moonscape of southeastern Xinjiang, it was all the local magistrate could do to mitigate the fallout from his arrival. “We are a rustic locale and have no guesthouse for him to stay in,” he observed. “So I ordered some Turban residents to vacate their home and let him occupy their quarters.” Tachibana’s arrival caused such a stir among the local populace that the magistrate had to issue a special order warning the Turkic peasants to “refrain from tracking his movements and thereby instigating an incident.” Grünwedel and Le Coq were no saints, either. After arriving at the border town of Tacheng in late 1904, officials all along the route to Dihua received orders to prepare “sheep, firewood, and hay for twelve horses.” These supplies were not intended as a gift. “If you can get the traveler to take care of the bill on the spot, that would help us avoid cumbersome paperwork.” Le Coq, however, did not take care of his bill, nor was he willing to accept a receipt for his expenses. After repeated attempts to procure payment from the Germans failed, Chinese officials had no choice but to shoulder the burden themselves, justifying their humiliating capitulation in moral terms.

¹⁰ Ibid., 250.

“Seeing as the amount in question is insignificant, the deputy magistrate should just pay for the expenses himself, as a display of magnanimous hospitality.”¹¹

Unfortunately for Xinjiang’s provincial coffers, such displays of “magnanimous hospitality” were becoming increasingly commonplace. Even when foreign archaeologists did not overtly consume provincial resources, Chinese officials were still forced to expend them. The treaties demanded it. “Disseminate an order to all village heads that [the foreigners] are to be afforded protection in accordance with the treaties,” wrote Li Fangxue, magistrate of Ningyuan county, in 1902. “In addition, send them water, vittles, foreign liquor and other necessities, all in fulfillment of our Excellency’s policy of treating guests from afar with great generosity.”¹² Once again, the moral gloss weaved into this statement belies the profoundly unequal nature of this relationship. Grünwedel and Le Coq were scholars without diplomatic credentials, and yet the highest officials in Xinjiang were forced to treat them as if they were foreign dignitaries. Chinese officials assumed the burden of expense for armed escorts, manservants, interpreters, and sometimes even daily provisions. If the foreigners failed to pay their bills, they could not be held accountable. If they ventured off the beaten path, they could not be called back. If they encountered bandits en route, blame fell upon the Chinese officials who did not sufficiently protect their risk-taking endeavors. If they lacked accommodations, locals were kicked out of their homes, then muzzled in their attempts to seek redress.

Last but not least, we must note the stratospheric expense of all the bureaucratic paperwork Xinjiang officials were obliged to maintain regarding these expeditions. As

¹¹ Ibid., 233, 228, 162–63, 166, 156.

¹² Ibid., 156.

the provincial governor of the early Republic once noted, the quality of paper produced in Xinjiang was “fit only to wrap packages, not to meet the needs of official documents.” This meant that all government organs were forced to import, at phenomenal expense, rolls of paper manufactured in inner China and transported to the northwest by camelback.¹³ Once in Xinjiang, much of this pricy papyrus was consumed by local officials who had no choice but to document, in mind-numbing detail, their latest adventures in babysitting for tempestuous foreign archaeologists. Over a twelve-month period during 1904–5, Chinese officials throughout Xinjiang had to deal with a constant stream of packages from abroad, all intended for Grünwedel and Le Coq in the field. Since the Germans changed their itinerary constantly, often failing to notify Xinjiang officials in advance, the ordeal of making sure their mail got to them intact became a near comic affair. Provincial couriers and magistrates chased the foreigners to every corner of the province.¹⁴ Two decades later such mundane distractions had not diminished. In 1931, no fewer than sixteen documents were circulated by various officials for the express purpose of tracking the development of a painful toothache in a Swedish archaeologist.¹⁵ These are merely a few examples of the sorts of daily bureaucratic chores that diverted both the attention and resources of Chinese officials in Xinjiang.

Official forbearance for such logistical tomfoolery declined markedly after the 1911 revolution. Though Xinjiang’s new governor, the shrewd and experienced Yang

¹³ Yang Zengxin, *Buguozhai wendu* [Records from the Studio of Rectification], vol. 1 (1921; repr. ed., Taipei, 1965), 184.

¹⁴ Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiq dang’an guan et al., *Jindai waiguo tanxianjia*, 166, 169, 175, 180, 182.

¹⁵ Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiq dang’an guan and Riben fojiao daxue Niya yizhi xueshu yanjiu jigou, eds., *Zhong Rui xibei kexue kaocha dang’an shiliao* [Historical documents concerning the Sino-Swedish Northwest Scientific Survey Expedition] (Wulumuqi, 2006), 138–48.

Zengxin, quickly neutralized Han revolutionaries in Dihua and Ili, foreign and domestic opportunists took advantage of the chaos to pursue their own agendas. Turkic peasants rose up against the harsh rule of the local Muslim khanate in Hami, Han secret society brotherhoods carried out a campaign of terror and assassination throughout the province, and Russian generals led Mongol cavalry in an invasion of Khovd. To add insult to injury, nobles in Outer Mongolia leveraged Russian support to declare independence from the new Chinese republic, and Tibet attempted to follow suit. All of these developments had consequences for foreign archaeologists in Xinjiang, by now the last majority non-Han region to remain under Chinese suzerainty. Paranoia was rife throughout the province. Count Otani's men, perennial *personas non grata* in Xinjiang, were now suspected of meddling in secret society affairs. "This traveler has been in Kucha for three months," an official noted in 1913. "Submit a report for my review regarding whether or not he has been inciting the ignorant commoners; whether he is conducting surveys of the land; where he lodges at night; what activities he engages in; and whether or not the local magistrate has sent someone to protect him."¹⁶

By far the biggest concern for the new governor was the extent to which his province was being professionally mapped in preparation for a possible military invasion. Suspicion fell first on the Japanese, but investigations turned up empty. Not so with Aurel Stein, whose British citizenship suggested that he may be a cartographic vanguard of a much larger expedition from India and Tibet, the latter a suspected British satellite. Officials were suspicious of Indian surveyors that Stein sent out ahead of the main party, and the provincial commissioner for foreign affairs, Zhang Shaobo, wanted to make sure

¹⁶ Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiq dang'an guan et al., *Jindai waiguo tanxianjia*, 241.

that Stein was aware of their concerns. “You should have a polite conversation with the British consul [in Kashgar],” Zhang wrote to his southwestern officials, “and make sure they inform this traveler that he is not allowed to survey important passes for national defense, nor can he draw up any maps. We must do this so that neighborly relations are not hurt when local officials begin to restrict his activities.” When Stein ignored these instructions, officials in Charchan took the unprecedented step of searching the luggage of one of his Indian attendants. “When I entered Narsun’s room and examined his luggage,” reported the local magistrate, “I saw a device used for surveying and mapping attached to a stand. When I asked him what it was, Narsun said that it was merely photographic equipment. Fortunately, I was able to recognize its true nature on my own, and was not deceived.” The conclusion forwarded to Governor Yang was that “both times Stein has come to Charchan, his goal has been to draw maps of our land under the guise of archaeological endeavors.”¹⁷

Governor Yang ordered the equipment in question to be detained, and a forceful note of protest was sent to the British consulate. “Tell Consul Macartney that if Stein draws up any more maps we will deport him.” Macartney denied that Stein had anything but scholarly aims. The governor did not believe him. After securing promises from Stein that he would not conduct any more surveys of the land (a promise soon broken), he was permitted to resume his travels. Not only that, but he was also allowed to take out a loan for his journey to the neighboring province of Gansu.¹⁸ Despite the newly varnished bluster of the post-Qing administration, the fundamental terms of its relationship with

¹⁷ Ibid., 113–16, 118.

¹⁸ Ibid., 119, 121, 123–24.

foreign archaeologists had not changed. Though Chinese officials evinced an increasing determination to confront foreigners when they transgressed treaty provisions, when push came to shove, there was still precious little the provincial administration could do about it.

During the nadir of Chinese state power in the early Republic, Governor Yang proved to be a steady rock of stability amidst a sea of turmoil. It mattered not. So long as China was weak and prostrate at the feet of foreign nations, any province still committed to a unified Chinese state was destined to adopt a similarly demeaning posture. The insults levied by foreign archaeologists to Chinese sovereignty in Xinjiang were virtually identical to those levied by foreign missionaries elsewhere in inner China. This meant that, unless Governor Yang was willing to risk a Boxer-like conflagration within his jurisdiction, he had no choice but to back off when men like Stein called his bluff. Such capitulation inevitably spawned resentment among a younger generation. “Our nation’s officials are completely powerless,” wrote a government intellectual in the early 1920s. “They give way in the face of adversity, renounce our handful of rights that actually are written into the treaties ... and allow foreigners to twist logic in violation of the regulations.”¹⁹ As we have seen through the expeditions of foreign adventurers during this period, however, the reality on the ground was quite different. China did not lack for stalwart and conscientious officials eager to safeguard their nation’s interests. They simply lacked the resources to enforce their claims of sovereignty on foreigners more powerful than themselves.

¹⁹ Xie, *Xinjiang youji*, 372.

Warlords and the Central Government

The only event that could change this unpalatable situation would have to be a political crisis of monumental proportions. The Europeans obliged in 1914, by declaring war on one other. The archaeological expeditions dried up almost immediately, and Governor Yang enjoyed a respite of sorts. It was short lived. In February 1917, the first of two revolutions overthrew the Russian monarchy. Nine months later, the Bolsheviks outflanked their parliamentary forbears, and a vicious civil war spilled onto Xinjiang's doorstep. Red and White partisans pressured Governor Yang to take sides in the conflict, and the warlord government in Beijing proved unresponsive to his pleas for assistance. Abandoned by his own central government and beset on all sides by rogue Russian combatants, Yang turned his gaze inward and attempted to consolidate control over his province. His efforts paid off. By 1921, the only foreigners to lay eyes upon the archaeological treasures of the northwest were several hundred foul-mouthed White Russians, forcibly interned in the desert waste of Dunhuang by a governor no longer cowed by their threats of retaliation.

The war in Europe and the establishment of a socialist government in Russia were watershed moments throughout China. In Xinjiang, they allowed Governor Yang to cleanse his province of unwanted outsiders, both foreigners and Chinese. Across the eastern seaboard, a new generation of Western-educated youth, disillusioned by Versailles yet invigorated by the Marxist alternative in Russia, facilitated the rise of a militant nationalism. This new nationalism took root among the scholarly establishment in Beijing, where a group of influential scholars articulated the cultural parameters of nationalist legitimacy for the new Leninist party-states taking root in southern China.

Following the events of May 30, 1925, this militant nationalism became a force to be reckoned with. On that day, British officers in Shanghai gave the order to fire on Chinese protesters in a factory, thereby igniting a groundswell of anti-imperialist nationalist sentiment among Chinese youth. When the fledgling Communist and Nationalist parties decided to lend moral and logistical support to their cause, they not only legitimated their own nationalist credentials. They also gave birth to a new political order in China: nationalist Chinese scholars laboring on behalf of a nationalizing party-state.

The first foreigner to fall afoul of the new status quo was American art historian Langdon Warner, whose 1925 expedition to Dunhuang succumbed to the backroom machinations of William Hung, dean of Yenching University. Warner departed China in a swirl of acrimony and accusations, and without a single artifact in his possession. A little more than a year later, the famed Swedish explorer Sven Hedin returned to China. He originally hoped to map out a pan-Eurasian air route through Chinese Central Asia, in accordance with the wishes of his Lufthansa financiers. It soon became apparent, however, that he would be lucky just to visit the northwestern frontier at all, much less scout out potential airstrips. The problem did not lie with the old warlord government in Beijing, then in its death throes yet still eager to issue the requested visas. The problem lie instead with “young China”—that new generation of Western-trained technocrats and intellectuals who had become increasingly vocal regarding the political subjugation of their nation at the hands of Western and Japanese powers, and who, after the May 30th incident, had become increasingly emboldened to do something about it.

In March 1927, Hedin got his first whiff of the new political environment. Having already been persuaded by government officials to renounce the exploration of air routes,

Hedin instead resolved to lead a team of Swedish and German scholars on an archaeological expedition to Xinjiang. Opposition to these plans soon coalesced among a handful of scholarly organizations in Beijing, chief among them the National Bureau for the Preservation of Antiquities. Despite the principled opposition of the Bureau, the warlord government was not about to cede its political authority to a group of scholars. So the three sides hammered out a compromise: Hedin's expedition could proceed, but it must be formally reorganized as a joint Sino-Swedish venture, with the inclusion of eminent Chinese scholars among its ranks. Hedin agreed to these terms, and the expedition departed from Beijing in April.²⁰ At Hedin's side was Xu Xusheng, dean of Beijing University and a professor of philosophy and history, who was to serve, along with Hedin, as co-director of the expedition. The selection of Xu as Hedin's counterpart was strategic: this ardent Chinese nationalist would not be intimidated or shunted aside by his white-skinned colleagues. Xu was the type of intellectual who admired Japan's ascent to parity with the Western powers despite its "extreme barbarism" in China, and he expressed his "abhorrence at the thought of collaborating with the White race to attack Japan."²¹ His unlikely partnership with the Europeans had a simple aim: redirect the ample resources of foreigners to the completion of tasks his own government could not yet achieve. As a scholar working under official government auspices, these tasks were both cultural and political in nature.

²⁰ Though Hedin claimed that he had already agreed to include Chinese scholars within his ranks prior to the demands of the opposition camp, the Bureau of Antiquities claimed that he did so only as a result of its protests. See Sven Hedin, *History of the Expedition in Asia, 1927–1935*, vol. 1 (Stockholm, 1943), 6–8; and Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqū dāng'ān guān et al., *Zhong Rui xibei kexue kaocha*, 6.

²¹ Xu Xusheng, *Xu Xusheng xiyou riji* [A diary of Xu Xusheng's western travels] (1930; repr. ed., Yinchuan, 2000), 220.

The governor of Xinjiang, Yang Zengxin, after receiving assurances from his security network that Xu and Hedin were not military vanguards of a warlord army, welcomed them into his province. The expedition was given comfortable quarters in Dihua and free rein to carry out its scientific experiments. Yet at no time did the Swedish explorer entertain any illusions about the new balance of power. Unlike yesteryear, Governor Yang now called all the shots, and the expedition existed entirely at his pleasure. Should Hedin run into trouble, no foreign consul would—or could—come to his aid. Nonetheless, Hedin soon became quite smitten with the governor, later recording their first meeting:

With stonily serious mien and penetrating looks he mustered us each in turn, greeting each with a hand-shake and a scarcely perceptible bow. One felt very clearly that it was he who had the power here in this country and that we were quite at the mercy of his lightest whim. He was a tall, powerfully built man, of dignified and noble bearing, who carried his head high and gave one an impression of majesty. His look was dreamy, melancholy and searching; he had a broad, strong nose and snow-white moustaches and goatee beard. He was, in a word, imposing and fascinating, and one always feels a certain interest in observing at close quarters a man who by dint of his own will and shrewdness has been able to achieve such terrific power over other men.²²

Xu Xusheng was equally impressed with Yang. “Though I had heard he was much advanced in years, you cannot tell just by looking at him. He is [sic] sixty-six years old, but is bursting with energy, and loves to talk about everyone and everything.”²³ During one of their many dinner banquets together, the governor even revealed a wry sense of humor. “Why do you take the trouble of riding about in the deserts looking for old ruins?” he asked Hedin in March 1928. “Here in my yamen you have ample opportunity

²² Hedin, *History of the Expedition in Asia*, vol. 1, 243.

²³ Xu, *Xu Xusheng xiyou riji*, 190. Xu was mistaken regarding Yang’s age: in 1928, the governor was sixty-four years old.

of studying archaeology, for as you see, everything here is in tumble-down, and the plaster in this room is falling off in big flakes.”²⁴

Yang’s cordial hospitality, however, soon came to a screeching halt. On July 7, 1928, some four months after the expedition’s arrival in Dihua, Yang was struck down by an assassin’s bullet while attending a graduation ceremony. Xu was devastated. “Just yesterday we shared a pleasant conversation,” he wrote in his diary the next day. “Today he is with the ancients!”²⁵ The departure of Governor Yang carried dire implications for the expedition. Because the assassins were almost certainly covert agents working for an inner Chinese warlord, Yang’s successor, a man by the name of Jin Shuren, immediately implemented martial law throughout the province and began to prepare for a possible invasion from Gansu in the east. Despite initially favorable impressions of Jin—Hedin referred to him as “gifted with presence of mind and energy,” and Xu commented on his “pleasant speech”—the new governor soon proved to be an implacable foe of the expedition.²⁶ From the governor’s perspective, war clouds loomed on the horizon, and scientific endeavors paled in comparison with the political crises of the day. Furthermore, for all Jin knew, Hedin and Xu, having arranged their visas through the old warlord government in Beijing, may have even played a role in the assassination of his predecessor.

Jin quickly made up his mind. The expedition had to go.

The governor handed this prickly assignment to Burhan Shahidi, a trilingual entrepreneur-cum-government servant who had obtained political refuge from Yang

²⁴ Hedin, *History of the Expedition in Asia*, vol. 1, 246.

²⁵ Xu, *Xu Xusheng xiyou riji*, 230.

²⁶ Hedin, *History of the Expedition in Asia*, vol. 2, 5; Xu, *Xu Xusheng xiyou riji*, 237.

Zengxin during the Russian civil war. Burhan promptly sniffed out large caches of bullets, which Xu claimed for hunting purposes but which Jin suspected of ulterior applications.²⁷ When the authorities failed to determine the make of the bullets, Jin tried another approach. After hearing that one of the archaeologists had unearthed a skull just north of Dihua, Jin accused the expedition of transgressing basic human decencies. “It is the custom of our country to leave the bones and skulls of the deceased in the ground,” Jin informed Xu. “Digging them up and exposing them to daylight is a practice scarcely to be condoned.” For his part, Xu, a famed Beijing academic, saw right through this façade. “These officials cannot understand the purpose of our expedition for the life of them,” he complained in his diary. “How can we entrust people who know nothing about the cultural significance [of these artifacts] with chief responsibility for cultural matters? Letting people like this determine ‘whether or not [our activities] are detrimental to culture’ is truly absurd.” Yet Xu knew better than anyone else that Jin was not really all that interested in whether local cultural norms were being offended or not. Rather, such appeals to culture merely served as a convenient pretext to monitor the expedition and to restrict the activities of its members. This calculus was in clear evidence in the vicinity of Turpan. In order to “alleviate misunderstandings with the locals,” “impose covert restrictions,” and ensure that on-site work “does not transgress academic boundaries,” the county magistrate personally shadowed a small group of Swedish archaeologists for forty miles by horseback. “I politely informed them that their activities must be restricted to

²⁷ Regarding Jin and Xu’s tense bullet diplomacy, see Xu, *Xu Xusheng xiyou riji*, 237, 240, 260; and Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqū dang’an guan et al., *Zhong Rui xibei kexue kaocha*, 16–22.

the realm of weather and astronomy, that there was no need to take pictures of the local topography, and even less need to fire their weapons in pursuit of game.”²⁸

Before long, even those archaeologists laboring in the field were recalled to Dihua. Invoking the specter of war on the eastern front, Governor Jin first ordered Xu to recall his men from the deserts of the southeast, and then informed Hedin that the town of Karashahr—a long way from Gansu—was also off-limits. This sent Hedin over the edge. “Perhaps there is some legitimate concern about provincial security near Charchan,” Hedin conceded, referring to Xinjiang’s southeastern most oasis. “But Karashahr and Kucha are far away from the area in question, and surely the same concerns do not pertain there.” Though Hedin refused to recall his men from the field, the writing was clearly on the wall. By late December 1928, both Hedin and Xu had exited Jin’s jurisdiction, leaving their expedition in shambles.²⁹

Yet unlike the heyday of Yang Zengxin, when a single strongman could govern Xinjiang virtually independent of the impotent central government in Beijing, Jin Shuren faced a fundamentally new dynamic in the late 1920s. The new protagonist was Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist government in Nanjing, an ambitious centralizing state strengthened by the super glue of Leninist party politics. In his bid to coagulate the “pile of sand” that was Republican China, Chiang made aggressive overtures to every corner of the country, including Xinjiang. When Governor Jin deftly rebuffed Nationalist attempts to infiltrate his jurisdiction, Nanjing looked to other means by which it could impose its authority over Xinjiang. In early 1929, opportunity knocked. In February, Sven Hedin

²⁸ Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqiang’dang’an guan et al., *Zhong Rui xibei kexue kaocha*, 21, 43; and Xu, *Xu Xusheng xiyou riji*, 243.

²⁹ Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqiang’dang’an guan et al., *Zhong Rui xibei kexue kaocha*, 31, 24–25; and Xu, *Xu Xusheng xiyou riji*, 253, 260.

returned to China, where he met up with Xu Xusheng in Nanjing, the new capital. They were received by Cai Yuanpei, a powerful official with dual posts in government and academia. Cai promised to renew the visas for their expedition, assuring Hedin and Xu that “the government has the means to enforce its will” on Governor Jin. Two weeks later they were granted an audience with Chiang Kai-shek himself, then preoccupied with a warlord rebellion in north-central China. Chiang authorized a telegram to Jin instructing him to “facilitate their endeavours and in no wise to throw obstacles in their way,” reminding Xinjiang’s governor that “it is your duty to act in accordance” with these orders. When Hedin suggested they wait for a response from Governor Jin before setting out for Xinjiang, he was told “that an order from the Central Government required no answer since in practice it *must* be obeyed.”³⁰

For those expedition members still under Jin’s watchful eye in Xinjiang, this was most welcome news, and they rushed to flaunt the new decree. “I have received a telegram from Dr. Hedin,” Swedish geologist Erik Norin informed the governor on March 19, 1929. “It says that the Chinese Association of Science has decided to extend our joint venture for an additional two years, and that the central government has also lent its approval. I trust that Your Excellency has already been informed of this decision?” Jin played dumb. “Regarding your claim that the central government has approved an extension of an additional two years,” Jin replied two weeks later, “my office has received no such notice. Seeing as it will be difficult to extend the deadline, you are

³⁰ Hedin, *History of the Expedition in Asia*, vol. 2, 50–52. Hedin reproduces the entire text of this March 13 telegram in an English translation. Though the original Chinese version is not available, a second telegram to the Xinjiang authorities in Chinese, sent by Hedin and Xu on the same day, confirms the contents of Hedin’s English translation. See Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqiu dang’an guan et al., *Zhong Rui xibei kexue kaocha*, 47.

hereby to adhere to the original schedule. I trust you will obey.” By early April, however, Jin realized that Nanjing was not on his side. He responded by ordering his Bureau of Provincial Education to levy a devastating indictment on the expedition. “They have been here for more than a year now, under the guise of academic inquiry, yet they have no accomplishments to speak of,” the Bureau alleged. “Instead they send their men to dig things up, disturb corpses, and fondle human skulls. These are grievous moral transgressions, and they have elicited the indignation of the Muslims.” Not only were they trafficking weapons into Xinjiang from Germany, but the Chinese members of the expedition were “merely the tools of the Swedish scientists, facilitating the secret mapping our land and surveying important strategic sites for foreigners.” The Bureau ended with an appeal to the ideals of cultural sovereignty, accusing the expedition of “destroying several thousand years’ worth of antiquities.”³¹

Nanjing hardly batted an eye. “The members of this expedition are engaged in scientific survey,” the Ministry of Foreign Affairs replied two weeks later. “This is quite different from that of an ordinary traveler, and you are to admit them into the province.” In order to defuse the governor’s accusations of cultural theft, the Ministry outlined in detail a set of regulations that Hedin had agreed to in Nanjing regarding the eventual deposit of all relics within a Chinese museum. As for the alleged weapons trafficking, Jin was informed ahead of time that Hedin would be packing a “handgun, hunting rifles, and ammunition” to Dihua. This decreased the number of legitimate channels of protest available to Jin. Still, Nanjing had not addressed the “indignation” of the Muslims nor the threat to public safety. Jin took note. “Only through unflagging efforts and timely

³¹ Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqiu dang’an guan et al., *Zhong Rui xibei kexue kaocha*, 48–50.

intervention was I able to prevent their work on the outskirts and escort Hedin safely out of the province,” Jin wrote on May 14. “But if Hedin returns to Xinjiang again, a misunderstanding is bound to occur and the people will rise up against them. It will then be difficult for me to afford protection, and it will be impossible to avoid an incident.” That same week Jin invented the non-existent “Society for the Preservation of Antiquities” in Dihua and sent a telegram in its name denouncing the expedition. He continued to tell expedition members in Xinjiang that he had yet to see a “clear statement” of the extension granted in Nanjing, and ordered them to leave the province at once.³²

Events came to a head at the Tacheng border crossing of Boggy Reed in June. Five Swedish and two Chinese members of the expedition, having set off from Europe, reached the border with Nanjing-issued passports in hand. On orders from the governor, the border guards at Boggy Reed turned them away. The next day Jin justified this brazen act with his most spectacular allegation yet. The previous year, the governor wrote, Hedin had tried to transport “numerous firearms and a case of ammunition to the Torghut Mongols” in Karashahr, whose tribal leader, the Living Buddha Touvden Serenchimid, had become increasingly hostile to Jin as of late. “I had originally hoped to avoid publicizing this incident, but since matters have now come to this, I must marshal my courage and expose the details in a direct and honest manner.” Coupled with this grave allegation was a final plea to consider the feelings of “the masses,” reputed to harbor “great antipathy” toward the expedition.³³ Here Jin was throwing down the gauntlet. The

³² Ibid., 51–55; and Hedin, *History of the Expedition in Asia*, vol. 2, 58.

³³ Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqū dāng’ān guān et al., *Zhong Rui xibei kexue kaocha*, 58–59.

central government must now decide whether or not, in the face of such determined resistance, its archaeological proxies were still worth fighting for. Could Chiang Kai-shek bear to suffer the insult of a distant frontier governor thumbing his nose at his orders?

The official response came one week later, in the form of a reprimand from the Ministry of Education to its administrative counterpart in Xinjiang. “This expedition is purely a scholarly venture, and completely bereft of ulterior motives,” the Ministry wrote. “If there are misunderstandings, then we will look to you to dispel the suspicions of the masses by means of logical explanation. You cannot simply echo popular sentiment and join in the attack.” Breathing down Nanjing’s back were powerful nationalist academics in Beijing. One of them, Liu Fu, a professor of literature at Beijing University and close colleague of Hedin’s co-director Xu Xusheng, spelled out the implications for Nanjing. “It seems that the orders of the central government must be approved by Governor Jin first,” Liu wrote from Beijing. “For a Chinese citizen, equipped with a passport issued from his own central government, to be unable to travel within the borders of our country—this is a frightening prospect.” According to Liu, Jin’s repeated invocation of Muslim indignation and popular antipathy was nothing more than a pretext to “spit openly upon the directives of the central government.” Though damage to the expedition was minimal, “damage to the prestige of the central government is immense.”³⁴

Governor Jin blinked first. The righteous anger of the masses disappeared, apparently owing to the governor’s “strenuous efforts at clarification.” Likewise, the Tacheng border guards suddenly reported that the expedition’s marching orders “actually do benefit academic research.” Despite his begrudging capitulation, however, Jin

³⁴ Ibid., 60–62.

continued to watch the expedition like a hawk, his eyes peeled for anything he could fling back at Nanjing. Meanwhile, the governor's ventriloquist outfit, the provincial Ministry of Education, renewed its attack on Hedin and Xu. In addition, Jin confiscated the expedition's wireless telegraph box, ordered careful inspections of its members' luggage, and intercepted all postal communications. "If you see any boxes with an inspection seal that has been tampered with," Jin instructed his border guards in Hami, "open it up immediately, check its owner and his attendants for prohibited items on their persons, and submit a detailed description regarding any letter or report that is harmful to the security of Xinjiang." When a suspicious letter addressed from a Russian official in Novosibirsk to a Russian consul in Tacheng was discovered in a piece of luggage, Jin postponed its delivery for two months while he mulled over its significance. Finally the mystery was solved, and its contents translated: "Move the equipment to Dihua when the road is dry."³⁵

The governor never found his smoking gun, and the Sino-Swedish expedition continued its work in the field for several more years, ultimately helping to train the very first generation of professional Chinese archaeologists, many of whom went on to long and distinguished careers. In the Chinese historical memory, the partnership between Sven Hedin and Xu Xusheng has long been lauded as one of the first instances of scientific cooperation between Chinese and foreign scholars, one that was carried out on a wholly equal footing. Yet its significance at the time derived more from the implications it carried for domestic politics rather than for international scholarship. During 1929–30, the Nationalist government in Nanjing managed to successfully impose

³⁵ Ibid., 77, 63, 65, 89, 90–91, 93–94, 100.

its symbolic authority over the most distant province in the country. To be sure, symbolic authority was several steps removed from actual authority. And yet, after more than a decade of intense warlord politics, Chiang Kai-shek knew his fledgling government would have to proceed by baby steps. In this case, the Generalissimo's first steps were successful. It just so happened that the cultural interests of cerebral nationalists in Beijing conveniently overlapped with the political interests of the central government in Nanjing. In forcing Hedin to cede half his authority to a Chinese co-director, the scholars in Beijing unknowingly did the future government in Nanjing a huge favor. The formal addition of Xu Xusheng and his Chinese colleagues shrouded all of the expedition's members—even the foreigners—within a rhetorical bulletproof vest. So long as Nanjing continued to marshal the political will to lock horns with a distant adversary, the combined weight of an official decree based on legitimate cultural and political principles simply could not be deflected, no matter how hard Jin tried.

The tables were turned, however, when British archaeologist Aurel Stein returned to China in 1930. American financiers at Harvard had enticed the sixty-eight year-old Hungarian-born explorer into an unprecedented fourth expedition to Xinjiang. In order to overcome opposition to his plans in China, however, Stein entrusted his visa to the diplomatic expertise of the British. They cautioned him against a visit to Beijing, where nationalist intellectuals were sure to levy onerous concessions and invite unwanted media attention. As a result, during late April and early May 1930, Stein made a brief, in-and-out visit to Nanjing, where the Minister of Foreign Affairs, C.T. Wang (Wang Zhengting), duly presented him with a visa for the “investigation of historical traces including relics of art and writing.” Stein then left China for India, where he prepared for

an overland trek into Xinjiang. He set off in August of that same year.³⁶ Nanjing ordered Governor Jin to prepare for his arrival. “He will enter Xinjiang via India and continue on to Inner Mongolia,” came the directive in early May. “The Ministry has already granted him a two-year passport with which to carry out surveying activities. Please order your subordinates and all border officials to afford him the appropriate protections.” Jin, chastened by the Hedin affair, made no attempt to prevent Stein’s entry, only instructing his officials to inspect his luggage upon arrival.³⁷

Meanwhile, in Beijing, the National Bureau for the Preservation of Antiquities—the same organization that had led the charge against Hedin’s solo venture in 1927 and then vociferously defended its reincarnation as a joint venture—caught wind of Stein’s pending expedition. This time, academic circles in both Beijing and Nanjing raised a ruckus over their government’s *laissez-faire* attitude toward the return of one of the world’s most famous archaeological “thiefs.” Cai Yuanpei, now president of the prestigious Central Research Academy (Academia Sinica) in Nanjing, demanded that Stein be treated as Hedin had been. “Our country’s borderlands are immense, and it will be difficult to prevent him from absconding with relics under the guise of casual travel,” Cai observed. Xinjiang’s officials “must restrict Stein’s movements and forbid the removal of any antiquity or relic from our territory.”³⁸ Cai forwarded his warning to Governor Jin in Xinjiang and stepped up his efforts to get Nanjing to cancel Stein’s visa.

³⁶ Shareen Brysac, “Sir Aurel Stein’s Fourth ‘American’ Expedition,” in Helen Wang, ed., *Sir Aurel Stein: Proceedings of the British Museum Study Day*, British Museum Occasional Papers, no. 142 (March 2002): 17–22.

³⁷ Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqu dang’an guan and Riben fojiao daxue Niya yizhi xueshu yanjiu jigou, eds., *Si-tan-yin di si ci Xinjiang tanxian dang’an shiliao* [Archival historical documents regarding Stein’s fourth expedition in Xinjiang] (Wulumuqi, 2007), 1–2.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 2–6.

This was easier said than done. On August 20, 1930, as Stein approached the Xinjiang border town of Tashkurgan, he received a telegram from the British consul in Kashgar informing him that he was no longer welcome. It was here that his decision to place his expedition in the hands of British diplomats paid off. Before long, the British consular corps launched a two-pronged campaign on Stein's behalf, one in Xinjiang and one in inner China. The British embassy in Nanjing lodged a forceful protest with the central government, while the head consul in Kashgar threatened to cancel a shipment of weapons then on its way to Dihua from India. With both the central government and Governor Jin feeling the heat, orders came down to permit Stein's entry. There was only one, very important caveat: All local officials in Xinjiang were instructed to implement the "strictest surveillance, disallow any and all excavations, and forbid any artifacts from leaving the country."³⁹ The nationalist ambitions of "young China" and the sobering reality of international politics had produced a compromise permitting all sides to save face. Though the young Nationalist government was still too weak to deflect a determined British salvo on Stein's behalf, neither could it afford to alienate the national intelligentsia in Beijing and Nanjing. Similarly, the governor of Xinjiang, preoccupied with warlord encroachments on the eastern front, could not risk either the alienation of British good offices (and weapons) or increased hostility with Nanjing.

Once the British were placated, the nationalist intelligentsia in Beijing and Nanjing emerged as the key variable in the relationship between Governor Jin and the central government. Now that Stein had gained physical entry to the province, he was a

³⁹ Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqiu dang'an guan et al., *Jindai waiguo tanxianjia*, 137–38, 140; and Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqiu dang'an guan et al., *Si-tan-yin di si ci Xinjiang*, 10, 18, 22–23, 32.

constant liability to both sides. Yet, unlike the last decades of the Qing empire, when any foreign power felt entitled to march an army into Chinese territory at the slightest whiff of injustice, no Western power in its right mind would sanction such brazen gunboat diplomacy in the aftermath of the May 30th incident. This time, Stein's liability to Chinese officialdom stemmed from the nationalist uproar sure to unfold should any reports of illegal pillaging emerge in the press. Claims to political legitimacy on either side of the country now rested entirely on whomsoever could successfully pose as the defender of China's cultural sovereignty. As such, control over the details of Stein's daily activities became a priority of the utmost importance.

Fortunately for Jin, Stein was already in Xinjiang. And, unlike Hedin, no Chinese colleague accompanied him. Why was that important? Because it had been clear to all that the addition of Xu Xusheng to Hedin's expedition had constituted a rhetorical bulwark for the central government against which a provincial governor had no defense. Without a centrally appointed Chinese companion for Stein, Jin could now turn the tables on Nanjing. In October 1930, when Stein arrived in Kashgar, he found a young postal employee by the name of Zhang Hongsheng waiting for him. Stein, hopeful that his companion might prove susceptible to "supplements in kind & coin," volunteered to pay his salary. Jin refused, then proceeded to double Zhang's wages.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Brysac, "Sir Aurel Stein's Fourth 'American' Expedition," 21. On the appointment of Zhang Hongsheng, see Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqu dang'an guan et al., *Jindai waiguo tanxianjia*, 138, 141; Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqu dang'an guan et al., *Si-tan-yin di si ci Xinjiang*, 22–23; and Wang Jiqing, *Sitanyin di si ci Zhongguo kaogu riji kaoshi: Yingguo Niujin daxue cang Sitanyin di si ci Zhongya kaocha lixing riji shougao zhengli yanjiu baogao* [Examination of Stein's diary during his fourth archaeological expedition in China: research compiled on the draft of the diary used on Stein's fourth archaeological expedition to Central Asia and stored at England's Oxford University] (Lanzhou, 2004), 197, 201–3. Wang's study of Stein's diary is in fact a word-for-word translation into Chinese of the original diary held in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, complete with copious footnotes and a faithful attention to detail. Since my reliance on Stein's diary occupies only a tiny part of this chapter, I have deemed Wang's

It was the best investment Jin ever made. Zhang's reports from the field provided Jin with a total monopoly on information regarding Stein's whereabouts and activities. In his diary, Stein complained endlessly about Zhang. This one-time postal employee simply refused to let his charge out of sight. When Stein managed to unearth a crumbling bodhisattva statue, a heated argument ensued about its fate—Zhang insisted the artifact stay out of Stein's hands.⁴¹ Then, on the road from Keriya to Charchan, Zhang found that the ground “was littered with derelict structures,” making it “the most difficult place ... to ensure that Stein obeys the laws of our country.” Not long thereafter, Stein took out his cartographic tools and began to survey the landscape. “On several occasions, when I tried to obstruct him,” Zhang reported to Jin, “Stein resisted and refused to obey. He claimed that his survey of the ruins was purely in the interests of scholarship, with no other purpose, and that, if need be, he would simply take it up with my Excellency upon his arrival in Dihua.”⁴²

Jin grew concerned lest word of Stein's transgressions leak to the national press. Zhang's attempts to deter Stein from illegal activity, Jin wrote somewhat harshly, were “insufficient and unacceptable.” As Stein continued on his route, there were to be no more surveys or excavations. “Exert every effort to watch over him, and do not let your

translation to be generally sufficient for the purpose at hand. In the interests of documentary integrity, however, I have not attempted to reproduce any direct quotes from the diary into this chapter, as that would entail the historically unforgivable sin of translating back into theoretical English a text that is only available to me via a Chinese translation of the English original.

⁴¹ Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiq dang'an guan et al., *Jindai waiguo tanxianjia*, 148–49; and Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiq dang'an guan et al., *Si-tan-yin di si ci Xinjiang*, 41. For Stein's complaints about Zhang, see Wang, *Sitanyin di si ci Zhongguo kaogu riji kaoshi*, 263, 292, 295, 359–60, 374–75, 430, 479–81, 505, 562–63.

⁴² Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiq dang'an guan et al., *Jindai waiguo tanxianjia*, 150; and Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiq dang'an guan et al., *Si-tan-yin di si ci Xinjiang*, 61.

guard lapse for even one moment.”⁴³ Stein, however, proved himself a resourceful traveler. Whenever he stepped into a new county, the local magistrate—often a fond acquaintance from an earlier expedition—frequently arranged a formal military reception, arraying his officials in an obsequious queue. A lavish banquet followed, on one occasion reaching sixteen courses. Stein talked late into the night with his mandarin friends, and landlords, chefs, and attendants from his first three expeditions appeared at every turn. Stein left each oasis laden with gifts. Tucked into his bags were letters of introduction for the next magistrate, who then granted permission to visit forbidden excavation sites. In return, Stein was anything but stingy: one line in his pre-departure budget included \$6,500 for “presents” to local officials.⁴⁴

In the face of such local adulation for Stein, Zhang found his loyalties split. In front of the district magistrate of Aksu, he expressed disapproval for the obstruction of Stein’s fieldwork, and talked excitedly about his finds at Niya. When the magistrate condemned the shrill rhetoric emanating from Nanjing, Zhang seconded his comments. The irony of Zhang’s behavior was not lost on Stein, who noted such duplicity in his diary.⁴⁵ Jin, likely anticipating Zhang’s conflict of interest, tried to defuse any fallout with nationalist intellectuals in Beijing. “The scholarly community is the light of our nation, and the preservation of ancient artifacts is the bedrock of national sovereignty,” Jin wrote to the Association of Chinese Academic Organizations in November. “Though Stein’s achievements over the past thirty years are acknowledged by both Chinese and

⁴³ Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqiu dang’an guan et al., *Jindai waiguo tanxianjia*, 152; and Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqiu dang’an guan et al., *Si-tan-yin di si ci Xinjiang*, 66.

⁴⁴ For Stein’s positive relations with local officials and community leaders, see Wang, *Sitanyin di si ci Zhongguo kaogu riji kaoshi*, 251–53, 256–57, 267, 288–89, 296, 307, 404, 418, 451, 476, 505. On Stein’s budget for “presents,” see Brysac, “Sir Aurel Stein’s Fourth ‘American’ Expedition,” 19.

⁴⁵ Wang, *Sitanyin di si ci Zhongguo kaogu riji kaoshi*, 411, 479–81, 505.

foreigners alike, he has attained them by pillaging the ancestral traces of our national heritage, and by trampling over our nation's sovereignty." He then spun a string of lies to the central government in Nanjing. Jin claimed that Stein had not visited any sites, that numerous spies and overseers were shadowing his every step, and that his exit from the province was imminent. In fact, the only reason he was still in Xinjiang at all, wrote Jin, was due to a bed-confining illness occasioned by an "eruption of anger" at postman Zhang. Behind the scenes, however, Jin scrambled to take control of the situation. "Find a way to force Stein out of the province as soon as possible," he wrote to his officials in Kashgar.⁴⁶

Neither the scholars in Beijing nor the bureaucrats in Nanjing bought any of the governor's excuses. At the Academia Sinica in Nanjing, Cai Yuanpei claimed that Stein was mapping the passes in preparation for a British military invasion from India, and that he had brought enormous funds to Xinjiang—for the collection of artifacts, a strategic survey of the land, or both, no one seemed to know. In late December, these concerns led the central government to cancel Stein's visa and order his removal from the province. Stein remained put. Four months later, Chinese scholars in Beijing came across a letter in the London *Times* postmarked by Stein from Xinjiang in February. Reports surfaced from foreigners in Tianjin that they had heard from Stein in Xinjiang as recently as early April. These developments finally brought the matter to the attention of Chiang Kai-shek himself. "According to the evidence presented in these reports, there is no doubt that Stein is still in Xinjiang and engaged in his work," Chiang wrote to the Administrative

⁴⁶ Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqun dang'an guan et al., *Si-tan-yin di si ci Xinjiang*, 24, 40, 45, 50, 54; and Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqun dang'an guan et al., *Jindai waiguo tanxianjia*, 144, 148, 151.

Yuan in May. “The duplicity and craftiness on display here is truly despicable. ... Send a stern telegram to the provincial government in Xinjiang that they are to observe and implement the many orders [we have issued], and expel him from the province.”⁴⁷

Jin responded with a chorus of lies. “We detained Stein at Keriya and sent him back to Kashgar,” he replied. “Then, right as we were about to expel him he got sick.” Jin denied that Stein had visited any remote sites, and assured Nanjing that he would soon be gone. As for the rumored military vanguard from British India, “there is no such thing. Please do not overly concern yourself. If this were true, would I not have done something about it long ago? The newspapers have been full of falsehoods and half-truths as of late. You should keep this in mind.”⁴⁸ With that, there was little else Beijing or Nanjing could do. The governor had a total monopoly on the intelligence network in Xinjiang. From such a monopoly came the right to adhere to whatever version of events he chose.

In late 1931, however, the situation changed once more. All those warning signs Stein noted in his diary—the endless chain gangs of conscripts, the crushing new taxes, the clampdown on prominent non-Han nobles—finally led to open rebellion. Just as Jin had predicted, opportunistic warlords from Gansu rushed into Xinjiang, and—just as Jin had predicted—Nanjing backed these proxy armies at Jin’s expense. In 1933, a coup in the provincial capital drove the governor out of the province. With the onset of civil war in Xinjiang, Nanjing sought out additional agents to send to the northwest. When Sven Hedin offered his services, the government promptly issued a visa and sent him on his way. With him were several Chinese companions from the archaeological expedition,

⁴⁷ Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqū dāng’ān guān et al., *Si-tan-yin di si ci Xinjiang*, 35, 69, 71, 74, 76, 78; Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqū dāng’ān guān et al., *Jindai waiguo tanxianjia*, 144, 153; and Wang, *Sitanyin di si ci Zhongguo kaogu riji kaoshi*, 374–75, 448.

⁴⁸ Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqū dāng’ān guān et al., *Si-tan-yin di si ci Xinjiang*, 80–81.

charged with exploring possible routes of road construction.⁴⁹ Once in Xinjiang, Hedin found that all the combatants claimed to be fighting on behalf of Nanjing, and it was all he could do to keep his head intact. “Military matters come before everything else,” he was told by one of his many captors. “Nanjing counts for nothing in a war in Xinjiang. For that matter, we are under Nanjing, too, and it ought to be in both your interest and Nanjing’s to help us.”⁵⁰

Nanjing’s many attempts to seize power in Xinjiang through proxy warlord armies only served to alienate the eventual victor, Sheng Shicai. As a result, he turned to Moscow for support, inaugurating a decade of Soviet influence in Xinjiang, to the complete exclusion of the Nationalists. In 1935, the British came up with a plan. Eric Teichman, a career consular officer and an “old China hand,” wanted to travel to Xinjiang “to study commercial relations, establish contact with the Provincial Government, and seek to concert with the latter measures for the encouragement of British trade with Xinjiang.” Nanjing leaped at the chance. “The reports we have received about Xinjiang as of late are quite disconcerting,” admitted Xu Mo, Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs. “We heartily welcome your attempt to set up a consulate in Dihua, a proposal fully in line with our own government’s policies.”⁵¹

The logistics involved were daunting, to say the least. “Though Sheng still sends an occasional telegram to Generalissimo Chiang [Kai-shek] and Wang [Jingwei],” Xu told his British counterpart, “to be perfectly honest, there is nothing else, and Sheng still

⁴⁹ Zhongguo Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqun dang’an guan et al., *Zhong Rui xibei kexue kaocha*, 161.

⁵⁰ Sven Hedin, *The Trail of War: On the Track of ‘Big Horse’ in Central Asia* (1936; repr. ed., New York, 2009), 101.

⁵¹ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, Nangang, Taiwan, Europe Division (*Ouzhou si*), file 366.3/0001, “Yingren Tai-ke-man youli Xinjiang” [Eric Teichman’s trip to Xinjiang], 5, 12–13.

harbors deep suspicions of the central government.” The frigid relationship between Sheng and Nanjing meant that Teichman would have to assume full responsibility for his safety. “We would love for you to send him to Xinjiang, and we welcome this venture,” Xu said. “But you must also understand that this mission does carry a certain element of risk.” Xu sent a telegram to Sheng, which he phrased “not as a request for his permission, but rather as a notification.” Yet the days when the central government could threaten, pressure, and otherwise cajole the governor of Xinjiang had long gone. “In the event that Sheng refuses,” Teichman was informed, “you will have to cease preparations for this trip.”⁵²

The initial response was not encouraging. “Normally we would welcome [such a journey],” wrote Li Rong, Sheng’s civil counterpart and chief figurehead. “Yet despite the fact that the chaos has been quelled, there are still bandits roaming about, and the roads are in disrepair as far as the eye can see. If we were to be remiss in our duties to afford him the necessary protections, foreign relations may suffer.” In the event Teichman persisted in his plans, Li presented a terrifying portrayal of the bubonic plague in Kashgar. He asked Nanjing to “please convey our deepest apologies.” Teichman was unfazed. “We look to you to see that there are no difficulties with the Provincial Authorities now,” he wrote to Vice-Minister Xu on July 30, “for we are already committed to considerable expenditure.” Faced with pressure from the British, Nanjing hardened its stance toward Sheng. “We have already approved this trip. Order your officials to afford him the necessary protections and lend all possible assistance once he crosses into your jurisdiction.” Again, Li responded with a list of reasons why he could

⁵² Ibid., 13–14.

not possibly look after Teichman. By this point, however, further negotiations were futile. Much to Nanjing's delight and Dihua's chagrin, Teichman departed for Xinjiang in September, bubonic plague be damned.⁵³

He arrived in Dihua—referred to in Turkic and Mongolian as Urumchi—in late October. The city sent shivers down his spine. “That there is something gloomy, dark and sinister about the Urumchi atmosphere no one who has resided there is likely to deny,” he wrote. Still, while the place gave him the willies, Sheng and Li were gracious hosts, betraying none of the suspicions evident in earlier negotiations with Nanjing. During the several weeks Teichman resided in Dihua, he gained keen insight into the balance of power in the capital. He described General Sheng as “omnipotent,” in contrast to Li Rong, who “gave rather the impression of a figure-head.” Yet while Sheng “professed his loyalty and full obedience” to Nanjing, Teichman witnessed quite a different orientation on November 7, Soviet national day. “I have assisted at innumerable ‘joy days’ of the nations of the world,” he wrote, “but never have I seen one so thoroughly celebrated as this Seventh of November in Urumchi.” He described the speech-making process at such functions as a “tedious business,” for every orator “had to be rendered in four languages, English, Russian, Turki and Chinese; and the necessary threefold interpretation, involving prolonged pauses between each sentence, afforded the speaker so much time for the preparation of his next remark that the speeches drifted on interminably.”⁵⁴

The striking ethnic and linguistic diversity of Xinjiang did not surprise Teichman. The manner in which General Sheng governed such a realm, however, did. During the

⁵³ Ibid., 50, 53, 62, 67–68.

⁵⁴ Eric Teichman, *Journey to Turkistan* (London, 1937), 102, 104, 105, 110–11.

recent civil war, many Muslim combatants seized upon the rhetoric of national determination as a recruiting call. When the war ended, Sheng discovered widespread antipathy from the majority non-Han populace, loath to see another Han governor in power. In response, Sheng imported Soviet affirmative action policies as a means to consolidate his rule. These policies were designed to wet the appetites of Turkic and Mongol peoples for a stake in the ethnopolitical power structure, while retaining ultimate authority in Sheng's hands. The crude ethnic moniker "Turban" was abolished, to be replaced by a ethnonym with more positive connotations: "Uighur," the name of an ancient Central Asian kingdom. "In the old days," Teichman noted, "all the district magistrates and higher civil and military officials were Chinese or Tungans [Chinese Muslims, or Hui]. Now all the magistrates of the Turki districts are Turkis, and several Turki leaders are associated with the Chinese in the Provincial Government."⁵⁵

Of the latter, the most prominent among them was Hoja Niyaz Hajj, a former Uighur rebel leader. Teichman sized him up in Dihua. "He was the leading symbol of Chinese-Turki co-operation in the government of Turkistan. Yet his bearded Turki figure seemed incongruous and out of place against the Chinese background; and, like many other Turkis, he had amongst his Chinese colleagues a rather melancholy look." If Teichman sensed a measure of malaise among the indigenous officials, it likely stemmed from the increasing realization that they wielded no real power. Though their presence in the provincial administration was unprecedented, it was little more than a mere "sprinkling of Turkis to maintain the principle of joint Chinese-Turki rule. But control

⁵⁵ Ibid., 188.

rested in the hands of the Chinese and their Russian advisers.”⁵⁶ This last statement reached its logical endpoint in 1937, two years after Teichman’s sojourn in Dihua. Having lured his former Turkic, Mongol, and Hui detractors into his orbit, General Sheng initiated a bloody purge throughout the province. Xinjiang transformed into a terrifying police state virtually overnight. Among the victims were Hoja Niyaz Hajj, the man with a “melancholy” face.

For the Nationalist government in Nanjing, however, these developments took place behind an iron curtain, so to speak. After Teichman’s departure, it would take another half decade before anyone with Nationalist papers would be allowed into Xinjiang. By the time the Nationalist government finally wrested control of Xinjiang away from General Sheng in 1944, anyone who wanted to learn more about this mysterious province had to turn to shoddy reprints of Wu Aichen’s *A Record of Travels in Xinjiang*, first published nearly a decade prior.⁵⁷ After 1944, the Nationalists finally won the rights to pen their own script in Xinjiang, one unmediated by estranged or hostile governors. Though there would always be the inevitable debates on policy, never again would a governor of Xinjiang feel so emboldened as to disregard a directive from the center.

From Sinking Ship to Creaky Junk

In 1937, when Eric Teichman published *Journey to Turkistan*, he could not help but join a chorus of voices—as fashionable then as it is today—that eagerly took sides in

⁵⁶ Ibid., 106–7.

⁵⁷ Wu Aichen, *Xinjiang jiyou* [A record of travels in Xinjiang] (1935, repr. ed., Chongqing, 1944), 1.

the debate concerning the morality of foreign archaeological expeditions in late imperial and early Republican China. First he presented the position of the new Chinese intelligentsia. “The Chinese complain, and the foreigner cannot well deny,” Teichman admitted, “that caravan-loads of priceless treasures from the temples, tombs and ruins of Chinese Turkistan have been carried off to foreign museums and are for ever lost to China. It makes ‘Young China’ boil with indignation to read in the books of foreign travellers descriptions of how they carried off whole libraries of ancient manuscripts, frescoes and relics of early Buddhist culture in Turkistan.” Then he summarized the stance of most foreigners, who argued that the removal of these artifacts saved them from being “destroyed by Moslem vandals, sold in the bazaars, or left to moulder away to nothing in the desert air.” In closing, Teichman made an attempt—as rare then as it is today—to straddle a middle ground. “Perhaps the fairest verdict is one of reasonable acquittal of both sides,” he wrote, “holding that, while it may have been right and proper in those early days to remove the treasures to a safer place abroad, further removals cannot nowadays be justified, when the Chinese national conscience is awakened and China at least professes the intention of herself safeguarding her own archaeological treasures from the past.”⁵⁸

We might do well to heed Teichman’s moderate posture, and attempt to move beyond the elliptical moral debates that so often dominate any discussion of foreign expeditions in China. As I have attempted to demonstrate in this chapter, the historical relevance retrospectively placed on such expeditions was not their defining feature at the time they were undertaken. At least, not by those people tasked with the levers of actual

⁵⁸ Teichman, *Journey to Turkistan*, 122–23.

governance. From the perspective of late imperial and Republican-era Chinese policymakers, foreign archaeologists were simply extensions of the political and military might of the nations which sponsored them. In this sense, the degree to which the Chinese state was able to dictate the terms of their expeditions was a direct referendum on the condition of the modern Chinese state. Through the lens of these foreign expeditions in Xinjiang, we see the shifting relationship between center and periphery against the backdrop of a larger transition from empire to nationalizing state.

So what did this transition look like along the Chinese borderlands? We can distinguish three distinct phases. During the end of the Qing, the Chinese empire was united, but it was united in subjugation to Western and Japanese powers. Thus it made little difference whether Grünwedel and Le Coq traveled through Xinjiang or through the suburbs of Beijing. Because the distant northwest borderlands were still tightly tethered to the sinking ship of late imperial China, the burdens conferred upon the Chinese administration in Xinjiang by foreign archaeologists were virtually synonymous with those imparted by Western missionaries throughout all of inner China. For these intrepid explorers from the outside world, the weakness of the Chinese state was a resource to be exploited. In Xinjiang, they demanded horses, manservants, and provisions, only some of which they actually paid for. They also required costly bodyguard services, in order to prevent an even more costly international incident. In return, the foreign archaeologists removed mountains of scrolls, antiquities, and relics, thereby bolstering their own career prospects and intellectual capital abroad. Within this context, the highest aspiration a Chinese official could hope to meet was to keep the financial and political damage accrued by the state to a minimum.

After the fall of the Qing, the former Chinese empire fragmented along regional fault lines. Partly because of this and partly because of the war in Europe, foreign expeditions to Xinjiang ground to a halt. When they resumed in the late 1920s, the rules of the game had changed. Though foreign explorers could still obtain a visa with ease, the central government no longer regarded as *political* liabilities those foreigners intent on traveling to areas of the country not under its direct control. Instead, foreign archaeologists were reinterpreted as *cultural* liabilities. As such, the abstract nationalist trauma now associated with their presence could be leveraged into a domestic political resource in its own right. As the Nationalist government managed, in fits and starts, to recover the estranged pieces of the imperial puzzle, foreign archaeologists became unsuspecting or indifferent pawns on the Republican chess board.

A decade later it was all over. In 1944, the central government took control not only over Xinjiang, but over the entire northwest. The days of foreign archaeologists setting the agenda in China were over. Instead, just like Sun Yat-sen had once dreamed, the development of the borderlands was finally within reach. One of the first items on the Nationalist agenda in Xinjiang was to draw up blueprints for massive Han colonization. As for the by now infamous outflow of Chinese antiquities, never again would such acts be tolerated. In fact, had some of the more strident Han nationalists had their way, the international trade in Eurasian antiquities would now begin to flow in the opposite direction. “When will our countrymen measure up to the Stein and Pelliot spirit,” asked one Chinese pundit, “and venture out into the world, unearth and gather up exquisite cultural treasures, and bring them back to our country, all for the greater glory of our

nation?”⁵⁹ The idea that the Chinese might one day send their own “Indiana Zhang” out into the world was evidence that the task of reunification was nearly complete.

⁵⁹ Yi Tuo, “Du ‘Dunhuang shishi fangshu ji’ ji ‘Si-tan-yin qianfodong qujing shimo ji’ hou” [After reading “An account of a visit to the library of the stone caverns Dunhuang” and “A complete account of Stein’s acquisition of manuscripts at the Thousand-Buddha Caves], *Haichao yin* 17, no. 12 (December 1936): 50.

Chapter 2

The Education of Governor Yang, 1911–16

“In the fall of 1911 we were struck by the calamity of revolution.” So begins the florid preface to *Records from the Studio of Rectification*, first published in 1921. This 3,770-page compendium of memorials, directives, and proclamations made public nearly every gubernatorial decision made by Yang Zengxin during his first decade of rule in Xinjiang. A hefty, thirty-two volume tome, *Records from the Studio of Rectification* does not make for light reading, but, then again, it was never intended to be read by mere laymen. To hear the many admirers of Governor Yang tell it, this *magnum opus* contained enough wisdom to “save inner China and bring peace” to its warlord-afflicted inhabitants. The governor’s methods of rule in the ten years since the 1911 revolution could be used as a “textbook curriculum” to “cure the ailments” of inner China. The evidence? “While the entire country has descended into chaos, Xinjiang alone has established an enduring and rare peace.” Yang’s recipe for success? “In all areas of governance, he employs the methods of the *ru*.” The measure of a true *ru* was someone who could, like the ancient sage Confucius himself, “champion moral governance amidst a thunderstorm of chaos.”¹ But for Yang Zengxin and other imperially groomed, classically trained scholar-officials, the revolution of 1911 was not merely a “calamity.” It was a civilizational crisis that threatened to destroy both their livelihood and entire system of belief.

For such men, Governor Yang was the last defender of the faith.

¹ Yang Zengxin, *Buguozhai wendu* [Records from the Studio of Rectification], vol. 1 (1921; repr. ed., Taipei, 1965), 1–20.

“He is an ancient living in the present,” wrote the scholar Ding Daoyuan. “If only we had ten more governors like him ruling our provinces,” suggested the famous historian Wang Shunan, “China would be doing just fine today.” Yet for those steeped in the classical literature of imperial China, one quality towered above all others. In a land torn by warring factions and carpetbagging politicians, the governor’s admirers lauded how his “only loyalty is to the country, un beholden to any party affiliation.” For Yang, the country was an abstract ideal that had been sullied by distasteful warlords as of late. “I worship only the temple, not the gods within,” he was fond of telling his guests.² This mindset allowed Yang to equate the “temple” with the ageless philosophical parapets of the classical Chinese canon. It is well known that the “Christian warlord” Feng Yuxiang, who would later orchestrate the assassination of Yang Zengxin in 1928, used to baptize his troops with a fire hose. Governor Yang, who, in good Confucian fashion, railed against the “wasteful” and “harmful” armies of his contemporaries, baptized the graduates of his province’s chief civil service academy with complimentary copies of Laozi’s metaphysical Daoist treatise as well as his own twenty-volume interpretation of the Chinese classics, *Diary from the Studio of Rectification*.³

Yang Zengxin was proud of his reputation as a faithful adherent to the old ways, and took every opportunity to present himself as such. In April 1917, a diplomatic envoy from Beijing traveled to Xinjiang and recorded his impressions of its governor. “Yang is

² This is how Yang described his own ruling philosophy (*zhuyi*) in a speech to members of the visiting Sino-Swedish archaeological expedition in 1928. See Huang Wenbi, *Huang Wenbi Meng Xin kaocha riji* [Huang Wenbi: Diary of an archaeological survey in Mongolia and Xinjiang], comp. Huang Lie (Beijing, 1990), 175.

³ Liu De’en, “Lüeshu Xinjiang shengli Ewen fazheng zhuanmen xuexiao” [A brief account of the Xinjiang Academy of Russian Law and Politics], in Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhizu weiyuanhui and Wenshi ziliao yanjiu weiyuanhui, eds., *Xinjiang wenshi ziliao xuanji* [Selected Xinjiang historical materials], vol. 3 (Wulumuqi, 1979), 69–77.

extraordinarily talented and experienced. But his mind is too steeped in the old ways of thinking and his convictions are too deeply imprinted. He has served as an official in the northwest for too long, and knows nothing of intellectual currents in the outside world. He will prove unable to row his boat with the tides of progress.”⁴ For Governor Yang, this was the ultimate compliment. When the same envoy published his impressions of the governor several years later, Yang accumulated a storehouse of copies as gifts for those friends, students, and acquaintances whom he hoped to impress.⁵ The governance of Xinjiang, Yang told them, had only one barometer of success. An official who served along China’s fragile borderlands must keep the land peaceful, and must maintain its boundaries as he inherited them. This was the message he imparted to newly inducted graduates as well, with whom he did not mince words. With name list in hand, the old governor fixed each student with a disconcerting stare (a “death gaze,” according to one of them), and then gave them a little bit of advice. “I have very little to say to you. Just this: don’t you dare mess this place up.”⁶

Yang Zengxin was not a warlord. In this, he was unique among the governors of Republican China. His appointment to Xinjiang’s top post in 1912 was based entirely upon his civil service resume, and his subsequent seventeen years atop the provincial throne owed little, if anything, to the military forces under his command. In fact, the ramshackle discipline and tatterdemalion comportment of Yang’s troops, frequently commented upon by Chinese and foreign observers alike, was a goal eagerly pursued by the governor himself. “You say my troops are degenerate,” Yang once told a guest from

⁴ Xie Xiaozhong, *Xinjiang youji* [An account of travels in Xinjiang] (1923; repr. ed., Lanzhou, 2003), 125.

⁵ Liu, “Lüeshu Xinjiang shengli Ewen fazheng zhuanmen xuexiao,” 70.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

inner China. “But they are not yet as degenerate as I would like them to be.” Anyone who witnessed the governor’s bodyguards accompany him on a trip through town were treated to a comic display of military buffoonery. “Their faces were filthy and clothing disheveled. They all lined up randomly behind the governor, minding their own affairs. By the time the governor reached his destination, half of them were nowhere to be seen. Yang paid them no heed whatsoever.”⁷ Russian observers offered a more merciless assessment of Xinjiang’s troops. “They are unorganized, unfit for service, and the chain of command is useless. They are seldom trained, and often cannot even handle a rifle or sit on a horse.”⁸ Occasional public military parades were a scarcely concealed stage act that everyone in attendance was in on.⁹

Yang retained such a disheveled army for the sake of appearances. “You cannot not have an army,” he explained. In addition, they were useful in projecting the mirage of a military force to covetous warlords in far-off inner China. Yang admired “the stratagem of the empty citadel” (*kongcheng ji*), supposedly deployed to great effect by the Three Kingdoms statesman Zhuge Liang nearly two thousand years prior. Like his ancient predecessor, Yang exuded a supreme confidence in the superiority of brains over brawn. “I have a brain and a brush. That is enough,” he was known to boast. A professional army, Yang insisted, “is like a fierce tiger. It creates trouble where there is none and oppresses the people.” Not only could Xinjiang not afford a professional army—the majority of its soldiers were decommissioned and recommissioned seasonally—but there

⁷ Zhang Dajun, *Xinjiang fengbao qishi nian* [Seventy years of turbulence in Xinjiang], vol. 5 (Taipei, 1980), 2669.

⁸ V.A. Barmin, *SSSR i Sin 'tszian, 1918–1941* [The Soviet Union and Xinjiang, 1918–1941] (Barnaul, 1999), 52.

⁹ Fu Yang, “Shilun Yang Zengxin zhuzheng Xinjiang shiqi de ‘ruobing zhengce’” [A brief discussion of Yang Zengxin’s policy of a “weak army” during his tenure in Xinjiang], *Xiyu yanjiu* 2 (2001): 32.

was also simply no need for one. Yang could never hope to finance an army capable of defeating the Russians, who comprised Xinjiang's only plausible foreign invasion force. As for Xinjiang itself, "if the land is peaceful, one has no need to resort to force."¹⁰

Without the silver subsidies issued by the central government during the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), a fully fledged military brigade would fast exceed the ability of Xinjiang's sparsely populated, anemic tax base to support it. This would lead to internal discontent, and before long the warlords of neighboring Gansu and Qinghai provinces would be knocking on Xinjiang's door, proclaiming their intent to "save" Xinjiang from its governor's "misrule." In order to prevent both Russian colonization and Chinese warlord deprivation of the province in his charge, Yang had to prevent the appearance of pretexts—those chinks in the armor of his rule that signaled fresh blood to encircling sharks. For seventeen years, Yang Zengxin largely prevented the appearance of such chinks. He was so successful, in fact, that his covetous contemporaries finally lost their patience and simply stopped waiting for the white-bearded governor to slip up. Yet up until the day that multiple shots of hot lead left him sprawling over a blood-soaked banquet table, Governor Yang made it his mission in life to convince the warlords and revolutionaries of his day of one simple truth: China's century-long hemorrhage of imperial prestige and unity could be stemmed, he insisted, not by more conscripts and better weapons, but by the time-tested wisdom and morality of the ancient sages.

There were, however, two considerable ironies attached to Governor Yang's enterprise. The first was that he would have to implement model Confucian governance in a land where nine out of every ten inhabitants were not even Chinese. Xinjiang, as

¹⁰ Zhang, *Xinjiang fengbao*, vol. 5, 2669.

Yang himself often lamented, had become a Chinese colony. What kept Yang up late at night, however, was the second irony: the realization that stability and peace in Xinjiang could only be maintained if it was sheltered from the turbulent throes of inner China. In order to understand the governor's mindset, we might do best to envision Xinjiang as a tortoise perched by the sea. Nearly two centuries prior to Yang's governorship, the towering waves of Qing China had swept over this tortoise, obliging it to swim in Chinese waters. And as long as China could continue to provide for this tortoise's special needs, it would continue to do so. Yet after 1911 the sea began to recede rapidly toward the horizon. The tortoise, exposed and vulnerable to predators, had only one recourse for self-preservation: retreat into its shell and wait patiently for the sea to return. "I have safeguarded our borders and pacified the people," Yang boasted in 1919, "all the while waiting for the day when the central plains calm down."¹¹

In short, in order to save Xinjiang for China, Governor Yang would have to turn his back on China.

An Imperial Official in Republican Robes

Yang Zengxin was born in 1864, the second of three brothers. Though the Yangs traced their ancestry to the fertile Jiangsu river delta in eastern China, the family had long since relocated to the subtropical jungles of southwestern Yunnan province. Yang's father, the holder of a provincial examination degree, took great pains to educate his sons, weaning Zengxin and his brothers on the ancient classics of Chinese statecraft and

¹¹ Yang Zengxin, *Buguozhai wendu xubian* [Records from the Studio of Rectification: additional compilations], vol. 1 (Shanghuan, 1926), 56.

philosophy. The efforts of his father paid off: In 1889, at the ripe age of 25, Yang Zengxin aced the highest exam in the land, acquiring the title of *jinsshi*, or “scholar who is presented [to the emperor],” along with the right to appointment in the imperial bureaucracy. That same year he was shipped off to the dusty, Italian-shaped province of Gansu in the northwest, which, at its northernmost terminus, shares a border with Xinjiang province. In his eighteen years of service in various postings throughout poverty-stricken Gansu, Yang distinguished himself in reconstruction efforts, flood relief work, education reform, management of religious affairs, and pacification of Muslim rebels. The six years Yang spent (1896–1901) as magistrate of Hezhou county, a region devastated by religious and ethnic warfare, earned him an imperial commendation and the good will of the salty locals, who erected “steles of moral government” in his honor.¹²

When he was transferred to Dihua, the capital of Xinjiang province, in 1907, Yang Zengxin was forty-four years old and an official on the rise. The following year he was selected by Xinjiang’s governor to be his province’s sole representative to Beijing, in response to the Qing court’s call for “men of talent to revitalize the country.” Yang’s talents were advertised in detail. “He spends his days studying the classics, but not for frivolous, worthless ends. He loves the people, is staunchly loyal, and has many achievements to his credit. ... Without question, he is a remarkably talented statesman.” Upon his arrival in Beijing, the emperor’s inner circle took stock of Yang. “He is a vigorous official in the prime of his career, with experience and erudition in clear evidence. ... Truly, he is one of our more capable, important border officials.”¹³ He spent

¹² Li Xincheng, *Yang Zengxin zai Xinjiang* [Yang Zengxin in Xinjiang] (Taipei, 1993), 17–21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 22.

the twilight years of the Qing empire as *daoyin* (circuit intendant) of Aksu district in west-central Xinjiang before finally attaining a coveted posting to the provincial capital Dihua in June 1911. Six months later the October revolution in Wuhan was re-enacted by newly arrived Han radicals in Dihua, where then-governor Yuan Dahua brutally suppressed the rebels. With the formal abdication of the last Qing emperor in February 1912, the staunchly monarchist Yuan Dahua resigned his post as governor and retired from politics.

But before Yuan could leave Xinjiang, he first had to find a suitable replacement. He chose the *daoyin* of Kashgar, Yuan Hongyou, then located 978 miles and well over a month's journey away by horse carriage from Dihua. In order to reach the provincial capital, Yuan Hongyou had to navigate the suddenly treacherous oases of southern Xinjiang, awash in terror following the activities of Han assassins sworn to the Elder Brotherhood. On May 7, 1912, only two weeks after his promotion to Xinjiang's top post, Yuan Hongyou and his wife were ambushed and massacred en route to Dihua. Their assailants were Elder Brothers working in opportunistic cahoots with Han revolutionaries. Had Yuan and his wife arrived in Dihua unscathed, Yang Zengxin may very well have remained little more than an obscure entry in an encyclopedia of Chinese officialdom. As it was, Yuan Dahua, now desperate to avoid the fate of his chosen successor, frantically cabled Beijing with his next choice: Dihua *daoyin* and judicial commissioner Yang Zengxin. It is important to note that Yang Zengxin did not seize power by force, nor did he bully his predecessor out of the picture. Following the rampant assassinations of prominent monarchist officials by the Elder Brothers, along with desertions of their posts by other top officials, Yang was the only person left

standing in Xinjiang with the credentials and experience to assume the governorship. Furthermore, unlike his predecessor, Yang had spent his entire career in the northwest. He had nowhere else to go, and no vested interests in Beijing. He would make or break his career in Xinjiang.

In the interests of self-preservation, Yang's first order of business was to find a way to deal with the nebulous Elder Brotherhood society, whose apolitical hitmen seemed to excel at removing heads from the shoulders of Xinjiang's ruling class. The Elder Brothers were an underground network of loosely organized Han toughs who first entered Xinjiang on the heels of General Zuo Zongtang's reconquest of the region in the 1870s. Its secretive membership included men from all walks of life, brought together by an acutely felt need for a social and economic security network to counter times of hardship. For Governor Yang, however, the Elder Brothers represented more than just a challenge to state legitimacy and social order. In Xinjiang, where Yang estimated the total Han population at a piddling three percent of the province's two million people, the Han-dominated Elder Brothers dangerously exacerbated tensions inherent to Han overlordship of the country's largest colony.

"Over the past several decades," Yang Zengxin lamented in 1914, "Xinjiang has become the colony (*zhimindi*) of the inner provinces."¹⁴ Though occupying a mere fraction of the province's total population, the sudden influx of Han soldiers, merchants, criminals, and aspiring officials was still far more than Xinjiang could absorb. Too few of them set down permanent roots in agriculture or trade, and the remainder served in the military or provincial bureaucracy. Without property or family ties, these Han became a

¹⁴ Yang, *Buguozhai wendu*, vol. 1, 56.

menace to society when downsized by the penny-pinching fiscal measures of Yang's early reign.¹⁵ "The natives of Xinjiang, be they Mongols, Kazaks, Hui, or Turbans, are engaged peacefully in agriculture and industry," Yang observed. "It is the roaming vagrants hailing from inner China who, having a mouth to feed but no livelihood, connive with bandits and destroy the peace."¹⁶ In spite of Yang's protests, the central government in Beijing, in a continuation of the late Qing policy of populating the vulnerable borderlands with Han migrants, never ceased to hatch plans for the resettlement of hardened criminals and inner Chinese peasants to Yang's jurisdiction. "If you send any more migrants beyond the pass," Yang warned in 1915, "there will be a crisis in the borderlands."¹⁷ The Elder Brotherhood welcomed these vagrant Han with open arms.

In order to stem the flow of unwelcome, troublemaking Han arrivals from inner China, in 1918 Yang ordered the installation of a special intelligence station at the congested Orangutan Pass. This station was equipped with its own telegraph box and a private line to Yang's office in Dihua. Designed to inform the governor of banditry activities, roving opium planters, as well as "important border affairs, spies, and persons of interest," Yang's Orangutan Pass spook house served as an effective chokepoint on the frontier ambitions of Han warlord and peasant alike.¹⁸ One injurious byproduct of Han colonial rule in Xinjiang that Yang could not defend against, however, was the pervasive desire among the province's educated Han stratum to strike it rich via government service. "The moment a person attains office, they immediately proceed to rape the

¹⁵ Li, *Yang Zengxin zai Xinjiang*, 126.

¹⁶ Yang, *Buguozhai wendu*, vol. 1, 121.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 122

¹⁸ Yang Zengxin, *Buguozhai wendu sanbian* [Records from the Studio of Rectification: three compilations], vol. 1 (n.p., 1934), 39.

wealth of the Hui and the Turbans, extorting excessive taxes and levies, the like of which no other province has seen.”¹⁹ In light of such activities, Yang could only echo the sentiment of one of ancient China’s most famous frontier generals. “It is as Ban Chao once said: ‘Those of our sons who go to the Western Regions are often not the best of our breed.’”²⁰ Little wonder then, that whenever the native non-Han inhabitants were stirred into action against the agents of their exploitation, “the inevitable victims are the Han.”²¹ A frequently heard rebel slogan was “exterminate the Han and take back our lands.”²²

The glaring lack of Han exemplars in Xinjiang, be it in government, military, or other pursuits, convinced Yang that he could not ensure the unity of his head and torso by relying upon—as he claimed seven out of every ten Han in Xinjiang were—“worthless opium addicts.”²³ This realization prompted the governor to resort to a tactic that he would gainfully revisit throughout his rule. With the Muslims largely at peace, and the three out of every ten Han in Xinjiang who were not opium addicts creating chaos, “the only way to maintain order and quell the current crisis is to rely on the Hui and Turbans.”²⁴ At the time of the 1911 revolution, Xinjiang’s standing army consisted of sixty-seven battalions, all of which were Han. In order to restore order, then governor Yuan Dahua ordered the conscription of an additional twenty Han and fifteen Muslim battalions.²⁵ Upon Yuan’s departure from Xinjiang, Yang Zengxin began to rely almost exclusively on the newly formed Muslim battalions. Not only were the Muslims “fierce

¹⁹ Yang, *Buguo zhai wendu*, vol. 1, 75.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 198.

²¹ Yang, *Buguo zhai wendu xubian*, vol. 9, 5.

²² Chen Chao and Chen Huisheng, *Minguo Xinjiang shi* [A history of Republican Xinjiang] (Wulumuqi, 1999), 98.

²³ Yang, *Buguo zhai wendu sanbian*, vol. 1, 40.

²⁴ Yang, *Buguo zhai wendu*, vol. 1, 54.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

by nature and excellent fighters,” they could also be easily reintegrated back into society once Yang no longer needed to employ brute force. By 1914, following the efficient despatch of over two hundred Elder Brother rabble rousers by Yang’s Muslim brigade, the governor quickly washed his hands of what had become Xinjiang’s only capable fighting force. “Because they all had property and family to return to, it was easy to decommission them,” Yang informed Beijing. “Had I conscripted itinerant Han, however, it would now be very difficult to get them to disperse.”²⁶

In suppressing the Elder Brotherhood, Governor Yang relied upon the native inhabitants of Xinjiang to combat the drifting social dregs of his own Han colonial constituency. With their demise, Yang successfully neutralized one of the chief threats to peace and stability to derive from China’s colonial legacy in the northwest. Yet there was an even more momentous political struggle, with battle lines drawn long before Yang entered the fray, to stem from Chinese overlordship of Xinjiang. Agents of Chinese revolution, having nurtured their dynastic hostility and racist anti-Manchu agenda worlds away from the deserts and peaks of the far northwest, finally infiltrated Xinjiang’s military during the twilight years of the Qing. In Dihua, where they were ill-prepared and caught off guard by news of the Wuhan uprising, the rebels were swiftly crushed by Yang’s predecessor. Their long entrenched counterparts in the Ili valley, however, succeeded in taking over the Qing garrison and commencing a march on Dihua. After a string of victories, the emboldened Ili revolutionaries decided—unwisely, as it turns out—to lay down their weapons when news of the abdication of the last Qing emperor reached the front in March 1912. When Yang Zengxin assumed the governorship two

²⁶ Ibid., 35, 55.

months later, he had a trump card that his reviled predecessor did not. Yuan Dahua, as the Qing-appointed governor of Xinjiang, was *persona non grata* to the Ili camp. Yang Zengxin, on the other hand, heartily endorsed by the new president of the Republic of China, had the requisite chops to force the Ili faction to the negotiating table. Once on Yang's turf and constrained to the realm of diplomacy, it was only a matter of time before the Ili revolutionaries fell victim to Yang's plotting. Their more pliable members were systematically dispersed and their chief belligerents surgically eliminated.

As his efficient defeat of the once intractable Ili revolutionaries clearly showed, Yang Zengxin owed his entire mantle of legitimacy to the central government in Beijing—a fact he would never forget. His relationship with the president of the new Republic, Yuan Shikai, was premised on mutual interests. President Yuan, an eminent Qing statesman whose control of the empire's best armies helped him neutralize all his revolutionary rivals, had no love for the democratic institutions of republican government. In Yang Zengxin he found a kindred spirit, someone who could articulate with intellectual verve why a single enlightened strongman was better for China than an unwieldy parliament. In 1913, when Yuan Shikai banned the revolutionary Nationalist Party and dismissed three provincial governors cut from its cloth, opportunistic calls for Yang Zengxin's removal were vigorously refuted. "There is not one of you can come near him," Yuan was reported to have said. "This Yang has the greatest mind in China today!"²⁷ During Yuan's presidency, the circulation of a pithy slogan summed up Yang and Yuan's conservative alliance: "Yuan in the east, Yang in the west, patrician hawks the

²⁷ Aitcher K. Wu, *Turkistan Tumult* (New York, 1940), 39.

both of them.”²⁸ With the death of Yuan Shikai in 1916, Yang lost his one and only ally outside of Xinjiang. “Back when President Yuan was in office,” Yang would later lament, “we worked in tandem to address the affairs of Xinjiang, almost as if we were one body. Since Yuan’s death, all my pleas for assistance have met only with silence.”²⁹

Governor Yang repaid his president’s vote of confidence by embracing Yuan’s unpopular policies and skewering his detractors. Less than a year after taking office, Yang enthusiastically backed Yuan Shikai’s attempt to bully a “meddling” National Assembly. “Until the National Assembly formally begins operations,” Yang declared in early 1913, “the provisional constitution is the law of the land. This law is handed down to the people directly from the President on high.” Defending the president’s prerogative to appoint his own supporters as Assemblymen, Yang wrote that “whomsoever the President decides to appoint . . . is not subject to the intervention of a third party.”³⁰ Yang’s impassioned telegrams to Beijing were a most welcome rhetorical bulwark for the embattled President Yuan, who believed his title was most effectively interpreted as a legitimized synonym for “emperor.” Yang agreed. “When a emperor is truly an emperor,” he explained, “then there is only one emperor. When an emperor is not truly an emperor, then there are one hundred emperors. The dictatorship of a multitude of power mongers, formless in their collective oppression, is far more despicable than the dictatorship of a single, named man.” A bad emperor could be named—and replaced. A

²⁸ Fan Mingxin, *Xinjiang “sanqi” zhengbian xie’an zhenxiang* [The true story of the “triple seven” coup] (Pingdong, 2001), 18.

²⁹ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, ed., *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: Xinjiang bianfang (Zhonghua minguo liu nian zhi ba nian)* [Historical materials on Sino-Russian relations: Xinjiang border defense (1917–19)] (1960; repr. ed., Taipei, 1983), 294.

³⁰ Yang, *Buguozhai wendu*, vol. 1, 30–32.

power-sharing government of nameless checks and balances, further incapacitated by the “self-rule” of the empowered masses, was nothing less than “the tail wagging the dog.”³¹

These deeply held conservative convictions reached full bloom in 1915–16, when Yuan Shikai marshalled his last reserves of political capital to abolish the feeble Republic, erecting in its stead the ambitiously named “Chinese Empire” (*Zhonghua diguo*). Yuan’s short-lived experiment in imperial governance—his “emperorship” lasted all of eighty three days—has been interpreted as little more than a quest for power by a dictator frustrated with the shackles of an emerging democracy. By singling out Yuan’s personal political ambitions as the chief motivating factor behind the restoration of the monarchy, however, we ignore his more pressing geopolitical concerns. In order to understand why President Yuan committed political suicide by cloaking his office in the trappings of a discredited emperorship, we need to more fully appreciate the crisis of Chinese empire which confronted both him and his officials who sweated along the borderlands.

“Until the independence of Urga is abolished,” Yang wrote to Yuan in February 1913, referring to the capital of Outer Mongolia, “the minds of the people are a cauldron of unease.”³² As Yang wrote these words, an army of some 7,000 northern Mongols was descending onto the steppes of north-central China, declaring their intent to “liberate” and “unite” into one state all the Mongols then living under Chinese rule. These Mongols, emboldened by Beijing’s chronic impotence and promises of tacit Russian support, made it clear why the former Qing imperium and its self-proclaimed successor state, the

³¹ Li, *Yang Zengxin zai Xinjiang*, 134, 200.

³² Yang, *Buguozhai wendu*, vol. 1, 27.

Republic of China, were not necessarily synonymous with each other. The Urga Mongols claimed, with some justification, that they had never professed loyalty to any entity called “China,” but rather to the Manchu-led, Aisin Gioro dynastic line of the Qing alone. “Consequently, today when the [Qing] court has been destroyed, Mongolia has no natural connection with China and should be independent.”³³

This *de facto* self-rule of the Mongols was a humiliating slap in the face to Yuan Shikai’s government, which claimed to represent a unified republic made up of five ethnic groups: Han, Mongol, Manchu, Tibetan, and Hui (Chinese Muslim). By 1915, however, the early audacity of the Urga Mongols had been dashed. Tsarist Russia, consumed with World War I, informed Urga that it would only support a “high degree” of Mongol autonomy within the parameters of a Chinese state.³⁴ This gave Yuan Shikai the encouragement he needed to refashion his state in a manner most attractive to the Mongols and other non-Han peoples. For this enterprise, Yuan chose the political construct that he knew best from his days as a Qing official: an empire. Governor Yang embraced Emperor Yuan’s plans. “A republican form of government does not suit the conditions of our country,” Yang memorialized the throne. “Everyone knows this.”³⁵

It is important here to define just what we mean by the term “empire.” Familiar to most people is the popular, mainstream media usage of the word, frequently deployed to describe any great power that achieves its ends through economic or military coercion. This coinage is familiar to us both from popular culture (*Star Wars: The Empire Strikes*

³³ Urgunge Onon and Derrick Pritchatt, *Asia’s First Modern Revolution: Mongolia Proclaims Its Independence in 1911* (New York, 1989), 40.

³⁴ Thomas E. Ewing, *Between the Hammer and the Anvil? Chinese and Russian Policies in Outer Mongolia, 1911–1921* (Bloomington, 1980), 77.

³⁵ Zhang, *Xinjiang fengbao*, vol. 1, 205.

Back) and Sunday morning political talkshows (“the prospects for American empire in the Middle East” or “the resurgence of Chinese empire”). From a historical perspective, however, “empire” is most often used to denote a specific style of rule that is applied broadly across a large and culturally varied geographic expanse. The key concept is differentiation. Prior to the rise of nationalizing states in the twentieth century, most large, successful states were empires. That is, they ruled the variegated peoples and cultures under their jurisdiction according to local norms and customs, often with only token acknowledgment—and even that by local elites alone—of distant overlordship. Throughout most of the Qing dynasty, its constituent parts were ruled quite differently from one another. Unlike today, every conceivable aspect of a person’s life was affected by whether they lived in Mongolia, Tibet, Xinjiang, Manchuria, or the Chinese heartland. Though all were equally subjects of the Qing, people living in each of these regions could expect radically different treatment in legal, cultural, economic, military, and political norms.

Along with President/Emperor Yuan, Yang Zengxin was an ardent believer in the utility of empire—i.e., political differentiation—as an effective governing tool. “Can we please treat Xinjiang province in the same way that Japan treats Hokkaido and Taiwan?” Yang asked the central government in 1916, referring to two contemporary colonies of the Japanese Empire. “This would allow us to adjust policies so as to cater to specific local conditions.”³⁶ For Governor Yang, the designation of Xinjiang as a province in 1884, along with three subsequent decades of assimilationist policies, had all been a terrible mistake. “The customs of the peoples of the borderlands and of those in inner

³⁶ Yang, *Buguozhai wendu*, vol. 1, 189–90.

China are different, and we cannot apply the same methods of rule in both places,” he wrote. If the methods of Qing imperial rule were not restored, Yang suggested, Xinjiang would go the way of Tibet and Mongolia, alienated by roughshod Chinese colonization and uniform Han rule.³⁷ To give merely one example, during Yuan Shikai’s emperorship, Yang pointed out, “the government decreed that Mongol legal cases could be decided on the basis of former Qing Mongol precedent.” Thus the restoration of imperial methods of rule in Mongolia had been good for Sino-Mongol relations, Yang claimed, and it could work well in Xinjiang, too.³⁸ Most non-Han peoples of the former Qing empire registered only lukewarm enthusiasm for the Han-dominated Republic of China. Perhaps, it was believed, a state more closely resembling the former empire could win back their loyalties.

The Chinese Empire was formally inaugurated on January 1, 1916. Governor Yang was the emperor’s most unflagging supporter. “I beseech my Emperor to swiftly ascend His throne,” Yang memorialized the next day. “I am rallying your servants and respectfully awaiting your commands. I will walk through fire and boiling water if you so decree it.”³⁹ As it turned out, Yang had to do nearly just that. Opposition to Yuan Shikai’s emperorship swiftly crystallized under the military governors ruling southwestern Yunnan, Yang’s own home province. At issue was not the geopolitical calculus underlying Chinese empire, but rather the concentration of power in a single ruler and subsequent emasculation of democratic institutions. Because Yang employed many men from Yunnan during the early days of his reign, it was inevitable that some of

³⁷ Ibid., 201.

³⁸ Ibid., 196.

³⁹ Zhang, *Xinjiang fengbao*, vol. 1, 204.

them would prove sympathetic to the anti-monarchist movement originating from their home province. A plot was soon hatched among Yang's martial subordinates to assassinate their governor and declare Xinjiang independent from Yuan's Chinese Empire. Catching wind of this plot on his life, Yang promptly executed the three chief plotters and again reaffirmed his commitment to protect his Emperor's fledgling enterprise. "What Heaven has erected cannot be torn down by any man," Yang declared with confidence. "The constitutional monarchy is an iron-clad fact, and no individual province may say otherwise."⁴⁰

Yang was forced to eat these words. The simple fact was that many individual provinces did say otherwise. From January to May 1916, eleven provinces in all announced their secession from Yuan's new state, and successfully fended off the emperor's attempts to counter them on the battlefield. Faced with an ultimatum, on March 22, Yuan abolished the Chinese Empire and restored the Republic of China. Humiliated, ill, and entirely bereft of political capital, China's very last emperor died three months later from uremia. Yet while Yuan's bold imperial experiment managed to swiftly torpedo his career, the short-lived Chinese Empire did succeed in achieving one of its chief aims: By the time Yuan died in June 1916, the Mongols had fully returned to Beijing's embrace. The Urga Mongols were now sending imperial-style tribute missions to the Chinese capital and openly accepting the investiture of Qing-era aristocratic titles as conferred by the new Chinese president.⁴¹ The Republic may have been restored in name, but as far as the borderlands were concerned, the norms and trappings of empire

⁴⁰ Ibid., 205, 207.

⁴¹ Ewing, *Between the Hammer and the Anvil*, 93–96.

continued to hold sway. Had not the Russian civil war introduced a volatile new mix of contingencies several years later, today's People's Republic of Mongolia would likely be known as the Chinese province of Outer Mongolia (a subject to be revisited when the Russian civil war spills over into Xinjiang in 1918).⁴²

With the ignominious fall of Emperor Yuan, only five years' Yang's senior, the governor suddenly found himself an endangered species. Yet unlike his fellow Qing relic in Beijing, Governor Yang did manage to successfully parry the republican assault on empire in Xinjiang, executing his Yunnanese conspirators without damage to his political prestige. Nevertheless, the post-Yuan world was still *terra incognita* to Yang, who could never again openly proclaim his disdain of republican institutions if he hoped to remain politically legit. "The doctrines of equality and people's rights have pierced the hearts of mankind," the governor conceded.⁴³ Though Yang's heart remained stubbornly unpierced, he proved his ability to adapt quickly to the new political environment. When he published his collected works in 1921, Yang carefully censored all references to his embrace of Emperor Yuan, omitting every memorial written during the 83 days of the Empire. In justifying the executions of his three Yunnanese conspirators, Yang praised their motives while defending his own actions. "Had they succeeded in overthrowing yours truly," Yang explained, "the Mongols and Muslims would become restless, foreigners would surely meddle, and Xinjiang would become the next Urga." Due to their "ignorance regarding border affairs," Yang had no choice but to strike first and ask

⁴² This is the conclusion reached by Thomas Ewing in his study of the period.

⁴³ Chen and Chen, *Mingguo Xinjiang shi*, 147.

questions later.⁴⁴ Their intentions, however, had been noble: “They wanted only to protect the Republic.” By offering to pay for their coffins, burial in Yunnan, and a suitable stipend for their surviving family members, Yang tried to placate the ire of his detractors.⁴⁵

With the tombstones of Emperor Yuan and his Chinese Empire staring him in the face, Yang Zengxin realized he could not stop the rise of a new rhetorical regime. A republican government composed of democratic institutions—however imperfect and corrupt they may be—had now become, to paraphrase Yang himself, an “iron-clad fact.” When he commented on developments in the Russian civil war several years later, Yang may as well have been speaking of his own begrudging sufferance of the new *status quo* in China. “All things under Heaven inevitably pass away, to be replaced by something new. In the entire history of the world, there are no exceptions to this rule.”⁴⁶ And yet, viewed from a different perspective, the hegemony of the “new” was less encompassing than it may at first have seemed. As long as he could prevent China’s new “gods”—

⁴⁴ Regarding the manner in which Yang supposedly executed his victims, there is a fantastic and grisly tall tale that has circulated since the 1930s. This story, involving pre-emptive executions of innocent whistle blowers, mafioso-style beheadings in front of unassuming banquet guests, and cold-hearted stage lines for Yang that might have been written by a Hollywood screenwriter, is almost certainly the product of teahouse gossip conjured up by later travelers. There are only two primary sources that discuss the affair. In April 1917, Xie Bin, a diplomatic envoy from Beijing, recorded a confidential conversation with someone from the governor’s office. This person told him that “during a banquet last year, [Yang] had military officers Xia Ding and Li Rong [Yin] killed. Not a single person knew about it beforehand.” This sparse description has spawned a host of embellishments, many of which were eagerly recorded by later travelers. (Owen Lattimore’s claim that Xie Bin was present at the banquet is erroneous.) As for Yang’s own account, in April 1917 he sent a telegram justifying the executions to Beijing. He made no mention of a banquet, stating only that they were “executed by firing squad.” From these two accounts, we can only deduce with confidence the following course of events. The governor held a banquet. Xia Ding and Li Yin attended this banquet. During the banquet, Yang ordered their apprehension. Then they were summarily executed, most likely in a location separate from the banquet, and most likely by firing squad, as would have been mandated by their military rank. See Xie, *Xinjiang youji*, 127; and Yang, *Buguozhai wendu sanbian*, vol. 1, 6–7.

⁴⁵ Yang, *Buguozhai wendu sanbian*, vol. 1, 6–7.

⁴⁶ Yang, *Buguozhai wendu*, vol. 6, 3753.

Emperor Yuan's successors—from sullyng his fastidiously tended “temple” on the frontier, Yang could simply embrace the Republic on paper while continuing to rule Xinjiang as he saw fit. The only substantive tie that continued to oblige Yang to look toward Beijing revolved around Russian interests in Xinjiang. If the central government could serve as the governor's effective advocate in the realm of international diplomacy, it would signal the return of a crystalline sea to a tortoise in search of curative waters. If Beijing proved once again incapable of lobbying for Xinjiang's interests, the exposed tortoise would withdraw into its shell and bid *adieu* to the central plains.

The Russians wasted no time in putting this relationship to the test.

Russian Roulette

“Back in the early Republic, I was a hotheaded son of a bitch,” Yang once mused. “It was only later that I became the Buddha.”⁴⁷ This transformation in Yang's temperament was largely due to his evolving relationship—disillusionment, we might say—with the central government in Beijing. With disaffection came a certain peace. Yet back when Yang first became governor of Xinjiang in mid-1912, there was nothing he would not do to please Beijing. Weaned on Confucian models of feudal loyalty and beset on all sides by threats to his and President Yuan's livelihoods, the young Governor Yang was eager to prove his mettle to his patrician ally. He was given the chance to do so almost immediately, as a direct result of the Mongol push for independence.

“Send forth your armies as reinforcements, and secure our northern borders,” came the order from President Yuan in May 1912. At stake was the frontier outpost of

⁴⁷ Guang Lu, *Guang Lu huiyilu* [Memoirs of Guang Lu] (Taipei, 1964), 54.

Khovd, suddenly under siege by five thousand Mongols operating under Russian generals. Governor Yang could have marshalled a thousand and one reasons why he could not carry out such an order. First of all, strictly speaking, Khovd was not even a part of Yang's jurisdiction in Xinjiang; in 1906, the Qing court had carved out the Altay and Khovd regions as two separate military satrapies, whose rulers were accountable only to Beijing. No one would have blamed Yang if he dragged his feet over the fate of an obscure border town outside the boundaries of his province. More importantly, however, Yang was already preoccupied with threats far closer to home, any one of which could end his career—or even his life—if mishandled. In the south, the Elder Brothers were decapitating one official after another. In the northwest, the Ili revolutionaries commanded an army capable of crushing any force the governor could send out. And in the east, a Muslim rebellion led by disgruntled Turkic peasants had consumed the oasis of Hami. Furthermore, Beijing had not offered any financial or logistical support to aid Yang in carrying out his orders. Yang's request for additional reinforcements from neighboring Gansu province was overruled. Yet the governor was unfazed by the difficulties. "It is our duty to obey the President's orders and lend our assistance to Khovd and Altay," he cabled his officials.⁴⁸

Preparations for an expedition began at once. Xinjiang's best fighting units had already been sent south to suppress the Elder Brothers or east to confront the Muslim rebels at Hami, leaving a sorry rabble of approximately one thousand Qing bannermen to cover five hundred miles of roadless wasteland from Dihua to Khovd. But because the province's storehouses of grain were so severely depleted, even these cavalry

⁴⁸ Yang, *Buguozhai wendu*, vol. 3, 1234.

detachments were soon forced to forsake their horses and strike out on foot, toting rusty artillery behind them. Throughout their journey, these reinforcements discovered that Xinjiang Mongols sympathetic to Urga had everywhere rallied to the cause, sabotaging wells and harassing the supply lines. By the time Yang's army reached Khovd in mid-August, the town had already fallen to the Mongols, making his troops sitting ducks for a pre-emptive attack. The Russian consul at Khovd threatened Yang with severe retaliations if his troops were not recalled to Dihua. Still Yang refused to budge. "First I will recover what has been lost, and then I will march eastwards [to Urga]," he boldly promised his president in October 1912.⁴⁹

By this time, however, President Yuan had already given up on Khovd, effectively throwing his loyal governor to the mercy of the wolves. Yang had consumed resources he did not have for a fool's errand that he could not afford, all the while drawing precious resources away from initiatives sorely needed to save his own butt back in the capital. Yang's actions had given the Russians the perfect pretext to station their own foreign troops throughout the province, which they proceeded to post wherever the presence of "endangered" Russian traders might warrant them. Meanwhile, a chastened Beijing could do little more than watch helplessly as Yang suffered from the fallout of this episode. Governor Yang thus took two important lessons away from the Khovd fiasco. First, he now understood that the central government in Beijing might serve as more of a liability, rather than a guarantor of security, for its far-flung government

⁴⁹ Liu Guojun and Fan Mingfang, "Yang Zengxin yu 1912 nian de yuan Ke zhiyi" [Yang Zengxin and the 1912 mission to reinforce Khovd], *Xi'an dianzi keji daxue xuebao* 17, no. 2 (March 2007): 141–44; and Yang Yongfu and Duan Jinsheng, "Yang Zengxin yu Ke-bu-duo shijian ji A-er-tai bing Xin" [Yang Zengxin and the Khovd incident, and the incorporation of Altay into Xinjiang], *Zhongguo bianjiang shidi yanjiu* 17, no. 2 (June 2007): 67–76.

servants. As long as China remained weak, what was in the best interests of Beijing's bureaucrats may not necessarily also be in the best interests of a provincial governor. Second, as discussed previously, Yang now knew that the appearance of pretexts to outside powers must be avoided at all costs. In his first foreign affairs crisis, Yang Zengxin had unwisely spat in the face of Russian military threats, and he paid a grave price for it. The dire consequences of such a move were a bitter pill to swallow, but for Governor Yang, it was a medicine that he would only need to taste once.

From a military perspective, at any point during Yang Zengxin's tenure as governor of Xinjiang, the Russians, had they been so inclined, simply could have waltzed across the border and driven the Chinese from the province with ease. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in St. Petersburg toyed with this idea occasionally, noting that "the Chinese government would hardly dare to declare war on us."⁵⁰ Most Russians with ground-level knowledge of the situation in Xinjiang, however, preferred to leave the thankless task of administration to the Chinese, while continuing to line their pockets with the profits of "gunboat" capitalism. For Governor Yang, the situation was clear. "Today China is weak and poor. Xinjiang has been abandoned and isolated, cut off from all assistance. In the face of powerful neighbors, we have only one means of keeping the peace: scrupulously adhere to the letter of the treaties."⁵¹ Yang was referring to the so-called Ili Treaty of 1881, which granted Russian traders "temporary" tax-free trading privileges throughout Mongolia and Xinjiang, in exchange for the removal of Russian troops from the Ili valley in the aftermath of the Yaqub Beg rebellion (1864–78). This

⁵⁰ Barmin, *SSSR i Sin'tszian, 1918–1941*, 27–28.

⁵¹ Yang, *Buguozhai wendu*, vol. 1, 70.

costly concession was already bad enough, seeing as it deprived the provincial government of critical tax revenue at a time of chronic fiscal crisis. Yet it also encouraged Xinjiang's native Turkic traders to learn the tricks of the chameleon. Easily passing themselves off as citizens of Russian Turkestan, with whom they shared linguistic, ethnic, and religious affinities, these amorphous traders could then sell tax-free goods for shady Han sponsors, who could not compete with the untaxed commodities of their Russian competitors.

For Yang Zengxin, there was one—and only one—saving grace to the hated Ili Treaty: tea, Xinjiang's most profitable commodity and the staple of most Chinese merchants, had been deemed exempt from the tax-free clause. Faced with the debilitating tax-free Russian trade in other commodities, the governor could only let loose a deep sigh and shrug his shoulders. But violations of the tea clause constituted legitimate grounds for protest. Any such protest required the services of the Beijing government, whose chops conferred international legality on the treaty. Initially, Yang had reason to be optimistic over Beijing's willingness to go to bat for its distant governor. In September 1910, as the annual ten-year period of revision for the Ili Treaty neared, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing attempted to coordinate the offices of governors throughout the empire to research possible areas of revision. The response in Dihua was energetic. "We must compile accurate reports if we are to prepare for this properly," Yang's predecessor as *daoyin* of Dihua wrote. "The details are voluminous and problems complex. If we do not divide the workload and cover all our bases, our national sovereignty will suffer."⁵²

⁵² Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqū dāng'ān guān, ed., *Xinjiang yu E Su shangye maoyi dang'an shiliao* [Historical documents on commerce and trade between Xinjiang and Russia/Soviet Union] (Wulumuqi, 1994), 15–16.

Bonus pay was set aside for researchers assigned to the case. Optimism throughout Xinjiang was palpable.

The 1911 revolution sunk any hopes Xinjiang officialdom may have had for treaty revision, but it did not shake their conviction that cooperation with Beijing would bear fruit sooner or later. The performance of the central government over the next couple of years, however, would do precisely that. At issue was an oft-abused clause in the Ili Treaty that allowed Russian merchants to *transport* tea through Xinjiang, so long as it was *sold* in Russia. When evidence began to surface that the Russians were selling tea en route at a considerable profit, Governor Yang thought it best to second Beijing's caution. "Temporarily refrain from getting involved, and simply inspect and approve their goods." Officials in the border towns of Ili and Tacheng promptly registered their discontent. "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has ordered us to temporarily refrain from getting involved. Yet this word 'temporary' has been ambiguous right from the outset," they protested, referring to the supposedly "temporary" tax-free privileges that the Russians had enjoyed for over thirty years now. "In the future, whenever the foreigners want to do something that is prohibited by treaty, they will simply invoke the word 'temporary' as an excuse to further ravage our borderlands."⁵³

Yang Zengxin, caught in the middle, tried to placate his officials. "Temporary does not mean forever," he wrote back to Wang Buduan, *daoyin* of Tacheng, a hopping border town. "Just make sure the other tea merchants do not find out about this, or they will think this is a fixed precedent." Other tea merchants did find out about it, however, and protested vigorously to the governor. "By selling tea in Xinjiang, the Russians are

⁵³ Ibid., 25–26.

blatantly violating the treaty provisions,” wrote one Qian Yisheng, a wealthy and influential tea merchant. “I plead with you to fight for our rights.” Qian complained that his heavily taxed tea products could not compete with the black market, untaxed tea sold by the Russians. “Even women and children can understand the language in the treaty. How is it that our lawyers are muddling up a clause that is as clear as day?” This, of course, was prudent doublespeak on Qian’s part. He knew full well that Xinjiang’s “lawyers” were not muddling anything up. The decision to pardon the offending Russian merchants was official government policy, first formulated in Beijing and then confirmed by Governor Yang. Forced to justify himself, Yang implored merchants and officials alike to be patient and place their faith in Beijing’s promise of a revised treaty. “At the present time, while China and Russia are involved in negotiations, the Ministry has ordered us not to stir up any ill will over piddling affairs.”⁵⁴

A determined exposé of offending Russian merchants would not only stir up significant ill will among the diplomatic community in Beijing. It might also lead to threats of military retaliation from the Russian consuls in Xinjiang—something to be avoided at all costs. In relations between Dihua and the five Russian consulates scattered throughout Xinjiang, the actual guilt or innocence of an accused Russian treaty violator was rarely what was at stake. Being on the losing end of “gunboat” capitalism, as Xinjiang most certainly was, was like a game of Russian roulette: Nine times out of ten, Russian threats of force were empty bombast. But because Xinjiang was so grossly inferior to Russia in both military and economic terms—and because meaningful assistance from Beijing was a hopeless pipe dream—the mere possibility of an

⁵⁴ Ibid., 28–29, 39.

occasionally loaded cartridge was sufficient deterrent to the dogged pursuit of any treaty violation. The Russian consuls might signal the likelihood that the cartridge was loaded by the language used in their communications, as in this customs dispute in 1916. “It is only with great reluctance that I prepare to report this matter to my embassy in Beijing,” wrote the consul in Dihua, awash in heroic restraint, “since I am convinced that your grace would never dare to order Xinjiang customs officials to so blatantly trample over the rights of our Russian merchants.” Making it clear that there was still time for provincial officials to repent and correct the errors of their ways, this consul merely asked for the sacking of the “offending” customs employee as a show of good faith. “Regarding the manner in which you have decided to resolve this matter, I hope to see a quick reply and confirmation that the aggrieved Russian merchant has been called to your office.”⁵⁵

Whenever a Russian consul determined that the time had come replace blank cartridges with real ones, diplomatic missives were succinct and to the point. “If your officials continue to detain my merchants, we will send an armed escort to transport their goods.” Because armed “escorts” had a nasty habit of morphing into long-term occupation forces, it was always a risky gambit to try and gauge whether or not the Russians were bluffing. When tea violations were uncovered at the Tacheng customs house in November 1913, local officials thus erred on the side of caution. “Because the Russians were clearly itching for a fight, our inspectors, fearful of instigating a foreign affairs crisis, had no choice but to let them pass without incident.” By early 1914, however, such humiliating cases of Chinese forbearance had begun to pile up, and Governor Yang was finding it increasingly difficult to placate his exasperated officials.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 79–80.

He continued to place his trust in Beijing's promise to negotiate a revised treaty, one that would specifically outlaw the creative machinations Russian merchants had come up with to skirt treaty provisions. "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is currently discussing with the Russian embassy how best to reform the national commercial tax revenue system so as not to injure either party."⁵⁶

Yet Beijing's promises of future diplomatic victories had come to sound more and more hollow to those Xinjiang officials sweating away on the front lines. Wang Buduan, *daoyin* of Tacheng, had neared his breaking point. "During my tenure here I have been unable to record a single success in addressing [Russian violations]," he wrote to Dihua. "If the central government does not engage in swift, serious negotiations with the Russian embassy, we in Dihua and Tacheng will be unable to prevent future violations." Two weeks later, Wang, informed by Governor Yang of Beijing's game plan, promptly lodged his displeasure. "I have seen the Ministry's orders. It seems to me that they still have not come up with any effective measures, instead merely ordering us to sit back quietly and continue to endure Russian threats and intimidation, all for fear of starting an incident." Wang's lack of faith in Beijing's ability to lobby for provincial interests was borne out in mid-1914, when a downcast Governor Yang was forced to report the latest diplomatic failure. "The Russian embassy has not agreed to our Ministry's proclamations, and the central government has been unable to discuss a new tea clause with them yet. In light of these developments, we have no choice but to release and pardon the Tacheng tea violators."⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Ibid., 57, 48, 50.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 55–57, 63.

Yang Zengxin's misplaced trust in Beijing's political clout threatened to compromise the relationship he had with his own subordinates. This loss of face was clearly on his mind in late 1914, as he prepared to confront his next foreign affairs melee. Fresh off their success in blowing off Beijing's feeble attempt to rein in rampant tea violations, the Russians next turned their attention to the acquisition of additional land for the growing Russian community in the southwestern oasis of Kashgar. According to the Russian consul, the 1862 Treaty of Beijing stipulated that all foreign powers were entitled to an extraterritorial "trade concession" (*maoyi quan*) within their spheres of influence. Because the land which had been granted to the Russians in Kashgar for the construction of a consulate building in 1903 had not been bequeathed to them under the specific phraseology of "trade concession," they argued, they were now entitled to additional lands wheresoever they deemed fit. The area they chose turned out to be the most densely populated district in all of Kashgar. "The ground beneath the houses of those residents constitutes their own private property," Yang protested. "How in the world can we force these residents to move and give their land to foreigners?" The Russian response must have sounded familiar. "Seeing as your reply constitutes a treaty violation, it seems that I have no choice but to report this matter to my government, and declare that Chinese officials are unwilling to grant us a trade concession in accordance with treaty provisions, and have erected numerous roadblocks to amicable cooperation."⁵⁸

Yang, having already strained his relations with Tacheng *daoyin* Wang Buduan, did not want to similarly alienate his Kashgar counterpart. Yet right as he began to roll up his sleeves for a fight, Beijing chimed in with its predictable two cents. Yang, still unable

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

to bring himself to turn his back on a directive from the central government, fell dutifully back in line. “Initially I was set on refusing this latest set of demands from the insatiable Russians,” he explained to his subordinates. “But then I received the Ministry’s orders telling us to let the Russians purchase the land.” So he did. Having thus once again displayed weak knees in front of the Russians, however, Yang found it impossible to stem further demands. The asking price of the locals, the Russians now complained, was too high, certainly not comparable with what they had paid for similar digs in sparsely populated Tacheng. At this, Yang finally put his foot down. “Wherever the locals are willing to sell, [the Russians] can purchase their land. But for those who are unwilling, we are not going to force them to sell.”⁵⁹

By the end of 1914, Governor Yang found himself in an awkward position. Beijing had repeatedly displayed its impotence in lobbying for Xinjiang’s interests, thus making exceedingly difficult—and often humiliating—the jobs of those men whom Yang relied upon to run the province. Yet Beijing was also the residence of Yang’s acknowledged champion, Yuan Shikai, with whom the governor’s political and ideological legitimacy was intimately intertwined. Furthermore, Yuan was just then preparing to embark upon his ill-fated Chinese Empire venture, an extraordinarily risky enterprise that required a united front with Yang. With their governor paralyzed in the middle, Xinjiang’s officials began to explore the weapons of the weak. Wang Buduan, *daoyin* of Tacheng and one of those officials whose job had been rendered both difficult and humiliating as of late, hit upon a plan that drew the swift fury of the Russians. In late 1916, suddenly and without warning, Wang replaced his usual Han Chinese customs

⁵⁹ Ibid., 66.

house inspectors with Turkic-speaking natives, hoping to catch red-handed any shady entrepreneurs attempting to do business for Chinese merchants under Russian treaty protection. “For two months now customs duties have been handled by five Turban merchants who cannot even speak Chinese or read the treaty clauses,” complained the Russian consul. “Not one day goes by that I do not have aggravated Russian merchants in my office complaining of harsh treatment and coarse inspection procedures.”⁶⁰ We might note the extreme unlikelihood of Turkic merchants unable to speak Chinese being installed as the sole inspectors at Xinjiang’s busiest border crossing. Far more likely was that Wang Buduan had found a way of exposing numerous shady rackets involving the chameleonic Turkic residents of Central Asia, who were moving and selling tax-free goods for treaty-excluded patrons.

So long as Russia remained strong and Xinjiang remained anchored to a weak China, however, plucky schemes such as that deployed at the Tacheng customs house were temporary stop-gap measures at best, destined to founder on the desk of a meticulous Russian consul. Similarly, so long as Emperor Yuan continued to push for the piecemeal restoration of the old political order so exalted by Yang, the governor himself would remain a steadfast martyr for the cause, leaving local officials to fend for themselves as best they could. The situation changed in 1916, with the death of Yuan Shikai. Yang had embraced his majestic impotence for the greater political and ideological good. It remained to be seen whether or not he would do the same for his successors.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 82.

As the Beijing government restored the institutions of a republic, a young envoy set out from Beijing to examine Xinjiang's financial ledgers. As it turned out, he would be the last outsider Governor Yang would welcome into his province for the next ten years.

Crisis in Paradise

“Entering through the northern gate, the muck and mire of the streets immediately defiled my clothes. Overgrown with picturesque grasses and shrubs, the roads emit a foul odor under the heat of the sun, and you must cover your nose as you walk. I have traveled many places throughout China, all with filthy streets, but these are the worst of them all.” As Xie Bin strolled through the streets of Dihua in April 1917, his aesthetic sensibilities were assaulted in every direction. Despite the arrival of spring, black snowdrifts persisted on every corner, leading Xie to observe that “three out of every four seasons feels like winter.” Yet it was not simply the visual and practical gloom of Dihua's cityscape that caught Xie's eye. After several months of travel throughout eastern Xinjiang, this young envoy from Beijing had already become convinced that the roots of the province's ills ran far deeper than what he could see in the streets. As a result, “what should be Heaven on earth is instead an undeveloped wasteland.”⁶¹

Xie Bin arrived in Xinjiang in early 1917 as a “special envoy” of the Ministry of Finance in Beijing. As such, he was tasked with the investigation of Xinjiang's finances, and warmly received by Governor Yang. To be sure, the governor had his own vested interests in Xie's arrival. In exchange for allowing the 26-year-old Xie unfettered access

⁶¹ Xie, *Xinjiang youji*, 124, 131, 2.

to his provincial ledger books, Yang hoped to convince Beijing once and for all just how deplorable a state his coffers were in. In the governor's calculus, such a realization by the central government—vouched for by its own auditor—might finally prompt Beijing to renew a portion of those Qing-era subsidies of yesteryear for which Yang had long pined after. This was a tit-for-tat arrangement. The governor gave Xie access to documents so sensitive that, when he published a narrative of his visit six years later, Xie occasionally declined to comment on their contents. In return, Governor Yang asked for a modest loan of one million *yuan*, which would allow Xinjiang to “balance its annual expenditures with its annual income, and not bother the central government with any more requests for assistance.”⁶² With the European war offering a brief respite from Western imperialism and the Russian civil war not yet on Xinjiang's doorstep, Xie's presence in Xinjiang in 1917 represented the last chance for Beijing and Dihua to forge a constructive relationship before the dawn of the warlord era. Xie Bin's mission in Xinjiang was to convince Governor Yang that Beijing was serious about lending a helping hand.

And a helping hand was precisely what the governor needed. Everywhere Xie looked, he saw the deleterious effects of Xinjiang's geographic and financial isolation from inner China. The telegraph poles between Dihua and Ili had not been repaired in twelve years. Official channels of communication had slowed to the point where the Russian consul referred to them disparagingly as the “camelgraph.” This was in sharp contrast to the situation across the border, where Xie later saw telegraph poles “set in a stone foundation, solid as tree trunks, and secured with nails of steel.” It was not just Chinese officialdom that found it difficult to keep in touch with each other, however.

⁶² Ibid., 127, 286.

Newspapers from inner China routinely took four to five months to reach Xinjiang, by which time current events had “already become history”—that is, if they were not detained by the authorities first, which they often were. As a result, inquiring minds were forced instead to turn to the Russian post, where “news from inner China arrives quicker . . . and the Chinese authorities are unable to inspect and detain it.” The root source of all these information handicaps, however, lay in the deplorable condition of overland transportation routes. Merely within Xinjiang itself, Xie noted, it could take more than two months to travel from one destination to another, not to mention the grueling three-to four-month journey to Beijing. All talk of building a railroad was mere fantasy: there were not even enough funds to construct the most rudimentary of roads from Dihua to Altay, thus laying completely bare and vulnerable a strategic expanse of more than one thousand miles.⁶³

Confronted with such staggering logistical handicaps, Xie managed to take solace in the fact that the European powers were currently in no position to exploit Xinjiang’s weaknesses. “Thank goodness Russia is beset by so many problems of late,” Xie wrote, “and thus lacks the means to meddle in our affairs.” Similarly, the British, preoccupied with the war in Europe, would find it “quite difficult to swallow us up.” As a result, Governor Yang just might be able to “delay the last breath of the doomed and buy us a little more time. Otherwise, [Xinjiang] would have long ago become the next Poland.” Xie urged the governor to take advantage of the war in Europe before the Western powers returned in force—as they were bound to do. “If we do not improve transportation and shrink the time required to travel between the northern and southern

⁶³ Ibid., 145, 378, 118, 198, 121, 298.

regions of the province,” he warned, “the moment a crisis hits, we will lose control over the eight oases of the southern marches. Kashgar will go first, and then all of Xinjiang will be threatened.”⁶⁴

Xie traveled extensively throughout the southern deserts of the province. In his written account, Xie perpetuates the contemporary Chinese practice of referring to its inhabitants—the people known today as Uighurs—as “Turbans” (*chanmin*, *chantou*, or *chanzu*), so described for their distinctive headgear.⁶⁵ Their homeland was an immense desert region wholly alien to Xie. He complained of man-eating ants that tormented him in his sleep and a suffocating dry heat palatable only to mummies. Most jarring was the complete absence of any amenities dear to his Chinese heart. “There are no liquor stores, no pigs, indeed nothing at all that a Han might find in a Beijing goods store. Han are extremely scarce here, and everywhere one looks he sees only Turban dwellings.”⁶⁶ Nevertheless, as he traveled through the region, it was the political economy of “Turban country” that consumed Xie’s thoughts the most. He noted with distaste the perpetuation of *beg* rule throughout the southern oases. These local Turkic notables and strongmen occupied an intermediary position between the ruling Chinese administration above and the alien Turkic populace below. Abolished on paper by the Qing court but continuing to serve in a de facto capacity during the Republic, they were ethnopolitical middlemen whose lack of accountability led to a host of abuses and gross inefficiencies in the distribution of state resources. Yet Governor Yang, unwilling to tamper with the imperial

⁶⁴ Ibid., 121, 119, 123.

⁶⁵ If the “Turbans” thought this ethnonym offensive at the time, they did not lodge an official protest about it: anytime a “Turban” produced a document for government eyes, he always referred to himself and his neighbors as such. This term was also used to refer to Turkic-speaking sedentary peoples across the border (today known as Uzbeks), though they were qualified as “Russian Turbans.”

⁶⁶ Ibid., 240–46.

status quo during a time of political and financial crisis, made no attempt to curb their influence. While acknowledging that Yang was a “brilliant and level-headed administrator, perhaps foremost throughout the nation,” Xie nonetheless criticized him for “having made virtually no attempt to eliminate the manifold abuses and exploitative practices of these *begs*.”⁶⁷

The situation was similar in Hami, an oasis region in eastern Xinjiang famous for its melons. Hami was home to a hereditary khanate and its Turkic king, enfeoffed in the eighteenth century for services rendered to the Qing court during its conquest of the region. When Beijing conferred provincial status upon Xinjiang in 1884, similar khanates in Turpan and Shanshan were abolished. Yet the Hami khanate was spared. The king, Shah Maqsut, though often described as a portly and amiable old man by outside visitors, was an exacting overlord to his own subjects, whose labor and wealth he exploited to the utmost. Despite a pair of uprisings in 1907 and 1912, the governor never wavered in his support for Shah Maqsut and his hereditary privileges. From Yang’s perspective, the foundation of Han rule in a non-Han land was premised upon an air-tight alliance with the upper stratum of Turkic and Mongol intermediaries. It was these people who constituted the religious, aristocratic, and economic elite at the local level, and it was to their interests that the Han ruling class catered. So long as the beleaguered peasants remained geographically isolated from tangible outside support, this Han-Turkic-Mongol ruling alliance proved fully capable of keeping their discontent in check. The vastly outnumbered Chinese administration, isolated and abandoned on the northwestern

⁶⁷ Ibid., 245. Though the *beg* system was abolished on paper after 1884, it continued to function without modification on the ground.

frontier, would not alter the imperial formula for ethnopolitical stability until circumstances absolutely forced them to.⁶⁸

Not surprisingly, then, those who were left out of this lucrative and exclusive ruling alliance pursued alternative channels of upward mobility. One option was to travel to the Ottoman Empire or to enroll in a Turkish school in Xinjiang, opportunities made respectable by ethnic, cultural, and religious ties. While passing through Kucha, Xie observed how the handful of expatriate Turkish residents were “viewed by the Turbans as representatives from their ancestral land, and worshipped to the utmost degree.” Turkish-run private schools never lacked for students. The reverence for all things Turkish underscored the undeniable ethnic gulf between the Han administration and its Turkic subjects, and allowed for the possibility that a future call to arms could derive in part from ethnic discord. The building blocks of such a conflict were duly recorded by Xie, who noted Turkic “distrust of Han medicine” during a recent epidemic.⁶⁹ Though insufficient by itself to fuel a sustained uprising, the inherent friction existing between the races lent itself to manipulation from outside forces.

In 1917, however, ethnic tensions were lukewarm at best. Xie agreed with the governor that the most pressing threats to Chinese sovereignty in Xinjiang lay in the lack of funds to develop transportation and infrastructure, and the vulnerability this entailed for foreign predators. This realization hit home upon his arrival in Altay, an autonomous jurisdiction sandwiched between Xinjiang and Mongolia. Located over a thousand roadless miles from Dihua, Altay bustled with Russian industry. If not for the distractions

⁶⁸ For Xie’s reflections on his time in Hami, see *ibid.*, 76, 87.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 172, 224.

of the war in Europe, Xie was certain that the Russians would have long ago turned Altay into another one of its satellites, much as it had with neighboring Khovd. His proposed solution? Assimilate the natives and encourage Han immigration. “We must set up Chinese-language schools here, force them to acquire a basic understanding of the language and script, and establish a center of operations to assimilate [the Kazaks and Mongols].” According to Xie, allowing barriers to exist between the races was a recipe for disaster, akin to “inviting a wolf into your home.”⁷⁰ Eventually the Russians would return in force. And when they did, the yawning ethnocultural gap between Han and non-Han would facilitate Russian overtures to the latter.

Xie Bin left Xinjiang in late 1917, and nothing came of his mission. Any promises he may have made to the governor were quickly overshadowed by the tempest brewing across the border. In the fall of 1916, the first of 300,000 Kazak and Kyrgyz nomads, in search of a haven from Russian persecution following botched conscription efforts for World War I, fled into Xinjiang. They were joined the following year by hardened partisans of the Russian civil war, toting grudges and firearms that would not be defused until 1921. The mishandling of this very same crisis by Chinese officials in Outer Mongolia ultimately led to that territory’s permanent separation from the modern Chinese state. For Governor Yang, who had displayed ample skills in fostering domestic peace but had yet to shine in foreign affairs, the coming battles would constitute nothing less than trial by fire.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 127, 310.

Chapter 3

Trial by Fire, 1916–21

“Countless Kyrgyz lie dead in the passes, piled one on top of the other. Their frozen corpses, stuck solid to one another, obstruct the mountain roads. It is a sight too horrible to describe.”¹ This was the gruesome report forwarded to Governor Yang’s desk on October 2, 1916. It described the fate of thousands of Kyrgyz and Kazak nomads who had fled Russian persecution and ventured up into the Pamir Mountains of western Xinjiang. Informed that Russian authorities had no intention of sparing the remaining 300,000 Kazak and Kyrgyz refugees from a similar fate, Yang Zengxin scratched his head. “The mountains are littered with corpses,” he wrote. “Russia is supposed to be a great civilized country, with respect for human life. How can they let this happen?”² They let it happen for the simple reason that, stranded right next to all those frozen corpses, were the shivering bodies of innocent bystanders, of far more value to the Russian authorities. “When the Kyrgyz fled from Russia,” Yang later learned, “they took with them a countless number of white-skinned women and children as hostages. These women and children are now howling from starvation and cold in the passes, their plaintive cries for help unanswered.” Before long, Russians armed with machine guns and bayonets were streaming over the border at will, in frantic search of wives and

¹ Yang Zengxin, *Buguozhai wendu* [Records from the Studio of Rectification], vol. 4 (1921; repr. ed., Taipei, 1965), 1913.

² Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, ed., *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: E zhengbian yu yiban jiaoshe (yi)* (*Zhonghua minguo liu nian zhi ba nian*) [Historical materials on Sino-Russian relations: the Russian revolution and general diplomacy (1) (1917–19)] (1960; repr. ed., Taipei, 1984), 13.

adolescents, descriptions of whom were posted as “missing persons” signs throughout the province.³

This whole sorry state of affairs began in the summer of 1916, with the ill-conceived decision in St. Petersburg to conscript Central Asian nomads for the war effort on the European front. Long exempt from forcible integration into the political projects of European Russia, the Kazaks and Kyrgyz of Russian Turkestan wasted no time in organizing armed resistance throughout the Karakul region. When Russian authorities responded in kind, the outgunned and outmanned nomads struck hoof for the mountain passes, carrying in tow the most important form of collateral they could get their hands on: Russian women and children, plucked straight from the warmth of their frontier homes. By November 1916, nearly 300,000 Russian Kyrgyz and Kazaks had crossed over into neighboring Xinjiang, ultimately taking refuge in the border districts of Ili, Tacheng, Altay, Aksu, and Kashgar. Most went to the Ili Valley, where over 200,000 nomads eventually resettled. When grain reserves proved insufficient to feed them, the Russian Kazaks and Kyrgyz proceeded to pillage the Xinjiang countryside. With Xinjiang’s sad provincial army the only means of combating such banditry, Governor Yang opted to err on the side of diplomacy. “The Russian Kazaks are armed only with swords, and have few professionally trained military men among them,” Yang observed. “If we employ force against them and meet with even the slightest setback, we will become a laughingstock and invite the scorn of foreigners.”⁴

³ Yang, *Buguozhai wendu*, vol. 4, 1925, 2040, 2052.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1894.

For Yang Zengxin, these refugees were a political disaster just waiting to happen. From his perspective, the threat to Xinjiang was twofold. First, the Kazaks and Kyrgyz had all holed up in the vicinity of Xinjiang border towns. This meant that Yang's relationship with his own beleaguered border officials, long strained to the breaking point by the governor's unwillingness to swerve from defeatist Beijing directives, was about to undergo a further test. More importantly, however, the threat of large-scale Russian military intervention in Xinjiang, always a latent possibility, had now become unavoidable reality. The specter of rogue Russians, armed to the teeth, lacking all diplomatic restraints, and bullying their way across the province—this was the stuff of Yang Zengxin's worst nightmares. As it turned out, however, the Kazak refugee crisis was merely a harbinger of what was to come. For when the October Revolution broke out in European Russia later that year, it would send shock waves throughout the continent, ultimately threatening to redraw the entire map of Central Eurasia.

In early 1916, the lands of Outer Mongolia, Xinjiang, Russian Turkestan, and Siberia were all ruled by colonial agents of the Russian and Chinese Empires. Five years later, only one of these rulers would remain standing. That ruler was Governor Yang, who found that the the storm could only be weathered by clamping down upon his own officials and turning his back on Beijing.

Rogue Localists and Fugitive Kazaks

“I have already gotten rid of the corrupt offices of the Ili General and Tarbagatai Counselor,” Yang boasted in 1917, employing the old Qing name for Tacheng

(Tarbagatai). “Today all that remains is the Altay Minister.”⁵ The Ili General (*jiangjun*), Tarbagatai Counselor (*canzan*), and Altay Minister (*zhangguan*) were semi-autonomous political offices within Xinjiang, all of which were originally set up during the Qing dynasty. To this list must also be added the Commander of Kashgar (*titai*), the bane of Governor Yang’s rule. Each of these unique offices, though nominally subordinate to the provincial governor in Dihua, held considerable leeway in the management of affairs within their jurisdiction. They each maintained private armies, and, perhaps most importantly, enjoyed privileges of direct communication with the central government in Beijing, unmediated by Governor Yang. During the glory days of the Qing, when Beijing still exercised rigid control over its far-flung dependencies, these various satrapies of the northwestern frontier functioned like a well-oiled machine, supplementing the deficiencies of one another. By contrast, when the Qing took a beating in the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries, these types of autonomous offices gradually became a mirror reflection of the rampant rogue localism then sprouting up throughout the Qing empire. At this point, they became a direct threat to Yang Zengxin’s rule, though not necessarily because he feared a coup directed by their hand (though that he certainly did). The problem was often far more mundane: all too frequently they simply ignored the governor’s orders, particularly when he played the role of Beijing’s feeble parrot.

As long as the chief issues at stake were little more than the thorny affairs of Sino-Russian trade, as they were for most of Yuan Shikai’s presidency and emperorship (1912–16), these special offices did little more than register their discontent, while managing local affairs as they saw fit. Provided they took care not to offend the Russians

⁵ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: E zhengbian* [1917–19], 127.

(as Wang Buduan had done with his Turkic-speaking customs officials in Tacheng) or incite a local uprising, the governor would be unlikely ever to hear the details of their day-to-day operations. This all changed with the Kazak refugee crisis in 1916–17, and the ensuing years of Russian civil war. “If even one region mismanages this crisis,” Yang wrote, “any single hotspot along our border with Russia—be it in Ili, Tacheng, Altay, or Kashgar—will bring the entire province down with it.” It was precisely for this reason that Yang promptly vetoed Russia’s request that Xinjiang’s “local officials” work in intimate cooperation with the Russian consuls to resolve the refugee crisis.⁶ In truth, this was the last thing the governor wanted to see happen. Until he had completed the delicate business of replacing his province’s Qing-era rogue localists with personal appointments beholden only to directives from Dihua, Governor Yang strived to limit all contact between the Russians and his many Achilles’ Heels situated throughout the province.

The Russians, on the other hand, eagerly sought out Xinjiang’s rogue localists, confident that a familiar elixir of bribes and threats could yield results that the governor himself would not dare to sanction. They got their way most quickly with the Altay Minister, a man by the name of Cheng Ke, whose predecessor had signed a private treaty with Russia in the aftermath of the Khovd affair. The Russians knew that relations between Governor Yang and Minister Cheng were less than jovial, and they exploited this rift to the utmost. What the Russians wanted most was for Yang Zengxin to admit that the fugitive nomads were little more than common bandits. Such an acknowledgment would then invoke the relevant treaty provisions, thereby requiring Xinjiang’s authorities to apprehend as many of the 300,000 refugees as possible and subject them to the mercy

⁶ Yang, *Buguozhai wendu*, vol. 4, 1851, 1917.

of Russian officialdom. “Basic human decency prevents me from sanctioning the apprehension of tens of thousands of Kazak refugees and simply handing them over to Russian troops for execution,” Yang informed the Russian consul.⁷ Failing that, the Russians next tried to acquire an open writ by local authorities allowing them to send armed Russian “escort” missions into Xinjiang. This would enable them to recover Russian hostages and capture those nomadic chieftains they deemed most responsible for the course of the revolt. Governor Yang steadfastly refused to grant either request.

Minister Cheng, however, was only too happy to oblige.

In September 1916, right as the first wave of Russian Kazaks began to flood into northern Xinjiang (Russian Kyrgyz fled mostly into southern Xinjiang), the Altay Minister held talks with the local Russian consul. “If any Russian Kazaks flee into Chinese territory,” Cheng Ke promised, “Chinese authorities will deliver them into the hands of the Russian consul.” With the “deep gratitude” of the Russian consul in his back pocket, Cheng kept to his word, clamping down on Altay’s political refugees with force. Upon confrontation with a group of recalcitrant Kazaks, the Minister ordered a “forced military escort” to the Russian consul, where they were most likely brought before a firing squad. Cheng Ke remained unrepentant in employing such tactics. “While we cannot avoid all obstacles in using this approach, so long as we use military force to suppress them, the Kazaks dare not resist for long.” The Russian ambassador in Beijing, Prince Nikolai Kudashev, was overjoyed with Cheng’s performance. “In Altay, Mr. Cheng Ke has managed to clear the region of seven hundred Russian Kazaks using no more than twenty to thirty troops,” he informed the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs.

⁷ Ibid., 1890.

“If only all of Xinjiang could emulate his methods, everything would be just fine.” The Chinese Minister then forwarded the ambassador’s recommendation to Governor Yang, with the following admonition: “It is none of our business whether or not the Russian authorities choose to punish these Kazaks after we hand them over.”⁸

Yang Zengxin did not intend to take this rebuke sitting down. “The Russian Kazaks in Altay were only seven hundred in number, which amounts to less than one percent of the Kazaks in Ili alone,” Yang countered. When matched against the total number of refugees throughout the entire province, he pointed out, Altay’s seven hundred paled in comparison, amounting to less than three-tenths of one percent of the total number. “It is easy to expel a handful, much harder to drive out a multitude. This is basic common sense. It is not as if Altay alone has hit upon a magic solution, while Ili and Tacheng are simply bungling it up.” Altay’s comparatively tiny number of Russian Kazaks made it immune from large-scale Kazak retaliation, a contingency other regions had to consider. Governor Yang took pains to spell out the dangers of an attack on the Kazak chain of command. His theory, a sort of built-in “domino effect” unique to the social organization of nomads, envisioned the swift transformation of all Xinjiang into a battlefield. “Under each chief, there are roughly one thousand subordinates under his rule,” Yang explained. “Even the lesser chiefs claim the loyalties of several hundred men. If Russian troops cross the border and begin to hunt down these chiefs, untold numbers of their subordinates may rise up in resistance.”⁹

⁸ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: E zhengbian* [1917–19], 29–30, 8, 17.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 39, 13.

Although the Altay Minister's independent handling of the refugee crisis certainly irked the governor, it did not even begin to measure up to his fears concerning the situation in Kashgar. This sprawling southwestern oasis, then under the military thumb of Commander Ma Fuxing, a Chinese Muslim (Hui), was home to about twenty thousand Russian Kyrgyz refugees. Ma, a debauched little rascal of a man who wore gaudy European military uniforms several sizes too big for his frame, was a loose cannon if ever there was one. In 1912–13, Governor Yang, preferring to avoid handling Muslim insurrections with Han troops, had briefly found Ma useful in defusing a Turkic rebellion in the eastern oasis town of Hami. Once Hami had calmed down and Ma Fuxing had outlived his usefulness, Yang wanted nothing more than to wash his hands of this unpredictable military menace. So he sent him to Kashgar, nearly a thousand miles and over a month's march away from Dihua. Ma turned Kashgar into his own private fiefdom, amassing a harem of Turkic concubines, styling himself a *pasha*, building lavish palaces, and garnering a reputation among the people for wanton cruelty. Though Governor Yang frequently deplored Ma's vices in telegrams to the central government, he knew he had to tread lightly. By rights, Commander Ma enjoyed his own direct line of communication with Beijing. At the slightest whiff of conspiracy, this volatile powder keg just might explode.

Yet Ma was not the sharpest tool in the shed. He rarely questioned, for instance, the wisdom of employing brute force. Not surprisingly, in September 1916, his first reaction to the Russian Kyrgyz then streaming over the border was to make a grand show of military bravado. The governor anticipated the Commander's tactics and rushed to the telegraph. "Do not attempt to do anything more than block their entry by peaceful

means,” Yang wrote in haste. “And absolutely do not open fire, not even warning shots into the air.”¹⁰ Despite Yang’s orders, in just the first several weeks of the refugee crisis alone, Commander Ma sent more than ten divisions of cavalry and artillery units to “persuade” the Russian Kyrgyz around Kashgar to leave Xinjiang. These military maneuvers were shrewdly noted by the Russian consul in Kashgar, who took advantage of Ma’s quick trigger finger to request the assistance of the Commander’s forces for their own “escort” mission into the environs of Aksu. The governor promptly ordered Ma’s units back to Kashgar and appealed to Beijing to enforce his orders. “If the Russians persist in pressing their demands for Commander Ma to send his troops to Aksu, you must refuse at all costs.”¹¹

With twenty thousand Russian Kyrgyz holed up in the mountains of Kashgar, Commander Ma’s blunt tactics risked a foreign affairs conflagration far more serious than that which Minister Cheng might have conceivably sparked in Altay, which had been the destination of only seven hundred Russian Kazaks. Governor Yang never tired of lecturing his subordinates on how every plan other than his own would inevitably result in Russian “pretexts.” A legitimate pretext, newly validated by “precedent” and encased in tortured treaty-protected logic, would allow the Russians to send armed forces into Xinjiang, something to be avoided at all costs. The governor’s doomsday scenarios were endless, and not at all implausible. A persecuted Russian nomad could retaliate by targeting Russian merchants living in Xinjiang. Or they could pre-emptively slit the throats of the Russian hostages they had brought with them. Military expeditions, be they

¹⁰ Yang, *Buguozhai wendu*, vol. 4, 1855.

¹¹ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: E zhengbian* [1917–19], 17–18.

Russian or Chinese led, also carried risks. Yang never even considered a Chinese force—they were sure to make a mess of things. And if the Russians sent in troops, Chinese Kazaks were bound to get mixed up in the fray, thereby instigating a domestic uprising. Finally, the governor continually harped on the sheer magnitude of the crisis, the latent dangers of which were vouched for by his nomadic “domino effect.” If nothing else, 300,000 desperate, natural-born cavalymen with swords were nothing to thumb one’s nose at.

The reason that Governor Yang constantly had to remind his officials of all these doomsday scenarios was because Beijing, no longer ruled by Yang’s patron Yuan Shikai, was now broadcasting orders increasingly at odds with Yang’s assessment of the situation. This meant that rogue localists such as Commander Ma in Kashgar and Minister Cheng in Altay could now find justification for their militant actions in central government directives, thereby undermining Yang’s position of authority. One of Beijing’s first orders during the refugee crisis advised Xinjiang officials “not to bend over backwards in appeasing the Russians, out of fear of giving them a pretext.” This was an open invitation to initiate an indiscriminate crackdown. Faced with such provocative language, for the first time ever the governor finally found the will to turn his back on Beijing’s orders. “Even though these are the Ministry’s orders,” Yang told his subordinates, “it appears that they simply do not understand the situation on the borderlands. We must act in accordance with local conditions, and avoid rash actions that will lead to incidents.”¹² Prior to the Kazak refugee crisis, Governor Yang’s unyielding adherence to Beijing’s defeatist directives had led to serious disaffection among

¹² Yang, *Buguozhai wendu*, vol. 4, 1917–18.

Xinjiang's local officials. Now the opposite was true. In order to keep a tight lid on what were fast becoming "rogue" local officials, Yang found that he had to refute the ill-considered martial solutions formulated in Beijing. Whichever way he sliced it, the governor was beginning to realize a simple truth: the central government was becoming a direct liability to survival of his administration in Dihua.

Yang, of course, did not simply sit back and watch quietly as his province came apart at the seams. As heavily armed Russians tramped across the land, and Xinjiang's officials prodded cornered nomads like so much cattle, the governor made frantic efforts to regain control of the situation. In those regions of Xinjiang still afflicted by Qing-era decentralization, such as Altay, Kashgar, Tacheng, and Ili, Governor Yang could only hope to stem the bleeding. But when the refugee crisis came to a head in Aksu, Yang saw an opportunity to turn the tide. The oasis of Aksu, nestled along Xinjiang's west-central border with Russia, was the governor's old stomping grounds. From 1907 to 1910, Yang had served as *daoyin* of Aksu, his first appointment in Xinjiang following his transfer from Gansu province. Yang knew the city and its environs well: Aksu was the only region within Xinjiang that Yang had ever been posted to outside the capital. Just as importantly, its current *daoyin* was a man Yang himself had plucked from obscurity: Zhu Ruichi, an old-style Qing official who had risen—thanks to Yang—from the lowly prefect of remote Guma county in 1908 to Yang's former office in Aksu by 1914. Zhu was a loyal member of Yang's tiny inner circle, safely ensconced in the one region within Xinjiang where the governor knew everyone and everything that was going on. This was where Governor Yang would make his pacifist stand, and attempt to create a new model for both Beijing and his own provincial officials to emulate.

By late 1916, the mountains around Aksu had become the temporary refuge of some twenty to thirty thousand Russian Kazaks. Before long, Russian headquarters in Semireche got word that chief fugitive Sabitanov and his brothers—believed to have instigated considerable violence during the Karakul uprisings—were hiding out near Aksu, with an unknown number of Russian hostages in tow. They immediately despatched a punitive expedition to cross the border. “When our troops arrive, we expect the *daoyin* of Aksu to provide for them and lend all necessary assistance,” came the somewhat imperious order.¹³ Unlike Minister Cheng and Commander Ma, Aksu *daoyin* Zhu Ruichi stood his ground. “The Russians are demanding that we assist them in apprehending the Kazaks,” Zhu informed Yang. “They are quite insistent and forceful.” Though Yang pleaded with Beijing to convince the Russian ambassador to call off this punitive expedition, the central government caved in without a fight. “When the Russians arrived here,” Zhu reported, “the first thing they told me was that our government had already approved the capture of Russian criminals.”¹⁴ Zhu, firmly in Yang’s camp, continued to drag his feet, thereby prompting a formal note of protest. “The unwillingness of your officials to assist us in the apprehension of these criminals resulted in a host of problems,” the Russian consul in Dihua later complained to Yang. “Please order the *daoyin* of Aksu to help us in capturing these bandits.”¹⁵

The governor had no intention of issuing such orders. Instead, confident that his Aksu disciple would continue to toe his pacifist line, Yang took aim at Beijing. After citing numerous reports suggesting that every Beijing-sanctioned Russian expedition into

¹³ Ibid., 1935.

¹⁴ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: E zhengbian* [1917–19], 15.

¹⁵ Yang, *Buguozhai wendu*, vol. 4, 1981.

Xinjiang thus far had resulted in the illegal seizure of refugees, Yang questioned Beijing's naiveté. "In my Ministry's previous telegrams, it was claimed that Russian troops were merely serving as escorts for Russian women and children," he wrote. "Now that it is clear what is truly going on, I ask that you go back and urge the Russian government to adopt a peaceful platform, one that includes a magnanimous amnesty capable of recovering the trust of the people." As for the situation in Aksu, the governor attempted to demonstrate to Beijing the wondrous powers of non-violent persuasion. After forwarding a report from Zhu Ruichi regarding the peaceful recovery of fifty three "white-skinned" Russian hostages near Aksu, Yang marveled at the accomplishments of his Aksu civil servants. Facing hostile winter conditions and cornered nomads, they had managed to obtain the release of Russian hostages by doing little more than "visiting and talking" with their captors. The governor, of course, had left nothing to chance in Aksu. In order to ensure the success of these olive branch missions, Yang personally endorsed an extra budgetary fund for a "special investigator" in the office of the Aksu *daoyin*.¹⁶ "After seeing how our unstinting efforts to save these hostages have succeeded in stimulating friendly and cordial relations with our neighbors," Yang boasted to Beijing, "I heartily endorse the practice of such humane procedures."¹⁷

If Aksu was being held up by Yang as Xinjiang's new model oasis, then Zhu Ruichi was Xinjiang's new model *daoyin*. And model *daoyins* were sorely needed elsewhere in Xinjiang. Once the situation in Aksu had stabilized, Governor Yang immediately transferred Zhu Ruichi to the post of Kashgar *daoyin*, the residence of

¹⁶ Ibid., 1978, 78, 83.

¹⁷ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: E zhengbian* [1917–19], 20.

powderkeg Commander Ma. Zhu took over for the exhausted Yang Zengbing, the previous *daoyin* and younger brother of the governor. In late 1916, with Commander Ma sending divisions all over the southwest and model *daoyin* Zhu Ruichi holding down the fort in Aksu, the governor's brother, despite his opium addiction, was the only other person Yang could trust to implement a prudently defensive policy in distant Kashgar. These three men—Yang Zengxin, his brother Zengbing, and Zhu Ruichi—constituted Xinjiang's trinity of pacificism during the refugee crisis. Whereas Commander Ma advocated a military solution in Kashgar, Zengbing coordinated a massive effort by local magistrates to venture into the mountains and personally persuade Russian Kyrgyz to go home. By January 1917, Governor Yang proudly reported success in Kashgar: all twenty thousand Kyrgyz, along with their two hundred thousand sheep, had vacated the region. "The reason that Kashgar was able to get rid of all its Kyrgyz," Yang wrote to Beijing, "was due to the diplomatic efforts of Yang Zengbing, who persuaded the local Russian consul to issue them repatriation papers."¹⁸

Zhu Ruichi's arrival in Kashgar coincided with the March 1917 revolution in European Russia. This was not the Bolshevik revolution, which would break out later that same year, but rather an anti-Tsarist revolt prompted by the hardships of Russian involvement in World War I. The impact in Xinjiang, however, was felt immediately. The transitional government in St. Petersburg, now consumed with far more serious matters closer to home, no longer had the energy to lock horns with Governor Yang and the Xinjiang peace brigade. A general amnesty was soon issued, and both sides agreed to the formation of a Sino-Russian Committee, with the aim of peacefully repatriating all

¹⁸ Ibid., 11, 39.

remaining nomads. As this was merely what Yang had lobbied for all along, he jumped at the chance to usher fugitive Kazaks and Kyrgyz home. To his dismay, however, the governor soon came face to face with an ominous feature of the new political landscape. In short, while the weakened Russian central government in St. Petersburg may have lost all appetite for confrontation, newly stranded Russians on the ground in Central Asia had most certainly not. And with the Russian government having lost all ability to restrain them, Governor Yang was offered a sneak preview of the frightening violence that was to come during the Russian civil war.

The first sign that something was amiss came in the form of a report to Kashgar *daoyin* Zhu Ruichi in June 1917. Reliable witnesses recounted a chilling scene. Approximately seven hundred Russian Kyrgyz, armed with little more than consulate-issued amnesty papers from Kashgar, had been mowed down like sitting ducks as they passed through an alpine valley. Rogue Russians, armed with machine guns, had clearly been responsible for this premeditated turkey shoot. “What is the meaning of all this?” Yang thundered to Beijing. “First they issue a general amnesty, then they execute every last one of them!” Getting these nomads to return in the first place had been a Herculean task, Yang observed, one that required vast amounts of provincial funds and labor. “Not only has this inhumane action resulted in the deaths of those who ventured to return, but it also ensures that those still remaining will not risk a similar fate.” Throughout the summer of 1917, additional reports of premeditated massacres and poisonings continued to reach an exasperated Yang. The Russian ambassador in Beijing could not have cared less. “Before they fled to Xinjiang,” Prince Kudashev patiently explained, “the Kazaks pillaged and ravaged the people of Russian Turkestan. It is only natural that the people

will enact their revenge upon their return.”¹⁹ This callous response from the Russian ambassador not only demonstrated a shocking indifference to the lives of Russian Kyrgyz. It was also an attempt to mask an uncomfortable new truth. Even had he been so inclined (and he clearly was not), Russia’s top political representative in China was now completely powerless to rein in the unauthorized actions of Russians living on Xinjiang’s doorstep.

The “general amnesty” that St. Petersburg offered to its refugees in Xinjiang, long awaited by Governor Yang, turned out to be a bitter sham. Yet it showcased a novel phenomenon for Xinjiang officialdom. The Russian government was weak. Sure, it could still issue official decrees and “amnesties” till the cows came home. Yet no Russians in distant Central Asia were under any pain of punishment to obey these orders anymore. From Yang Zengxin’s perspective, St. Petersburg suddenly seemed very, very far away. But if the governor allowed himself to indulge in even the tiniest bit of *schaudenfreude*, the flip side of the coin fast sobered him up. Even without a powerful central government lobbying for their interests, the Russians of Central Asia could still outgun anyone who stood in their way. And now they had been “unleashed,” so to speak, giving substance to Yang’s worst fear. That is, rogue Russians with vastly superior firearms and little accountability had scant incentive to ensure that Russian disorder did not spill into Xinjiang. A case in point was the multiple massacres of homeward-bound Russian Kyrgyz throughout the summer of 1917. No matter how well he laid the groundwork, the best laid plans of Governor Yang could be instantly undermined by a few wayward Russians and their trusty guns.

¹⁹ Ibid., 115, 120.

The Kazak refugee crisis of 1916–17 marked important transitions both in Yang’s relationship with Beijing and with his own officials in Xinjiang. Whereas the governor once tolerated and defended the majestic impotence of Yuan Shikai’s government, he now saw nothing more than gross incompetence in its successors. And whereas he once thought it prudent to leave his local officials to their own devices, he now knew how quickly “local initiative” could be exploited by trigger-happy Russians. In the turbulent storm to come, both of these relationships would be stretched to the breaking point.

Governor Yang Cracks

“The Russians here are terrified,” wrote Altay Minister Cheng Ke in March 1917, soon after news of the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II reached the Altay region. “Two factions of support and opposition have already formed, and both are agitating behind the scenes.”²⁰ Without giving it a second thought, Beijing promptly ordered Minister Cheng to dust off his guns. “If fired upon, by all means fire back,” came the response.²¹ In May, large numbers of Russian troops in Xinjiang were recalled, and the two camps, loosely divided into “Whites” (or “Old Russia,” mostly supporters of a constitutional monarchy), and “Reds” (or “New Russia,” loosely allied advocates of various radical socialist platforms), were basically left to duke it out among themselves. By the time the Bolshevik revolution struck in November, famine had gripped Russian Turkestan, and the once wealthy Russian consul in Ili begged Governor Yang to open up his storehouses of grain. “Supplies of grain are cut off all throughout Russia,” the *daoyin* of Ili observed in

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

²¹ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, ed., *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: Xinjiang bianfang (Zhonghua minguo liu nian zhi ba nian)* [Historical materials on Sino-Russian relations: Xinjiang border defense (1917–19)] (1960; repr. ed., Taipei, 1983), 13.

January 1918. “They will not be able to last much longer.”²² That same month the governor issued a ban on any Russians arriving via the railway from Harbin, which had become a hotbed of Bolshevik agitation in northeastern China. It mattered little. The Russians came anyways, swords brandished, rifles loaded, and with heavy axes to grind.

Tacheng was the first town to come under siege. In March 1918, six months after the Bolshevik coup in Moscow, victorious Red armies pursued a White brigade from Semipalatinsk to the Xinjiang border crossing of Boggy Reed, a mere twenty five miles from Tacheng. Tacheng *daoyin* Wang Buduan, having only just relinquished his semi-autonomous prerogatives as Tarbagatai Counselor the previous year, was not a trusted ally of the governor. In fact, he was one of those officials most put off by Yang’s regurgitation of defeatist Beijing directives during the reign of Yuan Shikai, and it was he who installed the Turkic-speaking customs officials that had so infuriated the Russian consul. Not surprisingly then, the governor was ill at ease to see the presence of so many Russian civil war combatants in the vicinity of this emerging rogue localist. Prior to 1917, Yang would have been breaking decades of precedent if he had tried to meddle in the affairs of the Tarbagatai Counselor. “If anything should happen,” Yang worried, “I will be unable to manage the affairs of Tacheng’s defense.” Although this special office was finally abolished during the summer of 1917, “local military forces are still wholly under the control of the *daoyin*.”²³ Since the *daoyin* was none other than former Counselor Wang Buduan himself, Yang found himself facing a situation distressingly similar to that which he had faced in Altay and Kashgar during the Kazak refugee crisis.

²² Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqu dang’an guan, ed., *Xinjiang yu E Su shangye maoyi dang’an shiliao* [Historical documents on commerce and trade between Xinjiang and Russia/Soviet Union] (Wulumuqi, 1994), 101.

²³ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: Xinjiang bianfang* [1917–19], 19.

In April 1918, the Russian consul in Dihua approached Yang with a proposal. If the governor would agree to send his troops to fight for the Whites at Boggy Reed, the consul would provide them with Russian armaments. Yang refused, then warned Wang *daoyin* in Tacheng that he was to pay no heed to such requests. “If we send troops over the border, then they will have the right to send their own troops into Tacheng,” Yang wrote. “Under no circumstances are you to send Chinese troops even one step into Russian territory.”²⁴ White forces that had fled into the embrace of the old Russian consulate in Tacheng, however, faced no such restraints. They soon began crossing the border at night and harassing Red armies stationed near Boggy Reed. By June 1918, Red forces had conquered nearly all of the former White territories bordering northern Xinjiang, and Moscow felt confident enough to announce the despatch of new consular officials to replace the White consuls in Xinjiang and Mongolia (ignorant of the actual situation, however, they mistakenly thought Ili and Tacheng to be cities in Outer Mongolia). While Yang weighed his options (he briefly considered a secret reception for the Red consuls), events soon overtook him. In late June, White partisans slipped across the border and murdered four Red agents who had been sent to replace Tacheng’s White consuls.

If the murder of four hopeful Red consuls by White operatives based in Tacheng was not enough to prod Governor Yang into action, the subsequent reports of his spies were. According to Yang’s spooks, Wang Buduan not only knew about the plan to assassinate the Red consuls, but had also lent substantial military and logistical assistance with which to carry out the operation. Yang was livid. “Wang *daoyin* did not disarm the

²⁴ Ibid., 31.

defeated Russian soldiers like he was supposed to,” he informed Beijing, “and instead sent his own troops, upon the request of the Russian consul, to provoke an engagement” with the Reds. Worst of all, “the *daoyin* did not report the truth of any of these matters to me.” When the governor got word that White forces in Tacheng had succeeded in killing seven more Red agents near Boggy Reed, he knew his wayward *daoyin* had somehow been involved. Reminding Wang that the Bolsheviks had already conquered all of Russian Turkestan and most of Siberia, Yang warned his *daoyin* that “little Boggy Reed will not be able to resist this force all on its own.” He then offered Wang some unsolicited advice. “Since you apparently do not have the time to research international law,” Yang wrote, “let me take a moment to quote some cautionary proverbs for you. ‘Don’t open your mouth during an argument, and don’t stick your hand into a fistfight.’ ... You are not adhering to international law, not respecting the treaties, and wholly ignorant of our country’s plight. How can you act so recklessly?” Yang backed his indictment with a plea to Beijing, hoping the central government would second his orders, “so as to prevent my Tacheng officials from disregarding my directives and dragging us all into a crisis.”²⁵

Although the *daoyin* still retained control over Tacheng’s troops, the fact that Wang could no longer lay claim to the title of Tarbagatai Counselor gave Governor Yang the pretext he needed to intervene. After learning about Wang’s collaboration with the Whites in June and July 1918, Yang decided to send an infantry and artillery division to Tacheng. The governor’s forces arrived in early August, and not a moment too soon. White forces in Ili, having teamed up with the Whites in Tacheng and gained the

²⁵ Ibid., 82, 72–73.

endorsement of Wang *daoyin*, had just launched an attack on Reds across the border. The Reds crushed them. The victors then massed at Boggy Reed and made preparations to invade Tacheng. Before they could depart, however, Yang's forces arrived. The governor's men immediately took control of the city, and the Reds, now convinced that a policy of neutrality would be enforced in Tacheng, promptly pulled their troops out of Boggy Reed. With the return of peace to the Tacheng border, resident Russian merchants expressed their "deep gratitude" to Yang for his timely intervention.²⁶

Yang faced much the same crisis in Ili, where the total number of White refugees had topped fifty thousand by late summer. On a single day in May 1918, several thousand Whites had clambered over the border at Hulgus Pass, towing eight hundred carts behind them. Ili had long been under the military control of Defense Commissioner Yang Feixia (no relation to the governor), who, like Wang Buduan in Tacheng, was not on good terms with the governor. In their missives to one another, the two Yangs constantly haggled over the total amount of troops Ili was permitted to maintain on its payroll. During the Kazak refugee crisis in 1916, the governor overruled the Defense Commissioner's request to conscript additional troops, offering to send his own troops from Dihua instead. He vetoed similar requests now. "Ili's military budget is already off the charts," Yang countered. "It is therefore not prudent to raise more troops at the present moment, lest we instigate a budget crisis." The local Russian consul, sensing correctly that the governor was monitoring the Defense Commissioner like a hawk, tried to solicit support for the White cause by more subtle means. "The radical party has been pillaging and slaughtering Chinese merchants [in Russian Turkestan] as well," he told the Yangs. "If

²⁶ Ibid., 92–93, 100.

you were to send in troops to protect them, we would then be willing to return all of the territory that China has lost to us over the years.” When Governor Yang found out that Yang Feixia was lending a curious ear to this proposal, he immediately issued a rebuttal. “If the Russians are harming Chinese citizens,” the governor reprimanded his Defense Commissioner, “then you must figure out a way to deal with it by diplomatic means. You are absolutely not permitted to send troops across the border.”²⁷

Although Yang Feixia obeyed the letter of his governor’s orders, he soon transgressed their spirit. In June 1918, the Reds decided to force the Yangs to show their hand. Without warning, they suddenly announced that a closet Bolshevik working in the office of the Ili consul was their choice to replace the current White consul. A tense standoff ensued, with the White consul declaring his intent to murder this “impostor” if he did not disappear within three days. The governor immediately arranged an armed escort for the Bolshevik mole, thereby incurring the anger of the White consul. With so much bad blood in the air, several Cossack divisions in Ili began to agitate for the return of their weapons and permission to return to the battlefields of Russian Turkestan. “If we approve this request,” the governor replied, “the Reds will simply transfer their undying enmity from the Whites unto us.”²⁸ This time, however, the Defense Commissioner, still smarting from the fallout from the Red consul affair, gave in to White demands. He rearmed a Cossack division and sent them back into the fray. Sensing an inch, the Whites took a foot. Ambassador Kudashev in Beijing began to press for the redeployment of

²⁷ Ibid., 53, 45–46.

²⁸ Ibid., 71.

additional Cossack forces, while the Russian consul in Dihua accused the Yangs of collaborating with the enemy for their role in escorting the impostor consul to safety.

As the complex salvos launched between the two factions in Ili show, attempting to remain aloof from Red and White machinations was like walking through a minefield. Both sides were constantly trying to lure Xinjiang officialdom toward a concealed mine, in the hopes that shrapnel from an explosion would hit their adversary. Governor Yang was relentless in pointing out to his officials where the landmines were located, and imploring them to steer clear. But whether it was Wang Buduan in Tacheng, Yang Feixia in Ili, Cheng Ke in Altay, or Ma Fuxing in Kashgar, each had shown his distaste for adhering to the governor's roadmap. Yang was at his wit's end. "The reason the Reds do not cross the border and pursue the Whites into Xinjiang is not because they lack the strength to do so," Yang warned. "It is only because we have disarmed their enemy and shorn them of the ability to launch a counterattack from Chinese soil." By permitting the White consuls to turn Tacheng and Ili into "bases from which to attack the Reds," Yang believed, Xinjiang's rogue localists had allowed themselves to become nothing more than "wooden puppets." Since these "wooden puppets" refused to listen to his orders, the governor tried to invoke a greater authority. "The declaration of war and negotiation of peace are the prerogatives of the President," Yang wrote on June 30, 1918. "Since our President has not yet declared war on the New Party, I am bound to advocate for peace. Unless you intend to usurp the military chain of command, you must fall in line with this policy."²⁹

²⁹ Ibid., 76, 83, 73.

One week later, in July 1918, the President of China declared war on the Bolsheviks, sending Governor Yang into conniptions. Led by Japan, the newly formed Siberian Expeditionary Force disembarked at Vladivostok in August, with the goal of bolstering White Russian forces in Siberia. Beijing, pressed by its World War I allies to present a united front, agreed to contribute several divisions of troops and additional logistical support. Governor Yang first got wind of this development in the form of an intelligence report from Zhu Ruichi's spies in Kashgar. "In response to rumors that China and Japan are teaming up to invade Siberia, the Reds are now debating whether or not to launch an attack on Ili and Tacheng. To prepare for this possibility, they have already sent a large amount of weapons to the Tacheng border." The White consul in Dihua wasted no time in flaunting the new decree, arguing that the governor was now obliged to return all their weapons and escort White forces to the battlefields of Siberia. Beijing, now convinced that it had taken the side of the eventual winner, cited recent White triumphs in Siberian strongholds such as Irkutsk, Verkhneudinsk, and Chita. "The situation is different than before," the central government wrote to Yang. "Surely you can indulge a few of their requests."³⁰

Governor Yang saw it somewhat differently. "If Red troops take the opportunity to invade northeastern China from Siberia," Yang pointed out, "our northern and northeastern provinces could all send reinforcements via railway. Japan, Great Britain, and France also would not sit idly by." If Red forces enacted their revenge by invading Xinjiang, however, "the central government is beyond reach, and the allied nations even more so." In short, Beijing had powerful patrons guaranteeing its security in the event

³⁰ Ibid., 82, 75.

that the Reds turned the tide and opted to pursue defeated Whites into Chinese territory. Yang Zengxin, alone on the isolated frontier, had nobody to watch his back if he supported the eventual loser. Beijing expressed sympathy with Yang's position, and acknowledged the state of affairs in Xinjiang. "Assess the situation as you see fit and respond accordingly. Just keep us informed." The governor agreed to do precisely that. "I can only adhere respectfully to my Ministry's orders: assess the situation as I see fit and respond accordingly."³¹ Beijing, perhaps without even quite realizing it, had just conceded to Governor Yang a very important precedent. Whenever the governor deemed central directives to be outside of Xinjiang's best interests, he could go his own way.

Beijing soon discovered the pitfalls of trying to please all sides. In August 1918, reports that the Reds were deploying Austrian and German prisoners from the European front as combatants in Russian Turkestan brought a visit from British Ambassador Sir John Jordan. "If the Russian civil war were indeed purely a domestic affair between the two parties, we would not interfere. But the use of Austrian and German war prisoners is of direct concern to the Allied nations." Chen Lu, China's vice minister of foreign affairs, defended Xinjiang's neutrality. Noting that Beijing was "very pleased with the performance of Governor Yang," Chen told the British ambassador that "the Allied nations simply do not understand the situation in Xinjiang. My government has the utmost confidence in Governor Yang's policies."³² Not surprisingly, the British did not share the vice minister's sentiments. In hopes of facilitating communications between Yang and the diplomatic community in Beijing, the Brits requested permission to send

³¹ Ibid., 95–96.

³² Ibid., 98–99.

their own investigative team into Xinjiang and offered to equip the governor with a wireless telegraph. The governor refused to bite. “If we allow the British to help us defend Xinjiang,” Yang replied, “the result will be the same as when the Russians defended Ili during the Qing. They will expect to be compensated.”³³

The Japanese, however, did not intend to take “no” for an answer. Led by military attaché Narita Tetsuo, they quickly wrested permission from Beijing to send a nine-member “investigative team” to Dihua. Governor Yang sized them up in October. “Under the pretext of anti-Red and anti-German defense, Narita Tetsuo is trying his best to get a mixed battalion of Japanese and Chinese troops posted to Xinjiang. He then intends to use this battalion as a base for Japanese activities.” The Japanese, who were then leading the charge for the Whites in Siberia, were far more worrisome to the governor, who had their every move monitored. Yang’s spies soon managed to intercept letters sent between the team members, which showed that they had kept themselves busy by compiling military statistics. The Japanese were pleased to discover that the Russians could be driven out of Xinjiang without too much difficulty, whereas for Yang’s provincial forces, “a few machine guns could do the trick.” Governor Yang was quick to alert Beijing. “If the Japanese request permission to send their troops to Xinjiang on the pretext of Allied defense obligations against Germany and Russia, it is imperative that you refuse at all costs.”³⁴

One thing that the governor could not defend against, however, was the outcome of World War I. On November 11, 1918, an armistice was signed at Versailles. In the eyes

³³ Yang, *Buguozhai wendu*, vol. 6, 3684.

³⁴ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: Xinjiang bianfang* [1917–19], 127–28, 148.

of the victors, White Russia, despite its territorial losses, was entitled to reap the spoils of war. This prompted the Russian ambassador in Beijing to go on the offensive. “I sincerely hope that the Chinese government, as a member of the allied war nations, will be able to fulfill its obligations and permit the passage of Russian troops” through Xinjiang. Sensing an opportunity to break Governor Yang’s recalcitrance once and for all, Ambassador Kudashev reached into his bag of tricks and pulled out an accusation of slander. Claiming that both the governor and his Defense Commissioner in Ili were restraining White forces in Xinjiang because they were taking bribes from the Reds, Prince Kudashev tried to guilt trip Beijing into action. “China calls itself a member of the Allied nations, yet it looks the other way when its border officials do business with radical partisans. It is regrettable indeed that China seems not to have heard that it is the policy of the Allied nations to exterminate the radicals.” In singling out Ili’s wayward Yang Feixia for condemnation, however, the Whites played right into the governor’s hand. Nobody kept better tabs on the wheelings and dealings of Ili’s Defense Commissioner than did Governor Yang himself. “If these accusations were true,” he asked Beijing, likely with a wry grin on his face, “don’t you think I would have known about it first?”³⁵

Although Xinjiang’s governor managed to fend off the combined pressures of Great Britain, Japan, and Old Russia, he was soon blindsided from an unexpected direction: Beijing. “The Allied nations have now achieved complete victory,” the Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed Yang soon after the armistice. “China is a member of the Allies, and we will soon participate in the peace talks. We must strive

³⁵ Ibid., 134, 131, 169.

wholeheartedly to lend assistance to Old Russia.” In order to gain much sought after diplomatic booty at the upcoming Paris peace talks (chief among which were Germany’s former concessions in Shandong), Beijing once again ordered Yang to permit fully armed White troops to pass through Xinjiang on their way to Siberia. The central government assured the governor that he had no need to fear Red reprisals anymore. “Now that their German ally has surrendered, their power is on the wane.” Hoping to piggyback on Beijing’s newfound optimism, Cossack Ataman Boris Annenkov soon arrived at Boggy Reed with a White army in tow. He declared his intent, in accordance with the new agreement, to pass through Tacheng. When Yang balked, Beijing was forced to slink back to Ambassador Kudashev with the unhappy news. “We had originally intended to provide all necessary assistance so that your troops could pass through Xinjiang,” the Ministry claimed. “But it turns out that numerous difficulties attending to the local situation will prevent this from happening.”³⁶

This back-and-forth, wishy-washy performance of the central government was fast destroying what little remained of Governor Yang’s affection for Beijing. One more diplomatic betrayal and the governor’s disillusionment would be complete. The curtain for this final act was raised by Viktor Lyuba, the Russian consul in Ili, and an old foe of the governor. Lyuba previously had served in various consular postings in Outer Mongolia, where he helped facilitate the Russo-Mongol invasion of Khovd in 1912–13. “When he was the Consul-General at Urga,” Yang noted, “he helped the Khalka Mongols in their bid for independence, thus cutting Mongolia off from China. If he stays in Ili much longer, he will surely succeed in cutting Xinjiang off from China as well.” To the Reds

³⁶ Ibid., 134–35, 146.

just across the border, Lyuba was the devil incarnate. “They would like nothing more than to flay his skin from his body and rip into his flesh.” Governor Yang was constantly fending off Red demands for Ili authorities to deliver Lyuba into their custody. “If not for the fact that our Chinese officials have been sheltering him,” Beijing explained to Prince Kudashev, “Lyuba would have been captured by the Reds long ago.”³⁷

The governor’s decision to protect Lyuba was not rooted in any sense of compassion for this diehard White loyalist. Rather, it was an unavoidable by-product of Yang’s rigid determination not to take sides in the civil war conflict. Though Yang’s platform of non-interference had thus far succeeded in preventing a Red invasion of Xinjiang, it was a policy that frustrated Lyuba to no end (who was apparently oblivious to the fact that Yang’s neutrality had thus far prolonged his life). After the governor, in open defiance of orders from Beijing, had refused to admit Annenkov’s army into Tacheng, Lyuba decided to take matters into his own hands. In April 1919, he began to forcibly conscript all Russian males in Ili (including Russian Turks) between the ages of nineteen and thirty five. He gathered supplies for this burgeoning rabble by accusing fleeing Russian merchants of Bolshevik sympathies, then promptly seizing their possessions. The Reds soon caught wind of Lyuba’s battle plans. “They have concluded that Lyuba’s ability to conscript an army in Ili must mean that the Xinjiang authorities have given their consent to such behavior, and they have decided to take action in response.”³⁸ Having stirred up his own hornet’s nest, Lyuba requested the aid of a nearby White detachment in Turkestan, on the pretext that provincial authorities would prove unable to ensure his

³⁷ Ibid., 175, 181.

³⁸ Ibid., 193.

safety in the event of a Red invasion. As a result, by mid-May the mountains west of Tacheng had once again become host to a band of White partisans itching to cross the border.

“Not only is there no time to wait for Beijing’s orders,” came the telegram from Tacheng’s *daoyin*, “but I may not even have time to wait for the Governor’s orders.” The Russian consul in Tacheng, claiming that this crisis was “none of my business,” advised Chinese authorities to get out of the way. “From the looks of things, I am afraid you will be unable to stop them.” He was right. Refused entry at the border, the White partisans simply snuck over the mountains, shooting dead three Chinese border guards who happened to cross their paths. “Such barbaric behavior is scarcely distinguishable from banditry,” Yang noted with gloom. Faced for the first time with Chinese bloodshed, the governor organized his biggest diplomatic offensive yet. Aware that Beijing’s patience for his own entreaties was wearing thin, this time Yang organized petitions in the name of the Xinjiang Provincial Assembly and his province’s branch office in Beijing. Nevertheless, Beijing assured Yang that he was wasting his time. “The Russian ambassador has lost all power to accomplish anything, thus rendering useless any negotiations with him.” With the defeat of a newly reconstituted White Russian government at Omsk later that summer, Xinjiang’s last diplomatic armrest had disappeared. “The Omsk government has been defeated by the radicals, the Russian ambassador exists in name only, and all negotiations have become pointless,” the

Ministry of Foreign Affairs confessed in an internal memorandum. “We can now only rely upon local efforts in Xinjiang.”³⁹

What Beijing preferred not to admit, however, was that the central government had become just as useless to Xinjiang as had the old Russian government. “My Ministry’s directives focus solely on damage control after the fact,” Yang observed at the height of the Lyuba crisis in Ili. “There is no consideration whatsoever on how to respond to fluid conditions on the ground.” Ironically, the prolonged confrontation with Lyuba in Ili had convinced the governor that his pacifist platform could only be realized if he had the guns to back it up. In early July, soon after the White border hoppers opened fire on Chinese sentries near Tacheng, Yang reflected on his predicament. “In principle, I am opposed to the maintenance of an army. But our border affairs are getting more tense by the day, and the Russian civil war is fast dragging us into the abyss.” Without any credible military force with which to intimidate the consul, the Lyuba crisis simply dragged on. Though the despatch of Yang’s personal representative to Ili to negotiate with Lyuba in September succeeded in putting a halt to the consul’s most egregious violations, Lyuba himself steadfastly refused to obey the governor’s orders to exit the province. Lacking the firepower to convince him otherwise, Yang could only sit back and watch. “Seeing as we lack the means to escort Lyuba beyond the pass, there is no point in even trying.”⁴⁰

During the early stages of the Russian civil war, Yang Zengxin requested weapons from Beijing approximately once every couple of weeks, even going so far as to

³⁹ Ibid., 210, 231, 224, 217, 269.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 215, 236, 227.

provide the central government with elaborate logistical plans on possible routes for the shipment. Though Beijing occasionally assented to Yang's requests, it consistently failed to deliver. "I received notice that my Ministry was going to send firearms and ammunition," Yang wrote in May 1918, "but have seen no evidence that any such shipment ever left Beijing. What the hell are those entrusted with this task doing?" In the meantime, Xinjiang's troops had to make due with "a limited number of outdated weapons, the kind of stuff that has been long been consigned to the trash heap even in inner China."⁴¹ Yang was not exaggerating. In 1934, when Swedish archaeologist Sven Hedin caught a glimpse of the armory in Turpan, he saw "worn rusty rifles ... some dated from 1866, but most [of which] would have been in their proper place in an artillery museum."⁴² During the Lyuba crisis of 1919, the governor began to end nearly every telegram he sent to Beijing with an urgent appeal for arms. "I do not like to deploy dramatic language in describing the situation we face out here," he wrote to Beijing in August. "but I am now begging you to send some arms immediately." Otherwise, he warned, China's "hands and feet will soon be severed from its torso."⁴³

Still no weapons came. The governor began to despair. "The people along our borderlands, not knowing any better, think that the central government cares deeply about every other province, and merely disdains Xinjiang alone," Yang accused Beijing. "Since I have heard from time to time of central government assistance to other provinces, it seems that only Xinjiang gets stiffed." Beijing responded by doing what it did best—damage control. "You have maintained peace along our borderlands and minimized

⁴¹ Ibid., 35, 260.

⁴² Sven Hedin, *The Trail of War: On the Track of 'Big Horse' in Central Asia* (1936; repr. ed., New York, 2009), 64.

⁴³ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: Xinjiang bianfang* [1917–19], 265.

conflict among Muslims and Han for many years now. This is all due to your hard work,” the central government assured Yang. “But our country has been afflicted by many problems as of late, and we simply do not have the resources to respond to your requests. Rest assured that we have not forgotten about you.”⁴⁴ Governor Yang, stressed by circumstance, had had enough of Beijing’s excuses. “The people of Xinjiang have been sorely disappointed in the government’s disregard for borderland security,” he fired back in November. Beijing had ignored Yang’s innumerable requests for weapons not for lack of resources, he alleged, but because Xinjiang’s governor had stayed aloof from the petty warlord politicking of inner China. “Do not discriminate against me simply because I am not affiliated with any of your factions.”⁴⁵

Then, on November 18, 1919, the unthinkable happened. Governor Yang, quite possibly the most composed gentleman in all of China, finally lost his temper. The catalyst was the sudden appearance of White partisans in the vicinity of Kashgar, heretofore a relatively unmolested region amid the chaos of civil war. “I see that these Russian troops are equipped with machine guns,” Yang observed. “Yet my own government has not only never issued a single machine gun for the defense of Xinjiang, but likewise has never even provided a single gun or bullet for the most fundamental of tasks.” Reminding Beijing of the hundreds of unanswered weapons requests he had lodged over the past two years, the governor then questioned his government’s patriotic credentials. “I do not know whose land you think Xinjiang belongs to, nor whose government rules over its people. Every time I reflect on this matter, it pains me deeply.”

⁴⁴ Ibid., 265, 271.

⁴⁵ Yang, *Buguozhai wendu*, vol. 6, 3596–97.

Yang addressed this telegram to then president Xu Shichang, who, like Yang, had served under Yuan Shikai. “Back when President Yuan was still in office, you were then State Councilor. In those days, we all worked in tandem to address the affairs of Xinjiang, almost as if we were one body. You were not then yet afflicted by your current state of apathy and indifference.” Yang signed off with a plea to look beyond warlord politics. “I beg you to look upon Xinjiang as part of the Republic of China and under the jurisdiction of its central government. Do not forsake Xinjiang simply because Yang Zengxin is not in your club.”⁴⁶

Of all the many thousands upon thousands of telegrams that Governor Yang authored throughout his seventeen-year tenure in Xinjiang, this is the only known instance when he signed off with the phrase, “submitted in indignation” (*ganfen chenci*). There can be no clearer evidence that November 18, 1919 marked a definitive spiritual break between Yang and Beijing. To paraphrase the governor’s own pet idiom, henceforth he would worship only the “temple” of China. As for the “gods” within, Yang felt, they had proven themselves to be a bunch of petty, carpetbagging warlords who only looked after the interests of their own factions, ignoring the greater good. This was a momentous shift in Governor Yang’s political philosophy. Of all the many countless officials scattered in government posts throughout the country during the early Republic, none had been more innately predisposed—be it through educational upbringing, personal conviction, or circumstantial expediency—to walk in lock step with the central government. The alienation of Xinjiang’s governor by the post-Yuan Shikai warlords of Beijing ushered in a new phase of Yang Zengxin’s career. Whereas he once saw the

⁴⁶ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: Xinjiang bianfang* [1917–19], 293–94.

rulers of inner China as similarly besieged comrades-in-arms, with an obligation to close ranks against the foreign powers, he now saw only hostile adversaries, scarcely distinguishable from other outside predators.

It was this mindset that soon enabled Governor Yang to spare Xinjiang from the fate of Outer Mongolia.

“Scholars Must Become Generals”

In the spring of 1920, two of the most brutal badasses that the White cause could produce waltzed into Xinjiang and immediately began to prepare for a counterattack on the Reds. The first was General Andrei Bakich (1878–1922), a Montenegrin Serb who had distinguished himself as an infantry officer for imperial Russia during World War I. A rabid anti-Semite and sworn enemy of socialism, after 1917 he found himself steadily retreating eastward from European Russia as Red forces inflicted defeat after defeat upon his army. Desperate for supplies and on the verge of starvation, Bakich marched into Tacheng with somewhere between eight to nine thousand Orenburg and Siberian Cossacks, with a trail of five thousand civilian refugees behind them.⁴⁷ Next came Cossack Ataman Boris Annenkov (1889–1927) and his several thousand partisans, who had already briefly flirted with the Tacheng border the previous summer (it was his men who intended to “protect” Consul Lyuba in Ili). A hereditary Russian nobleman who had once commanded a guerrilla unit against the Germans during World War I, Annenkov

⁴⁷ Andrei Vladislavovich Ganin, *Chernogorets na russkoi sluzhbe: General Bakichhh* [A Montenegrin in Russian service: General Bakichhh] (Moscow, 2004). I have relied upon the English summary provided by Willard Sunderland, “The Last of the White Moustaches: Recent Books on the Anti-Bolshevik Commanders of the East,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 595–607.

was distinguished by “absolute personal bravery” as well as the capacity for “astonishing cruelty.”⁴⁸ He is most remembered by historians of the Russian civil war for his decision to execute three thousand of his own men who expressed their willingness to quit the battlefield when offered the chance to do so. This act of wartime barbarity is notable only for the large number of those killed. Like Annenkov, Bakich, too, showed scant aversion to gunning down his own retreating troops during the heat of battle.

Annenkov and Bakich were gritty, experienced military commanders, tough as nails and conditioned by the toxic atmosphere of the Russian civil war. Nothing in Governor Yang’s career had prepared him to deal with men such as these. Up until their arrival in early 1920, White agitation in Xinjiang had been largely a disorganized affair, confined mostly to the activities of individual Russian consuls, who attempted to patch together ragtag bands of Russian refugees for the occasional border raid at night. They might bring ruin to a province under the thumb of a less capable governor, but for a man of Yang Zengxin’s caliber, their provocations had thus far proven to be within the bounds of the manageable. Annenkov and Bakich posed a qualitatively different threat. For theirs were massive, fully intact armies, complete with professional chains of command, superior firearms, and explosive artillery. Such a force could make quick work of even the finest of inner China’s warlord armies, to say nothing at all of the rabble that passed for a militia in Xinjiang. “These Russians are veterans of a hundred battles,” the governor warned Zhang Jian, the new *daoyin* of Tacheng, “and their mettle has been tempered to the highest degree. They may not have been able to overcome the New Russians, but they

⁴⁸ V.A. Barmin, *SSSR i Sin'tszian, 1918–1941* [The Soviet Union and Xinjiang, 1918–1941] (Barnaul, 1999), 49–50.

can certainly lay waste to Tacheng.”⁴⁹ For Annenkov and Bakich, Governor Yang and his coterie of mandarin-robed local officials were little more than irritating distractions, to be swatted away like so many pesky mosquitoes while engaged in the far more important task of anti-Bolshevik counterrevolution.

On April 21, 1920, Boris Annenkov bowled into Ili with intimidating panache. He demanded grain for his men, and, when no grain appeared, kidnapped the son of a local official. After a four-night standoff, Annenkov released his hostage in exchange for six hundred head of sheep. Sensing that such brazen behavior was rooted in desperation, Yang ordered his men to sit back and wait. “Accosting half-starved troops who are on the brink of death is sure to end in disaster for us. Let us wait for Annenkov’s men to crumble from within.” Having temporarily sated their hunger pangs, Yang hoped to tempt Annenkov with an offer of food for weapons. When seven hundred Whites appeared to take the bait, the governor was convinced of the wisdom of his approach. “If we can make him trust us, then it will be easy to disarm his men,” Yang wrote. “If he suspects us of ulterior motives, however, it will be very difficult.” Still, with so many battle-hardened White partisans camped out near one of Xinjiang’s rogue localists, the governor was clearly ill at ease. In early May, he decided to send his own man to assist with negotiations. Ili’s Defense Commissioner demurred. “I can deal with this situation by myself,” Yang Feixia assured his governor, “and I will take care not to provoke a conflict. Please relax. There is no need to send someone from Dihua.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, ed., *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: E zhengbian (Zhonghua minguo jiu nian)* [Historical materials on Sino-Russian relations: the Russian revolution (1920)] (Taipei, 1968), 456.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 299, 331, 321.

The situation deteriorated rapidly. “Last night Annenkov sent twenty men in secret back to Russian territory to transport buried weapons into Ili,” came the alarming report. “When our men caught them in the act, Annenkov’s troops fired on us.” Similar news arrived from Tacheng, where Bakich had also buried substantial caches of weapons before crossing the border. As evidence surfaced that Annenkov was in active contact with White partisans in Siberia, debates began to rage over the best place to relocate him. With great reluctance and some trepidation, Governor Yang decided to invite Annenkov to Dihua, which was equidistant from Xinjiang’s many border passes. The two sides eventually struck a deal. In exchange for an all-expenses paid trip back to Russia by any route other than Ili or Tacheng, Annenkov agreed to disarm his men and come to Dihua with no more than seven hundred officers. In August 1920, however, once Annenkov actually reached the capital, all bets were off. He continued to stash his best weapons beneath the ground, and threatened to start an incident in Dihua if the governor did not supply him with funds.⁵¹ For his part, Yang promptly reneged on his promise to grant passage back to Russia via Annenkov’s preferred route (via Altay and Outer Mongolia), informing him that he was to depart for the eastern oasis of Hami at once.

Annenkov was desperate for money because China formally rescinded diplomatic recognition of the old Russian government in September. With the departure of Ambassador Kudashev from Beijing and the closing of Russia’s five Xinjiang consulates, Annenkov was now cut off from the Boxer reparation funds which had previously financed his operations. For Annenkov and Bakich, their weapons were their sole

⁵¹ Ibid., 378, 703. Regarding Annenkov’s demand for monetary funds from Governor Yang, the issue at stake was rooted in a financial loss Annenkov had supposedly suffered at the hands of Bakichh in Tacheng. Once in Dihua, Annenkov badgered Yang about the recovery of these funds, which Yang interpreted as a thinly veiled pretext to extort money from Xinjiang’s treasury.

remaining bargaining chip. Up until the summer of 1920, they had hedged their bets through a mixture of both hard and soft tactics, one day trading a handful of dilapidated weapons for grain, the next day intimidating the authorities for sheep. But in August and September 1920, when rumors that the Russian civil war had begun to spill over into Outer Mongolia began to trickle into Xinjiang, the retention of their firearms suddenly assumed greater importance. Baron Roman von Ungern-Sternberg (1882–1921), a “pathologically brutal” White Cossack commander whose “sadism rightfully earned him the epithet, the ‘Mad Baron,’” finally brought the full brunt of the Russian civil war into Outer Mongolia, itself newly returned to Beijing’s embrace.⁵² “We are hearing rumors that the radical party has conquered Urga,” Yang wrote to Beijing in late August. “But news is sparse and Xinjiang is distant. Please confirm whether or not this is true.”⁵³ In fact, the opposite was true. Though Bolshevik agents were indeed agitating throughout Outer Mongolia, it was Baron von Ungern who finally laid siege to the Outer Mongolian capital in October 1920, driving out its Chinese garrison early the following year.

Efforts by von Ungern to acquire a new White foothold in Outer Mongolia infused new life into Annenkov. He wrote to both the president of China and the Japanese embassy in Beijing to try and obtain funds for passage to Khovd, where he could link up with White partisans. When that failed, he agreed to relocate from Dihua to Gucheng, an important trading post just north of the provincial capital, from which he could either strike east toward Hami or north toward Khovd. An inevitable test of wills soon broke out. “You ordered me to return to Russia via Beijing, and thus far I have obeyed these

⁵² Thomas E. Ewing, *Between the Hammer and the Anvil? Chinese and Russian Policies in Outer Mongolia, 1911–1921* (Bloomington, 1980), 195.

⁵³ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: E zhengbian* [1920], 646.

orders,” Annenkov wrote to Yang from Gucheng. “But since we never received a reply from Beijing, we have decided to divert course and return to Russia via Khovd, which is much closer. Heading toward Beijing will constitute an enormous detour and present a host of difficulties for us.” This was unacceptable to Yang, who was loath to see Outer Mongolia turn into a White battleground so soon after its return to Chinese rule. “If Annenkov goes to Khovd, he will either conquer it forthwith or proceed straight to Urga,” Yang predicted. “Either way, sending several hundred diehard Russian troops into Outer Mongolia will prove detrimental to our prospects there.” The lure of the Mad Baron, however, who was then on the verge of taking Urga, proved too strong to overcome. “Annenkov is getting more insistent by the day on heading toward Outer Mongolia,” Yang observed in November. “Before long, we will have to resort to force if we still hope to reroute him toward inner China.”⁵⁴

This turned out to be an ominous prediction. On the morning of January 6, 1921, Annenkov’s men, armed with 25 machine guns and a smattering of artillery, crept in from their suburban encampment and opened fire on the walls of Gucheng. They demanded that the governor return funds that he had allegedly appropriated from them, so that they might finance their upcoming trip to Khovd. Yang had had enough. He had prepared for just such a contingency the previous spring, after Beijing’s repeated failure to deliver even a single bullet had forced the governor to pursue other avenues. Working through a private liaison in Beijing, Yang succeeded in equipping Dihua’s soldiers with the first twelve machine guns they had ever laid eyes upon. Up until then, “my troops did not even know what a ‘machine gun’ was.” Once news of Annenkov’s assault on Gucheng

⁵⁴ Ibid., 807, 740–41.

reached the provincial capital, Yang immediately ordered two of his divisions to approach the besieged trading post, one from the east and one from the west, hoping to catch Annenkov in a pincer attack. “If he is not willing to disarm,” Yang warned his subordinates, “there will be war in a few days.” Annenkov, whose men had dug trenches around the city walls in preparation for a prolonged assault, was unfazed by the arrival of Yang’s Dihua divisions, having expected the usual Xinjiang rabble. Then they caught a glimpse of Yang’s new machine guns, and in the blink of an eye, one of Annenkov’s men dropped dead to the ground. For the first time ever, Yang had turned the tables on the Russians. “The provision of my troops with machine guns purchased in Beijing was the only thing that saved the situation in Gucheng,” Yang later boasted. “Otherwise, Annenkov would have been able to dictate his terms to us.”⁵⁵

As it was, Governor Yang did most of the dictating. Annenkov simply did not have the stomach to trade machine gun fire and casualties with a non-Bolshevik adversary. By flashing a dramatic ace in the hole, Yang turned the all-too-familiar game of Russian roulette back on its originators. He then informed the hot-headed young nobleman that the price of keeping a lid on Dihua’s twelve machine guns was the surrender of all their weapons and prompt transfer to Hami of half his White contingent. Annenkov agreed to the escort of 474 of his men, though he took care to bury his best weapons first, before having the worst of the lot transferred to the Xinjiang authorities. If Annenkov took heart in his ability to continue to deceive the governor, however, he was in for a rude awakening. The governor soon summoned him to Dihua for “discussions,”

⁵⁵ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, ed., *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: Zhongdong tielu, E zhengbian (Zhonghua minguo shi nian)* [Historical materials on Sino-Russian relations: the Chinese Eastern Railway affair and the Russian revolution (1921)] (Taipei, 1974), 8, 17.

and immediately placed him under house arrest. “Annenkov is a vile person, feared by both Whites and Reds alike,” Yang later explained. “By detaining him in Dihua, I effectively cut him off from his troops and prevented him from stirring up trouble later.” Now in the driver’s seat, the governor brushed aside Annenkov’s protests. “You, sir, hid weapons from me and dared to open fire on the gates of Gucheng with your machine guns,” Yang replied. “Everyone witnessed this.”⁵⁶

Then, in systematic fashion, Yang proceeded to dismantle Annenkov’s forces, now spread across three different locales: Dihua, Gucheng, and Hami. When the first two groups of Whites reached Hami in April, the governor ordered the local Turkic king to lock up their horses. “Russian soldiers are expert horseman,” Yang noted. “On foot, however, they are somewhat less impressive.” The governor feared that news of von Ungern’s occupation of Urga two months prior might inspire Annenkov’s Whites to strike their spurs north from Hami and Barikol and join their allies in Outer Mongolia. Bereft of their steeds, however, they could do little more than meander around Hami’s bazaars with deep scowls on their faces. “I refuse only to look after the welfare of Xinjiang,” Yang lectured Beijing, “while throwing Urga and Khovd to the mercy of these wolves.”⁵⁷ In order to pull off his final coup de grâce on Annenkov’s once fearsome army, however, Yang now required a little bit of help from unexpected quarters. The Mad Baron’s extermination of Chinese forces in Urga and the Red occupation of Kyakhta had stirred Hami’s Whites into too much of a frenzy. Yang now thought it risky to send them

⁵⁶ Ibid., 46, 35.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 46, 16.

onward to Beijing, where they would have to traverse a two-month route that crossed paths with numerous detours to Outer Mongolia.

So he hatched a new plan. He would send them to Dunhuang, a tiny desert oasis in the wastelands of northwestern Gansu, just east of the provincial border with Xinjiang. “Dunhuang lies ten days’ journey from Hami in the west, ten days from Jiayu Pass in the east, and ten days from Lop Nur in the southwest,” Yang pointed out. “In every direction there is nothing but desert.”⁵⁸ The endless sands of the northwest would thus serve as a natural prison, a perfect solution for a governor with few troops to spare. Yang’s counterpart in Gansu, however, begged to differ. “Annenkov is a fierce, ambitious man, and his men are hardened war veterans, courageous and brave beyond description,” Gansu’s governor shot back. “Do not send them here to lay waste to Gansu simply because you fear they will lay waste to Xinjiang.” Yang countered by proposing to split the expenses three ways (Xinjiang, Gansu, and Beijing), and then offered to sell Gansu the eight hundred prize White Russian war steeds quartered in Hami. “The people of Gansu must relax,” Yang replied. “I would never adopt a policy detrimental to my neighbors.”⁵⁹ Sensing that Xinjiang’s governor was determined to push his plan through, Gansu’s governor pulled out all his rhetorical stops. “We just had a major earthquake here, and the dead are piled high as a mountain,” he countered. “The weather in Xinjiang is more similar to the weather in Russia, and Governor Yang has far more experience dealing with the Russians. Surely he can manage this crisis on his own.”⁶⁰ For his part,

⁵⁸ Ibid., 25.

⁵⁹ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: E zhengbian* [1920], 726, 741.

⁶⁰ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: Zhongdong tielu, E zhengbian* [1921], 24.

Yang was quick to point out that the earthquake in question had occurred in southeastern Gansu, nearly a month's journey from Dunhuang.

The impasse between the two provincial governors was resolved only when Beijing, perhaps in an attempt to patch things up with Yang in the wake of his November 1919 outburst, came down firmly on the side of Xinjiang. "Quartering these troops in Dunhuang is a good idea," Beijing informed Gansu in March 1921. "Please work together with Governor Yang to carry out his plan." Forced into submission, Gansu's governor wanted to make sure that Yang had all his bases covered. "Annenkov's men will not be pleased to discover that they are to be forced into isolation at Dunhuang when in fact they believed they were going straight to Beijing," he warned Yang. "Make sure you find a way to break the news to them and obtain their consent prior to their arrival in Gansu, lest they raise a ruckus when they get here." Yang assured Gansu that there was nothing to worry about. "I served as an official of Gansu for more than twenty years, and regard it as my second home," Yang replied. "If my Dunhuang plan were to turn out badly for Gansu, how could I ever show my face there again?"⁶¹ Though Annenkov's 474 men took their revenge in Dunhuang by defacing the thousand-year-old murals of the Thousand-Buddha Caves, from a strategic point of view, Yang's plan had been a success. Hopeful rumors continued to circulate among White forces in Siberia and Outer Mongolia of the imminent return of Annenkov's troops. Before long, however, it was heard that they had been bottled up somewhere "in the depths of Turkestan."⁶²

⁶¹ Ibid., 27, 31, 46–47.

⁶² Jamie Bisher, *White Terror: Cossack Warlords of the Trans-Siberian* (New York, 2005), 279.

By May 1921, Annenkov's men had been swallowed by the sands of Dunhuang, and Annenkov himself was behind bars in Dihua. Yet just as one White threat was eliminated, the governor was confronted with another. And this time, his precious new machine guns would prove of little use. Whereas Annenkov's men had numbered no more than a thousand by the time they laid siege to Gucheng, General Bakich commanded more than eight thousand in Tacheng. Since their arrival in March 1920, they had proven surprisingly cooperative with the Tacheng authorities, allowing Governor Yang the breathing space he needed to focus on Annenkov. This all changed in May 1921. Having overcome the last hurdle to quartering Annenkov's men in Dunhuang, the governor in April ordered his Tacheng *daoyin* to begin discussions with the Reds at Boggy Reed for the peaceful repatriation of Bakich's military and civilian refugees. This plan initially met with a positive response, and roughly half of Bakich's men and nearly all of his five thousand civilian refugees prepared to cross the border. On May 1, however, approximately three thousand newly defeated White soldiers streamed into the environs of Tacheng. Popular faith in Bolshevik justice began to falter. General Bakich, now fearing that he would be executed if he chose to walk unarmed into the Red embrace, gathered four thousand of his most loyal diehards and rode out to meet up with General Novikov, the leader of these new arrivals. Inspired by the Mad Baron in Outer Mongolia, Bakich and Novikov decided that they would try to accomplish in Tacheng what von Ungern had achieved in Urga.

"There is now little hope that Urga will ever be recovered," Yang observed shortly after news of its fall had reached Dihua. "There is not a single place in all of northern Xinjiang that is not threatened by this development." Machine guns or not, Yang

Zengxin knew Xinjiang did not have the strength to resist a Mad Baron copycat in Tacheng. For the first time, he considered revoking his vow of neutrality. “Although the New Russians cannot yet be completely trusted,” Yang wrote, “at least they have a formal government and are in charge of a country. This fact alone makes them different from the Old Russians, who are now scarcely distinguishable from common bandits.” On May 14, soon after Bakich and his four thousand diehards cocked their rifles and rode out to greet Novikov’s three thousand partisans, Governor Yang received a letter from Red headquarters in Semireche. “We are requesting that Your Honor disarm Novikov and Bakich without delay. In the event that you are unable to disarm them, we request permission for the Red Army to enter Xinjiang and eliminate the White troops. ... When our mission is complete, the Red Army will withdraw in full. If you are unwilling to grant permission for the prompt elimination of these White troops by the Red Army, we will be forced to view your government as an enemy combatant.”⁶³

It is important to note that, at about the same time, the central government in Beijing was handed a similar ultimatum with regard to Outer Mongolia. Beijing not only roundly rejected Red offers of military assistance, but also proved utterly incapable of dislodging the Mad Baron with its own Chinese forces. The warlord faction which held power in Beijing at that time pinned all its hopes on its Manchurian ally Zhang Zuolin, who boldly promised to send 30,000 troops to exterminate White forces in Urga. When this army consistently failed to materialize, Moscow was confronted with an intolerable situation. The new Soviet government was not about to let one of its sworn enemies lick his wounds and regroup for a counterattack on foreign soil. Thus, when Red forces

⁶³ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: Zhongdong tielu, E zhengbian* [1921], 39–40, 65.

decided to send troops into Urga anyways, over the feeble protests of Beijing, they felt no obligation whatsoever to honor the nominal sovereignty which China still technically enjoyed in Outer Mongolia. As a result, following the Mad Baron's defeat, the Red Army not only did not pull out of Outer Mongolia, but decided to stick around and manage the resultant power vacuum itself. Beijing had bet the farm on the fickle interests of export warlordism and lost everything.⁶⁴

Yang Zengxin's spiritual break with Beijing in late 1919 thus proved a blessing in disguise. By mid-1921, Governor Yang no longer held any illusions regarding possible assistance from either the central government or its many warlord allies scattered throughout inner China. Heck, even neighboring Gansu province had shown its unwillingness to lend Yang even the slightest shred of assistance. With friends like these, Yang knew he would have to turn elsewhere for help in dealing with Bakich and Novikov. On May 17, he signed an agreement authorizing the Red Army to pass through Boggy Reed. "We must row our boat with the current," Yang told Zhang *daoyin* in Tacheng. "Heaven has presented us with an opportunity to destroy the Whites by borrowing the strength of the Reds. We cannot go against the will of Heaven." The Reds pledged to feed their own army for the first week of operations. If combat operations continued more than seven days, however, Xinjiang would assume the burden of provisions. Aware of the deep enmity that obtained between the Whites and Reds, the governor begged the Red Army to exhibit restraint. "If any White soldiers decide to lay

⁶⁴ Ewing, *Between the Hammer and the Anvil*, 263.

down their arms and surrender to you, please show respect for human life by resisting the temptation to slaughter them.”⁶⁵

On the afternoon of May 24, 1921, the Red Army burst into Tacheng and opened fire on the Whites. After an initial two-hour skirmish along streets and on building tops, 1,500 Whites lay dead and a further nine hundred were taken prisoner. The remnants of Bakich’s army, still five thousand strong, fled south to Emin county, where they took the local magistrate hostage and seized nomad herds. As Bakich neared Old Windy Pass, Yang realized with horror that he might strike south for the provincial capital. Doing his best impression yet of Zhuge Liang’s “stratagem of the empty citadel,” Yang managed to muster the illusion of an army all along the route from Old Windy Pass to Dihua. When the Red Army renewed its attack two days later, Bakich duly took the path of least resistance and made a beeline for the unmanned steppes of Altay. “Altay has few troops, and is cut off from Dihua by both distance and roads,” Yang observed. “If Bakich flees there, we will not be able to send reinforcements.”⁶⁶ Worse still, Bakich’s men tore down the telegraph poles as they fled eastward. There was now no way to warn the Altay *daoyin* of the tornado raging his way.

The Red campaign into Tacheng had been a disaster. Yang had expected the Reds to eliminate Bakich in one fell swoop. Now this Mad Baron wannabe was pillaging his way across northern Xinjiang, his sights now set on Altay as a White companion base to Urga. On June 13, Bakich reached the Ertix River, where he took hostage another magistrate and again pillaged Mongol and Kazak herds. As Bakich’s several thousand

⁶⁵ Yang Zengxin, *Buguozhai wendu xubian* [Records from the Studio of Rectification: additional compilations], vol. 6 (Shanghuan, 1926), 3, 10.

⁶⁶ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: Zhongdong tielu, E zhengbian* [1921], 82–84; and Barmin, *SSSR i Sin'tszian, 1918–1941*, 57–58.

Whites approached the city of Altay, *daoyin* Zhou Wuxue was urged by his officers to evacuate at once. “Officials have a duty to defend their territory,” Zhou replied. “If we die, then so be it. But I am not going to run away.” The next morning, June 14, Altay was a scene of chaos, as officials and civilians prepared to flee southward toward the Bulgin River. Faced with the humiliation of retreat, the *daoyin* retired to his study, pulled out a revolver, and blew his brains out. Hanging from the wall were his last words. “Harm not my city, harm not my people. Not abandoning my post, I die with virtue intact.”

Governor Yang was devastated. After the successful abolition of Altay’s rogue Ministership in 1918, he had personally appointed Zhou as *daoyin*. “He had no love for money and stood his ground in the face of danger,” Yang reflected. “Our Russian troubles will subside and the bandits will eventually be subdued, but a man like him cannot be replaced.”⁶⁷

Lu Xiaozu, the magistrate of neighboring Bulgin county, stepped in to fill Zhou’s shoes. Hearing of the botched operation in Tacheng, he ordered his troops to obstruct the path of the pursuing Red Army, in hopes of avoiding a repeat performance in Altay. Lu criticized Yang’s plan as “flawed,” and accused the governor of “inviting a wolf to drive out a tiger.”⁶⁸ Yang sacked Lu and appealed to the Reds for a second assault. On July 2, Bakich walked uncontested through the gates of Altay and occupied the city. To his delight, he found that four hundred rifles, sixty thousand rounds of ammunition, and a thousand tons of rice and grain had been abandoned during the exodus. For the next two months, Bakich attempted to rally the support of the White community in Altay. He also

⁶⁷ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: Zhongdong tielu, E zhengbian* [1921], 92; and Yang, *Bugozhai wendu xubian*, vol. 8, 2.

⁶⁸ Yang, *Bugozhai wendu xubian*, vol. 7, 31, 33.

made appeals to Kazaks and Mongols in the vicinity, whose herds he had only recently pillaged. At first, the Reds refused to commit to a second operation, hoping to hold out for generous diplomatic and trade concessions. But then, in July 1921, Red forces in Mongolia retook Urga from the Mad Baron, and fleeing White partisans began to regroup in Altay under Bakich. Bakich used these new arrivals to launch raids on Red bases across the border. The Reds could no longer afford to wait out Governor Yang. On September 12, representatives for both sides inked a new agreement at Tacheng, and a second attack soon flushed Bakich out of Altay. He was captured shortly thereafter in Outer Mongolia, and executed the following year. Convinced that Governor Yang was in control of the province and capable of preserving the peace, the Red Army kept good to its word, and left Xinjiang without delay.

Governor Yang's trial by fire was over. Of all the rulers who had held power in Central Eurasia five years prior, only he remained standing. The white-bearded governor had little to say to Beijing, other than to quote a poem by Ming philosopher Wang Yangming. "Circumstances compel us to do the impossible, scholars must become generals; Since this is the will of Heaven, how can I not rise to the task?"⁶⁹

The Frustration of Warlord Politics

The Russian civil war forced Governor Yang to turn his back on Beijing and clamp down on Xinjiang's rogue officials. Whereas the Kazak refugee crisis of 1916–17 allowed rampant localism to rear its ugly head, the ensuing five years of civil war provided a perfect forum for the full bloom of warlord politics in Xinjiang. The stakes

⁶⁹ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: Zhongdong tielu, E zhengbian* [1921], 123.

were high, and many of the governor's own erstwhile subordinates openly disagreed with his policies. They had only to look at the fate of neighboring Outer Mongolia to realize that Xinjiang could be next. Yet warlord politics did not bloom in Xinjiang. Fortunately for Yang, the rot of the central government in Beijing was exceedingly far away. So distant, in fact, that Xinjiang's rogue officials were unable to obtain anything other than toothless moral support whenever they chose to disobey their governor. Had Xinjiang not been so remote and inaccessible, the warlord politics of inner China would have inevitably exacerbated the tensions between Governor Yang and his subordinates. The various factions would have ensured that Ili's Defense Commissioner and Altay's Minister had the weapons necessary to wage war on one another, in hopes that the winner would extend his patron's influence into new frontiers. The agitation of White and Red Russians along Xinjiang's borders would have provided the perfect pretext to instigate a regional arms race, one which Governor Yang would not have been able to control. In order to respond to these threats from below, Yang Zengxin would have been forced to become what he despised most: a warlord.

In August 1918, when Beijing urged Yang to support the Japanese-led Siberian Expeditionary Force against the Reds, the governor reminded the central government of how inner China's extensive railway system would ensure Beijing's security in the event of a Red attack on Manchuria. The following year Yang discussed Xinjiang's lack of a railroad with the *daoyin* of Tacheng. "It takes several months by camelback and vehicle for goods from inner China to reach Xinjiang," the *daoyin* observed. "But Russian

railroads mean that goods reach their destination the day after they are produced.”⁷⁰ As the Russian civil war dragged on and Beijing proved incapable of managing the affairs of Outer Mongolia, this yawning gap between Beijing and Dihua became a blessing in disguise. It was precisely because there was no railroad linking Xinjiang with inner China that Governor Yang found it possible to ward off Beijing’s warlord rot. Lacking all material support from the distant warlords of inner China, it was only a matter of time before Xinjiang’s governor emerged victorious in his quest to eliminate his province’s isolated rogue localists. Tacheng came under Yang’s direct control in 1918, when he was forced to send troops to wrest power away from *daoyin* Wang Buduan, successor to the Tarbagatai Councilor. The office of the Altay Minister was abolished later that same year, and Ili’s Defense Commissioner was finally sacked in the summer of 1921. This left only Kashgar Commander Ma Fuxing, whose violent downfall will be examined in the next chapter.

China’s central government had proven itself both unwilling and unable to provide Governor Yang with the necessary weapons for border defense. But when Annenkov and Bakich attempted to conceal their considerable arsenal from the governor’s prying eyes, they unknowingly provided Yang with an armory equal to that of most inner Chinese warlords. After Annenkov was arrested and his men dispersed to Dunhuang, local residents in Gucheng began to stumble upon enormous caches of weapons left behind by the Whites. All in all, more than ten treasure troves of arms were uncovered. There was so much, in fact, that Yang had to order several White officers already quartered at Dunhuang to be escorted back to Gucheng so that they could point

⁷⁰ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: Xinjiang bianfang* [1917–19], 241.

out the remaining burial sites. The irony of it all could not have been lost on Yang. The niggardly warlord factions of Beijing, awash in firearms and artillery for use in factional battles, refused to send Governor Yang a single bullet in his quest to maintain China's territorial integrity. Yet it was Governor Yang, armed only with twelve measly machine guns, who saved Xinjiang for China, while inner China's warlords lost Outer Mongolia for good. To top it all off, the White Russians, whose demise Yang engineered, bequeathed to Yang the very same arsenal his own government refused to issue him.

Yang, however, had not the slightest intention of using these weapons, and it is here that we should remind ourselves of the difference between a warlord of inner China and the "benevolent dictator" that Yang was fast becoming on the frontier. Throughout his six-year trial by fire, Yang issued orders for a soldier to open fire on no more than one occasion. This occurred at the dramatic standoff in Gucheng, after the governor's pacifist platform became untenable. He consistently reprimanded Ili's Defense Commissioner for proposing to conscript a professional army, and he sent troops to Tacheng in order to prevent the *daoyin*'s troops from opening fire on the Reds. When White agitation in Xinjiang absolutely required the services of armed men, Yang took care to ensure that they would be easy to decommission later on, allowing only native residents to serve, and nomads whenever possible. Like the doomed mission to send reinforcements to Khovd in 1912–13, Yang continued to look after larger geostrategic interests by refusing to allow Annenkov's men to exit the province through Khovd and thus link up with White partisans in Outer Mongolia. In order to do this, Yang had to organize a complex logistical operation that required Gansu's governor to do nothing more than sanction the relocation of 474 unarmed Russians in the desert wastes of Dunhuang. Gansu's governor,

fully enmeshed in the warlord politicking of inner China, refused to lift a finger until reprimanded by his own patron in Beijing.

By the end of 1921, Yang Zengxin was nearing complete control of Xinjiang. Three of his province's four rogue localists had been eliminated, and he now had the weapons necessary to give pause to the ambitions of warlords from inner China. "I will maintain my portion of the country," Yang wrote to Beijing, right before his November 1919 tirade, "and you will maintain your portion. Is this not for the best?"⁷¹ The governor assured Beijing that he was merely preserving Xinjiang intact until the chaos of inner China subsided. "In the future, I will embrace whatever plans you devise for Xinjiang." After all, "I was born to serve the central government."⁷² In tortoise speak, we might say that the seas of China had fully retreated from the shores of Xinjiang. Governor Yang, exposed and vulnerable to predators, promptly retreated into his shell. The warlords, however, were loath to see him go. For his was a potential tax base and conscript pool just waiting to be harnessed. And China was too malnourished and Xinjiang too enticing not to make an attempt to reel the tortoise back in.

The old man would not be able to keep the sea at bay forever.

⁷¹ Yang, *Buguozhai wendu*, vol. 6, 3741.

⁷² Yang, *Buguozhai wendu xubian*, vol. 1, 56–57.

Chapter 4

Old Man by the Sea, 1921–28

“Nowadays everyone talks of protecting the constitution, saving the country, rescuing the people, implementing local autonomy, and instituting the rule of law,” Yang wrote in 1921, assessing his warlord contemporaries. “These phrases are intended to deceive. They are nothing more than pretty words designed to disguise a lust for power.”¹ The passing of a tumultuous decade had wrought great changes in the governor’s outlook on life. He had come a long ways since the early days of the Republic. Back then, the relationship between Yuan Shikai and Yang Zengxin was similar to that of a minister and his disciple. With regard to matters of principle, the disciple did not question the directives of his minister. Even when the immediate sagacity of such orders was not apparent, the disciple took comfort in the knowledge that loyal adherence to his decorated minister would somehow serve the greater good. Yang Zengxin did not question the wisdom of sending troops to Khovd in 1912, nor did he deviate from Beijing’s later orders to let the Russians run roughshod over him and his officials. The governor’s blind obedience cost him dearly, first in international diplomacy, and second with his own subordinates. Still, Yang’s devotion to his minister did not waver. Their relationship was masochistic at times, but at least there was a rhyme and a reason to the constant flagellations. Tough times had descended upon China, and Yang was prepared to die a martyr for the cause.

As Yang’s scathing commentary on the revolving door presidency of the post-Yuan era clearly shows, however, times had changed. The turning point came during the

¹ Li Xincheng, *Yang Zengxin zai Xinjiang* [Yang Zengxin in Xinjiang] (Taipei, 1993), 135.

height of the Russian civil war, when Beijing consistently failed to formulate a coherent course of action. One month Yuan Shikai's successor said this, the next month the successor of his successor said that. If Yang lodged a request for aid but failed to grease the appropriate palms, China's warlord presidents simply ignored him. None of them showed any concern for Yang's plight, unless it affected the trajectory of their own career. From the perspective of the "disciple," these new "ministers" were impostors to the cloth, political pups without an ethos. Yang Zengxin would not whip himself for such men. Under these circumstances, we might think of Governor Yang in the early 1920s as having made the decision to turn his back on the priests of the nation. He then raised up the barricades around his own domain and announced that he would preserve what the rest of the nation had lost. The governor, we might say, was now his own minister. Certainly, in telegrams to his own officials about this time, the governor ceased to distinguish between foreign and domestic enemies. "In Kashgar alone," Yang warned Commander Ma Fuxing in late 1919, "we must be on guard against the British and Russian consuls, Japanese intelligence agents, and investigative teams from China's Military Advisory and Border Defense departments. Every little thing we do is being monitored by foreigners and Chinese alike."²

Now that his own government in Beijing was treating him like the ward of a foreign state, denying him all manner of assistance and sending spies into his midst, the governor decided to return the favor. Henceforth, he viewed his contemporaries in inner China as hostile representatives of a foreign country. The time had come, he decided, to

² Yang Zengxin, *Buguozhai wendu* [Records from the Studio of Rectification], vol. 6 (1921; repr. ed., Taipei, 1965), 3625.

shut down Xinjiang province and insulate it from the turbulent throes of the outside world. After the dust from the Russian civil war had cleared, Yang ceased to communicate with the president's office in Beijing. In fact, there were now only two government organs within the central government that Yang would even deign to open his telegraph box for anymore: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Finance, both indispensable for any document requiring the chops of a legal representative of the Republic of China.³ Yang's calculus was simple. Warlord politics had wrought devastation throughout the land, intensified the suffering of the people, and exposed China to the ridicule of foreign nations. By wrapping his province in a cocoon of isolation, a tactic possible only on the inaccessible frontier, Yang could spare Xinjiang from a similar fate. As China's warlords bruised each other up, he could stand on the sidelines and root for the man he thought capable of restoring those financial and military lifelines severed by the 1911 revolution. Then he could retire to the foreign concessions of Tianjin and spend his twilight years hunched over a towering mountain of ancient Chinese manuscripts.

That was the plan. The reality, however, was that the warlords of inner China had little respect for a man who, as a pithy Chinese phrase puts it, "places his hands in his pockets and watches events from afar" (*xiushou pangguan*). Simply put, while Governor Yang had been busy preventing Xinjiang from going the way of Outer Mongolia, the warlords of inner China had been busy plotting the governor's downfall.

³ When Chinese archaeologist Xu Xusheng visited Dihua in 1928, he met with Fan Yaonan, the governor's right-hand man in foreign affairs, who informed Xu that "Xinjiang only maintains relations with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Finance. We have no dealings whatsoever with the Office of the President." Xu Xusheng, *Xu Xusheng xiyou riji* [A diary of Xu Xusheng's western travels] (1930; repr. ed., Yinchuan, 2000), 195.

The Butcher of Kashgar and His Friends

On December 16, 1919, Governor Yang wrote a letter to Ma Fuxing, the Commander of Kashgar. “I have always placed the utmost amount of trust in you, and your recent letter clearly dispels all the rumors. So why do you complain that your job is getting more and more difficult to perform?” Commander Ma, whose innumerable plans to deploy brute force during Xinjiang’s “trial of fire” were repeatedly frustrated by his governor, had become an increasingly unhappy camper as of late. Added to his frustrations was the fact that Zhu Ruichi, the governor’s loyal disciple and once model *daoyin* of Aksu, had recently been installed as *daoyin* of Kashgar—the perfect counterweight to Ma’s growing oasis fiefdom. Of course, the very fact that Yang Zengxin even thought it necessary to assure the Commander of his continued trust and inattention to rumors was precisely because the opposite was true. The governor placed not an iota of trust in his Commander, and he made assiduous notes about every little rumor that came his way. Cut off from Kashgar by the deafening silence of the Taklamakan Desert, however, Yang was still uncertain if Ma intended to act on his discontent, or simply stew harmlessly in the opulent splendor of his palace harem. So he ended his letter by dangling a tantalizing bit of gossip. “Lately I have heard rumors that troops from inner China will be coming to Xinjiang soon,” wrote Yang, neutral in tone. “I feel conflicted as to what to do. If I make the wrong decision, I may as well retire to my orchard.”⁴

The “rumors” in question were in fact a ploy by President Duan Qirui and his supporters in Beijing to manufacture a pretext for his affiliated warlord armies to march

⁴ Yang, *Buguozhai wendu*, vol. 6, 3626.

on Dihua, and, in so doing, secure Xinjiang as a base for the Anfu clique. In June 1919, Duan's men planted a news story in the *Shanghai National Salvation Daily*, which purported to include a request by Yang Zengxin for inner Chinese troops to be stationed in Xinjiang as a bulwark against Russian civil war combatants. The "news brief" claimed that "Xinjiang has requested that troops from the National Defense Army be sent to Xinjiang to assist in northwestern border defense." When the governor finally received his own copy of the story several months later, his eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. "For many years now, Xinjiang has maintained its own peace," Yang fired back to the editor. "The central government has given us absolutely nothing." Yang took care to point out how Xinjiang used native residents to man the provincial army, thereby lessening antagonisms among the majority non-Han residents. "I have never requested the assistance of outside armies, and I certainly did not ask for the National Defense Army to come to Xinjiang." Yang demanded that the editors print a correction at once, "lest wild rumors and vast distances lead to misunderstandings."⁵

Yet it was precisely just such "misunderstandings" that supporters of the warlord president were eagerly trying to foment. That same year Beijing floated the possibility that geriatric Guangdong warlord Long Jiguang might be sent to Xinjiang to help deal with the Russians. Yang directed Xinjiang's Provincial Assembly, a ventriloquist outfit, to issue a stern rebuttal. "Long's rapaciousness and vile nature are known to all. Letting his voracious troops into Xinjiang would be akin to opening the door for a thief, or using a tiger as your bodyguard."⁶ The purposeful circulation of such rumors by inner Chinese

⁵ Ibid., 3745–46.

⁶ Gao Jian and Zhao Jiangming, "Minguo qianqi Xinjiang shengyi hui yanjiu" [Research on Xinjiang's Provincial Assembly during the early years of the Republic], *Xiyu yanjiu* 3 (2005): 44.

warlords were cheap, low-risk attempts to flush out Xinjiang's malcontents, in the hope of encouraging Governor Yang's detractors to get in touch with ambitious warlords of inner China. Then the two sides could hammer out a concrete plan for wresting control of the province away from Yang Zengxin, and into the coffers of a carpetbagging warlord. Xinjiang's governor, however, was not born yesterday. Rather than let a known rogue official such as Ma Fuxing get inspired by such hare-brained rumors of outside assistance, Yang decided to confront Ma with his knowledge of the situation, and deprive the plot of any appeal of secrecy. Yet wild rumors continued to flow into Xinjiang, none too innocently. "I hear the central government is going to send reclamation armies to Xinjiang," Yang noted in yet another telegram to his officials. "If this is true, the people will be terrified and turmoil will surely visit the borderlands."⁷ Commander Ma did not bite at President Duan's bait in 1919, but he did begin to lend a curious ear to such overtures.

The cultivation of covert relationships with Xinjiang's rogue localists might be thought of as long-term plans to undermine Yang Zengxin's authority. There were bolder, short-term plans as well, many of which were inspired by warlord Xu Shuzheng's adventures in Outer Mongolia. In April 1919, Xu Shuzheng, a loyal disciple of President Duan Qirui, began to lobby the central government for an appointment as Northwest Frontier Commissioner, with primary responsibility for managing the affairs of Outer Mongolia. At that time, Outer Mongolia had just come back into the Chinese fold, but, much like Xinjiang, was threatened by covetous White Russian forces looking for a base of operations against the Reds. This was the perfect pretext for "export warlordism,"

⁷ Yang, *Buguozhai wendu*, vol. 6, 3744–45.

whereby an ambitious general tries to procure an additional territorial base of operations for his subordinates by means of bribery and coercion. After Xu Shuzheng submitted his rhetorically pleasing “blueprint” for a warlord empire in Outer Mongolia, his powerful patron, President Duan Qirui, went about procuring the requisite votes and elbow wrenching necessary to make Xu’s enterprise appear nice and legal.⁸ Never mind that Xu sorely mismanaged Outer Mongolia to the point of open revolt, and that the Reds soon became so fed up with the empty promises of Beijing’s export warlordism that it decided to kick the Chinese out of Outer Mongolia for good. From Governor Yang’s point of view, President Duan and his underlings had created a dangerous precedent: any man with an army could now lay claim to Xinjiang simply by drafting an unrealistic plan of governance and issuing the appropriate bribes.

Enter the “Christian general” Feng Yuxiang. Feng was unique among Chinese warlords of the early Republic in that he consistently lacked a fixed territorial base of operations. Instead, he roamed from tax base to tax base among the north China plains, preaching Christian discipline and revolutionary slogans, all the while encouraging a romantic impression of himself as a well-intentioned knight errant. Prior to 1923, Feng, in peripatetic fashion, roamed around Shaanxi and Henan provinces. But then his support for presidential aspirant Cao Kun paid off, and the new administration gave Feng the opportunity to leech the resources of China’s top prize: Beijing. Feng took advantage of his hard-won tenure in the national capital to try and do what any self-respecting warlord would do: acquire some land, settle down, and start his own little warlord family. At

⁸ Thomas E. Ewing, *Between the Hammer and the Anvil? Chinese and Russian Policies in Outer Mongolia, 1911–1921* (Bloomington, 1980), 145–46.

some point in 1922–23, Feng became obsessed with the idea that Xinjiang could offer a secure rearguard base from which he could strike out to conquer all of China. Xinjiang, he thought, just might fit the bill as the elusive fixed headquarters he had long pined for. Feng sneered at Yang Zengxin’s “stragem of the empty citadel” as a wasteful neglect of provincial resources, which could otherwise be harnessed in a bid to unite the country. Governor Yang’s moralistic injunctions against the “harmful” armies of his contemporaries, frequently reprinted in newspapers on the eastern seaboard, never failed to grate on Feng’s ears. “There are some people who say that China has too many soldiers,” Feng shot back in 1924, clearly taking aim at Yang and his ilk. “Our problem is not too many troops, however, but simply lack of training. . . . If you do not have an army then you cannot save China, and our country will go extinct.”⁹

According to Feng, Yang Zengxin simply didn’t get it. The sixty-year-old governor was a political dinosaur from the days of the Qing, still dressed up in mandarin robes and championing abstract moral principles irrelevant in the modern world of industrial warfare. Holding Xinjiang in splendid isolation from the chaos of inner China was not only selfish, Feng held, it was detrimental to the larger cause of national unity. What Xinjiang needed was someone who knew how to harness its people and its resources for the greater good, and Feng believed himself the man for the job. In May 1923, building on the Xu Shuzheng precedent in Outer Mongolia, Feng drafted a comprehensive plan to expand the office of Northwest Frontier Commissioner so as to include Xinjiang within its orbit, and place Feng himself in the driver’s seat. Yang

⁹ Luo Shaowen, “Yang Zengxin, Feng Yuxiang zhi jian de maodun he Xinjiang ‘sanqi’ zhengbian” [Tensions between Yang Zengxin and Feng Yuxiang, and the “triple seven” coup in Xinjiang], *Xibei shidi* 4 (1995): 68.

quickly marshalled his supporters, calling once more upon Xinjiang's Provincial Assembly to vilify Feng's plans in the press. "This is the same as forcing a healthy patient to swallow a fatal dose of medicine," wrote the Assembly. "Feng Yuxiang's so-called 'border defense' is just a convenient label. What he really intends to do is turn Xinjiang into his own personal stomping grounds." Before long, Feng was forced to drop Xinjiang from the jurisdiction of the Northwestern Frontier Commissioner's Office.¹⁰

Although Yang consistently thwarted Feng's efforts to gerrymander geopolitical boundaries and thereby gain access to Xinjiang, the Christian general did not put all of his eggs into one basket. In early 1924, Feng heard that the governor of Xinjiang was looking to recruit Russian-trained talent to staff his newly opened Xinjiang Academy of Russian Law and Politics in Dihua. Feng pulled the necessary strings to ensure that Zhang Chunxi, a graduate of the Beijing Academy of Russian Law and Politics and a cousin of one of Feng's colleagues, made Yang's short list of candidates. Yang does not appear to have been aware of Zhang Chunxi's connections with Feng, as is clear from Zhang's swift rise to influential posts within the Dihua bureaucracy. Though Zhang immediately scoured the political landscape in search of anti-Yang discontents, he came up empty-handed. Empty-handed, that is, until he discovered that one of Ma Fuxing's many wives in Kashgar was distantly related to the fourth aunt of newly installed President Cao Kun, himself a fair-weather ally of Feng Yuxiang. The actual details of who contacted who first are sketchy, but what is certain is that Ma Fuxing soon began to exchange presents and telegrams with President Cao. Between late 1923 and early 1924,

¹⁰ Gao and Zhao, "Minguo qianqi Xinjiang shengyi hui yanjiu," 45; and Luo, "Yang Zengxin, Feng Yuxiang zhi jian," 73–74.

Commander Ma sent Cao Kun twenty strapping Andijan prize horses, while the president sent Ma Fuxing an expensive “Seven Lions Sword” and a complimentary new title—the “August General.” None of these exchanges passed by Governor Yang unnoticed. The loyal Turkic king of Hami reported on the exchange of gifts, while Yang’s men in the Xinjiang branch office in Beijing reported on the activities of Ma’s wife and Cao’s aunt.¹¹

With his worst fears of rogue localist and inner Chinese warlord collaboration apparently in active brew, Yang sprung into action. Those in his inner circle could tell from their governor’s demeanor that Commander Ma’s days were now numbered. “Normally the governor was a calm, easily approachable person,” one of his officials recalled. “But when he was determined to take out an enemy, he was in a world of his own.” Another subordinate noted that “during a crisis, when the chips were on the table, Yang became an entirely different person.”¹² Ma Fuxing, Xinjiang’s sole remaining rogue localist, had to go. Yet Yang could not simply fire the Commander of Kashgar, even if he was not buddy-buddy with the president of China. Instead, in a move uncharacteristic of the governor, he hired an assassin. The assassin, however, failed to find an opening. That left only the least desirable option on the table. Yang must now march his own shabby troops across the desert and face Ma Fuxing in open combat. This he did. But he did it in such a way that Ma never knew what hit him, and President Cao and General Feng found themselves unable to call him to task for it.

¹¹ On Zhang Chunxi, see Luo, “Yang Zengxin, Feng Yuxiang zhi jian,” 80; and Fan Mingxin, *Xinjiang “sanqi” zhengbian xie’an zhenxiang* [The true story of the “triple seven” coup] (Pingdong, 2001), 68. On contacts between Ma Fuxing and Cao Kun, see Ma Fushou, “Yang Zengxin jianchu Ma Fuxing mudu ji” [An eyewitness account of Yang Zengxin’s elimination of Ma Fuxing], in Miqian xian zhengxie wenshi ziliao yanjiu weiyuanhui, ed., *Miqian wenshi* [Miqian historical materials], vol. 1 (Miqian xian, 1987), 72.

¹² Fan, *Xinjiang “sanqi” zhengbian xie’an zhenxiang*, 24–25.

Once upon a time, Ma Fuxing had a nasty falling out with a man named Ma Shaowu (no relation—almost every Chinese Muslim is surnamed Ma). The details of their mutual animosity need not detain us; it is enough to note that they despised one another for petty matters of both political and religious origin. Then, during the Russian civil war, Commander Ma cashiered Ma Shaowu from his post as prefect of a neighboring county of Kashgar. Governor Yang, looking for cracks in Ma Fuxing's façade, took the opportunity to install the newly unemployed Ma Shaowu as magistrate of a county near Aksu, long the governor's preferred breeding ground for loyal, card-carrying disciples. In the spring of 1924, when the time came to lock sabres with Commander Ma Fuxing, Yang ordered Ma Shaowu to lead an army from Aksu to Kashgar. All sources agree that Commander Ma never suspected his governor's hand behind the march of his archnemesis. Up until the day that Ma Shaowu arrived on the Commander's doorstep and laid siege to his palace, Ma Fuxing continued to believe that Ma Shaowu was acting alone, and that it would only be a matter of time before Yang Zengxin realized what this "rogue" official was doing and reined in his Aksu protégé. As a result, Ma Shaowu confronted a wholly unprepared Ma Fuxing, who lie drunk on his palace floor as the first shots rang out. On May 31, 1924, dimwitted Commander Ma was ignominiously hog-tied to a wooden cross and shot four times.¹³ Ma Shaowu commenced his lengthy tenure in Kashgar as loyal *daoyin* to Yang Zengxin, who was now the undisputed master of all of Xinjiang.

¹³ Ma, "Yang Zengxin jianchu Ma Fuxing mudu ji". For the view from the archives of the British consul in Kashgar, see Andrew D.W. Forbes, *Warlords and Muslims in Chinese Central Asia: A Political History of Republican Sinkiang, 1911–1949* (Cambridge, 1986), 21–28.

In justifying Commander Ma's downfall to the purveyors of public opinion in inner China, Governor Yang steered clear of any mention of the behind-the-scenes warlord machinations that had threatened to bring inner Chinese armies to Xinjiang. Instead, he played up Ma Fuxing's well-known debauchery and exploitation of the common man. "He abused his power and deprived the people of their wealth and women. Knowing no restraints, he styled himself a *pasha* and incurred the deep enmity of the people, who longed for his execution."¹⁴ The fact that inner Chinese warlords had made common cause with perhaps the most violent man in all of Xinjiang allowed Yang to insulate himself from the political mudslinging that usually followed such bloody intrigues. Simply put, neither Cao Kun nor Feng Yuxiang could express any public disapproval of the extermination of a man who had long been known as "the butcher of Kashgar." The governor not only foiled their plot before they could act; he also tied their tongues after the fact.

In the first serious attempt to dislodge Yang Zengxin from Xinjiang, the score at the end of the day was: Governor Yang 1, inner Chinese warlords 0. Thus far, the old man had shown that he could successfully turn back the sea. Both contestants warily retreated to their corners, and prepared for the inevitable rematch.

The Barometer of Success

Make no bones about it. Ma Fuxing was a fool for thinking he could break through the governor's great cocoon of Xinjiang undetected. By 1924, the year of Ma's downfall, Yang Zengxin had so many spooks and surveillance posts scattered throughout

¹⁴ Gao and Zhao, "Minguo qianqi Xinjiang shengyi hui yanjiu," 44.

Xinjiang and its immediate environs that even mail from inner China had begun to bottle up. As early as August 1920, China's Postmaster-General complained to Yang that "Xinjiang's inspection procedures have gotten out of hand. No one in Xinjiang has received a copy of a newspaper in over three years."¹⁵ Foreign and Chinese travelers invariably commented on the astonishing extent of Yang's information blockade, especially when contrasted with the governor's own near omniscient grasp of current events. "If a snake in Hami gets a fever," joked one Finnish traveler, "the governor is sure to know about it."¹⁶ More than anything else, it is this aspect of Yang's rule that has prompted Chinese and Western historians alike to slap the label of "despot" on Xinjiang's governor and denigrate his inward-looking policies as "reactionary." And, as long as our interpretation of modern Chinese history is fixated on the progress and setbacks of the Chinese revolution, Yang's swift retreat into his tortoise shell during the early 1920s will continue to be seen as a negative "setback."

Yet how might our impression of Governor Yang change if we were not so obsessed with the course of the Chinese revolution? When we privilege geopolitical interests over the rhetoric of the revolution, Yang's gameplan becomes much more clear. If we can only know two things about Republican Xinjiang, the first is that it was hopelessly poor, and the second is that it was about as far away from the centers of modern industrial power as was geographically possible at that time (in the age of deep water shipping, Dihua was the furthest metropolis in the world from a sea port). Absent the stabilizing financial subsidies and security guarantees provided by a modern

¹⁵ Yang Zengxin, *Buguozhai wendu xubian* [Records from the Studio of Rectification: additional compilations], vol. 2 (Shanghuan, 1926), 11.

¹⁶ Xu, *Xu Xusheng xiyou riji*, 266.

industrial power, Xinjiang was destined for political dismemberment. “Some ignorant blowhards like to wax poetic about how lush and fertile Xinjiang is,” Yang’s Provincial Assembly once wrote. “Perhaps they do not know how emaciated our oxen are, how their skin clings to their bones, and how even this meager ration is fought over both tooth and nail. Perhaps they do not know how catastrophic is the state of our finances.”¹⁷ Without a powerful stabilizing patron, Xinjiang was vulnerable to endemic chaos, crushing poverty, and perennial exploitation. We need only look to Afghanistan, one of Xinjiang’s neighbors and the only Central Asian state to consistently lack a committed patron, to understand the likely fate of Xinjiang in the modern world.

Thus it is clear that Xinjiang needed a powerful patron in order to remain intact. But to whom could Yang turn for assistance? Certainly not the Russians, who were always quick to propose joint ventures with the governor, confident that their superior economic and military might would quickly ensure a Russian monopoly (and they were right). Yang knew that any cooperation with the Russians would fast lead to the marginalization of Chinese interests. “The opening of a [commercial] boat route,” Yang wrote in 1915, “would only facilitate Russian colonization, not Chinese colonization.”¹⁸ Though Yang was not a big fan of colonization in general, and he looked down upon the social tensions that it produced, if forced to choose, this Han governor of Xinjiang would certainly not privilege Russian over Chinese stewardship. Admittedly, such a dilemma might not have bothered the ninety-five percent of the population who were Turkic or Mongol. But for Yang Zengxin, whose entire mantle of legitimacy rested upon his

¹⁷ Luo, “Yang Zengxin, Feng Yuxiang zhi jian,” 74.

¹⁸ Yang, *Buguozhai wendu*, vol. 1, 64.

commitment to a Chinese “temple” (if not its “gods”), the gradual erosion of Chinese sovereignty was tantamount to a slow political death.

Other than the Russians, the only other plausible patron for Xinjiang was inner China. And during the bleak dog days of the 1920s, the only thing that inner China could offer Xinjiang was the promise of war and exploitation. “If we implement the rapacious policies of inner China in Xinjiang,” Yang warned in 1927, “the people will surely rebel, and Xinjiang will go the way of Outer Mongolia and Tibet.” For all of Feng Yuxiang’s high-sounding promises of development and construction, neither he nor any other Chinese warlord had the financial resources to make Xinjiang’s government solvent and its borders secure. Until a viable patron emerged to play the role that the Manchu Qing dynasty once had, Xinjiang could be maintained at best; certainly it could not shoulder a radical facelift. “Right now we can only attempt to preserve our territory. We cannot hope to produce wealth.”¹⁹ The production of wealth required outside assistance. And in the 1920s, no outsider was prepared to offer such aid without exceedingly unpalatable strings attached. Sandwiched as he was between endless warfare on the one side, and the loss of national sovereignty and economic subordination on the other, Yang’s retreat into his tortoise shell makes perfect sense.

In Yang Zengxin’s line of work, when faced with such impossible circumstances, there was one—and only one—barometer of success. “I have preserved Xinjiang intact for fourteen years,” the governor reflected in 1925. “I will be satisfied as long as it does not slip through my hands during our lifetime. Anything more I dare not hope for.”²⁰ In

¹⁹ Yang Zengxin, *Buguozhai wendu sanbian* [Records from the Studio of Rectification: three compilations], vol. 1 (n.p., 1934), 39.

²⁰ Yang, *Buguozhai wendu sanbian*, vol. 4, 2.

other words, when the curtain finally closed on his career, would Xinjiang's borders look the same as they did when he inherited them in 1912? And, perhaps more importantly, would they still belong to China? The governor had proven his ability to ward off rogue localists, inner Chinese warlords, and White Russian partisans. But what could he do against an enemy that crept slowly into the minds of his subjects? What could he do against an enemy that struck with relentless persistence, but could not be struck back at?

National Determination and Its Discontents

“For too long now you have been wantonly abused and violently oppressed by your Han overlords,” announced Andrei Bakich, the White Russian general, in July 1921. “Now I have driven them out and taken control of Altay.” This was the provocative placard that confronted the Kazak and Mongol residents of Altay soon after their former *daoyin* had committed suicide. It was an appeal by White partisans to garner support for a makeshift regime and establish a viable base from which to counterattack the Reds. The nature of Bakich's appeal illustrates both the cynical artifice inherent in such exhortations as well as their very real potential to wreak havoc on Xinjiang's political landscape. “The Bhogd Khan will soon lead forth an army of Mongols to help you loosen your shackles of oppression. Since you all stand to benefit from such developments, I am demanding that each and every person provide cattle, sheep, and horses, as well as rice and grain rations.”²¹

²¹ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, ed., *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: Zhongdong tielu, E zhengbian (Zhonghua minguo shi nian)* [Historical materials on Sino-Russian relations: the Chinese Eastern Railway affair and the Russian revolution (1921)] (Taipei, 1974), 129–30.

We can safely say that General Bakich did not give a fig about what was in the best interests of the Kazaks and Mongols of the Altay. He needed war matériel and he needed it fast. In an effort to procure scarce resources from the local residents, he tried to convince them that their current Chinese rulers had placed them at the bottom of the political totem pole, and that, if they switched allegiances, their totemic fortunes would be sure to improve. This is what is known as an appeal to the doctrine of national determination: the idea that humanity is divided into a certain number of readily identifiable ethnic groups, and that each of these ethnic groups has the right to determine its own form of self-government in a state that ideally bears its name. In the early 1920s, the doctrine of national determination was extolled on the lips of leaders as diverse as Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin and American president Woodrow Wilson. When confined to the realm of political handshakes and armchair philosophizing, national determination often comes off looking like a relatively reasonable and harmless blueprint for the reorganization of the modern world into separate but supposedly equal “nation-states.”

The problem, however, arises in implementation, and its proclivity for abuse. Because the doctrine of national determination derived from the intellectual milieu of eighteenth-century European Romanticism, it arrived on the doorsteps of people outside Europe as a decidedly alien concept. And since all major states prior to the mid-twentieth century were empires, not “nation-states,” support for a platform of national determination meant, in effect, the dismemberment of a diverse ethnopolitical entity into its constituent “national” parts. Few imperial statesmen would bestow their blessing on an enterprise that mandated the destruction of the state they served. Casting further

suspicion on the implementation of this European-derived platform of political reorganization was the fact that none of the European empires practiced what their more romantic pundits preached. General Bakich was a product of the Russian Empire, yet he only parroted the doctrine of national determination in Xinjiang when he thought he could get something in return. Though the British urged Arabs living under Ottoman yoke to throw off their “foreign” rulers when it suited their interests during World War I, they did not apply such rhetoric to India, which they continued to rule as a British colony until 1947. And so on.

The point is that the romantic ideal of national determination as it looks on paper is often worlds apart from its cynical manipulation on the ground. Yang Zengxin’s tenure as governor of Xinjiang coincided with a deluge of deliberately manufactured appeals to national determination that aimed to knock the Han ruling class from its political monopoly atop the totem pole. Naturally, Xinjiang’s governor moved quickly to squash such propaganda. The British pamphlet urging Arabs living under Ottoman rule to throw off the yoke of their “foreign oppressors,” having found its way to Xinjiang in 1918, was a case in point. “This pamphlet urges people not to accept the rule of alien races,” Yang observed. “If any British merchant attempts to distribute such tracts to our Turbans, the local magistrates must find a way to confiscate and destroy them.”²²

Had such appeals been motivated by well-intentioned activists responding to earnest appeals from the common man, we might reserve a prudent dose of liberal sympathy for their cause. More often than not, however, calls for national determination during this particular time and place originated from the pen of someone who cared little

²² Yang, *Buguozhai wendu*, vol. 6, 3678–79.

for the welfare of Xinjiang. Viktor Lyuba, the indefatigable and ever-scheming White Russian consul in Ili, originally showed little concern for the non-Han residents of the Ili Valley. That is, until he needed to replenish the ranks of his army. “He has printed several hundred pamphlets in the Muslim script and disseminated them all over the place,” came the report from Ili in mid-1919. “He is trying to incite the Muslims and Turbans so he can form a new army.” Not surprisingly, the Reds did the exact same thing, paying Chinese Muslims 300,000 rubles to return to Ili and inform the local Muslims that their day of “liberation” was at hand and that they should rise up in response.²³ As this high-stakes rivalry for non-Han loyalties clearly shows, appeals to national determination were often manufactured with the explicit intent of procuring additional human or material resources for deployment on the battlefield.

Despite the large sums of money offered, it appears as if many people in Xinjiang turned a cold shoulder to such anti-Han appeals—at least for the time being. The very fact that the Chinese authorities were able to compile creaking bookshelves full of such tracts is testament to the number of local Turkic residents who refused Russian overtures and instead reported their machinations to Han officials. Alarmed family members of black sheep converts informed on their sons and brothers in Ili, and Kazak chiefs wooed by Bakich in the Altay immediately reported back to Governor Yang. These men continued to act as eyes and ears for the governor after the untimely death of the local *daoyin*. Nevertheless, the governor fretted over the possible long-term effects of such propaganda. “At present, the issue that most requires our attention is this doctrine of

²³ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, ed., *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: Xinjiang bianfang (Zhonghua minguo liu nian zhi ba nian)* [Historical materials on Sino-Russian relations: Xinjiang border defense (1917–19)] (1960; repr. ed., Taipei, 1983), 192, 234.

Muslim independence.”²⁴ His concerns lie not so much the actual tracts themselves, which were easily confiscated and burned. Instead, Yang worried about rumors regarding dramatic developments then raging in the former Central Asian colonies of the Russian empire, events over which the governor wielded little control.

Simply put, the Turkic populations of the Ili valley and Altay region were not the only colonized peoples who were being targeted for recruitment by White and Red partisans. The resident Turkic-speaking peoples of Russian Turkestan were also fair game. Concerted overtures by the Whites recorded only sporadic success. Much like Bakich’s crude appeals in Altay, the Whites were simply too desperate, their appetite for arms and provisions too transparent, their cause too hopeless, and proposed partnerships far too mercenary to produce a stable and lasting relationship. The Reds, however, tried a new and unprecedented approach. In short, they extended an offer of real substantive autonomy in exchange for support. This was a dangerous gambit, and one that required a delicate balancing act. Promise too much and the non-Russians might be difficult to rein in when the time came to reimpose a Russian-led state. Promise too little, however, and the non-Russians may not cooperate at all, thus endangering Red prospects from the outset. In the heady days of the Russian civil war, supporters of the Bolshevik cause offered no less than the stars and the moon to the Turkic-speaking peoples of Central Asia. These promises ranged the gamut from local autonomy to complete independence. Governor Yang believed that the Reds would be devoured by their own experiment. “Calls to throw off foreign rulers are all the rage these days,” he noted. “The day will

²⁴ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, ed., *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: E zhengbian (Zhonghua minguo jiu nian)* [Historical materials on Sino-Russian relations: the Russian revolution (1920)] (Taipei, 1968), 81.

soon come when the [native] peoples of Russian Turkestan ... drive out the Slavic Russians.”²⁵

He was wrong. In fits and starts over the next four years, the Bolsheviks forged the groundwork for a Soviet state that was revolutionary in its treatment of formerly colonized peoples. Rumors of what was happening trickled into Xinjiang, causing the governor no dearth of sleepless nights. “The strength of the Reds is growing fast in Tashkent,” came a February 1920 report from Kashgar. “Without regard to nationality or ethnicity, they are holding elections that are open to Hui, Turbans, Kazaks, and Russians.”²⁶ An uprising in Bukhara emboldened a group of itinerant workers from Kashgar to declare that “the Turbans in Kashgar have been the victims of unbearable exploitation by Han officials, and that an armed battalion should be sent to drive the Chinese officials out of Kashgar so that they may enjoy the same freedoms” as did the Turkic peoples of Russian Turkestan.²⁷ In Andijan, ex-pat Turkic laborers from Xinjiang set up a committee and “issued pronouncements concerning independence.” Though evidence emerged that the Reds were actively encouraging these pronouncements for their own strategic ends, such slogans, Yang lamented, “cannot be suppressed by force, nor can we neutralize them with countermeasures.”²⁸ They also suggest that at least some Xinjiang residents felt empowered by this new Soviet rhetoric to air their own grievances regarding Chinese rule in Xinjiang. That is, there was something halfway between cynical manipulation and genuine sentiment circulating in the air. By May 1920, Yang’s

²⁵ Yang, *Buguozhai wendu xubian*, vol. 9, 5.

²⁶ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: E zhengbian* [1920], 85.

²⁷ Yang, *Buguozhai wendu xubian*, vol. 9, 5.

²⁸ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, ed., *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: yiban jiaoshe (Zhonghua minguo jiu nian)* [Historical materials on Sino-Russian relations: general diplomacy (1920)] (Taipei, 1968), 122.

spies informed him that “formal autonomy has already been implemented in Turkestan. They have established a republic, with organized elections, and a seventy-four member senate. All power rests with the Turkestan government.” The governor’s commentary on this report is telling. “It is frightening to see these Muslims and Turbans handling their own affairs of state during this time of chaos.”²⁹

The shifting political landscape of Russian Turkestan during the early 1920s was a bewildering patchwork of experimental and opportunistic governments, many of which were not sponsored or led by supporters of the Bolsheviks. During these years, the Bolsheviks took careful notes and painstakingly gauged the degree to which the rhetoric of self-determination had saturated the political landscape. By 1924, Governor Yang gazed for the first time upon the new Soviet state’s innovative solution for accommodating the doctrine of national determination—without having to sacrifice a single inch of the former Tsarist empire. “Ever since Russia reorganized its polity, it has become a federation of autonomous parts,” Yang observed. “There are now over twenty republics within this federation, which looks quite different from the Russia of the imperial era.” Within each republic, representatives of the majority ethnic group had been installed in prominent government posts, in an effort to make each republic look as though it “belonged” to the people who lived within its borders. “The governor of Semireche is a Kazak,” Yang explained to the *daoyin* of Altay. “Though still a part of Russian territory, officials in this ‘Kazakstan’ are drawn mainly from the Kazaks themselves. Similarly, they let Kazaks serve in their own army.” The governor could not hide his cautious admiration for such a shrewd arrangement. “There is no need to rely on armed forces

²⁹ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: E zhengbian* [1920], 326.

anymore. The Soviet government understands this, and that is why it has given a Muslim republic to its Muslims and a Kazak republic to its Kazaks. ... It is not as if the Russians are unwilling to suppress their Muslims and Kazaks by force. They have the strength to suppress them. But you cannot do that anymore these days.”³⁰

What Governor Yang was getting at is a phenomenon that Soviet historians have identified as the world’s first state-mandated program of “affirmative action.”³¹ In brief, by offering the formerly colonized non-Russian subjects of the Tsarist empire the institutional trappings of their own “nation-state,” Lenin and Stalin hoped to placate and defuse the expected demands for independence by non-Russians citizens of the new state. That the actual exercise of autonomy within these “national republics” was often more fiction than reality is beside the point. By luring a significant number of bright, ambitious “ethnic” leaders into the new state, Soviet affirmative action, despite its glaring contradictions, effectively took the bite out of more strident calls for separatist movements. This radical reorganization of the political landscape, implemented all along Xinjiang’s extensive border with the new Soviet Union and its client state, the People’s Republic of Mongolia, was a serious threat to the stability of Governor Yang’s rule. “The Kazaks of Russian Kazakstan will collude with Chinese Kazaks. The Mongols of Russian Mongolia will collude with Chinese Mongols. The Muslims of Russian Turkestan will collude with Chinese Muslims. By taking the initiative and making proactive use of their

³⁰ Yang, *Buguzhai wendu sanbian*, vol. 2, 15–16.

³¹ For the authoritative treatment on this subject, see Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY, 2001).

Mongols, Kazaks, and Muslims, the Russians have gained the upper hand. They have put us on the defensive, and forced us to play catch up.”³²

The reason the Han ruling class in Xinjiang had been put on the defensive was simple. As the governor himself frequently noted, “Chinese officials have treated the common people like so much fish and meat for thousands of years now.”³³ In Republican Xinjiang, because the common people were closely related by religion and ethnicity to the same people who were now the subjects of Soviet affirmative action policies just across the border, a rebellion stemming from Han misrule would take a drastically different course from a similar rebellion in inner China. Instead of simply replacing the current Han administration with a new Han administration, the Mongols and Turkic peoples of Xinjiang would now aspire to the same privileges of so-called institutional autonomy that their “brethren” enjoyed in the Soviet Union. “If China were to lose its southwestern provinces today, there is little doubt that we would recover them sooner or later,” Yang observed. “But if we mess up in Xinjiang now, we will not be able to get it back later.”³⁴ This was one of the concerns that had consumed Governor Yang in 1924 during the Ma Fuxing crisis in Kashgar. Owing to the “butcher’s” decade-long deprivations of the Kashgar populace, word traveled to Dihua early that same year that “Chinese and Russian Turbans have gathered in Andijan and proclaimed their intent to lead an army on Kashgar and get rid of Ma Fuxing.” Ma Fuxing had not only invited inner Chinese warlords into Xinjiang. He also gave the Turkic residents of Kashgar a legitimate pretext to advocate for the abolition of Han rule throughout all of Xinjiang.

³² Yang, *Buguozhai wendu sanbian*, vol. 2, 16.

³³ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁴ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: Xinjiang bianfang* [1917–19], 14.

“Now that Ma Fuxing and his son have been eliminated,” Yang concluded after the affair, “the outrage of the Turbans has been appeased, and there will be no further cause for any incidents.”³⁵

Other than eliminating the most egregious of naughty Chinese officials, how could Yang Zengxin respond effectively to such ethereal threats, almost all of which blew in from a foreign land? Despite the fact that the actual danger lie more in their potential to facilitate future unrest down the road rather than imminent peril, Yang knew that his subjects were watching developments in Russian Turkestan with keen interest. “Bolshevik promises of independence for Muslims do not respect national borders,” Yang noted with alarm. “The effect in Xinjiang cannot be underestimated. ... The independence of their Muslims will spark a unstoppable tide of radicalism, with a political crisis sure to follow.” As for the governor’s solution? He was certainly not about to implement Soviet-style affirmative action in Xinjiang. Instead, he tried to turn back the clock on the rhetoric of national determination. “If ethnic boundaries are delineated too distinctly,” he argued, “this will cause fish to be separated from water and birds from their flocks.”³⁶ Yang realized that the Bolsheviks were intentionally manufacturing a national consciousness in their ethnic minorities, so as to pre-emptively undermine the expected calls for national determination among non-Russian peoples. This was fine for Russia, which, as Yang knew better than anyone else, clearly had the firepower to intervene whenever their experiment in affirmative action turned sour, as it often did.

³⁵ Yang, *Buguozhai wendu sanbian*, vol. 2, 14.

³⁶ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: E zhengbian* [1920], 81.

To attempt such a radical transformation of the political landscape in fragile, isolated Xinjiang, however, was akin to playing with fire. If the governor granted Xinjiang's Turkic and Mongol constituencies autonomy on paper, he had absolutely no means to ensure that such concessions remained a fiction, as it did in the Soviet Union. In Xinjiang, such measures would almost certainly lead to the swift departure of Yang's "fish" from the "sea" of China, and his "birds" from the Chinese "flock." The only recourse available to Yang was to try and convince the people of Xinjiang that continued Han rule was in their best interests. In Yang's mind, resorting to clever ruses of political doublespeak in an attempt to retain the loyalties of his subjects was nothing less than the failure of moral government. "This is tantamount to the admission that we are unable to win their hearts through benevolent rule, and must resort to coercion in order to pacify them. . . . I am not willing to admit this."³⁷ Spoken like a true disciple of the old Confucian order, Yang was an ardent believer in the therapeutic effect of sound government. "By far the most important thing is good governance, and not treating the common people like fish and meat. We must make sure that indirect rule by the Han is far superior to self-rule by the Turbans."³⁸

Yang knew that such a thing was easier said than done. "Fewer than one out of every ten Han officials in Xinjiang is talented and capable. Fewer than one out of every ten Han officials in Xinjiang is virtuous and cares about the people." If the performance of Han officials was not improved, "we can forget about the Turbans meekly accepting Han rule for all eternity. The day will come when they destroy us." The governor's sole

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Yang, *Buguozhai wendu xubian*, vol. 2, 53.

trump card was his proven ability to keep the peace. As long as he prevented White and Red Russians from laying waste to the land, continued to frustrate inner Chinese warlords from stationing their rapacious armies in the province, and eliminated martially inclined rogue localists, no one—not even Xinjiang’s own native discontents—could find a pretext to exploit. This was why the rhetoric of national determination was so threatening to Yang. There was no need for a pretext anymore. By its very nature, the doctrine of national determination presupposes a biological pretext for legitimate nationhood. The actual performance of an “alien” ruler in power was only of secondary importance. It used to be that the only means of uniting Xinjiang’s diverse peoples against their rulers was to advocate “holy war.” Now, the broad masses of largely indifferent fence-sitters could be united by slogans championing various hues of national determination as well. “The tide of calls for self-government is rising day by day,” Yang once observed. “It is not something that machine guns or artillery can stop.”³⁹

In shunning the rhetoric of national determination, Yang knew he was swimming against the currents of history. Yet if he could somehow ford his dilapidated, leaky boat of Han governance across the turbulent waters of foreign threats and domestic chaos, Yang was convinced that a strong and stable inner China awaited him on the other side. Despite all of China’s problems and all of Xinjiang’s terrible Han officials, the governor still thought he could beat the harsh odds of the day. All he had to do was hold down the fort for another few years, then limp across the finish line. Bruised, no doubt, but without a single inch of his province lost to posterity.

The slog to the finish line continued.

³⁹ Ibid., 54.

Bargaining with the Russians

In the early 1920s, the view from the Russian side of the negotiating table was frustrating, to say the least. “The Chinese nag endlessly, they fixate on trifles, and move with extreme slowness,” a Bolshevik diplomat complained.⁴⁰ Staring them back in the face was Governor Yang and his adamant resolve not to allow the new Soviet state to reinstate the same injurious relationship that had once bled Xinjiang of its wealth during the Tsarist era. “The days of the Russian empire are over,” Yang wrote in mid-1920. “In the realm of international diplomacy, we are starting anew on equal footing, leaving behind the aggressive policies of the autocratic era.”⁴¹ The Bolsheviks were newcomers to Xinjiang, and it took them some time to discover that Ili and Tacheng were not cities in Outer Mongolia.⁴² The old governor, however, despite getting on in years, did everything he could to educate himself about socialism and its doctrines, even going so far as to attend weekly tutoring sessions with a Soviet consular aid. “Wherever there are poor people,” Yang reflected in early 1923, “this so-called ‘doctrine of common property’ will find ready converts.” Xinjiang, chock full of poor people and sharing more than half its border with the Soviet Union, would prove difficult to insulate from inflammatory Soviet policies. The governor, however, was determined to try. “We have no choice but to maintain an active relationship with the Soviet Union,” Yang conceded in 1925. “But their policies of governance are not welcome in Xinjiang.”⁴³

⁴⁰ V.A. Barmin, *SSSR i Sin'tszian, 1918–1941* [The Soviet Union and Xinjiang, 1918–1941] (Barnaul, 1999), 68.

⁴¹ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: yiban jiaoshe* [1920], 213.

⁴² Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: Xinjiang bianfang* [1917–19], 34.

⁴³ Yang, *Bugozhai wendu sanbian*, vol. 1, 13; and vol. 4, 2.

For Yang Zengxin, the 1920s offered a rare opportunity to start from scratch. The old imperial order of Tsarist bullies and their noxious game of Russian roulette had been swept away in a furious gale of civil war, leaving an apocalyptic landscape in its wake. From 1917 to 1919, trade between Xinjiang and Russian Turkestan had come to a virtual standstill. This was a disaster for both sides. In Xinjiang, nearly all manufactured consumer goods came from a factory somewhere in Russia. The sudden cessation of such imports effectively catapulted Xinjiang back into the pre-industrial age of house- and yurt-hold handicrafts. As for the Russians, Xinjiang had long been an attractive source of cheap raw materials, much of which found its way to processing plants in the industrial towns of European Russia, Nizhni Novgorod and Irbit among the most productive. The new Soviet state, its economy in ruins after six years of civil war, desperately wanted to regain access to the cheap raw materials of Xinjiang's pastoral and agricultural markets. Both sides knew that Beijing would be of little use in the restoration of trade ties. In mid-1920, Yang received notice that Beijing was planning on working with the ineffective White Russian ambassador to revise the old unequal treaties. Noting that nearly all the former Russian territories bordering Xinjiang were now under the control of the Reds, Yang thought it best to try and "take advantage of this moment to abolish the old Sino-Russian treaties altogether," and initiate a temporary accord in its place. In the future, once Red Russia had been formally recognized by the international community and Beijing had come to its senses, this temporary agreement could "act as a precedent" for negotiations at the national level.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqu dang'an guan, ed., *Xinjiang yu E Su shangye maoyi dang'an shiliao* [Historical documents on commerce and trade between Xinjiang and Russia/Soviet Union] (Wulumuqi, 1994), 121.

Seizing the initiative, in March 1920 Governor Yang decided to meet in secret with Bolshevik representatives at Hulgus Pass. Two months later both sides signed an “Ili Provisional Trade Accord.” This was the first equal treaty in over seventy years to be signed by a Chinese official and a foreign government. Most importantly, it meant that Xinjiang could once again tax Russian merchants, thereby replenishing long vacant provincial coffers. Yang estimated the potential tax windfall at somewhere between two and three million silver *liang*, nearly three times that of the total tax revenue for all of Xinjiang province in 1913.⁴⁵ “Henceforth, Xinjiang itself can produce the financial subsidies that inner China has long begrudged us.”⁴⁶ Before long, the Bolsheviks installed a commercial representative in Ili, while Governor Yang sent Zhao Guoling, magistrate of Ili county, to Semipalatinsk. Zhao’s reports from Semipalatinsk suggest, however, that he and his governor were far more interested in keeping tabs on the radicalization of Chinese citizens in Russian Turkestan than they were in facilitating the movement of trade caravans. “More than half of these men,” wrote Yang, referring to the thousands of itinerant Turkic laborers who crossed the border in search of seasonal work each year, “are involved in hard labor. They are an uneducated floating population, and are extremely susceptible to instigation by foreigners.”⁴⁷ In October 1920, Zhao’s first cable from Semipalatinsk advised Xinjiang’s local officials “to conduct thorough background

⁴⁵ Cai Jinsong and Cai Ying, “Qianding ‘Yili linshi tongshang xieding’ (ji ‘Yining huiyi ding’an’) de qianqian houhou” [The signing of the “Ili Provisional Trade Accord” (also known as the “Yining consultation resolution”)], *Xinjiang lishi yanjiu* 4 (1985): 70–78.

⁴⁶ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: yiban jiaoshe* [1920], 237.

⁴⁷ Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, ed., *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian—di san ji: waijiao* [Collection of archival materials concerning the history of the Republic of China—vol. 3: *waijiao*] (Nanjing, 1991), 725.

checks on any future military conscripts, so as to avoid allowing any man who has performed seasonal hard labor abroad from filling our ranks.”⁴⁸

In the final analysis, Governor Yang was not terribly interested in facilitating trade with the Soviets. The Ili Provisional Trade Accord was designed to wet the Soviet appetite for economic intercourse, while retaining stringent controls over all commercial activity. Any incidental tax revenue would be an unexpected boon. In order to micromanage Soviet agents and prevent their unauthorized entry to the four corners of Xinjiang, Yang allowed commercial transactions to take place only at closely supervised markets in Ili, with all Soviet merchants forced to pay custom taxes at nearby Nilka Pass. To the governor, starting from scratch meant that he would try to prevent the re-emergence of diplomatic Russian roulette. Though the Bolsheviks were still weak, Yang knew that it was only a matter of time before they started to push their economic and political weight around the province again, just as the old Tsarist Russians had done. By refusing Bolshevik demands to expand the number of sites authorized for commercial activity, Yang hoped to cloister all Russian enterprises into a single, heavily monitored region. Then, in the event that an “incident” involving Soviet merchants broke out, militant consular “protection” could only be applied to a single locale. Thus, in late 1922, when a Turkic trader bearing Soviet citizenship applied for permission to transport goods to a mountainous region just south of Dihua, Yang’s reply was succinct and unyielding. “The region in question has not been designated as an open trade area. Therefore, no foreigner is allowed to proceed there for the purpose of commercial relations.”⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: yiban jiaoshe* [1920], 267.

⁴⁹ Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiq dang’an guan, *Xinjiang yu E Su shangye maoyi*, 161.

No doubt the increased tax revenue that the Ili accord brought to Xinjiang's coffers was a welcome boost for Yang's administration. Yet at no point was the governor prepared to sacrifice political sovereignty for economic gain. The clearest indication of this resolve became painfully apparent in the once hopping border town of Tacheng, reduced to a ghost town since the deprivations of General Bakich. With all legitimate trade now diverted south to Ili, unemployment soared and once thriving markets were evacuated. The situation got so bad that the poor and destitute soon began to starve to death. "The local magistrate," reported the Soviet trade representative in 1923, "has ordered free coffins to be built as an act of support."⁵⁰ We might say that this was the terrible toll exacted on the people of Tacheng by a Han ruling class intent on preserving a Chinese colony abandoned by its central government. We need not approve of Yang's asphyxiation of the provincial economy to understand why he thought such a drastic step necessary in the first place. The governor knew that the Soviets had already begun the systematic training of Chinese citizens for infiltration missions into Xinjiang, and he knew that merchants with Soviet citizenship often acted like a Trojan horse for the extension of foreign influence into his province.⁵¹ Yang's first decade of rule had been one long exercise in futility at trying to rein in acts of flagrant exploitation by Russian merchants and their powerful consuls. By confining all Soviet commercial activity to Ili and forbidding the reopening of the old Russian consulates, Yang was attempting to keep his one foreign competitor on a tight leash, no matter the cost.

⁵⁰ Barmin, *SSSR i Sin'tszian, 1918-1941*, 33.

⁵¹ On the training of Chinese citizens for Soviet propaganda missions, see Zhao Guoliang's reports from Semipalatinsk in *Zhongguo di er lishi dang'an guan, Zhonghua minguo shi dang'an ziliao huibian*, vol. 3, 725; and Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: yiban jiaoshe* [1920], 322.

Yet simply keeping a leash on Soviet activities in Xinjiang was not enough. The governor also wanted to know exactly what his ex-pat citizens were up to in the realms of former Russian Turkestan, so that he could head off unwanted agitation before they returned home. The fact that so many of his subjects migrated across the border had long kept Yang up at night, even before the arrival of affirmative action and socialist ideologies. Back in 1914, the Turkic king at Hami had once requested permission to make his semi-annual pilgrimage to Beijing via the Russian Siberian railroad, a gesture that would have saved both time and money. Yang, however, insisted that he stick to the traditional camel paths through inner China. “If the king enters Beijing via Russia and traverses thousands of miles in a foreign land, he will see with his own eyes the material prosperity and superior transportation of the outside world. ... It will then be very difficult for us to prevent him from becoming disaffected at heart.”⁵² Though Yang could impose isolation on Xinjiang’s non-Han nobles, he could not do the same for those thousands of undocumented poor migrants who left in search of work in the Soviet Union, often to return with “disaffected” hearts. In order to monitor them, Yang needed consulates. The Soviets, however, were not exactly keen on granting Governor Yang a base of operations right in their own backyard. To them, reopening the old Russian consulates under Soviet stewardship in Xinjiang seemed a natural matter of course. But reciprocal Chinese consulates in Soviet Central Asia? “The five consulates that the old Russian government maintained in Xinjiang,” the Soviets observed in 1924, “are not to

⁵² Yang, *Buguozhai wendu*, vol. 1, 46.

be compared with the sudden establishment of [Chinese] consulates in Soviet territory, in a region that has never before hosted such consulates.”⁵³

Still, Yang insisted. The Soviets would not be given the keys to the old Russian consulates until the establishment of five sister Chinese consulates across the border were also permitted. If not for the fact that Yang had already shown his willingness to starve his people to death whenever questions of Chinese sovereignty were at stake, the Soviets might be excused for thinking that the governor was merely constructing an elaborate ruse. In October 1924, the Soviets relented, leading to the distinctly odd phenomenon of a Chinese province running its own consulates entirely independent of the Chinese central government. Yang Zengxin touted his diplomatic victory as “an opportunity to look after our expatriate merchants and obtain compensation for their financial losses” during the long years of the Russian civil war.⁵⁴ No doubt there is some truth to this statement: happy ex-pat merchants laboring under the protective womb of their provincial government were far less likely to prove receptive to radical propaganda. Yet the opportunity to document and monitor a dangerously bloated, floating population of non-Han laborers was the primary reason Yang pushed so hard to wrench this concession out of the Soviets. “If I let Xinjiang’s Turbans cross the Soviet border with impunity and without any restrictions whatsoever, the ten thousand seasonal expatriate laborers of today will become the ten thousand agitating returnees of tomorrow.”⁵⁵

⁵³ Yang, *Buguozhai wendu sanbian*, vol. 5, 22.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 26. The five Chinese consuls were in Semipalatinsk, Almaty, Tashkent, Andijan, and Zaisan. From 1925 to 1931, the consul-general was stationed at the Semipalatinsk office. Thereafter the consul-general was relocated to Tashkent.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 33.

The Soviets were not pleased with these developments. After all, the destitute, floating population of Xinjiang expatriate Turkic laborers that Yang had hoped to control was exactly the same pool of defenseless malcontents that the Soviets hoped to court for clandestine missions back into Xinjiang. Over the next several decades, Soviet leaders would repeatedly return to this same pool of candidates for sensitive, cross-border undercover assignments. It should not come as a surprise, then, that the Soviets immediately hatched a plan to reduce the size of the Chinese expatriate community before Xinjiang's consulates could open their doors. In July 1925, Xinjiang's trade representative in Semipalatinsk informed Governor Yang that the Soviets had announced their intention to force any Chinese expatriate who did not obtain a consulate-issued passport within three months to become a Soviet citizen. At that time, the only consular posting even remotely prepared to issue such paperwork was the office of the former Semipalatinsk trade representative, which also happened to claim jurisdiction over the smallest number of Chinese expatriates. Yang clearly saw what the Soviets were up to. "Our expatriate workers are mostly composed of Kazaks and Turbans, who share ethnic and religious ties with the people living all along the Soviet border," Yang observed. "If the Soviets succeed in laying claim to our unregistered expatriates, they will be able to expand their network of socialist infiltration and avoid all claims for financial restitution by our aggrieved merchants."⁵⁶

By firing up the printing presses, eliminating the six *yuan* application fee, and threatening to treat Xinjiang's undocumented White Russian population in a similar fashion, Yang's five consulates appear to have averted the wholesale elimination of their

⁵⁶ Ibid., vol. 6, 52–53.

future constituencies.⁵⁷ Still, the Soviets were optimistic regarding their prospects for Chinese expatriate recruitment. They laughed at the governor's demands that socialist propaganda not be directed at Xinjiang's residents abroad. "We are a socialist country, and our newspapers disseminate socialism as a matter of course," came the reply. "It seems as if you are asking us to forbid your expatriates from reading our newspapers."⁵⁸ Chinese consular oversight notwithstanding, opportunities to lure Xinjiang's expatriate Turkic subjects into the Soviet embrace were quite literally around every corner. Soviet affirmative action policies had produced educational and political institutions that catered specifically to Central Asian Turkic youth. The Soviets hardly needed to make a special effort to go out and recruit Xinjiang's non-Han expatriates; piqued by equal parts curiosity and disaffection, these disgruntled youth came to the Soviets of their own accord.

And even if they did not, the Soviets could now rely upon the Outer Mongolians to help them stir up trouble. In 1924, the People's Republic of Mongolia was formally established under Soviet auspices, conferring a degree of diplomatic legitimacy on what had become, ever since the eradication of Chinese authority in 1921, a satellite puppet state of the Soviet Union. It is no coincidence that the reopening of the old Russian consulates in Xinjiang in 1924 dovetailed with the renewal of armed aggression along the Mongolian-Xinjiang border. "They call them 'consulates,'" observed Aksu *daoyin* Zhu Ruichi in 1926, "but in reality they are bases from which a monopoly on all commercial transactions is forcibly imposed."⁵⁹ For the first time ever, Yang had managed to install

⁵⁷ Ibid., 71–74.

⁵⁸ Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiq dang'an guan, *Xinjiang yu E Su shangye maoyi*, 151.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 231.

his own agents of diplomatic oversight within the borders of the former Russian empire. Unfortunately for the governor, this meant that the Russians could now do the same.

And before long, they were up to their old tricks again.

Cracks in the Shell

“In all of China, Xinjiang is the most desolate and remote province,” wrote Governor Yang in 1925. “And in all of Xinjiang,” he added, “Altay is the most desolate and remote region.” It was here that the Soviets decided to sponsor an Outer Mongol attempt to take a bite out of Yang’s jurisdiction. The *modus operandi* was familiar to anyone acquainted with Soviet affirmative action policies. In 1924, reports streamed into Dihua that the Outer Mongolians were propagating the doctrine of pan-Mongolism to nomads living along the Chinese side of the Altay border. Pan-Mongolism was an appeal to Mongols living outside the borders of the People’s Republic of Mongolia to take up arms and unite their lands with that of the Mongol “motherland.” The bogeyman conjured up by such propaganda was, as usual, the Han ruling class. “They are telling all Mongols under our jurisdiction to shed the shackles of abusive government and endless toil, and join the blissful path of development.” Before long the Mongols expanded their territorial claims beyond the Altay region, declaring, on the basis of historical demographics, that Ili, Tacheng, and even Dihua should also “return” to the Mongol embrace. “Ever since the Outer Mongolians began to receive Soviet financial and military backing,” Yang lamented, “their ambition knows no bounds.”⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Yang, *Buguozhai wendu sanbian*, vol. 4, 2, 18, 15.

Before long, the Mongols initiated raids on the steppes of Uriankhai, a nebulously defined border region, while the Soviets helped them discreetly move international markers that local Chinese officials had pounded into the ground. It was not the Mongol raids themselves that worried Xinjiang's governor, but rather the puppetmaster behind them. "If we could just get rid of their Soviet sponsors, the strength of the Mongols alone would not be cause for concern." As it was, however, "if we declare war on Outer Mongolia, we are in effect declaring war on the entire Soviet Union." Such a development was unthinkable. As before, all the governor could do was try and convince the Mongol and Kazak nomads living along the border that continued Chinese rule was in their best interests. "We can no longer sanction the treatment of our Altay nomads as so much fish and meat," Yang wrote to his Altay officials. "Otherwise, their hearts will open up to foreign intervention, and our borders will never know a day of peace." Aware that the border tribes were professing loyalty to whomsoever offered them the most attractive economic stimulus package, Yang decreed that tax burdens on Xinjiang's Kazaks be reduced. Then, in a classic demonstration of the weapons of the weak, Yang threatened to make an international incident of the affair if the Soviet consul did not restrain its Mongol agents. "According to our informants, we have discovered, much to our chagrin, that the Soviet consul and military officers at Khovd were directly responsible for instigating and directing these incidents," Yang's negotiator wrote. "This is a pity. ... If we were to publish our evidence in the press, the international reputation of the Soviet Union would be difficult to sustain."⁶¹ The border raids soon stopped.

⁶¹ Ibid., vol. 3, 27, 31–32, 11.

With regard to Outer Mongolia, unless Yang was prepared to wage open war with the Red Army, he could resort only to indirect countermeasures to fend off Soviet machinations. With the newly reopened Soviet consulates in Xinjiang, however, Yang was determined to prevent the reemergence of nosy Russian officials dabbling in the internal affairs of Xinjiang. It was a battle he was destined to lose. In September 1925, a Soviet trade company utilizing Chinese Kazak buyers began to purchase sheep and cattle from Altay nomads. Because Altay was not Ili, naturally it was excluded from the short list of acceptable locales where Soviet-Xinjiang trade transactions could legally take place. The governor suspected consular meddling. “It seems as though this case is not entirely bereft of political motives and the dissemination of propaganda,” he wrote to his Altay *daoyin*. “Keep your eyes open.” That same month, three Chinese Turkic merchants, all of whom had incurred substantial debt with a Soviet trade outfit in Zaisan, just northwest of Altay, fled their Russian debtors by hopping the border. Yang’s officials wanted to know how to proceed. “During the days of the old Russian consuls, cases like this were always attended to by the local Russian consul,” came the telegram. “But since we have signed a new trade pact with the Soviet Union, one that is fundamentally different than before, it seems that the question of consular jurisdiction is now irrelevant.”⁶²

At least, that is how Governor Yang wished to treat the Soviet consulates—as irrelevant to Xinjiang’s internal affairs. Much to his distress, however, they had already begun to resume their traditional role as (in the words of Zhu Ruichi) “bases from which a monopoly on all commercial transactions is forcibly imposed.” The Zaisan trade outfit,

⁶² Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqu dang’an guan, *Xinjiang yu E Su shangye maoyi*, 208, 212–13.

Yang wrote, “in open defiance of our stipulations, has cooperated with an official Soviet government organization and gone into business with Chinese citizens in order to purchase husbandry goods,” Yang replied. “They have spurned our national sovereign rights and transgressed international law.” Still, Yang maintained a prudent distance from the Soviet consulate in Altay. “This case is entirely an internal legal affair. There is no need to consult with the Soviet consul and revisit the detestable precedents of the past.”⁶³ The problem with Yang’s assessment, however, was that many of his own subjects and officials actually *wanted* to return to the “detestable precedents” of the past. How could this be? As touched upon previously, the old precedents were mostly injurious to Chinese sovereignty in Xinjiang. They were not necessarily injurious for the ninety-five percent of the Turkic and Mongol population who simply wanted to make a profit, and to whom it made little difference whether Russian or Chinese overlords mediated the transaction. The Chinese Kazaks and Turkic merchants involved in these two cases were not shackled to a chain gang and forced to work in Soviet employ. The desire to trade was mutual.

In order to preserve Chinese sovereignty in an abandoned Han colony, however, it had become clear by the early 1920s that the governor would have to shut his province down, even going so far as to turn market towns into ghost towns and starve his people to death. This was too high a price to pay for those who cared little about the prospects of Han rule in Xinjiang. It was also too high a price to pay for those Han officials whose desire to make a quick buck on the side overpowered their concern for lofty principles of Chinese sovereignty. Thus, with the return of Russian consuls in 1924 and the rediscovery of a merchant and bureaucratic community starving for trade opportunities,

⁶³ Ibid., 213–14.

Yang had to scramble to repair the emerging tears in his cocoon. Not surprisingly, the ghost town of Tacheng was one of the first dams to burst; free coffins, it seemed, were simply no way to make a living. In May 1925, the governor discovered that the *daoyin* of Tacheng had issued passes for Russian merchants to cross the border. The Russians had goods to trade, they knew that desperate customers waited for them in Tacheng, and they knew that the local *daoyin* would be more than happy to bring the two sides together, provided his palms were properly greased. “Much to my surprise,” Yang raged none too quietly, “Zhao *daoyin* collected tax customs from this man and issued him a trade pass without even performing a background check. ... It goes without saying that such an unauthorized opening of the border posts for commercial transactions constitutes a grievous assault on our sovereign rights.”⁶⁴

Yang’s verbal thrashing of his Tacheng *daoyin* did not end there, however. Several weeks later the same Russian merchant showed up again in Tacheng and Dihua, this time with even more goods. Before long he had managed to make three trips in all, the last time with a caravan of camels laden to the hump with goods. “Much to my chagrin, Zhao *daoyin* has acted recklessly and without giving a single thought to the gravity of his actions. ... The former deceased Zhang *daoyin* never did anything like this. Now my hands are tied with regard to internal and foreign diplomacy.” Though the governor decided to despatch investigators from Dihua to gather further evidence, he soon learned that violations in Tacheng were merely the tip of the iceberg. Unauthorized Russian merchants were popping up everywhere, to be rivaled only by Chinese “traitor merchants” hot on their heels. Business was brisk. In the southwest, despite Yang’s

⁶⁴ Ibid., 190.

injunction that the border at Tashkurgan be closed even to lowly rickshaw pullers (who might be secretly transporting goods for their merchant handlers), Russian and Chinese merchants quickly flooded the mountain passes. Seeing the writing on the wall, Yang decided to test drive a policy that would have been familiar to contemporary critics of prohibition in the United States. “When we close the passes they simply find another way in,” the governor conceded. “In light of this, the best approach would be to open a temporary route through Irkeshtam Pass, as a sort of special privilege to be managed directly by the government. All other passes are to be locked down without exception.”⁶⁵ If he could not stop unauthorized trade, at least he could tax a handful of scrupulously managed “exception” markets.

From 1924 to 1928, Governor Yang was consistently frustrated in his efforts to prevent the emergence of an international trade regime detrimental to the prospects of Han rule in Xinjiang. With each new case, the Soviet consuls found yet another pretext to lobby for the interests of their citizens, forcing Xinjiang’s governor to revisit an old and hated precedent: “temporarily refrain from getting involved.” The documents of the mid- and late 1920s are rife with this phrase. It must have felt like *déjà vu* to Yang Zengxin, who had now come full circle from the days when such defeatist concessions had served to alienate him from Xinjiang’s rogue localists. By 1924, Yang had beaten the last of these rogues, only to find himself newly bedeviled by foreign assaults on his cocoon. Furthermore, the dramatic downfall of Ma Fuxing in Kashgar did not signal the end of warlord threats from inner China. The Christian warlord Feng Yuxiang never gave up on his dream of exploiting the resources of Xinjiang for a campaign against his rivals.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 190, 227–28.

Though there were no longer any more rogue localists to work with, Feng did not need them anymore. In 1924, as noted earlier, he had managed to install his own mole, Zhang Chunxi, within Yang's administration. That investment was about to pay off.

The white-bearded governor had preserved Han rule in a brittle Chinese colony for nearly two decades. But now the Soviets had breached the Xinjiang cocoon, and the warlords of inner China were back on his doorstep. Beset on all sides by hostile powers, the governor began to talk openly of "retiring to my garden."

It was not to be. The governor's days were numbered.

The Governor and the Sage

"You and I are lonely souls, cast adrift on the sands of the Gobi," Yang wrote to his favorite colleague, in 1924. "When the time comes to return home, people like us should go back together."⁶⁶ The recipient of this letter was Fan Yaonan, who had just requested permission to resign his government posts and return to inner China, where his long estranged wife would rejoin him from Japan. In the end, Fan did return to inner China in the company of his governor, though not in a manner either man expected. In 1928, coffins containing corpses for both men were delivered to their families in Beijing, each man having died on the exact same day: July 7, 1928. In the years leading up to that fateful day, it is no exaggeration to say that Yang Zengxin and Fan Yaonan quite literally ran Xinjiang province.

Fan arrived in Xinjiang in late 1917, the result of a deliberate act of goodwill on the part of the governor. Hoping to make a token show of support for President Yuan

⁶⁶ Luo Shaowen, "Fan Yaonan zhuanlüe" [A brief biography of Fan Yaonan], *Hubei wenshi* 1 (2007): 171.

Shikai's then embattled successor, Li Yuanhong, Yang had requested that an official from Beijing be sent to take up the vacant post of Aksu *daoyin*. Of course, this was back in the days before Governor Yang had turned his back on Beijing, and when he still held out hope that Yuan's successor might wield the same unifying touch that the emperor himself once had. In any case, President Li sent Fan Yaonan, a talented advisor in the presidential office, who also held a law degree from Waseda University in Japan. By the time the paperwork had been processed and Fan packed his bags to make the months-long journey to Dihua, the post of Aksu *daoyin* had already been filled. Despite the fact that Yang's relationship with Beijing was already beginning to head south by this point, Yang had no intention of sending Fan back the way he came. Talented Han were an endangered species in Xinjiang, and Yang could count on one hand the number of his officials who had been trained in Japan. So he put Fan to work as *daoyin* of Dihua. His performance was so exemplary that Yang began to entrust him with additional duties, mostly those stemming from temporary vacancies elsewhere in the provincial administration. By 1922, the governor was so desperate for capable officials that he decided to triple Fan's duties, installing him in the critically important posts of Commissioner for Foreign Affairs as well as Commissioner of Military Affairs.⁶⁷

By the early 1920s, Fan Yaonan had become the undisputed right-hand man of the governor, and admiring colleagues began to refer to him as "the Sage" (*shengren*). His duties included responsibility for formulating military strategy toward inner Chinese warlords, handling all negotiations with the Russians, and administration of the region surrounding the provincial capital, Dihua. To top it all off, soon after the closure of White

⁶⁷ Luo, "Fan Yaonan zhuanlüe," 160–63; Fan, *Xinjiang "sanqi" zhengbian*, 31–33.

Russian consulates in Xinjiang in 1920, Fan also assumed the duties of the Russian consul-general in Dihua, ably handling the affairs of the sizeable and suddenly stateless Russian community. Other than the governorship itself, there were no more important duties than these. Fan's monopoly of Xinjiang's top posts constituted a glass ceiling for some ambitious officials, who, despairing of their chances for upward mobility, began to cast aspersions on the Sage. Governor Yang, for whom Fan Yaonan was a godsend, would have absolutely none of it. On the contrary, he petitioned Beijing to confer the coveted "stellar exploits of the second order" medal on Fan, who became only one of four officials during Governor Yang's reign to receive such an honor.⁶⁸

Fan, however, continued to ache for the day when he could reunite with his family in Beijing, a longing which prompted his letter of resignation in 1924. Because Yang could no longer fathom the capable management of the province without his right-hand man, Fan resigned himself to long-term residence in Dihua. He continued to involve himself in the education of his children, demanding that they send their homework nearly two thousand miles to Dihua for his comments. Despite his triple crown monopoly of top government posts in Xinjiang, Fan and his family lived in abject poverty. Unfortunately for his family, it seemed, Fan was well known as an upright official. His refusal to accept the usual bribes and kickbacks that his wealthy colleagues enjoyed prompted Yang to send money to Fan's children in Beijing. The governor accomplished this act of stealth through his own daughter, who was close friends with the commissioner's family in the national capital. When Fan discovered that the governor had offered to buy them a respectable house in Beijing, however, he forbid his family to accept. Then, in 1927,

⁶⁸ Luo, "Fan Yaonan zhuanlüe," 170; and Fan, *Xinjiang "sanqi" zhengbian*, 36.

Governor Yang sent his last remaining family members to settle down in Beijing. This was the signal he had been waiting for. Fan knew that the day was fast approaching when his governor would make good on his promise to take him back to inner China.⁶⁹

There were, however, several matters of business to care of first. In late 1927, Yang needed to delegate responsibility for the handling of Sven Hedin's Sino-Swedish archaeological expedition, due to arrive early the following year. After intercepting missives discussing the acquisition of firearms, the governor decided that this assignment was too important and sensitive to leave in the hands of his Minister of Provincial Affairs, Yang's original appointee. So he put Fan on the case. This was to be the commissioner's last major task before returning home to Beijing.

On February 27, 1928, Xu Xusheng, the team leader of the Chinese half of the Sino-Swedish expedition, arrived in Dihua. The next day he had an audience with Fan Yaonan.

Clouds Gather

“Fan was exceptionally polite to us, and explained that the reason for the previous misunderstanding was due to the contents of a letter we had sent. But that had all been cleared up now, and he indicated that we were very welcome here.”⁷⁰ The “misunderstanding” in question stemmed from the pen of a Swedish member of the expedition, who had written to one of his colleagues about the proper type of hunting ammunition the expedition would need. Yang's surveillance network immediately

⁶⁹ Luo, “Fan Yaonan zhuanlüe,” 174–176; Fan, *Xinjiang “sanqi” zhengbian*, 41–42.

⁷⁰ Xu, *Xu Xusheng xiyou riji*, 189.

sounded the alarm, and the question of how to deal with a “scientific research” expedition composed of armed foreigners and Chinese from Beijing—the latter to be feared more than the foreigners, in Yang’s estimation—suddenly shot to the top of the governor’s to-do list. Extra troops were sent to meet the group’s arrival in Hami, and it took a great many lavish banquets and late-night toasts to convince Yang’s officials that this was indeed nothing more than an archaeological expedition bereft of political motives. What ulterior designs might they have had? “At first, Governor Yang thought that we had been sent by Feng Yuxiang to stir up trouble in Xinjiang.”⁷¹

When we last parted ways with General Feng in 1923, he had been frustrated in his attempt to gerrymander political boundaries as a backdoor tunnel into Xinjiang. He was also somehow involved in the run-up to Ma Fuxing’s downfall in 1924, who had been in intimate contact with then president Cao Kun, Feng’s nominal ally, as well as Zhang Chunxi, Feng’s mole in Xinjiang. In early 1925, Feng set up his headquarters at Kalgan, approximately 125 miles northwest of Beijing, and contended with Manchurian warlord Zhang Zuolin for control of the capital. By mid-1925, Feng’s supporters had taken over the northwestern provinces of Suiyuan and Gansu, the latter no more than a stone’s throw from Xinjiang’s Orangutan Pass. Governor Yang expected an invasion at any moment, and Gansu’s governor openly declared his intent to attack Xinjiang. Yang decided it would be prudent to begin making regular cash payments to the governor of Gansu, Feng’s ally, and he also exchanged rare bear pelts with Feng’s representatives in Beijing.⁷² After Zhang Zuolin roundly defeated Feng and his allies in late 1925, Feng

⁷¹ Ibid., 6.

⁷² Luo, “Yang Zengxin, Feng Yuxiang zhi jian,” 75–76.

decided to travel abroad and make connections with diplomatic bigwigs in the Soviet Union. His return to Shaanxi province in mid-1926 coincided once more with sleepless nights for the old governor in Dihua, who had begun to think seriously about closing the curtain on his long political career.

Although Xu Xusheng and his archaeological team had not been sent to Xinjiang by Feng Yuxiang in order to “stir up trouble,” the final verdict awaited an audience with the governor himself. “When we talked for the first time,” Xu wrote in his diary entry for March 1, 1928, “it seemed as though he still harbored some suspicion as to whether we were agitators or not. Yet after he listened to us talk about mundane matters for a while, he seemed to relax and we all chatted quite openly.”⁷³ Before long, Xu became a regular attendant on the governor. Yang regaled him on five-hour walks through flower gardens and luncheons that lasted all afternoon. They talked about the weather (1928 witnessed the most rainfall of Yang’s tenure, Xu learned) as well as the latest current events, news of which was often received about a month after they had occurred in inner China. Xu learned that the governor of Gansu—Feng Yuxiang’s ally—often detained telegrams sent eastwards from Dihua. Then there was an odd incident involving shady agents sent from Gansu, one which Yang did not comment on, but which Xu learned the details of from his handlers. On March 3, Xu noticed that the city gates had been closed all morning. Rumors swirled that there had been a jail break, but the real story emerged the following day. “Diplomatic envoys sent from Gansu had been quartered in the governor’s library, sumptuously attended to but in effect under house arrest. They were unwilling to stay

⁷³ Xu, *Xu Xusheng xiyou riji*, 190.

there, so they set fire to the library and attempted to flee the city. One man jumped the city gates and fled about thirty miles due west. But now they have both been captured.”⁷⁴

The governor was clearly ill at ease after the March 3 arson and escape attempt by Gansu agents, and it is evident from Xu’s diary that strange happenings were afoot. Yang seemed eager to pick Xu’s brain, though Xu was never quite sure for what. On March 13, Yang went out of his way to invite Xu to a meeting. “Before I arrived I was certain that he had some important matter he wanted to discuss with me. But after I showed up, he just rambled on and on about irrelevant pleasantries.” Anyone who knew the governor knew that it was not like him to indulge in social frivolities, particularly in the middle of a busy workday. Five days later, “Governor Yang sent someone to tell us that he would visit us at eleven o’clock. Sure enough, he showed up right at eleven, having trudged through streets of mud and muck. We couldn’t believe he would do such a thing all on his own. Then he told us that yesterday he walked for two hours on foot toward the western gate.” Why was the aging governor of Xinjiang scrambling around town on foot, like Sherlock Holmes hot on the trail of a suspect? Xu’s subsequent conversations with Fan Yaonan may provide a clue. On March 28, Commissioner Fan confided in Xu. “Though Xinjiang looks peaceful from the outside, there are many hidden dangers all around. I do not know what will come of all this, but I wish the authorities would take closer notice and not underestimate such issues.” On another occasion, Fan was more specific. “The governor doesn’t realize how many suspicious people from other provinces are here. Something bad is bound to happen.”⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Ibid., 190–91.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 193–94, 197, 271.

By May 1928, the atmosphere was rife with rumors of the progress of the Northern Expedition in inner China. The Northern Expedition was a military campaign waged from Chiang Kai-shek's base in southern China, with the ultimate goal of knocking down central China's warlords one by one, until Beijing itself was brought to its knees. The enterprise had Soviet backing, and temporarily united both the Chinese Communist and Nationalist parties in one clear goal: the end of the warlord era and the beginning of Leninist party politics in service to a nationalizing state. When Feng Yuxiang returned from the Soviet Union in late 1926, he decided to row his boat with the current and soon became a fair-weather ally of Chiang's Northern Expedition. On March 17, 1928, Yang told Xu Xusheng that "if the southern armies were to take Beijing today, he would fly the white sun and blue sky flag [i.e., the Nationalist Party flag] tomorrow." In May, Zhang Chunxi, Feng's man in Xinjiang, approached Xu to inform him that the strategic city of Jinan "had already fallen to Feng," suggesting continued communication between the two men. In June 1928, General Feng declared that the "Xinjiang problem" must be solved soon, and Yang Zengxin promptly sent three separate cables of support for Chiang Kai-shek's new government at Nanjing. By all accounts, Xinjiang's governor was pleased at the progress of Chiang's southern armies, and was relieved that his retirement looked set to coincide with the resurgence of a strong central government. On July 6, soon after the successful completion of the Northern Expedition and only one day before he was to meet his maker, the governor told Xu that "he was very excited about national unification. As for his own exit [from Xinjiang], he said it would not be a problem." That same day Yang discoursed on rumors that Manchurian warlord Zhang

Zuolin had been assassinated, observing that “this might simplify the problem of [incorporating the] northeastern regions.”⁷⁶

Fan Yaonan was less optimistic over the prospects for a smooth transition. “The governor is changing the soup but not the medicine,” he told Xu less than forty-eight hours before his death. “I am afraid this will not be enough to ward off the hidden dangers here.”⁷⁷

A Day Like Any Other

On the morning of July 7, 1928, Governor Yang rose from bed at four o'clock in the morning, as was his usual routine. He ate his standard fare of plain tofu and cabbage for breakfast, meditated for an hour, perused a text on Daoism, and made his way to the governor's office to tend to the day's affairs of state.⁷⁸ It was going to be a gorgeous summer day, complete with soaring July temperatures. On Yang's desk was the usual pile of reports and telegrams requiring his attention. At some point during the morning he decided to re-examine a directive that he had written up five days prior, on July 2. The matter concerned a caravan of Chinese Turkic merchants who, owing to bad weather and a host of other difficulties, had requested permission to make a detour from the usual border crossing at Nilka Pass, and instead enter the Soviet Union through another route. For Yang, there could be no debate on this issue. “The appointed border crossing for trade transactions with the Soviet Union is at Nilka Pass,” Yang wrote, still invoking the seldom observed stipulations of the 1920 Provisional Ili Trade Accord. “We cannot make

⁷⁶ Ibid., 194, 209, 229.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 229.

⁷⁸ I have adapted the details of Yang's daily routine from Guang Lu, *Guang Lu huiyilu* [The memoirs of Guang Lu] (Taipei, 1964), 52–53.

an exception to this long-standing precedent simply for the sake of a few merchants.” Yang feared that granting an exception to his own merchants would be seized upon by the Soviet consuls as a pretext from which they could demand the expansion of the restricted trade zone in Ili to other parts of Xinjiang. The governor had already sent this reply to his officials in Ili, but he had not yet forwarded his decision to Fan Yaonan, his Commissioner of Foreign Affairs—a bureaucratic oversight he was about to correct. “Print and distribute this directive, and make sure your ministry follows up on this matter,” Yang wrote. “This is an order.”⁷⁹

It was the last order the governor would ever issue.

After Yang completed the mundane paperwork of the morning, he retired to take his daily nap. That afternoon promised to offer a respite from the morning’s bureaucratic drudgery, for today was the day that graduation ceremonies were to take place at the Xinjiang Academy of Russian Law and Politics. All major officials would be in attendance, including Zhang Chunxi, who, ever since coming to Xinjiang from Feng Yuxiang’s camp in 1924, had risen meteorically to become head of the academy where today’s ceremonies were to take place. After his nap, the governor saw to it that sufficient copies of his complete works, *Records from the Studio of Rectification*, had been prepared as gifts for that year’s graduating class, along with his favorite Daoist treatises.

Then he made his way several blocks to the academy. Pomp and circumstance proceeded without a hitch, and everyone took their seats. Lunch was about to be served.

It was two o’clock in the afternoon.

⁷⁹ Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqu dang’an guan, *Xinjiang yu E Su shangye maoyi*, 236.

“Suddenly we heard the sound of multiple gunshots. Amid the ensuing chaos, someone shouted out, ‘The governor has been shot!’”⁸⁰ Up until this moment, most of the guests in attendance had thought that the gunshots were actually firecrackers, set off to mark the festivities. But soon the awful truth emerged. Several waiters garbed in formal attire had approached the governor’s table with spirits in hand. The governor duly rose for the expected toast. Instead of opening their bottles, however, each waiter pulled out a revolver and fired repeatedly into Yang’s chest. The governor instantly doubled over, gargled the words, “What the—?!” (*ganma*), and collapsed onto the banquet table.

Yang Zengxin was dead. He was sixty-four years old.

Xu Xusheng was enjoying his afternoon nap when an acquaintance suddenly burst into his room. “‘There’s been an assassination!’ he said. ‘Who was assassinated?’ I asked. ‘The governor!’ he replied. When I asked him what happened, he said that right as he was fleeing the scene, he saw the governor leaning over a table and about to collapse, as if he had already been injured.” And as for Fan Yaonan? “[He said that] the commissioner was not injured, but had had a look of pure terror on his face.”⁸¹ After Fan gathered his composure, he leapt into his carriage and made a straight beeline for the governor’s quarters, twenty bodyguards hastily bringing up his rear. If he had the presence of mind to think on such matters, Commissioner Fan might have thought it odd

⁸⁰ Chai Hengsen, “Qi qi zhengbian qinjian pianduan” [The brief account of an eyewitness to the July 7 coup], in Xiao Qian, *Kunlun caiyu lu* [Distinguished selections from the Kunlun] (Beijing, 2005), 76–77.

⁸¹ Xu, *Xu Xusheng xiyou riji*, 229.

that all the shops and buildings he passed on the way were shuttered and closed, long before news of the assassination could have filtered out onto the streets. Once Fan entered the governor's office, two hundred troops suddenly appeared out of nowhere and laid siege to the building. "We heard a flurry of gunshots around the governor's office, and then all of a sudden there was silence." The silence set in at about five o'clock in the evening, roughly three hours following the assassination. Another two hours went by, and then a public notice appeared on streetposts all around town. It read:

Today rebels carried out an assassination of the governor and occupied the provincial headquarters. Fan Yaonan, the leader of the rebels, has already been executed and his followers suppressed.

Posted by order of Jin Shuren, Provisional Governor
of Xinjiang Province.⁸²

Xu Xusheng was in a state of shock. "This cannot be right," he wrote the next morning, after seeing one of the notices. "As far as I can tell, [Fan] seemed to have had a premonition that something like this was bound to occur sooner or later. But there is no way he was privy beforehand to yesterday's events."⁸³ For those who did not know Fan as Xu did, however, the second name on the notice was far more intriguing.

First, who in the world was Jin Shuren? And second, how did he, of all people, become Yang's successor?

A Harmless Gamble

"My lord is a master administrator, whose brilliance cannot fully be captured through his words," wrote Jin Shuren in 1921, in his dedication to Yang Zengxin's

⁸² Chai, "Qi qi zhengbian qinjian pianduan."

⁸³ Xu, *Xu Xusheng xiyou riji*, 230.

twenty-volume philosophical treatise, *Diary from the Studio of Rectification*. “Yet what he has entrusted to the woodblocks here are flawless principles. There are no wasteful words among them.”⁸⁴ The fact that Jin Shuren had been invited by Yang to author a dedicatory preface to the governor’s *magnum opus* in 1921 probably came as a shock to his contemporaries. At the time, Jin was a nobody. He had just been given the mediocre post of a county magistrate near Kashgar, but was soon fired by Yang for corruption. Yet Yang seems to have had an indelible soft spot for Jin, fourteen years his junior. They had struck up a teacher-disciple relationship during Yang’s two-decade tenure in Gansu, which continued when Yang facilitated Jin’s transfer to Xinjiang in 1914. Following the necessary acts of contrition in 1920, Jin soon found himself back in the administrative saddle, this time as magistrate of Kucha county. Then, in 1927, without ever having served as a *daoyin*, in one fell swoop Yang inexplicably promoted Jin to the prestigious position of Minister of Provincial Affairs, with an office in the capital.⁸⁵ He had the weakest resume of any official in Dihua, and his job security was entirely dependent upon his relationship with Yang. Only one year prior to Yang’s death, Jin was still little more than a lowly county magistrate with an inglorious record of accomplishments. If anyone had made a list in mid-1928 of possible successors to the governorship, there is little doubt that Jin Shuren would have been placed at the bottom.

So how did he end up with the most prestigious title in all of northwestern China? Despite abundant teahouse rumors to the contrary, there is no evidence that he plotted and organized the July 7 coup. Though Jin was an infamous devotee of the opium pipe,

⁸⁴ Yang Zengxin, *Buguozhai riji* [Diary from the Studio of Rectification] (Shanghuan, 1921).

⁸⁵ Fan, *Xinjiang “sanqi” zhengbian*, 51–52.

he was not a fool. Why would he assassinate the one man whose continued occupancy of the governorship was the sole guarantee of his office? No, Jin Shuren did not pine for Governor Yang's demise. But he did hope against hope that his teacher and patron would not leave Xinjiang so soon after Jin had just catapulted into the top ranks of provincial officialdom. Jin had no political connections in Dihua, and the loosely guarded secret of the governor's imminent retirement threatened to isolate Jin from Yang's inner circle. Once the governor was gone, Jin could only expect gradual downward professional mobility. Killing Yang Zengxin would not serve his purpose; what he wanted more than anything else was for the governor to remain in Xinjiang long enough for Jin to establish his own network of loyal supporters. But everyone knew the governor was leaving, and that was that. We can only surmise that, during the final months of Yang's reign, Jin Shuren must have been in a perpetual state of unease and anxiety regarding his future. It would have been right about this time that Jin Shuren caught wind of a plot on the governor's life.⁸⁶

We know that Feng Yuxiang's fingerprints are all over the July 7 coup, though we may never know the precise extent of his involvement. The assassination occurred at the Xinjiang Academy of Russian Law and Politics, which was the administrative domain of Zhang Chunxi—Feng Yuxiang's man. This was the only place where Zhang could have wielded complete control over the composition of his staff, installing, in the words of Fan Yaonan, "suspicious people from other provinces" as waiters, without word leaking out. Jin Shuren's link to Zhang Chunxi was one Mou Weitong, a former county magistrate in

⁸⁶ Guo Shengli, "Xinjiang 'qiqi zhengbian' zhenxiang kaoshu" [An inquiry into the real story behind the "triple seven coup" in Xinjiang], *Zhongguo bianjiang shidi yanjiu* 20, no. 1 (March 2010): 36–47.

Tacheng who now worked under Jin in his Ministry of Provincial Affairs. Mou Weitong was an old classmate of Zhang Chunxi, back from the day when they had both studied at the Academy of Russian Law and Politics in Beijing during the late 1910s. Perhaps Zhang intentionally sought out Mou in order to elicit Jin's support, knowing that he would soon be on the outs with a post-Yang administration. Or perhaps Mou managed to eavesdrop on a whispered conversation he was not supposed to have heard. Either way, Jin learned about the plot on Yang's life, and we know he learned about it through Mou Weitong, who soon found himself promoted to head consul in Tashkent following the consolidation of Jin's governorship.⁸⁷

There are several reasons to state with confidence that Jin knew about the plot ahead of time. First, he made the prudent move of withdrawing from the graduation ceremonies well before anyone else, on the pretext that he had pressing work to attend to. He later tried to cover up this decidedly suspicious act, by telling Chiang Kai-shek's government in Nanjing that Governor Yang was killed immediately upon his arrival at the academy.⁸⁸ Second, the men whom Jin called upon to lead two hundred troops in a siege against Fan Yaonan, who was shuttered up in the governor's building, all hailed from Jin's tiny inner circle of frustrated officials who had been unable to gain promotion under Governor Yang. They were soon to catapult to important positions of influence.⁸⁹ Finally, Jin saw to it that Zhang Chunxi was swiftly executed, before he could contradict Jin's version of events. The only reason he would have executed Zhang was if he had known about both the plot and its origins ahead of time. Otherwise, to everyone else,

⁸⁷ Fan, *Xinjiang "sanqi" zhengbian*, 74; and Guo, "Xinjiang 'qiqi zhengbian' zhenxiang kaoshu," 46.

⁸⁸ Fan, *Xinjiang "sanqi" zhengbian*, 74, 80–81.

⁸⁹ Guo, "Xinjiang 'qiqi zhengbian' zhenxiang kaoshu," 43–46.

Zhang was nothing more than the hard-working, widely respected head of the Russian academy, whose great misfortune in life had been to play unwitting host to the death of his august governor.

The picture that emerges, then, is as follows. Jin Shuren was a newcomer to the Dihua political scene, and knew that his astonishing (and patently undeserved) rise to the upper echelons of power was about to come to a swift halt. He gained wind of a possible attempt on the life of the governor, and was all ears. The teacher-student relationship between Yang and Jin notwithstanding, Jin first and foremost needed to consider his own future. Seen from the perspective of Jin's career prospects, Yang's departure meant the sudden loss of job security. Thus, strictly speaking, whether Yang left Xinjiang in a hailstorm of bullets or in a first-class berth on the Siberian railroad, it made little difference to Jin. A peaceful transition would leave precious little wiggle room for Jin to look after his own interests. An attempt on the governor's life, however, would open up a host of intriguing possibilities, especially if the chief instigators were political outsiders to Xinjiang, and especially if Jin's fingerprints were nowhere to be found on the plot. Jin probably doubted the prospects for a successful coup, but knew enough about the determination of those involved to take some simple and precautionary measures, ones that would maximize his chances of ending up in a favorable position. He left the graduation ceremony early, shut down the surrounding streets, and prepared two hundred troops in reserve. If the plotters got cold feet or if the rumors were false, Jin lost nothing, and his alibi for an early exit from the ceremonies was golden. If the assassination attempt failed, Jin could lead his men into the grounds of the academy and secure the scene, rescuing the governor and gaining instant political capital with Yang's inner circle.

If it succeeded, he could swiftly crush whomsoever emerged as the top contender for the governorship and then blame the crime on him.

As it turned out, Fan Yaonan was the man to emerge first from the academy, and he immediately rushed to secure the governor's building. This should not surprise anyone. Fan was the governor's right-hand man and the second most important official in Xinjiang. Indeed, it would be odd if someone in his shoes did not feel a sense of responsibility to secure the provincial offices in the midst of a coup attempt. Once he stepped through the gates of the governor's building, however, Fan was a dead man. He had no more than twenty bodyguards, far too few to stand up against Jin's two hundred soldiers. Jin's men stormed the building, riddled Fan's bodyguards with lead, and immediately executed Fan himself. The dilemma of whom to pin the crime on thus resolved itself, and for over seventy years Jin's version of the July 7 coup went virtually unquestioned. Because Fan was such an unlikely candidate to assassinate the governor, history buffs have had to scour far and wide in order to come up with a reason as to why he would kill Yang. Fan had once studied in Japan. Therefore, it was thought, he must have been a revolutionary at heart (since so many anti-Qing revolutionaries were once radicalized in Japan), and he could no longer stand to see an old Qing-era official such as Yang in power. What has served most to anchor Fan's guilt throughout the decades, however, were the supposed contents of a list issued by Governor Yang in June 1928. This list laid out the names and positions of officials in a newly reshuffled administration, which was to be reorganized under the nominal auspices of the Nationalist government in

Nanjing. Supposedly, Fan saw that his name was not on the list, and decided then and there to whack off the old governor out of spite.⁹⁰

We need not point out that a man like Fan Yaonan probably would have rejoiced at seeing his name excluded from such a list. That would mean he could finally, at long last, leave Xinjiang and return home, after three failed attempts to resign from his many responsibilities and reunite with his family. Such fanciful deductions need delay us no longer, however, since recent scholarship has shown that Fan's name was in fact on Yang's list, thereby eliminating the one motive that has consistently damned him. It is now time for historians to recognize that on July 7, 1928, both Yang Zengxin and Fan Yaonan died tragic deaths. At the time, it was common—though dangerous—knowledge that Fan had been framed. “Well-informed Chinese at Dihua,” wrote archaeologist Sven Hedin in 1934, a year after Jin himself had been dislodged in another coup, “were fully aware that the foreign commissary Fan Yaonan, who had been accused of the murder of Marshal Yang in 1928, was innocent, and that the real perpetrator of the crime was Jin Shuren.”⁹¹ In actuality, we now know that Jin Shuren was merely an opportunistic beneficiary of Yang's demise, a man who shrewdly managed to leverage the possible loss of his patron into a harmless gamble—and soon found himself clutching the jackpot. Jin was not directly responsible for Yang's death, though his hands are most definitely soaked in the innocent blood of Commissioner Fan. Yang's actual assassins were three or four nameless “waiters” whose historical tracks have long petered out. That leaves Zhang

⁹⁰ For a comprehensive review of the historiography on the July 7 coup, see Luo, “Yang Zengxin, Feng Yuxiang zhi jian”; Fan, *Xinjiang “sanqi” zhengbian*; and Guo, “Xinjiang ‘qiqi zhengbian’ zhenxiang kaoshu.”

⁹¹ Sven Hedin, *The Trail of War: On the Track of ‘Big Horse’ in Central Asia* (1936; repr. ed., New York, 2009), 14.

Chunxi, who secured both the means and the venue for his nameless assassins to fire into the governor's chest. Zhang's guilt inevitably leads us to wonder about Feng Yuxiang, who by 1928 had already thrown in his lot with Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Party. In July 1928, did the Christian general still have anything to gain by Yang's sudden downfall? Or was Zhang Chunxi acting largely on his own initiative, adhering to outdated coup conspiracies from a bygone era?

As we mentioned earlier, during June 1928 Governor Yang sent three separate telegrams of support to Chiang Kai-shek's new Nationalist government in Nanjing. "The Nationalist revolution has now succeeded," Yang wrote. "The good fortune of the rest of the country is also the good fortune of Xinjiang." Then, on July 5, two important events occurred. First, the Nanjing government finally replied to Yang's telegrams, expressing admiration for the peaceful preservation of Xinjiang and optimism that the coming transition to Nationalist stewardship would proceed smoothly. Second, the Shanghai *Central Daily* reported that Liu Wenlong, Yang's intimate colleague and chosen delegate to schmooze with Nationalist officials in Nanjing, had already arrived, and was about to make a formal presentation regarding the future of Xinjiang.⁹² Governor Yang, it seemed, intent on retirement, was fast moving into the Nationalist camp. This was bad news for Feng Yuxiang, who did not reap nearly as many spoils as he had hoped from his performance during the Northern Expedition. Chiang Kai-shek still refused to include Xinjiang within the jurisdiction of Feng's Northwest Frontier Commissioner post. Though he tried to placate Feng by proposing to split Xinjiang into two or three smaller provinces, and giving him control over one of those, still Feng longed for more. If he let

⁹² Zhang, *Xinjiang fengbao*, vol. 5, 2614.

events take their natural course much longer, it was clear that the transition from Governor Yang's rule to some form of Chiang-mediated, Yang-approved power-sharing government in Xinjiang would soon be a done deal. Feng needed to act before the imminent completion of a Yang-Chiang accord.⁹³

Developments in the wake of the July 7 coup support this analysis. Liu Yufen, the governor of Gansu and Feng's supporter, tried to convince Nanjing that Xinjiang had descended into chaos, and that an experienced strongman should be sent to restore the peace. Declaring that Jin Shuren's talents were piddling when compared to those of the deceased Yang, Gansu's governor advised Nanjing to "despatch a distinguished official who is both talented and learned, with an illustrious reputation. Only such a man will be able to develop Xinjiang. I do not advise the sending of some old grey eminence out here."⁹⁴ The Christian general was certainly no grey eminence. He was the most distinguished and powerful of all of China's remaining warlords, and had made a side career of constantly harping on the need to develop the northwest. It does not take a brain surgeon to figure out that Gansu's governor was advising Nanjing to grant Feng Yuxiang a green light to enter Xinjiang and "restore the peace." Thus, we can state with confidence that the July 7 coup was an attempt by Feng Yuxiang's mole in Xinjiang to foment chaos and disorder on the eve of the Nationalist penetration of the northwest, in hopes of creating a pretext for Feng Yuxiang to extend his territorial holdings at the expense of his Nanjing rivals.

⁹³ Fan, *Xinjiang "sanqi" zhengbian*, 61–63.

⁹⁴ Huang Jianhua, *Guomindang zhengfu de Xinjiang zhengce yanjiu* [Research on the policies of the Nationalist government in Xinjiang] (Beijing, 2003), 22.

Unfortunately for Feng, Jin Shuren had somehow caught wind of the July 7 coup, and moved swiftly to crush Feng's agents. Contrary to the assertions of Feng's ally in Gansu, Xinjiang did not descend into chaos, and the transition from Governor Yang to Governor Jin proceeded largely without a hitch. Furthermore, Chiang Kai-shek did not evince even the slightest interest in allowing Feng to expand his power base. Feng's enormous ambitions were well-known, and Chiang knew it was only a matter of time before hostilities erupted between the Nationalist government and its cabinet of nominally loyal warlord "allies."

The sole beneficiary of the July 7 coup was Jin Shuren. It catapulted him from a political pretender without portfolio to undisputed top dog in all of Xinjiang.

For everyone else, it was simply a tragic waste of life.

The End of an Era

Enough about conspiracies and coups. What did Jin's ascent to the governorship mean for the prospects of modern Xinjiang? Despite the tendency among historians to simply treat Jin as a less talented version of Yang, it is imperative that we understand exactly how these two men differed from one another. Because Yang had chosen to pull the wool over his eyes regarding a host of unpleasanties during the final years of his reign, Jin was forced to confront realities that his predecessor could not bear to face. Let us take a closer look at these unpleasanties.

First of all, Yang's attempt to construct an airtight cocoon and restrict all Soviet trade activity to Ili could only succeed so long as Russia was in chaos. On paper, all transactions were to be confined to the sister cities of Ili (on the Xinjiang side) and

Semipalatinsk (in Soviet Kazakstan), linked by a single transport route at Nilka Pass. But, as Jin himself later pointed out, “this accord was never truly implemented on the ground. The Russians continued to trade freely.” Yang continued to clutch at the illusion of control, but it became more and more of a mirage as his career wore down, and the Soviets became stronger and stronger. “It all was just an image,” Jin later complained. “We had to keep up appearances in the official documentary record, but in reality, the Russians quickly dominated all commercial activity, expanding their realm of influence at will.”⁹⁵ The available documents largely confirm Jin’s claims. Yang, however, did not entirely bury his head in the sand. After all, in 1926 we saw him propose a heavily monitored “exception” for a lone trade route through Irkeshtam Pass, in hopes of curbing the flood of undocumented and untaxed Russian traders in dozens of other “closed” passes throughout southwestern Xinjiang. By and large, however, Governor Yang seems to have resigned himself to letting the Russians run wild on the ground so long as he could continue to insist on the letter of the law on paper. Indeed, even on the very morning of his death, the last order Yang ever issued was for the denial of a petition from his own Turkic merchants to take a cost-saving detour around Nilka Pass. As long as he had the power to maintain formal Chinese sovereignty on paper, Yang would continue to insist on his illusion of control.

Second, the days when Yang could brazenly tout the sagacity of his “strategem of the empty citadel” were long gone. Yes, a small, homegrown army of seasonal recruits lessened the tax burden of the people and minimized the depredations of military men, and this had once been quite the admirable and successful policy back in the day. But

⁹⁵ Zhang, *Xinjiang fengbao*, vol. 6, 3099.

there were simply too many threats to public peace in Xinjiang now. The Soviets were actively cultivating national aspirations in the minds of disaffected Turkic laborers in southern Xinjiang and encouraging them to march an army on Kashgar. Soviet consuls supported and led Mongol raids into the Altay. Feng Yuxiang's ally in Gansu threatened to march on Dihua in 1926. The outside world was closing in all around Yang's shell, and any number of contingencies could now lead to a sudden invasion of Xinjiang. Yang knew he would be forced to make a drastic change in his tactics soon. "I've worked my 'strategem of the empty citadel' in Xinjiang for seventeen years now," Yang told Xu Xusheng in 1928. "But it won't work much longer."⁹⁶ In short, Xinjiang would soon need to raise a respectable army if it wanted to retain an autonomous, functioning government. The rabble that passed for a military force during Yang's reign had simply become too much of an eyesore for ambitious neighbors to overlook anymore. It was the diplomatic equivalent of hanging a large sign on the provincial doorstep. This sign read as follows: "Please come and invade our lands. You can exploit our vast and untapped resources, and we won't even put up a fight."

Yang Zengxin was not looking forward to the day when he would have to start acting like a warlord. He knew Xinjiang needed a modern army, but was unwilling to raise it himself. He knew the Soviets were violating his trade pacts at every turn, but he decided to look the other way. In all fairness, of course, we must remember that, unless Yang was willing to undertake military expenditures that he could not afford and pick fights with bullies that he could not hope to defeat, there was little else the governor could do. Yang relished his image as a Confucian pacifist sage, and did not want to see

⁹⁶ Xu, *Xu Xusheng xiyou riji*, 264.

his reputation tarnished. For seventeen years, he was given the extraordinary opportunity to rule Xinjiang like the benevolent dictator extolled in the Chinese classics. Yang could do this because of the extreme isolation of Xinjiang, the endless turmoil in Russia, and the endemic warlord disunity of inner China. Lacking any and all outside support, we must admit that Yang performed a remarkable feat in preserving a vastly outnumbered Han colonial administration and its complete territorial jurisdiction for nearly two decades. Chinese leaders in Outer Mongolia proved unable to replicate Yang's feat. Now that a strong central government in Nanjing appeared set to play the role of Xinjiang's long-lost patron, Yang could withdraw to a comfortable retirement in Beijing or Tianjin, and watch from a safe distance as his successor fumbled with those intractable problems that he had prudently—yet irresponsibly—ignored during the final years of his reign.

Yang was denied the dignity of a peaceful retirement. It fell to his successor to grapple with the warlords, the Soviets, and the rhetoric of national determination among his non-Han subjects. The July 7 coup signalled the final breach of the cocoon, the yanking of the tortoise from its shell. Xinjiang could no longer stand on the sidelines in blissful isolation. In order to avoid his predecessor's fate, Governor Jin would have to find the resources both to meet external military threats and to eliminate economic dependency on the Soviets. The challenge, however, lie not simply in raising a modern army. Yang Zengxin could have done that, had he been willing to exploit the people (and thus risk an uprising) and take out crippling loans from the Soviets. The real challenge was how to fund a modern army without disrupting the fragile ethnopolitical status quo or inviting Soviet economic imperialism. The words of Yang Zengxin during the Russian civil war were a warning to future governors: "If we mess up in Xinjiang now, we will

not be able to get it back later.” Yet the provincial treasury looked much the same on July 8 as it had on July 6. If there were no outside funds available to replace the imperial subsidies of yesteryear, Jin would have to make do with what he had.

He would have to open Pandora’s box.

Chapter 5

Opening Pandora's Box, 1928–34

Jin Shuren is the only person about whom every historian can agree on. Agree on what? Quite simply, that he was the worst governor in the history of Xinjiang province. “Of all the people who had occasion to work with Jin,” writes one Chinese historian, “not one has ever uttered a single word of praise about his ability to govern.”¹ Yet, as we shall see, this is a patently unfair portrayal of the man. Such a verdict is the same as blaming an intrepid traveler for the hurricane that tears him apart. Certainly, we can say that Jin Shuren marched recklessly into the heart of the maelstrom. But the maelstrom had its sights set on Xinjiang long before Jin became its governor. Rather than let himself be meekly swept off to Kansas, Jin instead embarked on a last-ditch effort to fortify the barricades before the onset of the gale—a task that Yang Zengxin, had he the stomach for such an endeavor, should have undertaken years ago. That the levies broke anyway and that Jin was swept out with the tide are not entirely his fault. Nor is the fact that Xinjiang could not even afford to construct the most rudimentary of storm defenses in the first place. Simply put, Xinjiang during the late 1920s was a lose-lose proposition for whomsoever was tasked with its administration. Despite his considerable merits, the glum reality is that Governor Yang departed Xinjiang in a hailstorm of warlord bullets. Yang’s dramatic exit highlighted the failure of his efforts to keep the chaos of inner China at bay.

¹ Fan Mingxin, *Xinjiang “sanqi” zhengbian xie’an zhenxiang* [The true story of the “triple seven” coup] (Pingdong, 2001), 52.

In his wake he also left unresolved the begrudging sufferance of a Soviet economic monopoly throughout the province, one that was threatening to turn Xinjiang into a Soviet colony. Russian penetration of Xinjiang had been bad enough when the swiftest means of entry to Tacheng had still required a fortnight's trek from the frigid hub of Novonikolayevsk on the east-west axis of the Transiberian railway. The imminent completion of the Turkestan-Siberian railroad (Turksib), however, built on a north-south axis cutting right through the heart of the Ili Valley, meant that overloaded freight trains from Moscow could now disembark mere days from the Xinjiang border. When archaeologist Xu Xusheng departed Xinjiang in December 1928, it took him a mere four days to get from Boggy Reed to a newly opened section of the Turksib. "Because this railroad runs more or less directly parallel with our border," Xu noted, "the sheer number of Russian armaments that can be continually transported to our doorstep is beyond our ability to comprehend. Xinjiang, home of the 'stratagem of the empty citadel,' will prove unable to endure much longer."²

The day that Yang Zengxin had long dreaded had finally come to pass. There was simply no denying it anymore. In order to defend itself against the encroaching tentacles of the outside world, Xinjiang would now have raise a standing army that was not the laughingstock of the modern world. The bullet-riddled bodies of Yang Zengxin and Fan Yaonan had scarcely been laid to rest when Jin Shuren plunged wholeheartedly into this task. Fortunately for Jin, the urgent need to reverse the pathetic state of Xinjiang's armed forces also happened to dovetail with another pressing task on his to-do list: consolidate

² Xu Xusheng, *Xu Xusheng xiyou riji* [A diary of Xu Xusheng's western travels] (1930; repr. ed., Yinchuan, 2000), 264.

his own base of support in Dihua. Though all lips were prudently sealed, few people believed that Jin Shuren had been entirely innocent in the deaths of Yang and Fan. Much like a classic case of domestic homicide, suspicion inevitably falls on the surviving family member who stands to collect a substantial life insurance payout. In the case of Xinjiang, this would be the undeserving disciple who inexplicably inherits the governorship. As a result, close confidantes of the dead Yang immediately drew up a list of possible rivals to Jin, even going so far as to include the old Defense Commissioner of Ili, who had long ago retired to a life of Daoist seclusion in the Bodga Mountains.³ Jin responded by embarking on a month-long reign of terror directed at real and imagined rivals, with the corpses of his victims tossed unceremoniously over the city walls every afternoon. Xu Xusheng kept meticulous notes about the latest arrests and executions. “They say that Zhang Youdan has just been arrested,” Xu wrote on August 27, 1928. “Though there has never been any cause to suspect him of anything, Jin’s spies are eager to please, and no one dares to vouch for him in the current climate.”⁴

Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist government in Nanjing, now acknowledged in both domestic and international circles as the new central government of China, also harbored deep suspicions of Jin. “Over my protestations,” Jin wrote Nanjing on July 18, 1928, “an assembly of all the eminent personages in Xinjiang, enraged [over the death of Yang], elected me as governor.”⁵ Nanjing, deeply skeptical of such false modesty, refused to confirm Jin as governor. “It is said that the authorities are extremely uneasy at Nanjing’s silence,” Xu Xusheng wrote on July 27, “and have decided to use a petition from the

³ Liu Xianghui and Chen Wuguo, *Yinmo Gebi de lishi suipian* [Fragments of history buried beneath the Gobi] (Wulumuqi, 2007), 45–46.

⁴ Xu, *Xu Xusheng xiyou riji*, 242–43.

⁵ Fan, *Xinjiang “sanqi” zhengbian xie’an zhenxiang*, 80.

Mongol and Muslim nobles to try and force Nanjing's hand." Still, Nanjing refused to blink, and before long announced that a "pacification commissioner" would be sent to Xinjiang to investigate the situation. Jin was furious. He detained bundles of public placards advertising the imminent arrival of a central government representative, and continued to agitate for confirmation of his "provisional" titles.⁶ Soon cognizant of the limits of its reach, in November the young Nationalist government finally relented and confirmed Jin in his civil titles. Yet it continued to withhold prestigious military designations for an additional three years. It was clear to everyone that the relationship between China's new central government in Nanjing and Jin's administration in Dihua would be marked not by constructive cooperation, but by mutual suspicion and hostility. The timely elimination of Governor Yang by warlord Feng Yuxiang, whose towering ambitions quickly made a mockery of the fragile gravitational pull of the Nationalist government in Nanjing, effectively sabotaged any hope of unity with the central government.

Beset by hostility on all sides, the only way Jin could ensure his political future was by surrounding himself with loyal supporters—"cronies," in the words of his detractors—who were beholden to him through native-place ties. As Jin hailed from Hezhou county in northwestern Gansu, he naturally looked to people with similar geographic and dialect backgrounds in order to secure his governorship. Travelers to Dihua took note of a popular saying circulating in the streets: "Learn the Hezhou dialect in the morning, get a fat government job in the evening."⁷ Xu Xusheng observed that "the

⁶ Xu, *Xu Xusheng xiyou riji*, 235, 250–51.

⁷ Liu and Chen, *Yinmo Gebi de lishi suipian*, 50.

governor does not trust anyone from Hunan, Hubei, or Tianjin,” places that had long produced the lion’s share of the Han economic and political nucleus in Xinjiang.⁸ Reliance on native-place networks is a common feature of Chinese political culture, however, and certainly not one pioneered by Jin. Yang Zengxin, for example, did the exact same thing, and no one has ever vilified him for it. Early in his reign, afflicted by rebellions and wars in every direction, Yang had relied almost exclusively on officials hailing from his home province of Yunnan, a tactic that later caused him ample heartache. He only narrowly managed to escape the sword of Yunnanese anti-restoration assassins in 1916. Eight years later he reluctantly took on Yunnan native Ma Fuxing, the “butcher of Kashgar.” After he had consolidated his governorship, however, Yang ceased to rely on officials from Yunnan, instead choosing to diversify his staff with men from Shaanxi and Gansu.⁹ Had Jin Shuren held the governor’s throne for more than five years, there is every reason to believe that he would have acted in a similar fashion.

But 1928 was not 1912, and Jin faced an even more hostile climate than that which had once confronted Yang. Jin was so paranoid about possible attempts on his life that he made sure a posse of bodyguards shadowed him everywhere he went, even on trips to the latrine. As was clear from the hostility evinced toward him from both Nanjing and the surviving members of Yang’s inner circle, no one would watch his back if he made a false step. Unlike Yang Zengxin’s early years, when China’s emerging rogue localists had still been restrained by the unifying hand of President Yuan Shikai, the central government in 1928 was unified in name only. Beyond the immediate Jiangsu

⁸ Xu, *Xu Xusheng xiyou riji*, 258.

⁹ Ding Yide, “Yang Zengxin zhi Xin yongren chutan” [An inquiry into Yang Zengxin’s methods of personnel management during his tenure in Xinjiang], *Xinjiang daxue xuebao* 30, no. 2 (June 2002): 78–82.

river delta region, Nanjing's writ lacked teeth. Though Yang Zengxin had carried out several ill-advised policies prior to Yuan's death in 1916, so long as his patrician ally still held power in Beijing, no one dared to kick him while he was down. Over the course of the next decade, however, the outside world had steadily encroached upon Xinjiang's defensive isolation. We have already seen how quickly Russian weapons and goods, moving briskly along the Turksib railroad, could now inundate the province. Yet as much as the prospect of a Russian invasion sent chills down Governor Jin's spine, however, the threat from the west was still more theoretical than imminent.

For a threat that was imminent, we must look eastward to Gansu. For it was there that a twenty-one year old brash warlord pup by the name of Ma Zhongying had begun to stir up a tempest. This tempest was qualitatively different from the Russian threat. The Russians deployed surgical, limited military forays in pursuit of economic profit; wanton destruction was not in their best interests. Not so with the threat from the east. If a Chinese warlord set his sights on Xinjiang, it was with an eye toward total domination. Feng Yuxiang had never wanted just a share of the Xinjiang pie. For the Christian general, it had been all or nothing, and the death of Yang was a means to that end. Similarly after 1928, once war broke out, neither Jin nor Ma would tolerate one another's presence. Both men could be counted on to prosecute their battles with utter disregard for the welfare and livelihood of the people in whose name they ruled.

The Ma Family in Gansu

“In the future,” Governor Yang wrote prophetically in 1914, “the scourge of Xinjiang will be roving, vagrant troops and peasants.”¹⁰ In 1928, Ma Zhongying was the most ambitious man of arms in northwestern Gansu who still lacked a fixed territorial base of operations. In the land of a thousand Mas, this particular Ma distinguished himself by laying claim to a prestigious pedigree of regional strongmen who had once rendered valuable services to the now defunct Qing dynasty. When the great Muslim rebellions of the 1860s and 70s succeeded in eradicating Qing authority in the northwest, a handful of the most prominent clans then leading the insurrection made a momentous decision. Faced with the imminent arrival of a punitive expedition led by Qing general Zuo Zongtang, Ma Zhan’ao and Ma Haiyan prudently decided to cut a deal, trading their swords for official court titles. During the largely successful Qing recentralization efforts of the 1890s and 1900s, the fulsomely feted descendants of these two Mas repeatedly labored on behalf of their Qing benefactors, helping to suppress dynastic enemies throughout the empire. They pacified rebels in Kashgar during the 1880s and played a key role in the disastrous decision to attack the foreign legations in Beijing during the 1900 Boxer debacle. All of the Mas rallied to the defense of the dynasty in 1911, abandoning Xi’an to the revolutionaries only with the abdication of the emperor in early 1912.¹¹

After the fall of the Qing, Yuan Shikai managed an imperfect yet durable peace among the Gansu Mas, a peace shattered only with the death of Yuan in 1916. Some Mas pursued spheres of influence in the neighboring provinces of Qinghai and Ningxia, while

¹⁰ Yang Zengxin, *Buguozhai wendu* [Records from the Studio of Rectification], vol. 1 (1921; repr. ed., Taipei, 1965), 56.

¹¹ Shi Lun, *Xibei Ma jia junfa shi* [A history of the Ma warlords in the northwest] (Lanzhou, 2005), 9–28.

others remained in Gansu. None of them, however, harbored any serious designs on the tightly insulated Xinjiang of Yang Zengxin's day. They were far too preoccupied with fending off the stubborn advances of peripatetic warlord Feng Yuxiang, whose designs on the northwest during the early 1920s had united all the Mas against a common enemy. The year 1930 found them once again locking horns with Feng Yuxiang's proxies, following the Christian general's open repudiation of his alliance with Chiang's Nationalists. Feng's proxies then began a concerted push into Gansu. "I despise the rebel Feng trampling all over my homeland, falsely claiming to be a revolutionary," Ma Zhongying wrote to Jin Shuren in December 1930, soon after Feng's defeat. "But because I am young and lack distinction, I would prefer to work together with you to complete our task of reconstruction."¹² With the fall of Feng's star from Gansu, however, the Mas predictably turned upon one another, jockeying for control of the region. Though Ma Zhongying might have harbored early delusions of receiving aid from Jin Shuren for use against his uncles and cousins, the events of the battlefield quickly sealed his fate. After repeating whippings by his uncle Ma Bufang, who had taken control of Qinghai, Ma Zhongying found himself banished to the vast desert wastelands of Dunhuang, right on the doorstep of Xinjiang.

This was no place to launch a glorious military career. It was the same place that Yang Zengxin had locked up Annenkov's White Russians in 1921. Ma Zhongying knew he could not feed an army on the ancient Buddhist cave murals alone, then and today the only attractions that put Dunhuang on the map. The warlord pup began to send spies into

¹² Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqū dāng'ān guān, ed., *Ma Zhongying zai Xinjiang dang'an shiliao xuanbian* [Selected historical documents pertaining to Ma Zhongying in Xinjiang] (Wulumuqi, 1997), 4.

Xinjiang, in hopes of finding chinks in Jin Shuren's armor. Ma Zhongying was young, patient, and remarkably impervious to setbacks. He bided his time, licked his wounds, and waited for Jin Shuren to slip up.

Building an Army

The constant fighting in Gansu, involving the various Mas, proxies of Feng Yuxiang, and agents of the Nationalist government, immediately alerted Governor Jin to the critical issue of border defense. The list of protagonists and political platforms was exceedingly complex, but one thing was clear. "Regardless of who wins and who loses, who waxes and who wanes," came an intel report in early 1931, "we will be unable to avoid troubles along our border." Jin toyed with various proposals to dabble in the affairs of Gansu, but his informants in Hami advised against it. "It would be best to wait and see whether or not Feng proves capable of recruiting more troops, and whether or not the central government has any means of resolving the conflict." Jin agreed that the best strategy was to "strictly attend to border affairs, keep our own house in order, and adopt an indifferent attitude toward the problems of others."¹³ One proactive measure he could take, however, was to initiate a pre-emptive military build-up. Such a build-up, it was hoped, might deter whomsoever emerged empty-handed from the conflict in Gansu from setting their sights on Xinjiang.

Though Nanjing was too weak to unify all of China, it was still more powerful than any single coalition of warlords. Feng's endeavors in Gansu forced the Nationalists to try and establish their own sphere of influence in this dusty, Italian-shaped province.

¹³ Ibid., 8–9.

The arrival of Nationalist agents intent on backing a winning horse initiated a scramble for Nanjing's official blessing. Anyone who lost out on the spoils of Nanjing's patronage would find themselves in danger of becoming politically delegitimized, scarcely to be distinguished from a "rebel" such as Feng Yuxiang or a "bandit" like Mao Zedong. Such a stigma would force them further and further out toward the unincorporated badlands. Despite the fact that Ma Zhongying had spent some profitable time in Nanjing, he was quickly passed over in lieu of his uncles, Ma Bufang and Ma Buqing, who paid ritual obeisance to Nanjing in exchange for prestigious titles. After the Nationalists chased Feng Yuxiang's proxies out of Gansu, Chiang Kai-shek's government gained the rights to sponsor—though not quite control—a new geopolitical landscape in the northwest. Ma Zhongying, scarcely past puberty, was destined to be omitted from Nanjing's preferred blueprint.

If twenty-something Ma Zhongying wanted Nanjing's blessing—and, by extension, political legitimacy—he would have to raise a ruckus loud enough to gain the attention of Chiang Kai-shek himself. By the early 1930s, Chiang was proving increasingly adept at eliminating, or, at a minimum, co-opting regional threats to his power. This expanding reach of the central government, derailed only by Japanese aggression, forced China's last remaining rogue localists to the farthest reaches of the former empire. By the end of 1930, the prospects for upward mobility in Gansu for an ambitious gunslinger like Ma Zhongying had greatly diminished. The roads east to Lanzhou and south to Qinghai were now blocked by the Nationalists and their Johnny-come-lately allies. Ma's own uncles had become too "legitimate" to associate with their

rogue nephew anymore. By contrast, the road to Dihua, left poorly guarded by Yang's administration, gave every impression of being a cakewalk.

Governor Jin had long known this day would arrive. A mere three weeks after the July 7, 1928 coup, the gates of Dihua already played host to snaking lines of conscripts, forced to sign their name on the dotted line. Jin stocked his new army exclusively with Gansu and Shaanxi Han, whom he presumed far more loyal to a Gansu man such as himself. The governor was in such a hurry to assemble the army that Yang Zengxin had refused to bequeath him, however, that he made the unforgivable mistake of conscripting Han peasants before the start of the autumn harvest. By December, the people of Xinjiang were paying the price. The cost of grain rocketed from a reasonable eighteen taels per picul to a crippling sixty taels per picul, more than a threefold increase. Yet, as Xu Xusheng correctly observed, "this year's harvest is better than last year's. Such an astonishing rise in the price of grain can only be accounted for by Governor Jin's reckless conscription efforts."¹⁴ Furthermore, Jin did not yet possess the means of provisioning his conscripts with even the most rudimentary equipment or training. "He is adding troops like crazy," Xu noted, "but does not provide them with either provisions or weapons. Though the presses churn out paper money day and night, there are not even enough bullets to go around, thereby making the rifles worthless."¹⁵ Nonetheless, the chain gangs continued to scour the countryside for Gansu and Shaanxi Han. By the end of the year, less than five months after his predecessor's coffin had been laid to rest, Jin had expanded his standing army to a mind-boggling thirty thousand troops, more than three

¹⁴ Xu, *Xu Xusheng xiyou riji*, 262.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 258.

times what Yang had grudgingly maintained, and far more than Xinjiang could support on its own.¹⁶

In order to finance this bloated army of ramshackle peasants, Jin reorganized provincial coffers to the point where seventy-four percent of the provincial budget went toward the military. Jin justified these expenses by citing the chaos in Gansu. “Due to the border raids of Gansu bandits,” Jin wrote to Chiang Kai-shek in December 1928, “I have mobilized two additional infantry and cavalry divisions and sent them to be posted at Ruoqiang, Weili, and Qiemo, as a preventive measure.”¹⁷ These three southeastern oasis towns were so remote and isolated that they may as well have been on the moon. If Jin wanted his armies to be able to reach them, then Xinjiang needed more than just the one-lane, pot-holed motorway that lurched from Dihua to Tacheng. Though Jin began to pour money into road construction, shoddy oversight resulted in their swift ruin when locals dragged thousand-pound oxen and rickety carts over them. Jin ordered repairs and implemented a comprehensive spy network to prevent unauthorized use. Yet all these measures cost quite the pretty penny.¹⁸ In order to facilitate communication between Dihua and his battalions along the borders, Jin also installed the first telephones of the modern era, and by 1932 all major cities had been linked into the switchboard.¹⁹ With his

¹⁶ Chen Chao and Chen Huisheng, *Minguo Xinjiang shi* [A history of Republican Xinjiang] (Wulumuqi, 1999), 230; and Fu Yang, “Shilun Yang Zengxin zhuzheng Xinjiang shiqi de ‘ruobing zhengce’” [A brief discussion of Yang Zengxin’s policy of a “weak army” during his tenure in Xinjiang], *Xiyu yanjiu* 2 (2001): 34.

¹⁷ Zhang Dajun, *Xinjiang fengbao qishi nian* [Seventy years of turbulence in Xinjiang], vol. 6 (Taipei, 1980), 3025.

¹⁸ Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqiu jiaotong shizhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, ed., *Xinjiang gonglu jiaotong shi* [A history of transportation and public roads in Xinjiang], vol. 1 (Beijing, 1992), 20–21, 24.

¹⁹ Chen and Chen, *Minguo Xinjiang shi*, 229–30.

checkbook already deep in the red, he also sent, at considerable expense, a handful of privileged students to study modern industry in Germany.²⁰

Thus it was clear to any casual observer in Xinjiang that massive changes were afoot. Other than printing money, however (a stopgap measure that could not be sustained indefinitely), how was Jin planning to pay for all of this? In a dramatic reversal of Yang's reluctant sufferance of a debilitating black market economy, Jin made up his mind to confront the Russians head-on, in hopes of regaining control over the commercial tax system. In September 1928, the governor issued orders to deport illegal Russian traders in Tacheng and Altay, followed eight months later by the detention of Soviet merchants in Turpan, all of whom were accused of illegal cotton purchases.²¹ By "illegal," of course, Jin meant any activity not permitted by the 1920 Ili Provisional Trade Accord drawn up by Yang Zengxin, a document that both Soviet and Chinese authorities had been winking at for years. Not surprisingly, Jin immediately drew the ire of the Soviet consul. "Recent directives from the provincial government have transgressed the long-standing policy of friendly relations between neighbors," wrote the Dihua consul in October 1928. "As a result, the Soviet Union has been forced to scale back its commercial operations." Jin was playing with fire here, and he knew it. "Today is nothing like the friendly policies of yesterday," the consul lamented.²² Jin got his taxes, but it would not be long before the Soviets made him pay a severe price for such fleeting gains.

²⁰ Liu and Chen, *Yinmo Gebi de lishi suipian*, 55.

²¹ Li Sheng, *Xinjiang dui Su (E) maoyi shi, 1600–1990* [A history of trade between Xinjiang and the Soviet Union (Russia), 1600–1990] (Wulumuqi, 1993), 345–46.

²² Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqu dang'an guan, ed., *Xinjiang yu E Su shangye maoyi dang'an shiliao* [Historical documents on commerce and trade between Xinjiang and Russia/Soviet Union] (Wulumuqi, 1994), 237.

Fresh from his antagonization of the Soviets, Jin turned next to the nomads and farmers of Xinjiang. With Soviet competition momentarily sidelined, Jin took the opportunity to impose his own monopoly on lambskin, long a bartering staple of Xinjiang's nomads. This enterprise quickly alienated the Living Buddha Touvden Serenchimid, the spiritual and political leader of the Torgut Mongols in Karashahr. Despite his pacifist title, the Living Buddha could be a powerful enemy to those who forsook him. Though Serenchimid called upon his followers to resist Jin's monopoly, he too was eventually forced to shut down several processing factories under his wing.²³ Yet Jin's micro-management of the nomadic economy was just the tip of the iceberg. He also levied a staggering cornucopia of inane taxes on the sedentary agricultural populations of the southern oases. When archaeologist Aurel Stein visited old Turkic acquaintances outside Khotan in December 1930, his host informed him that they would have to pay an exorbitant tax of three and a half taels if they slaughtered a lamb in order to entertain a guest. His host also showed him a private tree-growing farm tucked away out back, maintained for the purpose of avoiding soaring taxes on silviculture.²⁴

When all these measures still proved insufficient to finance his armies, Governor Jin finally admitted that the tax base in Xinjiang was simply too small and anemic to support the state-building projects of a modern state, no matter how hard he squeezed them. Yet still no outside power was willing to finance these projects unless he ceded his

²³ Liu Cao, Liu Jie, and Wang Xianhui, "Duo huofu zhi si" [The death of the Living Buddha Touvden Serenchimid], *Xiyu yanjiu* 2 (2006): 48–54.

²⁴ Wang Jiqing, *Sitanyin di si ci Zhongguo kaogu riji kaoshi: Yingguo Niujin daxue cang Sitanyin di si ci Zhongya kaocha luxing riji shougao zhengli yanjiu baogao* [Examination of Stein's diary during his fourth archaeological expedition in China: research compiled on the draft of the diary used on Stein's fourth archaeological expedition to Central Asia and stored at England's Oxford University] (Lanzhou, 2004), 313.

throne in return. His solution? Quite simply, he needed to create a larger tax base to exploit. How could he do this? By offering land to peasants who had just been uprooted by the chaos in Gansu. In March 1930, opportunity knocked. Shah Maqsut, the hereditary king of Hami, finally passed away. Before long, emissaries from the king's long oppressed Turkic subjects showed up on Jin's doorstep, begging him to abolish the slaveholding Turkic khanate and distribute its hereditary lands to the king's former subjects.

Governor Jin had a better idea.

The Hami Affair

“The king of Hami has treated his subjects so cruelly,” Yang Zengxin once wrote, “that in 1907 and 1912 the people twice rose against him in great rebellions.”²⁵ It was no secret that the hereditary Muslim kings of Hami, ennobled by the Qing dynasty for services rendered during the eighteenth-century conquest of Xinjiang, were harsh and exacting overlords. Yang Zengxin had occasionally considered proposals to abolish the kingship, but thought better of disrupting the old feudal order without support from the central government.²⁶ Jin Shuren, however, faced with an imminent threat from Gansu and military expenses that were off the charts, desperately needed additional tax revenue. This was the perfect chance to kill two birds with one stone. After the death of the old king in early 1930, Jin summoned Prince Shazir and his vizier Yolbars Khan to Dihua for a meeting. Despite Shazir's tearful pleas for his plum inheritance, the governor informed them that the khanate was to be abolished, Shazir was to be made a high-level advisor in

²⁵ Yang, *Buguozhai wendu*, vol. 1, 113.

²⁶ Zhang, *Xinjiang fengbao*, vol. 6, 3118.

the provincial capital, and his vizier was to return to Hami to begin a comprehensive survey of the king's lands. Jin did not just intend to resettle a new tax base in the suburbs of Hami. He also wanted to gain control over tax revenues formerly under control of the Hami king, funds that had long subsidized his parasitic reign.

The plan seemed like a good idea at the time. If executed with skill, it had the potential to please everyone except the weakling prince and his tiny circle of privileged court nobles. Multiple petitions over the years revealed that nearly all the toiling Turkic natives of the Muslim town in Hami longed to witness the abolition of the hated khanate, and Gansu peasants were fast approaching Xinjiang whether Jin wanted them to or not. By settling them in Hami, Jin could avoid infusing the rest of the province with rootless peasant discontents, and the creation of a new tax base would be firmly under his control. So why, less than a year later, did the Turkic peasants of Hami rise up in revolt? Though historians invariably cite “faulty implementation” as the cause of the rebellion, there is in fact no documentation to support this claim. The official directive redrawing the borders of the district of Hami, Provincial Decree #59, was not even issued until November 1930, and the drafting of tangible blueprints for implementation continued for months after that. Yet no later than April 1931, all of Hami was up in arms, and Ma Zhongying immediately began his terrifying charge out of Dunhuang. What had happened?

Jin later claimed that “the uprising broke out while household registration was still underway.”²⁷ If this was true—and all evidence suggests it was—then the chief protagonist on the ground in Hami at that time was Yolbars Khan, the former court vizier

²⁷ Ibid., 3124.

whom Jin had assigned with the task of overseeing land surveying operations.²⁸ It is important here that we reflect on the nature of the job that Yolbars had been tasked with. He had been ordered to dismantle the system of feudal taxation and hereditary privileges that he and his fellow nobles had grown fat on for decades. Thus we must take seriously Jin's version of events in mid-1932, already a year into the revolt, in which he claimed that Yolbars and his fellow nobles, "realizing that land reform was not in their interests, spread malicious rumors among the people, saying that the government was going to give Turban wealth and women to the Han."²⁹ Such tactics mesh perfectly with what we know of Yolbars' preferred methods of agitation. Twenty years later, when he found himself leading a guerrilla war of resistance against the Chinese Communists, Yolbars recruited followers by spreading rumors that the Communists were going to "force Han and Uighur to intermarry."³⁰ This was a bald lie in the 1950s, and it was a bald lie in 1931. Wherever Yolbars shows up in the documentation of the period, his bitterness over the abolition of the Hami khanate, his long-time employer, is in clear evidence. In his memoirs, published in Taiwan nearly four decades later, Yolbars skewered Jin for not acknowledging "the ways in which the khanate helped to keep the land peaceful."³¹ Then, in April 1933, after

²⁸ In his own account, Yolbars says that he was out and about in the mountain villages conducting his surveying work when he heard news of the rebellion. Yao-le-bo-shi, *Yao-le-bo-shi huiyilu* [Memoirs of Yolbars Khan] (Taipei, 1969), 78.

²⁹ Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqu dang'an guan, *Ma Zhongying zai Xinjiang*, 61.

³⁰ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, Nangang, Taiwan, West Asia Division (*yaxisi*), file 119.51/0001, "Xinjiang xianfei qianhou qingxing baogao" [A report on the bandit takeover of Xinjiang], 105.

³¹ Yao-le-bo-shi, *Yao-le-bo-shi huiyilu*, 78.

Jin had already tucked tail and fled Xinjiang, Yolbars sung the praises of Yang Zengxin, extolling his policies of “non-interference in the lives of the border peoples.”³²

Jin himself was later interrogated by Nationalist officials regarding the cause of the uprising. “It is a truism that an uprising simply cannot occur unless implementation was botched,” he was sternly informed. A stenographer present in the room then recorded Jin’s body language. “Upon hearing this, Jin let out a long sigh. Then he said: “Even if our implementation had been perfect, they still would have rebelled.”³³ This is a telling statement. Though documentation for this era is scarce, there appears to be compelling evidence that those nobles who had the most to lose from land reform were the same people who decided to sabotage Jin’s plans by stirring the Turkic-speaking populace into an anti-Han frenzy. By playing a shrewd tandem of race and gender cards (forced ethnic intermarriage), Yolbars and his collaborators borrowed from the emerging rhetoric of national determination to beat back the tentacles of Jin’s administration and preserve their own prerogatives as local strongmen.

So where does Ma Zhongying fit into all of this? At some point in late 1930 or early 1931, messengers from Yolbars Khan got in touch with the warlord pup, and the two men hatched plans for an uprising. Even if he could mobilize the former bodyguard of the Hami khanate and supplement it with peasant foot soldiers, Yolbars was still no match for the sheer wave of provincial conscripts Jin could send his way. The disgruntled nobles of the former khanate needed outside help. Before long, foreigners resident in Hami noted “steady streams of small caravans [from Dunhuang] carrying ammunition to

³² Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, ed., *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian—di wu ji, di yi bian: zhengzhi (wu)* [Collection of archival materials concerning the history of the Republic of China—vol. 5, no. 1: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5] (Nanjing, 1994), 515.

³³ Zhang, *Xinjiang fengbao*, vol. 6, 3127.

the mountains.”³⁴ In February 1931, Governor Jin gained word that Ma Zhongying “has sent agents to buy up an enormous quantity of opium, perhaps 300,000 bundles, and that he is planning to deliver them to Zhang Xueliang in the northeast, in exchange for mobilization expenses and weapons.” Merchant intel revealed that Ma Zhongying had suddenly stepped up his conscription of Dunhuang peasants, and was forcing local merchants to “donate” money to his cause. Jin’s lieutenant in Hami immediately raised the alarm. “It is clear that his intent is to attack Xinjiang,” wrote Liu Xizeng on February 28, 1931. “We must keep our eyes on him and prepare accordingly if we are to avoid disaster.” The clearest indicator that an attack was imminent, however, came when Ma suddenly began calling himself the “Supreme Commander of Gansu, Qinghai, and Ningxia,” arrogating to himself an expansive authority he had no right to claim.³⁵

It was clear what was happening. Since Nanjing would not sponsor his political legitimacy, Ma Zhongying simply created his own business card. Now the proud bearer of a rogue title rivaling those of his niggardly uncles, Ma bore the necessary credentials to “keep the peace” in the northwest should a disturbance arise. It was also a shrewd tactic designed to inspire confidence in conscripts and potential allies. To be sure, his credentials were patently illegitimate, but this was a piddling detail in the unincorporated badlands of the northwest, far outside of Nanjing’s reach. First, only those officials in direct communication with Nanjing were even aware that these titles were false. And second, even after such artifice was exposed, what was the central government going to do about it?

³⁴ Andrew D.W. Forbes, *Warlords and Muslims in Chinese Central Asia: A Political History of Republican Sinkiang, 1911–1949* (Cambridge, 1986), 49.

³⁵ Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqiu dang’an guan, *Ma Zhongying zai Xinjiang*, 11, 10, 8.

Now all Ma needed was a suitably destabilizing disturbance, and he could gallop into Xinjiang without reproach.

Pandora's Box

“Who is behind this Turban uprising, and why are they rebelling?” It was April 24, 1931, and Jin Shuren wanted answers from his garrison at Hami. “Once that is clear, I can draw up an appropriate plan of suppression.” Much mythology has grown up around an incident that supposedly occurred on February 27, in a little village known as Tiny Hamlet (*xiaopu*). The “Tiny Hamlet affair,” which, in its more outlandish formulations, involves cross-dressing brides and a Bacchanalian bloodbath, almost certainly never happened. At least, it is not mentioned in the reports of anyone present on the scene. Nevertheless, rumors that the oppressed Turkic villagers of Tiny Hamlet, pushed to the brink by a wicked Han garrison commander lusting over a chaste Turkic maiden, soon became a powerful rallying cry throughout the rural outskirts of Hami. It was combined with another rallying cry, one that likely had more basis in reality. “Certainly there is instigation from Gansu bandits,” wrote Liu Xizeng, the garrison commander at Hami, “but there is also provocation from within. The locals are envious and jealous of the Han, and they fear that the Han will be allowed to plow their land.”³⁶

This is where we must make due allowance for claims of “faulty implementation.” Every source tells a different story, but the crux of the matter is that many abuses accrued at the hands of those officials tasked with the redistribution of land. Pressed by the gaping hole in his wallet, Jin encouraged hasty implementation of his

³⁶ Ibid., 17.

directives, and the result was that many Turkic peasants found their land unfairly placed in the hands of Han refugees from Gansu. With popular anger fanned by Yolbars, events moved quickly. In mid-April, twelve villages nestled in the eastern marches of Hami (none of them, so far as we know, named “Tiny Hamlet”) rose up in unison. The villagers converged on the local garrison, killing its commander, twenty soldiers, and raiding the armory. The importance of this uprising was not in its strength, for it and many others were easily suppressed. “Though our troop strength is minimal,” Liu Xizeng wrote to Jin on April 24, “we have already managed to push the bandits into the mountains.” In the same telegram, Liu also relayed reports that “the bandit Ma has already set off from Anxi in two groups, one toward the gorge near Red Orange Grove, the other toward the backside of the gorge, via Slate Cave and Bitter Water.”³⁷ The uprising in April 1931 was memorable not as the result of any stirring victories the peasants may have scored, for they scored none. Rather, its importance lie in the fact that, at long last, Ma Zhongying finally had the pretext he needed to strike camp for Xinjiang.

Ma wasted no time. In late May 1931, he departed from Dunhuang, deftly skirted around the garrison at Orangutan Pass, and began his attack on Hami in July. Though his army numbered no more than a thousand men, mostly cavalry, its ability to inflict a disproportionate amount of goose bumps and destruction on its opponents fast became legendary. If Jin harbored any hopes of deflecting their assault, he would need men of a significantly higher caliber than the hapless country bumpkins who crowded the ranks of his tatterdemalion conscript army. He immediately turned to the Torgut Mongols of Karashahr, natural-born warriors on horseback. But the Living Buddha, still smarting

³⁷ Ibid., 61–62, 17–18.

from Jin's monopoly on the trade in lambskins, denied Jin's request for Mongol cavalry, claiming that he was still out "selecting horses in the mountains." By the end of the month, the Living Buddha had ignored or concocted bogus excuses for numerous orders to report to the front lines. Jin was livid, and ordered his officials in Karashahr to keep a close watch over the Torgut Mongols. In February 1932, when Jin posted defensive garrisons near Karashahr to prevent Ma Zhongying from advancing into the southern reaches of the province, the Buddha thought that Jin was preparing to punish him for disobeying orders the previous summer. After entertaining emissaries from Ma Zhongying in December, Serenchimid promptly laid siege to the city of Karashahr, forcing Jin to deal with an enemy who, by all rights, should have been a steadfast ally. For his treason during wartime, the Living Buddha was lured to Dihua in May 1932 and executed.³⁸

The untimely death of the leader of the Torgut Mongols underscores the ways in which Jin's chickens were finally coming home to roost. In order to meet the threat from Ma Zhongying in Gansu, he had been forced to finance an army. In order to finance an army, he needed additional revenue. In order to obtain additional revenue, he had been forced to resort to strongarm bullying tactics, such as the government monopoly on lambskins. When the chaos in Gansu finally spilled over into Xinjiang, important people whom Jin had been forced to squeeze in order to finance costly defensive measures against Gansu now took the opportunity to make his life exceedingly difficult. Some, like the Living Buddha, decided to join the attack on Jin. Others, such as the Soviet Union,

³⁸ Liu et al., "Duo huofu zhi si." For contacts between Serenchimid and Ma Zhongying in December 1931, see Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqu dang'an guan, *Ma Zhongying zai Xinjiang*, 58.

still offered to help, but only at ludicrously inflated costs. This was apparent when, in October 1931, with Ma Zhongying still refusing to throw in the towel, Governor Jin signed a secret pact with the Soviet Union, one that would later get him into serious trouble with Nanjing. In exchange for badly needed war planes, weapons, and vehicles for deployment against Ma, Jin was obliged to reinstate the old lopsided trade regime with the Russians. Not only did the Soviets once again enjoy what had passed for the informal status quo under Yang Zengxin, but they also gained a formal writ granting them near unfettered access to every corner of Xinjiang.

Meanwhile, Ma's attack on Hami soon turned into a bloody quagmire for both sides. Casualties in Ma's camp, however, paled in comparison with that of Hami's defenders. In August, Ma decided to head north toward Barikol, where he laid hands on a bountiful weapons cache. Jin thought his opponent's actions augured weakness. "As long as the bandits prove unable to take Hami, we need not worry about Barikol. Hami is the gateway to Barikol, and we have now locked the gate. He is cornered, and there is no doubt we will capture him." Though Ma was shot in the foot during the Battle of Liaodun, the sight of the warlord pup in chains was an elusive pipe dream for the governor. Only when Jin called in General Zhang Peiyuan and his seasoned cohort of machine gun toting White Russian refugees from the Ili Valley did Ma finally abandon the siege and retreat to Gansu. All that had prevented Governor Jin from the humiliation of (as one of his subordinates put it) "a pathetic little rabble sticking it to our great armies" was the arrival of the White Russians in September 1931. Yet Jin knew he had not seen the last of the warlord pup. "They have nowhere to go," he observed, painfully aware that Dunhuang was too poor and marginal to satisfy Ma's needs. "If he heads

toward [Qinghai], then Ma Bufang will certainly attack him. Blocked in that direction, what other options does he have?”³⁹

Jin already knew the answer to his question. Ma Zhongying was sure to return. There would be no respite from war.

Pandora’s box had been blown wide open.

Ma Zhongying Grows Up

In early 1932, the warlord pup finally got Nanjing’s attention. Through a blood-soaked display of reckless bravery and charismatic leadership, twenty-five year-old Ma Zhongying had nearly brought Jin Shuren and his “mighty” armies to their knees. Nanjing, which had failed to dislodge Jin back in 1928, finally decided that this was indeed a horse that they could back. As a result, in February 1932, Chiang Kai-shek bestowed upon Ma Zhongying what he had long pined for: an official title as Commander of the 36th Battalion of the Nationalist Army. Jin was aghast. “Why has Ma Zhongying been incorporated into the military?” he asked Nationalist general He Yingqin in August. “Is this some kind of reward for his illegal occupation of the Gansu border and destruction of everything in his wake?” General He tried to placate Jin, telling him that Ma had been ordered to “assume protection duties.” This, however, was a well-known euphemism. Protection against whom or what? Jin knew what Nanjing was up to. “The remnants of Ma’s bandit army have been incorporated into the national army,” Jin informed the county magistrate of Yangi Hissar. “At this time of national crisis, I am

³⁹ Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiq dang’an guan, *Ma Zhongying zai Xinjiang*, 27, 38, 59.

afraid that the central government has ulterior motives. The dregs [of Ma's army] will now survive to wreak havoc once more."⁴⁰

Not surprisingly, when Ma returned to Xinjiang in mid-1932, he was even more brash and confident than before. More importantly, his battlefield tactics evinced a new psychological maturity. The warlord pup had finally discovered the power of propaganda, and he used it to devastating effect. He gained droves of new followers by distributing leaflets urging Muslims and Kazaks to "rise up and cease being slaves of the Han." He sent agents all over Xinjiang denouncing Han misrule and playing up the religious affinities between his own Chinese Muslim followers and that of the Turkic-speaking Muslim populace. Ma Shaowu, the longtime Muslim *daoyin* of Kashgar, tried to fight back. "Everyone must be on guard against these appeals," Ma wrote to officials throughout the province. "If the bandits attempt to seduce us like this, I will look to our local *imams* and village heads to exhort the people not to lend their ears to such propaganda, lest they be taken advantage of." Yet Ma Zhongying proved adept not only at harnessing the cynical rhetoric of national determination, but also at demoralizing those who had no choice but to fight him. "When our troops were surrounded by Ma's men," one of Jin's generals reported in September 1932, "a loud voice suddenly shouted out: 'Don't run, little babies! Put down your weapons and we won't kill you.'" Aware that most of Jin's foot soldiers were little more than frightened peasant boys, Ma began to spare the lives of those he captured, sending them back to Jin without a scratch. Jin quickly ordered these returnees to be locked up, so that news of Ma's merciful treatment

⁴⁰ Ibid., 65, 69.

would not infect his front lines, which had been weaned on horror stories of what Ma would do to anyone who did not fight to the death.⁴¹

By the end of 1932, every corner of Xinjiang was aflame. “The bones of the dead lie heaped in piles, steaming blood is everywhere plastered, the earth is scorched dry, and no matter where you look, your heart aches,” Ma wrote, observing his handiwork. “The celestial garden of refuge has become nothing more than the home of tearful gods and wailing spirits.”⁴² Dihua and its immediate environs were the only jurisdictions still remaining where Jin’s directives constituted anything more than grist for the fire. In a frantic attempt to stem the bleeding, Jin promoted and demoted generals with reckless abandon, until at last he hit upon a man who was more than Ma’s equal on the battlefield: General Sheng Shicai. Trained in a Japanese military academy and plucked from a dead-end career in Nanjing, Sheng leapt at the chance to prove himself on the battlefield. After single-handedly saving Jin’s life by lifting Ma’s siege on Dihua in January 1933, Sheng became the governor’s go-to general. Though his presence about the capital ensured that Dihua would not fall to Ma, Sheng could not be everywhere at once. The situation was now just as Nanjing had feared: Xinjiang was coming apart at the seams. “There is no single person capable of putting all the pieces back together,” the central government soon learned.⁴³ As long as Sheng Shicai continued to stand between Ma Zhongying and the capture of Dihua, Nanjing’s man could not lay legitimate claim to the governorship. If the Nationalist government wanted to gain control over Xinjiang, it would need to do more than bestow its blessing on distant proxies.

⁴¹ Ibid., 88, 39, 72–75.

⁴² Ibid., 110.

⁴³ Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 1: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5, 522.

Fortunately for the central government, someone from Jin's inner circle had already had enough of war, and made up his mind to do something about it.

Nanjing's Hail Marys

During the latter years of Yang Zengxin's reign, Xinjiang had approximately 1.7 million acres of cultivable land. By 1934, only half of that remained. Pastoral nomads also saw their flocks decline by nearly half, as three million head of stock succumbed to famine and slaughter. All about, one was confronted with death and destruction. The road from Turpan to Hami was littered with so many rotten and festering corpses "that the smell was simply unbearable."⁴⁴ Yet just across the Soviet border in Tashkent, chief consul Mou Weitong continued to go about his business as usual. His office was far removed from the battlefields, and Governor Jin assured him that he had everything under control. Mou was fiercely loyal to Jin. After all, it was he who had been responsible for informing Jin about the assassination attempt on Yang Zengxin, in exchange for which he had been rewarded with the plum post of chief consul for Xinjiang's five offices abroad. Then, at some point in February or March 1933, Mou received a pair of disturbing telegrams from Ili and Tacheng. The military commanders stationed there had asked him to "procure, without delay, a large amount of military weapons," in exchange for raw commodities. "Wherever there are many troops," Mou promptly wrote to Jin, "there will be chaos. And wherever one finds many weapons, there he will find rebellion. I cannot stop the chaos in Xinjiang, but neither will I contribute to

⁴⁴ Chen and Chen, *Minguo Xinjiang shi*, 226–27; and Zhu Peimin, *Xinjiang geming shi (1933–1957)* [A history of the revolution in Xinjiang] (Wulumuqi, 1993), 42.

a rebellion.”⁴⁵ This was prudent doublespeak on Mou’s part, for he was almost certainly aware that the governor himself had authorized these weapons requests.⁴⁶ Mou did not like the direction things were going. “If we just used our brains,” Mou counseled Jin, “then our problems could be resolved without delay. We cannot rely on military force alone.”⁴⁷

Mou was sufficiently turned off by Jin’s commitment to the battlefield that he made the momentous decision to get in touch with Nanjing. “Various agents have recently arrived in the Soviet Union to purchase a massive quantity of firearms,” Mou wrote in April 1933. “But Xinjiang is Muslim territory. If we suppress popular uprisings with force, it will be sure to create hatred and enmity with the Han.” He ended his report with a vow to take action. “So long as I am in office, I cannot bring myself to just sit here and watch quietly as foreign munitions are used to lay waste to our borderlands.” For a member of Jin’s inner circle, this was a remarkable admission to make to the central government. To be sure, employees of Xinjiang’s five consuls enjoyed a freedom of speech that those within the province did not. “The moment I enter Xinjiang,” wrote the consul at Semipalatinsk in 1933, “regardless of whether I am an official or a commoner, I immediately forfeit the freedom to write my reports as I choose. It has been this way in Xinjiang for over twenty years.” Yet Mou’s telegrams constituted something quite different, and Nanjing knew it. If Mou had heretofore sounded a bit cryptic, his next

⁴⁵ Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 1: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5, 484.

⁴⁶ Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqun dang’an guan, *Ma Zhongying zai Xinjiang*, 89. Furthermore, Mou was obliged to lay the blame for these weapons request upon the generals in Ili and Tacheng because he also forwarded this telegram to the central government in Nanjing, toward whom he did not wish to reveal any information that would reflect poorly on Jin.

⁴⁷ Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 1: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5, 485.

telegram left no doubts as to where he stood. In a telegram that arrived in Nanjing on April 21, 1933, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs learned of Mou's latest advice to Jin Shuren. "The situation is grave, and Nanjing is unable to help us," Mou had written to Jin two days earlier. "I beseech my governor to sacrifice himself for the sake of Xinjiang. I hope you do not sacrifice all of Xinjiang for the sake of one man." Mou assured his governor that if "you were to explore exit strategies, the central government would be sure to give you one."⁴⁸

This was an open invitation for Nanjing to work together with one of the most senior officials in Xinjiang. For the Nanjing government, this was a rare chance to revisit the lost opportunities of yesteryear. In 1927, after the success of the Northern Expedition, one of the first issues Nanjing raised with Yang Zengxin concerned the transfer of authority over his consulates. At that time, Yang had been mostly concerned with obtaining adequate compensation for his diplomatic labors. The cost of maintaining these five consulates had totaled more than forty thousand taels, an outrageous sum that Xinjiang could not meet without sinking into massive debt. (It was also further proof of how political sovereignty was valued over fiscal solvency, since these the chief task of these consulates was to keep tabs on Xinjiang's susceptible expatriate population). "If the Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not come up with a resolution soon, Xinjiang will descend into crippling bankruptcy," Yang wrote.⁴⁹ Before Nanjing could come up with the funds, however, the July 7 coup prompted Yang's son-in-law in the Semipalatinsk office to urge Nanjing to send a diplomat who could take control posthaste, before the

⁴⁸ Ibid., 484–85, 567.

⁴⁹ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Taiwan), file 110.1/0001, "Zhu Xin bian wuling" [The five consuls of Xinjiang], 19.

new governor managed to install his own men.⁵⁰ Unfortunately for Yang's followers, Jin's men did get there first, and for the next five years the consulates answered only to Dihua. Though the Nationalists tried to bribe Jin's consular employees, whenever push came to shove—as it did in 1929 when Nanjing ordered the consuls shut down in response to the China Eastern Railway affair with the Soviet Union—orders from Dihua always trumped those from Nanjing.

With Tashkent's chief consul now filing daily reports to the ambassador in Moscow, however, Nanjing decided that the time for decisive action had finally arrived. Then, during the final days of April, momentous—though not entirely unexpected—news reached inner China. On Wednesday, April 12, 1933, disaffected officials in Dihua, working in tandem with a White Russian battalion, had chased Governor Jin out of the capital and elected General Sheng Shicai as the new *duban* (military governor) of Xinjiang.⁵¹ Word of these developments fast became front page news across the country, and unsolicited advice poured into Nationalist party offices. It was clear that Nanjing

⁵⁰ Ibid., 8–10. Nanjing's predecessor, however, the warlord government in Beijing, had been far less interested in Governor Yang's side projects. Back in 1925, when one of Yang's consular officials suddenly showed up on the doorstep of the Chinese embassy in Moscow, China's ambassador, entirely ignorant of the existence of any of the consuls, thought he was an impostor attempting to meddle in border affairs. See Yang Zengxin, *Buguozhai wendu sanbian* [Records from the Studio of Rectification: three compilations], vol. 1 (n.p., 1934), 26–30.

⁵¹ Ever since the founding of the republic in 1912, the governorship of Xinjiang had been divided between both a civil and a military post. From the very first day he assumed office, Yang Zengxin had always held both titles (whose specific terminology constantly changed), which is why we have referred to him by the general title of “governor.” Jin Shuren could only lay claim to the civil title initially, until Nanjing finally confirmed his military post in 1931, after the Hami uprising broke out. But since the military title had simply been vacant until conferred upon Jin, it makes sense to refer to Jin as “governor” as well. Sheng Shicai was different. As a unabashed professional military man, he was initially only given the title of “military governor” (*duban*), with the title of “civil governor” (*zhuxi*, in Nationalist parlance), accruing to three successive puppet officials: Liu Wenlong (1933), Zhu Ruichi (1933–34), and Li Rong (1934–40). This power-sharing arrangement, maintained in theory if not in practice, continued until 1940, when the death of Li *zhuxi* gave Sheng the pretext he needed to grab both titles for himself. Thus, only after 1940 could we justifiably refer to Sheng as “governor” of Xinjiang. In order to strike a compromise between historical accuracy and the convenience of the reader, however, I will refer to Jin's successor as “Sheng *duban*,” or simply “the *duban*,” for the duration of his tenure.

would need to send a delegation to Dihua as soon as possible. Mou Weitong counseled Nanjing to send “a prestigious, high-ranking official, who holds no prejudice against either Han or Muslim.” He should act as head of a delegation that “carries real power, with the ability to assume office immediately.” Though he advised Nanjing to send an official who was not prejudiced against Muslims, he himself was adamant about the composition of any new cabinet in Dihua. “Above all else, you cannot allow any Muslim figure to obtain a position of real authority in Xinjiang.” Nanjing heard the opposite from Muslim associations in Beijing and Nanjing. “We should send a loyal Muslim official who thoroughly understands the Nationalist political platform, and who is capable of obtaining the trust of people in the northwest.” Then, of course, there were the wacko opportunists, such as Han Fujun, the governor of distant Shandong, who begged Nanjing to allow him to “march my armies on the northwest, where I will first quell the rebellion, then cultivate the wastelands.”⁵²

By early May, Nanjing had made up its mind. Noting how difficult it was to “communicate the reputation and prestige of the central government to the distant borderlands,” Nanjing announced that it had selected Huang Musong, the “enlightened” Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, as “pacification commissioner” to Xinjiang. Huang’s entourage, shrewdly disguised as a peace-making delegation, was in fact a portable government administration on-the-go, equipped with all the gadgets, personnel, and cash that might prove useful in the event an opportunity arose to wrest power away from Sheng Shicai. Nanjing set aside 326,200 *yuan* for expenses, gave Huang his own portable

⁵² Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 1: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5, 522, 486, 527, 523.

telegraph, and explored the possibility of mobilizing the Gansu army of former warlord Hu Zongnan as a backup force. In the event that Hu balked, Nanjing still had an ace in the hole. “According to chief consul Mou,” wrote the Chinese ambassador in Moscow, “the total number of troops in Xinjiang does not exceed three thousand , many without weapons. The Northeast Volunteer Army is about to arrive in Xinjiang with close to ten thousand men. It is around them that we can form our core base of power.”⁵³ Though this was somewhat faulty intelligence (only three thousand actually made it to Dihua), the bare outlines were correct. Several divisions of the Northeast Volunteer Army, originally composed of 75,000 soldiers who had been driven out of Manchuria and into Siberia by the Japanese army in northeastern China, had arrived in Dihua via the Transiberian Railroad in late March. It was their arrival that prompted the conspirators in Dihua to move up the date of their intended coup to April 12, in order to oust Jin before he could get his hands on this unexpected crack fighting force.⁵⁴

In early June, Huang Musong set off for Xinjiang. Nanjing deflected Sheng’s requests to confirm his appointment as *duban*, telling him to wait until Vice-Minister Huang arrived in Dihua. But Huang’s marching orders were clear. “When I get to Xinjiang,” Huang reported to Nanjing on June 9, “I will begin my search for a powerful general upon whom I can bestow a title and work together with.” It was clear that Sheng, a party outsider who had once served under a warlord adversary of Nanjing, was not on Huang’s short list of candidates. The next day Huang arrived in Dihua. The state of the provincial capital shocked him. “Though the residents appear calm, the streets of the city

⁵³ Ibid., 524, 522.

⁵⁴ Zhang, *Xinjiang fengbao*, vol. 6, 3039.

resemble a riverbed, with filth and garbage strewn all about. ... If we do not thoroughly renovate the government here, the situation will soon be beyond repair.” Even more discouraging, however, was the alarming disconnect between the optimistic intelligence reports Huang carried in his back pocket, and the reality of the situation before him. The generals in charge of the Northeast Volunteer Army, whom Huang had hoped to take under his wing, “say that they are outsiders in Xinjiang, and are not interested in sacrificing their men for its sake.” They asked to be sent home to inner China so they could once again fight the Japanese in Manchuria. As for the political landscape, “the details are exceedingly complex, and the general situation is far more complicated than I had expected. There is much that I simply do not understand. If I slip up even slightly, conflict is sure to break out.”⁵⁵

Sure enough, Huang quickly made a mess of things. Less than a week after his arrival, he convinced the leaders of the original coup to try and overthrow Sheng Shicai, then stationed on the outskirts of Dihua. The plan was to call Sheng back to Dihua on the pretext of an imminent attack by Ma Zhongying, then bomb his entourage en route to the capital. Unfortunately for Huang and his co-conspirators—none of whom commanded a single soldier—Sheng learned of the plot and returned to Dihua in secret. His June 27 telegram to Nanjing must have sent chills down the spines of the Nationalist elite. “After I executed [the conspirators],” Sheng wrote, “documents were discovered in the house of Tao Mingyue [one of the newly dead] that proposed the election of Huang Musong as civil governor, and the creation of a so-called Military Affairs Commission [to replace

⁵⁵ Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 1: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5, 543, 546.

the *duban*].” Declaring that Commissioner Huang “appears to have been foolishly seduced,” Sheng advised Nanjing to send an even greater personage, such as Chiang Kai-shek intimate Chen Lifu, to investigate the situation and secure Huang’s release from house arrest. The next day, Ma Zhongying, in “abject fear of Huang’s life,” promised Nanjing that he would break down the city walls and rescue the pacification commissioner himself. Hostilities were narrowly averted when, two days later, generals from the Northeast Volunteer Army publicly declared their support for Sheng Shicai.⁵⁶ With that, the gig was up. Huang’s mission had been an unmitigated disaster, and the price of his release would be nothing less than the humiliating confirmation of Sheng Shicai as *duban* of Xinjiang.

As we shall see, Sheng’s acquisition of legitimate *duban* chops in July 1933 would prove to be the most powerful weapon in his arsenal, and it was one that Nanjing would live to regret. But concede it they did, and all sides tried to save face after the fact. Sheng admitted that the whole sorry affair had been a “slight misunderstanding,” while Nanjing blamed everything on the phantom machinations of Jin Shuren, who was then making his way back to Tianjin via the Transiberian Railroad, and supposed to have manipulated events from afar.⁵⁷ With Nationalist legitimation under his belt, Sheng next turned his attention to the elimination of chief consul Mou Weitong in Tashkent, who had been Nanjing’s chief informant for the past six months. Liu Wenlong, Sheng’s powerless civil counterpart in Dihua, tried to placate Nanjing. “I am fully aware that the central government intends to consolidate control over foreign affairs,” Liu wrote in August.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 574–77.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 558–59, 578.

“But we are requesting chief consul Mou’s transfer to Dihua due to shady activities he was involved in during the tenure of Jin Shuren.” Mou refused to budge. “After the authorities in Xinjiang executed Chen Zhong and Tao Mingyue, men who were predisposed to lean toward the central government,” Mou responded in anger, “they have kept strict watch over Commissioner Huang and deprived me of my titles. ... It is clear that their previously stated intent to relinquish control over foreign affairs to the central government was not sincere.”⁵⁸

Instead, Mou tried to remain at his post long enough to allow Nanjing to install its own man in his stead. “All of the directives sent from Liu Wenlong to the Tashkent consulate have been illegal and I have not implemented any of them. If the Ministry can send someone here who has no connections with the present government in Xinjiang, or if our embassy in Moscow can despatch an official to Tashkent, I will hand over the reins immediately.” The view from Nanjing’s ambassador in Moscow, however, was far less sanguine. “All the consular staff in each of these five offices maintain family and property in Xinjiang,” he informed Nanjing. “As a result, they dare not disobey a directive from Dihua.” The Nationalist consulate in Khabarovsk, just across the border from Manchuria, continued for several years to send agents to make contact with the Xinjiang staff, often with bribes in hand. It was clear, however, that little headway could be made so long as Dihua remained outside Nanjing’s orbit.⁵⁹ Mou Weitong was soon forced to abandon his post in Tashkent. A retrospective report from the consul in Zaisan in 1944 summed up the new relationship. “After 1934 ... Xinjiang’s five consuls not only

⁵⁸ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Taiwan), file 110.1/0001, “Zhu Xin bian wuling” [The five consuls of Xinjiang], 28–29.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 25–26, 49, 51.

ceased to follow the Ministry's orders regarding personnel, but were also unable to observe any of the Ministry's directives whatsoever, due to their direct subordination to the provincial government."⁶⁰

Though the Nationalists had failed spectacularly in their first serious attempt to assert control over Xinjiang, there was still hope for the party faithful. The logic was as follows. Even though Sheng Shicai had obtained Nanjing's blessing as *duban*, he still needed to be formally inaugurated. For this purpose, Nanjing decided that it had a legitimate pretext to send Luo Wengan, its bigwig Minister of Foreign Affairs, to Dihua in order to oversee the oath of office ceremony. Preparations were different for this venture, as Chiang Kai-shek was not eager to see another one of his prominent officials fall under humiliating house arrest in Dihua. There was to be no more pussyfooting around this time, recklessly staking the success of the entire mission on the timely arrival of fair-weather warlord allies. After swearing in Sheng on September 7, Luo immediately got in touch with both Ma Zhongying in Turpan and Zhang Peiyuan (Jin's former general) in Ili. Once again, Sheng's acute nose for conspiracy began to twitch, and he immediately organized a pre-emptive attack on Turpan. Luo tucked tail and fled to the Semipalatinsk consul, where he wrote to Zhang Peiyuan in Ili. "Now I can see that everything you said about Sheng before was true." Then, on October 12, he informed Nanjing that the time had come to implement their final solution. "The way I see it, Sheng cheated us in order to get his title, and the central government conceded it only to keep the peace. Because Sheng still has not reformed his immoral ways, we have no

⁶⁰ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Taiwan), file 110.19/0002, "Zhu Xin bian wuguan shiwu" [Affairs of the five consuls of Xinjiang], 23.

choice but to take him out and remove a pox on our nation and people. Otherwise, no one will have any respect for the central government anymore.’⁶¹

On December 29, 1933, Nanjing’s endgame was unveiled. Zhang Peiyuan set off from Ili with several thousand troops, intent on reducing Dihua to rubble. Two weeks later, on January 12, Ma Zhongying threw seven thousand of his best men against the walls of the capital. Had either Zhang’s or Ma’s armies survived for more than a week, there is little doubt that Dihua would have fallen. Sheng Shicai, outnumbered and outgunned, had absolutely no chance of surviving the coming pincer attack. Then, as promised by Nanjing, Ma Zhongying would have received jurisdiction over southern Xinjiang, while Zhang Peiyuan would have lorded over the north, both men paying something more than lip service to Nanjing.

It was not to be.

On December 30, only one day after General Zhang set forth from Ili, seven thousand Soviet soldiers, under cover of tanks, warplanes, and massive artillery, snuck up behind Zhang’s rear and blew his battalion to smithereens. Six days later he committed suicide, his brain-flecked shrapnel staining the snow. Back in Dihua, Ma Zhongying continued his assault on Sheng. Two weeks later he was on the verge of breaking through the city gates. Then, on January 18, Soviet planes appeared from nowhere and blew his encampment into oblivion. Ma and a smattering of survivors fled to southern Xinjiang, never to threaten Dihua again.

⁶¹ Cai Jinsong, *Sheng Shicai zai Xinjiang* [Sheng Shicai in Xinjiang] (Zhengzhou, 1998), 126, 129–30. These candid quotes from Huang are taken from telegrams held in the Number Two Archives in Nanjing. Though all foreign and even most Chinese scholars are denied access to the Xinjiang files in Nanjing (I myself was turned away none too politely), Cai Jinsong, a resident scholar in the archives, reproduces extensive quotes from these documents in his biography of Sheng.

In a dizzying change of fortune, Sheng *duban*, instead of lying maimed beneath the rubble, somehow stood triumphant atop it. There was only one question on Nanjing's mind: What the hell just happened?

The Rise of Sheng Shicai

In order to more fully understand this dramatic turn of events, let us take a look at a random page from the Chinese customs ledger at Nilka Pass for a single winter's morning in early 1934:

A convoy arrived at 10:30 a.m., with 9 vehicles, 18 drivers (lead driver named Qurban), 625 blocks of tin (27,500 pounds), 164 rounds of ammunition, 272 empty iron canisters, and 7 empty wooden canisters. Released at 11:30 a.m.

At 11:30 a.m. another convoy arrived, with 57 vehicles and 103 drivers (en route to Orangutan Pass), 640 barrels of oil (97,428 kilograms, 53,466 kilograms less than before), 11 rifles, 36 "seven star" revolvers, 8 turtle guns, 1,100 bullets, and 56 Soviet commercial representatives.⁶²

The resources described on this ledger represent only a piddling fraction of the generous material goodies that Sheng had managed to procure from the Soviet Union against the irreproachable credit of his *duban* business card. When Nanjing had been forced, in exchange for the life of one its top officials, to bestow legitimacy on Sheng's *duban* title, it had given Sheng a weapon far more powerful than anything Ma Zhongying or Zhang Peiyuan could have pointed at him. We should point out that the Nationalists had not been so careless as to let their support for the Ma-Zhang alliance become publicly known. Officially, therefore, until they succeeded in overthrowing Sheng and gaining Nanjing's effusive praise after the fact, Ma Zhongying and Zhang Peiyuan were still—at least on

⁶² Archives of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (Urumchi, China), file 2-3-1156, 9-14.

paper—rogue militarists rebelling on their own initiative against the sole legitimate *duban* of Xinjiang province. This gave Moscow the rhetorical wiggle room necessary to portray their suppression of Sheng’s enemies—Nanjing’s secret proxies—as little more than a selfless act of support for the beleaguered, Nanjing-approved *duban* of Xinjiang.

But why would the Soviets venture such a risky undertaking in the first place? To answer this question, we must return to the seminal moment in the establishment of the Soviet state in central Eurasia. In June 1921, when White Russian general Andrei Bakich occupied the entire Altay region and Turkic ex-pat laborers in Andijan were openly calling for an attack on Ma Fuxing in Kashgar, the Politburo in Moscow raised the idea of creating two separate states in Xinjiang: the Republic of Kashgar and the Republic of Jungaria (after the Jungar Basin near Altay). They would be established on the model of various ethnic republics the Soviets were then implementing across the border. Lenin, however, explicitly vetoed this proposal, sparking a decade-long debate with the Communist International (or Comintern, an organization devoted exclusively to the spread of socialist revolution throughout the world) over the proper stance toward the revolutionary potential of “subjugated” peoples the world over. The Comintern viewed the Chinese presence in Xinjiang as an example of “greedy and barbarous colonization,” and characterized its Han rulers as “slavemasters.”⁶³ In 1931, the Comintern paid close attention to the uprising in Hami, ultimately deciding that it exhibited the “characteristics

⁶³ V.A. Barmin, *SSSR i Sin'tszian, 1918–1941* [The Soviet Union and Xinjiang, 1918–1941] (Barnaul, 1999), 84–86; and Xue Xiantian, *Zhong Su guanxi shi (1945–1949)* [A history of Sino-Soviet relations (1945–1949)] (Chengdu, 2003), 211–13.

of a national liberation movement,” and, as such, deserved the full backing of the Soviet Union.⁶⁴

Stalin disagreed. In line with his well-known policy of consolidating “socialism in one country,” on June 23, 1932, the Politburo decided to approve sales of US \$200,705 worth of munitions to Jin Shuren for use against the rebels. As a further bulwark for the Chinese administration in Dihua, the Soviet Union went out of its way the following year to transport thousands of soldiers from the Northeast Volunteer Army to Xinjiang, for the express purpose of bolstering Jin’s prospects for survival. Turkic supporters of the rebels were demoralized, and complained to the Soviet consul in Tacheng. Aware of how the Soviet state claimed to empower formerly subjugated, colonized people elsewhere via the application of affirmative action policies, the protesters expressed their disbelief. “We were quite sure that if oppressed people rise up against their oppressors for the sake of liberating their nation and homeland from occupation,” the petition read, “that the Soviet state would treat such peoples with sympathy, and defend them from oppression. ... We believe that these rumors are false, because the Soviet authorities profess to be defenders of the oppressed.”⁶⁵ Certainly the Soviet state often professed such lofty aims. But it would only work toward the risk-filled implementation of them when support for “national liberation movements” also happened to dovetail with Soviet economic and political interests. As had become perfectly clear by early 1934 in Xinjiang, these interests did not yet dovetail for Moscow (though the situation would look very different a decade later).

⁶⁴ Xue, *Zhong Su guanxi shi*, 215.

⁶⁵ Barmin, *SSSR i Sin'tszian, 1918–1941*, 116, 124–25.

Soviet interests in Xinjiang were similar to Japanese interests in Manchuria. What both powers wanted above all else was an exclusive sphere of economic interests in a resource-rich region of China. The administrative headaches would ideally be handled by the Chinese, while handsome profits accrued to a thinly disguised Soviet or Japanese trade outfit. The cheapest way for Moscow to ensure a steady stream of cheap raw materials from Xinjiang was to buttress a weak Chinese administration that was cut off from the support of the central government in Nanjing. Support for a “national liberation movement” was a romantic ideal at best, and one that did not make economic sense in 1934. Neither did support for Nanjing’s proxies (Ma Zhongying and Zhang Peiyuan), either of which would be obliged to toe the hostile anti-Soviet line of the Nationalists if they overcame Sheng. By making the legal *duban* of Xinjiang entirely dependent on Soviet aid, the Soviets ensured that Sheng Shicai would not dare to turn down their requests for lopsided, exploitative economic ventures. But just in case he did start to think for himself, the Soviets hedged their bets by granting political asylum to his arch enemy Ma Zhongying. For reasons still unclear today, in July 1934, six months after his defeat at the hands of Soviet warplanes, Ma stepped willingly onto Soviet soil. He was never seen again. Though most evidence now suggests that the warlord pup met his end in a dank Soviet prison during the great purges of 1937, it is important to note that the authorities in Xinjiang still believed that he was alive—and capable of being unleashed—throughout the entirety of Sheng Shicai’s decade-long reign. As late as 1944, Feng Zuwen, the chief consul at Tashkent, informed Nanjing that “the retention and nourishment of Ma Zhongying in the Soviet Union is a lurking threat to peace along the borderlands.”⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Taiwan), file 110.19/0002, 40.

For all intents and purposes, the Soviet Union appeared to have Sheng Shicai firmly under its thumb. Most importantly, they had obtained this arrangement in a manner hardly reproachable by the Nationalist government, which had itself confirmed Sheng's title. All that Nanjing could do was attend to damage control. Once it became clear that Ma Zhongying was done for, Fu Zuoyi, the governor of Suiyuan and nominal ally of the Nationalists, rushed to his telegraph. "The entire nation is rejoicing now that the central government has discovered a pillar of loyalty and administrative talent [in the northwest]," Fu wrote to Sheng, hardly an ounce of sincerity in his words. "During these times of trouble along our borderlands, we must place absolute trust in Chiang [Kai-shek] and Wang [Jingwei] ... and pay no heed to the inevitable rumors." To judge from the telegrams that flooded into Sheng's office, Nanjing was most preoccupied with squelching any "rumors" that purported to expose how the Nationalist government had tried to destroy the same *duban* that it had crowned only six months earlier. "The central government is fully aware of your extraordinary concern for the nation," came a telegram from Tianjin, "and Chiang and Wang trust you completely. Do not listen to malicious rumors." From Qinghai, Ma Lin, a distant relative of Ma Zhongying, told Sheng not to believe anything he read in the newspapers. "Due to obstructions in communication and transportation, rumors have circulated unchecked throughout the nation, often appearing in the newspapers. Such things are truly regrettable, like gnat droppings in an otherwise flawless piece of jade."⁶⁷

What Sheng thought of these disingenuous telegrams we do not know, only that he somehow restrained himself from tossing them into the fire. Xinjiang and the central

⁶⁷ Archives of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (Urumchi, China), file 2-2-105, 89-90.

government in inner China were about to embark upon a decade of mutual hostility scarcely matched during the Republican era. In the meantime, however, a lot of people who had fled the chaos in Xinjiang suddenly begun to show up in Nanjing, in search of a government handout. Among them was unsuspecting former governor Jin Shuren, who was soon to be tarred, feathered, and raked slowly over a diplomatic bed of hot coals.

Nanjing's Uighurs

“I see in the newspapers here that Jin Shuren, the former governor of Xinjiang, has been arrested in Nanjing,” wrote Yan Huiqing, the Chinese ambassador in Moscow, in November 1933. “Is this because he exceeded his authority by signing a Sino-Soviet provisional trade pact? What is the official position of our government on this issue?”⁶⁸ On July 12, 1933, disgraced governor Jin Shuren, after an exhausting three-month odyssey that had taken him from Dihua to Tacheng via military escort, Novonikolayevsk to Vladivostok by railway, and finally Vladivostok to Tianjin by boat, once again set foot on Chinese soil. “Due to hardships incurred during my journey,” he wrote to Wang Jingwei, the Nationalist’s civil counterpart (and chief rival) to Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, “my old illness has flared up once more. After I have recovered, I will call upon your office and dutifully submit my report in person.”⁶⁹ Wang, however, had no intention of listening to Jin’s excuses over a leisurely cup of tea. On October 30, the day after Jin arrived in Nanjing, Wang ordered his arrest and indefinite incarceration while awaiting trial on four counts: 1) signing an unauthorized trade pact with the Soviet Union in 1931;

⁶⁸ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Taiwan), file 132.1/0001, “Jin Shuren ding Xin Su tongshang xieding chaojian” [A draft copy of the Xinjiang-Soviet trade accord signed by Jin Shuren], 29.

⁶⁹ Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 1: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5, 559.

2) absconding with provincial funds; 3) wanton destruction of Xinjiang; and 4) forced appropriation of peasant land. When Jin hired an expensive celebrity defense lawyer from Shanghai and began to defend himself in the press, the stage was set for a media frenzy.⁷⁰

Yet the Jin Shuren trial actually had very little to do with Jin Shuren. The former governor of Xinjiang was merely a convenient scapegoat whom Wang Jingwei believed would be unable to defend himself once isolated in the nation's capital. The real significance of the Jin Shuren trial lay in the fact that it marked the beginning of a sophisticated, long-term strategy by Nanjing to prepare for another assault on Xinjiang at some point in the distant future. The rollercoaster events of the past three years had repeatedly exposed how little the Nationalist government actually knew about the situation in Xinjiang. Bereft of any allies or loyal Party members in Dihua, Nanjing could only poke at the edges of Xinjiang: a disaffected consul in Tashkent here, a spurned official in Ili there, and an ambitious warlord from Gansu. In May 1933, Muslim councils in Beijing urged Nanjing to pay more attention to its image and less attention to fomenting Hail Mary military conspiracies. "The key to national defense lies not in military armaments, but in the minds of the people."⁷¹ Now that Sheng Shicai and his Soviet benefactors had forced Nanjing to take all military options off the table, Wang Jingwei and Chiang Kai-shek finally decided to take this advice to heart. But how to go about making a favorable impression on the people of Xinjiang, who lived many thousands of miles away? For a suitable plan of action, Wang and Chiang needed only to take a look at the playbook of the people of Xinjiang themselves.

⁷⁰ Zhang, *Xinjiang fengbao*, vol. 6, 3071; and Huang Jianhua, "Jin Shuren an tanxi" [An analysis of the Jin Shuren case], *Kashi shiyuan xuebao* 4 (1994): 47.

⁷¹ Zhongguo di er lishi dang'an guan, *Zhonghua minguo shi dang'an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 1: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5, 527.

On April 25, 1933, two weeks after Jin Shuren had been driven out of Dihua, a group of Turkic *imams* and traders, Han merchants, and Chinese Muslim traders from Kashgar composed a carefully worded telegram to Nanjing. After blaming all of Xinjiang's troubles on Jin Shuren, the authors of the telegram (most of whom were Turkic Muslims) tried to convince Nanjing to confer its patronage on Ma Shaowu, the Muslim *daoyin* of Kashgar and commander of its military, so that he could march north and "recover" Dihua for the central government. What is interesting about this telegram, however, is the manner in which the petitioners attempt to curry favor with Nanjing. "The reason we beseech the central government to show its concern for national defense is due to the fact that many tens of thousands of Han lives are on the verge of annihilation."⁷² In short, the mostly Turkic authors of this telegram avoid any mention of Turkic or Chinese Muslim casualties of war, instead choosing to highlight the threat to Han life and limb. This was a rhetorical device designed to tug at the heartstrings of Han diplomats in Nanjing.

How did this carefully manufactured Turkic appeal to Chinese sympathies provide a ready plan of action for the Nationalist government? Quite simply, by counterexample. If Nanjing wanted to go after the hearts and minds of the people of Xinjiang, they need only to adopt the same tactics that China's minority peoples employed when they tried to appeal to the perceived sensitivities of the Han. This was what the trial of Jin Shuren was all about. Jin was to serve as the central government's symbolic whipping boy, in an attempt to curry favor with the majority of the non-Han population who blamed him for Xinjiang's ills. The sight of a Han-dominated central

⁷² *Ibid.*, 519.

government holding its Han governor of Xinjiang responsible for crimes against the non-Han peoples was exactly what the sort of ethnically neutral justice the Nationalist government wanted to associate itself with. Even so, Wang Jingwei himself did not bring formal suit against the former governor of Xinjiang. That symbolic honor was reserved for Isa Yusuf Alptekin, a former translator in the Tashkent consul who had once made a lucrative side career out of selling certificates of nationality to Soviet citizens en route to Xinjiang. After leaving Tashkent in 1931, he made his way to Nanjing, where future pacification commissioner Huang Musong took a liking to him and included him as an advisor on the pacification mission to Xinjiang in 1933. Upon his return to Nanjing, he began to refer to himself as a “representative of Xinjiang,” and was given license to publish a host of periodicals concerned with border affairs. Isa’s career did not really get going, however, until 1934, when he leveraged his celebrity in the Jin Shuren trial to extend an invitation to noted intellectual Masud Sabri to join him in Nanjing.⁷³

Masud, a native of Ili who had spent more than a decade abroad completing a medical degree in Istanbul, was well known throughout Xinjiang. His tenure in Istanbul, amid the backdrop of World War I, turned him into a rabid Russophobe, a quality that never failed to endear him to the Nationalist brass in China. But he was also widely considered to be a progressive advocate of cultural modernization among Xinjiang’s Turkic populace, as was clear from the secular, pan-Turkic curricula he instituted in his many grade schools. From 1917 to 1928, Yang Zengxin twice shut Masud’s schools down, twice threw him into jail, and thrice personally interrogated him—all clear validation that he was a progressive modernizer cut from the Jadidist cloth. His many

⁷³ Luo Shaowen, “Ai-sha xiaozhuan” [A brief biography of Isa], *Xinjiang difang zhi* 2 (1996): 61–64.

setbacks during Yang's reign taught him the importance of cooperating with Chinese officialdom. Once properly appeased, he found, the Chinese would often provide the breathing space necessary to advocate for an ambiguously defined "Turkic nationhood" among the common people. When the apocalypse broke out in 1931 and Turkic militants established a short-lived separatist state in Khotan, Masud forsook medicine for good and plunged wholeheartedly into politics. Swift disillusionment with his patrons in Khotan prompted Masud to cross the Himalayas into India, where he accepted Isa's invitation to begin a new career in Nanjing.⁷⁴

Isa and Masud were the golden boys of Nanjing's platform of political legitimacy in Xinjiang. Wined and dined, showered with titles, and supplied with generous publishing funds, they were given free reign to vilify Han rulers in Xinjiang both past and present. Sponsorship of their activities allowed the Nationalist government in Nanjing to portray itself as the defender of the country's oppressed border minorities, whose agents of oppression were now portrayed as rogue Han governors acting independently of the central government. The courtroom proceedings for Jin's trial were dominated by the theatrics of Isa and two of Masud's sons, who subtly reinterpreted the Hami uprising as a Turkic national liberation movement, instead of the opportunistic defense of aristocratic privilege and cynical manipulation by warlords that it was. They also provided the newspapers with sentimental grandstanding that made Jin look like a cretin. "The judge then showed Jin a photograph of an *imam* [killed in the fighting], and asked him if he

⁷⁴ For a highly biased yet deeply informative biography of Masud Sabri, see chapter 6 in Liu and Chen, *Yinmo Gebi de lishi suipian*, 176–219, adapted from Luo Shaowen's obscure article, "Zhongsheng wuguo—minguo shiqi Xinjiang sheng di ba ren zhuxi Mai-si-wu-de de yi sheng" [A lifetime of injuring his nation: the life of Masud Sabri, eighth governor of Republican Xinjiang], *Xinjiang difang zhi* 1 (1995): 60–64.

knew this man personally. Jin replied, ‘Lots of people were killed in the fighting. I didn’t know any of them.’”⁷⁵ Shut out of Sheng Shicai’s Xinjiang, Nanjing encouraged the exploitation of ethnopolitical hot-button issues as a means of storing up political capital for future deployment in Xinjiang. When the inevitable chinks began to appear in Sheng’s armor—as surely they would some day—Nanjing wanted seasoned, loyal, well-known native politicians of Xinjiang ready to fight for the loyalties of the indigenous people on behalf of the Nationalist government. This unlikely alliance was both politically useful and remarkably free of tension so long as the stage remained in Nanjing. Their relationship would not be so rosy when transplanted to Xinjiang a decade hence.

While the general public may have been seduced by the exile narrative on display at Jin’s trial, those with actual knowledge of the situation on the ground in Xinjiang saw right through the political grandstanding, and quickly made themselves scarce. In April 1934, Wu Aichen, a technical advisor in Dihua who had gravitated toward Luo Wengan’s anti-Sheng camp in September 1933, was ordered by the court to testify against Jin Shuren. Wu ignored multiple subpoenas, claiming that he “did not know any inside details about the situation.” This was disingenuous at best. Hired by Jin in 1932 to explore mining ventures in the Altay, Wu was so much an insider on the Xinjiang political scene that he was ordered to debrief Chiang Kai-shek himself just six days before Jin’s trial was to begin.⁷⁶ More likely is that he understood the trial was not about bringing Jin to justice, but was instead designed to chip away at Sheng’s authority in

⁷⁵ Zhang, *Xinjiang fengbao*, vol. 6, 3128.

⁷⁶ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Taiwan), Personnel Division (*renshichu*), file 913.29/0001, “Zhu Xinjiang tepaiyuan” [The Commissioner of Foreign Affairs in Xinjiang], 42–74.

Xinjiang. And Wu, who had narrowly escaped Dihua with his head and shoulders intact, had had enough of Xinjiang politics.

As for Sheng himself, he too ignored numerous requests by Nanjing for damning evidence against Jin, preferring to keep the Nationalist government at arm's length. Then, in December 1934, Sheng decided that there was a constructive role he could play in Jin's trial after all. Since Nanjing was using the trial as a public relations campaign to try and strengthen the central government's claim on Xinjiang at the expense of Sheng, the *duban* felt he had every right to try and sabotage Nanjing's grounds for prosecution. "Jin has a corrupt mind whose worldview is outdated," Sheng testified in a written memorandum, masquerading as the Supreme Court of Xinjiang. "He delegated tasks poorly and left office without any accomplishments to speak of. But as for the present accusations against him ... we find that all of his actions were proper and justified by the circumstances at the time, and do not constitute grounds for legal culpability." Turning the revolutionary rhetoric of the Nationalist government against itself, Sheng defended the 1931 land reform efforts in Hami as being "in accordance with the doctrine of our late Premier Sun Yat-sen that we should eliminate systems of feudal governance." After reminding Nanjing that the Turkic subjects of the king had themselves repeatedly asked for the abolition of the khanate and redistribution of its land, Sheng went on to refute the case against Jin point by point. When he learned that the son of Fan Yaonan had also jumped on Nanjing's bandwagon, hoping to take advantage of the Nationalist's rhetorical assault on Xinjiang to rehabilitate his father and expose Jin's role in the assassination of Yang Zengxin, Sheng wasted no time in denying Nanjing any pretext to open an inquiry into the July 7 coup. "Fan Yaonan was the sole assassin of former governor Yang," wrote

Sheng, who had been living in Nanjing at the time and knew absolutely nothing about the coup. “These accusations are nothing more than malicious slander.”⁷⁷

Sheng’s surprising defense of his former boss, with whom he had often been at loggerheads, must have come as an unexpected blow to the Nationalist’s show trial against Jin Shuren. Nevertheless, because the trial had been designed from its very inception as a public billboard advertising Nanjing’s legitimate claim for stewardship of Xinjiang—and not to uncover the “truth” of any single event—Jin’s conviction had been a foregone conclusion all along. On June 29, 1935, he was found guilty, branded a “national traitor,” and sentenced to three and a half years in prison (in addition to the nearly two years he had already spent in jail).⁷⁸ The final twist to the case came three months later, on October 10 (National Day), when Chiang Kai-shek, jealous of rival Wang Jingwei’s increasingly successful attempts to associate himself in the public and Party eye with the recovery of Xinjiang, granted amnesty to Jin and allowed him to return to his hometown in Gansu. Jin, by then in perennially poor health, dutifully made his way back to the dusty plains of his youth (not too far from where Ma Zhongying had once made his name), and retired from politics.

A lifelong devotee of the opium pipe, Jin Shuren died in 1941, aged sixty-two. He has not been remembered fondly.

The Tragedy of Jin

⁷⁷ Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 1: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5, 559–60.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 561–65.

When he first assumed the burden of Xinjiang's governorship in 1928, Jin Shuren tried to assure Touvden Serenchimid, the Living Buddha of the Torgut Mongols in Karashahr, that he would continue to rule just as his predecessor had. "I promise to observe the principles of our departed governor, implement a just and fair administration, and maintain the peace."⁷⁹ Scarcely have more disingenuous words been uttered. Having risen to the top of Dihua's political totem pole through the shrewd manipulation of a bloody banquet blindsided conceived in inner China, Jin knew that the sun had set on Yang Zengxin's policy of defensive stagnation. Though it had worked reasonably well for more than a decade, the end result had been a deadly coup, something no sane successor to the bloodstained throne would risk a repeat performance of. Yet in Jin's preemptive rush to patch together a standing army capable of rivaling the goosebump-producing abilities of Gansu's fearsome warlords, he disrupted the delicate ethnopolitical economy that Yang had so meticulously attended to.

By late 1931, the die was cast, and Jin plunged headlong into the Rubicon. "To our surprise," wrote a Mongol leader from Karashahr, "we have discovered that military guardposts now block the road to Dihua. . . . Due to the ignorance of my people, rumors are rampant that my lord has renounced the southern Mongols. Terror and fright grip the land." Having utilized all his resources (and then some) to prepare for a military showdown that he believed would determine the political fate of the entire northwest, however, Jin paid little heed to the sensitivities that he was everywhere running roughshod over. "Because the eastern border remains restive and rumors are flying everywhere," Jin

⁷⁹ Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqu dang'an ju, Zhongguo shehui kexue yuan bianjiang shidi yanjiu zhongxin, and "Xinjiang tongshi" bianzhan weiyuanhui, eds., *Jindai Xinjiang menggu lishi dang'an* [Historical documents on the Mongols in modern Xinjiang] (Wulumuqi, 2007), 13.

replied, “the guardposts must remain in place and fulfill their obligation to inspect [everyone].”⁸⁰ Before long, the Torguts rose in revolt, and Jin was forced to execute the Living Buddha, an act of gratuitous violence that did little to endear himself to a strategic horde of nomads that had long been Dihua’s steadfast allies-in-arms. Xinjiang during the late 1920s was like a tense game of Jenga: some pillars could be removed without any noticeable weakening of the tower as a whole, but the more pillars one removed, the greater the risk that the cornerstone would not hold. At that point, even just fiddling with a weak pillar—say, land reform in the vulnerable eastern oasis of Hami—would prove more than enough to bring down the whole house of cards. One by one, in his headlong search for military funds, Jin Shuren pulled out the carefully laid pillars of Yang Zengxin’s reign, until so many pillars were missing that the collapse of the entire structure became a foregone conclusion.

Of course, it is important here that we remind ourselves just how few alternatives were available to Jin. If he did not take on the unenviable task of squeezing provincial resources to raise an army—if he did not remove the Jenga pillars one by one—Ma Zhongying would have done it for him, and sooner or later Jin would have shared the fate of his predecessor. There are not many historical circumstances better suited to the idiom, “Damned if you do, damned if you don’t,” than Xinjiang in 1930. And when that Jenga tower began to wobble, the doctrine of national determination, held in check under Yang, would supply the gale that toppled it for good. “In recent years,” observed Zhang Fengjiu, Jin’s diplomatic representative in Nanjing, in April 1933, “the notion of a great independent Muslim unity has gained widespread currency throughout the northwestern

⁸⁰ Ibid., 408–9.

regions.” As a result, it was not long before the Chinese ambassador in Moscow began to report that “the Muslim groups are all calling for national determination, and saying they will not tolerate Han rule anymore.”⁸¹

When a pair of disastrous, fly-by-night attempts to wrest the *duban*-ship away from Sheng Shicai failed miserably, Nanjing stepped back and began to formulate a sophisticated, long-term strategy for retaking the northwest. This strategy was designed to slowly chip away at the legitimacy of Sheng’s rule while simultaneously preparing for the emergence of the Nationalist star in the northwest at some later date in the future. As for Sheng himself, the lessons of Jin’s reign showed that the ruler of Xinjiang could not go it alone in the modern world. It needed a strong patron with deep pockets, one that was capable of financing the costly neutralization of any social unrest stemming from painful integration into a modern, extractive state. (Had Jin Shuren had a powerful patron, the fiasco at Hami never would have been allowed to spiral out of control). Yet Nanjing’s many attempted hits on Sheng virtually precluded him from turning to the Nationalists for assistance; after all, a man does not foil two attempts on his life and then return for more. So he turned to the Soviet Union, which informed Sheng that the price for placing a lock and bolt on Pandora’s box would be unfettered Soviet commercial and political access to Xinjiang. Even then, as he was soon to discover, Moscow intended to keep the key as collateral, as was clear from its retention of Ma Zhongying.

We have already seen Sheng’s proven determination not to kowtow to Nanjing. Yet Nanjing did not have the ability to deliver endless trains of Western-trained troops

⁸¹ Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 1: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5, 492, 506.

and weapons to his doorstep. If Sheng did not do Moscow's bidding, he would have to answer to a much deeper gunbarrel than Nanjing had ever pointed at him. Was Xinjiang destined to become a satellite state of the Soviet Union, fashioned in the same mold as the People's Republic of Mongolia? Or could the resourceful Sheng somehow get the best of both worlds?

The era of the orphan warlord was about to begin.

Chapter 6

The Orphan Warlord, 1934–42

On July 13, 1970, a remarkable event occurred—remarkable for being so utterly devoid of drama. Sheng Shicai, the seventy-six year-old former *duban* of Xinjiang, passed away peacefully in his sleep in a hospital bed in Taipei. That he did not meet his end decades earlier, face down in a dank puddle in a nameless dark alley, his throat slit by some aggrieved soul bent on revenge for a father once strangled on his orders, is nothing less than a minor miracle. Sheng’s younger brother had been murdered in 1942. Hired assassins killed six of Sheng’s in-laws on a single night in 1949. Sheng himself was called to account for his crimes at numerous Party conferences throughout the 1940s and 50s. Then, in the early 1960s, things got so bad that Sheng decided to change his surname to Yan and began to carry a revolver in his breastpocket. Yet not one of the many tens of thousands of relatives and friends of Sheng’s untold number of victims ever managed to get to him. Why? Who was watching Sheng’s back? The answer would have come as a shock to any informed observer of the Xinjiang political scene during the 1930s. “Yesterday one of our colleagues accused comrade Sheng of wanton mass murder during his time in Xinjiang,” Chiang Kai-shek acknowledged at the Sixth Party Congress in May 1945, less than a year after Sheng had left Xinjiang for good. “Yet the fact that comrade Sheng was eventually able to use his talents to deliver Xinjiang back to the central government is a contribution to both Party and nation. Everyone here needs to understand this. Let us look at the larger picture, and stop fixating on culpability for the

past.”¹ How did Sheng Shicai manage to transform himself from arch enemy of Nanjing in 1934 to Chiang Kai-shek’s comrade-in-arms in 1945? The answer, as we shall see, is as disturbing as it is instructive.

If there is only one thing we can know about Sheng Shicai, it should be that he had always been, from the earliest days of his career, a political orphan. Born in 1894, the first of seven siblings from a poor peasant family in rural Liaoning in northeast China, Sheng was marked by his father early on to receive the first formal education in the history of the family. Widely regarded as a precocious bully, Sheng secured the necessary patronage to work his way out of poverty, eventually attending schools in Shenyang, Shanghai, and Japan, where he spent much of his twenties studying political economy and military science. His expertise in the latter gained him employment with Guo Songling, an officer under Manchurian warlord Zhang Zuolin. When Guo rebelled unsuccessfully against Zhang in 1925, Sheng was left out in the cold. In 1927, he managed to scrape together a living kowtowing to his superiors in various low-level advisory roles in the new Nationalist government in Nanjing, but these posts carried little hope of upward mobility. Sheng was not a graduate of Chiang Kai-shek’s Whampoa academy, he had no connections with Chiang’s native-place network of officials from Zhejiang, and he was not a member of the Nationalist Party. In 1927, this meant that he was excluded from any post of substance. Overtures to Manchurian warlord Zhang Xueliang also bore little fruit. Having impressively overcome the harsh odds of the times

¹ Gansu sheng guji wenxian zhengli bianyi zhongxin, ed., *Zhongguo xibei wenxian congshu, er bian* [Collection of documents relating to northwest China, series two], vol. 13 (Beijing, 2006), 64–65.

by rising from a lowly farmhand to the graduate of a prestigious Japanese military academy, Sheng's enormous ambitions seemed finally to have hit a brick wall.²

Then, in late 1928, Jin Shuren, determined to assemble a fearsome army in Xinjiang, sent two scouts to Nanjing to procure someone capable of training his new conscripts. Jin's scouts were introduced to Sheng, whom they described as "a man of surpassing talent and learning, a perfect fit for the position." But Jin did not want a man of surpassing talent and learning. He knew that such a person would not be satisfied with the work of a journeyman. What Jin wanted was a man of ordinary talent who would be content to turn peasants into foot soldiers, and then step aside as Jin transferred the fruits of his labor to other generals loyal to the himself. To Jin's surprise, his scouts in Nanjing, who had already signed a contract with Sheng's superiors, threatened to resign if Jin made them go back on their word. Jin relented, and on October 10, 1930, Sheng Shicai and his family arrived in Dihua.³ Just as Jin had feared, Sheng soon began to instill his trainees not only with a sense of discipline, but also with a large dose of personal loyalty, inspiring a professional *esprit de corps* that was unheard of in Xinjiang at the time. Despite this (or perhaps because of it), Sheng was not Jin's first choice to confront Ma Zhongying at Hami, and the governor went through a long list of lackluster commanders and battlefield disappointments before finally being forced to hand over the reins to Sheng. On April 12, 1933, when Jin fled Dihua, the organizers of the coup voluntarily elected as *duban* the only man whose well-heeled soldiers could stave off the charges of

² Cai Jinsong, *Sheng Shicai zai Xinjiang* [Sheng Shicai in Xinjiang] (Zhengzhou, 1998), 1–23.

³ *Ibid.*, 31–36.

Ma Zhongying. The transition from destitute rural lad to lord of the northwest was almost complete.

When he assumed Xinjiang's *duban*-ship in mid-1933, however, Sheng had virtually no base of support outside his own army—an Achilles' heel his opponents were quick to exploit. Nanjing's two "pacification" missions eventually turned nearly every major political figure in Xinjiang against Sheng, forcing him to look to the Soviets in order to secure his position. Yet Sheng was able to bring himself to do what neither of his predecessors had been willing to do: trade de facto sovereignty in Xinjiang in exchange for a bottomless bank account and stability at gunpoint. He could do this precisely because he was a political orphan, a man about to be unceremoniously tossed out into the cold if he did not grab on to the nearest patron willing to take him in, motives and nationality be damned. Yang Zengxin and Jin Shuren both tried to solve Xinjiang's internal affairs entirely by themselves, spurning outside assistance, in full confidence that sound moral government and the durable institutional legacy of the Qing administration would be sufficient to keep the peace.⁴ Having borrowed the strength of foreigners to beat back the reach of his own central government, however, Sheng could not very well request that the Soviets leave him alone now, as Yang had once done when the target was White Russians. If Sheng had not already been enough of an outcast in Nanjing before his arrival in Xinjiang in 1930, the dramatic events of 1933–34 now left little doubt that he had become anathema to anyone who waved the Nationalist flag. For better or for worse,

⁴ Yang's sanction of the Red campaign against General Bakich in 1921 was only a last-ditch effort to resolve an external crisis that had merely spilled over into Xinjiang. It was a limited surgical procedure that provided insufficient pretext for Moscow to lay claim to an exclusive sphere of influence in Xinjiang.

just like Yang Zengxin, Sheng would now have to make or break his career in the northwest. The instant he left Xinjiang his political career would be over.

The orphan warlord thus had little choice but to work within the parameters of agency as dictated to him by his new Soviet patrons. This was all fine and good in 1934, when both Sheng and the Moscow shared the same immediate goal: peace and stability throughout the land, with a grateful Sheng *duban* uncontested in Dihua. The tasks of reconstruction were daunting, and the Soviet Union was the only power with the resources to rebuild Xinjiang. It had been well over a hundred years since a ruler in the northwest had had access to pockets so deep and a military so strong. As a result, Sheng could undertake innovative, expensive initiatives that had never been attempted before, without fretting over the possibility that a few disgruntled nobles or roving buccaneers from Gansu might stir up a hornet's nest (as they did in Hami in 1931). The Soviet Union had committed itself for the long haul in Xinjiang, and Moscow's leaders knew that they would have to invest significant capital in their pet project before they could make a substantive withdrawal. Whether or not Sheng, who had turned to Moscow as a matter of temporary expediency, would allow the Soviets to reap the profits of their investment remained to be seen.

Affirmative Action in Xinjiang

“Sheng Shicai is merely of ordinary talent, a man whose ambitions far outstrip his abilities,” Governor Jin informed Nanjing in July 1933, while Huang Musong was under

house arrest. “He will not be able to maintain peace along the borderlands.”⁵ When Jin made this disingenuous assessment of Sheng, the chief wellspring of chaos was situated on Xinjiang’s eastern border, where the shale rubble of Orangutan Pass kissed the desert sands of Dunhuang. In order to have any peace to “maintain” in the first place, Sheng had to find a way to isolate Xinjiang from this well of horrors. Though Ma Zhongying was soon out of the picture, Yolbars Khan, the disgruntled vizier of the former Hami khanate, was still holed up in his fortress, duly informing Nanjing of Sheng’s every move. The first group of Soviet experts to enter Xinjiang thus came up with a simple plan. They earmarked the route west from Dihua to major oases along the Soviet border—Kashgar, Aksu, and Ili—for immediate construction of nearly four thousand miles of state-of-the-art highways, complete with sturdy bridges and tunnels. In May 1934, twenty six Soviet engineers initiated a four-month survey of the route from Dihua to Hulgus Pass in the Ili Valley. It was here that Soviet resources were expected to be allocated most densely, in a region mere days from the Turksib railroad. The route east from Dihua toward Hami and Orangutan Pass, however—the chief artery connecting Xinjiang with inner China—would receive only a rudimentary, unkempt one-lane road.⁶ There was no better symbol of Xinjiang’s new orientation. All roads now literally led to Moscow.

Soviet hegemony in Xinjiang did not come without a hefty price tag, of course. In order to reconstruct this war-torn province, Moscow extended a pair of massive loans to Sheng Shicai. In 1935 and again in 1937, the Soviets extended two separate loans to

⁵ Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, ed., *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian—di wu ji, di yi bian: zhengzhi (wu)* [Collection of archival materials concerning the history of the Republic of China—vol. 5, no. 1: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5] (Nanjing, 1994), 558.

⁶ Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiq jiaotong shizhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, ed., *Xinjiang gonglu jiaotong shi* [A history of transportation and public roads in Xinjiang], vol. 1 (Beijing, 1992), 28–29. See also the fold-out map between pages 80–81.

Xinjiang totaling approximately eight million U.S. dollars. For Sheng *duban*, 1934–37 was the era of bottomless largesse, and he took full advantage of Moscow's munificence. Xinjiang was to undergo a complete Soviet makeover, a task necessitating far more than the rote application of financial band-aids. Moscow agreed to train a new class of technocrat officials, and between 1934 to 1936 over three hundred students studied in the Soviet Union, a number to be contrasted with the piddling five students sent to Germany during the reign of Jin Shuren.⁷ In the meantime, while waiting for the first batch of future officials to graduate, the Soviets set up and staffed a sophisticated surveillance agency to keep tabs on the general populace and ensure that the *duban* was kept abreast of any political agitation. The most visible transformation in Sheng's political portfolio, however, was brought about by Chinese and Uighur expatriate citizens in Moscow who worked for the Comintern. Nearly all of the Chinese agents were founding members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) from its early days in Shanghai, who had been shipped off to Moscow in the 1920s to be groomed as professional revolutionaries. Along with a sizeable contingent of Uighur socialists recruited long ago by Soviet consulates, the Comintern Chinese were sent back to Xinjiang to staff Sheng's administration in Dihua and make sure he read from the correct cue cards.⁸

These cue cards constituted the first revolutionary pronouncements ever to escape the mouth of a Han ruler in Xinjiang. There was good reason for this new gospel. Throughout the three years of incessant warfare, Ma Zhongying and other non-Han combatants had made devastating use of the rhetoric of national determination to garner

⁷ Cai, *Sheng Shicai zai Xinjiang*, 196–98, 207.

⁸ Zhu Peimin, *Xinjiang geming shi (1933–1957)* [A history of the revolution in Xinjiang (1933–1957)] (Wulumuqi, 1993), 25–29. The role of Xinjiang's Uighurs in the Comintern is the subject of a forthcoming dissertation by David Brophy at Harvard.

support for their cause. Turkic separatists in Khotan were among the most shrill. “Henceforth, we will have no need the employ the language or place names of outsiders,” declared one militant proclamation. “The black and yellow filth [i.e., Han and Chinese Muslim] have stained our land for far too long. We must cleanse ourselves of this filth, and drive out the yellow and black barbarians. Long live East Turkestan!”⁹ With the welcome mat rudely and suddenly withdrawn to anyone who could possibly be construed as a Xinjiang “outsider”—and no one was easier to classify as such than a carpetbagging Han general—Sheng found himself in dire need of a public relations massage. “Sheng is from the northeast [of China],” a central government report noted. “With respect to a platform of national determination, he is not qualified to fill the post of either *duban* or chairman in Xinjiang.”¹⁰ Another way to sum up the hostile environment confronting Sheng is to say that he was the first ruler in northwestern China forced to deal with the emerging crisis of Han colonial legitimacy. The meteoric rise of national determination rhetoric, from a bleary eyed romantic ideal in the nineteenth century to a militant political agenda by the 1920s, now forced the holders of political power the world over to justify their retention of any square inch of land predominately inhabited by peoples of different customs, language, or culture. In the 1930s, if Sheng Shicai could not somehow demonstrate that he was different from his predecessors—an “enlightened Han,” if you will—then he could not lay claim to the mandate to rule Xinjiang, China’s non-Han land *par excellence*.

⁹ Zhang Dajun, *Xinjiang fengbao qishi nian* [Seventy years of turbulence in Xinjiang], vol. 6 (Taipei, 1980), 3393–94.

¹⁰ Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, ed., *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian—di wu ji, di er bian: zhengzhi (si)* [Collection of archival materials concerning the history of the Republic of China—vol. 5, no. 2: *zhengzhi*, pt. 4] (Nanjing, 1998), 789.

Fortunately, the *duban* now had a wealth of Soviet experience and know-how at his fingertips, all culled from the Russian response to their crisis of colonial legitimacy over a decade earlier. Yu Xiusong, a Comintern Chinese despatched to Dihua in 1935, was tasked with the application of the Soviet affirmative action model in Xinjiang. Prior to Yu's arrival, Sheng had already formulated his "Five Great Principles," which were expressions of lofty governing platforms intended to anchor the conduct of his rule. When Yu suggested he add "ethnic equality" to the mix in 1936, the sixth and final "great principle" was born.¹¹ Ethnic equality meant, first and foremost, evincing an ostentatious show of respect in the public sphere for the majority non-Han peoples of Xinjiang. Yu started with the most basic of building blocks, consigning the allegedly derogatory moniker of "Turban" to the dustbins of history and referring to the people once encapsulated under that term as "Uighurs," a political designation of ancient pedigree first revived by the Soviets in 1922.¹² Before long, Yu had Sheng presiding over annual "ethnic representative conferences" in Dihua, with leading nobles and community leaders escorted to the provincial capital for an audience with the *duban*. The idea was to take the initiative and reach out to the people, all in an attempt to convince them that their participation in the provincial government was welcome. Nothing embodied this promise

¹¹ Gongqingtuan Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqu weiyuanhui and Balujun zhu Xinjiang banshichu jinian guan, eds., *Xinjiang minzhong fandi lianhe hui ziliao huibian* [An edited collection of materials on the United Anti-Imperialist Society of the Xinjiang Masses] (Wulumuqi, 1986), 9.

¹² Gansu sheng guji wenxian, *Zhongguo xibei wenxian congshu*, vol. 10, 507. One of the first usages of "Uighur" in Chinese that I have been able to find comes in a Chinese translation of a 1933 article in the official Soviet newspaper *Pravda*, where Russian commentary on the war in Xinjiang refers to "Uighurs" (translated into Chinese as "wu-yi-gu-er") as one of the many ethnic groups to be found in China's northwest. This may very well have been the first time Chinese leaders in Nanjing had ever come across this term, as is suggested by the unorthodox orthography used to transliterate what was to them a patently unfamiliar ethnonym (Sheng's administration transliterated "Uighur" as "wei-wu-er," a usage that has continued right up to the present day). See *Zhongguo di er lishi dang'an guan*, ed., *Zhonghua minguo shi dang'an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 1: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5, 502.

more than the ethnic composition of Sheng's new cabinet. Ostensibly fulfilling his vow to let the people of Xinjiang have a voice in the once exclusive Han administration, Sheng appointed Hoja Niyaz Hajj, a former Uighur rebel-in-arms once in cahoots with Yolbars Khan in Hami, as vice-chairman of Xinjiang. The symbolism of a non-Han politician occupying such an exalted political post was, as Sheng well knew, unprecedented.

The composition of Sheng's cabinet in Dihua was largely an exercise in visual propaganda, intended to convince jaded Uighurs that the *duban* was sincere in his desire to incorporate their leaders into office. In order to lure the commoners into participation as well, however, Sheng approved the establishment of two organizations: 1) the Anti-Imperialist Society (*fandihui*), and 2) the Association for Ethnocultural Advancement (*minzu wenhua cujinhui*). Revolutionary in both scope and action, these two mass organizations warrant extended analysis, for it was through them that the people of Xinjiang experienced a seismic shift in their perception of, and relationship with, the provincial government. The Anti-Imperialist Society, founded on August 1, 1934, was the official political mouthpiece of Sheng's administration, and it constituted the first and only organization into which a resident of Xinjiang could gain admission as a card-carrying "party member." From the moment of its inception, the Society was designed to indoctrinate the people with the sagacity of Sheng's policies, not least of which was his unswerving "friendship" with the Soviet Union. "The Soviet Union," wrote Yu, "is the good friend of all the small ethnicities of the world. The amount of help they have given to us in Xinjiang is known to all."¹³ Not surprisingly, the "imperialist" referred to in the name of the Society was not—as Chinese Nationalists in Nanjing certainly would have

¹³ Gongqingtuan Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhi qu weiyuanhui et al., *Xinjiang minzhong fandi lianhe hui*, 89.

alleged—the Soviet Union, but rather Great Britain and Japan, who constituted Moscow’s two chief rivals in Central and East Asia.

The Anti-Imperialist Society boosted the resonance of the state to a degree never before witnessed in Xinjiang. Urban dwellers experienced a revolution in print culture. Every time they went to the market, they paid in bills displaying both Chinese and Uighur script. By March 1936, there were 260 different titles of booklets, magazines, journals, pamphlets, and newspapers available for purchase on the streets. When the stress on Xinjiang’s rickety presses and limited paper supplies proved too much to bear, the Society consolidated operations into a single monthly flagship journal, *Anti-Imperialist Frontline* (*fandi zhanxian*), which soon tallied up a print run of 5,000 to 15,000 copies, in both Chinese and Uighur editions. In order to reach those nomads and sedentary rural dwellers who lacked convenient access to these publications, the Society also organized “back to the homestead” work teams, consisting of enthusiastic students and low-level government functionaries who vowed, during their summer vacations, to take the new gospel learned in Dihua back home to share with uninitiated friends and families. Hoping to hone the persuasive capabilities of these work teams, the Society sponsored speech competitions and training sessions in public rhetoric. “Though we have many kinds of print materials . . . if we want our message to penetrate the farthest corners of the province and take root in villages and marketplaces, we must hone our skills in public speaking and household persuasion, and communicate via the simple language of the streets.”¹⁴

Anyone fluent in both Chinese and a second indigenous language suddenly saw their stock skyrocket. One Mongol official was targeted for promotion based on the fact

¹⁴ Ibid., 20, 183.

that “he is fluent in Chinese, thoroughly conversant in the government’s policies, and has spent much time translating the speeches of the *duban* and other important figures [into Mongol].”¹⁵ Any man so linguistically endowed would have been sent to annual “ethnic representative conferences,” where he (or, for the first time, she) would have been thoroughly indoctrinated in the infallibility of Soviet affirmative action policies. “Other than the Soviet Union, which is the only country in the entire world to have completely and correctly solved its ethnic problems,” announced Yu Xiusong at the February 1937 Mongol Representative Conference, “Xinjiang is the only other place to have adopted a correct ethnic policy, made possible by our glorious April revolution.”¹⁶ Yu believed that in a land like Xinjiang, now supposed, in accordance with the “scientific” model of Soviet ethnic classification, to be home to fourteen distinct ethnic groups, ethnic tensions must be resolved before “any other subject can even begin to be broached.” How had Xinjiang’s ethnic problems been solved? First, “the special privileges of former ruling groups such as the Han have all been revoked.” Second, “from the vice-chairman to provincial committee members, from vice-departmental heads to vice-bureau heads, from vice-divisional heads through various organizations throughout the government—everywhere are representatives of the various ethnicities.” So long as their work adhered to the modified Stalinist maxim of “national in form, Six Great Policies in content,” all ethnicities would be allowed to conduct the affairs of their communities in their own languages.¹⁷

¹⁵ Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqu dang’an ju, Zhongguo shehui kexue yuan bianjiang shidi yanjiu zhongxin, and “Xinjiang tongshi” bianzhan weiyuanhui, eds., *Jindai Xinjiang menggu lishi dang’an* [Historical documents on the Mongols in modern Xinjiang] (Wulumuqi, 2007), 50.

¹⁶ Gongqingtuan Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqu weiyuanhui et al., *Xinjiang minzhong fandi lianhe hui*, 102.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 100, 104, 107.

The work of the Anti-Imperialist Society was largely a matter of making sure that the people of Xinjiang heard, read, and subscribed to the new political slogans emanating from Dihua. Though the Society went to unprecedented lengths to make sure everyone's ears were open, all it asked in return was a nod of the head and shake of the hand. By contrast, the tasks assigned to the Association for Ethnocultural Advancement carried much more potential for conflict. The Association, compartmentalized into nine sub-bureaus devoted to the affairs of each ethnic group (Han, Uighur, Chinese Muslim, Mongol, Kazak-Kyrgyz, Sibo-Solon-Manchu, White Russian, Tatar, and Uzbek), was charged with raising the cultural levels of "backward" peoples up to par with those of "developed" peoples. On the Marxist-Leninist scale of ethnic taxonomy, nomads such as the Kazaks and Kyrgyz invariably placed lowest on the barometer of civilization, ruling classes such as Han and Russian placed highest, and subjugated sedentary peoples such as the Uighurs and Uzbeks placed somewhere in between. Because nomads were assumed to be the most culturally impoverished of all, they were the subjects of the most aggressive policies. Not surprisingly, just like in the Soviet Union, Xinjiang's nomads were also the first to fight back.

In the spring of 1935, one of the first batches of twenty-eight Kazak and Mongol youth, ranging in age from thirteen to twenty seven, arrived in Dihua to register for classes at a newly opened elementary school designed specifically for the children of nomads. The provincial Bureau of Education, which managed these schools in tandem with the Association, was initially optimistic about the new arrivals, and glad that the Mongol and Kazak tribes were fulfilling their quotas for registered students. Before long, however, their lackluster performance became cause for concern. Four students left

school without explanation, three returned home due to “special circumstances,” and a staggering thirteen—nearly half of the entire class—showed up on the first day of classes with festering ulcers and boils covering their bodies. After being shipped off to a hospital and given a one-way ticket home, only eight students actually remained to attend classes. Why were the nomads of Xinjiang sending their sick, unmotivated, and irresponsible children to Dihua? A clue may be found in a newspaper rebuttal from Sheng’s government regarding the lackluster performance of some the new students. “Some people say, ‘Our family is poor and we live on a day-to-day basis. Our children must stay home to help, making it impossible to send them elsewhere to study.’”¹⁸ Sending healthy and diligent children to the provincial capital constituted a significant blow to the productive capabilities of the family left behind. Furthermore, as we shall soon see, once the first crop of students began to take the fruits of their education back home, their conservative elders did not like what they heard.

This brings us to the following question: What was the point of trying to educate Xinjiang’s next generation of youth in the first place? Was Sheng Shicai an altruistic advocate of universal education, someone who was merely trying to bring his people out of “darkness” and into the “light,” as so many of his public pronouncements alleged? In official missives between the *duban* and the heads of the various Associations, we catch a glimpse of the political pragmatism underlying the new educational system. “The Mongol people believe in Tibetan Lamaism, which is full of superstitions,” wrote a man named Saliq, the head of the Mongol Association, to Sheng. Therefore, “we should set up a Lamaist place of worship in Dihua, one which will give Mongol youth a pretext to visit to

¹⁸ Ibid., 151.

the capital. Then they can recite the Buddhist scriptures as they please, while we simultaneously compel them to enroll in school and receive the new education.” This way, the Lamaist religion would “naturally fade away” and Mongol youth would “fully comprehend the policies of our government.” The result would be enthusiastic ambassadors of government propaganda who would return to their communities and speak well of Sheng’s administration.¹⁹ In another directive, Sheng made it clear what he expected of any nomadic personage who received food and board in Dihua. “In the future they are to return to their pastures and thoroughly indoctrinate their people’s minds with our policies.”²⁰

The reason Sheng wanted to compel non-Han youth to take up study Dihua was because he needed credible indigenous cadres to help him defuse suspicions toward his new policies. What were some of these policies? To give merely one example, in the realm of custom and culture, the Comintern advised Sheng to abolish the ubiquitous practice of underage marriage among the Uighurs and Kazaks. In January 1936, word reached Dihua of the plight of eleven-year-old Patima, whose prepubescent marriage had resulted in injuries to her uterus and vagina. “The marrying off of adolescent girls is an age-old custom among the Kazaks and Uighurs,” the authorities observed. “Post bulletins banning this custom, and convene all village heads and tribal chiefs to explain to them that this practice is to be henceforth strictly forbidden.”²¹ Though our sympathies today are more likely to lie with Patima and the Dihua administration than with the wealthy Uighur clerics on this matter, it is important that we note the shrewd political calculus

¹⁹ Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqu dang’an ju et al., *Jindai Xinjiang menggu lishi dang’an*, 146.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 423.

²¹ Archives of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (Urumchi, China), file 2–6–962, 13–14.

underlying such appeals to cultural reform. A restriction against underage marriage did not simply free prepubescent girls from sexual abuse. It also undermined the authority of long-entrenched religious leaders throughout the province, who viewed these pronouncements as an attack on the very basis of their authority. Not surprisingly, local religious leaders paid little heed to the new directive. “[The people here] no nothing of official government policies,” reported an downcast official from Karashahr in December 1938. “Though our various leaders have enthusiastically propagated government policies, speaking until our tongues are dry and wisdom depleted, we can claim less than one enlightened convert out of every hundred people.”²²

Confronted with such stubborn indifference in the locality, Sheng tried to cultivate new leaders in Dihua who were loyal to his administration and eager to transform their communities. When an enterprising young Mongol noble from Karashahr took up an advisory post in Dihua, he decided to appoint a new breed of leader to take his place back home. “The current chief is a doddering old man, who spends his days reciting the scriptures and ignoring matters of state,” he wrote to Sheng. “In order to carry out our tasks of improvement, we must promote a talented new person. The current incumbent is not the man for the job.” The ideal candidate was someone more like the Living Buddha of Tacheng, who in 1938 “voluntarily stepped aside and let the pastures bordering Heshi county undergo household registration and be donated for urban construction.”

Deplorable were those tribal chiefs who “do not let any outsider settle on their pastures. As a result, no one is able to commit to serious cultivation, and the land lies fallow for

²² Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqu dang'an ju et al., *Jindai Xinjiang menggu lishi dang'an*, 80.

decades.”²³ Model leaders were supposed to welcome veterinarians from Dihua, who would then administer vaccines to their flocks with the goal of boosting herd sizes. Left unspoken yet suspected by the locals was that any flock surplus would not be for the shepherds to reap. To long incumbent tribal leaders throughout Xinjiang, accustomed to being left alone by Yang Zengxin, the pattern for Sheng’s preferred method of selecting local allies was becoming distressingly clear: the new ladder of success required a willingness to transform the productive capacities of fragile pasturelands.

When all the rhetoric is stripped away, these were the fundamental lessons that were being cultivated in the minds of those students who studied in Dihua. They were taught to despise their religious elders, lecture their neighbors on the evils of traditional marriage practices, turn their pastures into farms, and welcome immigration from ethnocultural outsiders. And they were expected to pay for Sheng’s new policies through a series of “voluntary donations.” When such “donations” proved less than forthcoming, the provincial Bureau of Education found itself saddled with requests for funds to cover the cost of textbooks, classroom supplies, bilingual teacher training, and student room and board.²⁴ Soviet-style affirmative action was not cheap, nor was it blind. Its proprietors “rescued” their subjects from a life of “feudal darkness” with great selectivity, promoting only those few who were willing to butt heads with the established political order back home. Just like in the Soviet Union, however, we would be wrong to assume that participation in the new order was invariably the product of coercion. In every oasis and tribe, there were always a handful of men and women with little to lose and

²³ Ibid., 50, 264.

²⁴ Ibid., 149, 152–53, 164.

everything to gain by attempting to undermine the status quo and throw in their lot in with the new Soviet-backed government.

It seems safe to say, however, that many people—nomads especially—had reason to be temper their initial optimism concerning the new administration. In the mid-1930s, of course, this was not yet a problem for Sheng. The Soviets were still committed to peace throughout the province, meaning that Sheng did not have to worry that his alienation of the steppe might contribute to general instability. As if to underscore the continued Soviet commitment to peace in the province, in September 1937 five thousand Soviet troops marched on Khotan and crushed the lingering bandit-army of Ma Hushan, the Commander of the 36th Battalion of the Nationalist Army after Ma Zhongying's departure in 1934. The victorious Soviet troops then relocated to the strategic stronghold of Hami, prompting Yolbars Khan to flee to inner China. These developments coincided with the opening salvos of Japan's attack on China's eastern seaboard, eventually severing Pacific shipping lines to the Nationalist wartime government in Chongqing. Before long, Xinjiang had become the only continental transport artery connecting Chinese armies on the front lines with the Soviet Union, now the sole supplier of critical munitions and other material assistance to Chongqing. Moscow, having invested heavily in Sheng's administration, now had even more reason to make sure their protégé stayed in power.

It was against just such a backdrop that Sheng decided to initiate his first purge.

Deplete and Replenish

“On December 4, 1937, at two o’clock in the afternoon,” reported the magistrate of Wulungu Lake county, in the Altay region, “we convened a meeting of approximately five hundred people. We explained the sentences of death for the most heinous offenders and announced the liquidation of their property. The audience responded with thunderous applause.”²⁵ Throughout the late fall and early winter of 1937, the people of Xinjiang were repeatedly regaled with harrowing accounts of traitorous officials occupying the highest echelons of power. These officials were said to have been “bought off by the imperialist powers,” to have served secretly as “running dogs of the imperialists,” and to be bent on “the mass murder of our compatriots.”²⁶ The endless meetings were necessary not only because the charges were so fantastic, but also because the purported offenders were so well known. In the three months from August to October 1937, more than eight hundred government officials received invitations to political gatherings meetings throughout the province. Upon their arrival, agents from Sheng’s security network placed them under arrest and escorted them to a jail in Dihua. Among the most prominent were the provincial Vice-Chairman Hoja Niyaz Hajj, former Kashgar *daoyin* Ma Shaowu, Soviet Consul-General Garegin Apresoff, and Comintern agent Yu Xiusong. All four of these men would later be executed.

The purges of 1937 were a clear indication that, four years after assuming the *duban*-ship, Sheng finally felt secure in his consolidation of power. Much as the Chinese Communists would do in the early 1950s, Sheng was now weeding out anyone toward whom he had once been forced to make political concessions of expediency. By late 1937,

²⁵ Archives of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (Urumchi, China), file 2–6–962, 36.

²⁶ Quotes taken from a public meeting convened on September 21, 1937 in a village in Ili. Archives of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (Urumchi, China), file 2–6–962, 100.

Yu Xiusong and his entire coterie of Comintern cadres had already served their purpose. They had imported a new rhetorical regime into Xinjiang and built the *duban* up into a “great helmsman” of impeccable revolutionary credentials. They had founded and staffed Xinjiang’s first professional publishing house as well as numerous social and cultural institutions. Most importantly, they had articulated Soviet-style affirmative action to an ethnically diverse populace deeply suspicious of a Han general atop the provincial throne. Though Soviet affirmative action had met with mixed results on the ground, it had already succeeded in achieving its chief goal: convincing Sheng’s rivals to take up a government post in Dihua, where he could watch them like a hawk. With Ma Hushan driven out of Khotan and Yolbars Khan squeezed out of Hami, Sheng could now remove his Dihua rivals without fear of retaliation. His first targets were Hoja Niyaz Hajj and Ma Shaowu, two men who had commanded some of the largest armies during the warfare of the early 1930s. Then, taking advantage of the widespread purges then occurring in the Soviet Union, Sheng parroted the Stalinist rhetoric of “Trotskyites” and “running dogs of imperialism” to implicate those Chinese, Russian, and Uighur agents of Moscow whom he feared may offer a viable alternative to his own leadership one day. And amid the purge hysteria of 1936–37, Stalin could hardly have ignored allegations of “Trotskyism” and “imperialist saboteurs” among his own foreign service corps. Thus the Soviet Consul-General Apresoff, whom Sheng had always found disagreeable, was promptly called back to Moscow and shot. Yu Xiusong and his several hundred Chinese Comintern agents were either jailed, reposted, or executed. To Sheng’s immense relief, Moscow questioned none of his accusations.

In the flash of an eye, Sheng gutted his entire administration of virtually anyone who had helped him consolidate power over the past three years. Yet they left behind them all the tools and institutions that had helped buttress Sheng's authority in the first place. All he needed was a new cohort of talented officials to help him replenish the organs of government. After the 1937 purges, lack of administrative talent, always a problem in Xinjiang, became even more acute. Complaints about unqualified officials and widespread vacancies began to flood the *duban*'s office. "Ever since these two officials fled their posts," wrote a Mongol from Karashahr in May 1938, referring to suspects who had narrowly evaded arrest, "affairs of state have gone untended. I alone certainly cannot assume the burden."²⁷ Sheng's security agents began to scour the countryside for suitable replacements, at one point embarking on a week-long search for talent in the Altay region. The local security bureau reported on "mannerisms of speech and body language," and cast in a positive light those youth born of mixed Han-Mongol marriages. "Since they are Han, they are completely loyal to the government." Other candidates were required to undergo an exhaustive vetting process designed to ensure complete political reliability. One candidate was ready to depart, but his local handlers "await the *duban*'s detailed investigation and directives before we send him to Dihua."²⁸

Cultivating indigenous talent in a Han colony was an excruciating process. The Soviets needed several decades in their former Russian colonies before the first new crop of loyal indigenous technocrats emerged. Sheng doubted Soviet largesse would last that long. Instead, six months before the autumn purges, Xinjiang's *duban* invited the Chinese

²⁷ Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiq dang'an ju et al., *Jindai Xinjiang menggu lishi dang'an*, 68.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 66–67.

Communists into Xinjiang. Having just survived their “long march” from Nationalist pursuit and reconstituted their headquarters in the loess caves of Shaanxi province, the Chinese Communists were eager to expand their base of operations. Fortunately for Sheng, in 1935 a detachment of the West Route Army split off from the main Long March convoy, eventually making its way toward western Sichuan and northwestern Gansu. This was hostile Ma territory, and in late 1936 the West Route Army suffered severe losses at the hands of Ma Zhongying’s uncle—Ma Bufang, the Nationalist governor of Qinghai. Though Mao Zedong made every effort to bribe the Ma warlords, hoping to purchase safe passage for the West Route Army, the Ma family resisted his overtures. It was only then that Stalin ordered Sheng to escort the embattled soldiers of the West Route Army into Xinjiang. “Where are you now, and how far are you from Dunhuang?” came the April 7, 1937 telegram from Yan’an, the Chinese Communist base. “You can go to Xinjiang. We have already received permission.”²⁹

After Sheng arranged an escort to Hami, Stalin authorized the posting to Xinjiang of an additional one hundred Chinese Communist cadres from Yan’an. Eager to please and under strict orders not to antagonize Sheng, this influx of administrative talent was just what Sheng needed. Whether by design or by luck, Sheng now had ready skilled replacements for the officials he had just purged. Nine cadres filled vacant posts in the empty *Xinjiang Daily* building, utilizing equipment imported by Communist contacts in Hong Kong. Before long they were churning out a daily newspaper with a print run of over twenty thousand, both in Chinese and Uighur editions. Chen Tanqiu, the secretary of

²⁹ Zhonggong Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqi weiyuanhui dangshi gongzuo weiyuanhui and Zhonggong Wulumuqi shi weiyuanhui dangshi gongzuo weiyuanhui, eds., *Zhongguo gongnong hongjun xilujun zuozhidui zai Xinjiang* [The left detachment of the West Route Army of the Chinese Workers and Peasant Red Army in Xinjiang] (Wulumuqi, 1991), 17.

the CCP's cover front in Dihua, laid down the principles by which his comrades were to conduct themselves. "Owing to Xinjiang's special economic and political situation," Chen announced, "not only will we not develop our Party here, but we will also refrain from propagating communism, and we will work without the formal organization of a Party structure." Sheng's Six Great Policies were "progressive policies best suited to Xinjiang's current conditions," and his Anti-Imperialist Society was "the only political organization" to speak of, and one in which undercover CCP members were expected to apply for admission.³⁰ CCP cadres were told to work under aliases, be humble, avoid being seen together, refrain from communicating with one another, and do their best to gain Sheng's trust. "Some comrades feel that it is wrong for us to risk our lives and endure hardships while working so hard to implement the Six Great Policies," Chen observed. "This is incorrect thinking."³¹

Mao wanted his cadres to endear themselves to Sheng for several reasons. First, a friendly Xinjiang provided a direct route of communication and transportation between Yan'an and Moscow. Before long, high-level CCP officials spearheaded the practice of taking a multi-day siesta in Dihua on their way to the Soviet Union. Badly needed war munitions and economic aid were also delivered to Yan'an via Xinjiang. Second, CCP leaders believed that if Sheng gained a favorable impression of its diligent, obedient workers, future prospects for CCP expansion in Xinjiang would be greatly improved. For Sheng's part, he was thrilled to gain access to a ready pool of revolutionary technocrats under strict orders not to meddle in the *duban*'s affairs. In propaganda organs,

³⁰ Zhonggong Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqi weiyuanhui dangshi gongzuo weiyuanhui and Zhonggong Wulumuqi shi weiyuanhui dangshi gongzuo weiyuanhui, eds., *Bahujun zhu Xinjiang banshichu* [The Eighth Route Army office in Xinjiang] (Wulumuqi, 1992), 34–35.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

educational initiatives, and cultural affairs, this glut of skilled free labor made the transition from Comintern to CCP management virtually seamless. “The *duban* treats us extraordinarily well,” observed one CCP report in April 1938, “and accepts ninety-five percent of all our suggestions.”³²

Sheng’s rosy relationship with these early CCP cadres also had the unintended consequence of conferring national publicity upon the *duban* as a leftist sympathizer. When disaffected Chinese from the inner provinces heard about Sheng’s cooperation with the Soviet Union and CCP operatives, they began to travel to Dihua in droves. Among them were the famous writer Mao Dun, who soon began to author articles for the *Anti-Imperialist Frontline*; the actor Zhao Dan; and Du Zhongyuan, a prominent polemicist and Communist sympathizer. A former classmate of Sheng’s from his days in Shenyang and Japan, in 1937–38 Du made three trips to Xinjiang. These trips inspired Du’s *New Xinjiang (xin Xinjiang)*, which offered a glowing portrayal of Sheng’s “revolutionary” administration and was intended to inspire like-minded youth in inner China to make a pilgrimage to Sheng’s Xinjiang. At the end of 1938, Sheng asked Du to stay on in Dihua as president of Xinjiang Academy. Du jumped at the opportunity, and before long he had founded student and women’s organizations claiming more than twenty thousand members.³³ Though Sheng would later grow suspicious of Du’s activities among the masses, for now he was just another hardworking advocate of the *duban*, one who filled critical vacancies in the realms of education and culture.

³² Zhonggong Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhi qu weiyuanhui dangshi gongzuo weiyuanhui et al., *Balujun zhu Xinjiang banshichu*, 20.

³³ Zhu, *Xinjiang geming shi*, 137–39.

With such a pliable, industrious workforce at his fingertips, Sheng decided to send many of his newfound employees to the most troubled regions of the province.

Throughout southern Xinjiang, from the devastated oasis of Kucha to the thin air of distant Tashkurgan, wherever an incumbent official was underperforming, CCP cadres soon showed up on their doorstep, red slip from the *duban* in hand.³⁴ “Ever since taking office as Moyu county magistrate,” Sheng observed in late 1940, referring to a suburb of Khotan, “Nasrijan has not had any accomplishments to his name. Relieve him of his post and fill the vacancy with Chen Jiexu, vice-director of the Khotan tax bureau.” Ten cadres alone were sent to Khotan, once the base of Ma Hushan’s bandit army. In Khotan, the CCP agents built bridges, dikes, schools, and hospitals, planted trees, and cleaned up corrupt tax bureaus. Results were swift. In 1939, the counties of Yarkand and Guma registered more than a twofold increase in total tax revenue over the previous year. CCP cadres in Khotan also undertook the delicate work of collecting and disposing of private firearms, widespread in the aftermath of war.³⁵ In both Khotan and Aksu, the only two oases in southern Xinjiang still without a newspaper, CCP cadres set up editorial bureaus and plugged these strategic regions into the provincial propaganda circuit.

The undisputed star of the CCP mission to Xinjiang, however, never set one foot outside the provincial capital. This was Mao Zemin, the younger brother of Mao Zedong. In February 1938, en route to Moscow for medical treatment, Mao stopped over in Dihua and was ordered by his elder brother to stay put. Ten days after his first audience with Sheng, Mao, working under the pseudonym Zhou Bin, was named vice-director of the

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 134–37.

³⁵ Zhonggong Hetian diwei dangshi bangongshi, ed., *Kang Ri zhanzheng shiqi Zhonggong dangren zai Hetian* [Chinese Communist Party members in Khotan during the period of the anti-Japanese war of resistance] (Wulumuqi, 1995), 22, 41–42, 55–56.

provincial Ministry of Finance. He had the biggest and most important job of all. Tasked with making Xinjiang fiscally solvent for the first time in its history, Mao's job was to relieve Sheng of his crippling reliance on the Soviets, who still provided one-third of the provincial budget. The enormity of his task quickly presented itself. "In little more than five years," he wrote to his brother in April 1938, "[Sheng] has printed 30 billion taels and taken out 20 million *yuan* in foreign currency loans. Who knows what other sins against humanity have been committed here?"³⁶

Mao decided to create a new provincial currency from scratch. The chief obstacles for the new currency were the lack of a trustworthy commercial bank in Xinjiang and paucity of gold and silver reserves. Without precious metals in the vault, any new currency was destined to become as worthless as its predecessor. On Yan'an's dime, Mao called in trained accountants and equipment from Wuhan to assist with the task at hand. Not long thereafter, the Xinjiang Commercial Bank opened its doors. A joint venture between government and the private sector, Mao's bank attracted droves of private savings. Between 1938 and 1942, the level of private capital stored in provincial banks multiplied 177 times. Reinvested by Mao's staff, this influx of capital was used to grant low-interest loans to "loyal farmers" and allow select rural backwaters to test-drive modern machinery such as tractors. Cotton and silk yields began to rise. Then, on Soviet advice, Mao identified the Altay mountains as the most likely repository of precious metals capable of backing the new currency. With the establishment of mining bureaus throughout northern Xinjiang, Mao encouraged a veritable goldrush to the Altay, offering

³⁶ Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqu caizheng ting, Zhongguo renmin yinhang jinrong yanjiusuo, and Xinjiang jinrong yanjiusuo, eds., *Geming licaijia Mao Zemin* [Revolutionary financier Mao Zemin] (Wulumuqi, 1994), 133.

highly attractive terms to any miner who struck it rich. Precious metals soon streamed into Dihua, stabilizing the provincial currency and providing guarantees for the banking industry.³⁷

Yet despite the establishment of a modern financial sector in Xinjiang, Sheng's ledgers were still in the red. The problem was clear: the Soviets were now demanding repayment of their sizeable IOUs. Mao, noting that annual provincial tax revenue was more than sufficient to finance the size of Xinjiang's bureaucracy, assessed the situation as follows. "If we had this [level of tax revenue] in northern Shaanxi," he wrote, referring to CCP headquarters in Yan'an, "we would find ourselves with an enormous surplus. But when we consider the unconscionable size of the foreign debt here, the situation is simply unsustainable."³⁸ As Mao surveyed the land for additional resources, Sheng sized up the wealth of those he had purged. Before long, Mao was placed in charge of the Rebel Assets Committee, a blanket organization that managed the confiscated wealth of anyone deemed a "rebel" by the state. It soon became clear that such resources were substantial. The confiscated estate of former Vice-Chairman Hoja Niyaz Hajj, for example, contained seventy-six camels and four thousand sheep in Dihua; five irrigation canals, one factory, and a hundred wells in Turpan; five thousand sheep and sixty irrigation canals in Hami; a house and tillable fields in Wushi; and one flower garden in Kucha.³⁹ All of this and more accrued to Sheng's vault.

There is little doubt that Sheng tried to utilize the coffers of the Rebel Assets Committee for the express purpose of alleviating his perennial financial deficits. During

³⁷ Ibid., 24–49, 63.

³⁸ Ibid., 133.

³⁹ Diary of Wu Zhongxin. Gansu sheng guji wenxian, *Zhongguo xibei wenxian congshu*, vol. 13, 183.

the era of the *duban*, anyone who went to jail could expect the majority of his family's assets to be confiscated. Though estimates vary, a veteran of Sheng's security force later put the number of those executed in Dihua alone at 14,000. Seeing as this number does not include the many more people who were jailed but later released, nor victims in any region outside of the provincial capital, we can probably concur with the assessment of another former official, Guang Lu, that the total number of people jailed during Sheng's tenure as *duban* was likely close to 80,000.⁴⁰ Sheng oversaw a vast security and surveillance network, employing more than a thousand people, far more than any other province in China. So many people were thrown into prison on trumped-up charges that visitors to Dihua elementary schools commented on the monopoly of female teachers in the profession. Half the students said they had no father at home. In 1944, with Sheng's departure, the Nationalist governor in Dihua found himself inundated with twenty to thirty petitions per day from relatives of the *duban*'s victims. Word on the street was decidedly pessimistic, and urban residents were known to repeat the following ditty: "Whether you go to jail now or go to jail later, only one thing is certain: sooner or later, you will go to jail."⁴¹

It seems likely that officials throughout Xinjiang identified prominent residents of some means, levying accusations of slander that automatically forfeited their wealth to state. Education and the military, two of the most costly institutions, seem to have been the chief recipients of confiscated assets. Owing to poor classroom conditions in Khotan, in 1939 a CCP educator registered his intent to "move the entire current group of students

⁴⁰ Ibid., vol. 11, 508; and vol. 10, 678.

⁴¹ Ibid., vol. 13, 131; vol. 10, 184; vol. 10, 95; and vol. 11, 134.

to the seized courtyard of rebel Ablajan, where they will hold class and assume lodgings.” Another school received 150,000 taels worth of auctioned-off “rebel assets” for “educational and cultural expenses.”⁴² In Hami, rebel assets were leveraged to purchase sixty-three camels to transport firewood for the local military garrison, and seized buildings were used to quarter troops.⁴³ Anything not funnelled into the military or education appears to have found its way straight into the coffers of Mao’s Rebel Assets Committee in Dihua. “We have taken possession of former Magistrate Chen’s rebel assets,” reported an official in Yarkand in May 1940, “and auctioned off his interests in copper and steel for \$1,477.26 in foreign currency. We will soon transfer these funds from the branch bank in Yarkand to the Rebel Assets Committee in Dihua. The remaining five hundred pounds of copper will be delivered on the next truck out.”⁴⁴ Whenever Sheng and Mao could not raise funds, they simply took them.

Mao Zemin and his CCP comrades helped Sheng extract money from the people of Xinjiang in another way, too, this one somewhat more tactfully disguised. Beginning with the first “voluntary donation campaign” in late 1936, the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war provided the perfect pretext for officials throughout the province to pass around a double-edged collection box. These collection boxes, once sanctioned from on high, made the rounds continuously for the next five years. Donation campaigns were run for almost anything that could be construed as a public cause. When the streets of Dihua turned into a mud-filled morass following the spring thaw, the municipal authorities

⁴² Zhonggong Hetian diwei dangshi bangongshi, *Kang Ri zhanzheng shiqi Zhonggong dangren zai Hetian*, 66, 63.

⁴³ Hami diqu difangzhi bangongshi and Hami diqu caizheng chu, eds., *Mao Zemin yu Hami caizheng* [Mao Zemin and public finance in Hami] (Wulumuqi, 1992), 189, 170.

⁴⁴ Archives of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (Urumchi, China), file 2–5–628, 51–52.

launched a “public hygiene” campaign. The patriotic slogan exhorted Dihua residents to maintain “healthy bodies if we are to drive out the Japanese bandits!”⁴⁵ In late 1936, a devastating earthquake in Lanzhou, the capital of Gansu province, provided the pretext for a “disaster relief” campaign. The residents of Kucha county forked out 122,000 silver taels for the victims, while thirteen wealthy donors in Weili donated 250,000 taels.⁴⁶ Despite the supposedly “voluntary” nature of these donations, clear quotas were imposed. In Dihua, all public servants were told to donate two days’ worth of salary for the front line in Suiyuan province.⁴⁷ During the public hygiene campaign in 1941, a Dihua shopkeeper observed that, due to a lull in business, “I am unable to submit my donation. I beg your sir to look upon me with pity, and order your subordinates to collect my donation in accordance with the lowest possible household regulations, as relief for your people.”⁴⁸

In those cases where overt quotas did not apply, a heavy measure of coercion appears to have been applied. In November 1937, one of Sheng’s generals turned an covetous eye on the property of native-place Han guilds from Hunan and Hubei. “Currently, these buildings stand as the private possessions of a minority of the population, and serve no benefit whatsoever to the general masses,” he noted. “Without instigating any suspicions, I propose that we send someone to make contact with the guild heads, convince them of the greater good they will be serving, and explain to them

⁴⁵ Ibid., file 3–1–53, 67.

⁴⁶ Ibid., file 2–6–933, 2–14.

⁴⁷ Gongqingtuan Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiq wei-yuanhui et al., *Xinjiang minzhong fandi lianhe hui*, 129. Employees in Xinjiang’s five Soviet consuls also donated several days’ salary.

⁴⁸ Archives of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (Urumchi, China), file 3–1–53, 66.

that we are not confiscating their property.”⁴⁹ The guild heads were, of course, free to decline the general’s entreaties. But in a political environment where any person of means was liable to be thrown into jail on charges of aiding the Japanese “imperialists,” they did so at their own peril. The clearest indication of widespread coercion, however, comes from the pre-emptive justifications of the collectors themselves. “The donations I collected this time were solicited without an ounce of forceful coercion,” wrote an agent for the Mongol Association of Ethnocultural Advancement in September 1939. “I took only from rich nomads who were willing to assist. No poor nomad was compelled to donate.” Collection agents working for the Anti-Imperialist Society also denied any wrongdoing. “These donations of sheep and jewelry were offered without the slightest bit of coercion, and every one of them was entirely voluntary.”⁵⁰

Why were collection agents of “voluntary donations” so paranoid about their image? The obvious answer is also the most likely one: precious few donations were, in fact, voluntary, thus necessitating repeated declarations to the contrary. There was, of course, the odd exception, such as the Uighur man in Luntai who, having no son, bequeathed three million taels to the provincial government upon his death (“for the war effort”), with the explicit injunction that his wealth not fall into the hands of the local Muslim clergy.⁵¹ But the vast majority of donation campaigns appear to have been carried out with coercion, and the wealth accumulated rarely seems to have been used for the intended purpose. We know this was the case because Sheng was quick to rail against

⁴⁹ Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqu dang’anju, Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan bianjiang shidi yanjiu zhongxin, and “Xinjiang tongshi” bianzuan weiyuanhui, eds., *Kang Ri zhanzheng shiqi Xinjiang ge minzu minzhong kang Ri mujuan dang’an shiliao* [Historical documents on donations by the various ethnicities of the Xinjiang masses during the anti-Japanese war of resistance] (Wulumuqi, 2008), 19.

⁵⁰ Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqu dang’an ju et al., *Jindai Xinjiang menggu lishi dang’an*, 175, 192.

⁵¹ Archives of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (Urumchi, China), file 2–6–933, 97.

such abuses, only two years after the first campaigns had begun. “In every district, despite repeated directives to the contrary, [local officials] continue to run rampant donation campaigns among the masses,” Sheng observed in July 1940. Noting that there would be no more mercy for offenders, the *duban* declared that “henceforth, anyone who proposes or advocates donation campaigns must be assumed to be a running dog of the imperialists, intent on sabotaging the policies of our government.”⁵² Local officials, who had come to depend upon these “donations” to finance their labors, resisted Sheng’s change of heart. They attributed any and all misunderstandings to “errors in translation,” and appealed to Sheng with the justness of their cause. “I was just about to proceed with collection duties for this year’s famine preparation donations,” wrote the magistrate of Korla county in September 1940, “when I received your orders that all donation campaigns should stop.” The magistrate appealed for an exception. “Can I continue to collect these donations or not?”⁵³

The broad outlines of Sheng’s donation campaigns appear to be clear. Under the pretext of war donations, public hygiene campaigns, earthquake relief funds, and famine preparation, Sheng was attempting to find additional sources of wealth that would allow him to pay back his Soviet loans. We might note that donations in kind, demanded of Xinjiang’s nomads, were exactly the sort of raw materials that the Soviet Union demanded of Sheng: cotton, silk, felt, mutton, leather, and sheep. Anyone who took seriously the slogan, “those with strength give strength, those with money give money,” were setting themselves up for disillusionment. When a Uighur peasant unable to meet

⁵² Hami diqu difangzhi bangongshi et al., *Mao Zemin yu Hami caizheng*, 329.

⁵³ Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqu dang’anju et al, *Kang Ri zhanzheng shiqi Xinjiang ge minzu minzhong kang Ri mujuan dang’an shiliao*, 204–5; and Archives of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (Urumchi, China), file 2–6–933, 87.

the donation quota in Korla offered to send his eighteen-year-old son to the front lines instead, he succeeded in unexpectedly calling Sheng's bluff. "It is not necessary for this man to send his son to the front lines to kill the enemy," the *duban* replied.⁵⁴ Only donations that could be used to buy off Soviet debts or finance expensive Soviet-style public institutions were to be accepted.

Only when Hitler attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941 was Sheng able to disguise his payments to Moscow in a shroud of legitimacy. "We have already set up a branch office of the Committee to Support the Soviet Red Army's Anti-German War," reported a CCP cadre in Khotan in September 1941. "Now we await distribution of our propaganda directives and a plan for collecting donations."⁵⁵ Those who helped Sheng ward off his Soviet debt-collectors were praised fulsomely. "This district magistrate has generously submitted a sizeable donation for the succoring of the Soviet Red Army," Sheng noted in January 1942. "This clearly shows his contempt for the enemy, and deserves commendation."⁵⁶ The last years of Sheng's reign were filled with unsuccessful attempts to halt rampant collection campaigns, nearly all of which had engendered vast amounts of ill will among the people. Sheng's pleas for restraint fell on deaf ears. Having sanctioned five years of forced donations from his subjects, Sheng and his administration were now dependent on such funds simply to tread water.

As we have noted before, the Soviet blueprint for bringing stability to non-Han Xinjiang and legitimizing a Han general as its *duban* was not cheap. It required costly

⁵⁴ Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqu dang'anju et al, *Kang Ri zhanzheng shiqi Xinjiang ge minzu minzhong kang Ri mujuan dang'an shiliao*, 140–41.

⁵⁵ Zhonggong Hetian diwei dangshi bangongshi, *Kang Ri zhanzheng shiqi Zhonggong dangren zai Hetian*, 32.

⁵⁶ Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqu dang'an ju et al., *Jindai Xinjiang menggu lishi dang'an*, 376.

affirmative action policies, public welfare institutions, and a professional army. It also required the services of an extensive security network that could neutralize anyone who became dangerously empowered by—or disillusioned with—Sheng's policies. The stabilizing effect of such costly public institutions was all that separated Sheng from the intractable quagmire faced by Yang Zengxin and Jin Shuren. Yet these institutions had never been free; if they had, Yang or Jin would have long ago made selective use of them. For the first three years of his reign, Sheng experiment freely with the ethnopolitical economy of Xinjiang, aware that Moscow did not expect him to pay back his debts yet. By 1937, with the land at peace for the first time in half a decade, the bill came due. Despite the efforts of Mao Zemin, Sheng found himself unable to pay in full. The deployment of CCP technocrats and constant exploitation of natural and human resources were Sheng's desperate attempts to climb over the hump of chronic fiscal insolvency in Xinjiang.

So long as discontent was confined to the urban sector, Sheng's security network proved more than capable of keeping a lid on the situation. But when Sheng took aim at the nomads of northern Xinjiang as well, he finally bit off more than he could chew. His determined assault on the steppelands of Xinjiang would spark a conflagration every bit as momentous as that which sprung out of Hami in 1931.

But this time, the Soviets would no longer be in any mood to help Sheng out.

Alienating the Nomads

In mid-1938, while scouring the provincial bureaucracy for opportunities to conserve funds, Qiu Zongjun, Sheng's father-in-law and the Minister of Provincial

Administration, hit upon the idea of abolishing titles of nobility among Xinjiang's nomads, the last bastion of hereditary aristocracy in Xinjiang. Bereft of their costly sinecures and prestigious monikers, dispossessed Mongol, Kazak, and Kyrgyz nobility would not only make an indirect contribution to the economy. They would also lose a key source of authority over their tribes. Ideally, such a transformation would be portrayed not as a fiat from on high, but as a voluntary petition from below. "It would be best if this tribe could request the implementation of a local administration and dissolution of the old titles of nobility on their own initiative," Qiu observed. "Then, after we carry out their request in accordance with the relevant statutes, those who are upset with the administrative change will have no pretext [to vent their anger]."⁵⁷ In the process, the provincial government would gain a legitimate pretext to tinker with the pastoral economy, now under the jurisdiction of county—not tribal—administration. For all of Qiu's lofty talk about the need to keep pace with the abolition of feudal vestiges in inner China, however, his chief motivation was economic, not political.

The above quote, excerpted from Qiu's July 1938 memorial to his *duban* son-in-law, clearly demonstrates the contradictions inherent within Soviet-style affirmative action. The Han-dominated state, hoping to defuse ethnic tensions, had made a tacit deal with its subjects. In exchange for access to the fruits of socialist modernity—schools, hospitals, material goods, and a small taste of political activism—the non-Han populace was expected to assist the Han *duban* in his efforts to increase agricultural and pastoral production, even if it came at their expense. Of course, Sheng hoped that his subjects would jump on board of their own volition. But in the event that they did not, the *duban*

⁵⁷ Ibid., 73.

now possessed enough coercive power to bring them onboard anyways. The goal was the transformation of unproductive steppelands into grain- and cotton-producing fields. Nomads, whose very mode of existence was premised on a vast domain of fragile pasturelands, stood to lose the most. Unlike many urban residents, who initially received the promise of socialist modernity with tentative optimism, nomads viewed these intrusions of the state as matters of life and death. And they were right. During the 1920s and 30s, in the Soviet Union, millions of nomads were forced to impoverish themselves through ecologically unsustainable agriculture, and an entire way of life vanished virtually overnight. Nevertheless, Han policymakers, taking a cue from their Russian counterparts, continued to believe that the failure of agriculture on the steppe was simply the result of lazy and stubborn nomads. “As only a tiny portion of the populace here is engaged in productive agriculture,” observed an official in Karashahr, “the vast majority of land has been left uncultivated, to the point where it has become a wasteland.”⁵⁸

Sheng, hoping to break out of the vicious cycle of unsustainable expenses that had plagued Yang and destroyed Jin, looked hopefully to the barren steppe. “In this time of all-out aggression from Japan,” Sheng wrote in mid-1939, “in order to fortify our rear base during wartime, we must find a way ... to stimulate increased productivity by developing agriculture and the pastoral economy.” The campaign to abolish titles of nobility among the nomads was the first concerted attempt to undermine traditional sources of authority on the steppe. This move granted Sheng’s government the right to sidestep the authority of tribal chieftains and administer direct governance to their lands. This was a stepping stone. Having neutralized one source of authority, Sheng turned to

⁵⁸ Ibid., 269.

others. Local officials were encouraged to undermine the positions of local Muslim leaders, and the more ambitious of them began to organize mass burnings of the Quran. As for the nomadic faithful, in 1937, Sheng issued an order banning the right to hunt. This struck right at the heart of the nomadic enterprise. “We have always depended on hunting in order to survive,” protested a Kazak chief. “If we cannot hunt, we will be unable to maintain our livelihood.”⁵⁹

Unfortunately for the nomads, however, this was precisely the point. The ban on hunting paved the way for the confiscation of firearms, their only means of resistance. By Sheng’s reckoning, without the legal right to hunt, the nomads no longer had any pretext to retain their guns. This was going too far. When the Mongols and Kazaks refused to hand over their weapons, Sheng suspected a conspiracy, and immediately resorted to coercive measures. In the fall of 1939, the *duban* invited tribal chieftains to Dihua, where he promptly placed them under house arrest. The idea was to ransom chiefs for guns.⁶⁰ The plan backfired. One Mongol chieftain defied the *duban*, gathered his followers, and fled the capital. Sheng sent emissaries to assure him that his “life, wealth, and status would be safeguarded,” and that he was free to transit as he wished.⁶¹ Back on the steppe, Mongols and Kazaks decided to take the battle to Sheng. In February 1940, Kazaks in Koktogay drew the first drop of what would turn out to be ten years of tumultuous bloodletting. Under cover of night, a team of braves laid siege to a security bureau and ambushed a firearms liquidation depot. Their message to the *duban* was carved on the

⁵⁹ Ibid., 96, 260.

⁶⁰ Zhonggong Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiq u weiyuanhui dangshi gongzuo weiyuanhui et al., *Balujun zhu Xinjiang banshichu*, 38–40; and Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 2: *zhengzhi*, pt. 4, 787.

⁶¹ Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiq u dang’an ju et al., *Jindai Xinjiang menggu lishi dang’an*, 176.

bodies of their victims, dumped unceremoniously at the gates of Altay city: corpses without eyes or tongues, and hearts and intestines dangling from their torsos.⁶²

Sheng responded by strafing the Altay steppes on repeated flyby missions. The Kazak rebels, soon fifteen hundred in number, shot down several warplanes.⁶³ In September 1940, a series of concessions brought Sheng an uneasy peace. He promised to close down local security bureaus, release imprisoned leaders, and cease the confiscation of firearms. Yet nomad unease continued. In June 1941, Koktogay flared up once more. This time, the Kazaks, fearing a Soviet takeover of the Altay, took aim at Russian convoys prospecting for gold and other precious metals. Altay officials begged Sheng to send reinforcements. “Because we lack any authority capable of keeping the peace out here,” wrote an alarmed official in Burjin in 1941, “our ability to develop agriculture has been compromised.”⁶⁴ Sheng reverted to familiar tactics. He invited those still willing to risk a meeting to Altay, where officials there convinced them to fly to Dihua. They were arrested on touchdown.⁶⁵

So long as the Soviets did not get involved, it was clear that Sheng could handle anything the natives of Xinjiang threw at him. The situation was similar to that faced by Jin Shuren at Hami a decade prior. Back then, Jin had easily suppressed the Turkic rabble led by Yolbars Khan and Hoja Niyaz Hajj. It was the entry of Ma Zhongying from Gansu that turned the tide. Nearly seven years in Sheng’s reign, history was about to repeat itself. But this time intervention would come from the west.

⁶² Zhang, *Xinjiang fengbao*, vol. 8, 4330–31.

⁶³ Zhonggong Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiq weiyuanhui dangshi gongzuo weiyuanhui et al., *Balujun zhu Xinjiang banshichu*, 28.

⁶⁴ Archives of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (Urumchi, China), file 2–6–961, 52–53.

⁶⁵ Zhang, *Xinjiang fengbao*, vol. 8, 4342–46.

Sheng Gets a Second Chance

In November 1940, Moscow decided to cash in on its long-term investment in Xinjiang. Ever since 1934, the Soviet Union had profited from a near trade monopoly in the province, enjoying an eightfold increase in raw material imports over the next six years.⁶⁶ But with war in Europe on the horizon, the Soviets needed more than just cotton, sheep, leather, silk, and oil. It needed the mineral building blocks necessary to construct modern industrial war munitions: tin, aluminum, copper, gold, silver, wolfram, and uranium. Lu Xiaozu, the one-time *daoyin* of Altay during the reign of Governor Yang, knew exactly why the Soviets refused to relinquish their hold over Altay. “Its rich deposits of metals are known throughout the nation,” Lu observed in 1945, a year after being released from the *duban*’s prisons. He recalled a debate he once had with Yang Zengxin regarding the relative importance of northern and southern Xinjiang. “[Yang] said, ‘Northern Xinjiang is more important. Even though southern Xinjiang has an abundance of agricultural products, their accumulated value still comes nowhere near the worth of the Altay mountains.’” From this recollected conversation Lu drew a sober assessment. “The reason the Soviet Union refuses to let Xinjiang out of its grasp is precisely because it wants to control the Altay mountains.”⁶⁷

Moscow’s response to the *duban*’s reports of Kazak unrest was to dispense with Sheng altogether and begin to build its own colonial regime in the Altay. In November

⁶⁶ Li Sheng, *Xinjiang dui Su (E) maoyi shi, 1600–1990* [A history of trade between Xinjiang and the Soviet Union (Russia), 1600–1990] (Wulumuqi, 1993), 479.

⁶⁷ Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, ed., *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian—di wu ji, di san bian: zhengzhi (wu)* [Collection of archival materials concerning the history of the Republic of China—vol. 5, no. 3: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5] (Nanjing, 1999), 305.

1940, the Soviets submitted for Sheng's approval a document that would allow them the right to unearth tin and other "ancillary minerals" in Xinjiang for a period of fifty years. Sheng, who owed his entire *duban*-ship to Moscow, duly affixed his seal. He had little choice in the matter. The "Xinjiang Tin Mines Agreement," or "Xin-Tin" as it came to be known, has been described as the most humiliating unequal treaty in China since Japan's "Twenty-One Demands" in 1915. The great experiment in Xinjiang was over. Reliance on the Soviets had not solved Xinjiang's problems, it had only delayed them—with interest. Like Yang and Jin before him, Sheng now fully appreciated the dangers of foreign aid.

Ever determined, however, the *duban* decided to give Mao Zemin once last chance to prove his worth. He responded by initiating a campaign in early 1941 to purchase "public debts," tastefully disguised as war bonds. Not surprisingly, the people of Xinjiang registered only lukewarm enthusiasm, and the campaign was dead on arrival.⁶⁸ Sheng blamed faulty implementation and deplored a widespread "apathy toward politics." By this point, however, eleven long years into his reign, Sheng was bereft of political capital. With the Soviets now demanding that he support the war effort in Europe, Sheng could only exhort his public servants to be more frugal, write on both sides of the paper, fix broken office chairs, ride bicycles to work, and, when conditions deteriorated even further, stop drinking tea. With Soviet loans at a standstill and the people of Xinjiang thoroughly disillusioned, the *duban* quite literally had no choice but to

⁶⁸ Hami diqu difangzhi bangongshi et al., *Mao Zemin yu Hami caizheng*, 273–75.

turn off the lights, an austerity measure soon implemented during working hours.⁶⁹ By 1941, Sheng was a pauper.

Had events been allowed to follow their natural course, Sheng would have certainly become a Soviet puppet, lacking all recourse to challenge the authority of those who kept him in power. In June 1941, however, Adolf Hitler breathed new life into Sheng's career. The German attack on Moscow shocked the Soviet leadership, diverting attention away from Xinjiang. Sheng, sensing an opening, decided to launch an attack on Moscow's proxies: CCP cadres from Yan'an. He already had the goods to initiate a purge—his spies in Khotan had long prepared for such a contingency. In 1939, Sheng's agents filed reports on clandestine meetings, the constant exchange of letters, and the unauthorized content of some of their propaganda. "The students in their classes have learned nothing about our government's policies whatsoever," revealed the report. "As evidence of this, when the students were asked who our great leader was, they responded, 'Mao Zedong.'" ⁷⁰ By July 1941, just one month after the German invasion of the Soviet Union, every CCP cadre in the province had been demoted or cashiered. Chen Tanqiu, the CCP's chief liaison in Dihua, relayed these disturbing developments back to Yan'an. "Recently Zhou Bin [i.e., Mao Zemin] offered some advice on the Altay troubles, and Sheng admonished him severely, demanding to know who was behind his plan," Chen later wrote. "As for myself, relations with the *duban* have become extremely cold. Four

⁶⁹ Gongqingtuan Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqu weiyuanhui et al., *Xinjiang minzhong fandi lianhe hui*, 247, 337.

⁷⁰ Zhonggong Hetian diwei dangshi bangongshi, *Kang Ri zhanzheng shiqi Zhonggong dangren zai Hetian*, 79.

months have passed since he last met with me, whereas in the past we used to meet twice a month.”⁷¹

The turning point came on March 19, 1942. For it was on this date that Sheng Shiqi, the *duban*'s younger brother, died under mysterious circumstances. In the months leading up to Shiqi's death, Moscow, consumed with Hitler's siege, did not have the time or resources to deflect Sheng's attack on their CCP proxies. They still tried, however, to procure resources for the battlefield. In March, the Soviets submitted an order to Sheng for fifty thousand horses, at prices well below market rates. While Sheng considered the request, Sheng Shiqi died suddenly and mysteriously from a bullet wound to the head. Based on extensive research, Cai Jinsong, Sheng's mainland biographer, has concluded that the death was most likely a homicide. He believes that Soviet agents convinced Shiqi's disgruntled wife to murder her own husband, before initiating an elaborate cover-up designed to make his death look like a suicide.⁷² At a minimum, we know for certain that Sheng himself believed his brother to have been murdered by Communist agents. The horse sale eventually went through, but his nine-year alliance with the Soviet Union was over.⁷³

Following the death of his brother, Sheng moved swiftly to root out his CCP subordinates. Chen Tanqiu, on high alert, warned Mao Zemin that his “situation may get worse,” and that he “may be the target of even more attacks.” Chen advised Mao to “be

⁷¹ Zhonggong Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiq weiyuanhui dangshi gongzuo weiyuanhui et al., *Balujun zhu Xinjiang banshichu*, 49.

⁷² Cai, *Sheng Shicai zai Xinjiang*, 325–39.

⁷³ On the sale of horses to the Soviet Union, and lingering disputes over payment, see Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiq dang'an guan, ed., *Xinjiang yu E Su shangye maoyi dang'an shiliao* [Historical documents on commerce and trade between Xinjiang and Russia/Soviet Union] (Wulumuqi, 1994), 496–98, 502–6.

careful, keep a cool head,” and meet his trials “with patience.”⁷⁴ Back in Yan’an, Communist leaders counseled their agents in Xinjiang to stay calm, and refrain from doing anything that might give Sheng a pretext to put them in jail. They were too late. On July 1, 1942, the *duban* called Chen via telephone and informed him that all CCP cadres were to be relocated to a new residence on the outskirts of Dihua, ostensibly for their own “protection.”⁷⁵ Chen demanded that Yan’an recall its men at once. “We are not morons,” Chen protested. “When conditions no longer allow us to cooperate, we should stop trying to cooperate. We are not lambs waiting to be slaughtered.”⁷⁶

Unfortunately, that was not for them to decide. Two months later, Sheng placed 140 of Chen’s men under arrest, and moved them to the infamous prisons of Dihua. Yan’an had been right about only one thing. Mao’s belief that Sheng Shicai would not harm his brother so long as Soviet troops were still in the province was true. Instead, Sheng waited for the departure of Soviet armies in 1943. Only then did he sign the order for their execution. Sheng, fully convinced that Yan’an and Moscow had been in cahoots, later offered the following justification for the untimely end of Mao Zemin. “Since Mao Zedong had my brother killed, why should I not kill his brother?”⁷⁷

Assessing Sheng Shicai

In late 1943, Osman Batur, an aspiring Kazak chieftain whose star had risen in the absence of Altay’s nobles, urged his followers to reflect upon the past decade of life

⁷⁴ Zhonggong Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqū weiyuanhui dangshi gongzuo weiyuanhui et al., *Balujun zhu Xinjiang banshichu*, 51.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 53, 60.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁷⁷ Whiting and Sheng, *Sinkiang: Pawn or Pivot?*, 244.

under Sheng Shicai. “Over the past eleven years, the *duban* has ruled Xinjiang through his Six Great Policies,” Osman observed in an open letter. “He said that Kazaks would be treated equally with all the other peoples, that he would implement sound local government, and that good people would be sent to run it. In addition, he promised us our own militias for the protection of our religion and wealth. He also promised to raise our cultural levels, decrease taxes, and improve our livestock.” Instead of making good on his promises, however, Osman accused Sheng of turning once pliant Kazaks into enemies of the state. “He put bad people in local government and imprisoned our leaders. He forbid us from organizing a Kazak militia, and tried to confiscate our guns. Instead of protecting our religion, he destroyed our mosques and incarcerated our *imams* and *mullahs*. He increased taxes, and confiscated our livestock at will. Trade has come to a standstill, and all personal wealth has vanished.” The Kazaks, Osman declared, had no choice but to resist. “We are not animals. We are the same as any other people. And when we see that the *duban*’s words do not match his actions, how can we not call our brethren to arms and wage a struggle for our people?”⁷⁸

Osman’s letter is an apt summation of the profound sense of disillusionment that descended upon Xinjiang during the late 1930s and early 1940s. Their disillusionment was made all the more acute due to the revolutionary pep talk given to them at the outset. The fact that Sheng had given them a pep talk in the first place was something entirely new. In the days of Yang Zengxin, the provincial government had very little contact with the common man. “In those days no one ever saw the governor,” one noble recollected in

⁷⁸ Zhang, *Xinjiang fengbao*, vol. 9, 5193–94.

the 1940s.⁷⁹ The relationship between those who governed and those who were governed was clear. Peasants, nomads, and all non-Han peoples were assumed to be ignorant, easily led astray, and in sore need of sound governance by elites schooled in the Chinese classics. Those who governed would never be so reckless as to actually promise to cede a share of their power to the ignorant masses under their charge. The result would surely be anarchy, or at least a tyranny of the ignorant. And yet, beneath his rhetorical veneer, by the end of the decade key features of Sheng's rule—those most deplored by his non-Han detractors—began to ape those of his predecessors, in substance if not in form. “The positions of assistant county magistrate and assistant bureau magistrate should all be filled with Han officials,” wrote the district magistrate of Karashahr in early 1939. “This will enable us to carry out our work.”⁸⁰ By the time Sheng turned to the Nationalists in 1942, no Turkic or Mongol official occupied any position of substance.

What Sheng Shicai brought to Xinjiang was the modern discourse of political mobilization. Those taken in by his fine promises might say he brought political doublespeak to the province. Sheng told the people of Xinjiang that he would provide universal education, grant political and cultural autonomy to each ethnic group, improve agricultural and pastoral production, and integrate men and women of talent into government, irrespective of ethnic or economic background. Those skeptical of yet another Han *duban* in Dihua were amazed to hear that he had actually invited them to join his government. Sheng could make such promises because he had a powerful patron watching his back. Moscow provided both the initial start-up capital and personnel

⁷⁹ Zhongguo di er lishi dang'an guan, ed., *Zhonghua minguo shi dang'an ziliao huibian—di wu ji, di san bian: zhengzhi (wu)* [Collection of archival materials concerning the history of the Republic of China—vol. 5, no. 3: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5] (Nanjing, 1999), 351.

⁸⁰ Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqiang dang'an ju et al., *Jindai Xinjiang menggu lishi dang'an*, 85.

necessary to get the new regime off the ground. Yet wholesale reliance on Moscow was not an viable long-term strategy. Sheng's adaptation of Soviet affirmative action policies in Xinjiang was a temporary expedient designed to restore peace to the land. The tools of Soviet government were a means to an end. And in the early years of Sheng's reign, the end was peace, and the tools performed brilliantly: a little more than a year after the April 1933 coup, most of Sheng's rivals had laid down their weapons and voluntarily joined his administration.

Once peace had been attained, Sheng found himself saddled with mounting bills for those organizations that had been necessary to vouch for his commitment to the new order. Yet when the bill for Soviet loans finally came due, outfits such as the Anti-Imperialist Society and Association for Ethnocultural Advancement—not to mention schools, print publications, and hospitals—began to make their burden felt. By this point, the logic of rising expectations precluded the possibility of regression. Sheng's political legitimacy was now bound up with these expensive organizations. To make matters worse, they had also become the focal point for social discontent. Over the course of several years, those who had bought into system now expected to rise to positions of substantive authority. But Sheng, a political orphan entirely dependent on the patronage of Moscow, could not afford to surround himself with ambitious officials beholden to the very same patron. At any moment the Soviets could replace Sheng with the man beside him. To make matters worse, those who had not bought into the system—nomads and Muslim clerics—continued to resist the institutional manifestations of Sheng's rule with bitter determination. Thus, unless the *duban* was willing to make good on his promises of a power-sharing government, disillusionment and conflict was inevitable. It should thus

come as little surprise to us that Sheng attempted to insulate himself from the fallout of his rise to power by resorting to a coercive security apparatus loyal only to himself.

Without a powerful patron or an airtight cocoon, the Han colonial administration in Xinjiang was destined to consume more resources than it could produce. Soviet subsidies were a temporary stopgap measure; they did not make the problem go away. In fact, premised as they were on the prospect of eventual profit for Sheng's investors, in the long run such subsidies actually exacerbated Sheng's plight. Sooner or later, the cost of keeping Nanjing out of Xinjiang would be visited upon Sheng tenfold. It is for this reason that Chiang Kai-shek's stanch defense of Sheng's tenure in Xinjiang is, as alluded to earlier, instructive as it is disturbing. That Sheng had been forced to bleed the turnip dry and operate a terrifying police state did not bother the Generalissimo in the least bit. What mattered most was that Sheng, in preserving his own power, had also preserved the territorial integrity of Xinjiang. So long as Sheng's interests continued to be synonymous with those of the province in his charge, anything Sheng did to keep himself in power ultimately served to buttress Chinese sovereignty in the northwest.

From Chiang Kai-shek's vantage point in Chongqing, Sheng had managed to pull off a minor miracle. More than a decade after militant calls to throw off Han rule had inspired Muslim armies to lay waste to the northwest, an expertly camouflaged Han colonial administration and its Han *duban* still reigned supreme. Even better, Sheng had utilized foreign Soviet resources in order to preserve domestic Chinese rule. The coup de grâce came in 1942, when Sheng purged Chiang's Communist rivals and kicked out the his foreign patrons, without ever having paid the their bill in full. And now he would need a new patron. From their wartime base in Chongqing, the Nationalist government

must have looked on with equal parts admiration and optimism.

Chapter 7

Moscow's Revenge, 1942–44

On December 31, 1942, Chiang Kai-shek reflected on the events of the past year by penning an entry in his diary. “In July, Xinjiang’s civil governor and *duban* Sheng Shicai redeemed himself by submitting to the central government, and Ma Buqing removed all of his troops from the Hexi corridor. As a result, we have recovered approximately 1,900 miles of land from Lanzhou in the east to Ili in the west. This constitutes the greatest accomplishment in the history of the Nationalist government.”¹ Though Chiang was eager to take credit for these momentous developments, he had in fact done very little to bring them about. In reality, the “recovery” of Xinjiang was first set in motion by Hitler’s march on Moscow in the summer of 1941, brought to fruition by the Axis siege of Stalingrad the following year. Much like Yang Zengxin’s six-year “trial by fire” during 1916–21, the fate of Xinjiang was once more being determined by larger geopolitical developments thousands of miles away. Yet while European crises might set the stage for the political theater of modern Chinese history, Han actors were destined to play the leading roles. Just like during the Russian civil war, the weakness of the Soviet state was a temporary phenomenon, but it was one that could be skillfully exploited for strategic gains normally out of reach to an inferior military power like China. In 1924, Yang Zengxin had managed to wrangle five consulates out of an embattled Soviet state still in its infancy. In the three years from 1942 to 1944, Chiang Kai-shek took similar

¹ Gao Sulan, “Zhanshi guomin zhengfu shili jinru Xinjiang shimo (1942–1944)” [An account of the takeover of Xinjiang by the Nationalist government during the war years (1942–1944)], *Guoshiguan xueshu jikan* 7 (2008), 160.

advantage of Russian political headaches to pull off a feat that rivaled that of the long deceased governor.

There are three interlocking stories to be told here. The first is how, after nearly three decades of political alienation and economic orphanage, the abandoned Han colony of Xinjiang was reeled in by a Chinese central government far too weak to handle its unexpected catch. The second story relates how Moscow, soon on the mend from the German failure to take Stalingrad, enacted its revenge on both Sheng and his new Nationalist patrons by training, arming, and inciting the Turkic inhabitants of Xinjiang against Chinese rule. No longer interested in helping Sheng camouflage the perpetuation of a Han colonial administration in Xinjiang via the use of an affirmative action platform, the Soviets turned their strategy on its head and began to ruthlessly exploit the Han crisis of colonial legitimacy. They would gain by proxy force what they had failed to secure by diplomatic finesse. And finally, there is Sheng himself, the orphan warlord, who would now attempt to hang on for dear life as one spurned patron readied to do battle with another. Sheng did not “redeem” himself with the central government because he had a nationalist awakening. He invited Nationalist delegations to Dihua for the express purpose of deflecting the wrath of the Soviets, who were intent on punishing him for what they perceived as his “ingratitude.” Just as Sheng had tolerated Mao Zemin’s management of Xinjiang’s finances only so long as he could continue to make strides toward fiscal solvency, so too would he now entertain Nationalist diplomats only so long as they could stave off the fury of Moscow.

In October 1944, when the dust settled, the Nationalists appeared to have emerged victorious. Yet it was a pyrrhic victory. The harder the Nationalists tried, the more they

were forced to realize just how far in over their heads they were in Xinjiang. No matter how many troops or dollars they committed to the cause, it would never be enough to trip up a Soviet foe determined to undermine Nationalist prospects in Xinjiang. Just five months after declaring the recovery of Xinjiang the “greatest accomplishment in the history of the Nationalist government,” the Generalissimo found himself shackled with a military and economic quagmire that he had few resources to meet. The advent of Nationalist authority in Xinjiang fast became a burdensome black hole for the central government, one that sucked precious troops, funds, personnel, and political capital away from the struggle against Japan and the impending civil war with the Chinese Communists. The Nationalists would have been much better prepared to face the challenges of the 1940s if they have never gained sovereignty over Xinjiang in the first place. This fragile behemoth, forsaken by Beijing during the Russian civil war and thereafter a mortal liability for its governors, offered nothing but trouble for a Nationalist government that could not even exercise effective control over the Chinese heartland.

Yet the tantalizing prospect of geopolitical unity, a mirage that had sung its siren song to generations of frustrated Chinese statebuilders, proved irresistible. The Nationalists had done nothing to bring about the opportunity to infiltrate Sheng Shicai’s Xinjiang. If anything, they should have sent a thank-you card to Adolf Hitler. Yet they had prepared well for just such a contingency. And when the moment came, Chiang was ready. By 1944, he had done more than enough to deserve his new territorial gains in the northwest. Unfortunately for the Nationalists, these new gains came served with a crushing dose of Moscow’s revenge. And, just like Japanese meddling in Manchuria a decade earlier, the bitter pill the Soviets would force Chiang to swallow seriously

undermined the strength of his party, and endangered Nationalist control not just over Xinjiang, but over the entire country.

Taking Stock of Sheng

During the first decade of Sheng *duban*'s rule in Xinjiang, we talked little about his relationship with the central government. The reason is simple. For all intents and purposes, from 1934 to 1942 there was virtually no relationship to speak of. Sure, there were rote telegrams laced with political decorum, like when Chiang Kai-shek congratulated Sheng on his assumption of the civil governorship in 1940, after the death of figurehead Li Rong. "Your exalted enquiries and majestic words are engraved upon my heart," Sheng replied, most insincerely, in April. The *duban* did not even bother to save face for the many Nationalist generals whom Chiang had called upon to second the Generalissimo's congratulations. "During this time of war, in the interests of frugality, please forgive me for not replying to each telegram individually."² The two sides watched each other like a pair of hawks. After Kazaks from Barikol and Altay began to flee to Gansu and Qinghai in the late 1930s, the Nationalist government sent the former vizier of the Hami khanate, Yolbars Khan, to Lanzhou, where he liaised with Ma Bufang to make overtures to the refugees. By 1939, Yolbars was translating Kazak grievance letters for Nationalist planning committees in the wartime capital of Chongqing, hoping to gather political capital for future operations. Yolbars and Ma despatched numerous humanitarian missions to the Xinjiang-Qinghai border region, a

² Archives of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (Urumchi, China), file 2-2-93, 85-86.

strategic move that did not pass by Sheng unnoticed.³ When a group of refugees suddenly returned to Xinjiang unexpectedly, alarmed officials in Barikol debated whether or not they should detain them, so as to prevent them from intermingling with those who had not fled.⁴ After all, who knew what secret mission or rumors the Nationalist delegations had supplied them with?

The first sign of a possible thaw in the relationship between Dihua and Chongqing came soon after the German assault on Moscow. In July 1941, Sheng Shicai granted permission for a Nationalist diplomat working in the Chinese embassy in Moscow to come to Xinjiang for an unofficial tour of the province. During his month-long tenure in Dihua, this Nationalist envoy fixated on Xinjiang's "ethnic problem." Noting that most long-term Han residents were sickly and decrepit opium addicts, he contrasted them with the region's Kazaks, Uighurs, and Mongols. "Lacking any vices, their bodies are strong and healthy, which enables them to work hard and be industrious. Though less educated and without weapons, they put to shame those of Han lineage, who live in abject fear of them." It was precisely this ethnic divide that gave foreign powers like the Soviet Union the opening they needed to exploit the Han crisis of colonial legitimacy in Xinjiang. As a result, the report predicted that the Turkic and Mongol peoples "will not be content to accept Han rule forever." Though he proposed a long-term solution involving Han migration and assimilation through education, the envoy saw much to recommend in Soviet nationality policies. Having passed through Kazakstan and Uzbekistan on his way to Dihua, the envoy noted that both republics, though nominally autonomous states, were

³ Zhongguo di er lishi dang'an guan, ed., *Zhonghua minguo shi dang'an ziliao huibian—di wu ji, di er bian: zhengzhi (si)* [Collection of archival materials concerning the history of the Republic of China—vol. 5, no. 2: *zhengzhi*, pt. 4] (Nanjing, 1998), 840–79.

⁴ Archives of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (Urumchi, China), file 2–2–105, no page number.

in fact “puppet” governments. “Though native peoples are installed in office, every important lever of decisionmaking is controlled by the Russians.” The report ended with a call to emulate Sheng’s selective adaptation of Soviet nationality policies in Xinjiang. “In just two years he has achieved stunning results, and there appears to be no downside to this approach. In the future perhaps we can employ similar tactics for our own profit.”⁵

This optimistic report provided much food for thought for the Nationalist brass back home. It seemed to confirm the prevailing wisdom—first in evidence during the show trial of Jin Shuren in 1934—that the central government could best consolidate its hold over Xinjiang by sponsoring prominent non-Han officials who nonetheless held no real power. Success depended on the quality of the camouflage, a political artifice that the Soviets seemed to have mastered. Despite Sheng’s success in hiding widespread provincial discontent from his Nationalist envoy, the very fact that the *duban* had been in power for nearly a decade clearly inspired confidence and admiration in Nationalist circles. Even after his reign of terror came to light, no one seemed to care. “Today Xinjiang is still a part of China,” the same report declared triumphantly. Any unpleasanties effected under Sheng’s rule were merely the result of “political chaos and economic hardship,” two ills that the central government thought it could handle. It did not matter how Sheng and his Han administration had lived to see the dawn of 1942. It was enough simply that they had, and that the Nationalist flag still flew over Dihua.

⁵ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, Nangang, Taiwan, Legal Division (*tiaofasi*), file 607.6/0005, “Xinjiang diaocha baogao” [An investigative report on Xinjiang], no page numbers.

“Right now the Xinjiang authorities are busting their tails and enduring all forms of hardship. Their efforts deserve our commendation.”⁶

The Chinese Communist infiltration of Xinjiang, much feared in Nationalist circles, had not come to pass. Chongqing now knew that Sheng was not cooperating with the Soviets and the Communists out of political conviction. He was exploiting them out of pragmatism. This realization prompted a sense of urgency for the Generalissimo. In July 1942, when the *duban* invited a major delegation of high-ranking Nationalist officials to Dihua, Chiang knew his window of opportunity would be short. Comintern agents had survived only two years under Sheng. The Chinese Communists had made it to three. Chongqing would have to find a way to position Nationalist diplomats and troops throughout Xinjiang in as short a time as possible. And the Generalissimo would have to do it without arousing the suspicions of Sheng, who had a habit of lashing out against anyone who got too near.

The battle for Xinjiang was set to begin.

The Nationalists Enter Xinjiang

“You let Sheng Shicai get away, so it is your job to bring him back,” Chiang wrote to Zhu Shaoliang in July 1942, shortly before his departure for Dihua. “You are not allowed to leave the northwest until Xinjiang is taken care of.”⁷ Back when the future *duban* was still living in Nanjing, General Zhu had been his immediate supervisor. He had also signed the contract and provided the funds that allowed Sheng to make the trip

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Cai Jinsong, *Sheng Shicai zai Xinjiang* [Sheng Shicai in Xinjiang] (Zhengzhou, 1998), 342.

to Xinjiang in 1930. Twelve years later, Chiang ordered Zhu to accept Sheng's offer of a preliminary mission to Dihua. The groundwork had been laid several months earlier, when Sheng Shiyi, another younger brother of the *duban*, met with Nationalist officials in Chongqing and encouraged the cultivation of closer ties. On July 3, 1942, Sheng held a lavish banquet for Zhu's delegation. The Soviets responded immediately. Vyacheslav Molotov, the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, pulled all of Sheng's skeletons out of the closet. He told the Generalissimo about the *duban*'s past proposals to "implement communism," his support for Chiang's arrest during the Xi'an incident, and a purported offer to turn Xinjiang into a Soviet republic just one year prior. Chongqing did not take the bait. "The Soviet Union now realizes that it has lost control of the situation," Chiang's intelligence chief noted, "and is exposing Sheng's past collaboration in a desperate attempt to make the Generalissimo lose all faith in him."⁸ For his part, Chiang left no doubt as to where he stood. "For all matters pertaining to Xinjiang," Chiang informed the Soviet ambassador on July 9, "your government must now deal with the central government of China. You are not permitted to discuss anything with Sheng *duban*."⁹

Chiang told the Soviet ambassador that General Zhu would henceforth be the contact man for all affairs concerning Xinjiang. Since sensitive negotiations with Sheng were still ongoing, the Generalissimo ordered all lips within the Party to be sealed. "Anyone in the know should keep quiet, anyone out of the loop should not inquire. If

⁸ Gong'anbu dang'an guan, ed., *Zai Jiang Jieshi shenbian ba nian: shicongshi gaoji muliao Tang Zong riji* [At Chiang Kai-shek's side for eight years: the diary of Tang Zong, a high-level diplomat in the intelligence office] (Beijing, 1991), 289–90.

⁹ Cai, *Sheng Shicai zai Xinjiang*, 344.

someone asks, just say that the Soviet Union is treating us well.”¹⁰ When later made public, the contents of the secret negotiations turned out to be vintage Sheng. The Nationalists would be allowed to set up a special office in Dihua, where they would handle Xinjiang’s foreign affairs, and they were permitted down to plant Party roots throughout the province. The Nationalist Party was to replace the Anti-Imperialist Society. Crucially, however, Sheng insisted that he—and not a Chongqing-appointed delegate—serve as the provincial Party head. The establishment of a foreign affairs office did little to chip away at his authority: both the *duban*-ship and civil chairman titles remained his alone. Furthermore, the secret accord did not allow for the deployment of any Nationalist troops. Sheng got exactly what he had hoped for. The levers of governance remained entirely in his hands, while the enraged Soviets were now Chongqing’s beast to tame.

The Generalissimo was happy, too. To be sure, control over foreign affairs and a handful of emasculated Party cells did not constitute *de jure*, or even *de facto*, sovereignty in Xinjiang. But they were certainly better than nothing. With General Zhu constantly shuttling between Dihua and Chongqing, the *duban* insisted that the Nationalists assign a permanent liaison to handle his foreign affairs. Chongqing selected Wu Zexiang, the holder of an economics degree from London University, and a career diplomat within the Ministry. Sheng asked that Agent Wu take up his duties immediately. “It is imperative that Wu arrives in Xinjiang at an early date,” Sheng wrote on in late August, eager to wash his hands of the Soviets.¹¹ Nine days later Agent Wu stepped off

¹⁰ Gongganbu dang’an guan, *Zai Jiang Jieshi shenbian ba nian*, 291.

¹¹ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan, Personnel Division (*renshichu*), file 913.29/0001, “Zhu Xinjiang tepaiyuan” [The special agent for foreign affairs in Xinjiang], 89.

the plane. Accompanying him was Soong May-ling, the Generalissimo's wife. For his own part, Agent Wu came to Dihua armed with the unexpected title of "minister" (*gongshi*). This was a prestigious and unprecedented designation for someone serving in a domestic post. Normally reserved for senior diplomats in overseas embassies, Wu's ministership, personally approved by Chiang himself, was intended to "help him handle the special conditions and circumstances in Xinjiang."¹² No one held any illusions about the difficulties Wu would face. When push came to shove, it was believed, only a "minister" could stand up to both Sheng and the Soviets.

After the festivities were over, Madame Chiang returned to Lanzhou. Agent Wu struggled to find his footing. His position was unique in Republican China, and it was not at all clear where his duties began and Sheng's ended. Wu, fearful of "overstepping my authority," requested clarification from Chongqing. The Ministry's response was clear. "There is no such thing as 'local foreign affairs,'" Wu was told. In an effort to better understand local conditions, he could "consult" with provincial authorities. In the end, however, he was responsible to the central government, not the *duban*. In the event Sheng and Wu did not see eye to eye, Chongqing became the sole arbiter. "In any matter relating to provincial sovereignty or economic profit, the case must be brought to the attention of the central government, regardless of the gravity of the affair."¹³ Old habits died hard, however. In the first diplomatic crisis to occur after Wu's arrival, the Soviet consul-general in Dihua, accustomed to acting as a direct intermediary between Moscow and Sheng, bypassed Wu and took his case directly to the *duban*. Consul-General

¹² Ibid., 104.

¹³ Waijiaobu, ed., *Waijiaobu dang'an congshu—jiewu lei: Xinjiang juan* [The Ministry of Foreign Affairs documents series—border affairs: Xinjiang files], vol. 2 (Taipei, 2001), 379–80.

Pushkin issued a “warning” to Sheng, alleging his complicity in a suspicious strike of Han workers at the Soviet-run oil rigs at Dushanzi.¹⁴

Much to Wu’s chagrin, Sheng, in formulating a response, took the lead in countering Pushkin’s accusations. Agent Wu was a consultant who remained on the sidelines. This was not what Chongqing wanted to see. “In the future,” the Ministry advised, “whenever a similar case arises, it would be best not to issue a reply from the provincial government. Instead, our reply to the Soviets should come directly from our special agent for foreign affairs, and it is he who will consult with the provincial government.”¹⁵ In other words, Agent Wu needed to step up to the plate and assert his authority, a prospect that terrified him at first. “When Agent Wu first arrived in Xinjiang,” Sheng explained several months later, “he was unfamiliar with the local situation and clearly needed the assistance of the provincial government to carry out his tasks. But now he has been here for quite some time, and understands local conditions quite well. Henceforth let Agent Wu deal with all matters of foreign affairs on his own authority.”¹⁶ Sheng’s repeated demands that Wu assume responsibility for the Soviets at was born out of pragmatism. Some of the thorniest and most contentious negotiations arose during the final months of 1942, when Sheng demanded all Soviet technical and military personnel to withdraw within three months. This demand posed numerous logistical difficulties for the Soviets, then engaged in a fight to the death at Stalingrad and desperate to retain oil reserves at Dushanzi.

¹⁴ Ibid., 381–82.

¹⁵ Ibid., 383.

¹⁶ Ibid., 385; and Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan, file 913.29/0002, “Zhu Xinjiang tepaiyuan gongshu” [The office of the special agent for foreign affairs in Xinjiang], 65.

It was then that Sheng levied his final insult to Moscow—the slap in the face that necessitated an entire rethinking of their strategy in Xinjiang. On November 3, 1942, Sheng issued the following directive. With the sole exception of Sheng’s own state-run trade outfit, “all other organizations, groups, and private persons are prohibited from engaging in any trade activity involving foreign imports and exports. Transgressors will have their commodities confiscated and will be charged with the crime of sabotaging financial backing for the rear lines of the war effort.”¹⁷ Though Sheng hoped to slam the lid on the Soviet coffin, this state-imposed monopoly actually wrought far more havoc in Xinjiang. The rationale was clear. Like a modern-day Trojan horse, foreign influence in China and Xinjiang had always ridden the backs of foreign merchants and trade outfits. If the opportunity to abolish foreign trade privileges should ever arise, foreign political influence would follow fast on their heels. But Xinjiang’s governors had experimented with such a dangerous gambit before, and the results had been free coffins in Tacheng. Until the central government managed to build a railroad to Dihua, virtually the only source of consumer commodities were Soviet railroads. Cut that off, and disaster was inevitable.

It did not take long to see that Sheng had sorely misjudged the Chongqing’s capacity to replace Soviet contributions to the economy. The trade restrictions carried immediate consequences for Agent Wu’s staff. By early 1943, prices in the marketplace began to skyrocket. “We are overwhelmed with work and my staff is uneasy,” Wu reported. “All this causes me undue strain.” Just one year into Sheng’s monopoly, the

¹⁷ Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqu dang’an guan, ed., *Xinjiang yu E Su shangye maoyi dang’an shiliao* [Historical documents on commerce and trade between Xinjiang and Russia/Soviet Union] (Wulumuqi, 1994), 488.

price of daily commodities had increased between four and ten times. When the fearsome Xinjiang winter hit, Wu's staff resigned in droves. "My employees can barely even purchase enough firewood to keep warm," Wu complained. He asked that blankets be sent from Chongqing. In 1944, when prices rose an additional five to ten times, Wu's staff, in an effort to make ends meet, began to sell their possessions and borrow money.¹⁸ So tight was the vice Sheng had imposed on Soviet trade that special permission had to be obtained for the Uighur Association for Ethnocultural Advancement in Kashgar to purchase a single copy of the Soviet newspaper, *Red Star Uzbekistan*.¹⁹ After two years of enduring such conditions, Wu was at his wits' end. "My staff is starving and freezing and many are submitting their resignations," Wu reported in late 1944. "My Ministry must find a way to provide for us out here. I am losing considerable amounts of sleep and can barely find the energy to complete my work."²⁰ By turning off the faucet on international trade, Sheng did far more to sabotage the Nationalist infiltration of Xinjiang than to deter Soviet ambitions. Either way, injury to one or both parties still suited the interests of the *duban*, who was now revisiting the strategy of Yang Zengxin two decades earlier.

Back in Chongqing, the idea of Xinjiang was much more attractive than its reality. The first six months of 1943 witnessed the height of Nationalist enthusiasm for its new possession. The excitement was palpable. Newspapers in Chongqing hailed the recovery of the northwest as a "miracle," while the press made an enormous effort to introduce this "alien" land to an audience that still mistook "Xinjang" for a foreign

¹⁸ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan, file 913.29/0002, 62, 91, 100; and file 913.29/0003, 15, 44.

¹⁹ Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiq dang'an guan, *Xinjiang yu E Su shangye maoyi*, 492.

²⁰ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan, file 913.29/0003, 115.

country. “Every sector of society is beside itself with joy,” wrote Wu Aichen, a prominent player in the 1933–34 coup attempts against Sheng. “Everyone now harbors unlimited optimism for the future of the northwest.”²¹ Chongqing drew up grandiose blueprints for Han migration to Xinjiang, and printed new maps redefining the “northwest” as Gansu, Qinghai, and Xinjiang. Prior to this, the term “northwest” was often used to refer to Gansu alone. Border pundits such as Wu Aichen downplayed Sheng’s historical hostility to the central government, and defended his reign as an exercise in territorial preservation amid great disunity. In official Party rhetoric, Sheng was praised for his political acumen. His return to Nationalist graces is revealed in the diary of Wu Zhongxin, Sheng’s successor to the governorship. From 1944 to 1946, Wu recorded every tidbit of juicy gossip concerning the dark side of Sheng’s rule. In revising his manuscript for publication, however, Wu revisited his manuscript and crossed out every instance in which he had reproduced an unflattering portrayal of Sheng’s reign.

In 1943, with the formal establishment of the Nationalist Party organization and disbanding of the Anti-Imperialist Society, Chongqing had no choice but to invest Sheng with full Party honors. After all, he was now the sole legitimate face of the central government and its ruling Party. The Generalissimo was investing precious financial and political capital in Xinjiang: two-thirds of the cost to support the Party apparatus were borne by Chongqing. In March, the Soviets agreed to remove all military and civilian personnel, paving the way for the purchase of Russian-built infrastructure by Chongqing. It was not cheap. Not surprisingly then, Chiang Kai-shek exhibited zero tolerance for

²¹ See the May 1943 preface in the reprint edition of Wu Aichen, *Xinjiang jiyou* [A record of travels in Xinjiang] (1935, repr. ed., Chongqing, 1944), 1.

anyone who undermined his Xinjiang investment by airing the *duban*'s dirty laundry in public. In return for the Generalissimo's absolution, Sheng fell in line with Chongqing's wish to let the British and Americans set up consulates in Dihua. They were soon followed by the inevitable foreign missionaries. The arrival of Anglo-American influence sent a message to Moscow that their exclusive sphere of influence in Xinjiang was over. Once vilified by Sheng's propaganda machine as the worst of the "imperialists," the British and Americans wasted no time setting up branch offices, commencing consular operations in April 1943.

To the Americans, at least, Dihua was classified as such a hardship post that they actually feared for the sanity of diplomatic personnel assigned to the region. No women were allowed to serve in the Dihua consulate. For the men, an inspector for the foreign service declared that "no American should be left at Tihwa more than two years. The only exceptions should be in those rare instances such as that of Mr. Mackiernan [a covert radio operator] where the individual has an unusual knack of being able to live under rugged pioneer conditions and still retain a normal American outlook."²² Though the U.S. consular corps deemed Dihua an "unhealthful" post, it was one where very important Soviet intel might be gleaned. In preparing the groundwork for these consulates, the Nationalists even went so far as to escort defeated presidential Republican candidate Wendell Willkie to Dihua, where his faith in political reason received a jolt from the *duban*. "The stories he told me of murder, intrigue, espionage, and

²² National Archives of the United States, College Park, Maryland, Foreign Service Inspection Reports, Record Group 59, John J. Muccio, "Tihwa Inspection Report," pt. 1, personnel, June 28, 1948, 3b. I am extremely grateful to Charles Kraus, who has generously granted me permission to cite this source from among his substantial research materials.

counterespionage sounded like a dime thriller and would have been incredible to an American were it not for the evidence all about of suspicion and mystery.”²³

As always, Sheng saw conspiracies everywhere he looked. Once Agent Wu settled into his post, he immediately got in touch with Fu Bingchang, the Chinese ambassador in Moscow. In January 1943, Wu made the long journey to Moscow and the next month brought Ambassador Fu back with him to Dihua. They set their sights on the five Xinjiang consulates in Soviet Central Asia, which, despite many attempts over the years to orient them away from Dihua, were still firmly in the grip of the *duban*. Now that jurisdiction over foreign affairs had been ceded to Chongqing, Wu and Fu had a legitimate pretext to lay claim to the consulates. Two days after Fu’s arrival, he and Wu departed for Tashkent, for an “investigation” of the Soviet border. Two weeks later, Sheng intercepted telegrams sent by Wu and Fu from a town outside of Novosibirsk in Siberia. Wu was still there in late March, nearly two months after his departure from Xinjiang. His conspiracy radar on high alert, Sheng demanded that Chongqing recall Agent Wu to Dihua. “Matters of foreign affairs are pressing,” the *duban* wrote. “Agent Wu said he would return within two weeks, but it has already been more than a month and still there is no sign of him.” Hoping to avoid placing the consulates under Wu’s authority in Dihua, Sheng instead offered to place them under the jurisdiction of Ambassador Fu in Moscow, more than two thousand miles distant. “This would allow Agent Wu to concentrate his energies on handling and researching matters of foreign affairs in Xinjiang,” Sheng concluded.²⁴

²³ Allen S. Whiting and Sheng Shih-ts’ai, *Sinkiang: Pawn or Pivot?* (East Lansing, Mich., 1958), xii.

²⁴ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan, file 913.29/0002, 48–50; and 40, 45–46, 53, 56.

The sun had barely risen over the Nationalist dawn in Xinjiang and already Sheng felt threatened by the activities of Chongqing's emissaries. Delicate negotiations throughout 1943 defined the new balance of power in the northwest. The *duban* wanted just enough of a Nationalist presence to scare off the Soviets, but not so much as to threaten his own position. For Chiang Kai-shek, there was no such thing as prudent caution when 1,900 miles of national sovereignty were at stake. Xinjiang had to be infiltrated, its Nationalist institutions developed, and its *duban* isolated, all before Sheng's paranoia got the better of him. The clock was ticking, and history had shown that the Generalissimo could expect no more than one additional year to complete his task. To be sure, the jockeying between Sheng and Chongqing was still masked within the confines of political decorum and civility. But cracks had definitely begun to appear.

Unfortunately for both Dihua and Chongqing, the enthusiasm with which they kicked the Soviets while they were down convinced Moscow of the need to change tact. After Sheng brought Sino-Soviet trade to a standstill, the Soviets were convinced that the only language either Sheng or Chiang would understand was force. Behind the scenes, the *duban* and Chongqing could muscle all they wanted for control of Xinjiang. The Soviets no longer cared where the balance of power lay. From their perspective, all Han rulers in Xinjiang now looked more or less the same. Chiang Kai-shek or Sheng Shicai—it mattered not. Both were clearly intent on consolidating Han prospects in Xinjiang at the complete expense of Soviet interests.

The time had come to hit the Han colonists where it hurt the most, just as the Comintern suggested a decade before.

The Tip of the Iceberg

On May 4, 1943, the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union passed a new resolution regarding the Chinese province of Xinjiang. It called for the support of “national liberation movements” along the Soviet borders with Xinjiang, a goal that would be recognized three-and-a-half years later. In August 1946, Stalin and Lavrentii Beria, the Soviet Minister of Internal Affairs, conferred medals on everyone who had helped carry out the May 4 directive. During the planning and execution stages, the neighboring Soviet Central Asian republics of Kazakstan and Uzbekistan were ordered to allot a fixed amount of funds to be used for training, arming, and transporting non-Han insurgents. The mission was simple: drive Sheng *duban* out of the province and install in his place “an administration composed of indigenous Xinjiang residents loyal to the Soviet Union.”²⁵ Though the mission appeared simple, its fulfillment would require considerable amounts of time, money, political capital, and human resources. The expected payoff? The same economic and political monopoly the Soviets had enjoyed under Sheng during the 1930s, but without the distractions of capricious Han officials.

The five Soviet consulates quickly went to work, beginning with low-risk acts of harassment. By July, reports began to stream into Agent Wu’s office claiming that the Soviets were moving international border markers in Ili, Kashgar, and Altay. Residents in border villages complained that Soviet soldiers fired their guns into the night sky, undermining any attempt to sleep. The plunder of livestock rose, and numerous Soviet

²⁵ V.A. Barmin, *Sin'tszian v sovetsko-kitaiskikh otnosheniakh, 1941–1949 gg.* [Sino-Soviet relations and Xinjiang, 1941–1949] (Barnaul, 1999), 75, 84, 71.

airplanes appeared on apparent reconnaissance missions. Soviet agents were caught with illegal firearms, threatening any Han officer who tried to detain them. Soviet guardposts along the border received a massive facelift. “In the past, Soviet border posts were manned by no more than ten soldiers,” reported the Kashgar security bureau in August 1943. “Since mid-June, however, they have all been supplemented with approximately sixty cavalrymen.” In one base alone, “they have built a wireless telegraph station, military barracks, and a new road for vehicular traffic. This location, only ten miles or so from our border, has two hundred cavalrymen, among which are numerous Kyrgyz and Uzbeks.”²⁶ Reports described the behavior of the new border patrols as “provocative.” In Tacheng and Altay, White Russians began to spread rumors that “Altay and Tacheng are already a lost cause, and soon Ili and Kashgar will become part of the Soviet Union.”²⁷

With regard to the Turkic and Mongol inhabitants of Xinjiang, the Soviets turned first to the nomads. With their ready supplies of firearms, steeds, and frequent participation in intertribal warfare, the Kazaks, Mongols, and Kyrgyz of Xinjiang were naturally trained cavalrymen. From a practical standpoint, they required far less training and equipment than sedentary Uighur peasants. Kyrgyz holed up in the mountains outside Kashgar struck first. On August 24, just after midnight, the Wuqia guardpost reported “the sound of rocks being tossed onto the upper deck. When our captain led a small contingent upstairs to investigate, approximately fifteen shots rang out from the northwest corner. We returned fire but did not register any fatalities. The bandits have now surrounded our base. Please send help.” The “bandits” were Kyrgyz guerrillas, who

²⁶ Waijiaobu, ed., *Waijiaobu dang'an congshu—jiewu lei: Xinjiang juan* [The Ministry of Foreign Affairs documents series—border affairs: Xinjiang files], vol. 1 (Taipei, 2001), 201.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 218, 209–11, 219–21.

laid siege for more than four hours before retreating. Additional reports reached Agent Wu's desk of a fully trained Kyrgyz battalion on Soviet territory, apparently awaiting orders to invade Wuqia. Though Wu's boss in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs forwarded these reports along to the Generalissimo, few in Chongqing believed the Soviets would attack their wartime ally. "In the current international climate," observed Song Ziwen, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, "it seems unlikely that the Soviet Union would send an army to openly attack our territory." Nevertheless, because the Soviets were "not pleased with the recent changes in Xinjiang, it will prove difficult to guard against their covert despatchment of armed Kyrgyz forces. Passing themselves off as Xinjiang Kyrgyz with ease, they will seduce their feckless brethren and stir up trouble."²⁸

The Soviets looked to the Kyrgyz to destabilize southern Xinjiang. For northern Xinjiang, they turned to the Kazaks. In 1943, this meant Moscow would have to deal with Osman Batur. Before we delve into Osman's career in detail, it is important understand everything we do not know about the life of this bandit-turned-*batur*. Later mythology notwithstanding, almost nothing is known of Osman's life prior to 1941. We know only that he was born in Koktogay in 1899 to a father named Islam, a poor shepherd with a large family. He likely played a small role in the uprising of 1940, directed against Sheng's imprisonment of Kazak hereditary chieftains. By 1941, when the Kazaks rebelled for a second time, Osman was still a relatively unknown figure, whose name did not even make it into official reports compiled by Sheng's security bureau. It was only after Sheng had lured the leaders of this second rebellion to Dihua for peace talks—where they were jailed upon touchdown—that a poor shepherd like Osman could finally make

²⁸ Ibid., 203, 217–18.

his name.²⁹ By 1943, Osman's humble background was evident in the title bestowed upon him by his peers: a *batur* denotes a self-made "hero" of non-noble birth.³⁰

In late 1941, after the elimination of the top two tiers of Kazak leadership, Osman finally emerged as a man of minor consequence. Sheng thought he could be lured into a peace treaty. Accompanied by a posse of peripatetic braves and a handful of firearms, Osman rejected the *duban*'s overtures and fled south to the Bulgin River. Here he settled in for the winter, receiving emissaries from the Outer Mongols. Disputes over grazing rights soon surfaced, and Osman began to raid Mongol outposts. The Mongols returned the favor. This petty territorial bickering ended only when the Soviets, now on their way out of the province, began to take measure of Osman's political prospects. Soviet representatives now told Osman that he could have as many guns as he liked, so long as he aimed them at Sheng. In November 1942, once it became clear that Stalingrad would not fall, the Soviets ordered the Mongols to make more formal arrangements with Osman. In exchange for weapons and training, Osman and his followers were to relocate to Mongolia. There, Russian and Mongol generals whipped his bandit rabble into a crack contingent of warriors. Their goal was to retake Altay.³¹

When the Soviet Politburo passed its clandestine resolution in May 1943, one of the chief beneficiaries was Osman. In exchange for unfettered access to the mines of Koktogay, the Soviets supplied Osman with an arsenal beyond his wildest dreams. He

²⁹ Zhang Dajun, *Xinjiang fengbao qishi nian* [Seventy years of turbulence in Xinjiang], vol. 9 (Taipei, 1980), 5188; and Gansu sheng guji wenxian zhengli bianyi zhongxin, ed., *Zhongguo xibei wenxian congshu, er bian* [Collection of documents relating to northwest China, series two], vol. 10 (Beijing, 2006), 317–23.

³⁰ Frank Bangall Bessac and Susanne Leppmann Bessac, *Death on the Chang Tang: Tibet, 1950: The Education of an Anthropologist* (Missoula, Mont., 2006), 62.

³¹ Zhang, *Xinjiang fengbao*, vol. 9, 5189–92.

received over two hundred rifles, ample ammunition, light machine guns, and provisions with which to recruit followers. Still, Osman remained suspicious. Fully aware of the fate of Soviet Kazaks a decade earlier, Osman asked for guarantees regarding religion, the exclusion of communism, and future autonomy in Altay. Whenever Osman felt that the Soviets had reneged on a promise, he organized an ambush of their mining convoys.³² By June, however, both sides had reached an understanding. Osman attacked one of Sheng's security outposts and slaughtered its twenty Han soldiers. Sheng conscripted three hundred convicts and sent them Osman's way. His strategy backfired. The poorly trained convicts cut down civilian Kazaks, and indignant nomads flocked to Osman's banner. Sheng's brute squad was dismembered. In September, with Kyrgyz battalions amassing near the Kashgar border, the Soviets increased the amount of aid Osman received. They helped him form a "Committee for the Revival of the Altay Kazaks," structured his army into ten professional divisions, and doled out artillery for the first time.

Osman's ego stretched accordingly. "For the past four to five years," he announced in late 1943, "I have toiled ceaselessly [on your behalf], enduring sleepless nights, frigid winters, and scorching summers. When I sleep, I sleep on horse manure, with a hard rock for my pillow. ... Now that a *batur* like me has arrived to fight for the future of our people, you must arm yourselves and leap astride your steed. ... I swear to the Almighty that you are my wings and my tail." Osman forbid the sale of camels and horses to Han merchants, and kept tabs on Sheng's frontier servants. Though his rhetoric was stirring and professed goals noble, his *modus operandi* appears less so. "I despise Osman," wrote one Kazak to the local county government office. "Only an ignorant

³² Ibid., 5192; and Gansu sheng guji wenxian, *Zhongguo xibei wenxian congshu*, vol. 10, 324–26.

animal would believe his words. ... If we try to return to our lands, he will execute us and take all our belongings. If we submit to him, he will confiscate all our livestock. We join his bandit army merely to safeguard our lives.”³³ Convinced that Osman was a polarizing figure among Kazaks, in late 1943 Sheng renewed his attack. In the face of such a determined onslaught, Osman was fortunate to escape with his life. Five of his relatives were not so lucky. Osman himself was shot three times. He withdrew to Mongolia, where Sheng’s army dared not enter. The *duban*, aware that the Soviets were watching Osman’s back, did not want to risk a skirmish with the Mongols, knowing full well the Soviets would intervene.

Back in Chongqing, the Generalissimo saw the situation differently. When his chief of military intelligence prepared a telegram to Sheng endorsing his prudence at the Mongol border, Chiang deleted the phrase, “refrain from getting involved in a direct conflict with the Outer Mongolians.” Why was Chiang goading the *duban* into a fight with the Mongols? The reason was simple. He wanted Sheng to become embroiled in a conflict that he could not handle, for that would give Chongqing the pretext it needed to station its own troops in Xinjiang. Sure enough, in March 1944, the next time Osman sallied forth, Sheng’s troops beat him back to the border and opened fire, just as Chiang had hoped. The Soviets, invoking their diplomatic obligation to defend the Mongols, accused Sheng of armed aggression toward a Soviet ally. Moscow’s intervention was now justified. Before long, ten bomber planes crossed the border and rained a hail of bullets on Sheng’s battalions.³⁴ The Generalissimo, too, now had an opening. “With the

³³ Zhang, *Xinjiang fengbao*, vol. 9, 5193–95.

³⁴ Gongganbu dang’an guan, *Zai Jiang Jieshi shenbian ba nian*, 422, 416.

Russian bombing of Xinjiang,” Chiang wrote in his diary later that month, “we now have the perfect opportunity to move our troops into Xinjiang and recover our national sovereignty.”³⁵ Two Nationalist battalions from Gansu took up positions near the site of the conflict.³⁶ They were the vanguard of a Nationalist military base in Xinjiang. By year’s end, escalating violence between Sheng and the Soviets allowed the Nationalists to base troops in Hami, Barikol, Gucheng, Turpan, Dihua, and Altay.

For the Generalissimo, the pieces were finally falling into place. And yet, had Chiang fully understood just how ambitious Moscow’s blueprint for Xinjiang actually was, he may not have been so eager to witness the beginning of the end for Sheng. For, as it soon became apparent, Soviet aid to Osman was merely the tip of the iceberg.

Manufacturing an Insurgency

“The Soviet Consul-General has two very large FAS limousines,” wrote John Muccio, an American inspector in Dihua. “[They] gain face with their cars and the pretentious consular compound—one large block square—they maintain, housing about 180 members of the consular, Sino-Soviet airlines, Sino-Soviet cultural institute, and hospital staffs.”³⁷ Muccio’s report highlighted the considerable material “swank” of the Soviet diplomatic corps in Xinjiang. This swank proved useful in convincing clandestine recruits that Moscow would reward anyone who labored on the Soviets’ behalf. Yet swank also had its downsides. Ostentatious bling caught not only the eyes of peasants and

³⁵ Gao, “Zhanshi guomin zhengfu shili jinru Xinjiang shimo (1942–1944),” 150.

³⁶ Gongganbu dang’an guan, *Zai Jiang Jieshi shenbian ba nian*, 419.

³⁷ National Archives of the United States, College Park, Maryland, Foreign Service Inspection Reports, Record Group 59, John J. Muccio, confidential and informal communication to Christian Ravndal, Director General of the Foreign Service, May 22, 1948, 2–3. Once again, I am indebted to Charles Kraus, who has allowed me to reproduce this quote from among his research materials.

nomads, but also of their Han rulers. If one wanted to unravel Soviet machinations, one need only trail the dibursement of Soviet glam. “I was chatting with Ibrahim at the entrance to the Kyrgyz school,” reported Officer Shira in Kashgar in August 1943, “when suddenly an official Soviet car drove quickly past us, heading toward Tokkuzaq Street. We immediately followed the vehicle to Gulshdin, where it stopped briefly, then sped away. A man appeared where the car had stopped, so I rushed forward to apprehend him. As we struggled, a bag attached to his waist came undone and flyers fell into the gutter. After I yelled for Ibrahim to come help me, we were able to tie the man up and collect all the flyers.”³⁸

The man they caught went by the name of Sadiq, the head of the local Uighur Association for Ethnocultural Advancement. He was a typical example of the sort of man targeted by the Soviets. Men like Sadiq had been told that, in exchange for his support of yet another Han administration, Sheng *duban* would raise him into a position of authority and allow his people to enjoy the same fruits of modernity the Han supposedly enjoyed. Once it became clear that Sheng did not intend to keep his end of the bargain, community leaders such as Sadiq had no choice but to suppress their ambitions or risk having them suppressed. The ideal of national determination, however, was not so easily suppressed. Here was the kindling for Soviet ambitions in Xinjiang, easily set alight for an agenda formulated in Moscow. Sheng had betrayed them, Sadiq was told, but the Soviets would not. The many ethnic republics erected just across the border were a testament to Moscow’s commitment to oppressed peoples such as himself.

³⁸ Waijiaobu, *Waijiaobu dang’an congshu—jiewu lei: Xinjiang juan*, vol. 1, 196.

According to Sadiq, his contact in the Soviet consulate in Kashgar was a short, fat man who went by the name of “Shapin.” In exchange for generous sums of cash, Sadiq did whatever Shapin told him to do. On the top of his agenda was the disposition of the Uighur masses toward the Han government. Shapin ordered Sadiq to canvas village sentiment toward government conscription efforts and rumored immigration plans. “When you go to the countryside this time, I want you pay close attention to whether the people are talking about these matters, and then report back to me,” Shapin said. When Sadiq returned with a less than encouraging report, having failed to find evidence of systemic antipathy toward the government, Shapin decided to foment unrest himself. Handing Sadiq a stack of Uighur-language pamphlets, Shapin ordered his spy back to the countryside. “Take these leaflets to the people and disseminate them among the peasants and *imams*.” His new mission was to “wake the people.”³⁹ After this meeting, Sadiq was ushered into a vehicle, dropped off on Tokkuzaq Street, and immediately apprehended by the Kashgar police.

The Soviets pursued similar tactics with other recruits. A Uighur man named Ariz was told to “investigate public opinion and write up a report,” then hand it over to a man who would utter the phrase, “two fewer books, please.” A Tajik man by the name of Zemi, tasked with smuggling guns into Tashkurgan, was assured that “the Soviets are not just recruiting you alone to go to the Soviet Union. We have people all over the place disseminating propaganda.” In Khotan, a Soviet agent working under the cover of a geological mission conducted a social experiment. “Twenty days after I depart, under cover of night, post ten billboards in public that read as follows: ‘Our *imams* have sold us

³⁹ Ibid., 197.

out to the Han, our extinction is imminent.’ ... Pay attention to the public response, and report immediately to Kashgar. Then, after another ten days have passed, post more signs, under cover of night, that read: ‘There are 800,000 of us Khotanese living here. Why do we not wake up and fight for our rights?’ Again, pay attention to the public response, and send your reports along to Kashgar.” Only when the Kashgar Police Bureau forwarded this stack of confessions to Agent Wu in Dihua did it finally begin to dawn on the Nationalists just how broad the Soviet net of conspiracy had been cast. “It is evident from these reports,” wrote Wu in late August, “that the Soviets have despatched a considerable number of spies who are agitating all over the province.”⁴⁰

What message did they bring? A Kazak brochure seized near Tacheng speaks volumes. “Following the invasion and occupation of Xinjiang by China over a period of many centuries, there came a decade of colonial policies by Sheng Shicai. The people have been oppressed, cheated, exploited, subjugated, and made ignorant. Our leaders have been eliminated, and now the Han and their armies control the entire province. The Solon, Kazak, Kyrgyz, Mongols, Tatars, Uzbeks and other oppressed peoples have all become the slaves of Sheng Shicai and his running dogs. We cannot take this anymore. Let us initiate a glorious battle for freedom and equality.” From the streetside scuffle with Sadiq in Kashgar, the following exhortations were gleaned. “Sheng *duban* proposed the concept of ethnic equality and established the shells of cultural organizations in various districts. These organizations were just a means to an end—a veil—and one that everyone has now seen through. ... At the locality, are there any district or county magistrates today who are Muslim? No, they are all Han, and no matter what crimes they commit,

⁴⁰ Ibid., 195–96, 200–2.

they always go unpunished.” Additional leaflets drew attention to the prospect of mass Han immigration, and mocked Sheng’s affirmative action platform. Who was best positioned to exploit such platforms? “These Kyrgyz, Kazak, and Uighur pamphlets,” observed Agent Wu, “are printed on the presses of ‘a certain party,’ and are absolutely not something that could be produced in Kashgar.”⁴¹

The extent to which Soviet propaganda accurately reflected popular sentiment, or merely tried to manufacture such sentiment, is an open question. As is clear from numerous confessions, the Soviet consulates engaged in a sophisticated canvassing of popular attitudes toward the Han administration. This approach allowed them to tailor their propaganda to the most deeply held anxieties of each non-Han community. And yet, if the confessions obtained by Sheng’s security network are to be believed, then the vast majority of rural peasants were passive listeners, uninterested in discussing Sheng’s crimes. It was this disheartening realization that prompted Shapin, the Soviet contact for undercover agents in Kashgar, to supply Sadiq with brochures containing precisely those incendiary comments that apparently were not being batted around in village teahouses. We just make an important distinction here. There is little doubt that Shapin’s urban intellectual recruits were thoroughly disenchanted with Sheng and ready to enact their revenge upon his “running dogs.” And yet, with the crucial exception of Xinjiang’s nomads, the majority of rural dwellers were not interested in taking up their pitchforks. This does not mean that they openly embraced Sheng’s government. It merely suggests that they had scant contact with the Han administration, and that abstract appeals to ethnic conflict took a backseat to more pressing daily affairs.

⁴¹ Ibid., 202, 199, 204.

After learning as much as they could about the attitudes of the people, the Soviet consulates in Kashgar, Ili, and Altay submitted their reports to Moscow. At issue was the question of where to initiate a large-scale rebellion. The Kashgar consul, convinced that his spies were missing ubiquitous signs of anti-Han discontent, reported on the intense hatred for Han in his district. He added, however, that any uprising in Kashgar “must allow the participation of the Muslim clerical establishment, otherwise we will not be able to develop the struggle for national liberation.” Since a movement united only by religious fervor could just as easily turn against the Soviets as it could the Han, Kashgar was scratched off the short list of possible bases. The Ili consul submitted a much more positive report, drawing attention to the sizeable community of Soviet-educated intellectuals living in the area. Promoted to office during the early days of Sheng’s reign but now thoroughly embittered at their expulsion from government, these men would serve to offset the influence of Muslim clerics, who were viewed as key but unpredictable allies.⁴²

Just as Ili was chosen as the future site of a “national liberation movement” due to the favorable disposition of its Muslim elite, most clandestine recruits were also culled from the ranks of those familiar with Soviet culture. Often they were the same seasonal drifters and mobile intellectuals that Yang had once tried to keep tabs on in the 1920s. The chief training grounds for the insurgency appeared to be in Tashkent and Almaty, the capitals of Uzbekistan and Kazakstan. In January 1944, Feng Zuwen, consul-general for all five offices, reported on the “frequency last year of suspicious Uighur expatriates

⁴² Barmin, *Sin'tszian v sovetsko-kitaiskikh otnosheniakh, 1941–1949*, 76–77; and Xue Xiantian, *Zhong Su guanxi shi (1945–1949)* [A history of Sino-Soviet relations (1945–1949)] (Chengdu, 2003), 195–97.

applying for a visa to pass through Irkeshtam Pass on their way to Kashgar.” After a joint investigation with Agent Wu revealed connections with the Soviets, Feng ordered the rejection of all such applications. The Andijan consulate compiled a list of twenty four agents whose covert despatch to Xinjiang was known to be imminent, and forwarded it to Agent Wu for reference. The consul in Zaisan kept tabs on twenty Turkic expatriates who had been sent to Moscow for training, then whisked back to Tacheng and Altay for undercover missions.⁴³

The Turkic ex-pats of Xinjiang constituted a ready pool of recruits for the Soviets in Central Asia. According to the Tashkent consul, most maintained Chinese citizenship purely to avoid conscription and taxes by the Soviet state. “They have no sense of nation whatsoever.” The Chinese consul, hoping to instill these mostly Uighur drifters with a pinch of patriotism, asked Chongqing to ship “quality domestic periodicals from inner China” for their perusal. There is little evidence, however, that such tactics had any effect. By far the most dangerous suspects, however, were not the masses of Turkic foot soldiers. It was their apolitical, renegade White Russian generals, most of whom suffered greatly under the *duban*-ship of the man they had helped catapult to power. One such man, Polinov, the former chief of Xinjiang’s White Russian battalions under Jin Shuren, had just emerged from Sheng Shicai’s dungeons. Unaware how or when Polinov arrived in Tashkent, Consul-General Feng quickly picked up his trail. He found that White Russians and Uighur ex-pats frequently assembled at vacant factories and repair shops to listen to Polinov and his associates. The White Russian general railed against “how the

⁴³ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan, West Asia Division (*yaxisi*), file 110.19/0002, “Zhu Xin bian wuling shiwu” [Affairs of the five Xinjiang consulates], 36; Waijiaobu, *Waijiaobu dang’an congshu—jiwu lei: Xinjiang juan*, vol. 1, 238–40; and Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan, file 110.19/0002, 42.

Han in Xinjiang oppress the other ethnicities, how Anglo-American imperialists are being invited into the province,” and he was “preparing to enact his revenge.”⁴⁴ Polinov would later become a key general for the insurgency.

Back across the border, Soviet consular staff continued to make overtures to the non-Han peoples of Xinjiang. In Ili, they set up free Russian-language schools, hospitals, and film venues. They drove to the distant countryside and steppe to hand out candy and consumer goods, inquire into the health of the locals, and disseminate Soviet citizenship papers. “Whether these actions constitute the first steps toward initiating a major conflict along the borders,” Agent Wu warned Chongqing, “it is too early to surmise.” In Dihua, Soviet targets included White Russians, who had the military training and battlefield experience to lead hastily recruited greenhorns. Tracts designed to tug at the heartstrings of exiled Russians in Xinjiang were placed between the pages of books sold at the Soviet International Bookstore. The same store also distributed leaflets in Uighur extolling “how wonderful life is for Uighurs in the Soviet Union.” Yaqub Beg, a nineteenth century rebel, was presented as a national hero.⁴⁵ Those who were inspired by these tracts were assured that when push came to shove, the Soviet consulate would protect them. In April 1944, when Chinese police tried to escort a White Russian to a Dihua prison, their route happened to pass by the Soviet consulate. “Suddenly the consulate opened its front gates, and the criminal broke away and rushed into the compound,” the police report stated. The

⁴⁴ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan, file 110.19/0002, 187–88, 38–39.

⁴⁵ Waijiaobu, *Waijiaobu dang'an congshu—jiewu lei: Xinjiang juan*, vol. 1, 208–11, 224, 225, 228. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs directed Wu to declare all Russian schools, hospitals, and film venues illegal, and to monitor closely the despatch of delegations to rural areas.

Soviets refused to produce the man in question, instead accusing the Xinjiang authorities of “provocative” behavior.⁴⁶

The five Soviet consulates in Xinjiang could do little to stop Agent Wu’s meticulous documentation of their activities. In fact, it is largely due to Wu’s keen eyes and unflagging persistence that we know so much about their covert operations in the first place. The five Xinjiang consulates in Soviet Central Asia, however, were dangerously dependent on Soviet cooperation. Fully aware that all five consuls were submitting detailed exposes to Chongqing, Moscow decided to make life extremely difficult for their staffs. “I went to the local foreign relations office to pick up our monthly provisions,” wrote Sun Wendou, an employee in the Zaisan office, in early 1944 “and was told that it had not yet arrived. ... This is nothing more than an excuse.” After repeated rebuffs, Sun soon found himself with enough provisions to last just two weeks, with similarly diminishing supplies of horsefeed. In Semipalatinsk, the situation was similar. “Ever since we returned to the central government,” wrote Wen Songling in August 1944, “the attitude of the local authorities has changed considerably toward us.” Wen detailed inexplicable resignations of hired help, denial of firewood, refusal of foodstuffs, broken door locks, derailed telegrams, and disconnected telephone wires. “The weather is still warm now, so we can bear such neglect at present,” Wen observed. “But if this situation continues into the winter, our lives will become miserable.”⁴⁷

It did, and they were. By October, a downcast Sun submitted his resignation. “We are waiting to die here.” His resignation refused, Sun and his colleagues were forced to

⁴⁶ Ibid., 228.

⁴⁷ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan, file 110.19/0004, “Su difang dangju dui wo Xin bian ge guan daiyu” [The treatment afforded our Xinjiang consulates by the local Soviet authorities], 8, 17–18.

prepare their own meals and sweep their own floors. But mealtime pickings were scarce. “They will not even give me a single potato or head of cabbage here.”⁴⁸ Once the temperature indoors dropped below freezing, Sun was forced to scavenge for cow dung to light a fire. Faced with a struggle for mere survival, Xinjiang’s consular staff no longer had any time or energy to report on Soviet activities. “My entire staff is shivering from the cold,” wrote Wen Songling in Semipalatinsk. “We cannot get any work done.” Based on the demeanor of their Soviet caretakers, Sun Wendou was decidedly pessimistic about the future. “Since it seems that this is all being done for the sake of revenge, there is little hope the situation will change.” Fu Bingchang, the Chinese ambassador in Moscow, came to the same conclusion. “Whenever I forward our reports to the Soviet foreign ministry, the manner of their response suggests that this is all being done in the spirit of revenge.”⁴⁹

With Xinjiang’s five consulates thus sidelined, Moscow could now move toward its first objective: removing Sheng Shicai. As before, the Soviets looked to Osman to fire the opening shot. The consul in Altay was now certain that the time had come for a decisive charge. “Under favorable conditions,” wrote Consul Mikhailov, “Osman’s Kazaks can play a decisive role in preparations for an uprising in the Altay.” Once conquered, an Osman-controlled Altay was expected to merge with the coming movement in Ili. Osman’s appeal to the Soviet Union lay in his well-known charisma and popularity with the Kazak hordes. If handled correctly, his Soviet handlers believed Osman eventually could “contribute a large portion of the district’s population.” In

⁴⁸ Ibid., 55, 78.

⁴⁹ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan, file 110.19/0002, 122; and file 110.19/0004, 32, 19.

March 1944, Osman counted approximately three thousand warriors under his wing, a substantial army in 1940s Xinjiang. (By contrast, Sheng's troops for the entire province did not exceed ten thousand men). After the fiasco in March 1944, when Soviet bombers from Mongolia strafed Sheng's forces while in pursuit of Osman, the *batur* prepared for a new attack on Koktogay. This time, with twelve Soviet planes providing cover, Osman took Chingil with ease. Taken prisoner during battle was a twenty-year-old Mongol soldier. "We were told that we were here to help the Kazaks resist government troops," he said. Aware that Soviet commanders were leading many of the battalions, the prisoner revealed plans for an attack on the town of Burjin. "Our lieutenant told us: 'Planes from Xinjiang have crossed our border many times in preparation for war, so we should go help the Kazaks to fight back.'"⁵⁰

For his part, Sheng had seen enough, and demanded to know when the Nationalist government was going to file a formal note of protest with the Soviet ambassador. Chongqing, however, had little to gain by sticking its neck out for the *duban*. If the Generalissimo raised a fuss, "naturally the Soviets, via pretty phrases and misleading words, will deny all involvement, and then we will have no other recourse." The Soviet response to such protests could be predicted with distressing regularity. "We are currently investigating the matter, and will get back to you shortly," Chongqing was informed in September. "But we have encountered such problems before, and our investigations have never confirmed the accusations brought forth by Agent Wu. The Sino-Soviet border is extremely long ... and investigations over this vast area are extraordinarily difficult to

⁵⁰ Barmin, *Sin'tszian v sovetsko-kitaiskikh otnosheniakh, 1941–1949*, 76–77; Zhang, *Xinjiang fengbao*, vol. 9, 5198–5103; and Waijiaobu, *Waijiaobu dang'an congshu—jiewu lei: Xinjiang juan*, vol. 1, 232.

undertake.”⁵¹ Short of declaring war on his ally, there was very little the Generalissimo could do. In cases like these, might made right. And until the Nationalists had an equally menacing gun to point back at the Soviets, Moscow knew it could act with impunity.

For Sheng, the final straw came in July 1944, when a large army of Kazaks, most likely from Osman’s camp, descended upon the Altay border town of Jemunay. They attacked government offices and set fire to buildings. Amid the chaos, large convoys of felled lumber were transported across the Soviet border. “The Soviets are assisting the bandits in open warfare, in an attempt to lay waste to our borderlands,” Sheng complained to Chongqing. “Please raise a solemn and stern protest.” The Nationalist government, however, was utterly powerless to stop the Soviets. In early August, reports streamed in from Altay regarding the sudden departure of eight thousand nomads. They headed for the Soviet border. Among their caravan went forty thousand sheep, eight thousand horses, seven thousand cattle, and five hundred camels. Agent Wu noted with alarm that several thousand men were healthy fighters in the prime of their youth. Something similar happened in a village near Tacheng. Without any apparent cause, sixty White Russians took their family and possessions and suddenly crossed the border. When Sheng’s troops pursued the men, Soviet border guards shot down their Han captain.⁵² The Nationalists were unable—or unwilling—to do anything about it.

Sheng sprung into action. On August 11, one month after the attack on Jemunay, he ordered the arrests of more than seventy Nationalist officials in Xinjiang. Brutally tortured, they were forced to admit that, unbeknownst to their Nationalist employers in

⁵¹ Waijiaobu, *Waijiaobu dang’an congshu—jiewu lei: Xinjiang juan*, vol. 1, 236, 247, 249.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 271, 266–67, 242–45, 248–49.

Chongqing, they were actually underground communist agents from Yan'an. Ding Weici, an employee in Agent Wu's office, was one of the accused. "He received some of the most severe interrogations of anyone," Wu reported. "We can scarcely imagine the horrors he suffered in jail."⁵³ In the two years since Sheng had turned his back on the Soviets, Moscow had succeeded in showing the *duban* the profound error of his ways. Now confronted with clear evidence that the Soviets were preparing to deliver the coup de grâce, Sheng made one final attempt to rescue himself. Much like the Comintern, Mao Zemin, and Du Zhongyuan before them, the Nationalists had now outlived their usefulness. Their failure to protect Sheng from the Soviets indicated that Chongqing was now a liability to his career.

Yet if Sheng thought that the Generalissimo could be discarded like so many cuckolds of yesteryear, he was sorely mistaken. For Chiang Kai-shek possessed two trump cards that his predecessors had not. First, unlike the Comintern, Chinese Communists, Soviets, or other prominent Uighur and Kazak leaders, Chiang's administration represented the sole internationally recognized government of China. If Chiang decided to call Sheng's latest bluff, the *duban* would either fall in line or find himself ostracized from the Chinese political establishment forever. It was better to be a political orphan under the adoptive care of the Nationalists than a political bastard left out in the cold. Second, during the previous two years, the Nationalists had taken advantage of incessant Kazak attacks to insert their own armies throughout northern Xinjiang.

⁵³ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan, Personnel Division (*renshichu*), file 913.29/0003, 154.

While Sheng's men were succumbing to the battlefield, Chiang's forces had stayed aloof from the fray. If need be, they were primed and ready to march on Dihua.

Confident that he now had the upper hand, on August 16 the Generalissimo sent General Zhu Shaoliang back to Dihua. Zhu told Sheng that Chiang had need of him elsewhere: the Ministry of Forestry and Agriculture, to be exact. Unaware of how Sheng might react, Zhu put all Nationalist military forces in Xinjiang on alert, and flew additional fighter jets to the Gansu border. Sheng, out of options, duly submitted his resignation. One week later, the Generalissimo sent him a personal letter. "For over ten years now you have maintained and protected the borders, keeping them perfectly intact," he wrote. "Words can hardly describe the unspeakable hardships you have endured. Since the founding of the Republic, no one has succeeded as you have in preserving the nation's borders."⁵⁴ We should not doubt the sincerity of his words. From Chiang's vantage point, Sheng Shicai had accomplished a remarkable feat. He had kept Xinjiang a part of China during the darkest decade of the Republic. His decision to remove Sheng was the result of careful deliberations that dated back to Mongol border skirmish in March 1944. Back then, Chiang's chief of military intelligence advised that "we must find a way to adjust our personnel in Xinjiang, and transfer Sheng Shicai out of Xinjiang and into another post. Everyone with whom I have discussed this matter agrees."⁵⁵

The August arrests merely provided the pretext necessary to deliver Chiang's ultimatum. For both Chongqing and Moscow, after 1942 the removal of Xinjiang's *duban* had become a question of "when," not "if." But if Sheng's departure was Moscow's only

⁵⁴ Cai, *Sheng Shicai zai Xinjiang*, 397.

⁵⁵ Gonganbu dang'an guan, *Zai Jiang Jieshi shenbian ba nian*, 419.

goal, as many in Chongqing initially believed, Osman and the other Soviet insurgents should have been reined in immediately upon his departure. They were not. This realization led General Zhu to a pessimistic conclusion. According to Zhu, “the question of personnel is only secondary. The chief concern is still the Soviet Union itself. ... If the Soviets have no intention of improving relations with us, our removal of one major official will have no impact.”⁵⁶ He was right. The border raids, weapons smuggling, and Soviet denials continued as usual, taking little notice of Sheng’s departure. There were, however, some cosmetic changes. Moscow, for instance, recalled Consul-General Pushkin from Dihua, and Chongqing removed Agent Wu. Believing that the London-educated Wu had failed to make a positive impression on the Soviets, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ordered the Chinese embassy in Moscow to select a suitable replacement.

The embassy’s pick, a longtime ex-pat named Liu Zerong, did everything he could to delay his departure. Expected to arrive by early autumn, soon October came and went and still his whereabouts were unknown. “I hear that Agent Liu has no intention of taking up his post,” Wu wrote on November 9, himself eager to get out of Xinjiang. “Delays like this will embolden the rebels. Please send someone else or order Liu to assume his post immediately.”⁵⁷ Chiang Kai-shek ordered his departure at once. “On account of my talent being insufficient for the task,” Liu wrote in mid-November, “I had hoped to resign from this position. But my request was not granted, and I soon received another telegram from [the Generalissimo] ordering me to take up my post at once.”⁵⁸ By late December, Liu was in Dihua and none too happy about it. Though the era of the

⁵⁶ Ibid., 430.

⁵⁷ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan, file 913.29/0003, 112.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 114.

orphan warlord was over, Moscow's determination to alter the geopolitical landscape of Xinjiang was stronger than ever. By the time Agent Liu took up his post in Xinjiang, Soviet labors had already borne fruit.

On November 7, 1944, the city of Ili came under siege.

The Afterlife of Sheng Shicai

On September 11, 1944, Sheng Shicai flew to Chongqing and began his tenure as the Minister of Forestry and Agriculture. The Generalissimo saw to his every need, personally signing an order allowing Sheng to recoup his storehouse of wealth beneath the governor's building. With three witnesses present, the basement was unlocked to reveal fifty thousand taels of gold, chests full of valuable antelope horns, and endless blocks of opium. All in all, Sheng removed 135 truckloads of wealth, all with the blessing of Chiang Kai-shek.⁵⁹ Despite the Generalissimo's promise to shield Sheng from his detractors, however, it did not take long for the former *duban* to come under siege. The first signs of trouble came in April 1945, when Peng Jiyuan, Sheng's former Minister of Finance, was beaten to a pulp by unknown assailants in Dihua. Following his recovery, Peng relocated to Chongqing, where he hoped to find refuge with Sheng.⁶⁰

But Chongqing did not bring solace. "I hear that Sheng has started to lose his mind in Chongqing," observed Wu Zhongxin, Sheng's successor as Xinjiang governor. The former *duban* did not even trust his closest confidantes anymore. "It seems that, in accordance with the tenets of Buddhism and as recompense for his past crimes, he has

⁵⁹ Gansu sheng guji wenxian, *Zhongguo xibei wenxian congshu*, vol. 10, 657–61; and vol. 11, 121.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. 12, 283.

descended to the lowest depths of hell.”⁶¹ Soon thereafter, in May 1945, token Uighur figurehead Masud Sabri took advantage of the Sixth Party Congress to call for Sheng’s head. As we saw earlier, however, Chiang Kai-shek would have none of it, and revisited his vociferous defense from 1944. “Xinjiang is as large as our four northeastern provinces put together,” Chiang announced upon Sheng’s arrival in Chongqing in September 1944. “To be able to return such a large territory back to the central government without firing a single shot is the greatest accomplishment a border official can accrue to his name.”⁶² Always loyal to the Party line, Governor Wu later deleted the entirety of Masud’s attack on Sheng from his diary.⁶³

The attempts to bring Sheng to trial on charges of mass murder did not subside, and their toll on Sheng soon became apparent. “After only half a year in Chongqing,” Wu noted on a visit back to the capital, “Sheng looks pale and emaciated, and most despondent. He seldom leaves his residence and prefers seclusion.”⁶⁴ Before long, Sheng, desperate to put some distance between himself and his detractors, managed to obtain an advisory post in the office of former warlord Hu Zongnan in Xi’an. But his enemies tracked him down, and he was soon feeling the heat again. Once more, the Generalissimo came to his rescue, explaining that Sheng’s actions had been mandated by the times and circumstances in which he ruled. After another stint in Wuhan, Sheng fled with the Nationalists to Taiwan in 1949. From there, he urged his wife’s family in Lanzhou to hurry up and evacuate the northwest. “Too many people are now fleeing from Xinjiang

⁶¹ Ibid., vol. 11, 261.

⁶² Cai, *Sheng Shicai zai Xinjiang*, 407.

⁶³ Gansu sheng guji wenxian, *Zhongguo xibei wenxian congshu*, vol. 13, 61–63.

⁶⁴ Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, ed., *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian—di wu ji, di san bian: zhengzhi (wu)* [Collection of archival materials concerning the history of the Republic of China—vol. 5, no. 3: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5] (Nanjing, 1999), 464.

into Lanzhou,” Sheng wrote to his father-in-law, Qiu Zongjun, on May 3, 1949. “It would be best if you made preparations to go to Chongqing at once.” Several days later, Sheng wrote another letter, this time with added urgency. “Please move the entire family to Taiwan, so as to avoid being harmed in a revenge plot by the Communists.” Sheng’s in-laws did not move fast enough, however, and in the late evening hours of May 16, six of Sheng’s in-laws and five innocent bystanders were brutally murdered in their home. Among the dead were Qiu Zongjun, the former Defense Commissioner of Ili and Minister of Provincial Administration in Xinjiang, as well as Sheng’s five-year-old niece.⁶⁵

It was not, however, the Chinese Communists who carried out these revenge killings. Instead, it was a former Han cavalry lieutenant in Sheng’s administration, bitter over a purge more than a decade old. Most of Sheng’s kin were ambushed in bed, where they were chopped up with axes and knives. Of the eleven victims, only one—Qiu Zongjun, Sheng’s father-in-law—could be plausibly construed as harboring any blame for the depredations of Sheng’s reign. This did not deter Isa Yusuf Alptekin, one of Nanjing’s Uighurs-in-exile and a piggyback signatory to the many legal suits against Sheng, from shamelessly exploiting the bloodshed. Isa led a thirty-six member delegation, self-styled the “Group of Xinjiang Personages Bestowing Reverence and Consolation upon the Heroes,” to Lanzhou so as to provide solace for the accused. Isa pleaded for clemency, and spent hours taking down their “heroic account” of the slaughter. The goal was to produce a pamphlet to be disseminated throughout Xinjiang and thus “satisfy” the

⁶⁵ Ma Zhiyong, “Xinjiang junfa Sheng Shicai yuefu yijia bei sha zhi mi” [The mysterious case of the murder of Xinjiang warlord Sheng Shicai’s father-in-law and his entire family], *Wenshi tiandi* 9 (2008).

people. Though a trial soon got underway, it was cancelled two weeks later on account of the approach of the People's Liberation Army. After the Communists took control of Lanzhou, the murderers were released and rewarded for their "righteous" courage.⁶⁶

Back in Taiwan, Sheng passed away his retirement authoring occasional articles for the press on Soviet current events. He also met with interested scholars and politicians, such as Allen Whiting, an American political scientist, who helped him publish an account of his years in Xinjiang.⁶⁷ But his multitudes of victims would not let Sheng rest. Every year at one annual Party conference or another, some determined foe would raise the usual accusations, only to be deflected by Chiang Kai-shek. By the late 1950s, the uproar over Sheng's unaccountability reached a peak, and some people suggested that he should "commit suicide in order to appease Heaven."⁶⁸ Yet Sheng also had his defenders, chief among them the Generalissimo and one-time governor Wu Zhongxin. In Wu's book, the former *duban* had earned full "merit for his ability to preserve Xinjiang as part of Chinese territory." Wu reserved for Sheng the same praise that he bestowed upon Yang Zengxin, who "governed Xinjiang for seventeen years, keeping our borders entirely secure." This, of course, despite Yang's unflagging support for Yuan Shikai, the man who banned the Nationalist Party in 1913, as well as his own execution of anti-monarchist Yunnanese conspirators three years later. In fact, when he found a bust of Yang tucked away in a storage closet in Dihua, Wu adopted a humble posture. "In light of such singular accomplishments, I bowed three times in front of his statue, as an

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Whiting and Sheng, *Sinkiang: Pawn or Pivot?*, xiii.

⁶⁸ Cai, *Sheng Shicai zai Xinjiang*, 408; and Zhang Murong, "Li jiang hou de 'Xinjiang wang' Sheng Shicai" [The life of "Xinjiang king" Sheng Shicai after leaving Xinjiang], *Wenshi chunqiu* 11 (2003).

expression of veneration.”⁶⁹ In the final analysis, it did not matter who—or, in the case of Sheng, how many—people died in the quest to keep China’s borders intact. So long as they were, virtually anything could be forgiven.

On July 14, 1970, the day after Sheng’s passing, the Nationalist government flew the flag at half mast.

⁶⁹ Gansu sheng guji wenxian, *Zhongguo xibei wenxian congshu*, vol. 10, 302, 158–59.

Chapter 8

Upping the Ante, 1944–46

“In former times, through the efforts of one man, Yang, Jin, and Sheng all managed to preserve Xinjiang’s territory completely intact,” wrote Governor Wu Zhongxin in February 1945. “So how will it look today if, under the control of the central government, even the slightest loss of territory is countenanced? The esteem of our nation and reputation of our Party will suffer.”¹ During his one-and-a-half year tenure in the northwest, sixty-year-old Governor Wu sunk into a deep depression. Often sick and plagued by what he called a “weak heart,” Wu thrice submitted his resignation to the Generalissimo, only to be thrice rebuffed. “I am advanced in years and lack vigor,” he wrote in June 1945, halfway through his governorship. “I cannot preside over the troublesome affairs of Xinjiang much longer. Please prepare my replacement.”² At the forefront of Wu’s frustration was not simply Soviet support for the manufactured insurgency in Ili. There was certainly that. But there was also what he perceived as his own government’s flaccid response to the uprising. Very early on, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs advised against the publication of its mountain of evidence documenting Soviet machinations in Xinjiang. This caused Wu to question the directives of his superiors. “Though we have kept our mouths shut all along regarding their support for these bandits, still they encroach upon us,” Wu countered. “Their goal is to lay waste to

¹ Gansu sheng guji wenxian zhengli bianyi zhongxin, ed., *Zhongguo xibei wenxian congshu, er bian* [Collection of documents relating to northwest China, series two], vol. 11 (Beijing, 2006), 521.

² *Ibid.*, vol. 13, 147.

all of Xinjiang. I am fed up with this charade, and can endure our capitulations no longer.”³

Wu was a founding member of the Nationalist Party, and a fiercely loyal disciple of Chiang Kai-shek. This made it all the more difficult for him to stomach the various crises of his governorship. First, the Soviets humiliated him by carving off large chunks of the province only a month after his arrival in Dihua. Second, Wu’s own boss in Chongqing, rather than meet the Soviet threat on the battlefield, adopted a platform in fundamental contradiction of the longstanding ethnopolitical dogma of the Party. During the previous two years, money had been no object for a spendthrift Nationalist government eager to infiltrate Sheng’s regime. Once sovereignty was recovered, however, Nationalist resources were diverted elsewhere. Governor Wu protested. “The situation in Xinjiang is special,” he wrote in November 1944. “In all its endeavors here, the central government must view Xinjiang through the lens of politics, with the welfare of the country as a whole foremost in mind. We cannot view Xinjiang through a standard perspective of simple economic loss and profit.”⁴ Wu, however, had the weight of the nation against him. In the effort to unite the country, it is true that no expense was spared to dislodge rival warlords. Yet once their territories were recovered on paper, the Generalissimo promptly turned his attention elsewhere. China was too large and too fragmented for the Nationalist government to devote anything more than a threadbare maintenance allowance to any region not in open rebellion.

³ Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, ed., *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian—di wu ji, di san bian: zhengzhi (wu)* [Collection of archival materials concerning the history of the Republic of China—vol. 5, no. 3: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5] (Nanjing, 1999), 294.

⁴ Gansu sheng guji wenxian, *Zhongguo xibei wenxian congshu*, vol. 10, 215.

Instead, the Nationalist response to Moscow's aggression turned out to be a source of considerable friction between Chiang Kai-shek and Wu Zhongxin. The latter wanted to believe that he embodied the will of the Generalissimo. "I represent the central government," Wu told a gathering of performers in early 1945, "and four hundred million of our Chinese compatriots. This fact alone negates any comparison with the past, when Xinjiang was the domain of a single person." The era of the warlords was over, he declared. "In all matters of state, I alone am now in charge." Yet Wu had been chosen for his loyalty, not his initiative. "With you in Xinjiang," the Generalissimo said before his departure, "I will not have to worry about domestic or foreign crises anymore."⁵ The final arbiter of Nationalist policy was Chongqing, not Dihua. The plan was as follows. Instead of throwing men and resources at a proxy foe he could not beat, Chiang would call upon his Uighur exile politicians to counter Soviet patronage of non-Han figures in Xinjiang. This tactic would initiate a drastic escalation of the rhetoric of national determination in the northwest. Chongqing hoped to conceal—and Moscow to exploit—the crisis of Han colonial legitimacy in Xinjiang.

The cultivation of strident Uighur exile politicians never ceased to grate on Wu's nerves. In response, he tried hard to show his Party just how many indigenous figures in Xinjiang were willing to work for the central government. Chongqing did not need carpetbagging Uighur politicians, Wu thought, especially those who had been absent from Xinjiang for over a decade. Wu portrayed his local recruits as cut from a different cloth than people like Masud Sabri and Isa Yusuf Alptekin, Chongqing's veteran Uighur officials. From Masud and Isa's perspective, however, Governor Wu was a conservative

⁵ Ibid., vol. 11, 448; and vol. 10, 474, 10.

roadblock obstructing their triumphal return to Xinjiang. But it was the Generalissimo's decision to make. And once Chiang made up his mind to use them, the longstanding ethnocentrism of the Nationalist Party lost its bite. In the five years from 1944 to 1949, the non-Han peoples of Xinjiang were given the opportunity to strut across the political stage like never before and never again. This is the era when, for ever so fleeting a moment, the roll call for substantive non-Han agency in the northwest included names that most Chinese could not even pronounce: Osman Batur, Masud Sabri, Isa Yusuf Alptekin, Mohammed Emin Bugra, Burhan Shahidi, Ali Han Tore, Ahmetjan Qasimi, Ailin Wang, Hadiwan Hadicha, Yolbars Khan, Ujingbin, and Manchakejaboo, to name just a few.

We must remember that Governor Wu and the Generalissimo shared the exact same goal. They both wanted to achieve Nationalist sovereignty over every last square inch of the former empire, and they both wanted to assimilate its inhabitants to Han norms. But as everyone was soon to learn, there was more than one way to skin a fish.

Reassessing Affirmative Action

“The rulers of Xinjiang must be Han,” wrote Wu Aichen in May 1943, ten years after he participated in Huang Musong's failed coup against Sheng Shicai. “We have a gift for governance. Other races suffer from inferior cultural levels, with no ability to rule Xinjiang. Whenever Han are in charge, the land is at peace. Whenever other races are in charge, the inevitable result is chaos.”⁶ During the 1930s and 40s, the above rhetoric

⁶ See the May 1943 preface in the reprint edition of Wu Aichen, *Xinjiang jiyou* [A record of travels in Xinjiang] (1936, repr. ed., Chongqing, 1944), 9.

represented the mainstream ethnocentrism of the Nationalist Party. The basic Party line did not allow much room for the assertion of non-Han identities within the emerging Chinese state. During one of Wu's awkward meetings with Masud, the governor portrayed the fate of China's non-Han peoples as a function of their proximity to the Han. "Han civilization has flourished for millenia, with a stunning array of material culture," he said. "Those peoples who followed the Han have risen high, while those who turned their back on the Han have disappeared." For Wu and his colleagues, the Manchus had been the classic case. Their ability to adapt to Han norms was directly responsible, in his mind, for the unprecedented success of their Qing dynasty. The one great mistake of the sinicized Manchus, Wu held, was that they had not obliged other non-Han peoples to follow their lead.⁷ Wu dreamed of rectifying this oversight. The Committee for Tibetan and Mongolian Affairs, a prominent Nationalist think tank on which he served, brainstormed the following question in 1946: "How can we infuse the Uighurs with Han culture to the point where they will be gradually assimilated," asked the Department of Internal Affairs, "and thus immune to international instigation?"⁸

When transplanted to Xinjiang, however, this bulldozing ethnopolitical agenda ran up against the memory of Sheng's Soviet-inspired platform of affirmative action. Taking his cues from a Soviet template, Sheng had delineated fourteen distinct ethnic groups in Xinjiang—nine more than the old imperial dynasty had allowed for, and a whopping thirteen more than wartime Nationalist rhetoric sanctioned. The prospect of Soviet ethnology in Xinjiang during the 1920s was what prompted Yang Zengxin to

⁷ Zhongguo di er lishi dang'an guan, *Zhonghua minguo shi dang'an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 3: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5, 398–99.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 486.

condemn the practice of separating “fish from water and birds from their flocks.” In short, the practice of “excessive delineation” of ethnic identities. In the age of national determination, this was sure to result in separatist movements along China’s borderlands. Yet the Soviet affirmative action model had never been intended to promote secessionism. Quite the contrary, it was designed to defuse separatist sentiments by convincing minority peoples that they could enjoy all the blessings of national autonomy without venturing forth from the larger state umbrella. In return, this umbrella promised to protect them from foreign imperialists and provide them with the fruits of socialist modernity.

Sheng and the Soviets, secure in their military might, saw in affirmative action the promise of political stability and territorial integrity, with only minimal risk. The Nationalists, on the other hand, plagued by fiscal insolvency and political disunity, saw only the specter of foreign-wrought separatism, unchecked by an effective military deterrent. In Xinjiang, their solution was not to revive on the imperial platform of five nationalities. Instead, they insisted on an even narrower definition of China’s ethnic composition. “Even though it is now said that there are fourteen ethnicities in Xinjiang,” Wu was informed in December 1944, “there is in fact only one, and we spring from the same ancestor.” The governor agreed. Kazaks and Han, Wu claimed, “are just like the British, Americans, and Canadians. We all share the same blood.”⁹ Differences in appearance, language, and custom were all due to time and geography, not race. Wu’s views were legitimized by the official pronouncements of the Generalissimo himself. *China’s Destiny* (1943) concluded that China’s so-called ethnic groups had diverged only

⁹ Gansu sheng guji wenxian, *Zhongguo xibei wenxian congshu*, vol. 10, 749, 494.

due to “regional and religious factors, and not to race or blood.” In fact, Chiang wrote, “the various clans actually belong to the same nation, as well as to the same racial stock.”¹⁰ Alarmed by foreign attempts to “delineate” China’s border peoples, the response in Nationalist quarters was to turn back the clock on Western ethnography.

At least, this was the official rhetoric, and it was one to which Governor Wu wholeheartedly subscribed. Thus we can imagine his utter bewilderment when Chiang Kai-shek, the author of *China’s Destiny*, offered a prominent soapbox to known proponents of ethnic separatism, and then encouraged them to spout political heresies. In September 1942, just two months after Sheng returned to the Nationalist embrace, Chiang’s inner circle of strategists became alarmed by the pronouncements of Masud and Isa. They went on record suggesting that Xinjiang be granted independence, or, at a minimum, that it be governed by the people of Xinjiang themselves. In response, Chiang’s chief of intelligence drafted a directive recalling Masud and Isa back to Chongqing. He noted that such rhetoric was old hat for the Uighur duo, who had “demanded independence for Xinjiang a decade before, when they openly called China an imperialist country.”¹¹ Wu agreed with the decision to recall Masud and Isa. It was the Generalissimo “alone [who] holds a dissenting opinion, and has simply instructed [the governor of Gansu] to keep an eye on them.”¹² During the 1940s, Masud and Isa owed their entire political portfolio to Chiang Kai-shek.

¹⁰ Chiang Kai-shek, *China’s Destiny and Chinese Economic Theory* (New York, 1947), 39–40.

¹¹ Gongganbu dang’an guan, ed., *Zai Jiang Jieshi shenbian ba nian: shicongshi gaoji muliao Tang Zong riji* [At Chiang Kai-shek’s side for eight years: the diary of Tang Zong, a high-level diplomat in the intelligence office] (Beijing, 1991), 306–7.

¹² *Ibid.*, 312.

Chiang instructed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to come up with a way to use Masud and Isa in Xinjiang. The Ministry, aware of Agent Wu's reports on covert Soviet agitation, considered a proposal to "devise a set of principles on ethnic equality" and "inspire patriotic sentiment among Xinjiang's Muslim peoples, in an attempt to combat the detrimental effects of foreign propaganda."¹³ Bu Daoming, head of the West Asia Division, submitted to Chiang a draft plan for "making the nationalities content in both their political and daily lives, so that the Soviets cannot instigate them from the sidelines." One of Bu's proposals was for a "provincial senate in which ethnic representatives could participate."¹⁴ Though the Generalissimo urged caution on the hasty implementation of a senate, his belief that Masud and Isa could succeed in engendering non-Han affection for Nationalist stewardship in Xinjiang remained unshaken. "I have already received notification from the Generalissimo himself," Governor Wu wrote in despair in December 1944. "He has instructed [Chen] Guofu and [Chen] Lifu to find a way to use Masud."¹⁵

Wu was frustrated. He believed that Masud had taken advantage of Soviet propaganda to convince gullible officials in the central government that all problems in Xinjiang were rooted in ethnic conflict. "In the past, uninformed people have irresponsibly condoned and encouraged Masud," Wu alleged, referring to his colleagues in Chongqing.¹⁶ But in December 1944, when a strident anti-Han Soviet tract, "Why Do We Fight?," began to circulate in the Chongqing, its strident calls to slaughter the Han

¹³ Waijiaobu, ed., *Waijiaobu dang'an congshu—jiewu lei: Xinjiang juan* [The Ministry of Foreign Affairs documents series—border affairs: Xinjiang files], vol. 1 (Taipei, 2001), 238.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 254.

¹⁵ Gansu sheng guji wenxian, *Zhongguo xibei wenxian congshu*, vol. 10, 736.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 737.

reinforced the belief that concessions to minority autonomy might be prudent.¹⁷ Governor Wu urged caution. “A small number of uninformed people in the central government, knowing little about the actual situation, mistakenly believe that all of Xinjiang’s problems are rooted in ethnicity,” Wu wrote in his diary. In his mind, Xinjiang’s real problems stemmed from nothing more than a shoddy transportation infrastructure and incessant foreign meddling. Wu advised “senior officials from inner China to make a trip out here and live in Xinjiang for a few months. Then they would experience a great awakening.” As for Masud and Isa’s suggestions—among which, according to Wu, were that Xinjiang be renamed “East Turkestan”; that the people of Xinjiang govern Xinjiang; that the central government not be permitted to station troops in, or sponsor migration to, Xinjiang; and that the various nationalities all be considered part of the Turkic race—these were all “absurd proposals,” Wu wrote, certain to “sabotage national unity.”¹⁸

Wu Zhongxin was not simply a squeaky wheel. He had his own plan for how to rule a non-Han land, and he pursued his vision after his arrival. On October 9, 1944, just a week after stepping off the plane, the new governor had already taken stock of Sheng’s prison. “Among the imprisoned are many Kazak leaders,” he observed, mindful of the ongoing troubles in Altay. “If we used men like Prince Ailin in a prudent manner, we just might be able to quell the Kazak uprising.” The incarceration of Prince Ailin, one of the most respected nobles in the Altay, had sparked the first Kazak uprising in 1940. It also provided a rallying cry for Osman Batur. Wu decided to court Ailin, sending him numerous gifts in jail. Before long, he ordered his release. The governor assured the

¹⁷ Waijiaobu, *Waijiaobu dang’an congshu—jiewu lei: Xinjiang juan*, vol. 1, 255.

¹⁸ Gansu sheng guji wenxian, *Zhongguo xibei wenxian congshu*, vol. 11, 473; and vol. 12, 199–200.

prince that the status quo *ante* Sheng would be restored. “From here on out,” Wu said, “I will take the moral policies of Confucius as my guide, supporting and caring [for the Kazaks] as if they were my own younger brothers.” Ailin was touched, and promised to do his utmost to rein in the insurgents. “In the past, we Kazaks lived peacefully and without incident,” Ailin told his benefactor. “It was only when the government started to imprison Kazak leaders that a handful of bad elements took the opportunity to incite a rebellion.”¹⁹

Having met with such gratitude, the governor decided to base his entire Kazak pacification effort around Ailin. Whomsoever the prince deemed fit to be released from jail was promptly given the keys to their freedom, with their absurd rap sheet tossed in the trash. Before long, Ailin had a substantial team of allies, and the governor sent them back to the Altay. Hadiwan Hadicha, Ailin’s wife, obtained so many declarations of loyalty among the rebels that Wu personally commended her to the Generalissimo and lobbied for her promotion.²⁰ After only half a year of pacification work, Wu’s Kazak returned with encouraging reports. “The nomad bandits have been deeply touched by the return of Prince Ailin to the Altay, and are submitting in droves. ... They are calling Governor Wu the ‘savior of the nomads.’”²¹ These were not the words of a sycophant. As will become clear soon enough, the governor’s vote of confidence in Prince Ailin dealt a near fatal blow Osman Batur, who could only recover his legitimacy by following the prince’s lead.

¹⁹ Ibid., vol. 10, 101, 116, 457.

²⁰ Ibid., vol. 10, 652; and vol. 13, 79.

²¹ Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 3: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5, 241.

Wu's patronage of Ailin was only the beginning. The incarcerated noble held in highest esteem by the Mongols in Karashahr was Manchakejaboo, the successor to the Living Buddha Serenchimid following his execution in 1932. After seven years without their spiritual and political leader, Manchakejaboo's followers pleaded tearfully with the governor for his release. Wu obliged, and the representatives of seventy thousand Torgut Mongols pledged their allegiance to the Nationalist government. Manchakejaboo, deeply embittered over his lengthy imprisonment, took somewhat longer to warm up to the new administration. He finally came around, however, once Wu authorized the return of all his weapons, property, and livestock confiscated during the Sheng era. According to reports from the new Han magistrate in Karashahr, the rehabilitation of Manchakejaboo and his wife, Ujingbin, made the nomadic populace virtually immune to Soviet instigation. "The magnanimous overtures of Governor Wu have greatly moved us," a Mongol representative was quoted as saying. For the remainder of his tenure in Xinjiang, the governor never had to worry about Karashahr. "It was said that there had been much restlessness among the Karashahr Mongols previously," Wu observed in early 1945. "But the release of Manchakejaboo Khan and the return of his wife Ujingbin has put their minds at ease and quelled their unrest."²²

Last but not least, Wu reached out to longstanding non-Han personages in Dihua. Provided they talked the Nationalist talk and walked the Nationalist walk, Wu was not averse to employing Turkic and Mongol officials. The venerable Tatar politician Burhan Shahidi, born in the oasis of Aksu, was just such a man. The ultimate political survivor, by the time he died in Beijing in 1989, aged ninety-five, Burhan had pulled off the

²² Gansu sheng guji wenxian, *Zhongguo xibei wenxian congshu*, vol. 10, 354, 373, 424; and vol. 11, 629.

remarkable feat of having served in every single administration in Xinjiang during the post-Qing era, from Yang Zengxin to Deng Xiaoping. A master of the sycophantic locution, he combined his skill in rhetoric with an uncanny ability to identify which way the political winds were blowing, and position himself accordingly. His fluency in Russian, Chinese, and Uighur made Burhan indispensable to the administrations of Yang and Jin, who deployed him as a diplomatic inspector in trade disputes with the Russians. By the 1930s, he was a well-connected entrepreneur of considerable wealth, precisely the type of person targeted by Sheng. After a stint in the Zaisan consulate, Sheng threw Burhan into jail in 1937, where he remained until courted by Governor Wu seven years later.

“He is just the sort of educated professional that Xinjiang needs more of,” wrote Wu in November 1944. “During his seven years in prison, he spent his days translating the ‘Three Principles of the People’ and the works of the Generalissimo into Uighur. This is most commendable.” Palatable to the Soviets, respected among the natives, and not associated with any threatening ethnic constituency (only a few thousand Tatars lived in Xinjiang), Burhan was a godsend to the Nationalist administration in Xinjiang. Before long, Wu offered him the prestigious posts of Dihua commissioner (*zhuanyuan*, successor to the *daoyin*) and Head of Public Security. These were both highly strategic offices formerly held exclusively by Han officials. “Burhan is the first non-Han to ever hold these positions,” Wu observed. “[His appointment] clearly shows the government’s commitment to ethnic equality and public welfare.” The recruitment of Burhan Shahidi into Wu’s administration was a public relations coup for the governor. Along with his sensitive regaling of Prince Ailin, Hadiwan Hadicha, Manchakejaboo Khan, and

Ujingbin, among a host of others, Wu was trying to convince the central government to drop its plans for the “triumphant homecoming” of Masud and Isa. When the Generalissimo still continued to push for Masud’s early return, Governor Wu pleaded in vain for a plan of action that utilized his own indigenous recruits. “People like Ujingbin and Ma Tingxiang [a Hui official] are local Xinjiang leaders of real influence and power, and they are loyal to the nation,” Wu protested. “And there are others like them all over the province. In the future I can escort them to Chongqing for a personal audience with you.”²³

Unfortunately for Wu, that day would never come. Mere weeks into his governorship, distressing news arrived from the Ili valley. It confirmed what everyone had been dreading for the past twelve months.

The Ili Rebellion

“Just before the last consul in Kashgar returned to the Soviet Union, he told his staff not to talk to anyone. When the new consul arrived, he also told his employees not to talk, assuring them that they would know why in two months’ time.” This report from Kashgar, having arrived on Wu’s desk in mid-October 1944, immediately caught the eye of the governor, who commented on its “cryptic” nature. At the time, he had just learned of a Kazak uprising in Gongha county, south of Ili, where reports full of suspicious details seemed to lend import to the words of the Kashgar consul. In Gongha, thirty Kazak bandits had suddenly morphed into six hundred well-heeled soldiers. During their attacks on Han garrisons, the rebels waved flags brandishing the words “East Turkestan

²³ Ibid., vol. 10, 242; vol. 11, 505; and vol. 13, 146–47.

Republic.” Further sleuthing revealed that professional Soviet soldiers had been disguised within their ranks, and that poor vagrant men had been recruited with free cloth, eggs, tea, and sugar. A few days later, after broadcasting strident anti-Han propaganda throughout the countryside, the bandits, now clearly made up largely of Kazaks, Tatars, and White Russians, moved toward the affluent oasis of Yining, the urban jewel of the Ili valley. There they picked off Han policeman in a wave of sniper attacks. It was then that the Soviet consulate began to sport a machine gun on the top of its roof, purportedly for “defensive measures.”²⁴

On the morning of November 7, 1944, with these disconcerting reports from Ili on his mind, Governor Wu made his way to the consulate-general in Dihua to celebrate the twenty-seventh anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution. The Soviet consul bent over backwards to accommodate Wu, adjusting the ceremonies to the governor’s schedule and giving Wu the honor of first toast. Afterwards, the consul-general escorted Wu to his vehicle, where the governor praise Stalin as a “remarkable leader.” Had he known of the horrific Soviet-orchestrated bloodshed then taking place in the streets of Yining, Wu may have tempered his praise. Several hours prior, a well-armed force composed of White Russians and Kazaks fanned out into the streets of Yining and immediately occupied a middle school. From there they fought their way into several key buildings, each of which afforded strategic positions for an extended siege. Faced with state-of-the-art machine guns, heavy artillery, and ample vehicular support, a little more than two thousand Han residents, officials, and officers retreated to three defensive locations: an airforce training camp, a Chinese temple, and the municipal airport. Those who were

²⁴ Ibid., vol. 10, 146–47, 592–96.

captured were forced to strip naked before being shot in the head. For everyone else, armed patrols menacingly roamed the streets of the city, shooting any Han who could not prove they were born in Xinjiang.²⁵

For Governor Wu, there was no doubt that the Soviets were responsible for the mayhem in Ili. Multiple eyewitness accounts confirmed the participation of Soviet soldiers and generals, the latter directing all major offensives. The rebels were frequent visitors to the Soviet consulate, where they held meetings and procured weapons. From a mountaintop perch, one eyewitness described a view of “endless convoys of vehicles traveling back and forth between Yining and Hulusi Pass night and day.” Wu cabled Chongqing, requesting anti-aircraft weapons to defend Dihua. “The insurgents have no planes and no aircraft personnel,” Chiang’s befuddled secretary wrote back. “How can they bomb Dihua?” Wu organized a squadron of reinforcements, but knew he would need more. “Xinjiang does not have the resources to deal with this problem all on its own,” he noted. Chongqing, however, offered no help. Wu’s pessimism proved well founded. Well before his reinforcements reached the outskirts of Yining, the rebels pinned them down and cut off their retreat. Many lost limbs to frostbite, while others were forced to eat leather.²⁶

Over the next two months, the Ili defenders found themselves in increasingly precarious straits. In late January 1945, having retreated from the temple and airforce training camp, the survivors converged on the airport. When food ran out, camels, dogs, and horses were slaughtered. Impressed that the Nationalist garrison had managed to last

²⁵ Ibid., 254–58, 358–68; and vol. 11, 422–24.

²⁶ Ibid., vol. 11, 373; vol. 10, 286, 702; vol. 12, 119; vol. 11, 425; vol. 10, 303; and vol. 12, 55–56.

more than two months under such conditions, Governor Wu criticized Chongqing for “ignoring this crisis.” In diary entries and draft telegrams that would later be crossed out, Wu deplored the “lack of material commitment” shown by the central government. The last telegrams from Yining, sent at the end of January, crushed Wu’s already fragile heart. “We have no more blood to spill or bones to break,” the governor read. “When are reinforcements due to arrive? Should we continue to starve and await our deaths, or is there a chance that we might be able to link up with reinforcements if we were to break out of our encirclement?” After several commanders attempted suicide, the defenders decided that the time had come to charge enemy lines. On the evening of January 30, over a thousand survivors broke through the encirclement and headed straight for the winter countryside. Three days of frantic pursuit ensued. The rebels finally caught up and fired at will. The survivors scattered to the wind. By the time Wu learned of these developments a week later, Nationalist authority had been entirely eradicated from the Ili valley. “The bodies of over a thousand of our revolutionary soldiers are now buried beneath endless heaps of snow.”²⁷

The loss of Ili in January 1945 accelerated a trend of demoralization within the Nationalist administration in Xinjiang. This was the culmination of a process that had begun in 1943, when Sheng’s embargo on Sino-Soviet trade first began to wreck the economy. Now, two years into the crisis, rumors and conspiracy theories flew through the streets of Dihua. The city was placed under martial law and a strict curfew imposed. Inflation, already acute before the siege of Ili, now soared to levels fifteen to thirty times worse than that in Chongqing. In the suburbs of Dihua, transportation arteries became the

²⁷ Ibid., vol. 11, 72–74, 190–91, 431; and vol. 12, 57–62.

domain of bandits. They were joined by waves of Han refugees, who fled the towns of northwestern Xinjiang. And if the general public was not already frazzled enough, reports began to surface of civilian convoys packed with women and children falling victim to mines near Hami.²⁸

Within the provincial Party organization itself, morale ran dangerously low. Those netted in Sheng Shicai's final purge had no desire to remain in Xinjiang. The governor grew concerned over the loss of administrative talent. "It is not easy for the central government to send officials to Xinjiang," Wu noted in alarm. "Seeing as we have so much work to do, it is imperative that we try to console these people and encourage them to stay put." Few people heeded the governor's call, however. Before long, Wu had to reach out to several shady figures—the "butcher" of Kashgar's son, Ma Jiyun, among them—just to keep the county administrations in proper working order. Those who did serve found that Xinjiang offered only hardship posts. Transportation was so primitive that the newly appointed *zhuanyuan* of the Altay region had to wait three months before a vehicle could be requisitioned to escort him. From Wu's arrival in October 1944 to the fall of Ili four months later, not a single official from southern Xinjiang was able to make the journey to Dihua to meet him. In the once productive oil rigs of Dushanzi, newly arrived workers from Gansu proved unable to get along with the Soviet-trained native staff. Oil production plummeted to three tons per day. To make matters worse, those serving the Nationalists might be targeted at any moment. In May 1945, a plot was

²⁸ Ibid., vol. 10, 415–17; vol. 11, 546, 579; and vol. 10, 698.

uncovered in the capital to blow up the offices of the Bureaus of Transportation and Security and deliver machine guns to underground cells in Dihua.²⁹

The demoralization of Party and populace was bad enough. But it was the condition of the military that threatened to unravel the administration. Transferred to Xinjiang in an effort to dislodge Sheng from the province in 1943–44, the roughly 100,000 Nationalist troops now in the province were overwhelmed by the vast distances and paucity of resources all around. And Chongqing, content to recover national sovereignty on paper, had no intention of siphoning additional resources to ease their livelihoods. The neglect of the military transformed greenhorn conscripts into social parasites virtually overnight. In Khotan, local merchants vented their anger at orders to deliver grain for the military without compensation. Without proper care, many of the camels, donkeys, and horses sent to Dihua never made it to their destination. For the Uighurs of southern Xinjiang, this was a decree reminiscent of the Sheng era. Soldiers posted to the front line at Jinghe, just opposite the Ili camp, refused to pay for grain, rice, and livestock angering the local residents. In Dihua, three soldiers were arraigned on charges of rape. And in Altay, limited grain reserves prompted General Zhu to recall all but essential personnel, a decision that invited the Ili rebels to turn their sights eastward. In light of such troubles, Governor Wu decided that he would need to travel to Chongqing to lobby for additional aid.³⁰

It was clear to Chiang Kai-shek that Moscow had planned, equipped, and directed the Ili insurgents to victory. He decided, therefore, that it would be pure folly to send his

²⁹ Ibid., vol. 10, 710; vol. 11, 100, 266, 289; and vol. 13, 10–17.

³⁰ Ibid., vol. 13, 264, 234, 202; and vol. 11, 465, 344.

limited military resources into the jaws of a vastly superior foe. Even if the Nationalists had not been tethered to the war on the eastern front, still they would not have had the means to counter the Soviet threat in Xinjiang. The only alternative was an vigorous political response, one that did not rely on mortars and ammunition to make its point. For several years now, the Generalissimo had been confiding his intent to send Masud and Isa to Xinjiang. But it was not until early 1945, once details began to emerge regarding the leading personnel and ideological composition of the rebel regime in Ili, that the Generalissimo finally put his plan into action. In the back of his mind were the shrill pronouncements Ali Han Tore, the president of the East Turkestan Republic in Ili.

“Before long we will march on Dihua,” the president declared after the fall of Yining. “We will overthrow the Han government and drive all the Han out of this province.”³¹ Ali Han Tore is one of the most mysterious figures to emerge from the Ili rebellion. Reportedly an Uzbek fundamentalist Muslim cleric, he rose to power as part of a broad Soviet coalition that included both secular intellectuals and Muslim religious leaders. Captured Kazaks later reported that the original rebel leaders were “elected by local Islamic gentry.” Real military power, however, was placed in the hands of Soviet or White Russian generals, such as Polinov.³² Ali Han Tore was viewed as an influential Muslim cleric in the Ili valley who could bring legions of pliable foot soldiers on board. During the early stages of the insurrection, his fire-and-brimstone rhetoric provided a clear rallying cry: drive the heathen Han from our land. “God is on our side,” he told his followers. “To my Muslim brethren, I say this: you must be on guard and you must be

³¹ Ibid., vol. 11, 352.

³² Waijiaobu, *Waijiaobu dang'an congshu—jiewu lei: Xinjiang juan*, vol. 1, 289.

brave. When the time comes for our final victory, we will drive the barbarous Han out of our homeland. We will throw them out from our precious ancestral land of East Turkestan.” To hear President Ali tell it, the Han were an “the enemy of God,” and the idea that Xinjiang belonged to China was an “absurd fallacy.”³³

On April 13, 1945, two months after Ali Han Tore became a household name in Nationalist circles, Chiang Ching-kuo, the Generalissimo’s Russian-educated son and Minister of Education, stopped in Dihua on his way to Moscow. “He suggested that we might now adopt the idea of some of our comrades in other clans, and try to appoint some of their talented people to government positions,” Wu noted in his diary, adhering to the Party line stipulating that there are no separate ethnic groups in China, only “clans” (*zongzu*) and “tribes” (*buluo*). Not only that, Ching-kuo also recommended “placing representatives from other clans as heads of government bureaus, with a Han occupying a secondary post.” Then, he told Wu, they might even consider appointing someone from another “clan” as vice-governor. Wu, fully aware that Ching-kuo was preparing the way for his father’s Uighur exile squad to assume future office in Xinjiang, assured him that he had already made progress toward this goal. His efforts fell far short of what the Generalissimo had in mind, however, as was clear when he attended the Sixth Party Congress in Chongqing in May. “All of the border officials in attendance said that it was time to implement national autonomy along the borderlands,” Wu wrote. “I said it was too early for that.”³⁴ It was also at this conference that Masud Sabri increased his Party profile considerably by skewering Sheng from the pulpit.

³³ Xinjiang shaoshu minzu shehui lishi diaocha zu, ed., *Sanqu geming ziliao huibian* [Edited materials on the Three Districts Revolution], vol. 5 (Wulumuqi, 1959), 4–6.

³⁴ Gansu sheng guji wenxian, *Zhongguo xibei wenxian congshu*, vol. 12, 332; and vol. 13, 50.

Wu registered an allergic reaction to the idea of “borderland autonomy.” On June 15, during a face-to-face meeting with the Generalissimo, he tried to convince Chiang of the folly of sending Chongqing’s Uighurs to Xinjiang. Instead, with great reluctance, he consented to their return. “Can Masud and the others return to Xinjiang now?” Chiang pressured Wu. “They can return at anytime,” Wu replied. “But they harbor incorrect ‘East Turkestan’ thoughts. We must first rectify this shortcoming.” In the notations following this event in his diary, later to be crossed out, Wu vented his frustration. “Whenever border figures are treated too generously during their time in the central government, I fail to see any good come out of it. Quite the contrary, they bring nothing but trouble to the state.”³⁵ Defeated in Chongqing, Wu slunk back to Xinjiang in despair. No one listened to his proposals, the entire Ili valley was in rebel hands, and Party morale had hit rock bottom. To make matters worse, Masud Sabri, a known proponent of ethnic separatism, was being groomed to succeed him as governor. And the man responsible for Masud’s swift rise? The Generalissimo himself.

If Wu thought his predicament could not deteriorate further, however, he was in for a rude awakening. As the curtain closed on the war in the Pacific, Moscow decided to make one final push in Xinjiang.

The Rebellion Spreads

The early summer snowmelt is a time for renewal and optimism in Xinjiang. Major transportation arteries bustle with long suppressed activity, frozen mountain passes shed their impassable snow drifts, and nomads pack up their yurts and migrate to greener

³⁵ Ibid., vol. 13, 95–96, 146.

pastures. After a miserable and dark winter, Wu Zhongxin, too, welcomed the onset of summer. “The cold spring beyond the pass is something those living in inner China simply cannot imagine,” he wrote. “The snow does not melt, and everywhere the ground remains an endless expanse of white.”³⁶ In 1945, however, the belated summer thaw simply brought more heartache. In May, several thousand Kazaks joined forces with the Mongols and proceeded to raid the Altay region. Soviet planes were spotted every other day or so, and one Kazak detachment was sent south to attack Barikol. In June, Ali Han Tore and the armies of the East Turkestan Republic renewed their assault. A thousand rebels marched straight through the Heavenly Mountains to the south, toting heavy artillery behind them. They had their sights set on Kucha. In nearby Aksu, the severed heads of ten Han men were found strung up along the roadside.³⁷

Then, on July 2, officials in Tacheng sounded the alarm. Bandits had appeared in the surrounding countryside, and entire villages defected to their side. Vast caravans of pillaged livestock headed toward the border, where the cargo was exchanged for firearms. Lacking reinforcements, Wu watched in despair as the bandits took over the countryside and approached Tacheng. Polinov, the White Russian general, led the assault, on orders signed by the Soviet Minister of Internal Affairs Lavrentii Beria and approved by Stalin. Though most Nationalist officials managed to escape to the Soviet Union, ten thousand Han civilians were not so lucky. Trapped behind the city walls, they soon met a gruesome fate. On July 31, Wu received his last telegram from the Tacheng authorities. It was marked “urgent as hell” (*shiwān huojī*). “Their weapons are state-of-the-art and they have

³⁶ Zhongguo di er lishi dang'an guan, *Zhonghua minguo shi dang'an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 3: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5, 449.

³⁷ Gansu sheng guji wenxian, *Zhongguo xibei wenxian congshu*, vol. 13, 218, 378.

heavy artillery. The sound of wailing shakes the earth. ... Lacking appropriate words, I send my tears with this telegram.”³⁸

Once Tacheng fell, the Ili rebels continued toward Altay, where Osman’s army was expected to play a supporting role. The Kazaks struck first, however, raining heavy artillery upon the streets of Altay, incinerating everything in its wake. In one sustained succession of six assaults, more than three hundred bombs cascaded over the city walls. The only bodies on the battlefield were Han, as “the Kazak warriors tie their feet into their saddles, so that their horses transport the dead riders away.” The regional *zhuan yuan*, Gao Boyu, informed the governor that “if no bomber planes come to our assistance within the next twenty-four hours, the entire district will be lost.” Three days later, the Ili army from Tacheng finally drew near, stopping along the way to occupy Burjin. On September 5, Gao *zhuan yuan* sent his final telegram. “If you were planning on sending any reinforcements, it is now too late,” he wrote. “There will soon be nothing more to report from Altay. This is my last telegram.” Though he vowed to fight to the end, at the last moment, under cover of darkness, Gao and a hundred followers fled the city and made a dash toward Mongolia. Altay fell to the rebels two days later, and every Han resident not married to a Kazak spouse was slaughtered.³⁹

Before he bolted for the hills, Gao warned Wu that “unless you fight back, the same suffering will be visited upon you. Before long, Dihua will become the next Altay.” Rebel movements appeared to confirm Gao’s prediction. In late July, the Ili march on Tacheng had been matched with an eastern drive toward Jinghe, the first town out of Ili

³⁸ Ibid., 240–44, 516–18; and Xue Xiantian, *Zhong Su guanxi shi (1945–1949)* [A history of Sino-Soviet relations (1945–1949)] (Chengdu, 2003), 203–4.

³⁹ Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 3: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5, 251, 262–63, 271, 278, 333, 337.

on the road to Dihua. After a heavy artillery attack on Nationalist forces at Jinghe, the Ili rebels struck forth for the Manas River.⁴⁰ Then the Japanese surrendered, and the rebels paused. During the interlude, Chongqing and Moscow signed the Sino-Soviet Friendship Treaty, a document containing wide-ranging implications for China's northern borderlands. In exchange for Stalin's pledge to refrain from dabbling in the affairs of Xinjiang and Manchuria, the Nationalists formally recognized the *de jure* independence of the Mongolian People's Republic. "As far as China is concerned," Wu wrote after learning the details, "the recovery of the northeast is of paramount importance. This should also make it easier to settle the situation in Xinjiang."⁴¹

It came as a profound shock to Wu, therefore, when, less than a week later, the Ili rebels renewed their advance on the Manas. "The bandits are now vigorously expanding, obviously in fulfillment of some planned and organized joint movement," Wu observed. Though the Soviets had promised not to meddle in the affairs of Xinjiang, "in reality, they are still unwilling to release their grip." During the first week of September, as the rebels closed in on the approach to Dihua, General Zhu ordered his men to make a stand. By all accounts, the fighting was intense. The Soviets rose to the challenge. "There are frequent reports of heavy weaponry and brand new firearms among the rebels," Wu wrote. "Vehicles transport grain and ammunition, and new soldiers appear in their ranks." On September 4, the rebels closed reached Dushanzi, where the Soviets once operated lucrative oil rigs. The next day, two bombers strafed the approach to Wusu, less than two hundred miles from the capital. The rebel army was seven thousand strong. Refugees

⁴⁰ Gansu sheng guji wenxian, *Zhongguo xibei wenxian congshu*, vol. 13, 477.

⁴¹ Zhongguo di er lishi dang'an guan, *Zhonghua minguo shi dang'an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 3: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5, 265.

poured into the capital and Nationalist officials sent their relatives out of the province. By contrast, the American consul, often skeptical of Chinese claims of foreign instigation in Xinjiang, had no idea what was going on. “He first expressed extreme concern over the recent bombings,” Wu pointed out, “and then asked me, ‘Where did the planes come from?’” The day after the bombings at Wusu, Liu Zerong, successor to Agent Wu, returned to Dihua from Moscow. Convinced that the treaty he had helped negotiate in Moscow would lead to an immediate ceasefire, Liu met Wu with a smile on his face. It fell to the governor to burst his bubble. “You place too much trust in other people, my friend.”⁴²

The imminent threat to Dihua finally drew Chongqing’s attention. Prior to that, Wu lamented, the central government had not sent a single bullet for the defense of Xinjiang. Pushing the melodramatic envelope, General Zhu threatened to commit suicide if the Generalissimo did not send help. If tangible supplies or troops could not be sent, Wu begged Chiang to at least send a “big official.” On September 13, his prayers were answered. At the airport in Dihua, General Zhang Zhizhong stepped out onto the tarmac. Zhang, then the head of the political department in the Military Affairs Commission, was one of the most respected figures in all of China. He had distinguished himself in several high-profile, tense negotiations with the Chinese Communists, rightfully earning an epithet as China’s “peace general.” He was debriefed on touchdown. Rebel armies were two days from Dihua and the capital was on the verge of starvation. Under no illusions about who was controlling the rebels, Zhang walked straight to the Soviet consulate and delivered an ultimatum. “The rebel army must halt its military movements immediately.

⁴² Ibid., 272, 281, 279.

This will allow both sides to send representatives to engage in formal peace talks,” he said. “If military operations continue to expand, I am afraid that there will be no opportunity for a peaceful resolution.”⁴³

In exchange for their services as mediator, the Soviets asked that Chongqing submit a proposal for Sino-Soviet economic cooperation in Xinjiang. Zhang agreed. With that, the crisis abated almost immediately. In London, Molotov informed Wang Shijie, the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, that the situation in Xinjiang “was simply transitional in nature, and that we should not overly concern ourselves with it.” Wang himself suspected that recent events “had all been planned prior to the signing of the Sino-Soviet treaty.”⁴⁴ What Wang meant is that the military aggression on display in late August and early September belonged to an earlier Soviet blueprint, and that the fulfillment of its provisions trumped any promises made in the Sino-Soviet Friendship Treaty. After the meeting in London, less than twenty-four hours were to pass before the Soviet consul in Yining made an important announcement. The Ili rebels, he said, had asked the Soviets to mediate peace talks with the Nationalists. As other historians have pointed out, had this truly been the case, it would have been a coincidence of cosmic proportions. There had not even been enough time for a single telegram to make a round trip from Moscow to Chongqing, much less Dihua and Ili.⁴⁵ Furthermore, having sliced through Nationalist armies like steel on tinfoil, it beggars belief to think that Ali Han Tore would have suddenly had a change of heart. Quite the contrary, it is clear that

⁴³ Ibid., 277, 290.

⁴⁴ Waijiaobu, *Waijiaobu dang'an congshu—jiewu lei: Xinjiang juan*, vol. 1, 309.

⁴⁵ Xue, *Zhong Su guanxi shi (1945–1949)*, 227–29.

Moscow, having pushed Chongqing into a compromising position, now decided to call off the rebel advance and wait for the economic concessions to roll in.

It was no mystery to the governor why the rebels stopped their advance so suddenly. “According to reports,” he wrote in early October, “most of the Soviet members of the Ili army returned to the Soviet Union in late September.” In fact, following the arrival of Zhang Zhizhong in Dihua, not only had Soviet personnel been recalled from the front lines. Every last scrap of heavy artillery and modern weaponry, including all aircraft bombers, had been pulled from the rebel camp. What remained were Uighur and Kazak foot soldiers sporting the same rusty rifles and ramshackle artillery wielded by their Nationalist counterparts. In other words, just enough firepower to fend off a Nationalist advance, but nowhere near enough to add to their own gains. The reason was simple: the Soviets had achieved all of their goals. The gold and uranium mines in Altay, the tungsten mines in Koktogay, the trade hubs of Ili and Tacheng, the oil fields of Dushanzi—they had all been wrested from Nationalist control. In addition, Chongqing had been forced to divert the talents of a key diplomatic figure to Xinjiang, a man sorely needed elsewhere. To achieve its goals, Moscow had facilitated the deaths of fifteen thousand Nationalist soldiers and ten thousand civilians, the overwhelming majority of whom were Han.⁴⁶

Now, in order to consolidate its new position, Moscow needed to put out the fire. Rebel leaders in Ili, however, having been promised in no uncertain terms sovereignty over all of Xinjiang, refused to lay down their arms. Facing orders to send representatives

⁴⁶ Zhongguo di er lishi dang'an guan, *Zhonghua minguo shi dang'an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 3: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5, 325, 356.

to peace talks in Dihua, Ali Han Tore informed his followers that they were to ignore the ceasefire.⁴⁷ At the same time, Ali's men laid siege to Aksu, the only city in southern Xinjiang to come under sustained attack. The attack on Aksu was in direct violation of Moscow's directives. Three weeks after rebel armies in northern Xinjiang had already halted their advance, the battle for Aksu continued without Soviet aid. On October 6, after a month of encirclement, Nationalist forces lifted the siege. Without Soviet help, the tide quickly turned. President Ali openly criticized the fickle calculus of the Soviets. In response, Moscow decided to replace Ali and his radical supporters with a new crop of leaders. It was time for the secular intellectuals to take over. It did not take long before Ali Han Tore vanished from the political scene, seemingly without a trace. A probable victim of one of the most ominous euphemisms in Soviet political culture, he was "recalled to Uzbekistan" in 1946.⁴⁸

Chongqing's Uighurs Step Up to the Plate

The horrific summer of violence put on full display the game Moscow was playing. The Soviets had alternately harnessed and manufactured anti-Han sentiment. They had trained entire armies from scratch, then equipped them with modern weaponry. They had recruited nomad chieftains and leveraged the social impact of Muslim clerics. And, when push came to shove, they had bombed Nationalist forces into brazen submission, even when the use of such aircraft clearly exposed Soviet patronage. Then,

⁴⁷ Xue, *Zhong Su guanxi shi (1945–1949)*, 231–32.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 236; and V.A. Barmin, *Sin'tszian v sovetsko-kitaiskikh otnosheniakh, 1941–1949 gg.* [Sino-Soviet relations and Xinjiang, 1941–1949] (Barnaul, 1999), 58. A Chinese source asserts that Ali Han Tore continued to reside in Soviet Uzbekistan until his death in 1976. See Xinjiang sanqu geming shi bianzuan weiyuanhui, ed., *Xinjiang sanqu geming dashiji* [A chronology of the Three Districts Revolution in Xinjiang] (Wulumuqi, 1994), 6.

just days shy of Dihua, Moscow pulled the plug. The message to Chongqing was clear: the ball was now in their court. How did the Nationalists react?

On September 11, General Zhang wrote to Governor Wu from Chongqing. “The Generalissimo is very concerned about recent events,” he told Wu. “If the rebels are willing to send a representative to talk to us, then I will bring Masud, Isa, and Emin to Dihua in order to facilitate communications. What is your opinion?” Wu, despite his conviction that Masud, Isa, and Emin were peddlers of a “narrow-minded ethnic nationalism with ulterior motives,” was powerless to object. “If the arrival of Masud and company will benefit the situation, then by all means they are welcome.” As Wu knew all too well, the Generalissimo himself was behind Zhang’s plan.⁴⁹ The triumphal homecoming of Chongqing’s Uighur exile team was about to be realized. In preparation for their departure, however, Masud, Isa, and Emin used their newfound political capital to raise a debate concerning the Nationalist Party’s most unassailable platform: the monolithic unity of the nation.

“In accordance with the principle of ethnic equality,” Masud wrote in the weeks leading up to his departure, “the government has permitted the independence of Outer Mongolia and granted high-level autonomy to Tibet. Yet the people of Xinjiang have not yet enjoyed similar treatment. This is most regrettable.” His petition ended with what sounded like a threat. “Today many people in Xinjiang are advocating for secession from their ancestral nation,” Masud wrote. “If the central government continues to view Xinjiang as simply another province, and does not confer a suitable political status on it,

⁴⁹ Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 3: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5, 291, 288, 269.

the people will be disappointed and their minds will become uneasy. The land will not know a day of peace.” Among the Party faithful, the response to Masud’s petition was shrill. What alarmed them most was the comparison with Outer Mongolia, which seemed to suggest that Xinjiang would become a Soviet satellite as well. What Xinjiang needed was less autonomy, they said, not more. It needed to become less “special” from the rest of China, not more.⁵⁰ Or, as Governor Wu put it, “the inner provinces have undergone a period of political tutelage that has lasted for decades. Xinjiang has just begun this process.” How could regional autonomy and democracy possibly outpace that of the more “advanced” provinces of inner China, which were still then undergoing “tutelage”?⁵¹

Despite his and his colleagues’ profound misgivings, Governor Wu was soon forced to play host to Zhang and his Uighur advisors. It was clear that they were to be used to counter the Soviets. “If the talks [with the Ili representatives] proceed smoothly,” Wu learned, “then we will not let Masud and company meet with the bandit representatives. If the talks experience difficulties, however, then we can consider using them as intermediaries.”⁵² One of the Ili representatives, a man by the name of Ahmetjan Qasimi, continued to strike a belligerent tone during the talks. “The current era is an era in which invaders get punished,” he wrote in early 1946, in the midst of the talks.⁵³ In response, Zhang gave Masud, Isa, and Emin free rein to spout their own anti-Han heresies. The reasoning was simple. Overt sponsorship of Uighur nationalists who chose

⁵⁰ Waijiaobu, *Waijiaobu dang’an congshu—jiewu lei: Xinjiang juan*, vol. 1, 363–66.

⁵¹ Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 3: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5, 308.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 327.

⁵³ Xinjiang shaoshu minzu shehui lishi diaocha zu, *Sanqu geming ziliao huibian*, vol. 1, 7.

to work within the system would demonstrate to the world that the Nationalists were committed to ethnic reform and tolerant of dissent. It would also take the bite out of any anti-Han or secessionist rhetoric coming out of Ili.

Thus, the more brazen Masud's rhetoric became, the more legitimate Chongqing's claim over a non-Han land became. Fortunately for Chiang and Zhang, Chongqing's Uighurs did not disappoint. "Since the middle of last month," Wu reported in distress in late November, "these three people have been running around instigating the populace and exhorting young people to demand high-level autonomy. . . . Masud tells the Muslim clergy to take up the issue in their weekly sermons, and counsels the people not to be afraid of speaking up anymore. Our detractors now openly insult the government and say that the Han have lost their strength. They demand the transfer of power and threaten to take up knives, axes, clubs, and rocks to exterminate us." His worst fears realized, Wu could hardly contain himself. "When General Zhang invited them to Xinjiang, he intended for them to help resolve the Ili affair. Instead, they have organized and incited the masses, and stirred up a wave of discord."⁵⁴ Editorials in the Nationalist press echoed the governor's concern. "On the surface they follow the central government," opined a Shanghai newspaper, "but behind the scenes they are collaborating with the Ili rebels. Uighur *imams* who used to gravitate toward the central government have now joined their ranks."⁵⁵ Yet if the Nationalist faithful were disturbed by the Generalissimo's opening act, they would scarcely be able to stomach the feature presentation. "It is said that Masud will be given the post of Inspectorate of Xinjiang," Wu noted in February 1946. "I have

⁵⁴ Zhongguo di er lishi dang'an guan, *Zhonghua minguo shi dang'an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 3: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5, 365.

⁵⁵ Waijiaobu, *Waijiaobu dang'an congshu—jiewu lei: Xinjiang juan*, vol. 1, 376.

nothing against him personally, but he propagates a pan-Turkic doctrine that will split our country apart.” Two days later, Wu learned that his paranoia was not nearly deep enough. The inspectorate post had merely been intended as a stepping stone. His ultimate destination was the governor’s mansion.⁵⁶

Like Wu, the majority of Nationalist officials simply could not fathom why the Generalissimo had given Zhang the green light to let his Uighur squad run wild in Xinjiang. The hostility toward Zhang and Chiang’s unpopular platform led to friction with Governor Wu, a lifelong friend of both men. Wu advised Zhang to exercise extreme caution with Masud. Zhang asked Wu to stop interfering. “You and I agree on eighty percent of our ideas on how to rule Xinjiang,” Zhang replied. “But our viewpoints regarding Masud and the others are different. I still intend to use them, as a counterweight to the Soviet Union.”⁵⁷ What sort of a counterweight could Masud provide? We should recall that his intellectually formative years were spent in Istanbul in the 1910s, when the Ottomans joined the war against the Russians. From there on out, Masud became a rabid Russophobe and advocate of pan-Turkic ideologies. He viewed the Soviet nationality project in Central Eurasia as a divide-and-conquer tactic, not as “affirmative action.” These pan-Turkic sympathies sometimes even led to indirect support for Nationalist policies. By insisting that Sheng Shicai’s fourteen ethnic groups had been an insidious artificial delineation of the Turkic race, Masud actually reinforced the Nationalist attempt to consolidate ethnic identities. They had only to tweak his formula

⁵⁶ Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 3: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5, 441, 443.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 464–65.

slightly to conclude that the “Turkic race” was in fact merely a “clan” of the larger “Chinese race.”⁵⁸

After his arrival in September 1945, General Zhang dominated Xinjiang politics for the remainder of the Republican era. He shuttled back and forth among Dihua, Chongqing, and Lanzhou, he led negotiations with Ahmetjan Qasimi and the rest of the Ili camp, and he tried to implement economic and political concessions that would please their Soviet patrons. Once Moscow was satisfied with the progress of the talks, Ahmetjan began to sing a new tune. In 1946, he assured Zhang that “our national liberation movement is not directed at any particular ethnic group, but only at that group’s ruling class and its authoritarian government.”⁵⁹ These comparatively mild statements were worlds apart from the fire-and-brimstone pronouncements of Ali Han Tore. They could also barely hold a candle to the words of Masud Sabri, who drew his paycheck from none other than the Nationalist government itself.

With General Zhang and his Uighur officials now running the show, Governor Wu found himself on the sidelines, where he eagerly awaited a transfer back to Chongqing. Before he left for good, however, Wu desperately wanted to demonstrate the merits of good old fashioned conservative statecraft. He refused to condone Zhang’s sponsorship of Uighur nationalists, and failed to see how it had helped them weather the storm. Yet his own lusty exposes of the enthusiastic reception Masud and Isa enjoyed among the people of Xinjiang confirmed the resonance of Zhang’s strategy. Either way, Wu’s work was no longer in the cities. Whether he agreed with the Generalissimo’s

⁵⁸ Bai Jiezhong, “Du Mai-si-wu-de xiansheng ‘Jieshao Xinjiang de minzu,’” *Tujue* 67 (1944): 16.

⁵⁹ Xinjiang shaoshu minzu shehui lishi diaocha zu, *Sanqu geming ziliao huibian*, vol. 1, 14.

blueprint for peace or not, Wu knew that it was only half the battle. As had been perfectly clear all along, the bulk of the front lines in the Ili armies was composed of nomadic Kazak cavalry. Masud, Isa, and Emin meant nothing to these peripatetic horsemen. True, the timely deployment of Chongqing's Uighurs had dealt a severe blow to the intellectual justification behind the Ili uprising. Theirs was a poison administered to the rebel brain. In order to strike at the rebel heart, however, Nationalist authorities had to appeal to a man far more elusive and volatile.

They had to reach Osman Batur. Only Governor Wu knew how to get to him.

Courting Osman

“If I could just get these Altay bandits to submit,” Wu wrote in January 1946, “it would bring succor to the people, considerably weaken the Ili camp, and constitute a devastating blow to the Soviet Union, the bandit manipulator.”⁶⁰ When he took up the reins of power in October 1944, Governor Wu identified the Kazak uprisings in the Altay as the most pressing threat to peace and security in the province. Though the Ili rebellion never ceased to vex his weak heart, Wu did not blame himself for its outbreak. Just like everyone else who had read Agent Wu's reports regarding clandestine Soviet activity, the governor knew the Soviets were behind the uprising. As such, there was little Wu could do about it. It was up to the central government in Chongqing to decide how to respond. Though he disapproved of the Generalissimo's response, the arrival of Zhang Zhizhong and his Uighur exile team clearly absolved Wu of further involvement. The Kazaks were

⁶⁰ Zhongguo di er lishi dang'an guan, *Zhonghua minguo shi dang'an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 3: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5, 408.

different. Osman waged resistance “purely against the oppressive policies of the former *duban*,” Wu believed, and not, as a matter of principle, the Han people. In other words, Osman’s insurgency was at heart a domestic affair. Han rulers had alienated him, but Han rulers could also reel him back in. Unlike the Ili rebels, Osman shed his blood long before it had become useful to Moscow. And since he was an unaligned nomad at heart, viewing the Soviets merely as a means to an end, Osman, Wu was convinced, would be open to a deal. Handled correctly, he just might prove receptive to the idea of “trading in his weapons of war for silks and jade.”⁶¹

First, Wu needed to make contact with the elusive *batur*, no mean feat in and of itself. The lines of communication between the provincial administration and its discontented nomads had been completely severed during the Sheng years. It thus took Osman nearly four months after Sheng’s departure just to learn that the *duban* was no longer resident in the province. Another reason for the delay was due to the strict surveillance of his Soviet and Mongol handlers. Recall that it was in early 1944 that the Soviet consulates in Ili, Kashgar, and Altay submitted their reports to Moscow regarding the best locale for an uprising. Up to that point, Osman had proven useful to the Soviets for his willingness to lead bold raids on Sheng’s military outposts.⁶² With Sheng’s exit and the establishment of the East Turkestan Republic, Moscow needed someone less capricious and more disciplined. In mid-1944, the Soviets brought in a Kazak by the name of Delilhan, who quickly began to nudge Osman out of the limelight. The Mongols now treated Osman like a prisoner, trotting him out on special occasions, but bereft of all

⁶¹ Gansu sheng guji wenxian, *Zhongguo xibei wenxian congshu*, vol. 10, 196–97.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 196.

real authority. Delilhan was being groomed to lead the charge. Osman's role was reduced to that of a cheerleader.⁶³

Osman's dramatic demotion to house arrest cost him substantial face with his subordinates. One of them, a man named Suleyman, admonished the once boastful *batur*, telling him that "you should manage your affairs, and not let outsiders manage them for you." Delilhan caught wind of these comments and revoked Suleyman's titles, a humiliation that drove him straight into the arms of Governor Wu. In January 1945, just as the siege of Yining was about to conclude in the rebels' favor, the governor finally assembled a Kazak "pacification team." Its members included the respected Prince Ailin and his wife, Hadiwan Hadicha. The latter could hardly stomach the thought of a lowly commoner like Osman usurping her birthright. "Osman is a shepherd from Koktogay," she told Wu, with obvious disdain. "He is a nobody." This dismissive appraisal of Osman's appeal encouraged Wu to issue a menacing warning, intended to scare Osman's followers into submission. "We will crush you on the battlefield, like eggs thrown against a rock," the governor announced. This bold statement was pure bluster. Only one day prior, Wu admitted in his diary that Nationalist forces were wholly unprepared to engage Altay nomads on the battlefield.⁶⁴

By February 1945, just one month after Ailin and Hadiwan's arrival in Altay, the results of Wu's pacification mission were astounding. Along with Suleyman, two other Osman subordinates, Manat and Habas, also expressed a desire to submit. Wu was ecstatic. "Without firing a single bullet, our pacification efforts have already succeeded.

⁶³ Ibid., vol. 13, 482–85; and vol. 12, 82–83. For a bare-bones biography of Delilhan, see Xinjiang sanqu geming shi bianzuan weiyuanhui, *Xinjiang sanqu geming dashiji*, 11.

⁶⁴ Gansu sheng guji wenxian, *Zhongguo xibei wenxian congshu*, vol. 13, 483; and vol. 11, 116, 51, 46.

The eastern marches may soon be at peace.” Deprived of his subordinates and handicapped by Mongol surveillance, Osman began to look for an exit strategy. He slipped messages into the pockets of emissaries, and asked them to convey his greetings to Governor Wu. Osman indicated a desire for a “trusted representative” to be sent to meet him, and requested permission from the Mongols to return to his home in Koktogay. The Mongols refused his request and threatened to bomb him from the sky should he sneak back across the border. Osman began to despair. “The people do not listen to my rallying cry anymore,” he admitted to one of Wu’s spies. “I am fully aware of how the Outer Mongols intend to treat me. Before long, they will throw me in jail or they will murder me.” At the same time, his former comrades-in-arms, Suleyman and Manat, made a pilgrimage to Dihua and undertook their own pacification missions. “In the past we used to fight against the communists,” Manat railed in one of his speeches. “And now we are supposed to listen to them and act on their behalf? Think for a moment just how stupid this is.” Taking aim at the national determination rhetoric of the East Turkestan Republic, Manat spread the message that “no country in the world can be composed of so few people [as us]. We were born in China. We are Chinese.”⁶⁵

In March, sensing the shift in the wind, Osman sent a goodwill mission to Prince Ailin, handing over eight horses, fifty sheep, and two yurts. The Soviets, alarmed by Osman’s rapid disaffection and the erosion of his mystique among Kazak braves, commenced damage control. In July, one month before the attack on Altay, Wu learned that the Mongols, on Soviet advice, had formally bestowed upon Osman the title of “khan.” In the mind of the governor, this move was intended “to cheat and deceive” naïve

⁶⁵ Ibid., vol. 11, 577–78; and vol. 12, 83, 152, 268–69.

Kazak youth, who might flock to Osman's banner once more. Certainly Osman himself was not immune to such flattery, and he eagerly publicized his promotion. First, however, he needed to test the parameters of his authority. Was Osman "Khan" the real deal, a reward for his patience and suffering? Or were the Soviets trying to dupe him for some ulterior motive? He found out soon enough. After accusing the Mongolian government of confiscating his livestock much as Sheng *duban* once had, the herds in question were promptly set free.⁶⁶

The advent of Osman Khan appeared legit, both in form and substance.

Deferential no more, Osman now sent out orders to apprehend Prince Ailin's emissaries and deliver them to the Mongol authorities. Wu was outraged. "Osman is an incorrigible man," he fumed in August. "We are now resolved to exterminate him." Over the coming weeks, however, the governor began to receive reports regarding Osman's participation in the siege on Altay. What he learned gave him pause. Logistical command had been entrusted to Delilhan, with Osman's men relegated to a supporting role. The final insult came in early September, when the city fell. "When Osman arrived at Altay, he heard that a Soviet official had been sent from Ili to assume control over the city," Wu learned. "He turned away and left immediately." The *batur-cum-khan* promptly gathered his men and told them that he would not stop them if they wanted to the Nationalist government. "We nomads have starved to death, witnessed the devastation of our flocks, and lost over three hundred of our men in the battle for Altay. ... From this day forward, anyone who wants to surrender can do so freely. I will not stand in your way." The realization that his "khan" moniker had been a sham all along cut Osman to his core. "We

⁶⁶ Ibid., vol. 13, 389, 479.

fought the government for many years, long before the uprising at Ili,” he announced. “They were inspired by our lead. We were the original vanguard. So how can we just sit by and allow them to come in and take over our affairs in Altay?”⁶⁷

Osman’s open defiance of Delilhan and the Ili officials, coming as it did at a critical strategic moment, was quickly brought to the attention of officials in Moscow. Lavrentii Beria, the Soviet Minister of Internal Affairs, informed Vyacheslav Molotov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, that the “Kazak Robin Hood” does “not intend to recognize the government of East Turkestan . . . and believes himself to be Khan of the Altay.”⁶⁸ With the highest levels of the Soviet government alerted to Osman’s intransigence, Moscow’s agents pressured him to accept a post in the Altay government. This, however, was little more than a face-saving measure. Everyone knew that Osman was not a happy camper. After Delilhan secured the city, Osman returned to his old habits of unaligned banditry. He attacked distant Nationalist outposts, in hopes of sabotaging peace talks in Dihua. Despite these attacks, Governor Wu found that he had begun to admire Osman. “He was the earliest of all the rebels,” he wrote, “and the Altay Kazaks love him.” In Wu’s mind, there were two aspects of Osman’s career worthy of admiration. “First, he wants only to protect his land. And second, he is not willing to sell out his Kazaks. Because he keeps the interests of the common good in mind, I believe

⁶⁷ Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 3: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5, 246, 424, 269.

⁶⁸ Barmin, *Sin’tszian v sovetsko-kitaiskikh otnosheniakh, 1941–1949*, 106.

that [Osman] deserves my trust in the future.”⁶⁹ The view from Moscow was more pessimistic. Osman Batur, Beria lamented, was simply “uncontrollable.”⁷⁰

While peace talks proceeded apace, both Governor Wu and the Ili rebels made multiple efforts to woo Osman to their side. Osman rebuffed the overtures from Ili, and instead sent emissaries to Dihua to inquire about the “current situation in the government.” The Soviets, Osman complained, had begun to prospect for new mines in the Altay mountains, levy taxes on the nomads, and restrict migration to summer pastures. The Altay Kazaks increasingly began to rally around Osman’s rogue banner. “The people are embracing Osman with enthusiasm,” Wu learned, “and turning their backs on Delilhan.”⁷¹ It was clear that Osman was on the verge of making a big move. During the first half of 1946, he reconnected with his former subordinates and gathered new recruits among Kazak youth. Then he bided his time. In July 1946, the peace talks in Dihua culminated in the establishment of a “coalition government.” Zhang Zhizhong was to be governor, while Ahmetjan Qasimi and Burhan Shahidi acted as vice-governors. Osman accepted a post as Altay *zhuanyuan*. Now that his political capital had reached a peak, Osman decided to hit the Soviets where it hurt the most. Just one month after accepting the *zhuanyuan* post, Osman withdrew his men from Altay. He then sent an

⁶⁹ Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 3: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5, 360, 424.

⁷⁰ Barmin, *Sin’tszian v sovetsko-kitaiskikh otnosheniakh, 1941–1949*, 106.

⁷¹ Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 3: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5, 389.

expose to General Zhang in Dihua regarding illegal Soviet mining activities in the area, and began to raid Soviet mining camps.⁷²

Tacit Nationalist support for Osman quickly drove a wedge into the coalition government. Moscow's plan to restore Soviet hegemony in northern Xinjiang quickly fell apart, and less than a month after the establishment of a coalition government, accusations again began to fly. Governor Zhang, having used Masud and company as an antidote to the crisis of Han colonial legitimacy, now found himself equipped with a strategic military deterrent as well.

He had his predecessor, Wu Zhongxin, to thank for that.

The H.M.S. Chongqing

On March 1, 1946, Governor Wu boarded a plane for Chongqing. His Xinjiang nightmare, however, had yet to draw to a close. "Our plane experienced horrendous turbulence on the way to Hami, and many passengers vomited in the cabin," Wu wrote later that day. "Our aircraft was a military transport plane that had already been in service for many years. There were no seats, the heater did not work, and the windows were not sealed. With cabin temperatures of forty below, the bitter cold pierced our bones." Flying through thick cloud cover and ferocious winds, the plane lurched and weaved through mountain peaks, on several occasions nearly colliding with rocky outcroppings. Wu watched anxiously as the pilot cursed and sweat, barely managing to land the aircraft intact, and many hours behind schedule. It was clear to all that they should not have taken

⁷² Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, Nangang, Taiwan, Legal Division (*tiaofasi*), file 604.1/0001, "Xinjiang Zhong Su jingji hezuo fang'an" [Documents on Sino-Soviet economic cooperation in Xinjiang], 2.

off in the first place. So why did they? “Though the weather was not conducive to flying today,” the pilot later explained, “there were so many well-wishers at the Dihua airport, all giving us a grand and enthusiastic farewell, that it would have been a severe letdown to all if we had not taken off.”⁷³

Wu’s harrowing flight out of Dihua might be taken as an apt analogy for the entire course of Nationalist stewardship in Xinjiang up to 1946. From 1942 to 1944, the Generalissimo charged headlong into the province despite knowledge of the political turbulence they were sure to encounter. After all, as a newly promoted member of the Allied “great powers,” Nationalist authorities had to live up to their vaunted claim that they represented all of China. They could not let fiscal insolvency, lack of equipment, and hostile elements frighten them off course. Soon after wresting control of the province away from Sheng in 1944, however, the Nationalists were beset on all sides by threats to their survival. “Today Xinjiang is like a boat passing through a great tempest,” the American consul told Governor Wu in September 1945, at the height of hostilities. “I hope it does not tip over and sink.”⁷⁴ Though the H.M.S. Chongqing was subject to a near-fatal battering, the decisions of its captains saved the vessel from capsizing. These decisions involved counterintuitive and unconventional appointments in the personnel department.

It is true that most of these appointments were utilized with great reluctance, pushed to the fore to meet the unprecedented contingencies of the Soviet threat. In the era of decolonization, Moscow and Chongqing were jockeying for leverage through the only

⁷³ Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 3: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5, 449–50.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 281–82.

channel available to them: indigenous elites. In an attempt to associate themselves with the moral high ground of non-Han national determination, Zhang and Chiang breathed new life into the careers of people like Masud Sabri and Osman Batur. For their part, Masud and Osman proved adept at riding this unexpected wave of support to a real measure of fame and influence. Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of Osman. A shepherd by birth, he seized the opportunity afforded to him by Prince Ailin's arrest to carve out a niche of appeal in the Altay region. Substantially weakened by Sheng's punitive expeditions, Osman got a second lease on life when the Soviets wrapped him in the mystique of ethnonationalism, a doctrine that neutralized his non-noble handicap. By 1945, however, he had once again become a hindrance to his handlers. This time, Osman revived his career by joining forces with a Nationalist administration also eager to sponsor the idea of ethnic autonomy. Under normal circumstances prior to the 1940s, Osman never would have been able to make a name for himself. Instead, his prospects were bolstered by the Soviet exploitation of—and Nationalist response to—the crisis of Han colonial legitimacy. Each time Stalin and Chiang upped the ante of affirmative action in Xinjiang, they did so by laying down a non-Han trump card.

But were men like Masud Sabri and Osman Batur really little more than “cards,” to be accumulated and discarded at will? The Generalissimo certainly thought so. Otherwise, he would not have sent them into the fray. Despite his support for Masud's return to Xinjiang, Chiang had clearly defined limits as to the degree of agitation he would allow. “According to reports,” Chiang wrote to Governor Wu in December 1945, at the height of Masud's activities, “Masud and company have gathered men from the Kazak Association for Ethnocultural Advancement and the *Xinjiang Daily* and demanded

that the government implement people's rights. Otherwise, they say, they will take up arms and achieve their own liberation. They have also disseminated pamphlets in various places of worship. Keep a close watch on them."⁷⁵ From the Generalissimo's perspective, the strategy to control Xinjiang had changed little from the Nationalist blueprint of the 1930s. This was nothing more than the Jin Shuren show trial transplanted to Xinjiang. The sufferance of Masud's salvos were scarcely different from the testimony of non-Han witnesses who railed against Jin Shuren in the 1930s. Allowing Masud to vilify Han governance in Nationalist robes was the ultimate display of symbolic Han self-flagellation. This elaborate display of political theater was intended to convince a non-Han audience that their oppressors felt guilty about their past conduct, and were determined to make things better in the future.

For the first five years of Nationalist rule in Xinjiang, Moscow and Chongqing escorted an unprecedented plurality of non-Han voices across the stage. Few of them were inclined to adhere word-for-word to the script handed down to them. Yet Chiang Kai-shek, Wu Zhongxin, and Zhang Zhizhong all shared the same goal, and they were equally determined to achieve it. They simply deployed different means to the finish line. The Generalissimo, for example, showed no qualms in adopting policies in direct contradiction to the ethnopolitical dogma of his Party, so long as they preserved sovereignty in Xinjiang. Wu Zhongxin, unable to sponsor political heresies regardless of the justification, nonetheless proved just as effective in meeting the Soviet challenge. Yet once it became clear that Moscow harbored economic rather than territorial ambitions, the limits on non-Han autonomy became clear. If the Soviets were not going to allow the

⁷⁵ Ibid., 396.

East Turkestan Republic to become independent, for instance, then there was no corresponding need to let Masud advocate Xinjiang independence. As the Manichean politics of the Cold War spread to Xinjiang, the once condoned autonomy of non-Han actors was destined to be circumscribed. The tensions and contradictions of Han rule in a non-Han land were about to come to a head.

Chapter 9

Last Gasp of the Unaligned, 1947–52

In August 1947, the Soviet Union abruptly ordered the Chinese consulate in Semipalatinsk to shut its doors and cease operations. The Chinese ambassador in Moscow was at a loss to explain this sudden demand. “Though their motives remain a mystery,” he wrote to Nanjing in November, “rumor has it that an earthquake is expected in the Kazak capital [of Almaty] sometime before 1950, and that there may be some relocation efforts. Thus it is possible that sensitive military or chemical installations will be transferred soon, and they do not want foreigners to spy on them.”¹ The ambassador’s hypothesis about an “earthquake” would ultimately hit nearest the mark, though not in the sense he intended. Two years later, on August 29, 1949, the Soviets successfully tested their first atomic bomb just outside the city of Semipalatinsk. Though there were no longer any Chinese diplomats stationed nearby to report on the matter, an American CIA agent operating in neighboring Xinjiang was able to determine, based on the atmospheric composition of prevailing winds, that an atomic blast had indeed taken place somewhere north of the Caspian Sea.²

The Cold War had officially arrived in Xinjiang.

The advent of great power nuclear politics along China’s northwestern border would not have come as a surprise to former governor Wu Zhongxin. More than anyone else, he had seen first hand how Moscow had successfully manipulated native discontent

¹ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, Nangang, Taiwan, West Asia Division (*yaxisi*), file 110.11/0001, “Zhu Xie-mi lingguan chexiao” [Closure of the Semipalatinsk consulate], 45.

² Thomas Laird, *Into Tibet: The CIA’s First Atomic Spy and His Secret Expedition to Lhasa* (New York, 2002), 81–90.

against Han rule for the sake of attaining a superior postwar position. “Whether or not a foundation for peace in Xinjiang can be established,” Wu observed in January 1946, three months into peace talks with the Ili camp, “hinges not on the signing of a peace treaty . . . but rather on the international situation and Soviet intentions.” Lacking Soviet good offices, any treaty signed with the Ili representatives was “merely black ink on white paper, capable of being ripped to shreds at any moment.”³ Both he and General Zhang, the chief negotiator, understood that the peace talks were a political farce. After heated debates, Ahmetjan Qasimi and his fellow Ili representatives retired to the Soviet consulate for a “rest,” from which they invariably emerged several hours later with properly coached demands. This was a carefully orchestrated stage act on both sides, and every participant was expected to recite lofty principles with heartfelt conviction.

Wu Zhongxin did not have the stomach for such charades. Zhang Zhizhong did. His enthusiasm for the talks was bolstered by the realization that Moscow was only using the Ili rebels as a means to economic and political concessions denied them by Sheng Shicai. “I firmly believe that the Soviets do not harbor territorial ambitions in Xinjiang,” Zhang told the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. His assurance prompted the Administrative Yuan to view the resulting coalition government, composed of Ili and Nationalist officials alike, as a Soviet outfit operating clandestinely within the Chinese government. “Sensitive files and intelligence reports are not to be sent to the provincial government,” one analyst decreed in October 1946, three months into the coalition, “but rather to [Zhang’s] Office of the Northwest Commissioner, from whence they can be forwarded

³ Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, ed., *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian—di wu ji, di san bian: zhengzhi (wu)* [Collection of archival materials concerning the history of the Republic of China—vol. 5, no. 3: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5] (Nanjing, 1999), 402.

onward. This is because the provincial government now contains numerous enemy elements ... [who] may sabotage our directives or leak sensitive information.”⁴ This strategic calculus is crucial to our understanding of how General Zhang intended to counter and placate the Soviets at the same time. At the negotiating table, Zhang offered political and economic concessions to his Ili counterparts, ones he knew their Soviet patron desired. Behind the scenes, however, he gave full rein to the anti-Han and regional autonomy rhetoric of his Uighur exile team. The many “ethnic initiatives” sponsored by Zhang Zhizhong during 1946–47 were unprecedented in the history of modern China. They included the appointment of the first non-Han governor of Xinjiang, a tabloid dance troupe tour of Shanghai and Taiwan, and an acrimonious whistle-stop public election campaign across southern Xinjiang. Combined with the full brunt of Osman’s martial wrath in 1947, the Nationalist counterattack in late 1940s Xinjiang effectively threw Moscow on the defensive.

The momentous shifts brought about by the Sino-Soviet relationship in late 1940s Xinjiang has led one Chinese historian to declare that “no other province in China had this kind of administration at that time.”⁵ This is an important point, and one which deserves to be belabored. Following the surrender of Japan, Mongol activists operating in the Chinese provinces today referred to as the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region sought to elicit support for their independence movement. The Nationalists, wholly excluded from Inner Mongolia during the war years, countered with a rigid definition of Chinese ethnopolitical unity, one intended to disabuse the Inner Mongols of their

⁴ Waijiaobu, ed., *Waijiaobu dang'an congshu—jiewu lei: Xinjiang juan* [The Ministry of Foreign Affairs documents series—border affairs: Xinjiang files], vol. 2 (Taipei, 2001), 214; and vol. 1, 381.

⁵ David D. Wang, *Under the Soviet Shadow: The Yining Incident: Ethnic Conflicts and International Rivalry in Xinjiang, 1944–1949* (Hong Kong, 1999), 316.

aspirations for statehood. The Nationalist platform, often seen as the ultimate embodiment of “great Han chauvinism,” has never ceased to attract the vitriol of its many detractors. Yet perhaps it has been misunderstood. The Nationalist insistence on the immutability of a single Chinese race (*zhonghua minzu*), to which all subordinate “clans” (*zongzu*) belonged, was the rhetorical product of a weak central state. Hard pressed to unite even the Han heartland, the Nationalists feared that formal acknowledgment of racial diversity within China would grant tacit legitimacy to ethnic separatist movements all along the fragile borderlands. Adherence to a monolithic ideal of ethnic unity, however delusional it may have sounded to outside observers, was a rhetorical strategy. It was designed to safeguard Chinese claims over ethnopolitically diverse peripheries that lay outside its orbit.

Once the central government took control of the periphery, however, a surprising degree of accommodation could be allowed. We will see this most clearly in Xinjiang during the second half of the 1940s, even amidst continued instability. Contrary to prevailing wisdom, the Nationalists, when operating in regions under their *de jure* control, proved themselves more than capable of sponsoring a liberal ethnopolitical line beneath their conservative façade. After the partition of India in August 1947, the Nationalists also rose to confront the challenge of global decolonization. When emissaries from the Kashmir statelet of Hunza arrived in Kashgar, they provided the Nationalists with an opportunity to experiment with the discourse of “regional autonomy.” As we shall see, given more time to consolidate their power, the Nationalist experiment in Xinjiang almost certainly would have aped the same framework of regional autonomy that the Communists established after 1949. The geopolitical aims of both

Parties on the peripheries had long been similar. As the civil war came to a close, however, their means began to converge as well.

The New Status Quo

In October 1946, three prominent non-Han members of the Xinjiang Coalition Government arrived in Kashgar to observe local elections. These men were Vice-Governor Burhan Shahidi, a Soviet-leaning Tatar; Saypidin Azizi, the Ili-appointed Minister of Education; and Muhammad Emin Bugra, a moderate Uighur nationalist loosely affiliated with Masud and Isa. Burhan and Saypidin immediately set to work, declaring that Han troops should leave the province. “They have ordered Uighur and Kyrgyz schools to tear up posters of both our late Premier [Sun Yat-sen] and the Generalissimo,” reported the local security bureau. “In their place they distribute reactionary propaganda, such as the Ili-produced journal *Combat*.” Emin, on the other hand, attempted to peddle a more moderate stance, one that advocated regional autonomy but not independence. “No one listens to his message,” the authorities lamented. “He is simply ignored.”⁶ During the preceding several years, Ali Han Tore, Masud Sabri, Ahmetjan Qasimi, and Isa Yusuf Alptekin had paved the way for the strident anti-Han rhetoric of Burhan and Saypidin. This was a new tune for the normally moderate Burhan, who had never before gone on record as advocating independence from the Chinese central government. Yet the bar had been raised so high by this point that even someone as cautious and moderate as Burhan felt the need to dip into his vitriolic anti-Han inkwell.

⁶ Zhongguo di er lishi dang'an guan, *Zhonghua minguo shi dang'an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 3: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5, 499–501.

The irony of the situation was striking. By late 1946, a seasoned yes-man such as Burhan could only ensure his continued popularity by parroting political heresies that he himself had long combated. By contrast, a man like Muhammad Emin Bugra, who had once participated in a militant Turkic separatist movement in Khotan during the early 1930s, now struggled to find anyone who would listen to his considerably moderated platform.

The Nationalist brass had a difficult time digesting the new status quo. In 1946, when Zhang Zhizhong appointed a pro-Soviet, Ili-leaning Uighur to the post of Kashgar commissioner, the general's advisors thought his actions portended "a repeat performance of the Ili rebellion in Kashgar."⁷ But, as was clear from the extraordinary popularity of Masud and Isa, Zhang was playing both sides. Former governor Wu Zhongxin had frequently commented on their enthusiastic reception throughout the province, while Chinese Communist intelligence reports regarding the Xinjiang political scene came to the same conclusion: "They exert a strong influence among Uighur youth as well as Uighur officials in Dihua." During the 1949 transition, Soviet advisors warned about the "deep impression" Masud and Isa had made on Uighur youth. They had a personal following of "one to two hundred young Uighur vagrants who engage in provocative activities and manufacture ethnic incidents."⁸ The reason Burhan and Saypidin tore down images of the Generalissimo in Kashgar was largely due to the fact that the Generalissimo had managed to associate himself in the public eye with the agenda of Masud Sabri, for whom an equal abundance of public support was found

⁷ Waijiaobu, *Waijiaobu dang'an congshu—jiewu lei: Xinjiang juan*, vol. 1, 390.

⁸ Zhonggong Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiq weiyuanhui, Dangshi gongzuo weiyuanhui, and Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun Xinjiang junqu zhengzhibu, eds., *Xinjiang heping jiefang* [The peaceful liberation of Xinjiang] (Wulumuqi, 1990), 161, 180.

plastered around the streets of Kashgar.⁹ To Uighur youth in Kashgar, images of the Generalissimo embodied the specter of Chinese colonization. Thus General Zhang had to make sure that Masud became associated in the public eye with the Han commitment to transform ethnic relations. As a result, the Ili camp viewed these same images of the Generalissimo not only as representative of Chinese colonization. They also highlighted the deceptive campaign of Han self-flagellation that was being communicated to the people of Xinjiang through a man they regarded as an unsuspecting Uighur puppet: Masud Sabri.

At the same time he was sponsoring non-Han agitation, however, Zhang Zhizhong also took care to give every appearance that he was bending over backward to please the Soviets. In the eleven months from July 1946 to May 1947, Zhang restored the Sino-Soviet Cultural Association; returned Soviet assets confiscated at Hami during the Sheng era; engaged Hami-Almaty airline negotiations clearly detrimental to Chinese interests; and established a Soviet expatriate organization that returned White Russians to Soviet control. He even tried to award medals of honor to those Soviet “mediators” who had helped broker the Ili peace talks. This last request, however, was simply too much to ask from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Nanjing. Wang Shijie, the foreign minister, refused to reward Russians who had merely thrown water onto a rebellion they themselves had ignited.¹⁰

⁹ Ahmetjan himself admits that pro-Masud posters existed in Kashgar, though he claims they were deliberately manufactured and posted by Nationalist authorities, an allegation that, in light of widespread Nationalist antipathy for Masud, seems unlikely. See Xinjiang shaoshu minzu shehui lishi diaocha zu, ed., *Sanqu geming ziliao huibian* [Edited materials on the Three Districts Revolution], vol. 1 (Wulumuqi, 1959), 129–30.

¹⁰ Xue Xiantian, *Zhong Su guanxi shi (1945–1949)* [A history of Sino-Soviet relations (1945–1949)] (Chengdu, 2003), 244–57.

Zhang's gestures of goodwill to Moscow were little more than a smokescreen. His next move would infuriate the Soviets. On May 28, 1947, he resigned his post as governor and named Masud Sabri as his replacement, an appointment approved by Chiang Kai-shek himself.¹¹ The impact was immediate. The *Los Angeles Times* called Masud's appointment "unprecedented," while Zhang, claiming that Nanjing was bowing to native wishes to see "a Xinjiang man rule Xinjiang," portrayed it as the manifestation of Chinese "respect for the political rights of minorities."¹² Most people in the Nationalist government, not to mention the Chinese public at large, were aghast. To his detractors (among whom was Zhang's good friend Wu Zhongxin), the general responded by playing down Masud's well-known separatist rhetoric and extolling the benefits of an alleged Han puppet adored by the Uighurs. "Masud is a highly virtuous gentleman, who enjoys a senior position of authority among the Uighurs," wrote an anonymous journalist in *China News*. "But in truth, even though Masud has ascended to the governorship, he wields very little real power." Assuring his Han audience that General Zhang, "the real power behind the throne," was still in command, the author belittled Masud as Zhang's "ace card."¹³

Once Masud assumed office, Zhang hit the road and took his message to inner China. In the fall of 1947, with a colorful Xinjiang dance troupe in tow, Zhang embarked on a three-month tour of Shanghai, Nanjing, Hangzhou, and Taiwan. The event initiated a media frenzy. To his Han audience, Zhang played up the idea that long-estranged

¹¹ Masud's pending appointment and the Generalissimo's hand in the arrangement was leaked to the Western media about a month before Masud assumed his post. See Waldo Drake, "Chiang Backing of Turks Likely to Prove Costly," *Los Angeles Times*, May 1, 1947.

¹² Waldo Drake, "Russ India Push Seen in Sinkiang," *Los Angeles Times*, June 15, 1947; and "Wei Mai-si-wu-de jiuren bensheng zhuxi Zhang zhuren yu sheng canyiyuan laihui hanjian" [Letters between Commissioner Zhang and members of the provincial senate regarding the appointment of Masud as provincial chairman], *Han haichao* 11 (1948): 24.

¹³ "Cong Mai-si-wu-de dao Bao-er-han: zhe shi Zhang Zhizhong yishou daoyan de jiezuo" [From Masud to Burhan: a masterpiece directed by Zhang Zhizhong], *Zhongguo xinwen* 8 (1949): 8.

branches of the Chinese family were about to reconnect. Burhan Shahidi jumped on board as well, reversing his separatist message in Kashgar and declaring that Xinjiang “will never depart from the Republic of China.” For their part, however, Isa and Emin were given free rein to propagate a pan-Turkic agenda designed to appease their supporters back home. A striking example came on December 17, when the official Nationalist Party organ, the *Central Daily*, reprinted a sample of Uighur calligraphy provided by Isa on behalf of his dance troupe. The Uighur version, penned in Arabic script, read as follows: “Let us develop well our national art of Turkestan.” This was a classic expression of their pan-Turkic agenda, insofar as it posited a single Turkic nation estranged under Soviet and Chinese rule.¹⁴ They reinforced this message by filling publications under their editorship with images of mosques in Turkey. All of these projects were financed by General Zhang. As we have seen, however, Zhang had a different message for his Han audience. The very same pan-Turkic slogan in Arabic Uighur was translated in Chinese as, “Develop the culture of Xinjiang.” Instead of Turkish mosques, the Chinese newspapers carried pictures of Uighur performers paying homage to Sun Yat-sen’s shrine in Nanjing.¹⁵

¹⁴ There is little doubt that someone in the Nationalist camp was aware of the pan-Turkic message embedded within the Uighur calligraphy, but was directed to leave it as is. The evidence for such an assertion comes from Wu Zhongxin, who in September 1945 complained about how Masud and Isa had managed to include the Uighur phrase, “for use in Chinese Turkestan,” on the new Nationalist paper currency being prepared for circulation in Xinjiang. After its discovery, the offending bills were recalled and destroyed. Two years later, with Zhang Zhizhong in charge, similarly subversive messages—especially those published in the official Party newspaper—would have been countenanced at the highest levels. For Wu’s account, see *Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 3: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5, 288.

¹⁵ On the ethnic initiatives of Zhang Zhizhong during the second half of 1947, see Justin Jacobs, “How Chinese Turkestan Became Chinese: Visualizing Zhang Zhizhong’s *Tianshan Pictorial* and Xinjiang Youth Song and Dance Troupe,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 67, no. 2 (May 2008): 545–91. I have revised some of my assertions from the original article, which mistakenly portrayed Uighur “resistance” as undetected and uncountenanced by its Nationalist handlers. On the contrary, I have now seen ample evidence to suggest

There can be no better example of the narrow plank Zhang was trying to walk. That he pulled it off at all is remarkable. That he somehow managed to turn it into a public relations coup for both Chinese and Turkic nationalists infuriated the Ili camp. On the day Masud took office, Ili authorities organized massive protests through the streets of Yining. They demanded his immediate resignation and disparaged his motives. Masud, alleged one such pronouncement, was nothing more than a “puppet behind whom [the Nationalists] can carry out their reactionary activities.” For his part, Ahmetjan Qasimi was alarmed by what was being said on the street. Uighurs were heard to claim that “good things will happen during the era of Masud,” and they thanked the central government for giving them the “blessing” of Masud. Ahmetjan resolved to expose the Nationalist conspiracy for what it really was. “To those who do not understand how the colonialists operate, here is what they do. They say: ‘We have given you a leader from among your own people.’ They say this in order to attract people to their side and fracture our indomitable, united front of national liberation.” According to Ahmetjan, Masud was nothing but an ambitious careerist, a man who “babbles manure” for a living. He had deceived himself into thinking that the Nationalist authorities would actually allow the realization of his pan-Turkic “fantasies.” Quite the contrary, Ahmetjan claimed, he was simply doing the work of the Han colonialists for them.¹⁶

There are equal parts truth and hypocrisy to these allegations. Without a doubt, Masud and Isa were actively laboring on behalf of a larger “Han colonialist” agenda, perhaps even unwittingly. Yet nearly every single accusation leveled at Masud and Isa

that this was all part of Zhang and Chiang’s plan to counter the Soviet challenge emanating from the Ili camp.

¹⁶ Xinjiang shaoshu minzu shehui lishi diaocha zu, *Sanqu geming ziliao huibian*, vol. 6, 104; and vol. 1, 68–69, 75, 93–107.

could just as easily be leveled at Ahmetjan, too. Both sides were doing their best to negotiate a measure of non-Han autonomy at the dawn of the Cold War. In order to pursue this agenda, both sides had to resort to the fickle patronage of distant metropolises. The only difference lay in their “choice” of patron: those operating under the fair-weather thumb of the Soviets were obliged to lock horns with those operating under the fair-weather thumb of the Chinese. The nasty battle of words that ensued was simply a reflection of the larger conflict between Nanjing and Moscow. Not surprisingly then, the Nationalists were determined to resist calls for Masud’s removal. According to the Ministry of Defense, this was “the most difficult demand to meet, and the primary source of the current impasse.”¹⁷ Nearly a year into Masud’s governorship, long after the Ili representatives had withdrawn from Zhang’s coalition government, Ahmetjan still demanded “the dismissal of Governor Masud as a precondition for any return to Dihua for further talks.”¹⁸ Masud, once viewed as the very antithesis of Nationalist interests in Xinjiang, now came to symbolize Nanjing’s stake in “enlightened” Han sovereignty over the northwest. The polarizing politics of the Cold War had pushed a pan-Turkic agitator into the same camp as ardent Chinese nationalists. The survival of each depended upon the cooperation of the other. So long as the Soviets continued to exploit the crisis of Han colonial legitimacy, Nanjing needed Masud just as much as Masud needed Nanjing.

Ahmetjan and Masud were both “ace cards” for their patrons, each one neutralizing the increasingly bold hand of his opponent’s patron. It would be a mistake for us to take the coalition government of 1946–47 too seriously. There is little point in

¹⁷ Waijiaobu, *Waijiaobu dang’an congshu—jiewu lei: Xinjiang juan*, vol. 1, 355.

¹⁸ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan, file 112.93/0001, “Mengjun qin Xin” [The invasion of Xinjiang by the Mongolian army], 25.

trying to assess whether Chinese concessions to Ili demands for non-Han autonomy were implemented with any degree of “sincerity,” or whether the appointment of Masud by Nationalist fiat was a violation of provisions reached during the peace talks. Such details, hopelessly obscured by partisan bickering, disguise the larger geopolitical calculus of both sides. To the extent that Masud and Ahmetjan pursued an autonomous agenda, it was an agenda groomed by their handlers to obtain political or economic interests for a distant metropole. If we want to examine a true example of non-Han autonomy in Xinjiang, we must look elsewhere.

The Baytik Incident

“Osman Batur,” wrote Ian Morrison, a British journalist, “dominates a room (or yurt) the moment he comes into it.” A. Doak Barnett, an American scholar, took note of Osman’s “tremendous vigor,” “terrific ego,” and “large powerful face.” He thought it easy to see how, by sheer force of personality, Osman “had risen to a commanding position amongst a people for whom personal leadership still counts for much.”¹⁹ In a career spanning less than a decade, Osman had become one of the most fascinating figures in modern Chinese history. In 1947, he was forty eight years old and an ally of the Nationalists. Governor Wu had worked hard to bring this unlikely turn of events about. He believed that the nomads only wanted a return to world that existed before Sheng Shicai. In other words, they wanted differentiated governance that did not penetrate below the intermediary stratum of indigenous leaders. In return, the Kazaks would pay

¹⁹ Ian Morrison, “Some Notes on the Kazakhs of Sinkiang,” *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 36, no. 1 (1949): 69–71; and A. Doak Barnett, *China on the Eve of Communist Takeover* (New York, 1963), 274–76.

allegiance to a distant Han governor. Wu not only restored the authority of Prince Ailin and his wife, he also allowed a common shepherd like Osman to keep that piece of the pie that he had won in Ailin's absence. The *batur* was grateful. "I am an official in service to my country, and I have a duty to defend its territory," he proclaimed in 1947. "In order to protect our national territory, we Altay Kazaks must deliver a severe blow to any evil power attempting to destroy national unity."²⁰

In August 1946, Osman withdrew from Altay and sided with the Chinese. Over the winter he garnered new recruits and raided Soviet mining camps. The Ili army retaliated and drove Osman to the south. In April 1947, Osman asked the Nationalists for permission to pasture in the Baytik Mountains, four days northeast of Dihua. Once there, he immediately clashed with Mongol border patrols. On May 20, during one especially fierce engagement, Osman took custody of eight Mongol hostages. The commander of a Chinese garrison several days away ordered Osman to release the prisoners. He ignored the order. Two weeks later, on June 2, the Mongols announced that severe repercussions would attend if the hostages were not released within forty-eight hours. Osman again ignored the order. Then, as promised, on June 5 four or five unidentified aircraft crossed the Chinese border and laid waste to Osman's camp. The *batur* escaped, only to return with more followers. For the next two months, Osman and the Mongols traded bullets and casualties all along the mountainous border. Young Kazaks rallied to his banner in droves. When Osman first arrived at Baytik, he was accompanied by less than two hundred braves. Four months later, he counted 1,700 warriors among his horde.²¹

²⁰ Zhou Dongjiao, *Xinjiang shinian* [A Decade in Xinjiang] (Lanzhou, 1948), 301.

²¹ For the exceedingly complex course of events leading up to and succeeding the Baytik incident, see Waijiaobu, *Waijiaobu dang'an congshu—jiuwu lei: Xinjiang juan*, vol. 2, 182–234.

Days after the June 5 attack, newspapers throughout China raised the shrill alarm of World War III. Yet Nanjing did not receive its first reliable report from General Zhang until June 17, nearly two weeks later. In the meantime, the “Baytik incident” provided both sides with the opportunity to engage in a grotesque display of Cold War posturing. Nanjing tried to coordinate a nation-wide anti-Soviet campaign, hoping to direct the energies of student protests toward Moscow. The Soviet ambassador in Nanjing alleged that the Generalissimo was at the head of a vicious “conspiracy,” one that was designed to “obtain American aid and suppress the domestic democracy movement.”²² Reflecting back on Osman’s career several years later, *Time* magazine declared that Osman had singlehandedly and “armed only with outmoded equipment from China’s Nationalists, declared war on the whole Soviet Union.”²³

In an attempt to refute Soviet accusations, General Zhang organized a team of investigators to make the trek up to the Baytik Mountains. There they debated the eyewitnesses accounts, the make and model of munition fragments, and the alleged markings on the aircraft that had bombed Osman’s encampment. Seeing as Nanjing hoped to bring Moscow to trial in the court of world opinion, such logistical nitpicking was essential at the time. Today, however, their efforts appear largely academic. That four or five aircraft bombed Osman’s encampment on the Chinese side of the border is beyond dispute. Unless we believe that the Nationalists bombed their own ally in order to frame the Soviets, then there is only one possible conclusion. The incident in the Baytik Mountains was a Soviet attempt to take out Osman once and for all. The two weeks’ lag

²² Waijiaobu, *Waijiaobu dang’an congshu—jiewu lei: Xinjiang juan*, vol. 2, 200.

²³ “To Follow the Faith,” *Time*, October 22, 1951.

time between the taking of eight Mongol hostages on May 20 and the issuing of an ultimatum by the Mongol authorities on June 2 was more than enough time for the Soviets to take control of the situation. The planes used to carry out this attempted hit could only have been Soviet or Mongol. It hardly matters which. Simply put, the Mongols could not have attempted to eliminate someone as significant as Osman without authorization at the highest levels. The fact that the bombing coincided with the appointment of Masud made it all the more justified. In his diary, the Generalissimo came to the same conclusion. “Because Osman opposes Russia and Ili, they want to finish him off once and for all.”²⁴

Osman’s popularity soared after the Baytik incident. For the first time ever, he could now truly call himself a *batur*. Indeed, he had built himself into a self-made hero and continued to recruit his own following. Nor was he subject to the constraints of a foreign patron. After spending the summer in the mountains, Osman decided he was strong enough to return to Altay. Zhang Zhizhong told him to stay put. Osman left anyways. In late August, he reconquered Chingil and drove out Soviet mining camps in Koktogay. Several weeks later, he laid siege to Altay and drove Delilhan from the city. Nationalist authorities declared that Osman was “acting entirely on his own initiative.”²⁵ Not only were they unable to stop him. They did not want to stop him. The Ili camp fell into complete disarray. After retaking Altay, Osman rode west to conquer Tacheng. This bold move astonished everyone, for Osman had always been assumed to harbor parochial interests in Altay. Moscow now had no choice but to re-arm Delilhan and send him back

²⁴ Xue Xiantian, ed., *Zhong Su guojia guanxi shi ziliao huibian* [An edited collection of historical materials pertaining to Sino-Soviet relations] (Beijing, 1996), 452.

²⁵ Waijiaobu, *Waijiaobu dang’an congshu—jiewu lei: Xinjiang juan*, vol. 1, 343–44.

into the fray. He returned to Altay with six tanks at the fore of his army. Osman was forced to retreat. For the Soviets, the loss of its economic colony in northern Xinjiang was simply unacceptable. With an active nuclear weapons program, Moscow placed a high priority on the mines of Altay.

The whirlwind events of 1947 crystallized the Cold War camps in Xinjiang. Aware that Osman had humiliated Delilhan on the battlefield with weapons and provisions supplied by the Nationalists—a fact the Chinese made no attempt to hide—the Soviets forsook reconciliation with General Zhang.²⁶ In his speeches, Ahmetjan Qasimi condemned Osman as a “dog,” “rapist,” “enemy of the people,” and an “agent of Nationalist fascism.”²⁷ By way of such statements, Zhang knew the situation was hopeless. The Ili camp demanded, “the arrest of the so-called ‘Altay bandit Osman’,” Zhang noted. Not only that, they also demanded “that we hand him over to the people for a public trial as a precondition for any return to talks in Dihua.” Judging by their “tone of language and grotesque posturing, I do not see any willingness to meet us halfway. Thus the situation will only get worse, and the current deadlock is likely to intensify.”²⁸

With that, the upping of the affirmative action ante in Xinjiang had finally hit the glass ceiling. With Governor Masud in Dihua and Osman leading the charge on the battlefield, there was little more the Nationalists could do to prove that they were more tolerant and enlightened than the Soviets. In other words, unless Moscow or Nanjing was willing to go to the next stage—actual *de jure* independence—then the possibilities for

²⁶ In a discussion with General Song Xilian, the American consul reported that “Sung admits that Osman’s advance was aided by Chinese materiel but insists no Chinese troops were sent and declares that present drive was disapproved by Chinese.” See United States Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947*, vol. 7: *The Far East: China* (Washington, D.C., 1971), 573.

²⁷ Xinjiang shaoshu minzu shehui lishi diaocha zu, *Sanqu geming ziliao huibian*, vol. 1, 58–61, 101.

²⁸ Waijiaobu, *Waijiaobu dang’an congshu—jiewu lei: Xinjiang juan*, vol. 1, 361.

Han or Russian patronage had been exhausted. Turkic figureheads (Masud and Ahmetjan) had already been installed in the highest posts of both Chinese and Soviet proxy administrations. On the battlefield, the main players were two former Kazak shepherds. Short of granting actual independence, what else could Nanjing or Moscow do? Within the parameters of a geopolitical chess match dictated by Han and Russian players, ultimate power would not be ceded to the pawns under their control. The situation in late 1947 was about as far as the envelope could be pushed. In the exploitation of the crisis of Han colonial legitimacy in Xinjiang, the Soviets had finally exhausted the capacity for innovation. Though the inflation of affirmative action policies in Xinjiang played only a marginal role in the battle for inner China, it would leave a threatening legacy for whomsoever emerged the victor.

This legacy became even more threatening with the partition of India in August 1947. In Xinjiang, the reverberations of global decolonization offer a sneak peak into how the Chinese central government—be it Nationalist or Communist—intended to govern the frontier after the dust of civil war settled. It would also reveal the inherent pitfalls of projecting an ethnonationalist blueprint beyond the Han lands of inner China.

Hunza and the Idea of Regional Autonomy

“Although they are a vulgar and rustic people, they are capable of appreciating the majesty and virtue of the central government. As their annual submission of tribute has shown, they have not forgotten their ancestral nation.”²⁹ “They” were the people of Hunza, one of nearly six hundred semi-autonomous “princely states” administered under

²⁹ Ibid., vol. 2, 21.

the British Raj in colonial India. In 1947–48, Chinese officials variously estimated its population at anything from ten to twenty-seven thousand people. Mir Mohammad, the hereditary ruler of Hunza, claimed up to forty thousand subjects, all in a state the size of Switzerland. Baltit, the capital, was situated several days' southwest of Tashkurgan, in the heart of the Karakoram Mountain range. It was, according to a passing Shandong merchant, a labyrinthine congregation of stone-constructed hovels perched precipitously on narrow alpine slopes, beset on all sides by bone-crushing poverty. Following the Qing conquest of Xinjiang in the late 1750s, the Hunzan Mirs began to send annual tribute missions to the Manchu garrison at Kashgar, where they exchanged gold for handicrafts and commodities. In the mid-1800s, as reward for assistance rendered during a Muslim rebellion, the Qing emperors conferred upon the Mir territorial and economic concessions in Yarkand. As the reach of the Qing empire waned, Hunza fell under British domination. The privileged rulers of Hunza learned English at a British-run university in nearby Gilgit. The Mirs, however, continued to hedge their bets by sending goodwill missions to a host of powerful neighbors, including the Maharaja of Kashmir and, during the early twentieth century, the Chinese *daoyin* at Kashgar.

None of this was known to Nationalist officials in Nanjing. In November 1946, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs began to compile data regarding disputed territories along China's boundaries with the Soviet Union, a task frequently aided by British accounts of the region. From piecemeal Chinese records Nationalist officials learned that Yang Zengxin maintained intermittent trade relations with Hunza, while as late as 1931 Jin Shuren had approved the bestowal of "gifts" to the Mir. It was only when a man by the name of Sun Fuken was released from the *duban*'s jails in 1944, however, that the

Ministry was able to confirm the last known “tribute” had occurred in 1935, two years before Sun, the sole Hunza contact in Xinjiang, had been incarcerated. Before long Sheng Shicai clamped down on British Indian traders throughout the province and closed the passes at Tashkurgan. Twelve years later Hunza had become nothing more than a cartographic exotica to Nationalist officials, who added it to the long list of former Qing “dependencies” nostalgically characterized as “lost territories” (*sangshi tudi*).³⁰

The postwar British resolve to wash its hands of India reawakened the Ministry’s interest in Hunza. In keeping with a global trend throughout the postwar European empires, a belief took root in Whitehall and London that far-flung colonial administrations were no longer worth the trouble. The “psychological effect of revolts in French Indochina and Indonesia,” wrote Lord Wavell, the last Viceroy of India, in October 1945, meant that the situation in India had become “more dangerous” than at any time during the last ninety years. Back home in Britain the London *Times* opined that “the entire practice of the rule of one race by another” had been “discredited” by events of the past several decades.³¹ This was the era of global decolonization, an often violent epoch of post-imperial geopolitical reshuffling that would last well into the 1970s. From Nanjing’s point of view, the imminent relaxation of British rule over the princely states of northwestern South Asia meant that Hunza would soon be in the market for a new patron.

It was against just such a backdrop that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs dusted off what meager Hunza files it could lay its hands on. In June 1947, with the announcement

³⁰ Ibid., 21–22, 40–41.

³¹ Matthew Jones, *After Hiroshima: The United States, Race, and Nuclear Weapons in Asia, 1945–1965* (Cambridge, 2010), 14.

that India would be partitioned by August of that year, the Ministry told Zhang Zhizhong to order the Mir of Hunza to resume his former tribute relationship with China. Zhang did a double take. “Issuing a hasty order for Hunza to resume its imperial tribute does not seem to be the proper posture for a modern country to adopt,” he replied. Zhang’s response was negated by the Mir himself, who in July sent an emissary to a Chinese consulate in India, just one month before partition. “In discussions with our consul in India, this envoy produced documentation proving their former allegiance to us and requested the resumption of their status as a dependency of China,” wrote Zhao Xiguang, commander of Nationalist forces in southern Xinjiang. One month later the British formally granted independence for India and Pakistan, and the nearly six hundred princely states were informed that they could choose to remain independent or accede to a country of their choice. Zhao thought this an excellent time to inform Great Britain and India of the new relationship agreed upon at the Chinese consulate.³²

Meanwhile, in August, Mohammad Jamal Khan, the Mir of Hunza, paid a visit to Kashmir. There he likely learned that Maharaja Hari Singh, a Hindu, was planning to lean toward India despite his majority Muslim populace. In September, when Muslim insurgents in Pakistan threatened to attack Kashmir if the Maharaja acceded to India, Mir Mohammad returned to Hunza. Then he penned a letter to the Chinese authorities at Kashgar. His letter was filled with benign pleasantries and a stated desire to “restore our friendship of old.” The man whom he entrusted the letter with, however, Ali Jauhar, carried far more ambitious marching orders. Ali told the Chinese district magistrate at Tashkurgan that because Hunza “was originally part of Chinese territory,” his people

³² Waijiaobu, *Waijiaobu dang'an congshu—jiewu lei: Xinjiang juan*, vol. 2, 24–25.

were “willing to return to China, for whose people we have particular affection.”³³ With that, Ali proceeded to Kashgar, where he arrived in early October. Zhao Xiguang, the deputy commander of Xinjiang and a close ally of General Zhang, looked after him.

Throughout the winter of 1947–48, as Ali waited patiently in Kashgar, Nationalist officials in Xinjiang worked furiously to coordinate an ambitious Hunza policy with Nanjing. Zhao borrowed from Soviet and Ili rhetoric to declare that the return of Hunza would allow the Nationalists to implement “our lofty policy of succoring and uplifting the weak and small peoples of the world.” As a result, the Nationalist government in Nanjing decided to abolish the “feudal system of submitting tribute, and establish a Hunza Autonomous Region in its stead, under the jurisdiction of the Administrative Yuan.” Parroting a carbon copy blueprint of the “regional autonomy” doublespeak then employed by the Chinese Communists in Inner Mongolia, the Nationalists decreed that Mir Mohammad would now be known as Mohammad *zhuanyuan* (the equivalent of the old *daoyin* post), and that Party and military officials would be sent to “participate in the government and act in an advisory capacity.” All of Hunza’s military and foreign affairs were henceforth to be handled by Nanjing. Soon thereafter, Zhao relayed a further message from the Mir, whose envoy was now requesting Chinese troops to be stationed in Baltit. Furthermore, the Mir asked for the *xian* system of county administration to be implemented in Hunza. The blueprint for regional autonomy worked out by Nanjing now came off as almost too generous. “If we are able to hold Hunza up as a precedent and broadcast the virtue of the central government to northern India,” wrote Sun Fuken, “then

³³ *Ibid.*, 51, 27.

Ladakh may follow, and, in light of the current conflict between Pakistan and India, perhaps even Kashmir.”³⁴

The Generalissimo signed off on the Ministry’s Hunza policy, and on December 17, it was cabled to Commander Zhao in Kashgar. The next day, Bu Daoming, head of the West Asia division, fired off an urgent telegram to Agent Liu in Dihua. “Do not forward Despatch No. 140 to Commissioner Zhang or Commander Zhao just yet. If you have already done so, immediately inform the commander that he is not to share its contents with the Hunza envoy.” It was too late. On December 23, Zhao and Ali Jauhar reached an agreement outlining the integration of Hunza into the Chinese state. Then, in a mysterious development, five days later, before he had had a chance to inform the Mir of the agreement, Ali received orders to return to Hunza. Back in Nanjing, the Nationalists began to react with alarm to reports suggesting that the Mir had not been honest with them. News wires from India alternately claimed that Hunza had already acceded to Pakistan, that India and Pakistan were dividing Hunza up among themselves, and that the Hunzans were active participants in the Kashmir conflict. As later investigations would conclude, Nanjing was right to be suspicious. In October, one month after sending Ali Jauhar to Kashgar, the conflict in Kashmir spread to within four days’ travel from Baltit. Alarmed, the Mir decided to send additional envoys to Muslim insurgents in Pakistan, who gave the Mir a gift of a hundred rifles. In exchange, the Mir sent soldiers to fight alongside the insurgents, and, on November 3, formally declared his allegiance to

³⁴ Ibid., 28, 33, 38.

Pakistan. Convinced that his alliance with Pakistan would insulate Hunza from the front lines, the Mir then recalled his envoys from Kashgar.³⁵

The Ministry of Defense in Nanjing began to worry about the Soviet reaction should they learn about the secret negotiations in Kashgar. For his part, General Zhang advised the Ministry to drop the Hunza matter altogether. “It seems that this affair is not nearly as simple as the Hunza envoy made it out to be during his time in Kashgar,” he wrote. Hunza was a “tiny little piece of land,” of “inconsequential value,” and it would be foolish to proceed any further. Fortunately for Zhang, recent events had also changed the attitude of the Mir. In February 1948, Mir Mohammed finally read the agreement reached in Kashgar, which outlined four conditions for Hunza’s absorption by the Nationalist government. The Mir composed an indignant reply. “Hunza has always been an independent nation and no foreign power has ever tried to spoil her of her rights to independence,” he wrote in English and Uighur. “Hunza cannot accept the slavery of any foreign country, and we intend to preserve our system of independent governance.” Instead, the Mir proposed, he would only accept a relationship based upon “the old terms and bases, because the old terms are much more acceptable and respectable to both nations.” For those Nationalist officials unaware of what the “old terms and bases” entailed, the Mir outlined in helpful detail what he expected to receive on his end of the “tribute” stick. “The Chinese Government used to send presents, of which I hope you have got the list, along with grazing rights in Tagdumbash and Sarikol, territorial rights in

³⁵ Ibid., 39, 41–42, 56, 63, 67, 70–71, 74.

Yarkand ... and cultivation rights in Raskam.” As a gesture of his good faith gesture the Mir sent to Kashgar “a very small present of shoes, which I hope you will accept.”³⁶

The joke was on the Nationalists. As a Han merchant in Baltit later put it, “the Mir is acting purely in his own interests, and his original proposal was not the result of any true affection for China.” Once Nanjing realized that the Mir was using them to hedge his bets against contingencies in Kashmir, the Hunza issue was quickly dropped. Bu Daoming noted that the Mir’s interests in Yarkand and Tashkurgan were “detrimental to our interests.” Naturally, therefore, “we will not accede to this request.”³⁷ Bu’s comment offers a telling reminder of the vast disconnect between the territorial ambitions of a nationalizing state and the thorny legacies left to such states by their imperial predecessors. In order to obtain a provisional guarantee of security, the Mir of Hunza catered to the territorial fancies of Han officials. The Nationalists bought into the Mir’s sugary rhetoric and nearly triggered a geopolitical trap. Had events in Kashmir not developed so rapidly and had the Chinese actually managed to set up a garrison in Hunza, they would have found themselves an active participant in the conflict in Kashmir.

In a sense, post-partition Hunza offers us a microscopic and condensed view of Republican Xinjiang. Flung outside the orbit of its long-standing patron, the rulers of both regions found it difficult if not impossible to maintain their autonomy and livelihood without outside support. Yet outside support always comes with strings attached. By the late 1940s, the Mir could not simply follow the lead of Yang Zengxin and wrap his realm in a defensive cocoon, shutting out all outside influences. That option had long since

³⁶ Ibid., 62–63, 76, 117–24. I have modified the syntax and orthography of the error-laden English used in the Mir’s original letter, which would have been read in a grammatically correct Chinese translation by Nationalist officials.

³⁷ Ibid., 90, 84.

passed. He could, however, take a page from the playbook of Sheng Shicai and Osman Batur, and jump from one patron to the next for as long as he could. Pakistan was no exception. “The Mir told me that his accession to Pakistan was actually an attempt to garner support for independence,” wrote another Han traveler to Baltit, long after Nanjing had ceased to care, “and that neither Pakistan nor India would be able to force him to join their governments.”³⁸

By the late 1940s, however, anyone who tried to stay aloof from the tentacles of the modern nationalizing state was fighting a losing battle. Not only had the tentacles grown considerably longer and more intrusive than those of the imperial state. The cerebrum directing their reach now employed a highly sophisticated rhetorical regime capable of justifying its grip. Hoping to project an enlightened veneer of nationalized administration to non-Han peoples living (or, in the case of Hunza, soon to be living) under Han rule, Nanjing made liberal use of Soviet and postcolonial rhetoric. Gone was what was widely denigrated as a morally heirarchical form of “tribute.” In its place was a blueprint for “regional autonomy” identical to that peddled by the Chinese Communists in Inner Mongolia (and later in Xinjiang). The Mir of Hunza, however, saw right through these rhetorical hula hoops, equating Nanjing’s offer of “autonomy” with the imposition of “slavery.” Instead, he said he would accept only the “old terms and bases,” which were “much more acceptable and respectable.” But by the late 1940s, the old imperial system inherited and practiced by Yang Zengxin was nearly extinct. Whether in Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, or Hunza, both the Chinese Communists and Nationalists had demonstrated a unified approach to the non-Han borderlands. Regardless of who prevailed, it was now

³⁸ Ibid., 94.

clear that the victor would import a Han foundation stone, then apply a slick varnish of “regional autonomy” on top of it.³⁹

And yet, as negotiations with the Mir of Hunza show, the rhetoric of “regional autonomy” did not deceive those toward whom it was directed. For them, the conclusion of the Chinese civil war was not a reason to rejoice. It meant that, for the first time in over half a century, the full brunt of a unified central government would be brought to bear on its wayward peripheries. And when that time came, anyone who still fancied himself a “mir” of Xinjiang would quickly find himself on the run.

The Peaceful Liberation of Xinjiang

It would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that Zhang Zhizhong was single-handedly responsible for the peaceful takeover of Xinjiang. There were two stages to this process. First, there was a diplomatic course of events that prompted Xinjiang’s civil and military governors to declare their allegiance to the new state. It is true, as mainland historians often point out, that this stage of the transition was “peaceful.” It is still an open question whether or not we should follow their lead in calling it a “liberation.” After the peaceful surrender of government controls, however, there emerged a protracted campaign of guerrilla warfare that would not be defused for an additional three years. In this latter stage, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) would fight more one hundred and twenty battles with native insurgents.

³⁹ On the history of the CCP’s regional autonomy policy, see Minglang Zhou, “The Fate of the Soviet Model of Multinational State-Building in the People’s Republic of China,” in Thomas P. Bernstein and Hua-Yu Li, eds., *China Learns from the Soviet Union, 1949–Present* (Lanham, Md., 2010), 477–503; and Xiaoyuan Liu, *Reins of Liberation: An Entangled History of Mongolian Independence, Chinese Territoriality, and Great Power Hegemony, 1911–1950* (Stanford, 2006), 243–80.

But first, the peaceful “liberation” of Xinjiang.

In the spring of 1949, Zhang Zhizhong was once again called away from his Northwest Commissioner’s office in Lanzhou to negotiate with the Chinese Communists in Beijing. By this time, events on the battlefield had more or less assured the Communists of victory over the Nationalists, who were already preparing to retreat to Taiwan. Despite Zhang’s fame as a level-headed negotiator under fire, the talks quickly broke down and the battlefield route of Nationalist forces continued. Xinjiang’s four remaining consuls in Soviet Central Asia requested permission to shut their doors and report to the Ministry.⁴⁰ Amid all the drama, Zhang made a decision that would carry momentous implications for Xinjiang. On June 26, 1949, he severed all ties with the Nationalist Party and declared his allegiance to the Communists. Not only that, he also accepted an assignment to convince all the top leaders in Xinjiang to follow his lead. Communist and Nationalist accounts both confirm that Zhang’s defection dealt a fatal blow to Nationalist prospects in the northwest. According to early Communist intelligence, “all the leaders continue to maintain their trust in Zhang Zhizhong even to this day.” From Taiwan, the Nationalists recalled that, “after Zhang moved into the Communist camp, the crisis in the northwest became acute.” The reason, of course, was that Zhang “enjoyed considerable influence among those military and civil officials posted in the northwest.”⁴¹

⁴⁰ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan, file 110.13/0002, “Ta-shi-gan lingshi qing diaohui bu” [Tashkent consul requests permission to return to Ministry], 2.

⁴¹ Ibid., file 119.51/0001, “Xinjiang xianfei qianhou qingxing baogao” [A report on the bandit takeover of Xinjiang], 95–96; and Zhonggong Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiqiu weiyuanhui et al., *Xinjiang heping jiefang*, 144.

In his four years since coming to Dihua, General Zhang had stationed loyal officials in every corner of the province. During the summer of 1949, he called upon them to surrender. In July, Burhan Shahidi, the figurehead successor to Masud in the governor's mansion, convened a secret meeting of Zhang's subordinates in a mountain retreat outside Dihua. They resolved to renounce their Nationalist membership at an opportune time. One month later Burhan's military counterpart, Tao Zhiyue, traveled to Karashahr for a meeting with Commander Zhao, who came up from Kashgar. They, too, vowed to surrender. Between the two of them, Tao and Zhao controlled the lion's share of the 71,000 Nationalist troops still remaining in Xinjiang. In late August, after the Communists took Lanzhou, PLA forces made a direct beeline not for Xinjiang, but rather Qinghai. The idea was to cut off all possibility of Nationalist retreat to (or reinforcements from) inner China. In response, a minority of loyal Nationalist commanders in Xinjiang began to agitate. They posted signs threatening to behead anyone who intended to surrender. Chiang Ching-kuo, the Generalissimo's son, cabled Communist-leaning officials in Dihua and told them they had a responsibility to "find a way to defend Xinjiang. Or, when you can defend no more, strike a blow for our nation and race."⁴²

The final weeks leading up to the surrender were tense. Hu Zongnan, still leading the crumbling resistance in inner China, ordered loyalist forces in Xinjiang to "eliminate the traitors in Dihua and take your troops to the south," where they could establish a long-term base. A plot to arrest pro-Communist officials in Dihua soon surfaced, but was defused by Tao Zhiyue, who conveyed Zhang's assurances of life and limb should the conspirators depart the province in peace. They agreed, but fretted over the logistics of

⁴² Zhonggong Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhi qu weiyuanhui et al., *Xinjiang heping jiefang*, 18–22, 243, 248.

the new arrangement. Most Nationalist soldiers insisted on surrendering to the Han armies of the PLA, and refused to surrender to the Uighur- and Kazak-armies of Ili, citing a “loss of face” too great to bear. In a similar vein, Nationalist officials in Dihua suddenly rushed to pay rent arrears to Uighur landlords, and begged for affidavits proving a long-time “friendship” with their non-Han neighbors. Apparently, the surrender of Nationalist troops several weeks ahead of the arrival of Communist forces was expected to usher in a period of anarchy marked by ethnic pogroms.⁴³

Fortunately, such predictions proved unfounded. In the late evening and early morning hours of September 24–25, under cover of night, approximately 160 Nationalist officers crammed into ten separate trucks and departed the capital.⁴⁴ Less than twenty-four hours later, Tao Zhiyue sent a formal telegram of submission to PLA forces at Zhangjiakou. The next day Burhan followed suit for the civil bureaucracy. The reins of power had been transferred, with little to no bloodshed. Yet for those Nationalist supporters now on their way to southern Xinjiang, the real danger lie ahead. In their rush to reach Kashgar, their trucks took a terrible beating, necessitating mechanical ingenuity across an endless expanse of uninhabited desert. The urge to put as much distance between themselves and the incoming PLA was so great that the drivers sped recklessly through local oases. On one occasion they ploughed through a team of donkeys, whose intestines later decorated the vehicle like a Christmas tree. Once in Kashgar, they struck out on foot, scaling snowy slopes in sub-zero temperatures. Pack animals slipped on a daily basis and fell to their demise, their splattered innards and mangled limbs an

⁴³ Ibid., 6–8, 24–25, 179, 230, 251.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 265–66.

ominous warning. The elements were just as brutal, as lips and facial extremities peeled beyond all recognition. One child froze to death, six people were seriously injured, and two-thirds of the party came down with a debilitating sickness. Their perseverance, however, paid off. On November 12, little less than two months after setting off from Dihua, the Nationalist convoy arrived in Gilgit, which, along with Hunza, was now a part of Pakistan. From there they made their way to India, where they were forced to panhandle to make ends meet. Viewed as stateless “White Chinese” by the Indian government, they soon got in touch with Nationalist authorities in Taiwan, who saw to it that they were repatriated.⁴⁵

With the Nationalist brass in flight and their soldiers meekly awaiting surrender, the PLA marched into Xinjiang unopposed. In September, Mao Zedong predicted that the Communist takeover of Xinjiang would be a breeze. “Xinjiang is no longer a military concern,” he wrote to Peng Dehuai, commander of the northwest forces. “It is now just a matter of resolving all affairs in a peaceful manner.” The rapid entry of Peng’s forces was accomplished with substantial Soviet logistical assistance. At least forty passenger planes whisked essential personnel and equipment from Gansu to Dihua, and in early October, the first PLA battalions reached Hami.⁴⁶ From there it was a cakewalk. On October 20 Dihua fell without a fight, Kashgar a month later. By March 1950, even the distant oasis of Charchan greeted its first PLA arrivals. All that remained were the three districts of the Soviet-run East Turkestan Republic: Ili, Tacheng, and Altay. For the story of their return to Chinese Communist authority, we must turn back the clock several months.

⁴⁵ Zhang Dajun, *Hengdu Kunlun san wan li* [Crossing the Kunlun Mountains at 30,000 li] (Taibei, 1953), 44–45, 74–76, 86–87, 124.

⁴⁶ Zhonggong Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiwei weiyuanhui et al., *Xinjiang heping jiefang*, 29–30, 32–33.

In May 1949, with the victory of the Chinese Communists a foregone conclusion, top Ili leaders had suddenly begun to sing a new tune. The moderate tone adopted during the 1946–47 coalition government had been replaced the following year with shrill condemnations of Masud and Osman. In 1949, however, the rhetoric of the Ili camp underwent yet a third facelift, this time striking a clear note of ethnic reconciliation. “When we rose up to overthrow the Nationalist government and destroy their military power,” wrote Ahmetjan in June, “we treated all the Han people as if they were the same as the reactionary Nationalist colonialist authorities.” That attitude, he now explained, had been a grave mistake. “The liberation, equality, and freedom of our nation can only be achieved in concert with our democratic brothers from inner China.” The bloodshed and pogroms that had characterized life for the Han in their jurisdiction were now blamed on a handful of “bad elements.” Praising the good fortune of the Inner Mongols to be the first recipients of a Communist “autonomous region,” Ili leaders announced that the time had come to abolish their own independent republic and reunite with the “motherland.” The Chinese Communists, it was held, were about to “build a democratic republic that all ethnicities would be willing to join.”⁴⁷

For their part, the Chinese Communists knew virtually nothing about the situation in Ili. They began to fill in the blanks on August 14, when Deng Liqun arrived in Yining. A member of the Chinese Communist Party since 1935, Deng had spent most of his career in underground work in Beijing and Manchuria. His mission in Xinjiang, undertaken with the express consent and support of the Soviets, was to coordinate the

⁴⁷ Xinjiang shaoshu minzu shehui lishi diaocha zu, *Sanqu geming ziliao huibian*, vol. 1, 137–38; and vol. 2, 6, 9.

integration of the East Turkestan Republic into the new PRC state. For the first two weeks, work proceeded without a hitch. Deng compiled portfolios on the Soviet backgrounds of all the top Ili leaders, and made arrangements to send Ahmetjan and four other representatives to the inaugural National Political Consultative Conference in Beijing. Ahmetjan asked Deng whether it would be appropriate to bring gifts to the conference, and asked for a personal escort to help safeguard against any “mistakes” he might utter during interviews with the press. On August 20, only a week after meeting Ahmetjan, Deng was optimistic. “They are sincere in their willingness to obey every directive and decision issued by the central government.”⁴⁸ Two days later they were driven across the border to Almaty, where the Soviets had agreed to escort them by aircraft to Beijing.

Then, on September 3, disaster struck. The Soviet consul in Ili called Deng into his office. On August 27, he was told, a plane carrying all five members of the delegation crashed on the southern shores of Lake Baikal. No one survived. Deng quickly organized a second delegation, this time headlined by Saypidin Azizi, the only remaining leader of some clout. Before long, however, word on the street began to turn on conspiracy theories, and they have redounded to this very day. In Yining, someone wrote an “anonymous letter demanding that the Soviet consul return their leaders,” while blame was placed at the feet of “Han or Soviet machinations.”⁴⁹ Even today, it is not uncommon for educated Uighurs in Xinjiang to openly express their conviction that foul play was involved, a view echoed by many foreign scholars as well.

⁴⁸ Zhonggong Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhi qu weiyuanhui et al., *Xinjiang heping jiefang*, 140–41, 48, 127–28, 143–44.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 188–89, 205, 53.

It is time to lay to rest our suspicions. Let me explain why.

On their way to Beijing, the Ili delegation passed through Soviet territory at the express request of the Chinese Communists—not on the orders of Stalin. The conference in Beijing was less than a month away, and the nearest domestic railhead lay over a thousand miles distant. In mid-August, “diehard” Nationalist generals such as Ma Chengxiang, nephew of Ma Bufang, were still stationed in northern Xinjiang. Still in command of about 24,000 troops, they effectively blocked the road to Dihua. Transportation to the nearest PLA base by air would have required a Herculean, non-stop flight of 1,600 miles from Ili to Lanzhou, all over hostile enemy territory. Aircraft technology being what it was, the only feasible route of transportation was via the Soviet Union, whose border was mere days from the Ili capital. A voluminous trail of paperwork from Ili to Moscow to Beijing reveals that a detailed itinerary and extensive logistical arrangements had already been prepared for the delegation’s arrival in northeastern China. These arrangements included a modest welcoming feast, the procurement of a personal Muslim Hui escort for the duration of their stay, and various modes of transportation from the Siberian border to Beijing. Furthermore, during his negotiations with Deng, Ahmetjan had repeatedly fawned over the Chinese Communist Party, expressing a near servile determination to carry out Beijing’s every whim. It is clear that if a conspiracy was afoot, Beijing had been left in the dark.⁵⁰

The reason that so much suspicion has accrued over the years lies in the fact that the new Communist government waited for more than two months before making any public acknowledgment of the tragedy. Saypidin himself was responsible for the initial

⁵⁰ Ibid., 127–28, 147–49, 50, 169, 171.

delay. He thought it would be prudent to suppress the news of the crash until after he returned from Beijing, with the bodies in tow. In late September, however, excerpts from Saypidin's speeches in Beijing began to appear in the newspapers, with Ahmetjan nowhere in sight. Furthermore, Soviet workers in Ili shared news reports from back home. "Because Ahmetjan's party passed through the Soviet Union on their way to Beijing," wrote Deng, "everyone is demanding answers from the local Soviet consul, who is hard-pressed to respond." With the Ili armies incensed over the mysterious disappearance of their top general, both Deng and Moscow implored Beijing to make an official announcement. But still there was silence. What was Beijing waiting for? The answer lies in the course of the PLA's advance into Xinjiang. In late September, when rumors of the plane crash first began to surface, Burhan and Tao had just surrendered, and no PLA troops were present in the province. Three weeks later, on October 20, the PLA entered Dihua. One week after that, Saypidin, now having sworn an oath to defend the new state, returned from Beijing. Almost immediately upon his return, details of the crash finally appeared in the press. The juxtaposition of these events clearly shows Beijing's reasons for the delay. Quite simply, the Chinese Communists, with only one civil official in Ili and not a single soldier anywhere in the province, did not want to publicize potentially inflammatory reports until they felt confident in their control of political and military levers in the province.⁵¹

Similarly, there is no reason to suspect Moscow of foul play. Over the course of nearly half a decade, Ahmetjan had proven himself the most loyal and obedient of puppets. In his speeches, he regurgitated contemporary Soviet policy on everything from

⁵¹ Ibid., 188, 287, 301, 99.

the conflicts in Cyprus and Greece to the threat of American imperialism in China. When it became clear that the state he led was to be subsumed under a new Chinese umbrella, Ahmetjan did not rant and rave as had Ali Han Tore. Rather, he fell dutifully in line. Moscow did not ask to transport the delegation to Beijing; that request came from the Chinese side. In addition, there was little that the Soviets could have gained from the sudden elimination of its entire cadre of proxy leadership. As later developments during the first six years of the 1950s would clearly show, Moscow was not at all eager to relinquish its privileged economic position in the three districts of the former East Turkestan Republic—even to the Chinese Communists, toward whom they were obliged to uphold appearances of fraternal brotherhood. In this regard, the Soviet-trained Ili leaders and their 14,000-strong Soviet-trained army could have continued to lobby for Soviet interests under an overt Communist guise. On the contrary, the death of the top Ili general so unnerved Ili soldiers that the Soviet consul was forced to ask a PLA general to take over his command.⁵² Moscow had nothing to gain from such an arrangement. Ahmetjan was not an intractable Uighur nationalist. He was a loyal servant, who had always done whatever Moscow told him to do. Therefore, in the absence of any motive or evidence to the contrary, we must conclude that the explanation given by the Soviet consul to Deng Liqun on September 3 was, in fact, the correct one: Ahmetjan, eager to reach Beijing and incensed at multiple delays en route, insisted on flying through a storm.⁵³ His entire delegation paid the price.

⁵² Ibid., 287.

⁵³ See also Saypidin's account of the plane crash and his subsequent journey along the same flight path. His version, unlike that of Burhan, is in full accord with the available documentation. Sai-fu-ding, *Sai-fu-ding huiyilu* [Memoirs of Saypidin] (Beijing, 1993), 500–6.

The Soviets tried to salvage what remained of the Ili regime. They told Deng Liqun that “it would be inappropriate for the Ili armies not to make a show of military force” during the transitional period, and that they could play a key role in the occupation of southern Xinjiang. In response, Peng Dehuai found a symbolic role for the Ili armies, permitting one division to march on Dihua as “victorious liberators of the people.” For the remainder, however, they were soon intermixed with joint PLA contingents and scattered throughout the province. The pretext for this intermingling of forces was to provide Han soldiers with a “bridge” to the non-Han masses. Once the bulk of the troops left Ili, the PLA moved in. “Because the situation in Ili, Tacheng, and Altay is complex,” observed a PLA commander, “there is an urgent need to station our troops there.” After that, the formal infrastructure of the East Turkestan Republic simply vanished. Whereas all soldiers had once sworn an oath never to let the state flag be taken down by an outsider, a month after Ahmetjan’s death his successors quickly assented to the abolition of the civil flag, to be followed by steadily decreasing use of the white Muslim flag. By the end of December, less than four months after Ahmetjan’s death, all traces of the East Turkestan Republic and its armies were gone.⁵⁴

The person who benefited most from the August 27 plane crash was Saypidin Azizi, the one-time Ili-appointed Minister of Education. To Saypidin, the disappearance of the top rung of Ili leadership was like the sudden clearcutting of a grove of redwoods. A disaster for the forest at large, it was nonetheless an unexpected boon for the once malnourished saplings below. These insignificant pods now leveraged the unprecedented

⁵⁴ Zhonggong Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhi qu weiyuanhui et al., *Xinjiang heping jiefang*, 285–86, 82, 99, 102, 292.

influx of sunlight to grow to heights previously undreamt of. Not surprisingly, Saypidin immediately expressed his “fervent hope that the new delegation would arrive in Beijing prior to the onset of the conference,” and said that it would constitute a “profound regret” if he could not participate in the opening ceremonies. Once in Beijing, he applied for membership into the Communist Party. His aggressive approach paid off, and before long he was elected into the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Committee. As the only surviving Ili leader of any clout, the token titles and memberships once reserved for Ahmetjan and the others were his for the taking. All this came about in spite of the fact that his Chinese was so bad that Deng Liqun could not even commission a brief Chinese autobiography out of him. Though the Soviet consul claimed Saypidin carried potential, in 1949 it was just that: potential. “In light of the deaths of Ahmetjan and the others,” Deng wrote in November, “Saypidin is not yet seen as a leader of any prestige. In order to cultivate his influence to the point where he can unite the ethnicities, we must offer him our full support.” Though not without his faults, Saypidin was “basically a good person.”⁵⁵

In the meantime, there was Burhan. For him, the death of Ahmetjan had been an unmitigated disaster. Ever since moving into the governor’s mansion in January 1949, he had worked to cement closer ties with Ahmetjan and the Soviets, whom he mistakenly believed would exert de facto control over the province for decades to come. It was at about this time that Burhan evinced an openly hostile attitude toward Masud, Isa, and Emin, even going so far as offering to carry out orders for their arrest in September. As the first Ili delegation prepared to depart for Beijing in August, Burhan kept up a steady

⁵⁵ Ibid., 195, 99, 216, 324.

stream of correspondence with Ahmetjan. The Soviet consul issued effusive praise for Burhan, lauding his progressive politics, favorable image among the Han, fluency in three languages, and lack of “narrow nationalist” sentiment. The Soviet consul also recommended Burhan as “the top candidate” for leadership posts in Xinjiang. Though Beijing did appoint Burhan as the inaugural civil governor of Communist Xinjiang, this was merely a temporary expediency. Burhan’s intimate association with the Soviets and the loss of his steadfast allies in Ili would ultimately work against him. Had Ahmetjan survived, he and Burhan could have presented a formidable bulwark against the marginalization of Soviet—and by extension, their own—interests in Xinjiang. As it was, following the clearcutting of the Ili leadership, Burhan was the most conspicuous redwood left standing, with roots too deep and widespread for Beijing’s comfort. Had the giants of the forest all remained standing, Burhan could have blended in seamlessly and worked to protect the common interests of the grove. As it was, his conspicuous presence was tolerated only until such time as the adopted Saypidin could capably fill his figurehead shoes.⁵⁶

As for Masud, Isa, and Emin, the defeat of their long-time Nationalist patron proved fatal to their political prospects in China. Masud, at sixty-three years old by far the most senior of the group, fell into a deep depression. By the time Burhan surrendered to the Chinese Communists in September, Masud had “long since shut his door to the outside world, on account of an illness that deprives him of the strength to engage in politics.” Zhang Zhizhong tried to put in a good word for his former ally, but the Soviets would have none of it, insisting that “the time for his enlightenment had already passed.”

⁵⁶ Ibid., 161, 196–97, 207, 212–13, 235, 186.

Lacking the strength to flee, Masud was arrested by the Communists and thrown into prison. He died there two years later. His young protégé Isa, hugely popular among Uighur youth, fled to Ladakh, where he organized the relocation of refugees to Turkey. Several years later he moved to Istanbul to look after the exile community. Emin, once a staunch Uighur nationalist who had never felt comfortable with Masud and Isa's pan-Turkic agenda, sent out feelers to the Communists. He told them of his warm reception by the Communist war office in Chongqing years ago, and that famous leftist writer Guo Moruo had expressed admiration for some articles he had written regarding Xinjiang's "ethnic problem." When he failed to hear back, however, he packed his bags and followed Isa to Istanbul.⁵⁷

Zhang Zhizhong, Ahmetjan Qasimi, Burhan Shahidi, Saypidin Azizi, Deng Liqun, Masud Sabri, Isa Yusuf Alptekin, and Muhammad Emin Bugra—these were the men whose actions in late 1949 ensured that the initial changing of the guard would be peaceful. There were others, however, who did not intend to go so quietly.

Last Gasp of the Unaligned

"So far the only lapse in discipline was that of an officer in the 15th Division, who struck a Uighur vegetable peddler after a verbal misunderstanding. We have already located this Uighur man, and forced the offending officer to make amends and undergo additional training."⁵⁸ For the first several months after the PLA marched into Xinjiang, there were few setbacks to speak of. Incidents like that involving the Han officer and

⁵⁷ Ibid., 161, 203, 228; Waijiaobu, *Waijiaobu dang'an congshu—jiewu lei: Xinjiang juan*, vol. 1, 298; Zhang, *Hengdu Kunlun san wan li*, 124; and Luo Shaowen, "Ai-sha xiaozhuan" [A brief biography of Isa], *Xinjiang difang zhi* 2 (1996): 61–64.

⁵⁸ Zhonggong Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhi qu weiyuanhui et al., *Xinjiang heping jiefang*, 94.

Uighur peddler described above were so rare that they merited special attention in reports sent back to central command. In Xinjiang, the image of a Han-dominated PLA as a well-disciplined force for good appears to have been warranted. Yet it is a relatively simple matter to maintain discipline amid a complete and total lack of opposition. The true test of a soldier's mettle comes under fire. This was supplied by Yolbars Khan and Osman Batur.

By the late 1940s, Yolbars had come full circle from his days as a bandit leader in the mountains of Hami. Once the esteemed vizier of the now defunct Hami khanate, Yolbars rose to fame in the 1930s on the strength of a rural Turkic insurgency that he himself had coordinated. Forced to lay down his arms to Sheng Shicai in 1934, Yolbars fast found his position in Hami untenable. In 1937, he fled Xinjiang and joined Masud and Isa in the central government. Yolbars, however, was cut from a different cloth than Masud and Isa. Fluent in Chinese and Uighur yet for a long time illiterate in both, he was intimately associated with two phenomena of which Masud and Isa had little experience: the hereditary Turkic aristocracy and the military. Adopted by the *shah* at the age of thirteen, Yolbars laid claim to a territorial base of operations in eastern Xinjiang that none of his rivals could match. He was exactly the sort of savvy indigenous politician that the Nationalists were desperate to associate themselves with. In 1946, he returned to Xinjiang together with Masud and Isa. Yet Yolbars, confident in his base of support in Hami, hit a markedly different note in his speeches. "Ever since Yolbars arrived in Dihua," observed a Nationalist official, "he has extolled the virtue of the central government to various leaders and ... strenuously refuted the absurd proposals for

independence and high-level autonomy.”⁵⁹ In many respects, Yolbars Khan and Burhan Shahidi were mirror images of each other. They were both savvy indigenous politicians who, unlike Masud and Isa, were willing to say virtually anything to ingratiate themselves with the man at the top. Nonetheless, there was still a crucial distinction between the two men: only Yolbars knew how to turn peasants into rebels.

In this respect, Osman was a natural ally for the former vizier. Both men elicited a visceral enthusiasm among the people living among them, and both men had little trouble restocking their armies after a defeat. Their reputations as fearless leaders were widespread and entirely deserved. By the time the PLA entered Xinjiang, Osman had probably survived close to a hundred battles. A full ten years into his crusade for nomadist autonomy in the Altay, he had become a virtual living legend. He had suffered three bullet wounds and lost five family members, yet had stubbornly refused to yield to Sheng Shicai. Born into a poor shepherd’s family, Osman now enjoyed a level of prestige greater than Prince Ailin, whose messengers he had once sent to Mongol jails. He defied the powerful Soviets as well, repeatedly harassing their mining operations in Altay. Before long he survived a Soviet attempt to bomb him into oblivion at Baytik, only to return, stronger than ever, to chase Ili armies out of the Altay and ride on Tacheng. This remarkable display of undaunted courage prompted an American CIA officer, working under vice-consul cover, to initiate contact with Osman and discuss the possibility of a future partnership. Foreign journalists eagerly sought him out and ran his picture in the

⁵⁹ Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian*, vol. 5, no. 3: *zhengzhi*, pt. 5, 466.

New York Times. In yurts all across northern Xinjiang, Kazak bards had already begun to sing of his exploits.

A man like this would not tuck tail and run at the first sign of trouble.

Hoping to avoid conflict, the Communists quickly sent feelers to both men.

Yolbars, the *zhuanyuan* of Hami, played host to early PLA armies, and he had no choice but to help facilitate transportation and lodgings. Yet his steadfast refusal to go to Dihua, sending his son in his stead, should have put Communist authorities on high alert.

Yolbars then spent the winter making the rounds of his district, spreading rumors and drumming up support in the Hami countryside. Emissaries to Osman also bore little fruit. Though offered the post of Altay *zhuanyuan*, Osman informed Communist envoys that he would not cooperate with any government that worked with the Ili camp. In the meantime, fifty thousand PLA soldiers spread out through the province. Osman and about three thousand Kazaks decided to winter in Barikol, just north of Hami. With the spring thaw, the Communists tried one last time to lure Yolbars to Dihua. On March 18, 1950, he promised to make the journey with his wife in one week's time. That same day he met with Osman. Less than twenty-four hours later, Yolbars and his family took to the mountains, lodging with locals and meeting up with a prearranged convoy of camels and horses. Once PLA scouts discovered downed telegraph poles and ransacked checkpoints, the hunt for Osman and Yolbars—already drawn up in draft blueprints over the winter—began in earnest. Right as PLA “bandit suppression” forces took to the hills, however, the magistrate of Yiwu, a confidante of Yolbars, laid siege to the county seat.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan, file 119.51/0001, “Xinjiang xianfei qianhou qingxing baogao” [A report on the bandit takeover of Xinjiang], 99–102, 110–13; and Zhang Yuxi, ed., *Xinjiang pingpan jiaofei* [The suppression of bandits in Xinjiang] (Wulumuqi, 2000), 11, 492–96.

This was a planned uprising, and one coordinated by Yolbars. The rebels surrounded the PLA garrison in town and prevented all communication with the outside world. Since the main brunt of the PLA attack had been focused on Osman and Yolbars in the mountains, the besieged contingent in Yiwu was left abandoned. By the PLA's own later admission, its performance in Yiwu was deplorable. The rebel magistrate was captured, but soon escaped from jail. The martial abilities of the bandits were consistently underestimated. One PLA soldier exposed himself by pushing a cart of ammunition slowly across the street. When his comrades shouted at him to hurry it up, he laughed. "Do you really think the bandits can hit me?" He was shot dead in the street. When reinforcements finally came, they walked right into an ambush. It was not until a month later that word reached Hami that the defenders had resorted to drinking their own urine to stay alive. With that, two thousand PLA soldiers were sent to lift the siege. In the meantime, the PLA had also sniffed out Osman's encampment at Lake Barikol, where they decimated his forces and sent the *batur* and a handful of stragglers toward the Baytik Mountains.⁶¹

Despite its victory, the PLA's performance in Yiwu and the surrounding mountains reflected a disturbing new reality. In the heat of battle with Kazaks and Uighurs, once complacent Han soldiers began to view the battlefield as a site of ethnic warfare. Some troops were heard to say that "there isn't a single good Uighur anywhere," and that their chief mission was "to attack Kazaks." Such statements alarmed PLA commanders, who began to criticize widespread cowardice, negative attitudes, and a lack

⁶¹ Zhonggong Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhiq u weiyuanhui dangshi gongzuo weiyuanhui, Zhonggong Xinjiang Hami diqu weiyuanhui, and Zhonggong Xinjiang Yiwu xian weiyuanhui, eds., *Yiwu baowei zhan* [The battle to defend Yiwu] (Wulumuqi, 1991) ; and Zhang, *Xinjiang pingpan jiaofei*, 160.

of discipline among their ranks. Kazak banditry, most prevalent in the Hami to Dihua corridor, was blamed entirely on Osman, who was accompanied by a handful of White Russian mercenaries. “In our bandit suppression efforts,” wrote Wang Zhen, chief commander of PLA forces in the northwest, “we will implement a generous policy of clemency to all nomads who surrender or are taken hostage as a result of being forced into banditry. The only exception applies to the bandit chief Osman and his White Russian followers. They are to be captured or killed.” Wang informed soldiers in the field that it was “strictly prohibited to insult, abuse, or wantonly kill” the defeated enemy. PLA headquarters produced new slogans attempting to fix blame squarely on the shoulders of Osman and Yolbars, not Kazaks or Uighurs in general. “Destroy the bandit chiefs Osman and Yolbars,” such slogans announced, “and publicly expose their criminal behavior and deceptive propaganda in front of the people.”⁶²

It was not hard to get Han and urban Uighur residents of Xinjiang on the PLA’s side. It was an uphill battle, however, to win the hearts of those Kazaks and rural Uighurs to whom Osman and Yolbars chiefly appealed. After the lifting of the siege at Yiwu and the devastation of Osman’s camp at Barikol, Yolbars fled south to the Gansu-Qinghai border, while Osman moved north to his favorite haunt in the Baytik area. From there both men waged a distant war of propaganda. The most effective rumors, the ones that never failed to win recruits, warned that nomad herds would soon be confiscated, that Kazak and Uighur women would be forced to marry Han husbands, and that the Chinese Communists would ban the practice of Islam. The Communists realized that they would need to combat the legacy of the *duban*, who had carried out a decade of exploitation

⁶² Zhang, *Xinjiang pingpan jiaofei*, 49–50, 52–53, 63, 65.

under the guise of a Marxist ideology. “We will not be like Sheng Shicai, who convened meetings in order to victimize you,” announced PLA authorities in Hami. “Our meetings are held in order to improve your lives.” Unfortunately for the new Communist authorities, Xinjiang’s nomads had heard this line before. The Kazaks continued to harass the suburbs of Dihua, and the authorities were forced to delay the collection of household firearms for several years. PLA reports now frequently began to invoke the specter of ethnic conflict among the people of Xinjiang.⁶³

In July 1950, the PLA flushed Osman out of his Baytik stronghold. He fled south to the Gansu-Qinghai border in order to rendezvous with Yolbars. In the ensuing flight, the PLA captured a man by the name of Janimhan, one of Osman’s loosely affiliated subordinates. Zhang Zhizhong, alarmed by the slow progress of bandit suppression campaigns, suggested that Janimhan might be rehabilitated and presented as a positive example to Osman’s followers. Instead, Communist authorities, caught in the middle of what was fast becoming an ethnic war, ordered his execution. His death came as little solace for the Communists, who still wanted Osman. “The bandit suppression campaigns have scored some notable achievements,” observed Zhu De, vice-chairman of the Politburo, in September. “But Osman, a political bandit who enjoys the support of the Anglo-American imperialists and Chiang’s regime, has not yet been caught. Make sure he is eliminated, so as to avoid consequences down the road.” Meanwhile, in late July, Osman and five hundred of his followers reached the Tibetan lowlands. There he and Yolbars discussed their options. The latter announced that he could do more to resist the

⁶³ Ibid., 42–43, 117, 169.

Communists alive than dead, and that he intended to cross the Tibetan plateau before the onset of the winter snowfall.⁶⁴

Osman, however, refused to budge. Yolbars offered to escort his sons to Taiwan, where they could find refuge with the Nationalist government in exile. Again, Osman declined. Ultimately more than ten thousand Kazak refugees struck off for Kashmir. Osman was not among them. Yolbars could sense that the *batur*'s tank was empty. "I urged him to leave this place immediately and head west to avoid an enemy attack," Yolbars later wrote. "But because his entourage was exhausted and depleted, they were in desperate need of rest and did not depart at once." Yolbars knew that anyone who did not reach India before the first snowfall would be trapped in China for good. Still, Osman, suffering from a painful eye ailment, "told me that he intended to stay behind, and was not willing to continue on [toward Tibet]." Yolbars left him and headed for India.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, the *batur* and a ragtag band of Kazaks remained to endure a miserable winter. On February 17, 1951, the PLA set off from Dunhuang. They had their sights set on Osman, and they found him two days later. By all accounts, a dramatic high-speed chase ensued. Eventually, however, he ran out of steam, and a hand-to-hand scuffle ensued. He was tied up, transported to Dihua, and executed two months later.

The story of Osman, however, does not end there. With the PLA fixated on Osman, his sons had fled the scene of their father's capture with ease. The oldest of them, Sherdiman, whom Osman had refused to allow Yolbars to escort abroad, gathered his two younger brothers and regrouped in the mountains north of Dihua. By August he was

⁶⁴ Ibid., 88, 91, 102; and Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan, file 119.51/0001, 113, 121–22.

⁶⁵ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan, file 119.51/0001, 125–27.

issuing calls for Uighurs and Kazaks to unite against the PLA, and claiming that the Americans, who had made shady promises of covert aid to his father, would soon help them beat back the Communists. In October, Sherdiman returned to Altay, and Kazak bandits renewed their attacks. The PLA assembled a crack contingent of 250 cavalry, but failed to bring Sherdiman to heel. In April 1952, PLA headquarters admitted to Beijing that Kazak bandits continued to bedevil the province. The executions of Janimhan and Osman had had little effect. The Kazaks organized a Religious People's Liberation Army and simply sent out a call for a new *batur*. "Whoever kills and pillages the most will become the next *batur*," they announced. In July, the PLA finally succeeded in inflicting some collateral damage on Sherdiman's forces. He still refused to submit. Fed up with the stubborn refusal of the Osman clan to come to its senses, Communist authorities decided that the time had come to broker a deal with the devil.⁶⁶

The first sign that Osman's son might be willing to talk came in September. Forced to abandon all his livestock, Sherdiman and 133 followers sent in a list of eight demands. The fifth of these underscored the deep distrust of Xinjiang's nomads for any state that promised to "improve" their lives. "We will not participate in any government conferences and we will not go to Altay city," he wrote. "We want only to pasture our herds in the mountains." The authorities agreed to seven of the eight points. Sherdiman, however, became suspicious when his scouts discovered PLA troops concealed around the negotiating site. Fully expecting a Sheng-style ambush should he turn over his firearms, Sherdiman insisted that the government make a showing of good faith. In exchange for half of his rifles upfront, the Communists must release all those members of

⁶⁶ Zhang, *Xinjiang pingpan jiaofei*, 178, 185–87, 191, 214.

the Osman clan who been taken prisoner in Dunhuang. The state agreed, though the new magistrate of Koktogay almost ruined everything. “He told them, ‘You should all be sent to do hard labor in road construction and digging ditches.’ His words caused quite an uproar, and renewed suspicions all around.” Having stored half his firearms, however, Sherdiman now demanded more evidence that the state would not renege on its promises. The authorities responded by sweetening the deal so much that Sherdiman could no longer refuse. First he obtained custody over his father’s body, which the family buried in an unmarked tomb on the Koktogay steppe. Material provisions were then distributed among the clan, and all of Osman’s sons were given important government jobs in Altay. In November 1952, Sherdiman even made a trip to Dihua, where he made peace with the mortal enemies of his father: Burhan, Saypidin, and Wang Enmao, the new military commander of Xinjiang.⁶⁷

From that point on, Sherdiman and his family became distinguished citizens of the new People’s Republic. The provincial administration forbid the local security bureau to have any contact with members of Osman’s clan, and orders went out directing Sherdiman’s superiors to “make sure that not a single member of the tribe goes hungry.” In 1954, Sherdiman took up the post of assistant director of animal husbandry in Altay city. Several years later he was promoted to deputy director of the People’s Political Consultative Conference in Ili. This post required him to leave behind his father’s homeland—and the life of the nomad—for good.⁶⁸ With that, the fate of Osman’s clan

⁶⁷ Ibid., 218–20, 224–28.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 247–48; and Sai-mai-ti Xie-er-de-man, “Huiyi fuqin Xie-er-de-man Wu-si-man” [Remembering my father Sherdiman Osman Uli], in Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi, Yili Ha-sa-ke zizhizhou weiyuanhui, and Wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui, eds., *Yili wenshi ziliao* [Ili historical materials], vol. 21 (Yili, 2005), 228–33.

became irreversibly tied to that of the new state. It had taken half a decade and nearly 120 military engagements, but the inevitable had finally come to pass. With the flight of Yolbars Khan, the execution of Osman Batur, and the domestication of Sherdiman, the new Chinese state could at last breathe a sigh of relief.

The last gasp of the unaligned was no longer audible.

The Nationalist Dream Fulfilled

“Some of the young people out here are wondering why the new Chinese leadership is not adopting the Marxist-Leninist principles of national determination as a means to national liberation. Instead, they say we are merely implementing regional autonomy. How do I respond to such queries?”⁶⁹ This was the thorny dilemma that confronted Deng Liqun in October 1949, while coordinating the Communist takeover of Xinjiang. Though the Chinese Communists had once paid lip service to the Soviet ideal of “national determination” in the 1920s, this provision had disappeared during the United Front with the Nationalists in the late 1930s. At that time, both parties unanimously rejected the possibility of secession from the Chinese state, as a safeguard against Japanese machinations among the Mongols. Japanese puppet states, installed all along China’s northern and northeastern borders, had certainly dealt a blow to the idea of Chinese unity. Yet it was a blow considerably softened by Japan’s defeat in World War II. This allowed those Mongols and Manchus who had bought into Japanese enterprises to be easily discredited as “collaborators.” The situation was different in Xinjiang, where the Soviet Union, on the side of the victors, had also sponsored insurgencies under the

⁶⁹ Zhonggong Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhi qu weiyuanhui et al., *Xinjiang heping jiefang*, 306.

guise of national determination. To add insult to injury, the end of the war ushered in a wave of hasty decolonization among the European powers. This was a double whammy to Chinese authorities. So long as China was allied with the Soviet Union, the Nationalists could not discredit Soviet-backed rebels as “collaborators” or “puppets.” Meanwhile, the fallout of global decolonization in China meant that the Nationalists could only counter accusations of “Han colonialism” by appearing to offer the same concessions the Western empires had offered to their colonies.

The Nationalists were up to the task. In order to counter Soviet proxies in Ili, Chiang Kai-shek and Zhang Zhizhong sponsored a group of Uighurs and Kazaks whose critical words and belligerent actions neutralized their proxy counterparts. In order to counter the threat of global decolonization, the Nationalists (and the Communists) adopted a platform of regional autonomy for China’s non-Han peoples. In Inner Mongolia and Hunza, this version of “regional autonomy” was designed to silence accusations of colonialism while nonetheless preserving Chinese sovereignty. Indeed, the Chinese Communists approached the situation in Xinjiang merely as an extension of what they had done in Inner Mongolia. In Xinjiang, Moscow advised Beijing to “initiate a broad campaign advertising the concrete facts and policies regarding the resolution of the ethnic problem in inner China, and to disseminate documents and information showing how the Muslim problem has been resolved in both Inner Mongolia and the northwest [regions of Gansu, Ningxia, and Shaanxi].” Mao agreed that figurehead minorities should be retained in highly visible committees and offices.⁷⁰ To address the concerns of those skeptical of “regional autonomy,” Premier Zhou Enlai invoked the unassailable tenets of

⁷⁰ Ibid., 180, 29–30, 75.

national security. “Without a doubt, every nationality has a right to self-determination,” he explained. “But now the imperialists are attempting to split Tibet, Taiwan, and even Xinjiang from our country. Under such circumstances, we will call our state the People’s Republic of China, and not a federation.” Wang Enmao, the new Party secretary in Xinjiang, seconded Zhou’s statement. The idea of a Chinese “federation,” he added, “in which Xinjiang would become a republic within the People’s Republic of China,” represented “incorrect” thinking.⁷¹

After 1949, all that remained was for the victor of the civil war to implement what had long been agreed to in principle. In October 1955, three years after the PLA suppressed the last of the Xinjiang bandits, the Communist government drew the curtain on the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. The inauguration of an autonomous region along the borderlands was a sign of strength for the new state. After all, Beijing would not concede the forms of “regional autonomy” unless it felt entirely secure in their lack of substance. At the same time, the Communists relieved Burhan Shahidi of his governorship, and put out the venerable Tatar out to political pasture. Saypidin Azizi, a man of scant prestige who owed his entire career to Beijing, took his place. Yet the changing of the subaltern carried little real significance. As always, real power continued to lie with their Han counterparts. It was they who were destined to realize the Chinese nationalist—and Chinese Nationalist—dream of airtight centralized control over the non-Han borderlands. Long deferred by political disunity and foreign meddling, by the mid-1950s the dream had finally come true.

⁷¹ Zhonggong Xinjiang Wei-wu-er zizhi qu weiyuanhui dangshi yanjiushi, ed., *Zhongguo gongchandang yu minzu qiyu zizhi zhidu de jianli he fazhan* [The Chinese Communist Party and the establishment and development of the ethnic regional autonomy system], vol. 1 (Beijing, 2000), 68, 305.

In October 1949, as the Chinese Communists poured into Xinjiang, a Nationalist officer in flight to India passed through the southern oasis of Kucha. The local Han magistrate, Liu Wenshang, invited him into his home. The officer, Zhang Dajun, met his Uighur wife and two children. His curiosity got the better of him.

“The Uighurs of southern Xinjiang are against Han men marrying their women,” he said. “But here you are, and you have gone and married a Uighur girl. How come they don’t resist our immigration?”

His Han host shot back. “What is there for them to resist? All the children born here speak Uighur. Not only that, there are plenty of *imams* who openly say in public that ‘even if a hundred thousand Han come out here, we will simply assimilate a hundred thousand Han. What are we afraid of?’”⁷²

This simple statement stood as a sober reminder of just how much work lie ahead for the new Chinese state. In the early 1950s, the Chinese Communists completed the process, first begun by the Nationalists three decades earlier, of unifying inner China and incorporating its non-Han frontiers. Yet political unification, no matter how important, was merely the first step. In economic, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic terms, Xinjiang was still a foreign country.

All that was about to change. And as it did, the Nationalists, from their island stronghold of Taiwan, would prove themselves an unexpected ally of their erstwhile foe.

⁷² Zhang, *Hengdu Kunlun san wan li*, 43.

Chapter 10

Exile Island, 1951–71

In January 1954, foreign diplomats joined more than two hundred Nationalist luminaries in Taipei to mourn the death of Liu Zhe, a prominent official who had served the central government for over three decades. Among the crowd of well wishers were two men who must have tried hard to avoid bumping into one another: former Xinjiang *duban* Sheng Shicai and his one-time nemesis Yolbars Khan. Two decades earlier they had tried their best to kill one another. Now here they were, both living on government handouts on a tiny tropical island fifty times smaller than the land they had once called home. Should they happen to brush elbows at Liu's casket, the awkward tension might have been defused by yet another former governor, Wu Zhongxin, also in attendance and friendly with both men. Conspicuous by their absence were ex-governors Zhang Zhizhong and Burhan Shahidi, who had gone over to the Communists in 1949. The defection of Burhan in September of that year had set in motion a chain of events that culminated with the execution of Osman Batur. One month later Yolbars Khan, who had urged Osman to accompany him to India, arrived in Taiwan, his eldest son in tow. Now sixty three years old, Yolbars had some pressing matters to attend to. His wife had died during the trek through Tibet. So, in December 1951, a mere seven months after setting foot on the island, he married Liu Shujing, a 25-year-old lass from Sichuan. Serving as witness was Yu Youren, a grey eminence of the Nationalist cause.¹ Even had the two men not been friends, there would have been ample cause for Yu's attendance. For the

¹ *Lianhe bao*, January 9, 1954, September 24, 1955, and December 20, 1951.

groom was no longer just the former *zhuanyuan* of Hami—he was now the governor of Xinjiang province.

In Taiwan, that is.

Yolbars had a business card that was unique within the Nationalist exile government. Officially, he headed the Office for the Chairman of the Xinjiang Provincial Government (*Xinjiang sheng zhengfu zhuxi bangongchu*). The Nationalists were not delusional: they acknowledged that they had lost Xinjiang. Rather, what this was was a special office reserved specifically for the chairman (governor) alone, bereft of any claim to actual territorial administration. The other two provincial administrations operated by the Nationalists after 1949—those of Taiwan and Fujian—both retained a living tax base and tangible clumps of land to look after (though in the case of Fujian this meant only a handful of offshore islands). Not so in the case of Xinjiang. The *raison d'être* for this office derived entirely from its symbolic power. In March 1951, soon after Yolbars crossed the Indian border with Tibet, a Nationalist planning committee decided to invite him to Taiwan. The reason was simple. Many thousands of refugees had started to stream into Kashmir, Pakistan, and India, and their dramatic plight quickly caught the attention of Western media. “The world is looking at developments in Xinjiang very closely,” the planning committee observed. The Nationalist government needed a respected, high-profile native of Xinjiang to act as liaison on its behalf. All eyes turned first to Isa Yusuf Alptekin and Mohammed Emin Bugra, two prominent Uighur politicians who had

worked under the Nationalist wing for nearly two decades. Unfortunately, the planning committee learned, they “remained abroad,” and apparently out of touch.²

That left Yolbars. Though the Nationalists had already appointed him governor of Xinjiang in early 1950, while he was waging a guerrilla war near Hami, Yolbars did not learn of his appointment until more than a year later, upon his arrival in India. To be sure, the prospect of luring Isa or Emin to Taiwan seems to have exerted a greater pull at first. They were learned, cosmopolitan Uighurs, respected throughout the Muslim world and thoroughly versed in the power of propaganda. A decision by either one of them to take up residence on Taiwan would have constituted a public relations coup, and instantly raised Taiwan’s profile among Middle Eastern countries. By contrast, Yolbars was a product of the battlefield, and a parochial one at that. His fame derived from his role in the 1931 uprising at Hami, his stubborn resistance to Sheng Shicai, and his siege of a Communist garrison at Yiwu (outside Hami) in 1950. Until now, he had never set foot outside China. Compared to Isa and Emin, Yolbars was as a coarse man of war. Zhang Zhizhong had never warmed to him, preferring to mix with the intellectuals. He did, however, have one redeeming feature, and it was a big one. Having spent his formative years in service to the politically toothless Hami khanate, Yolbars harbored no separatist sentiments whatsoever. When Jin Shuren abolished the khanate in 1931, Yolbars teamed up with Ma Zhongying in Gansu. When Sheng Shicai drove him from Hami in 1937, he fled to Nanjing. When the Nationalists encouraged Isa and Emin to spout separatist rhetoric in the late 1940s, Yolbars condemned their speeches. To be sure, his talents in

² Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, Nangang, Taiwan, West Asia Division (*yaxisi*), file 119.51/0001, “Xinjiang wenti” [Matters pertaining to Xinjiang], 38–41.

battle would prove less useful on a tropical island. Still, he was a loyal Uighur official whose actions during the Communist takeover had earned him coveted stripes of valor.

By the time Yolbars arrived in Taipei, the Korean War had been raging for nearly a year. Cold War politics were in full bloom, and the world's major powers had already drawn lines in the sand. The loyalties of many of the world's less prominent actors, however, were still up for grabs, and it was toward them that Yolbars was expected to wage a sweeping propaganda campaign. Though he never failed to issue bellicose statements regarding the recovery of Xinjiang (and the cultivation of Kazak refugees to man the Himalayan invasion force), these were nothing more than obligatory rhetorical flourishes, similar to Chiang Kai-shek's ludicrous claims that he would one day retake the mainland. These were political platitudes, intended to justify the continued existence of the Nationalist administration on Taiwan and extract economic and military concessions from its American ally. Neither the Generalissimo nor Yolbars took them seriously. Beneath the rhetoric, however, another story waits to be discovered. This story is one of new beginnings and fresh starts. The U.S. blockade of the Taiwan Strait in 1950 gave Chiang Kai-shek a chance to start over. Like a breath of fresh air, he could govern without having to strike compromises and deals with latter-day warlords, without having to worry about foreign aggression or Communist "bandits," and without being forced repeatedly to watch his expensive institutional investments go up in flames. For the first time ever, the Generalissimo did not have to deal with the crippling baggage of modern Chinese history.

The situation was similar within the Xinjiang exile community. As we shall see, the loss of the mainland effectively transplanted two decades of conflict to new

battlegrounds abroad. The shifting alliances and Byzantine machinations that had so characterized the last two decades of the Republican era did not count for much outside Xinjiang. Much like Chiang Kai-shek, Uighur nationalists such as Isa and Emin, now freed from the baggage of modern Xinjiang history (in their case the establishment and consolidation of Han rule), suddenly found themselves free to build their own constituencies and platforms. Far from Taiwan or the mainland, they too no longer had to accommodate the Chinese establishment, and could stop striking compromises that served to dilute their political ideals. In exile, among thousands of refugees, they could build their own ethnopolitical community from scratch. Given a free choice, Isa and Emin were convinced, the people of Xinjiang would choose them over the Chinese. The Middle East now became their ethnopolitical laboratory.

Not surprisingly, the Nationalists had a different take on the situation. The people of Xinjiang, they believed, under conditions of extreme duress, had not turned their backs on them in the 1940s, nor would they do so now. In fact, if not for Soviet meddling, the Nationalists were convinced that their tenure in Xinjiang would have been blissfully uneventful. Now that the refugees had fled far from Soviet clutches, surely they would prove receptive to Nationalist overtures once more. And it was the job of Yolbars to make sure that they did. Thus, for the next two decades, he, Isa, and Emin waged ideological warfare upon one another, as part of a larger Cold War chessboard. Though pawns, the starving and hard-luck refugees were by no means unwitting. Indifferent but not imperceptive to Cold War politics, they attempted to exploit the ideological rigidity of their courtiers for their own personal gain. Ultimately, however, the real significance of this struggle lies elsewhere. That is, even in exile, Chiang Kai-shek sought to ensure

that the geopolitical integrity of China remained intact, even if the immediate beneficiary of these efforts was the Communist government on the mainland. Though Isa maintained a substantial following in Turkey for a period of more than four decades, his impact on the world stage has been negligible. In the end, he failed to make himself the “face” of Xinjiang in the way that the Dalai Lama became the “face” of Tibet.

Why?

For the answer, we must turn to the Xinjiang government in “exile.” It is only there that we will be able to grasp the true legacy of Yolbars Khan. It is to the history of post-1949 Xinjiang what the Nationalist legacy on Taiwan is to China as a whole.

A Cold War Scramble

“I served in the central government for thirteen years,” Isa wrote to Yolbars in December 1952. “Thinking back on it now, I accomplished absolutely nothing. It was all a waste of time. In the formulation of policy, the government never once consulted us, and it never adopted a single piece of our advice.” Embittered by his experiences of the past decade, Isa was now proving thoroughly resistant to overtures from the Nationalist government on Taiwan. “If I go to Taiwan, won’t it be just like before? It is enough that you are there. Until I finish my work abroad, and until the central government recognizes our achievements, then there is nothing for me to do in Taiwan. It is better for me to stay here.”³ “Here” was Istanbul, where Isa and Emin took up permanent residence about the time of this letter. In the three years prior, they had both crisscrossed the Middle East on fundraising tours among long-established refugee communities, many of which dated

³ Ibid., file 109/0005, “Xinjiang nanmin yiju Tu-er-qi” [Xinjiang refugees relocate to Turkey], 108.

from Sheng Shicai's campaigns of persecution in the late 1930s. One particular goldmine was Saudi Arabia, where approximately eight thousand refugees had long since integrated into local society and were eager to donate their accumulated wealth to Isa and Emin. In 1951 alone, Emin collected six thousand U.S. dollars in Saudi Arabia and an additional two thousand in Egypt. These funds were intended both to help relocate several thousand Kazak refugees to Turkey and to publish anti-Communist propaganda from their offices in Istanbul.⁴

The swift relocation of refugees to Turkey was of the utmost priority. In order to justify the establishment of a new base of operations outside of Xinjiang, Isa and Emin needed an ethnopolitical constituency to go along with it. Ideally, both the new headquarters and its community of refugees would be located in a country with familiar linguistic and cultural norms. Turkey, now the only Turkic-speaking nation not under Communist rule, fit the bill. Furthermore, Masud Sabri, Isa's longtime mentor and one-time figurehead governor of Republican Xinjiang, had bequeathed his substantial contacts in Turkey to both men before the Communist takeover. Though Masud lacked the strength and will to flee Xinjiang in 1949, several thousand Kazak and Uighur refugees did manage to escape. Over the next two years, they began to trickle into Pakistan, India, Kashmir, and Afghanistan, their movements closely monitored by Isa and Emin, who had set up temporary camp in Srinagar ever since their escape from Xinjiang in the summer of 1949. Because Yolbars had not fled, instead opting to wage a guerrilla insurgency for another year, Isa and Emin enjoyed an eighteen-month headstart in the cultivation of refugee loyalties. Their whereabouts apparently unknown to the Taiwan

⁴ Ibid., 113–18, 239–42.

government, they made the most of their advantage. Shuttling between diplomatic offices in Mumbai and Ankara, Isa and Emin liaised with representatives from multiple governments and charity organizations, finally arranging for the relocation of 1,734 refugees to rural Anatolia.⁵

By the time Yolbars got his office in Taiwan up and running, the arrangements were nearly complete. Nevertheless, Yolbars still sent out feelers to the refugees, and ensured that some funds from the Association for Mainland Refugee Assistance were redirected to Kashmir. This modest act of charity appears to have encouraged Ali Beg and Hamza, two of the most prominent refugee leaders, to delay their imminent departure to Turkey. Unbeknownst to Yolbars, these two Kazak chieftains, both of whom had fought under Osman, had already been in touch with American and British authorities as well.⁶ In early 1952, former Dihua consul John Hall Paxton, now based in Tehran, sent a check for three hundred dollars to Ali Beg and Hamza. “We have the pleasure to inform you that this amount was equally distributed by us amongst ourselves,” Ali Beg wrote back in March. “So please accept our heartfelt thanks for this aid especially from the refugees of Kazaks 340 in number.”⁷ Nine months later, suddenly aware of an additional source of funds in Taiwan, Ali Beg began to couch his appeals to Yolbars within the rhetoric of the Nationalist government. Noting that 176 Kazaks and 13 Uighurs had already left for Turkey, he announced that the remainder of his band, some 180 Kazaks, “swore an oath to remain behind in Kashmir and await orders to invade Xinjiang and

⁵ Ibid., 227–35.

⁶ Godfrey Lias conveyed their overtures to Winston Churchill in *Kazak Exodus* (London, 1956), 229.

⁷ Letter from Kali Beg and Hamza to J. Hall Paxton, March 13, 1952, in National Archives and Records Administration of the United States, College Park, Maryland, RG59, SA250, R49, C07, S02-03, Records of the Office of Chinese Affairs, “P Files,” 1948–55, box 23, folder: “#6p Sinkiang 1953.” I am indebted to Charles Kraus, who has allowed me to reproduce this quote from among his research materials.

eliminate the Communist bandits. We are loyal to Party and state, and will follow the blue sky and white sun flag as we march forward.”⁸

It was clear by now that the refugees had become a hot Cold War commodity. At the same time that Yolbars and Ali Beg were exchanging letters, representatives from the Communist government on the mainland approached a group of 2,630 Kazaks refugees in Pakistan. After a month of free banquets and regular allowances paid out in Russian rubles, a deep split emerged. Some of the refugees returned to the mainland by sea, while others were persuaded to recross the Himalayas on their own initiative. Isa, alarmed by the sudden overtures from Beijing and Taipei, attempted to reel Ali Beg back in. “The Turkish government has recently sent representatives to agitate among us, and they are inviting us to go to Turkey,” Ali Beg informed Yolbars. “But I was resolute, and told them that my government is the Nationalist government, and that I will always be a citizen of the Republic of China.” By late 1953, however, the allure of the resettlement deal in Turkey, brokered almost entirely by Isa and Emin, proved too much for the destitute refugees to turn down. Only Ali Beg and a hundred of his followers remained behind, in a final bid for Nationalist largesse. “People from Xinjiang are scattered throughout many Muslim countries now,” Ali Beg wrote. “If the central government ignores us, then it will have a negative impact on foreign relations with the Muslim nations of the Middle East, and they will begin to suspect that the government looks down on the weak peoples of the world.”⁹

⁸ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, file 109/0005, 129–30.

⁹ Ibid., 175–80, 171, 110.

These last-minute entreaties fell on deaf ears in Taiwan. No doubt the confirmed relocation of 1,734 refugees to Turkey had severely undermined Ali Beg's declarations of loyalty. "In light of current financial difficulties," the Administrative Yuan announced soon after learning of the relocation efforts, "it will no longer be possible to provide relief funds to Xinjiang refugees in India and Pakistan. At this time of hardship, we hope our compatriots will be able to cultivate a spirit of 'overcoming all hardship' and look after their own provisions." Though Yolbars scrambled to come up with a formal blueprint to bring Ali Beg and his hundred followers to Taiwan, the anticipated pricetag (\$30,000) for their relocation was seen as too high to justify the meager benefits such a publicity stunt might accrue. Instead, the Nationalist government decided that it could simply work through Isa and Emin as liaisons, and attempt to foster symbolic declarations of loyalty from among the resettled refugees. After all, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs still considered these refugees to be "overseas Chinese," despite the fact they had all been required to fill out Turkish citizenship papers upon their arrival in Istanbul. In an attempt to foster continued goodwill, in early 1954 the Nationalist ambassador in Ankara traveled to the new settlements in rural Anatolia and doled out \$1.34 to each refugee. These modest dispensations appeared to be well received. Despite expressing his disappointment at the termination of relief funds while in Kashmir, Ali Beg, after arriving in Turkey in late 1954, continued to offer declarations of loyalty to Chiang Kai-shek. Such platitudes appear to have been part of a bid to reconnect with a stream of largesse that would absolve him of the need to engage in agricultural labor, an alien enterprise for a lifelong nomad.¹⁰

¹⁰ Ibid., file 152.11/0048, "Xinjiang sheng zhengfu ji Zhongguo huijiao xiehui zhi guomin waijiao

The Rift

The idea that the Nationalist government could simply work through Isa and Emin was based upon a faulty assumption; namely, that the interest was mutual. Once the refugees were settled in Turkey and the prospect of additional aid from Taiwan diminished, however, serious doubts began to surface. “Of course we are extremely excited about news of an impending counterattack on the mainland,” Emin wrote to Yolbars in February 1953. “But never once did we receive a clear indication of what the government’s position will be regarding Xinjiang.” In order to facilitate preparations for the retaking of the mainland, Emin demanded that Taipei issue a clear statement regarding its “attitude” toward Xinjiang. “If the government insists on being as stubborn as before and continues to view Xinjiang as an inseparable province of China,” he added, “then I assure you that the disputes and disagreements will never end.” Yolbars countered with vague assurances. “As far as I know, the government plans to respect the opinions of local figures and implement regional autonomy,” he replied. He then cautioned Emin not to let his political ambitions cloud his practical judgment. “You are an old veteran cadre of the Party,” he wrote, “and you have served the central government for a long time now. You have studied the dictates of our late Premier [Sun Yat-sen] and know what the fundamental policies of the Party are. Surely you do not harbor any misconceptions on that front.” Instead, Yolbars tried to focus all attention on the Communist threat to their

huodong” [Foreign relations activities of the Xinjiang Provincial Government and the Chinese Muslim Association], 30; and file 109/0005, 216–19, 229, 246–47, 256.

homeland. “Mutual suspicions and individual pursuits will only serve to divide our strength.”¹¹

But the rift was clear. Just three months after this exchange with Emin, Yolbars submitted a comprehensive plan to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to raise Taiwan’s profile in the Middle East. He now blamed the “conspiracy of Emin” for the way in which “two thousand of our Kazak compatriots were seduced into adopting Turkish citizenship.” To make matters worse, Beijing had begun to send formal Muslim diplomatic delegations to the Middle East, an initiative that dovetailed with its interest in those refugees still in Pakistan. In response, Yolbars proposed a detailed list of countermeasures. He suggested bringing some of the refugees from Turkey to study in schools on Taiwan, staffing Nationalist embassies abroad with Muslim personnel, sending an annual delegation to the World Muslim Council, and participating in the *hajj* to Mecca. This last proposal met with enthusiasm, and plans got underway to organize a pilgrimage to Mecca the following year, with Yolbars himself headlining the delegation. In the meantime, in January 1954, Emin and his wife paid a visit to the Nationalist embassy in Ankara, not realizing that Yolbars had been forwarding his letters up the Nationalist chain of command. The ambassador duly lashed out at Emin for “advocating Xinjiang independence and separation from the Republic of China.” In no uncertain terms, Emin was told that “the central government will never grant you independence,” and that “bad things” would happen to him if he persisted in “pursuing such proposals

¹¹ Ibid., file 109/0005, 109, 120–121.

abroad.” Though the ambassador still forwarded Emin’s request for \$400 to Taipei, it was now clear that any further largesse would come with strict strings attached.¹²

On July 17, 1954, with tensions running high, Yolbars, his son, and three other prominent Chinese Muslims boarded a plane for Mecca. Though the Nationalist press touted this *hajj* delegation as an opportunity to win over Middle Eastern leaders, the real goal was to bring Isa and Emin to heel. Chiang Kai-shek approved additional relief funds for distribution among Xinjiang refugees, and Yolbars vowed to convince Isa and Emin to relocate to Taiwan.¹³ On July 26, the long awaited reunion took place in Cairo. Yolbars handed Isa a goodwill gift of \$2,000 and asked him to come to Taiwan. Isa countered that the Nationalists should first demonstrate their sincerity by placing \$10,000 in an international bank account and giving him free rein to spend it as he chose. Yolbars must have demurred, because suddenly the gloves came off. “The government has never trusted me,” he said, “instead giving power to Zhang Zhizhong, Masud, and finally Burhan. Though I once received the post of secretary, still the government did not trust me.” Five years later, Isa was still smarting from an incident with Nationalist border guards in 1949, who had briefly detained and roughed him up as he tried to flee the province. He now realized that his service for the Nationalists in Xinjiang a decade prior had all been a charade, and that Chiang Kai-shek had simply used him as a rhetorical counterweight to Soviet puppets in Ili. “The government fanned my hatred for communism and the Soviet Union, but then let Xinjiang fall into their very hands. As a

¹² Ibid., file 152.11/0048, 21–22; and file 109/0005, 226, 239–42.

¹³ Ibid., file 105.22/0005, “Juyu feibang chaosheng tuanti qianzheng; zhu Sha dashiguan zhoubao” [Refusal to issue visas for the bandit *hajj* group; weekly reports of our ambassador in Saudia Arabia], 89–90, 95–96, 110, 119.

result, untold numbers of anti-Communist youth were slaughtered and thousands of refugees fled abroad. The government cannot shirk responsibility for this tragedy.”¹⁴

Yolbars appears to have been taken aback by Isa’s tirade, for his account contains no indication of a rebuttal. Not so two weeks later, when they met again in Mina, a town just outside of Mecca. This time Isa showed up with a posse of loyal refugees in tow. They immediately put Yolbars on the defensive. “We hear that you are destitute in Taiwan and have had to borrow money to make ends meet,” one of them said. “If you like, you can remain here with us and we will make sure that all of your living expenses are met. Rest assured that we have the means to take care of you.” In addition, they blamed the loss of Xinjiang on the Nationalist failure to grant high-level autonomy to the province. This time, however, Yolbars came prepared. “It is inappropriate to raise words of accusation at this time and place,” he responded. “Unless we succeed in our goal of retaking the mainland, all talk of other matters is nothing more than hot air.” If they wanted high-level autonomy in Xinjiang, Yolbars suggested, then they would have to earn it by deeds, not words. “I obtained my current titles as Governor and Commander of Xinjiang Pacification neither before the loss of Xinjiang nor after arriving in Taiwan,” he explained. “They were bestowed on me while I was in the mountains waging war on the Communists.” If Isa wanted an official statement on high-level autonomy or independence for Xinjiang, Yolbars suggested, then he and the refugees would have to first unite with the Nationalist government on Taiwan and work together for the liberation of the mainland.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid., 157–58.

¹⁵ Ibid., 158–59.

In the evening Isa returned for a third meeting. Yolbars, fed up with his intransigence, did not even bother to record a detailed set of minutes for the occasion, merely noting that he “again complained about the government’s lack of trust in him and revisited his abuse at the hands of the border patrol officer.” When Yolbars visited Isa at his lodgings the next day, he found sixty refugees waiting for him. They must have had some choice words for Yolbars, for he launched into a spirited defense of his past. “When Sheng Shicai leaned toward the Soviets and united with the Comintern,” Yolbars said, “I fled to the central government and met high-ranking officials on Isa’s introduction. The details of my service in the central government are all known to Isa and he can vouch for me. I have never been bought off by the Han and I am certainly not their running dog. Isa is in attendance here today. Go ahead and ask him whether or not this is true.” One month later, upon his return to Taiwan, Yolbars hurried to debrief the Generalissimo. His conclusion was decidedly pessimistic. The goal of “preventing Isa and Emin from being used by others” would prove “very difficult to meet.” Over the course of four heated meetings in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, two things had become very clear. First, Isa and Emin’s “true colors” had emerged: they were now hostile to Han rule in general, be it in Nationalist or Communist guise. And second, Xinjiang refugees throughout the Middle East were fast falling under their wing, in the process subscribing to a vision of ethnic conflict that wholly omitted the many contributions Isa and Emin had once made to the stabilization of Han rule in Xinjiang.¹⁶

Now faced with a propaganda war on two fronts, Yolbars quickly got to work. He renewed his correspondence with Ali Beg in Turkey, and through him learned of other

¹⁶ Ibid., 159–60.

former nomads who were either unhappy with the life of a farmer, annoyed at Isa and Emin, or both. Working through the Nationalist embassy in Ankara, Yolbars extended an offer of free university education for any disaffected refugees, permitted they were willing to study in Taiwan. Among the hundred or so volunteers was Ali Beg's own son. At the same time, Yolbars petitioned George Yeh, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, to build a new mosque in Taipei, in hopes of making a positive impression on visiting Muslim dignitaries. The *hajj* trips to Mecca became a near annual occurrence, though poor health and advanced age precluded Yolbars' inclusion. Then, in a move that would pay enormous dividends down the road, Yolbars also maintained assiduous contact with a man by the name of Delilhan, a former Kazak guerrilla chieftain still holed up in Srinigar (not to be confused with the Soviet-trained Delilhan whom Moscow intended to replace Osman with). Yolbars and his staff repeatedly attended to the complex logistical arrangements necessary to procure his participation at periodic Party congresses in Taipei. As for the rift with Isa and Emin, Nationalist authorities simply acted as though nothing was amiss, continuing to claim both men as steadfast allies in the press. They combined their public silence on the "East Turkestan" issue with a slew of new propaganda from Yolbars' office, including *Frontier Culture* (*bianjiang wenhua*), a monthly pictorial highlighting Uighur, Kazak, and Mongol loyalty to the Republic of China.¹⁷

¹⁷ Ibid., file 109/005, 246–47, 251–53; file 112.22/0003, "Tu-er-qi jizhe fang Tai; lü Tu-er-qi huaqiao fang Tai; lü Ba-ji-si-tan huaqiao Sha-bu-lei; Ai-sha zhangzi Mu-la-de fang Hua; Zhong Tu youhao xiehui" [Turkish reporters visit Taiwan; overseas Chinese in Turkey visit Taiwan; Shabula, overseas Chinese in Pakistan; Isa's oldest son Mulat visits China; the Chinese-Turkish Friendship Association], 28–31; and file 152.11/0048, 111–14.

The publication of *Frontier Culture* in October 1955 coincided with the designation by Beijing of Xinjiang province as a “Uighur Autonomous Region.” This move was intended to ape the rhetorical forms of Soviet affirmative action policies while sidestepping the more drastic institutional changes mandated by a federation of equal member republics. It was also an indication that the Chinese Communists now felt secure enough on the borderlands to risk a display of political concessions without fear that they would actually be called to concede them. If Yolbars understood what the mainlanders were up to, his pronouncements in the press gave no evidence of it. He went on public record denouncing the move as a “stepping stone” to formal annexation of Xinjiang by the Soviet Union, and claimed that Moscow had succeeded in “swallowing up” China’s northwestern province. Aware only of Beijing’s rhetoric but lacking eyes on the ground, Yolbars may actually have believed his colleagues’ rhetoric that Beijing “had to satisfy its master in the Kremlin.” The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, however, was less quick to jump to conclusions. After a thorough examination of an atlas published recently on the mainland, one official observed that “Yining, Tacheng, and Altay are all still present on the bandits’ map.” This official, thinking that perhaps Yolbars had based his comments on secret intel gleaned from refugees, concluded that the comments in the press by Yolbars and other Nationalist officials were mere hyperbole, and that Xinjiang had not been literally “swallowed up” by Moscow. “Though Soviet ambitions in northern Xinjiang are well known,” he wrote, “even the Communist bandits would not lightly give away a chunk of our national territory.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Ibid., file 152.11/0048, 186–93; and file 119.5/0001, 228.

It was this uncompromising aspiration for political and national sovereignty, a goal shared by Chinese Communist and Nationalist alike, that ultimately determined the fate of Chinese border politics during the Cold War. Simply put, neither Chiang Kai-shek nor Mao Zedong would willingly countenance the separatist activities of non-Han actors, be they in Turkey or Tibet. During the 1959 Tibetan uprising against the Communist government, the Generalissimo, while eager to exploit the revolt for his own aims, was unable to bring himself to support the goals of the rebels.¹⁹ To do so would be the kiss of death to the ideal of national unity. It was the same with Xinjiang. In July 1956, when Yolbars issued a comprehensive report on the activities of Isa, Emin, and the Chinese Communists among Middle Eastern countries, he made the following assessment. “Taking advantage of their physical proximity,” he wrote, Isa and Emin “frequently lure [the refugees] with promises of gain, threatening and cajoling them with considerable skill. From their base of operations in Istanbul and Cairo, they publish journals and magazines, thereby swaying hearts and minds and influencing international opinion.” The implications for Nationalist policies on Xinjiang were clear. “We should worry more about these activities than those of the Communist bandits.”²⁰

The threat of ethnic separatism was deemed of far greater import than a Communist regime committed to the protection of China’s national sovereignty. To be sure, Yolbars kept meticulous tabs on the many cultural and religious delegations sent by

¹⁹ Jay Taylor writes that Chiang “came close to saying he would recognize Tibetan independence, declaring that the Tibetan people should have the right to determine their own future.” Taylor, *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek and the Struggle for Modern China* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009), 505–6. It is important to note, however, that he did not, in the end, recognize Tibetan independence. During their tenure in Xinjiang in the 1940s, hollow pronouncements that non-Han peoples should have the “right to determine their own future” fast became old hat for the Nationalists. Any attempt to translate such words into deeds, however, was invariably met with hostility and sabotage.

²⁰ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, file 152.11/0048, 124.

the mainland to various Middle East countries, and he often noted the participation of “the traitor Burhan.” But these reports did not raise eyebrows. What did were indications that Xinjiang refugees in Turkey were listening closely to the hostile ethnic rhetoric of Isa and Emin, who now ran the East Turkestan Refugee Association in Istanbul. These shifting dynamics were apparent in a letter sent to Yolbars in 1958 by a Uighur man named Wahad. Once a lieutenant-colonel in the Nationalist army at Manas, the scene of some of the most vicious fighting with the Soviet-armed Ili rebels, he had fled to Istanbul in 1949 and (one must assume) quickly fell under Isa’s wing. In 1957 he wrote a letter to Chiang Kai-shek requesting a military pension. His plea apparently fell on deaf ears, for the following year he wrote a letter to Yolbars that was filled with violent ethnic rhetoric. “It is very difficult to get one’s debts back from the Han,” he wrote. “Unless you slit their throats you can’t get anything.” Referring to the Chinese staff at the Nationalist embassy at Ankara as “authoritarian Han,” he lambasted the “many excuses they have for why they cannot help a Uighur compatriot.” But the Han themselves, he continued, “have tons of money, travel to all the gorgeous places in the world, and live in beautiful Western houses.” In order to enforce his claim for a military pension, Wahad considered murdering an embassy employee from Zhejiang. “Maybe if I do this, I can knock some sense into the Han.” He signed off by giving fair warning of his intentions, declaring that “it will be my glory to dispatch of such an enemy.”²¹

It seems safe to say that Wahad’s letter did not elicit much sympathy in Taiwan.

Yet it must have been unsettling to see a former lieutenant-colonel in the Nationalist

²¹ Ibid., file 107/0001, “Tu-er-qi renwu zhi; Xinjiang ji Wa-he-de shenqing zhengjian; Xinjiang ji Su-dan shenqing zhengjian; Xinjiang ji Pa-la-ti xueli shengqing zhengjian” [A summary of important Turkish figures; application materials of Xinjiang resident Wahad; application materials of Xinjiang resident Sudan; application materials and academic history of Xinjiang resident Palat], 61, 107–9.

army transformed into a hate-spouting proponent of ethnic violence. And Wahad, as it later turned out, had not even been conscripted into the military. He had joined voluntarily and then graduated from infantry school. His subsequent rise to a position of leadership indicates a significant degree of ideological indoctrination as well. This is apparent in the path of his retreat from Xinjiang in 1949. Instead of crossing the Himalayas with Isa, Emin, or even Nationalist armies composed of Han, he retreated first to inner China, eventually exiting through Guangzhou. This was a loyal Uighur who had repeatedly risked his life for the Nationalist cause. Once he arrived in Istanbul, however, where the Uighur community numbered around a thousand exiles, it is inconceivable that he would not have been drawn into Isa and Emin's orbit. The lesson for Yolbars and the Nationalist government on Taiwan was clear: without vigorous countermeasures in relief funds, education, and propaganda, Xinjiang refugees throughout the Middle East would eventually begin to parrot the rhetoric of Isa and Emin.

The Final Assault

Despite accusations to the contrary, Yolbars and his young wife appeared to be doing quite well for themselves on Taiwan. In 1966, a thief broke into his home and stole 200,000 *yuan* worth of jewelry and other valuables. An article in the press referred to his "beautiful" and "intelligent" wife and their "perfect" life together. Yet Yolbars, now entering his seventh decade, began to feel the effects of age, and was often confined to his desk. This, however, did not prevent him from continuing to attend official government functions, host the occasional delegation from Muslim countries, and

continue to arrange for more exchange students from Turkey.²² In 1960, one such student, Chengis Yarpağ, asked for more money to fund his studies. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed Yolbars that expenses for these refugee students were becoming “excessive.” But still the cost was worth it. “Since it is our nation’s policy to take care of our border peoples, and seeing as Isa and Emin continue to raise the flag of independence at this time,” the same memo observed, “we too will actively continue to cultivate the loyalty of our expatriate sons overseas for our own ends.”²³ Yolbars had come a long ways since the early 1950s, when the Nationalist government once despaired that the refugees in Turkey had become a lost cause.

Things changed again in the mid-1960s, when new developments began to alter the refugee landscape. First, in 1965, Emin died in Istanbul, aged sixty four. Isa, who would live another three decades, was now in complete control of the exile community in Turkey. He immediately took the East Turkestan movement to a new level. In April 1965, he traveled to Mecca to make a presentation at the eleventh convocation of the World Muslim Congress. He asked the assembled delegates to pass a resolution encouraging the Nationalist government to declare “East Turkestan” independent of China and to abolish the “colonial name” of Xinjiang. In addition, member nations would vow to provide tangible and moral support for Xinjiang refugees throughout the Middle East. When a representative from Syria supported the motion, Nationalist spokesman Sun Shengwu immediately lodged a note of protest, invoking Congress prohibitions from involvement in politics. The next day the representative from Saudia Arabia, a staunch

²² *Lianhe bao*, March 9, 1962; January 30, 1963; June 25, 1963; and February 25, 1966.

²³ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, file 112.22/0003, 34–35.

ally of the Nationalist government, rallied to Sun's defense, declaring that Muslims everywhere must adapt to the conditions of the country in which they live. Sun watched with satisfaction as Isa packed his briefcase to leave, but the Congress host convinced him to stay.²⁴

After the initial blindside, Sun gathered his composure. Several days later, he issued a rebuttal. "Mr. Isa was appointed by our very own government as secretary of the Xinjiang provincial government," Sun read. "Once the Communist Party began to occupy the mainland and Xinjiang, all the provincial leaders fled abroad. Except for a small number of ambitious careerists like Isa, the majority of them have continued to embrace the legal government of the Republic of China." It was here that the recruitment of Yolbars and funding for his propaganda finally paid dividends. "In Taiwan we have set up an Office for the Chairman of the Xinjiang Provincial Government, and it is chaired by Yolbars Khan, a Uighur Muslim. This office provides relief aid and succor for dispersed refugees, and draws up plans for the recovery of lost territory." The biggest blow to Isa's credibility, however, came when Sun divulged his extensive history of cooperation with the Nationalist government. "The political status of China's Muslims are not below that of any other Muslim nation," he concluded. "Indeed, Mr. Isa himself has been nurtured and mentored by our government for more than three decades now." In his report, Sun again recorded with relish the sight of Isa "folding up his briefcase and preparing to depart." In front of the assembly, however, Sun tried to preserve the moral high ground. He invited Isa to come to Taiwan and "participate in the sacred task of

²⁴ Ibid., file 152.11/0045, "Huijiao renshi Sun Shengwu yu Xiao Yongtai" [Muslim personages Sun Shengwu and Xiao Yongtai], 40–43, 46–48.

resisting communism and recovering the mainland,” and promised to submit his case to the government for “consideration.”²⁵

Back in Taiwan, Yolbars was getting help from unexpected quarters. The disastrous famines of the Great Leap Forward (1958–61) and persecution campaigns on the mainland had resulted in a renewed stream of refugees from Xinjiang. This time they ended up in Pakistan and Afghanistan, neither of whose governments recognized Taipei. One refugee in particular stood out from the pack. His name was Sabik, and he claimed to represent 701 refugees in Afghanistan. In December 1963, he wrote a letter to the Nationalist ambassador in Ankara, who duly forwarded it on to Yolbars. Sabik told the following story. A native of Yarkand in southern Xinjiang, he was a member of several Nationalist Party organizations, including the local branch of the Uighur Association for Ethnocultural Advancement, a vestige of the Sheng era. Formerly a well-to-do man, he described repeated imprisonment after 1949, including the confiscation of US\$60,000 in assets. During the famines of the Great Leap Forward, he claimed, starving Han had resorted to eating Uighur babies. In 1961, following his wife’s remarriage to another man, he contacted relatives in Afghanistan and managed to flee as part of a trade caravan. Once in Kabul, the Afghan government pressured the refugees either to return to Xinjiang or resettle in another country. After turning to the Americans for help, he was encouraged to get in touch with both Isa in Istanbul and the Nationalist embassy in Ankara.²⁶

Yolbars saw a golden opportunity. Sabik’s background was not unlike that of Wahad, the one-time loyal Nationalist lieutenant turned violent anti-Han racist.

²⁵ Ibid., 61–66.

²⁶ Ibid., file 119.5/0001, “Zhiliu A-fu-han Xinjiang nanmin” [Xinjiang refugees detained in Afghanistan], 11–12.

Furthermore, because Sabik was from Yarkand, where Isa once maintained an influential base of operations, Yolbars worried that the two men would quickly form a bond. When Isa proved slow to respond, however, Yolbars sprung into action. “In this hour of need, when life and death hang in the balance,” he wrote to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Isa and Emin have abandoned these refugees. The political significance of a rescue effort undertaken by our government at this time would be considerable.” Though Yolbars tried to bring them to Taiwan, the Ministry urged them to relocate to Turkey, which was now offering to pay for their relocation expenses. Events soon conspired to undermine this arrangement. First, Isa finally wrote back to Sabik, “scolding me for exchanging letters with Governor Yolbars.” Suddenly aware of the deep schism that ran throughout the Xinjiang refugee community, Sabik informed Yolbars that he “no longer wanted to go to Turkey, since it will be hard to get along with my compatriots there if Isa is acting like this.” Instead, Sabik asked Yolbars if he could help them travel to Saudi Arabia, where the Xinjiang exile community was more prosperous. But even that would prove difficult now. Alerted to Turkey’s offer of resettlement, Beijing began to put pressure on Kabul to reverse its stance and let the refugees remain in Afghanistan. At least in this case, it seems, the Communists were more determined than the Nationalists to keep potential recruits out of Isa’s backyard.²⁷

For his part, Yolbars, informed that his own government was unwilling to assume the burden of the resettlement in Taiwan, saw little reason to help them relocate to Saudi Arabia, where the existing refugee community maintained extensive contacts with Isa. In Afghanistan, however, Sabik could continue to work on behalf of the Nationalist

²⁷ Ibid., 14–20, 51–53, 96–100.

government as a covert agent of influence among the steady stream of refugees who continued to file out of Xinjiang. With relocation efforts stalled, Kabul fast became the next frontier for Isa and Yolbars. Isa sent his men to Afghanistan to spread rumors about the negative effects a Nationalist passport would bring to its owner, and promised to sponsor free annual *hajj* trips to anyone who relocated to Turkey. They brought letters from refugees in Istanbul attesting to the luxurious life they lived under Isa's patronage. Yolbars countered by lodging urgent requests with his government for relief funds to distribute among Sabik's followers. It is not clear how much, if any, money was actually dispensed, but something in Yolbars' overtures must have been sufficient to give many of the refugees pause. For in August 1965, when Isa finally succeeded in leveraging United Nations support for their resettlement in Turkey, only 235 of Sabik's 701 followers took up the offer. The rest remained in Kabul, and Sabik maintained his steady correspondence with Yolbars. In his own documents, Yolbars began to refer to Sabik as "my secret agent and contact man in Afghanistan."²⁸

For the next four years, Sabik was exactly that. The complex wheelings and dealings of the Xinjiang exile community need not detain us here, but suffice it to note that during these years Sabik served as a highly effective counterweight to Isa among the Middle Eastern exile community. Shuttling back and forth among Iran, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and Taiwan, he was entrusted with ever greater sums of cash, numbers that peaked in 1969 with the deposit of US\$25,000 in an Iranian bank account. Such large sums of money inevitably opened Sabik up to accusations of graft, and Isa's men never missed an opportunity to fan the rumor mill in Kabul. An investigation by

²⁸ Ibid., 101–7, 150–53, 220, 225, 242–50.

Yolbars' son, however, eventually cleared Sabik of any wrongdoing, and merely advised the prudence of obtaining a signed receipt whenever money changed hands. In 1969, with some 12,000 refugees having set down roots in Afghanistan, Yolbars gave Sabik his biggest task yet, flying him out to Taiwan to draw up comprehensive blueprints that would provide this burgeoning exile community with the necessary startup capital to maintain a livelihood in Afghanistan. The archives for this time period are filled with requests for relief funds from newly arrived refugees, most of whom had their wishes granted, with gifts ranging anywhere from one to six hundred U.S. dollars. With confidence running high, Yolbars, cognizant of his impending mortality, even offered his governorship to Isa upon his death, provided he came to Taiwan.²⁹

Not surprisingly, Isa refused, but the symbolism was clear. Yolbars was now negotiating from a position of strength, so much so that he thought Isa might actually throw in the towel and accept his offer. By 1969, the son of former governor Masud Sabri, once a devout Isa fan, had broken off contact with his former mentor and informed Yolbars that he would like to visit Taiwan. Even Isa's own son began to get in touch with Yolbars, though his reasons were later determined to have sprung from an unrelated dispute. At the same time, however, someone who did believe in the Nationalist cause decided to make a move that would finally take the battle one step further, and fatally undermine the unity of the exile community in Istanbul—Isa's home turf and an area long been deemed out of bounds for Yolbars and Sabik. This man was Delilhan, the one-time Kazak guerrilla warrior who had holed up in Srinigar in 1950 and never left. Delilhan

²⁹ Ibid., "Jiuji Xinjiang nanbao" [Relief efforts for Xinjiang refugees], and "Zhiliu A-fu-han Xinjiang nanmin"; and file 119.5/0002, "Jiuji Xinjiang nanbao" [Relief efforts for Xinjiang refugees].

was the son of Janimhan, the former Minister of Finance in Nationalist Xinjiang, who was executed the year before Osman. Refusing numerous offers to relocate to Turkey, Delilhan instead kept up a rigorous correspondence with Yolbars, who flew him out to Taiwan on several separate occasions in the 1950s and 60s to attend Party congresses as a formal representative from Xinjiang. He made several trips to Afghanistan to liaison with Sabik, and worked in his stead in 1969 when accusations of graft temporarily sidelined Yolbars' "secret agent."³⁰ That same year, however, he made his biggest move yet when he and his brother decided to abandon their home of nineteen years in Srinigar and spend their twilight years in Istanbul.

They did not like what they saw. The second generation of Kazak youth had been almost entirely assimilated into Turkish culture, and Uighur exiles enjoyed far better living standards than their Kazak counterparts. Delilhan blamed Isa, whom he accused of siphoning off UN aid money for his own personal use and then inflating his and Emin's own role in resisting Chinese Communism in 1949. He reminded everyone of how Isa and Emin had fled Xinjiang long before the arrival of Communist troops, and how he, his father, and Osman had waged a bloody struggle for an additional two years. Fluent in Kazak, Turkish, Chinese, Urdu, and English, Delilhan wasted no time in contacting Turkish authorities and lobbying for better living conditions for the Kazak community. He was a cosmopolitan, experienced politician, with an established reputation among Kazak youth. They had grown up hearing tall tales about the brave struggles of men like Delilhan and Osman. Isa had met his match. After Delilhan's arrival, a deep rift emerged

³⁰ For those activities Delilhan carried out on behalf of Yolbars, including correspondence between the two men, see file 119.5/0002, 13–15, 156–59; file 119.5/0001, "Zhiliu A-fu-han Xinjiang nanmin," 249; file 119.5/0001, "Jiuji Xinjiang nanmin," 104, 163–65; file 112.22/0003, 40–41, 96–99; file 109/0005, 137–39; and *Lianhe bao*, May 26, 1960.

within the exile community in Turkey. Delilhan described Yolbars and the Nationalist government in Taiwan in glowing terms, and continued to sponsor student exchanges into the 1980s.³¹ When I met Delilhan in Istanbul in 2008, he was eighty seven years old and basking in the reverent respect of the younger Kazak generations. It was they who leveraged the substantial wealth of their parents' generation (who had struck it rich in the 1980s) and gutted Isa's headquarters of any association with its founder.

One China, Indivisible

On the morning of July 27, 1971, Yolbars Khan passed away in his sleep at the Taipei Veterans General Hospital. He was eighty three years old. Chiang Kai-shek wrote an inscription for his tomb that lauded his many decades of loyalty and service to the central government. Yet it was his services after the fall of the mainland that were probably of greater import to the Chinese nation than anything he did before 1949. By the time of his death, the seeds of Isa's political downfall had all been planted. The Xinjiang refugee community was divided between two opposing camps, with power fast shifting toward those who looked to Taipei. By maintaining a vigorous base of operations in Taiwan, Yolbars emitted a viable gravitational pull for anyone willing to pay lip service to the Three Principles of the People. Though Isa enjoyed a considerable headstart in the cultivation of refugee loyalties and funded his activities with UN money, he proved unable to maintain his considerable advantages in the face of determined opposition from Yolbars Khan. It was the institutional resources of a Xinjiang government-in-exile that

³¹ Ingvar Svanberg, *Kazak Refugees in Turkey: A Study of Cultural Persistence and Social Change* (Uppsala, 1989), 172–74.

proved his undoing. In the end, Yolbars effectively denied a steady stream of vulnerable immigrants to Turkey, retained crucial loyalties in Afghanistan and Kashmir, and, when the time was ripe, even infiltrated Isa's own backyard. Indeed, just two months before his death, the fruits of his final labors were put on full display in the Nationalist press: Pakistan refugee Seyiti Abdulhan and his family of eight arrived in Taiwan to take up permanent residence on the island.³²

After the death of its chairman, the Office for the Chairman of the Xinjiang Provincial Government quickly withered away. Under Yao Daohong, Yolbars' eldest son, the office signed off on a letter to U.S. President Jimmy Carter in 1977 urging him not to normalize relations with the mainland government. Other than that, however, the archival record runs dry, and rumor has it that the bulk of the files were burned to avoid investigations of financial wrongdoing. Then in 1988, Yao submitted a routine application for a new government car, as allowed once every ten years. The proposed 600,000 *yuan* pricetag garnered ministerial attention, and it was decided to shut down the office within a year. By this time the Xinjiang office had become a quaint curiosity of the Cold War, and several articles appeared in the press poking fun at its past activities.³³ But it had been no laughing matter for the Generalissimo. During the twenty three years that the Nationalist government on Taiwan held the China seat in the United Nations, its "governor" of Xinjiang played a crucial supporting role in upholding Chiang's "one China" policy. Just as the Generalissimo's continued survival on Taiwan guaranteed that the island would not fall prey to Washington's preferred "two Chinas" policy, so too did

³² *Lianhe bao*, July 28, 1971; and Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, file 162.5/0001, 154–55.

³³ *Lianhe bao*, May 20, 1988, May 31, 1991, and December 28, 1991.

the Xinjiang government-in-exile help secure Chinese sovereignty—both Nationalist and Communist—over a historically non-Han, weakly integrated region.

How is it possible to say that one small office on a tropical island helped secure Chinese rule over a land several thousands of miles away and fifty times its size? To understand this claim, we need only to examine the history of the Tibetan exile community. After the Tibetan uprising against Communist rule in 1959, approximately 80,000 Tibetans fled with the Dalai Lama to India, where they set up a Government of Tibet in Exile. What is less well known is that the Nationalist administration on Taiwan, acting through its Tibetan and Mongolian Affairs Committee in Taipei, also offered assistance to the refugee community in Dharamsala. By and large, their overtures were rebuffed, and it was not until the late 1960s that any Tibetan politicians or students traveled to Taiwan to meet with Nationalist representatives. Offers of financial assistance, the construction of refugee schools in India, and invitations to travel to Taiwan were all declined.³⁴ The Dalai Lama soon rose to international fame and influence, virtually unchallenged within the Tibetan exile community. The only other person qualified to undermine his claim as spokesman for Tibet—the Panchen Lama—made the fateful decision to remain in China after 1959, where he publicly supported the

³⁴ Chen Ming-hsiang, “Zangbao zai Tai shenghuo zhuangkuang diaocha ji fudao cuoshi zhi yanjiu” [Research on the living conditions of Tibetans in Taiwan and suggestions for future measures], paper commissioned by the Committee for Tibetan and Mongolian Affairs and Tamkang University, February 2002. Chen bases his conclusions for the failure of Nationalist efforts on Taiwan to make headway among the Tibetan refugee community during the 1960s on three collections of historical documents, including Xu Zhengguang, ed., *Minguo yilai Meng Zang zhongyao zhengce huibian* [An edited collection of important documents pertaining to the Tibetan and Mongolian Affairs Committee since the founding of the Republic] (Taipei, 2001); Meng Zang weiyuanhui bianyi shi, *Meng Zang weiyuanhui jianshi* [A short history of the Tibetan and Mongolian Affairs Committee] (Taipei, 1971); and Liu Xueyao, *Meng Zang weiyuanhui jianshi xubian: fu liren weiyuanzhang jianli* [Addendum to the short history of the Tibetan and Mongolian Affairs Committee: including a brief history of each committee head] (Taipei, 1996).

Communist government. Not only did these actions shatter his credibility outside the Communist bloc, but his subsequent persecution during the Cultural Revolution effectively undermined Mao's goal of using him as a counterweight to the Dalai Lama.

Isa Yusuf Alptekin was not the Dalai Lama, and Yolbars Khan did not carry the political weight of the Panchen Lama. But still the comparisons are illuminating. Had Yolbars not escaped from Xinjiang with his head intact and not made the decision to settle down in Taiwan, the Nationalist government never would have been able to create a Xinjiang government-in-exile with the prestige necessary to make headway among the refugee community in the Middle East. That declarations of loyalty among the refugees were likely motivated more by poverty than ideology is beside the point. The end result was that, after an initial "hemorrhage" of 1,734 refugees to Turkey in the early 1950s, Yolbars stepped in, clear battle lines were drawn across the Middle East, and an increasing number of refugees made the decision to stand on the Nationalist side of the fold. As word spread that a veteran anti-Communist Uighur warrior had succeeded in convincing the Chinese government in exile to dispense substantial funds to destitute refugees, the appeal of Isa's umbrella in Istanbul diminished, especially since he forced them to renounce all ties with Taiwan. By the late 1960s, Yolbars was bankrolling his own secret agent in Afghanistan, a man who jet-setted around the Middle East like Santa Claus, throwing cash at receptive refugees and telling them to thank the Generalissimo. Having fostered a substantial base of sympathetic refugees over a period of two decades, Yolbars effectively laid the groundwork for Delilhan to leverage his considerable investment and strike a deathblow to Isa's stronghold in Turkey.

The Office for the Chairman of the Xinjiang Provincial Government is one of those obscure footnotes of history that are all too often overlooked. Yet it played an important role in modern Chinese history. There is a reason why no one outside of China had ever heard of Xinjiang prior to September 11, 2001, when pan-Islamist terrorist attacks finally drew sustained global attention to China's Muslim population. There is a reason why, in the words of political scientist David Bachman, there exists today "no unified opposition and no widely agreed upon leader who is seen internationally (and even in China) as speaking for Uyghurs or Xinjiang in the way that the Dalai Lama speaks for Tibet."³⁵ While the Dalai Lama was busy consolidating his position within the Tibetan exile community and shrewdly publicizing the plight of "his people" around the world, Yolbars Khan was busy sabotaging the efforts of Isa and Emin to speak for "their people" in Xinjiang. The Nationalists no longer represent China in the United Nations and the Xinjiang government-in-exile is nothing more than a disparate collection of seemingly random documents buried in misleading and obscure archival folders. The historical legacy of both entities, however, should not be forgotten. If not for stubborn political afterlives of Yolbars Khan and Chiang Kai-shek on Taiwan, the world of nation-states today might include two separate Chinese republics, and the one on the mainland might find itself facing a unified Xinjiang opposition movement in exile every bit as strong as that led by the Dalai Lama.

³⁵ David Bachman, "Making Xinjiang Safe for the Han? Contradictions and Ironies of Chinese Governance in China's Northwest," in Morris Rossabi, ed., *Governing China's Multiethnic Frontiers* (Seattle, 2004), 182.

Conclusion

In the fall of 2009, I purchased a 1944 reprint edition of Wu Aichen's *A Record of Travels in Xinjiang* (1935) from a bookseller in Yunnan. On the inside flap of the front cover I later found six vertical lines of handwritten notes, likely penned at some point during the mid-1960s.¹ "This book is well written," observed its previous owner. "Though concise, the narrative style is fresh." The events described within, however, belonged to what was, at least for the author, a wholly alien world. The passage of several decades had changed the geopolitical landscape of Xinjiang beyond recognition. For starters, "after liberation the railroad was extended to Urumchi, and roads now reach every corner" of the province, itself converted into an "autonomous region" in 1955. As for politics, "the era of independent warlords is over, and imperialism has been eradicated throughout all of China. The days of human slaughter are gone and they will not come back." Credit for all these achievements, the author wrote, was "due to the enlightened leadership of Chairman Mao." The inscription ends with a rumination on the lessons of history. "This book can help us engage in critical self-reflection. The ancients had a saying: 'Look into the mirror and know thyself. Look at the actions of men and know our successes and failures.'"

Using the evidence presented in the preceding ten chapters, let us gaze into the mirror of late imperial and Republican Xinjiang. What does it tell us about the history of modern China?

¹ The laudatory references to Chairman Mao, statement that "several decades" (*ji shinian*) had passed since the events narrated in the book took place (the early 1930s), and mention of the completion of a railroad to Urumchi all suggest that this inscription was written sometime in the mid-1960s, prior to the onset of the Cultural Revolution (when possession of a book containing a preface portraying Nationalist rule in Xinjiang in a positive light would have been a liability to its owner).

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the waves of central authority were rapidly receding in China. Much as the ocean retreats from the shore following a rupture in the earth's tectonic plates, so too did the reach of the central government in Beijing ebb precariously from its many provinces and dependencies. The catalyst was a seismic shift in global power occasioned by the arrival of Western—and later Japanese—gunboats. In Xinjiang as in other parts of the empire, the diminished capacity of the central government to buttress a Han administration on the distant frontier ushered in a geopolitical crisis. Yet Xinjiang was different from Tibet and Outer Mongolia. It was not a loosely governed “dependency” (*fanshu*) peppered with a tiny smattering of Manchu, Mongol, or Han “representatives.” After 1884, Xinjiang was a province (*sheng*) much like the ones in inner China, with an expensive county-level administration and a standing army officered and staffed exclusively by Han appointees from inner China. Over the next three decades, the expeditions of foreign archaeologists revealed just how weak and tenuous the Han grip on power in the northwest actually was. Not over their mostly non-Han indigenous subjects, of course, but rather with respect to the foreign powers, in particular Russia, England, and Japan. The late imperial Han administration in Xinjiang occupied such a precarious position—just barely able to keep its head under the receding tideline, if you will—that anyone traveling under the consular protection of these countries had to be treated as if he himself was a foreign dignitary, rather than just an adventurous, fame-seeking scholar.

After the 1900–1 Boxer debacle, the crippling indemnities levied by the foreign powers on the Qing court merely confirmed the wisdom of using kid gloves to deal with

foreign explorers in Xinjiang. Yet these same financial indemnities ultimately sounded the death knell for central government authority in the northwest. By the time of the 1911 revolution, silver subsidies ceased to exist, the waves were in rapid retreat, and the tortoise that was Xinjiang was left cold and dry. Needless to say, such developments were alarming for the tortoise. In response, Yang Zengxin, the first governor of Republican Xinjiang, tried desperately to make his way back toward the receding coastline. The president of the Republic, Yuan Shikai, tried with equal desperation to halt the hemorrhaging of central authority, and he looked to supporters like Governor Yang to back his bid for centralization. Because their alliance was premised on the larger geopolitical interests of China as a whole, both men privileged strong central authority at the expense of the political reform demanded by the revolutionaries. Any policy that Yang and Yuan perceived as capable of restoring the majesty and reach of the central government was soon put into motion, by force if necessary. The president assassinated his enemies, abolished the Nationalist Party, disbanded parliament, and strong-armed revolutionary sympathizers in the provinces.

Out in Xinjiang, Yang also eliminated his rivals in the revolutionary camp. At the same time, he followed his president's orders to make a disastrous stand against a Russian-led Mongol invasion in Khovd. Yet he capitulated in all matters of foreign affairs with the Russian consuls, hoping to avoid a repeat of the Boxer incident. Both of these actions allowed President Yuan to save face at the national level, while costing Governor Yang considerable face at the provincial level. It all came to a head in 1915–16. For eighty three days, President Yuan donned the robes of an emperor, and the Republic of China became the Chinese Empire. Both the empire and the emperor were revived to

balance a strong central government in inner China with flexible ethnopolitical differentiation on the distant non-Han frontiers. As such, Governor Yang lent his enthusiastic support. He executed dissenters in his own ranks and railed against anyone who opposed his beloved Emperor. It was all for naught. The revolutionaries and their sympathizers knew little about the non-Han borderlands, and even less about the desire of its non-Han nobles for the trappings of empire. With the geopolitical dimensions of Emperor Yuan's project failing to register on the revolutionary radar, all that remained was what appeared to be a cynical grab for power by an insatiable bully. The revolutionary camp may not have had much in the way of an army, but they still had a monopoly on the discourse of political legitimacy. Denouncing Emperor Yuan's enterprise as a betrayal of the revolution, the revolutionaries gave Yuan's military commanders the pretext they needed to finally break free of his iron grip.

The era of the warlords had arrived. Its defining feature was that military force now became the only means of resolving political disputes. In 1911, the revolution destroyed the legitimacy of the central government, and along with it went the sacred writ of civilian institutions. Yuan Shikai proved unable to restore the integrity of the central government without resorting to force, a stopgap solution that worked only so long as he paid lip service to the Republic.² In short, calls for political reform within the Chinese heartland proved more powerful than cries for geopolitical preservation along the distant borderlands. The resulting breakdown in central authority and the rise of warlord politics throughout inner China carried ominous implications for Xinjiang. Strictly speaking,

² Edward A. McCord, *The Power of the Gun: The Emergence of Modern Chinese Warlordism* (Berkeley, 1993).

Governor Yang could not compete with his fellow warlords. Perhaps his “stragem of the empty citadel” was borne from noble philosophical aims, and perhaps it was carried out strictly in the interests of self-preservation. Despite my own sympathetic portrayal, we can never truly know for certain what Yang’s motives were.

Yet one thing is crystal clear: Yang did not have access to resources that would have enabled him to build an army capable of rivaling those of inner Chinese warlords. Not only could he not increase the strength of Xinjiang’s army, but the loss of silver subsidies from Beijing meant that he would have to significantly downsize his provincial expenditures simply to remain solvent. If Yang was to play the part of a warlord in Xinjiang, he would have had to either squeeze his people to the verge of rebellion, cede economic sovereignty in exchange for Russian military aid, or expand his holdings to provinces with more readily extractable resources. But Xinjiang was vast (sixteen times the size of Zhejiang) and transportation links atrocious. The extreme isolation of Dihua turned out to be Yang’s saving grace, and it provided an ideal stage for the merging of imperial ideal and Republican reality. The export warlordism of inner China could only be exported so far. Warlords in Yunnan could expand with relative ease to Sichuan in the north or Guangdong in the east. But getting an army to Xinjiang was a Herculean feat, and for most warlords, entrenched in distant regional bases, it hardly seemed worth the effort. The peripatetic Feng Yuxiang proved the lone exception, forcing Governor Yang to always be on his guard. Generally speaking, however, Yang enjoyed a luxury denied his counterparts in inner China: the luxury of choice. He himself could decide whether or not he wanted to enmesh the people of his province in the warlord politicking of inner

China. For most of his seventeen-year-long reign, no warlord from inner China could force Yang's hand unless he himself decided to join in.

As a result, the governor of Xinjiang simply clammed up. None of his options for change proved more attractive than the retention of the status quo. For the time being, the waves of inner China were far enough away that none of its warlord sharks could entertain any thoughts of turtle soup. Alone on the distant shore, the tortoise decided to retreat into its shell and clean up the grime and detritus left by the receding tides. This meant Xinjiang's rogue localists, who now scrambled to save their necks by inviting Russian partisans and Chinese warlords back into Xinjiang. Yang, with geography and distance on his side, silenced them all. Having consolidated control over his shell, the tortoise proceeded to sit still and wait for the sea to return. "In the future, I will embrace whatever plans you devise for Xinjiang," he wrote Beijing in 1919, explaining why he was withdrawing into his cocoon.³ In the meantime, however, insulating his province from the outside world was the only plausible means of self-preservation for this abandoned Han colony. Even if he had wanted (and he most definitely did not), Yang did not have the resources to play the warlord game, nor was it practical to try and expand his territorial holdings beyond a province already the size of Alaska. Inviting the Russians into Xinjiang had always been out of the question; Yang did not want to be known as the Zhang Zuolin of the northwest. Similarly, there were no practical or ideological incentives to break away from the Chinese republic and pursue independence. If Xinjiang was no longer a part of China, then how could Yang continue to justify the political

³ Yang Zengxin, *Buguozhai wendu xubian* [Records from the Studio of Rectification: additional compilations], vol. 1 (Shanghuan, 1926), 56–57.

monopoly of a Han ruling class composed of less than five percent of the entire population?

This last point, however, underscores the one soft spot—the underbelly of the tortoise—against which Yang could not defend. This was the doctrine of national determination, first applied in Xinjiang by partisans of the Russian civil war. At first, it was applied in a crude manner, transparent in its desperation. In 1921, Andrei Bakich tried to seduce the Kazaks and Mongols of the Altay into “donations” for the White Russian cause, all for the glory of himself and the Mad Baron. A few years later, however, more organized and effective calls were heard just across the border from Kashgar. In Tashkent and Andijan, Bolshevik agitators fanned the hatred that seasonal Turkic laborers from Xinjiang had reserved for Ma Fuxing, the “butcher of Kashgar.” Since Xinjiang’s Turkic populace often lumped Chinese Muslims (Hui) like Ma into the same category as the Han Chinese, calls for his removal could easily encompass Han rulers such as Governor Yang himself. The doctrine of national determination invoked a biological determinant to undermine the legitimacy of Han officials to rule over a non-Han populace. As such, there was really no way to defend against such a weapon except to suppress it. This Yang did through five consulate “listening posts” that he set up in Soviet Central Asia. Yet just as President Yuan’s attempt to suppress a new political regime with force ultimately brought about his downfall, so too did the alarm with which the doctrine of national determination was greeted by Governor Yang reveal the precarious nature of Han colonial rule in Xinjiang. Fortunately for Yang, the Russians were not yet convinced of the desirability of eliminating Han colonial rule in Xinjiang, and Yang’s many countermeasures were sufficient to defuse the situation. Yet the long-

term threat remained, and everyone knew that in the hands of a determined foe, the doctrine of national determination could serve as lethal grist for the fire.

So long as the land was at peace and Yang held the warlords of inner China at bay, however, there was little reason to worry. In the 1920s, the governor was simply waiting for the tide to come back in, wash over the tortoise, and allow him to retire. His wish was granted, but not in the way he had hoped. The tide did come back in, but with it came a tangled mess of floundering warlords, pushed out ahead of the foam. Where did they come from? In the early 1920s, the founding of two competing Leninist parties—the Communists and the Nationalists—wedded organizational cohesion, nationalist ideology, and military discipline into a single Party-state entity. For the self-interested and squabbling warlords, the Leninist Party-state was nothing less than a tsunami. As it swept over established warlords in the heartland, it also pushed minor fringe warlords farther out toward the tortoise's neck of the woods. This carried ominous implications for Xinjiang. Those warlords of long repute in danger of drowning in a sea of Nationalist expansion now cast a desperate hook toward the northwestern frontier. This was the Christian general Feng Yuxiang, who snagged Yang on his second throw. Though the assassination of Yang Zengxin did little to improve Feng's prospects for survival—the Nationalist tsunami engulfed him entirely—it served to exacerbate the situation with China's fringe warlords, who were now washing up in the vicinity of Xinjiang.

Yang's successor, Jin Shuren, was quick to pull the welcome mat out from under their feet. Neither Jin nor Yang had not gone looking for trouble; trouble came to them. But now that the fiercest and poorest of the fringe warlords, the Chinese Muslim Ma Zhongying, had been dumped at Xinjiang's doorstep, Jin faced a stark choice: he could

either become a warlord himself, or be replaced by one. Naturally he chose the former, and turned his energies to the destabilizing extraction of human and material resources that Yang had never dared to touch—and with good reason. Before long, Jin set off a deadly chain reaction. He fleeced the people of Xinjiang for every penny and soldier he could get, straining his relations with prominent Mongol and Turkic nobles in the process. One of them, Yolbars Khan, the former vizier of the Hami khanate, was so distressed by the sudden transformation in the ethnopolitical status quo that he turned to the fringe warlord in Dunhuang for help. Ma Zhongying, barely past puberty and itching for a fight, was happy to oblige. The carnage was awful, owing in part to the skill with which all non-Han combatants deployed the doctrine of national determination for their own agenda. This in turn gave rise to the specter of an endgame so frightening that no Han official anywhere in the country even wanted to think about it. Governor Yang once summed it up succinctly. “If China were to lose its southwestern provinces today, there is little doubt that we would recover them sooner or later,” he wrote in 1919. “But if we mess up in Xinjiang now, we will not be able to get it back later.”⁴

This is what we might call the “Outer Mongolia” effect. The trauma of losing Outer Mongolia in 1921 was so great for Han officialdom that ritual reference to its loss soon became a recurring trope in all diplomatic correspondence. No one wanted to be accused of pursuing policies that might lead to a “repeat of Outer Mongolia” (*wai Meng zhi xu*). And in the case of Xinjiang, home to a fully fledged Han administration never implemented in Outer Mongolia or Tibet, the humiliation of its loss would be all the more

⁴ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, ed., *Zhong E guanxi shiliao: Xinjiang bianfang (Zhonghua minguo liu nian zhi ba nian)* [Historical materials on Sino-Russian relations: Xinjiang border defense (1917–19)] (1960; repr. ed., Taipei, 1983), 14.

acute. We will deal with the implications of Soviet intervention in 1934 in a moment. For now, we want to better understand the chain of events set in motion by the return of the central government to Xinjiang. The Nationalist tsunami, in ferrying China's last fully autonomous warlords out past the borders of Xinjiang, effectively ignited the conflagration of 1931–34. The Han administration in Xinjiang had depended upon a weak central government to divert the ambitions of inner Chinese warlords elsewhere. But, as we have seen, war on the non-Han borderlands was a greater threat to China's geopolitical sovereignty than was war in the provinces of inner China. Not because Han elites in the Nationalist government necessarily feared the rise of a separatist non-Han regime, though many did. Instead, it was their long-conditioned fear of Russian, British, or Japanese intervention that prompted the Nationalists to formulate an aggressive policy toward war-torn Xinjiang.

Simply put, the waves of the central government had gotten tantalizingly close to the tortoise, but as yet they were still only lapping at its feet. Injecting a sense of urgency into the situation were beached tiger sharks like Ma Zhongying, who quickly sunk his teeth into the frightened turtle. The Nationalists desperately wanted to get over that last hump and wash away all the combatants in Xinjiang, but they could not yet draw upon the vast resources of the sea to do it. In the meantime, the fear in Nationalist circles was that an unpredictable Russian bear might amble on over at any moment and devour not only the tortoise, but also the tiger sharks and anything else it happened to find on the shore. The weapon of choice would be the doctrine of national determination, which would conceal the bear's true intentions as he tore at the turtle's flesh. Unlike in inner China, prolonged civil war in Xinjiang could lead to its eventual separation from the

Chinese state. The fighting had to stop. And when it did, the Nationalists needed somehow to ensure that its authority would be recognized in a manner more substantial than that acknowledged by previous governors. But how was this to be done?

The answer: vanguard proxies. In 1932, Nanjing decided to confer its blessings first on Ma Zhongying, by granting him a formal military title. That is, the tiger shark was no longer biting into the shell of the tortoise simply to sate its own hunger; it was altruistically trying to drag the tortoise back into the sea, where it had always belonged. But its prey was stubborn. Even after Jin Shuren was ousted in a coup, his successor, Sheng Shicai, continued to resist. But Nanjing had now tasted the turtle's blood, and was not about to give up. With precious intelligence streaming in from a disaffected Xinjiang consul in Tashkent, in mid- to late 1933 Nanjing sent two skiffs out to maneuver on Ma's behalf. These were the "pacification" missions of Huang Musong and Luo Wengan. Both men were significant bigwigs in the Nationalist administration, and one of them (Huang) had already carried out similar missions in Tibet. They came within an inch of netting the tortoise. Having conferred his blessing on a second tiger shark, Zhang Peiyuan, a general in the Ili Valley, Luo watched in horror as Sheng, who was mere days away from annihilation, called upon Moscow to destroy his enemies for him. The following analogy can help us envision this remarkable turn of events: just as the waves of the central government were about to crash over the long-lost tortoise of Xinjiang, the Soviets rushed in and built an impregnable dam between them. The waves slammed against this great mass of concrete with violent force. For the next nine years, much to the chagrin of the Nationalists, the dam held with distressing rigidity. The tortoise began to wade in Soviet waters.

The formidable “dam” erected in Xinjiang in 1934 is an apt metaphor for the way in which foreign powers continually stymied the course of the Nationalist tsunami during the second half of the Republican era. Much of our attention as historians has focused upon the the dams built by the Japanese, one of which rescued the Chinese Communists from certain destruction. But in Xinjiang it was the Soviets who excelled in erecting such stifling masonry. Until the outbreak of the Second World War, the interests of most foreign powers in China were best served by a weak central government. Though the overseas powers reversed this calculus during the Pacific war, the land-based powers, the Soviet Union and Japan, continued to subscribe to this policy. Because a strong central government would invariably privilege domestic over foreign concerns, the Russians and Japanese found it necessary to intervene whenever the Nationalist tsunami began to encroach on their “spheres of influence.” After the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941–42 caused fatal cracks to appear in the Soviet dam in Xinjiang, the waves of the Nationalist government immediately burst through. Once Moscow had recovered from the initial German blow, it began to initiate damage control in Xinjiang, and erected a new dam across the three districts of Ili, Tacheng, and Altay. This was the Ili rebellion. Its brazen construction by the Soviets has not received the attention it deserves, partly because it was packaged skillfully as an indigenous uprising, and partly because Japanese machinations in the heartland have long cast a exclusive shadow over the historical literature. In a sense, however, the Soviet dam in Xinjiang after 1944 was far more dastardly than what the Japanese had done. Whereas Tokyo had rarely disguised its distaste for the Nationalist government, the Soviets were in effect waging a full-blown war against their very own wartime ally.

Butting heads with these constant roadblocks was an exhausting affair for the Nationalist government. Despite this, Chiang Kai-shek, never one to shy away from adversity, made sure the waves never stopped looking for clefts in the wall. And whenever and wherever the dams cracked, water rushed in with reckless abandon, hoping to inundate what lay beyond before the dam was rebuilt. During the early 1940s, the Nationalist tsunami, rebuffed by Japanese blockades all throughout inner China, turned instead to flood the northwestern desert and steppe provinces: Gansu, Qinghai, and Xinjiang.⁵ Though they expended significant amounts of resources and manpower in the process, the acquisition of these territories was of little strategic value in the civil war with the Communists. What the advance into the northwest did showcase, however, was the impressive march of China's central government into every region of the former empire not blockaded by foreign powers. Too often we fault the Nationalists for compromises they were forced to make as a result of foreign pressures and meddling. It was a much simpler matter for the Chinese Communists to retain their organizational and ideological purity in the lice-ridden, uncontested caves of northern Shaanxi. Yet as the embodiment of the political establishment, the Nationalists became perennial punching bags for Japan and the Soviet Union. Constantly pummeled from corner to corner, Chiang Kai-shek had to settle for a weakened tag-team alliance with ideologically vacuous warlords. He could not afford to simply cast them aside, nor did he have the time or resources to retrain every warlord and his armies from scratch. Though still no match for the Nationalist tsunami, their continued presence within the Party invariably fouled

⁵ Hsiao-ting Lin, "War, Leadership and Ethnopolitics: Chiang Kai-shek and China's Frontiers, 1941–1945," *Journal of Contemporary China* 18, no. 59 (2009): 201–17.

the purity of Chiang's waters. Meanwhile, safe on the sidelines, the Communists licked their wounds in peace and built a formidable Party-state free of warlord dilution.

These important distinctions between the two parties, while important in explaining the outcome of the civil war, tend to obscure the simultaneous expansion of the central government, a goal pursued by both parties alike. After it became clear that Japan would lose the war, the reunification of China under a strong central government became a foregone conclusion. The Soviets, the last of the contiguous land powers, tried to delay the inevitable by playing the Nationalists and Communists off each other, but this was a temporary stopgap measure at best. After 1945, the tsunami—be it compelled by Nationalist or Communist power—could no longer be stopped. In Xinjiang, one by one existing pockets of autonomy fell by the wayside. The Nationalists took out Sheng Shicai in 1944. They then imposed a political umbrella over every Uighur activist not under the Soviet wing, and made impressive progress in taming Kazak wildcard Osman Batur. The confidence with which they pursued their geopolitical aims became clear in 1947, when Nanjing went so far as to lay claim to the Himalayan statelet of Hunza.

None of these enterprises, however, came without a price tag. Unfortunately for the Nationalists, it was a price tag only occasionally measured in dollars. More often the cost was exacted in diminished institutional vigor. From the very beginning, Nationalist stewardship in Xinjiang was a constant drain on state resources, one that quickly sapped Party morale. Wu Zhongxin barely survived his sixteen-month governorship in the mid-1940s, and famed negotiator Zhang Zhizhong was constantly called away from important meetings in inner China to confront the Soviets in Xinjiang, much to the annoyance of the Party brass. Over one hundred thousand Nationalist soldiers served in Xinjiang, and their

expensive upkeep was further exacerbated by losses suffered in battle with Soviet proxy armies. The Communists did not have to shoulder these burdens. When the civil war turned in their favor, all the spoils of Chiang Kai-shek's efforts—the taming of the warlords, the recovery of the southwest and northwest, and the costly stand against Japan—became the seamlessly inherited property of the Chinese Communists. They had not had to suffer, as did the Nationalists, the consequences of the running the establishment during the darkest period in modern Chinese history. All they had to do was beat the terminally broken Nationalists, then restock an administration that their vanquished foes had already integrated with the central government. The grunt work had been done for them, at great cost to their predecessors.

To recast all of this in tortoise speak, by the late 1940s the waves of the central government had succeeded in washing over every province from the late imperial era. All that remained was to see which whale, the Nationalists or the Communists, would win the right to roam the sea. After the Communists banished the Nationalists from the sea, they immediately began to butt heads against those few regions that even the Nationalists had never penetrated. They succeeded in Tibet but failed in Outer Mongolia (a region many Communist leaders still expected Moscow to return). As for Xinjiang, after an act of God reduced the Soviet dam around Ili, Tacheng, and Altay to rubble (the plane crash that claimed all the top Ili leadership), Moscow attempted to salvage the situation. In exchange for strategic and economic concessions, the Soviets offered technical expertise to the new regime. After several years of playing by the old rules, the Communists, now

in full control of their sea, kicked the Soviets out and canceled all joint ventures.⁶ With the confident designation of Xinjiang as a “Uighur Autonomous Region” in 1955, the transformation was nearly complete. Contrary to the official proclamations, by 1955 the degree of regional autonomy to be found in Xinjiang was lower than at any point since the original Qing conquest two centuries prior.

From their perch on Taiwan, the Nationalists, had they had not been blinded by ideological shutters, would likely have approved of the consolidation of central authority in Xinjiang. Certainly the geopolitical aims of both parties were identical. After 1949, the Communists waged ruthless campaigns to stamp out the memory of “East Turkestan”, always referring to the Soviet-sponsored proxy state not by its proper name, but as the “Three Districts Rebellion.” The Nationalists evinced the same degree of hostility to any reminders of its own Soviet-instigated troubles during the 1940s. In 1949, when Nationalist officer and future historian Zhang Dajun passed through Hunza on his flight from Xinjiang, a man asked him, “Are you coming from East Turkestan?” Zhang’s response was laced with indignation. “I am coming from Xinjiang,” he said.⁷ When Yolbars Khan fled to Taiwan in 1951 and assumed his new duties as “governor” of Xinjiang in Taipei, he worked tirelessly to combat the separatist rhetoric of Isa Yusuf Alptekin among Xinjiang refugees across the Middle East.

Similarly, when details began to emerge regarding the Tibetan uprising of 1959, the Nationalists could not bring themselves to support their separatist agenda. Indeed, when I visited the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Taipei, I found one only

⁶ Charles Kraus, “Creating a Soviet ‘Semi-Colony’? Sino-Soviet Cooperation and Its Demise in Xinjiang, 1949–1955,” *Chinese Historical Review* 17, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 129–65.

⁷ Zhang Dajun, *Hengdu Kunlun san wan li* [Crossing the Kunlun Mountains at 30,000 li] (Taipei, 1953), 95.

file discussing this event. On the cover was a reprint of the oft stated position of Communist China, the mantra that “Tibet is an inseparable part of China.” Inside, the folder contains only one copy of a mainland newspaper report condemning the uprising. Unlike similar folders concerning contemporary events in Xinjiang, not a single word of commentary accompanies the article.⁸ Apparently the Nationalists had little to say. Along the non-Han borderlands, ideological distinctions melt away, to be replaced by sober geopolitical calculations. Chiang Kai-shek knew exactly how he would have responded if he had still been on the mainland in 1959.

He would have done the same thing as Mao.

⁸ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, Nangang, Taiwan, West Asia Division (*yaxisi*), file 119.6/0001, “Xizang shi woguo lingtu bu ke fenge de yi bufen” [Tibet is an inseparable part of China].

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