



**Qing Dynasty and Uyghurs
in the 19th Century
(Controversy over the Question of Re-
conquering Xinjiang)**

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In the second and third quarters of the 19th century, the Qing Empire experienced considerable difficulties due to the political crisis caused by the two Opium Wars and the ignominious “opening up” by Western superpowers. Confrontation with Japan over Ryukyu Islands and Taiwan, the Taiping rebellion and the uprisings of non-Han peoples added up to the Empire’s problems. A bewildered victim of the incursions of European colonizers, and with the Manchu Dynasty enfeebled, China was in need of inner strength and resolve, as well as external resources to maintain and restore its power over the vast territories of modern Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region, which it lost as a result of Uyghur and Dungan liberation movement in 1864-1878.

So let us try to understand why the Qing Empire decided to regain control over Dzungaria and Kashgaria (Eastern Turkestan), which it had lost almost 15 years previously, in spite of the seemingly unfavorable political and economic situation, because the existence of China within its modern borders is a direct result of the Qing military undertakings of the time.

First, emperor Qian Long (r. 1736-1795) performed some truly spectacular conquests in Xiyu, and then later generals Zeng Guofan, Zuo Zongtang, and Li Hongzhang did much to defend their country during the devastating 1860s and 1870s, recovering the lost territorial acquisitions of Qian Long. In order to regain control over this region the Qing government decided to undertake a punitive expedition to Xinjiang. Our task is to clarify the reasons underlying this decision, which was taken in a political period that was most unfavorable for the Empire.

In order to better understand the topic in question we will have to take a brief look at the status of the so-called the Western Lands (Xiyu) in the political thinking of Chinese empires throughout the ages. For almost two thousand years, despite significant difficulties, many a Chinese dynasty to have begun with the Han people has strived to strengthen its influence in the eastern oases of the Gobi and the Taklimakan deserts (Kumul/Hami and Turfan/Turpan), as well as to resist the nomads of the Central Asian steppe. Meanwhile, separated from China Proper by a significant distance, Xiyu was traditionally rather successful in counteracting Chinese cultural influence. The people of *Tianshan beilu* (Northern Tianshan route—future Dzungaria), as these lands were often called in ancient China, had their own highly developed culture, and were strongly influenced by the Buddhist and later by the Islamic world.

On the other hand, Chinese attempts to establish outposts in modern Xinjiang were rooted in the fact that for many centuries, it had hosted hubs of the great Trans-Eurasian Silk Road: we could compare the commercial importance of the network of caravan trails, connecting oases, to the straits of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles. Up until the very end of the 19th century Kashgaria was an arena of struggle between Great Britain, Russia, and China, both historically and politically remaining closer to Eastern Turkestan than to China.

Chinese claims to the territories in question were based on centuries-old foreign policy principles. That is why it is extremely useful to analyze the discussion on the fate of Xinjiang in Qing ruling circles at the end of the 19th century, when prominent politician and general Zuo Zongtang embodied the driving force behind the demand to reconquer Xinjiang. Lands situated to the North-West of China Proper, and stretching to the North and South of Tianshan Mountain range, were subject of Chinese political interests for more than two thousand years. Starting with the Han era one can trace the tendency described in Immanuel Hsu's book *The rise of Modern China*. Xiyu had never been an integral part of China, having remained a frontier land that China has tried to dominate when strong and inevitably lost when weak.¹

Even in Han times there was no agreement on the need for military expeditions to such a remote land, one which returns so small a profit. Thus Ban Guang (39—92 AD) wrote in Han Shu that even Emperor Wu, who organized expeditions to the Fergana (Davan) and unleashed wars against Xiongnu, considered that Xiyu had not yielded any profit and abandoning it would cause no harm.² Historians have mostly disapproved of these campaigns. Han Shu, for example, said: "Ancient monarchs were mostly concerned about the state of the inner lands rather than the outer ones. Now, on the Emperor's will valuable people are being exhausted for the sake of unnecessary projects. Such dissection cannot promise stability."³ Beishi said that the "Han dynasty did not guard its borders but opened up remote western lands and thus exhausted the empire, so what was the benefit?"⁴ Beishi's conclusion was correct: the Han empire undermined its power with ambitious military ventures.

Imperial secretary Anguo gave an interesting interpretation of the reduction of Chinese activity in Xiyu after the fall of the Han, during the San Guo Period (Three Dynasties: Wei [220-265 AD], Shu [221-263 AD], and Wu [221-263 AD] discussing the question of military opposition to the Xiongnu. He wrote: "We did not fail to conquer barbarians because of the lack of military power and force, but because it was not worth burdening the central states for the sake of this remote land and this ungovernable people".⁵

During the next period of active Chinese involvement in the North-Western territories, Yang Jian (581-604), founder of the **Sui** dynasty (581-618), led several successful military operations against the Turkish

Khanate (583-589), and held the greater part of Central Asia. The emperor was pursuing at the time the vital goal of freeing the country from foreign influence and Turkish threat. So, the famous historian Sima Guang wrote that, in 607, Emperor Yang-di, influenced by philosopher Pei Ju, suddenly began to dream about a repetition of Qin Shihuang's and Wu-di's exploits and about the conquest of all Central Asia.⁶

In Sui times we can also find polarized viewpoints concerning Central Asia. Thus, Sima Guang wrote that the weakening of the Middle Kingdom and its subsequent decay had been caused by the "sweet songs" of Pei Ju⁷, who supervised "barbarian" affairs, including relations with the Turks, and the problem of North-Western borders in general.⁸ As in Han times, Xiyu is depicted as a kind of swamp, draining away the economic and military resources of Chinese inner lands.

Then, in its relations with the barbarians, Tang China stopped depending on the Great Wall, realizing that it had repeatedly failed Chinese security since Han times. Tang politicians put most of their efforts into diplomacy and "maneuvering." After 640 Tang's expansion in all directions reached an unprecedented level. In 647 a successful expedition was launched to Eastern Turkestan, and after 10 years Tang troops led by Su Dingfang had destroyed the Western Turkish Khanate. Let us quote the general estimate of Chinese relations with the Western lands, made in a source from the Qing-period *Qinding Huangyu Xiyu Tuzhi*, written under Qing emperor Qianlong (1736-1796):

Zhang Qian of Han only once managed to walk the lands of Xiyu. Though the Tang established positions such as Commander-in-Chief and founded protectorates, these functioned mainly in name only. When the Eastern Turkish Khanate, bordering on the Tang state, came to an end, China, as a result of its external activities, not only strengthened its position, but also came closer to its old goal of controlling the transfer points of the Silk Road.⁹

While interpreting Chinese and Manchu historical writings we should take into consideration the ambitions of their compilers, who were eager to praise Emperor Qianlong's achievements in contrast to those of previous emperors. Nevertheless, the general line of the quotation is true: Periods of Chinese rule over some Xiyu regions were short lived and the occupation itself was not particularly stable.

The history of the Celestial Empire's relations with Xiyu lands before the Qing dynasty is one of a fractured and costly series of attempts to establish, maintain, and strengthen Chinese influence in a number of outposts along caravan routes, the goal being to provide security for Chinese embassies and trade missions. Prior Qing contacts with Western lands had not resulted in any real control or colonization of Dzungaria and Eastern Turkestan: They were aimed at seeking allies against the nomadic empire of Xiongnu in Han times, against the Turks during Sui dynasty, and against Tibet in Tang times. Relations with states and peoples of Xiyu were formed from a power standpoint, and the balance of power did not always lie with China. It is for this reason that the praise of Chinese military success found in some historical writings had the goal of further encouragement, which finally succeeded in the late Qing period.

The history of relations between Dzungaria and Eastern Turkestan, on the one hand, and the Manchu Qing Empire (1644—1911), on the other, usually attracts much closer attention than that of the earlier times. This is because in the Qing period the territories were finally conquered and transformed into Xinjiang province. Compilers of *Qinding Huanhyu Xiyu Tuzhi* were right: No other dynasty had achieved this.

The three most important periods of Chinese involvement with the North-Western lands during the Qing dynasty were: Emperor Kangxi's war against Khan Galdan (Galdan Boshoktu-khan) during the 1680s and 1690s; outward expansion under Emperor Qianlong (1736-1795); and the restoration of Qing supremacy in North-Western lands in the 1870s after the suppression of the Dungan-Uyghur rebellions and the destruction of Kashgaria, the placement of Yakub-beg at the head of a Uyghur state, and the administrative incorporation of Dzungaria and Eastern Turkestan into China Proper.

Qing documents explain the motive behind expansion quite traditionally: One of Qianlong's edicts of 1762 on the purpose of military action in Turkestan says that the "military expeditions of the emperors Kangxi and Youngzheng were caused by frequent Oirat attacks on Chalcha and Tibet."¹⁰ Assuming that Chalcha and Tibet's security seemed inseparable from China's, it is likely that the notion of securing boundaries by incorporating unruly states and peoples might strongly appear as mere rhetoric, but in reality it turned external problems into internal ones. Exactly this happened in the 19th century, when the Muslim rebellions broke out.

Controlling Xinjiang meant possession of a key location from which to defend China from Britain's advance from India and Russia's from Central Asia. China could now establish direct contacts with all the countries bordering the region, while the natural riches of Xinjiang were duly noticed too. The political situation in Xinjiang, torn by inner conflicts in 17th—18th centuries, made Xiyu rather an easy catch for the Manchus, who were entering their golden age of colonization.

By the beginning of 1866, after the suppression of the Taiping rebellion (1864), the situation of the Qing Empire had stabilized. The Qing government launched a major campaign to eliminate the remaining centers of anti-Qing resistance; that is, the Nian rebellion, the uprisings of Shaanxi and the Gansu Dungans, and the eradication of independent states in Dzungaria and Eastern Turkestan.

In 1874 Gong Qinwang (I Xin) and Wen Yamen (Foreign Office in charge of foreign affairs from 1861) submitted questions to the court's discussion on the matter of Xinjiang. Among officials who submitted the most notable reports and influenced the Court's policy were Zeng Guofan, Li Hongzhang, Zuo Zongtang, and Zhang Zhidong. It was expected that all the notable political leaders of the country would take part in the discussion. One of the most vital questions was without a doubt that of funds. Some high-ranking officials and military leaders suggested that the government should take the peaceful diplomatic route and recognize independent Dzungaria and Eastern Turkestan, others advocated tough military action and suppression of the rebellion.

The main argument of the peacemakers was the organizational and financial complexity of a punitive expedition. Influential figures that supported this point of view mentioned the famous political leader of the late Qing era, Zeng Guofan (1811-1872), who proposed giving up all the "lands to the West of Jiayuguan."¹¹ The main argument of their opponents was that loss of Dzungaria and Kashgaria would pose a permanent threat to the western borders of the Qing Empire. The leader of this group, who shared Zuo Zongtang's opinion, was emperor Xianfeng's (1851—1861) half-brother, Prince Chun Yihuan. Yihuan even suggested that he lead the expedition to the West personally.

Li Hongzhang (then Governor-General of metropolitan Zhili province) used the publication of the discussion theses to persuade the government to relinquish its intention to restore Manchu power in Xinjiang forever. An elderly diplomat and politician, General Li underlined the crucial geographic position of Xinjiang for China, trying to alarm the government by pointing out that the territory bordered Russia in the North, British India in the South, and Turkey and Persia in the West. Li asked the court to stop the Xinjiang campaign and to transfer the allotted funds to his navy program.

Li's idea that preoccupation with Xinjiang entailed the possibility of endangering the heart of the country through attack from the sea seemed totally wrong from General Zuo Zongtang's point of view. Zuo recalled that coastal war was not in question at that time, while Xinjiang was mired in hostilities. He considered that if China had allowed the Muslims to establish semi-independent states in Xinjiang, Russia subsequently might have been able to annex them easily. This point provoked lengthy discussion. Li was adamant; he was sure that the government would not be able to hold the region for long.¹² Zuo was sure that due to the obvious advantages of the mountain "line of defense" along the Western borders of Xinjiang, its control could guard China from any invasion from the north or the west.

The main arguments in favor of Li's Naval development program were as follows. Beijing was close to the coast, while Xinjiang's remoteness from the capital involved considerable expense and made victory doubtful, which made the practical effects of a Western expedition uncertain. Being no more than a great chunk of mostly unfertile land, Xinjiang was of little practical value for China and not worth the expense. Moreover, it was surrounded by strong neighbors and thus could not be effectively guarded; this was simply the most prudent way of preserving Chinese strength

Both Zuo's and Li's arguments seemed persuasive, and yet Qing officials deemed the maritime situation not critical, while the anti-Manchu uprising in Xinjiang, waiting to be suppressed, they thought way more important. The factor of "traditional interests" in Xinjiang inherited by Qing from previous dynasties also influenced the court, which finally concluded that cancelling the Xinjiang campaign could drastically undermine China's position in Central Asia, while not adversely affecting the maritime defense situation.

Like in the Han and Tang periods, some historiographers opposed the idea of a Western expedition. For instance, in *Qing History* it is said that the desire to mobilize for the sake of a western expedition is not a good one and that it would have been better to give Yakub Beg the opportunity to maintain his state. The argument of *Qing History* supports Li Hongzhang and explains that Zuo's argument was successful only because of Junji Dachen (Grand Minister of State in the Qing), who was Wen Xiang's personal supporter.¹³

The next round of debate took place after Qing troops had taken Urumchi on 18 August, 1876. Tso Zongtang wrote that after the restoration of Manchu power in Urumchi and Turfan his troops had started to occupy strategic positions, controlling less than one-third of fertile land, and that if China could reconquer the whole of Xinjiang and rule it correctly, it could pay for itself in the long run, and all past troubles would be forgotten.¹⁴ The Court readily accepted this argumentation. Realization of this plan led to the total conquest of Xinjiang by China in January 1878.

The Qing acquisition of new territory was a costly and exhausting military enterprise for China, and was accompanied by the merciless massacre of the local Xinjiang population. History showed that the east coast had often been a gateway for the military and economic conquest of China, but it seems that even the phenomenal efforts of Li Hongzhang and his allies to create a navy could not have stopped his process. As for the north-west, no matter how many historical sources might speculate about the defense of the maritime border, it seems probable that the idea of a strategic pivotal region was considered important because it involved control of a number of vast regions in Central Asia.

An analysis of China's involvement with the Western Region starting back in the times of the ancient Han Empire shows that the ruling strata of China entertained a number of traditional considerations concerning their political presence there. The main outcome of these considerations was the extension of Chinese rule to some areas of what is now Xinjiang (the Komul and Turfan oases) or at least to the active trade arteries there. Depending on the era, different motives dominated: Trade along Silk Road; the need to ensure security of China Proper; a desire to oppose the Turkish Khanate; and, lastly, an understanding of the region's strategic role in this pivotal part of Central Asia, which borders virtually every country of significance for China in the area. Control over Xinjiang meant holding the key strategic positions, making it possible for China to defend itself from the potential advance of both Britain and Russia.

China's relations with Xiyu throughout the ages present no opportunity to determine one and only one general political status of the western lands in Chinese ideology and historiography; since Han times there had been no common opinion on the practical use of the Xiyu for the mainland. But history and politics are not always about straightforward usefulness: Our example shows how despite an unfavorable political situation, sad historical lessons, and the doubts of honest historians, Chinese rulers favored and accomplished expeditions to the Xiyu.

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- ¹ I. C. Hsu, *The Rise of Modern China* (New York, 1970), p. 73.
- ² N. Ya. Bichurin (Iakin), *Sobranie svedenii o narodah, obitavshih s Srednei Azii v drevnie vremena*, vols 1 and 2 (1950, 1953), p. 214.
- ³ *Op. cit.*, vol.1 (1950), pp.181-182.
- ⁴ *Op. cit.*, vol.2 (1953), p.241.
- ⁵ Yu. L. Kroll, "Kitai I varvary v sisteme konfucianskih predstavlenii o vselennoi (II v. do n. `e-II v. n. `e)", *Narody Azii I Afriki*, no.6 (1978), p. 51.
- ⁶ Sima Guang, *Zizhi Tongjian [Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government]* (Beijing-Shanghai, 1956), jusn. 180, 3235.
- ⁷ *Op. cit.*, 3236.
- ⁸ A. F. Wright, *The Sui Dynasty* (New York, 1978), pp. 169-170.
- ⁹ *Qinding Huangyu Xiyu Tuzhi [Official Maps of the Imperial Western Region]*, ed. Fu Heng et al. Peking: Wuyingdian, 1782.
- ¹⁰ Song Yun, *Qinding Xingjiang shilue [Brief Official History of Xingjiang]* (1821?) Juan 2, p. 5.
- ¹¹ Jiayuguan—the western-most point of the Chinese Wall, situated in Gansu province.
- ¹² Zuo Zongtang, *Zuo Wenxiang Gong Quanji [Complete Works of Prince Zuo Wenxiang (Zuo Zongtang)]* (1888-1897), jusn 49, pp. 58, 59; jusn 52, pp. 26-32.
- ¹³ *Qingshi [Qing History]*, Taipei (1961), vol. 6, p.4764.
- ¹⁴ Zuo Zongtang, *juan* 50, p.77.

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