

XINJIANG AND THE MODERN CHINESE STATE

Justin M. Jacobs

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FOREWORD

Stevan Harrell

Xinjiang, or East Turkestan, as its independence activists call it, has been getting increasing attention in world political and journalistic circles. Once completely overshadowed by Tibet and Taiwan as margins of the Chinese political sphere, Xinjiang has attracted interest because of widely publicized riots in 2009, increased PRC government surveillance and repression of native populations, the incarceration of Xinjiang Uighurs in the U.S. military prison at Guantánamo Bay, and most recently, the arrest and conviction of Uighur economics professor Ilham Tohti for subversion and the repatriation of Uighur refugees by the Thai government. No longer is Xinjiang the conflict zone nobody but locals and specialists have ever heard of.

There are two pervasive ways of talking about today's Xinjiang. According to the discourse promoted by the world press and most governments, Uighurs are a Turkic-speaking, Central Asian Muslim people who resent heavy-handed Chinese rule and large-scale Han in-migration (some call it occupation), and have expressed opposition in forms ranging from private publications to exile websites to occasional riots and acts of terror, spurring further government repression in a vicious cycle. According to the official discourse of the PRC government and media, however, things are different. In this view, Uighurs are one of the fifty-six *minzu*, or national minorities, who make up the Chinese nation, they are progressing toward affluent modernity under Communist Party leadership, and only a tiny minority, probably manipulated by foreign powers seeking to weaken China, ever express opposition or cause any trouble.

What is missing from these discourses, and what Justin Jacobs's *Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State* delivers in abundance, is the his-

torical context of imperial governance. He stresses the important point that all three regimes that have ruled mainland East Asia in the last two centuries—the imperial Qing, the Republic of China, and now the People's Republic of China—have been empires, multiethnic or multinational countries whose central rulers have had to deal with the problem of governing the linguistically, culturally, religiously, and politically different peoples that inhabit their border regions. All three of these imperial regimes have recognized that ruling the ethnic peripheries presents different problems from ruling the Han core, and all three have employed a variety of strategies for what Jacobs refers to as the “strategic manipulation” of “the politics of difference” in governing their peripheries, particularly Xinjiang. Using the strategies that Jacobs calls “ethno-elitist” and “ethnopolitist,” these regimes have attempted to win over the population of Xinjiang either through their traditional leaders or through appeal to the populace at large. They have done this while countering the appeals not just of local nationalism and independence sentiment, but also the ever-present threat of Russian territorial ambitions—Tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet. But under no strategy of governance has the region been at peace for long.

Today's rulers of Xinjiang are thus not facing a new problem. And like their imperial and Republican predecessors, they have not been very successful in solving it. There is local opposition from Uighurs and other local peoples, as there always has been. There are shifting policies and pressures from the central regime, as there always have been. There are external geopolitical interests, as there always have been. Through Jacobs's analyses of the successes and failures of Xinjiang's recent historical rulers, we come to appreciate not just the complexity but also the depth of its troubles. Perhaps we can better understand just why today's PRC leaders are at such a loss, and why they have not fulfilled their announced mission of helping Xinjiang advance harmoniously into the Chinese version of modernity. As long as Xinjiang is part of a state centered on China, problems of governance and conflict will come, literally, with the territory. But China will not grant any appreciable degree of autonomy, because there are geopolitical interests involved. We can only

hope that lessons to be learned from Jacobs's stories of previous failures and occasional successes will somehow be useful in future attempts to solve the Xinjiang question.

X*injiang and the Modern Chinese State* views modern Chinese political history from the perspective of Han officials who were tasked with governing Xinjiang. This region, inhabited by Uighurs, Kazaks, Hui, Mongols, Kirgiz, and Tajiks, is also the last significant “colony” of the former Qing empire to remain under continuous Chinese rule throughout the twentieth century. By foregrounding the responses of Chinese and other imperial elites to the growing threat of national determination across Eurasia, Justin Jacobs argues for a reconceptualization of the modern Chinese state as a “national empire.” He shows how strategies for administering this region in the late Qing, Republican, and Communist eras were molded by, and shaped in response to, the rival platforms of ethnic difference characterized by Soviet and other geopolitical competitors across Inner and East Asia.

This riveting narrative tracks Xinjiang political history through the Bolshevik revolution, the warlord years, Chinese civil war, and the large-scale Han immigration in the People’s Republic of China, as well as the efforts of the exiled Xinjiang government in Taiwan after 1949 to claim the loyalty of Xinjiang refugees.



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STUDIES ON ETHNIC GROUPS IN CHINA

Stevan Harrell, Editor



"Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State adds important new material and frames our understanding of this period of Xinjiang history. It will revise approaches to Nationalist China in general and help us compare the politics of minority ethnonationalism in post-1949 China with the similar but distinct Soviet approach."

—**JAMES MILLWARD**, author of *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*

"Adds to our knowledge of the region's history and argues for placing China's ethnically distinct borderlands at the forefront of China's modern history."

—**LINDA BENSON**, author of *China since 1949*

"With the publication of Justin M. Jacobs's *Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State*, our understanding of the dynamics between Han and non-Han within the late Chinese empire (the Qing/Manchu dynasty, the Republic of China, and the People's Republic of China) makes a quantum advance in sophistication and precision."

—**VICTOR MAIR**, University of Pennsylvania

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