

Clashes of Universalisms: Xinjiang, *tianxia* and Changing World Order in 19th Century

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The history of Xinjiang, or in a geographic sense, the region including predominately the Zhungarian Basin, Tarim Basin, and Turpan basin, is contested.¹ However, this contestation has affected not only the territorial, spatial and political-economic configuration of the region of Xinjiang/'Chinese Turkistan'; it also affected China's own conception of world order. From 1759 to 1884, Qing Empire changed its understanding of the strategic significance of "Xinjiang" region. By investigating the Chinese shifting political understanding of its western border in the context of 19th-century European colonial expansion, this paper hopes to demonstrate that challenges emerged in "marginal" regions like Xinjiang help to shape Qing's understanding of the emerging new world order based on the principle of modern international law. Originated in the European historical context, the discourse of international law gave a particular focus on "real international person," which is constituted by a clearly defined sovereign territory and people settled on it.² This discourse gained its universality through the political confrontations among Chinese, Russian, and British Empires starting from 19th century. During this process, the traditional Confucius "tianxia" (under heaven) world-view, which emphasizes cultural recognition began to ebb away. We could also see that the languages of ethnicity and national independence were used pragmatically through the process of colonial expansion against the Qing's administrative authority in these peripheral regions. The case of Xinjiang provides us a window to review the historical process in which the Eurocentric universalism of international law acquiring its universality.

This paper contains four parts. The first section gives a brief overview of the Chinese "tianxia" worldview and how it changes in the 19th-century transnational political context on

¹ Rian Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 2-7. The socio-political, cultural, and legal complexity of this geographic region is reflected in the multiplicity of its names. The author has no intention of denying such a historical complexity. The author is also aware the political implication and the academic burden of the term "Xinjiang". Hence, the author wants to ensure the readers that this article uses the term "Xinjiang" merely for the convenience of discussion unless stated otherwise in the text. It indicates the geographic region containing the Zhungarian Basin, Tarim Basin, and Turpan basin.

² L. Oppenheim, *International Law, a Treatise*, vol. 1 (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1912), 107-08.

the Eurasian continent. The second part is based on the investigation of Chinese language materials. It presents a picture of how Xinjiang was perceived politically in *tianxia* worldview and governed under Qing's administration. The third part elaborates the European, predominantly British, political discovery of Xinjiang/Eastern Turkistan during the Russian-British competition for trade routine through Central Asia. The fourth section demonstrates how some of the Qing political elites began to understand the political significance of Xinjiang through a geopolitical perspective, which eventually led to the annexation of Xinjiang as a province after the Qing regained the control of the region following the death of Yaqub Beg in 1877. The conclusion offers some implications of this argument for how we understand 'illiberal' conflict management in contemporary Xinjiang.

The Chinese Discourse of "*Tianxia*"

Today's discourse of international politics asserts the universality of the nation-state model, which stands as a modern political embodiment of the relation between state and people. China, in this context, is seen as strictly the sovereign residence of people, who are ethnically Han. This perception is used retrospectively to understand the political order of imperial China. To the Western observers, Qing Empire was a loose union of several distinct ethnic regions. The Han area, which could be considered as the foundation of today's Han Chinese nation-state is referred as "China proper." It roughly contains the eighteen provinces located in the south-east coastal region. The "periphery" areas of Qing Empire, including Manchuria, Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet, are then considered as the result of imperial expansion toward Central Asia.³ This narrative, deployed in New Qing History, demonstrates a taxonomic attempt of systematically regulating Chinese history with modern ethnological and political knowledge, using the Westphalian nation-state discourse to interpret the socio-political order under 天下 *tianxia* (*orbis terrarum*, literally means "under heaven") worldview.⁴

³ John K. Fairbank, ed. *The Cambridge History of China: Late Ch'ing 1800-1911 Part I*, vol. 10 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 351. Also see Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West, the Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010). And Laura Hostetler, *Qing Colonial Enterprise: Ethnography and Cartography in Early Modern China* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁴ The concept of '*tianxia*' resurfaced in the Chinese scholarly discussion in the early 21st century. The publication of Zhao Tingyang, a prominent philosopher from Chinese Academy

Similar to the Westphalian system, which envisioned a set of rules developed in the European socio-historical context to ensure the peace of Christendom, the *tianxia* worldview or discourse also envisaged a *pax orbis* (in Chinese, 天下太平 *tianxia taiping*, which means peace under heaven) which was universal to the “world” known to China.⁵ Both of the worldviews were universal and constantly in flux due to their ever-expanding geographic knowledge of the “world” and socio-political interactions with the “others”. China, in this context, suggests a political entity spanning from East coast to the heartland of the Eurasian continent, which embodies the epistemological understanding of the *tianxia* worldview.

of Social Science published a book titled *Tianxia Tixi: Shijie zhidu zhexue daolun* (The Tianxia System: A Philosophy for the World Institution). He traced the genesis of this concept in Chinese historical tradition and argues that it departs from the state-centric polity. The main argument of Zha’s monograph is summarised in an English journal article. See: Tingyang Zhao, "Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept 'All-under-Heaven' (Tian-Xia, 天下)," *Social Identities* 12, no. 1 (January 2006): 29-41. William Callahan noted that Zhao’s new scheme privileges order over freedom, ethics over law, and elite governance over democracy. See William A. Callahan, "Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-Hegemonic or a New Hegemony?," *International Studies Review* 10 (2008): 749-61. In his inaugural Tsai Lecture at Harvard, Wang Gungwu also addresses the issue of *tianxia* system. He provides a historical depiction of how Qing Empire was gradually getting to know the new world order brought by the Western colonial powers. See Gungwu Wang, "China and the International Order: Some Historical Perspectives," in *China and the New International Order*, ed. Gungwu wang and Yongnian Zheng (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 21-31. The Western scholarship also acknowledged that the concept of *tianxia* denotes a universal kingship associated with a widely shared sense of participation in higher culture. However, such a cultural recognition was also accompanied by an overarching authority achieved mainly through military and political campaigns over large areas. See Benjamin I. Schwartz, "The Chinese Perception of World Order, Past and Present," in *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations*, ed. John King Fairbank (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 278.

⁵ The term ‘worldview’ is used throughout the article to indicate the discursive construction of the world beyond China in Chinese discourse.

There is an abundance of English and Chinese scholarships intending to provide a working definition for *tianxia*. The most influential interpretation in the English-speaking world comes from Joseph R. Levenson. He suggests that *tianxia* is a “regime of value” in contrast with *guo* (國, nation), which is a regime of power. He argues that based on *tianxia* worldview, the Chinese Empire is “the world.”⁶ He then famously proposed the “culturalism-to-nationalism thesis,” which suggests that by the 19th century, the Chinese cultural recognition of *tianxia* began to give way to a nationalist recognition.⁷ *Tianxia* as a cultural recognition based on Confucian value is widely adopted by most of the Western scholars.⁸ However, as some of the young Chinese scholars point out, *tianxia* as a political geographic concept, contains at least two levels of meaning as a spatializing discourse. It could be widely defined as a comprehensive understanding of the world. It could also be narrowly used to refer to the political unity of China.⁹

In Qing Empire, *tianxia* world order was also practiced as a political arrangement which reflects the multiplicity of the imperial legal order. The emperor pertained to a role of an overarching ruler of the empire, as well as leaders specific to different religious and tribal groups.¹⁰ Distinct from the Western *pax orbis* concept, which historically denotes a tendency of centralization and homogeneity of units around the modern state,¹¹ the Chinese *tianxia*

⁶ Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate, a Trilogy*, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968). 99.

⁷ Ibid. 103-8.

⁸ For example, see John K Fairbank, "A Preliminary Framework," in *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations*, ed. John K Fairbank (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974). 1-14. Also James Townsend, "Chinese Nationalism," in *Chinese Nationalism*, ed. Jonathan Unger (Armonk and London: M. E. Sharpe, 1996). 1-30.

⁹ Qixian Zhang, ""Zhongguo" Yu "Tianxia" Gainian Tanyuan (the Formation of Two Key Concepts: "Zhongguo" and "Tianxia")," *Soochow Journal of Political Science* 27, no. 3 (2009).

¹⁰ Regarding the discussion of Chinese emperor in *tianxia* world order during the late Qing period, see Yongle Zhang, *Jiubang Xinzao: 1911-1917 (Remaking an Old Country: 1911-1917)* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2016). 55-7.

¹¹ See Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, eds., *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011). 11-13.

world order generally considers diversity as a source of power and moral foundation for the world peace. Such a spirit was famously depicted in the Confucian classic *Analects* as “harmonise without homogenising” in responding to a quest about the art of government.¹² This principle is accommodated in Qing’ imperial structure. In the preamble of the Great Qing Code (大清律例 *Ta Tsing Leu Lee*) announced in 1740, it emphasizes that the codification of the Qing statutes is based on the spirit of “*tianli*” (天理, heavenly principle) and “*renqing*” (人情, human heart), so that every part of it arranged in such a way as to ensure “universal application” and “justice.”¹³ “*Tianli*,” in this context, is considered as a form of celestial principle which constitutes the moral and divine foundation of universality. Within this foundation, a level of flexibility was introduced to accommodate the multiplicity and free will within the world. This flexibility was reflected through the consideration of “*renqing*.”

The transition which happened in the late 19th century in China marked a universal empire’s drastic and painful political change towards a seemingly Western-style republic. A common perception is that the global systematic transformation in the 20th century known as modernisation inevitably led the world into a historical moment when nation-state, alone with its guiding principles of governance, truly gains its universality. *Pax orbis* should and will be achieved through international collaboration among nation-states assimilated to the same universal principle.

Through interactions with other forms of universalisms, particularly during the moment when security pressures in the Inner Asia region from the Russian and British Empires was perceived as threatening to its political existence, the Qing Empire began to adopt a new model of governance in its border region.¹⁴ These political threats in China’s

¹² Bojun Yang, *Lunyu Yizhu (Analects with Annotation and Interpretation)* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2006). 159. The English version is translated by me based on Yang Bojun’s famous interpretation of “君子和而不同，小人同而不和” in *Analects* 13:23.

¹³ Tao Tian and Qin Zheng, eds., *Daqing Lüli (the Great Qing Code)* (Beijing: Law Press, 1998). 4-5.

¹⁴ By the mid-19th century, Russian threat had already extended to Ili area. The Russian Empire gained control of Lake Zaysan and Kokand areas before the Second Opium War (1856-60). In 1851, Qing and Russia signed Treaty of Kulja, which opened Qing’s Kulja and

inland boarder area constituted a different challenge comparing to ones from nomadic tribes. In addition to the political pressure they put on Qing Empire, they also brought in a fundamentally different epistemology, which offers new narratives of governance, jurisprudence, moral principles of legal and international conducts. Under the continuous pressure in its border area, intellectuals and bureaucrat scholars such as Zuo Zongtang, Wang Wenzhao, Li Hongzhang, and Wen Xiang in Qing Empire began to discuss the strategic importance of “costal defence” (*haifang*) and “border defence” (*saifang*), which emphasised the geopolitical relations between the “centre” and the “periphery”. Sovereignty as a Western political concept also started to influence Qing’s understanding of governance, and by extension conflict management, particularly in the border regions.

Similar to the nation-state order gaining its shape in European historical context since Peace of Westphalia in 1648, the *tianxia* order was also constantly in flux. By the end of the 19th century, some non-Western states in Eurasia also began to conduct legal reforms, resulting in the positivist transformation of state sovereignties in these universal empires. A significant element of such a transformation, in China, for example, involves “*bianfa*” (literally meaning “change law”), which involves legal codification and an attempt to transform state legislation by accepting the Western sovereign criteria. Consequently, the traditional Confucius “*tianxia*” worldview was criticised and later abandoned as a result of educational and political reforms. Conventional studies of such legal transformation in China usual investigate the activities happened in “treaty ports,” port cities located in Chinese East coast, where free trade with Western nations was obligatory under the so-called “unfair treaties.” The first of this type of treaty was signed in 1842 after the first Opium War in Nanjing between Qing Empire and British Empire. Geographically, these coastal cities were considered by the Western writers as “China proper,” which includes 18 provinces with ethnic Han Chinese as their main residences. However, starting from the mid-19th century,

Chuguchak to Sino-Russian trade. In 1864, Russia also signed Treaty of Tarbagatai with Qing, which gave Russia the control of Issyk-Kul Lake area. Issyk-Kul Lake in Treaty of Peking (1860) was recognized as the border lake between Qing and Russian Empires. The Russian threat was very much over the Inner Asia region in 19th century. Regarding the Russian and British threat to Qing Empire in Inner Asia and Tibet region in the mid-19th century, see Fairbank, John K., ed. *The Cambridge History of China, Part 1: Late Ch’ing 1800-1911 Pt. 1*. (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978). 35-106.

confrontations against colonial expansion in Qing Empire's inland frontier such as Xinjiang, Mongolia, Tibet, and Manchuria were not less intense than what happened in its coastal cities. These confrontations were also accompanied by regional upheavals, which sometimes were directly influenced by the British and Russian expansionism in the region.

Mapping and Governing Xinjiang

How did Xinjiang fit in the political structure of Qing's *tianxia* system? How was it governed? These questions are the key focus of this section and essential to understanding the political dynamic in the period of imperial struggle. Before the mid-19th century, the discourse of unification and internal security occupied a vital role in Qing's political narrative of legitimacy.

In the early 18th century, Emperor Kangxi of Qing Empire commissioned a group of Catholic missionaries to conduct a geographic survey of China by using Western techniques. These missionaries consequently became the first Europeans who began to acquire systematic knowledge about Chinese geography, particularly its border region. Under the joint support of Chinese Emperor Kangxi and Louis XIV of France, the Jesuits began to map the Empire on July 4th, 1708. As a result of these expeditions, a total number of 29 maps were made under the title *Huangyu Quanlan Tu* (皇輿全覽圖 Complete Atlas of the territory under the rule of the Emperor) by 1717.¹⁵ This collection of 29 maps was also introduced to Paris. With the addition of European topographic data, cartographer Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville made *Carte Générale de la Tartarie Chinoise* (1732), and *Carte la Plus Générale et qui Comprend la Chine, la Tartarie Chinoise et le Thibet* (1734 and 1737). The 1732 map was black-and-white with no representation of southern Chinese provinces. From south to north, the map covers areas between 33 degrees north and 54 degrees north. The East coverage includes today's Japan and Korea with clear borderlines. Due to the lack of detailed survey data, the Western region was poorly marked except major geographic landmarks such as mountain range, river, desert and cities such as Aqsu and Kashgar. These maps constitute the early Chinese "scientific" understanding of her north-east border regions.

¹⁵ In regarding to the making and various versions of this map, please see Li, Xiaocong. "Ji Kangxi *Huangyu Quanlan Tu* de Cehui jiqi Banben" (On the making and editions of *Huangyu Quanlan Tu* in Kangxi period), *Gugong Xueshu Jikan* (Forbidden City Quarterly), Vol. 30, No. 1, 2011, 55-79.

This geographic survey sponsored by Emperor Kangxi overlapped with Qing's long military campaign against the Zhungars (1687-1758) in the north of Tian Shan (literally, Sky Mountain). By the time when *Huangyu Quanlan Tu* was produced, Tibet and Xinjiang were still under the control of Zhungar confederation, which was predominately ruled by a Mongolian tribe believing in Tibetan Buddhism. Soon after the Zhungar threat was eliminated, Burhan al-Din and Khoja Jahān, who were released by Qing's expedition army from their captivity in Ili under Zhungar's rule and installed by Qing as local collaborators among Muslims, began to wage a war of separation against Qing rule in 1757. In Qing official documents, this was known as the Revolt of Altishahr Khojas. Qing military success against the Altishahr Khojas in 1759 marked the beginning of a relatively stable period which lasted for just under a century.

In 1755, by the end of the campaign against the Zhungars, Emperor Qian Long ordered a comprehensive survey of the empire's territory including areas formerly under control of the Zhungars. This, according to Qian Long, was to “announce the unification of the centre and the periphery” (以昭中外一统之盛).¹⁶ The survey and mapping of the Qing Western region was completed in 1761 by the French Jesuit missionary P. Michel Benoist (1715-1774) under the commission of Emperor Qianlong. Based on *Complete Atlas* made in Emperor Kangxi period and geographic survey data about Central Asian region provided by Antoine Gaubil (1689-1759), another French Jesuit missionary to China, Benoist produced a more comprehensive atlas of Qing Empire. This was known as *Qianlong Neifu Yutu* (乾隆内府舆图 Complete Atlas of the territory under the rule of Emperor Qianlong).

The Qing Empire considered itself as a legitimate inheritor of Chinese imperium. Geographically, this Imperium covers two major pieces of landmass divided by Jiayu Pass, which located at the narrowest point of the western section of the Hexi Corridor and marked the beginning of the Great Wall. On the east side of Jiayu Pass, the landmass was customarily referred as *Zhonghua* (中华, popularly translated into English as the “middle kingdom”). *Xiyu* (西域, literally means Western region) refers to the area west of Jiayu Pass, reaching as far as Balkhash Lake. To Qing, the unification could only be achieved if the ruler could

¹⁶ *Daqing Gaozong Chun Huangdi Shi Lu* (Imperial Record of Emperor Qianlong), volume 490.

demonstrate his virtue (*de* 德) and power (*liang* 量).¹⁷ Hence, the territorial unification of *Zhonghua* and *Xiyu* became a vital evidence not only to demonstrate the power of the empire but more importantly the virtue to rule China legitimately. The long military campaign to unify *Xiyu* was accompanied by a constant map-making practice. At the end of this long military campaign for ‘unification’, in the Qing’s own terms, the military success was immediately enshrined in the grand atlas.

The discourse of unification in Qing Empire is also reflected in its strategic arrangement in the region after the military campaign. As a universal empire ruled by non-Han ethnic group, Qing Empire’s primary security concern was the internal rivalry from Han elites. Apartheid was used as a preferable method of governance in remote areas for internal security. The non-Han regions in the margin of the empire formed a circle of containment surrounding the provinces which were populated mainly by Han people. The ruling Manchurian alliances with Mongolian and Uyghur elites were considered as a balancing power, restraining and containing the Han majority regions of the empire. Ethnic groups were segregated from each other and forbidden to interact with the Han Chinese and study the Chinese language. In Qing’s legal system, regional customary laws were recognised as the main source of law for governance. This arrangement was formed based on the principle of *Jimi* (羈縻), which emphasised on mutual restriction among different ethnic groups under the Manchurian dominating influence. This political arrangement was used in China since the 7th century, particularly designed to handle the relations between the central government and remote regions with vastly different socio-political structures. It was under the growing external pressure from Central Asia in the late 19th century that Qing Empire began to abandon the *Jimi* principle and fully incorporate the centralised prefecture system (*junxian* 郡县) in Xinjiang.

By 1759 after the military success in Xinjiang region, the Qing employed three governing systems. In the East region, including Ürümqi, which had a large number of Chinese-speaking Han and Hui population due to the long-lasting administrative connection with the central government and private trade flow since the Tang Dynasty, Qing established provinces same as the hinterland areas. In regions north to Tianshan Mountain populated by

¹⁷ “Huangyu Quantu Shuo (皇輿全图说)”, in Fu Heng ed., *Qinding Huangyu Xiyu Tuzhi* (钦定皇輿西域图志), vol. 1 (Beijing: Wuying Dian, 1782).

Mongolian nomadic tribes and East region such as Hami and Turpan populated by Uyghurs, Qing used *Jassag* system. *Jassag* was a Mongolian term referring to the chief of Banner who had absolute civil and military authority. In south Xinjiang, the Beg system was introduced to form an alliance between Manchurian ruling class and existing political elites in the Uyghur Muslim community.

As the Qing's ruling elites also came from the peripheral area of the "Middle Kingdom," Qing's campaign for unification was more significant politically and performed as a manifesto of legitimacy to rule. During the campaign, the biggest challenge was providing logistic supply for the troops. In addition to locally collected taxation, state-sponsored agricultural settlement and trade activities were commenced to tackle this challenge. This strategy, known as *Tuntian* (屯田, literally means agrarian lands) system, was used since Western Han Dynasty (221-206 BC). Settlements established along the route of military campaign were referred as *tun* (屯 camp). These camps combined military and agricultural functions. Soldiers and residents in these outposts were farming together during peacetime and could be transformed into combat personals when needed. The agricultural products and economic gains through trade were consumed locally to subsidise the military expense for the stationed army.

The camps established during the campaign were a mixture of social class and ethnicity. Qing was not particularly concerned about whether or not to implement direct governance of the Xinjiang region after the unification. In fact, they were constantly hoping to work with local Muslim elites after the campaign in both Zungar and Altishahr regions. During this process, there were five types of *tun* (literally means camp), namely *Bingtun* (兵屯, military camp, consists of Qing's military personals), *Huitun* (回屯, Muslim camp, consists of Uyghur Muslim migrating from Ili), *Hutun* (户屯, civilian camp, consists of migrants from other provinces), *Qitun* (旗屯, Banner camp, consists of Manchurian Eight-banners soldiers and their families)¹⁸, and *Fantun* (犯屯, criminal camp, consists of convicted

¹⁸ *Qi* is a political term used by Manchurian. Literally, it means flag, which refers to the colour coded banners used by different clans of Manchurian families. This clan association is a main political identification within Manchurian social system. In English world, *qi* is translated as banner.

criminal offenders sent from other provinces).¹⁹ Qing began to set up *Bingtun* and *Qitun* in the mid-18th century and allow exiles and migrants to be sent to those camps serving as agricultural settlers. Barköl was the first outpost receiving internal military exiles (*junliu*) in 1758. All of them were convicted for gang-related armed robbery, theft, or tomb raiding.

According to Emperor Qianlong's imperial instruction in 1761, sending criminals to "land far away" could prevent them from "contaminating their homeland customs," and at the same time, it could also "help the newly emerged agricultural settlement in Xinjiang to achieve its self-sufficiency."²⁰ Ürümqi and Ili were the two major outposts receiving these exiles, between which Ili usually took more dangerous offenders as the region was more remote and with the harsher condition. From 1761 to 1767, each inland province was sending roughly six hundred exiles to Xinjiang every year.²¹ A large number of these exiles were ethnically Manchurian. By 1785, Qing had already expanded its internal exile outposts to Altishahr region south to the Tian Shan. In addition to internal military exiles, the "cultivating mission" of Qing was also exercised through state-sponsored voluntary settlers, primarily from Gansu region. The first group of 730 state-sponsored settlers arrived in the winter of 1761.²² Although the state-sponsored resettlement ended in about 1781, self-sponsored economic migration from neighbouring provinces to Xinjiang did not stop until 1864 when the Muslim Rebellion began. This led to Muhammad Yaqub Bek's control over Xinjiang and completely cut off its traffic to the surrounding provinces in Qing Empire.

Just as the agricultural activities in *tun*, trades were also designed to subsidise the local military budget. Qing applied strict rules in regulating the incoming flow of Han merchants, ordering them to "trade in military camps." In Qianlong's opinion, it is much easier to suppress the potential upheaval if traders from hinterland stay closer to military camps. If they mix with "*Hui ren*" (Muslims), then it is much easier to breed turmoil.²³ This order was issued in 1766. Since then non-Hui people living amongst the Hui communities in Xinjiang became a punishable crime. Qing's state-supported trade activities in Xinjiang

¹⁹ For detailed explanations of the five types of camps, please see Perdue. 343-5.

²⁰ *Pingding Zhungeer Fanglue, Xubian* vol 10, p. 14.

²¹ *Daqing Gaozong Chun Huangdi Shi Lu* (Imperial Record of Emperor Qianlong), vol. 782.

²² Li Hua, *Qingdai Xinjiang Nongye Kaifa Shi (History of Agricultural Development in Xinjiang During Qing Dynasty)* (Haerbin: Heilongjiang Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 1995). P. 57.

²³ *Daqing Gaozong Chun Huangdi Shi Lu* (Imperial Record of Emperor Qianlong), vol. 746.

began as a method to provide logistic support for the troops during Revolt of the Altishahr Khojas. Qing's troop carried silk and fabrics produced in hinterland regions and sold them in major trade cities in Xinjiang such as Ürümqi, Ili, Aksu, Yarkent, and Yarkent in exchange for food and resource as army provisions. The military supported trade activities significantly deepened the connections between Xinjiang and other parts of Qing Empire. With the success of the military campaign, more cities in Tarim Basin became trade posts. By 1768, it already formed a systematic network of supplies with the Governor-General of the Shaanxi and Gansu Provinces and Surrounding Areas as the main governmental delegates overseeing the demands from all trade ports in Xinjiang and the supply purchased from Jiangning (today's Nanjing), Suzhou and Hangzhou. By the end of 18th century, there were seven major trade posts in Xinjiang, namely Tarbaghatay (known in Chinese today as Tacheng)²⁴, Ili, Uchturfan, Yarkent/ khotän, Kashgar, Karasahr, and Aqsu. These trade cities served as knots in the extensive trade network connecting Chinese coastal and inland cities with Central Asia.

By the mid-18th century, Qing's legitimacy as a universal empire was supported by its control of the "Middle Kingdom" as the territorial centre, and reinforced through the successful unification of *xiyu* and *zhonghua*. Its cultural and political legitimacy was articulated by continuing the Imperial Examination, selecting state bureaucracy through testing their ability to understand and interpret Confucian moral, historical, and political canons. As we discussed above, during its heyday from 18th to the early 19th century, Qing Empire's primary method of governance in the peripheral regions was, similar to most of the universal empires at the time, indirect rule through collaboration with the local elites. Starting from 1762 when Emperor Qianlong appointed the General of Ili as the imperial representative of both military and civil authority, Qing Empire officially implemented the so-called "military bureau" (*junfu*) administration. By the mid-19th century, when General Zuo Zongtang regained the control of Xinjiang, there were 37 people appointed to this position. Among them, only three were Mongolian, the remaining 34 were all Manchurian.²⁵

²⁴ Or known in European language as Chuguchak, which is the transliteration of its Mongolian name.

²⁵ Altanvcir, *Qingdai Xinjiang Junfuzhi Yanjiu (Study of Qing Empire's Military Bureau System in Xinjiang)* (Ürümqi: Xinjiang University Press, 2000), 202-06. Also see Ho-Dong Kim, *Holy War in China: The Muslim Rebellion and State in Chinese Central Asia, 1864-1877* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 15-18.

Different from the “provincial system” (xingsheng) used to rule the so-called “China proper” region, the military bureau administration allowed the Qing Empire to facilitate a form of internal balance of powers among different ethnic groups. By maintaining the socio-political structure and introducing the General of Ili as a representative figure to maintain the presence of imperium in these regions, the *jimi* system effectively transformed the Qing Empire’s administrative system in border areas into a *de facto* confederation with ethnic/tribal groups. Under the *jimi* system, border regions enjoyed a high level of autonomy.²⁶ Central power was articulated through the leaders of ethnic/tribal groups at the empire’s margins.

The European Discovery of Xinjiang/Eastern Turkistan

Despite constant skirmishes at the western border, this balance of power worked effectively in maintaining the peace in Qing Empire. However, the loose link between border regions and the central government meant that the central authority of the Empire was subject to both the personal capability of bureaucrats representing central government and the political influence from neighbouring foreign powers.²⁷ By the mid-19th century, the delicate balance within this confederation was severely challenged by the changing dynamic in Central Asia.

Expedition and exploration in Chinese North-west region since the 18th century was primarily dominated by the Europeans. The most commonly used European name for this region bordering Tibet, Central Asia, and Mongolia was “Chinese Tartary.” This is reflected in a series of geographic survey reports and maps. Russia took the leading position in surveying Mongolian and Trans-Ili areas. A large number of these survey reports were translated by British Royal Geographical Society into English starting from the mid-19th century and later contributed significantly to the British-led survey from Punjab area to

²⁶ 19th century Russian geographic reports also described Qing’s policy in Xinjiang. See Chokan Valikhanov, *The Russians in Central Asia: Their Occupation of the Kirghiz Steppe and the Line of the Syr-Daria: Their Political Relations with Khiva, Bokhara, and Kokan: Also Descriptions of Chinese Turkestan and Dzungaria*, trans. John Michell and Robert Michell (London: E. Stanford, 1865). 187-8.

²⁷ Regarding the political impacts caused by the corruption of local high ranking officials, see Perdue. 548-551.

Xinjiang. Both the Russian and the British surveys were purposefully designed to discover new trade routes leading towards central China via Xinjiang.²⁸

Hitherto Russia had enjoyed rather exclusive trade rights in Central Asia region with China. The legal trades were sanctioned by Treaty of Kyakhta in 1727 and Treaty of Kulja in 1851 between Qing Empire and Russia. However, these treaties limited Russian cross border commerce in four border cities, namely Nerchinsk (known in China as Nibuchu, 尼布楚), Kyakhta (Qiaketu, 恰克图), Kulja (Yining, 伊宁), and Chuguchak (Tacheng, 塔城市). By the mid-19th century, Russia was concerned that the opening up of treaty ports in Chinese coastal area could post a serious challenge to the Russian commercial interests in China. Hence, “Chinese Turkistan” isolated from the coastal region by “physical obstacles” became a valuable market Russia could dominate.²⁹ It was around the same time that the Russians began to increase their expedition further into Kashghar area. As a British source suggested, the Governor-General of Western Siberia General Gasfort once stated that “[t]he transformation of Kashgar (the southern part of Chinese Turkestan) into a State independent of China under a Russian protectorate would render a great service to its people ... We shall make ourselves masters of Central Asia, and we shall be able to hold all the Khans in respect, which will facilitate our march forward.”³⁰ This could summarise Russia’s strategic rationale of installing an independent Xinjiang.

The international strategic significance of Xinjiang became more relevant to the Qing Empire in the context of the mid-19th century inter-European rivalries in Central Asia.³¹ On September 21, 1856, Russian dispatched a survey team heading towards Chu river valley region. This expedition was led by P. Semenov, a Russian army officer in Alatau region. He departed from Fort Vernoye in today’s Almaty and reached as far as the western shore of

²⁸ Dominic Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000). 210-7. And K. N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978). 243-5.

²⁹ Valikhanov. 467. Also regarding the

³⁰ Nicholas Vakar, "The Annexation of Chinese Turkestan," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 14, no. 40 (1935). 118-123.

³¹ Ke Wang, "Guoji Zhengzhi Shiye Xia De 'Xinjiang Jiansheng' (the Establishment of Xinjiang Province in the Context of International Political Contests)," *Twenty-First Century* 99 (2007): 40-53.

Lake Issik-Kul. In his report, this vast region including Ili was referred as Eastern Turkistan. This report was translated into English in 1869 and published in the official journal of British Royal Geographical Society in London.³² His specific account of this region includes its geographic location, climate, the local language, major cities, and this region's political relation with Qing Empire. He argued that people living in Kamil, Tourfan, Aksou, Kashfar and other towns of Little Bucharria were the "descendants of Hoei hou, the Ouigours and the Usbecks," who were all "people of the Turkish origin." Hence, "we may give to these countries the name of Turkestan."³³

As a heartland of the Eurasian continent, the Central Asian region saw a constant process of political, economic, and cultural entanglement with other ethnic groups and political entities. This complex entanglement also becomes the historical momentum which drives the shifting perception of this region as a political entity. As John Gallagher suggests that by the mid-Victorian period, British policy "preferred informal means of extending imperial supremacy rather than direct rule."³⁴ This installed Britain as a "free trade empire." If possible, Britain preferred to "trade with informal control"; and direct control over foreign land was only used as the last resort.³⁵ Gunboat diplomacy, which was passionately implemented by British Foreign Ministers such as Henry John Temple, 3rd Viscount Palmerston during the mid-19th century, was a typical example of the then British spirit of interventionism. It suggests the willingness of defending right to trade at all costs, even if the costs involve an act of war.³⁶

³² P. Semenoff, "Narrative of an Exploring Expedition from Fort Vernoye to the Western Shore of the Issik-Kul Lake, Eastern Turkistan," *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 39 (1869). 311-38.

³³ George Timkowski, *Travels of the Russian Mission through Mongolia to China, and Residence in Peking, in the Years 1820-1821*, 2 vols. (London: A. & R. Spottiswoode, 1827). 383.

³⁴ Lieven. 210-7. And Chaudhuri. 243-5

³⁵ John A. Gallagher, "The Imperialism of Free Trade, 1815-1914," *Economic Review* VI (1953). 1-15.

³⁶ To China, the most famous example of this interventionist policy is the Opium War in 1839.

Before the Crimean War, Britain's focus in Asia was about the Himalaya, Tibet, and Hindostan (India).³⁷ Soon after 1856 when Russia began to intensify its activities in Central Asia, Britain's attention also shifted accordingly. The British expeditions to Central Asia could be considered as a response to the Russian expansion in the region. It served a direct purpose of discovering new trade routes connecting Xinjiang and Britain's then newly acquired colony of Punjab. Starting from the same period, all the significant British survey reports exploring the region of Yarkand and Kashgar began to consciously refer to this region as "Eastern Turkistan" instead of "Chinese Tartary."

Unlike Russia, which approached Xinjiang from the north, Britain's attempt started from the south, in connection with Tibetan region. On May 25, 1868, Sir Roderick Impey Murchison, president of the British Royal Geographical Society at the time, gave a long speech at its annual conference. His speech systematically describes the current world order and the geopolitical focus of British colonial trade. The section regarding Central Asia and Western China reveals the British political intention of expanding trade activities in this region. It also provides a British reading of the legitimacy of Qing's administrative power in this region. According to Sir Murchison, Eastern Turkistan is a baffle zone joining the frontiers of two colonial empires. This area includes Yarkand, Kashgar, and Khotan. He is clearly aware that the "Eastern Turkestan" and Yunnan province, which lay between British Punjab and western China, are under Chinese administration. However, the Muslim revolts in this region sweep away Chinese officials and establish autonomous governments. This political turbulence also influences Chinese Sichuan, Gansu, and Shanxi provinces. Although these autonomous governments temporarily halt the British trade activities between British Burmah and China, they became a natural barrier for the British colonial frontier against the potential threat to British India from Russia.³⁸

Sir Murchison's address could be seen as a summary of the British activities in Central Asia in the 1860s, which were filled with pragmatic concerns. The British colonialism in South Asia, particularly in Bengal and Punjab in the late 18th century

³⁷ Roderick Impey Murchison, *Address to the Royal Geographical Society of London: Delivered at the Anniversary Meeting on the 24th May, 1852: Preceded by Observations on Presenting the Royal Medals of the Year* (London: W. Clowes and Sons, 1852).

³⁸ "Address to the Royal Geographical Society," *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 12, no. 4 (1867-1868).

significantly increased the productivity of cash crop in this region. Through cotton plantation and textile production, Britain wove this area into its trade network. The newly emerged industrial capitalist class transformed old Christendom's "civilising mission", which in practice was to cultivate *Terra nullius*. Instead, they were looking at a new form of colonial expansion, helping to carry out the "commercialisation mission".³⁹ Unlike the religiously-inspired universalism reflected in the "civilising mission", the "commercialisation mission" was formed in a secular world order, which no longer seeks for achieving religious equality under the divine rule. Instead, the latter intends to maintain a hierarchical world order due to the unbalanced socio-economic development in different regions, hoping to preserve the existing commercial monopoly and maximizing profit. It is from the hegemonic position in its own imperialism of free trade that Britain's support of an independent "Eastern Turkestan" could gain realpolitik value.

The British believed that having an "Eastern Turkistan" free from Chinese central control would be beneficial to the British traders. Similar to Russia's concern, one of the key focuses of British power politics in this region was also to gain commercial interests.⁴⁰ After witnessing Russians' "recent acquisitions of the Western Turkistan," British traders realised that although Western Turkistan only had "a market of 7,000,000 of people", it provided a valuable indirect access to the vast market of Eastern Turkistan and Western China of 35,000,000. British traders intended to move a step further into the "formerly Chinese Tartary." They aimed to gain access to Kashgar and Yarkand, which was "Eldorado hitherto closed to Europeans." Because the "exclusive Chinese are expelled" from the region, British traders believed the European (mainly British) and Xinjiang commercial interactions "would be welcomed."⁴¹

³⁹ P. J. Marshall gives a detailed historical account regarding the policy changes of Britain in Bengal region as well as the modern transformation of this region for the purpose of effectively delivering colonial trade. See P. J. Marshall, *The Making and Unmaking of Empires: Britain, India, and America C.1750-1783* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). 147.

⁴⁰ Louis E. Frechtling, "Anglo-Russian Rivalry in Eastern Turkistan, 1863—1881," *Journal of The Royal Central Asian Society* 26, no. 3 (1 July 1939).

⁴¹ Robert Shaw, *Visits to High Tartary, Yarkand, and Kashghar (Formerly Chinese Tartary), and Return Journey over the Karakoram Pass* (London: John Murray, 1871). 68.

Tianxia Revised and the Annexation of Xinjiang

The different attitudes between Britain and Russian Empires regarding the legal status of the “Eastern Turkistan” are reflections of their own strategic and realpolitik concerns about securing the monopoly of trade right in the region. Unlike the *tianxia* worldview, the European Westphalian system strongly emphasises the national interest of a sovereign. Through the proactive search for new trade routes, the European struggle for power began to unfold on a global scale. Hence, it achieved the globalisation of the Westphalian world order. To Qing Empire, it was under such realpolitik pressure that the strategic importance of Xinjiang was reevaluated. After the First Opium War in 1842, some Qing intellectuals and officials began to discuss the strategic value of Xinjiang as an outward looking, border region safeguarding the territorial integrity of Qing rather than a *fanbu* (藩部, outlying region populated primarily by non-ethnically Han people), which was mainly serving the purpose of “fencing against” (*fanli*, 藩篱) the nomadic disturbances and “counterbalancing the power of ethnically Han regions” (*jimi*).

In *tianxia* system, trade was a form of political recognition rather than a channel for economic gains. It could only happen under the sanction of the Chinese emperor between acknowledged members within the *tianxia* system. Therefore, the Qing considered these growing demands for free trade as outrageous threats toward the *tianxia* order. Due to the different attitudes towards trade, tensions between Qing and sovereigns in Central Asia began to build. By the late-18th century, Xinjiang’s agricultural development had already led to a socio-economic and demographic transformation. The area north to Tian Shan, which was known in Qing period as “*Zhunbu*” (准部, region of the Zhungar people), had seen a significant growth of peasants from Han, Uyghur, and Hui ethnic origins. The oasis agricultural economy in the south of Xinjiang, “*Huibu*” (回部, region of the Muslims), also began to boom. Areas such like Yarkand enjoyed busy trade traffics from coastal regions of the “Middle Kingdom,” and “Outside tribes” (*Waifan*, 外藩) in the Central Asia. By their royal decreed, the Qing administrators were supposed to regulate trade and supervise the fair trade and profit for local benefits in order to ensure stability. In practice, trade right was sanctioned in exchange for the local elites’s promise of not jeopardising the existing regional

political balance.⁴² However, starting from the early 19th century, Qing's trade partners in the region particularly Khanate of Kokand and Russia began to make more economic demands such as tax-free treatment and less or even no customs control from Qing.⁴³

With the growing instability in the region in this period, some Qing scholars to argue that using valuable resource from the heartland of China to subsidise the marginal *tributum* was a complete economic waste. The remoteness of these "Western regions," made them difficult to acquire and costly to maintain. Consequently, it would not be a lost to abandon them completely.⁴⁴ Some others, however, such as Gong Zizhen believed that instead of even considering leaving the peripheral area like Xinjiang, Qing should consider changing its traditional administrative approach of "*jimi*" and treat Xinjiang with no difference than any other provinces in Chinese hinterland. By strengthening its administrative connections with the central government, Qing could then truly "guard its (Xinjiang's) territory, and govern its people" (疆其土, 子其民).⁴⁵

Gong did not hold any official posts. However, he was one of the intellectuals, who were in good relations with Lin Zexu. Lin served as an official in Qing's court. He received a royal mandate from Qing's Emperor Daoguang to suppress the opium trade in Guangdong province. Immediately after the end of the First Opium War, Lin was held responsible by Qing under pressure from Britain and sent on exile to Xinjiang. As one of the first generation high-ranking officials who had direct interactions with the Western powers, Lin acquired valuable legal and political knowledge of dealing with the European powers in the Westphalian legal context. During his three years exile, he began to evaluate Qing's policy on administrative practice in Xinjiang. Using the experience gained while governing Qing's coastal border, Lin mainly focused on developing agriculture in major cities such as Ili, Aksu,

⁴² Regarding the trade relations in Xinjiang with Central Asia in 18th and 19th century, see Zhiping Pan, *Zhongya Haohanguo Yu Qingdai Xinjiang (Khanate of Kokand in Central Asia and Xinjiang in Qing Period)* (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 1991). 71-81.

⁴³ Ibid. 82-4.

⁴⁴ Shen Yao, "Xinjiang Siyi (Private discussion on Xinjiang issues)," *Luofanlou Wenji* (Collected works of Shen Yao), vol 1 (Zhejiang: Wuxing Liushi Jiayetang Keben), 1830-1840.

⁴⁵ Zizhen Gong, "Yushi Anbian Suiyuan Shu," in *Gong Zizhen QuANJI (Collected Works of Gong Zizhen)* (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1975). 112.

and Hami. As a former high-ranking official, Lin was highly respected by Xinjiang regional governors and army generals. Soon after Lin's arrival in Xinjiang, Emperor Daoguang was considering to dissolve the military outpost in Ili. In the early 19th century, there were two military outposts in Xinjiang, Barköl, and Ili. According to Emperor Daoguang, Barköl outpost was immediately guarding the Jiayu Pass, the first pass at the west end of the Great Wall. Hence, it carried more strategic importance than Ili outpost, which located far away to the western peripheral of the empire. Due to the remoteness of Ili outpost, and also its close distance to the main camp of General of Ili, Emperor Daoguang decided to merge the two posts and use General of Ili's camp to carry out the military function of Ili County outpost.⁴⁶ After receiving the announcement, Bu Yantai, then the General of Ili received the order, immediately consulted Lin Zexu. After discussing with Lin, Bu Yantai recommended not to dissolve the Ili County outpost. According to his report to the royal court, it was exactly due to the remoteness of Ili region and the rapidly changing political environment in the surrounding region that the outpost demonstrated its utmost significance in "pacifying the border defense" (镇静边防). Additionally, as a self-sustained military outpost, soldiers stationed in the outpost were settled as farmers when not on their military duty. Resettling these soldiers would be extremely costly and problematic.⁴⁷ After several rounds of consultation, Ili County outpost was kept.

By the mid-19th century, local officials began to actively defend the essential role of strengthening the military outpost through agricultural settlement in the governance of Xinjiang. This formed the foundation of Qing's idea of land defense. Gong Zizhen, one of the key advisers to Lin Zexu, even began to promote the idea of transforming Xinjiang into a full-fledged province, instead of treating it as a remote military outpost ruled by the mixture of military governors and tribal Begg. He argued that it was crucial for the Qing central government to take back the administrative authority from Uyghur Begg. Traditionally, Qing retained the tribal structure in the south part of Xinjiang with the particular intention of using this region to restrain the power of neighbouring provinces occupied primarily by Han and other ethnicities. Hence, south Xinjiang (*huibu*) did not see many agricultural settlers. However, to intellectuals and officials who saw the needs of strengthening the defense of

⁴⁶ Qing Xuanzong Shilu, vol. 384.

⁴⁷ Zhonghan Wang, ed. *Qingshi Liezhuan (Biographies in History of Qing)*, 20 vols., vol. 14 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1997). 4229.

Qing's land border, they saw the needs of broadening the similar dual-purposed outpost system into South Xinjiang. Qing did not accept this suggestion until late 19th century when General Zuo Zongtang regained the control of Xinjiang from Yakoob Beg in 1877. Zuo Zongtang was recommended to Lin Zexu in 1849 when Lin was on sick leave in Fujian during his post as Governor-in-General in Yungui province. Zuo developed Lin's idea that land defense was equally necessary to the security of Qing Empire as a coastal defense. Zuo tackled the Beg system and argued this administrative system caused the separation between "officials and their people." Zuo was aware that in some areas, people would subscribe to the authority of local chief (Beg) rather than the Qing officials who represented the state authority. Some corrupted officials were also abusing their power and "treating the people like dogs and goats." Whenever there were needs for taxation and conscription, the local chief would then represent the officials' authority and apply extra burden on the people for their economic benefits. Consequently, this stirred up people's discontent with the Qing officials rather than their local chiefs.⁴⁸

Zuo Zongtang's primary concern after regaining the control of Xinjiang was to establish the direct connection between state and its people by terminating the Beg system, which was practiced by Qing for a century as the key component of its *jimi* policy. He took back local Begg's land and rent edit to local peasants for sharecropping. This attempt at land reform terminated the political and economic influence of local Begg's but did not remove their social influence in local communities. In fact, as a courtesy, although the Uyghur political elites lost the Beg title, they were still assigned sinecure posts in the region and given Qing official ranks. They became local gentries, mediators, official translators, and book keepers. The traditional social stratification remained despite the major political and economic reforms under Zuo Zongtang's governance. As we can see, by the time when Xinjiang was officially created as a province, it was the Qing officials who had prior experience of dealing with "foreign affairs" (*yangwu*, 洋务) rather than "outlying regions' affairs" (*yiwu*, 夷务) who played crucial roles. Qing's administrative policy towards Xinjiang changed with its understanding of "international" affairs.

⁴⁸ Zongtang Zuo, "Fuchen Xinjiang Qingxing Zhe (Report on the Situation in Xinjiang)," in *Zuo Zongtang Quanji (Collected Works of Zuo Zongtang)* (Changsha: Yuelu Shushe, 1982). 173.

In Zuo's reports to the royal court, he repeatedly mentioned the concept of "*liguo youjiang*" (立国有疆, literally means "territory establishes a nation"). This demonstrates an early reception in China about the modern Western concept of sovereignty. He interpreted it with the traditional *tianxia* concept and referring it as a representation of the traditional value that "the righteous ruler should safeguard four barbarian regions" (天子有道, 守在四夷 *tianzi youdao, shouzai siyi*). In his opinion, the military outpost system treated the peripheral similar as any other regions in the hinterland. This was not an effective way to govern the border regions. Military generals would not be able to understand the local customs fully. To him, instead of treating regions occupied by different ethnic groups as independent balancing powers in the area, it was important to establish their recognition towards the central state and form as border defense against the outside invasions. Zuo's understanding of Xinjiang had already acquired a Western perception of sovereignty carrying an obvious geopolitical feature. He was particularly aware of the threat from Russian Empire. He stated that if Xinjiang were occupied by Russia, then it would become an outpost for Russian expansion in Asia. Losing Xinjiang would not only threaten the security of Qing's northwest frontier but more importantly, destabilise Qing in general.⁴⁹

Conclusion

Under Chinese traditional *tianxia* world order, the practices of governance and conflict management do not depend on the recognition of ethnicity as it does so strongly in the Westphalian order. Through Qing's governance of Xinjiang before the late 19th century, we could see that by identifying the difference between *Huibu* in the south and *Zhunbu* in the north, Qing was hoping to install regional clients of the empire in order to ensure the Manchurian rule internally and the regional security internationally. The rapid expansion of Russian and British imperial trade in Central and East Asia challenged the Chinese *tianxia* world order and also transformed the regional powers' perception of their relations with Chinese Empire. The dysfunction of *tianxia* world order also triggered an internal political shift in China. The universal empire was gradually absorbing the Western legal perception of sovereignty. Although the 1911 revolution disrupted Qing's attempt of reforming its state-people relations, China's search for reconciliation of its imperial legacy in a modern state structure continues even until today.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 170-4.

The memory of social unrest and political instability has a historical lineage. However, the specific historical and political momentums leading towards upheavals are not always the same. The political and historical consequences of conflicts could, henceforth, be drastically different. Without investigating the social contexts and political contests which fuel the different historical moments of turmoil, we might not be able to truly understand the fundamental logic leading towards the seemingly chaotic confrontations happening in different periods and places. What is the “Xinjiang problem”? This is the question we asked at the beginning of this paper. In today’s world, we can see similar questions being asked in many other areas suffering from social unrest, most significantly being “Islamic problem” or “terrorist problem.” These problematics demonstrate an ahistorical attitude of understanding social instability. They imply a teleological argument of portraying confrontations as the result of “clash of civilisations” or ethnic antagonism. Instead, we might want to consider the possibility that each case of animosity might be unique to our time and subject to the larger historical background of social, political, and ideological transformation of relations between Western and so-called Rising powers.

Arguably, Xinjiang caught the Western academic and public attention by the end of the Cold War.⁵⁰ With the decline and eventually fall of the Soviet Union, some US experts on Soviet Central Asia region began to shift their attentions to Xinjiang. Starting from 1998, the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute in John Hopkins University launched the “Xinjiang Project.” Under the directorship of Stephen Frederick Starr, Nicholas Platt, and Graham E. Fuller, this project gathered 18 scholars specialised in Chinese anthropology, Qing history, Islamic studies, and economy. As one of the main results, Fuller and Starr published a policy report, which coins the term “Xinjiang Problem.” According to them, Xinjiang Problem by nature is

⁵⁰ It was also during the 1980s that the most significant riots and protests began to break out in Xinjiang. See Stanley Toops, "Recent Uighur Leaders in Xinjiang," *Central Asian Survey* 11, no. 2 (1992). 77-99. Also see Nicolas Becquelin, "Xinjiang in the Nineties," *The China Journal*, no. 44 (2000). 65-90. The Western media attention towards Xinjiang also began in the 1990s with the famous report by *The New York Times* editor Karl Meyer in 1995. See Karl E. Meyer, "Editorial Notebook: Asia's Lost World," *The New York Times* December 4, 1995. <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/12/04/opinion/editorial-notebook-asia-s-lost-world.html>.

a “confrontation between two very distinct peoples,” namely “Han Chinese” and “indigenous Uyghur Turkish Muslims.”⁵¹

Studies in the 1990s predominately set the paradigm of understanding “Xinjiang problem” as the result of Chinese colonial administration and Islam-driven Uyghur nationalist resistance. This paradigm is also employed retrospectively to understand the historical development of the regional upheavals, arguing that the historical origin of “Xinjiang problem” was the result of a nearly 300-year long Uyghur nationalist struggle against Chinese control.⁵² In such a teleological interpretation of “Xinjiang problem,” the centuries-long Chinese administrative and political change appears to be absent. Even the term “Xinjiang” was taken by its literal meaning as “new territory” without considering its genealogy, evolving within the long history of political transformation both in China and across the region.⁵³ In fact, nationalism and Islam as a major political force only began to surface in Xinjiang among the Uyghur separatists in the 1980s.⁵⁴ The ethnic-nationalist

⁵¹ Graham E. Fuller and S. Frederick Starr, “The Xinjiang Problem,” in *Silk Road Papers* (The Johns Hopkins University: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, 2003). 4.

⁵² Elizabeth van wie Davis, “Uyghur Muslim Ethnic Separatism in Xinjiang, China,” *Asian Affairs* 35, no. 1 (2008). 15-29.

⁵³ This literal translation of Xinjiang is famously used in Jonathan D. Spence’s *The Search for Modern China*, which is widely used as a textbook for students of Chinese modern history in the West. See Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1990). 97. However, throughout the long process of unification in Qing dynasty, the term “Xinjiang” was used to refer to areas being gradually brought into Qing administration through not only military campaign but also legal reform. Regarding the historical genealogy of this term, see Zhiping Pan and Lan Shi, “Xinjiang He Zhongya Jiqi Youguan De Dili Gainian (Xinjiang, Central Asia, and Other Related Geograhic Concepts),” *Zhongguo Bianjiang Shidi Yanjiu (China's Borderland History and Geography Studies)*, no. 3 (2008).

⁵⁴ Harbar, “Xinjiang De Zhengzhi Lixue Yu Zhonggong De Minzu Zhengce (the Political Dynamics in Xinjiang and the Ethnic Policy of the Chinese Communist Party),” *Twenty-First Century* 109 (2008). 26-35. Also see “Attempts to Transform Ccp's Ethnic Minority Policy in the Early 1980s,” *The Chinese Historical Review* 15, no. 2 (2008). 296-314.

disturbances in Xinjiang emerged almost in the same period when China began its market reform. By the end of the 1970s, Chinese government began to shift away from class politics. Consequently, both domestic and international socio-political conflicts were no longer interpreted in the language of class struggle. Instead, the Chinese government started to subscribe to the language of identity politics and pragmatic discourse of economic development as a means of conflict management. This marks the new era and the birth of today's "Xinjiang Problem" and the tension between Western and Chinese modes of understanding the conflict that is currently taking place in the region.

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