A Review of *Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State*

By Andres Freeman

Xinjiang is located in Central Eurasia, and is a culturally diverse conduit for trade in ideas, technology, religion, and biology throughout Eurasia. In the last three centuries, borders have become more sharply defined by the and Qing-Muscovite empires, especially after the toppling of the Dzungar Empire, which isolated the nomadic and semi-sedentarized: Kazaks, Dungun, Turkic-Speaking people, Uyghur, Oriats and Khalkha Mongols, to their periphery. The Northern region, which is proximal to Russia, is rich in mineral wealth, while the central pasturelands keep nomadic herds alive, and the southern portion serves as the agricultural basin, along with its oil supply located in the central Tarim Basin. As Moscow and Beijing grew their states, and the race for oil was on between the U.S. and Europe in the Middle East, Xinjiang served as the Sino-Russo chess board, where each agitated in the others disenfranchised Central Asian minorities. It is with the factors aforementioned that the common people of Xinjiang’s ethnic-elites, where agents caught primarily between Moscow and Beijing, as they wrestled to maintain ethnic populist control in Xinjiang’s political, as well as socio-economic participation.

Ethno-populism shaped Xinjiang’s political climate from the late Qing Empire, until present day, which offers some insight on the complexities of political discourse and policy, regarding China’s Uighur population. This review of Justin Jacobs’ *Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State* is limited in detail due to the immensity of Eurasia’s complex history and symbiotic relationships regarding state building across the continent, which fall outside of this works scope, but should not deter scholars engaging with the intricate details Jacobs work covers. It is flexible enough to connect many common, misinformed nationalist narratives and deconstruct them with incidents, which parallel a
global trend of repressive measures the people of Central Asia experienced in the twentieth century. Though the work could use more personal accounts from non-elites in Xinjiang, it links the particular insight that political, or military leaders, bring as far as on the ground experiences in governorship, to the three eras covered. Historians and social scientists should familiarize themselves with this source material, at least as a baseline understanding, of the Uyghur discussion in modern Chinese Eurasian history.

Since the nineteenth century, competitive state building in Europe, permeating ideas of self-determination, which often are followed by the exploitation of ethnic differences amongst interrelating corporate groups and authority figures, shocked the world including China. In Xinjiang, the political strategy during the end of the Qing Imperial Dynasty (1644-1911), the Republican Period (1912-1949) and the People Republic of China era of the Chinese Communist Party (1949-present), are similarly characteristic of other frontier colonial campaigns. As such, ethno-populist politics have continually hindered the respective eras process of reconciliation with colonialisms permeation through Beijing's progressive policy and continually widens the sociopolitical gap between Han Chinese and ethnic minorities in China. Each respective era of Xinjiang’s governors employs ethno-populist policies as strategy, by utilizing ethnic-elites and corporate groups, to garner popular political support in maintaining Han dominance of the region. In addition, the methodology, along with the ideological approach, changes with geopolitical strategy in mind. Jacobs doesn’t directly express the role that western conquest for oil brought the global economy, but does explain the strategic interest for Russia in Xinjiang, which is linked to the political motivations that carried the global community through a brutal multi-century war, for control of the global economy. Jacobs’s main point is that the findings of his research indicate a snafu in the semantics of the nation state model. To Jacobs, China should be referred to as a National Empire because of its lack of reconciliations with the Qing Dynasty’s imperial expansion, a
distinct model from the Soviet model of a Nation of Empires, and by focusing on the geopolitical climate during the three eras of governors in Xinjiang, his examples illuminate the significance that Han chauvinism plays in creating tension between Beijing and the capital Urumqi.

Jacobs is a historian of modern China who authored *Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State* and currently teaches at American University, where he teaches courses on modern China, East Asian civilization, Indiana Jones in History, and the Japanese Empire. His research concerns the northwestern Chinese borderlands, comparative Eurasian empires, and the historical politics of archaeological expeditions. His background of study puts his research dead in the middle of strategically significant regions of Central Asia and gives a platform to correlate the geopolitical watershed events, as an explanation for the collision and aftershock in Xinjiang.

Governor Yang Zengxin was a Han ruler of non-Han people first and foremost, from 1912-28, however his brand of ethnic-populist policy was continued from Qing era bureaucratic structures that his frontier experience was steepened in, leaving him a better understanding of how to govern the frontier as opposed to Han-Manchu officials in Beijing, during the Republic era. To avoid creating another outer Mongolia, Yang requested less aggressive tactics from Beijing, and to send arms so that the predominantly Uyghur and Kazak people of the regions could govern its borders, before the Soviets offered a sweeter deal. Yang postured as a defender of non-Han interest, while warding off competition with the Bolshevik encouraged ideas of self-determination. Ensuring Han rule of traditionally non-Han land was ultimately Yang's motivation for his request for arms, though it was not received as such by Beijing. Yang’s tenure in 1924 when he had Sino-Muslim General of Xinjiang’s Kashgar district, Ma Fuxiang, killed for his involvement in conspiring to assassinate him illustrates his character. Instead of bidding on the behalf of disenfranchised non-Han people who popularly supported such deviations, Yang blamed Ma’s mistreatment of the Uyghur’s under
him as the cause, subsequently brushing over the totality of growing discontent in Xinjiang. Ma was installed to prevent British, Japanese, and Russian agitation in the Mongol population, but soon began to favor the Soviets, over the Han-Chauvinists, or the former Qing Government, which prompted Yang to exploit this dynamic for his own political gain.

The competition between Bolshevik Russia and China during the republican period influenced many of the ethnic-elite partnerships, that were a continuation of ethno-populist policy, weakening Beijing's already brittle claim of Xinjiang as part of China under the auspices of Zhonghua Minzu, especially in the city of Ili. Sheng Shikai used Soviet Style Nationalism to patronize Uyghur Nationalist, in part by giving the non-Han people a limited political platform. In one of Xinjiang’s more Soviet friendly regions, there was a monopoly over the extraction of the province’s agricultural and mineral wealth, which is why in (1934-1937) the U.S.S.R. shelled out an 8 million dollar investment, to garner popular support from the Turkic speakers, Mongol and other non-Hans in the region. The relationship diminished because of the implanting of a Russian consulate in China's Kazak inhabited Ili, which resulted in the soviet backed Ili Rebellion (1944), where a coalition government rose from East Turkistani separatist (ETIM), who were brutally put down by the Kuomintang nationalist party. The ETIM were a party who called for national sovereignty from China, with support from primarily Western powers through Xinjiang’s exiles, and Taiwan, following the Chinese Communist Party’s rise to power. The competitive relationship between the two shifted as China strayed away from the Austro-Marxism, where the ideological restructuring put loyalty to the Chinese state above the Soviet model, which in combination with agitation of Kazaks and Uyghurs, marked the early years of Sino-Soviet estrangement.

Jacobs points out that the Chinese Communist Party used ethno-populist control via affirmative action as an extension of ethno-populist political strategy, where politically charged Han migration into Xinjiang, facilitated the CCP’s commandeering of
political power from the splintered separatist. In designating Xinjiang, a special Autonomous region, the CCP crippled minorities route of autonomous political participation by diluting the concentration of non-Hans and removed the platform for organic leadership to thrive. The shift in Beijing’s relation to Urumqi, Xinjiang’s capital, also kept the exiled separatist out, facing the difficult position of fighting their way into the state, as opposed to Autonomy. Jacobs uses his concept of National Empire to explain why policy in Xinjiang unfolded as it did, however, in the context to geo-politics and strategy, serves a joint purpose of having a larger presence to offset Beijing’s past neglect, and to limit the influence of Europeans who had been agitating in the region since the Opium Wars. Regardless of stance, the people of Xinjiang endured the brunt of any adverse effects, as elites and middlemen used their client relationships, during the early years of the Cold War.

In current day 2020, the condition of the Uyghur’s of Xinjiang has been a critical question posed by human rights groups and media outlets, most of which are western based or associated to the U.S. in a geo-economic client capacity. Correspondence with strong criticism of Beijing of holding Uighur’s in detention camps, often characterizes them Holocaust era concentration camps, subsequently ignoring anti-Semitism being a European phenomenon and the direct support of brutal Israeli occupation of Palestine in line with the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Washington’s stance is not surprising, the Bush administration brandished the Eastern Turkistani Independence Movement a terrorist organization in 2002, which served two significant roles related to this reading: the application of Neoconservative foreign policy through the Bush Doctrine, as outlined in U.S. Plan for New American Century, and facilitating a mutual benefit of not having to address campaigns in Central Asia, which would implicate the U.S. Global War on Terror Campaign on Afghanistan as a Geo-strategic imperial venture. With this dynamic in mind, it is also important to recognize the role globalization plays in state-to-state interactions considering Afghanistan and Xinjiang’s proximity to
each other and what these borderlands mean in terms of the Geo-strategy of economic warfare into the twenty-first century.

The US dollar is used to buy oil products in the world market, where it funds its ventures by storing the excess printed money in other countries' national reserves, which hides inflation on its end and ensures the direct exchange in petrodollars, whose value is supported by other countries’ use of the USD. In other words, the other countries, such as Saudi Arabia, buy our debt, which clears us up to continue state building ventures, but allows the U.S. to impose brutal sanctions on “non-compliance,” or trading without the USD. Recently, Russia, China, Iran, and Venezuela, to name a few, are already working on moving away from the USD, due to the effect the harsh sanctions have on their economies. This is significant because the energy crisis that plagued the twentieth century is the root cause for western interest in the Middle East and Central Eurasia, into the twenty-first century.

The Russo-Afghan War kept Beijing isolated into the Deng era, while bleeding the Soviet Union to its collapse, where the liberalization campaigns and subsequent globalization facilitated the infiltration of the U.S and Britain’s intelligence agencies into strategic locations such as Tibet, where Taiwan became a major point of Western involvement in agitating near large Uyghur exile communities. Though many of the reports pertaining to Xinjiang are questionable at best, it is beneficial for the Uyghur community to be acknowledged and its reports of abuse to be validated: the lack of an ability to engage in representational politics removes actual autonomy in Xinjiang and is clearly a product of centuries of pacified reconciliation with Qing Imperial expansion. Jacobs argues ethno-elitist/ethno-populist pacification makes China a National Empire, which I believe suggests the Uyghur’s of Xinjiang have not been afforded a true chance at autonomy. As proxy conflict functions, the decisions large states make, have real and oftentimes tragic effects for the inhabitants whose everyday lives are in direct contact with bullets flying overhead, as opposed to those who supply and instruct their factions from behind a desk,
distant from the shockwaves of warfare. The research presented in Jacobs work should be carried forward into a mainstream discussion, that facilitates a clean break in dialogue from orientalist interpretations of history, which often parade around Islamophobic rhetoric, xenophobia, or sympathies for imperialism, like Han-Chauvinism does.

**Bibliography**

Author Bio

Andre “Andres” Freeman is a history track B major in CSUSB’s Social and Behavioral Science Department, who is set to graduate in Spring 2020. His scholarly research concentrates primarily on Central Asia, relative to the Middle East and East Asia in the twentieth century, as a mode of understanding the complexities of geo-politics. Andres’ plan is to obtain his master’s in history to teach at his local community college, and eventually earn a PhD, in hopes of joining CSUSB’s History Department faculty. He would like to thank his peers and instructors for their unwavering support, vigorous discussion, and constructive criticism. A special thank you goes out to Dr. David Yaghoubian, Dr. Jeremy Murray and Dr. Yvette Saavedra for their constant guidance, without which, Andres believes, he would have been bereft of the confidence to engage with complex geo-political discussions, in a historically substantiated fashion.